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Processes and patterns in the development and maintenance of stepparent-stepchild relationships

Kristin Hadfield

March, 2015

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement of a Doctorate in Philosophy of the University of Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. The research was conducted in the School of Psychology.

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Kristin Hadfield

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Summary

This thesis is an investigation of the processes underlying the development and maintenance of stepparent-stepchild relationships and the patterns that characterize these relationships. Underlying the conceptual focus on relationships within stepfamilies is a substantial body of research which has highlighted the significance of family processes as a mediator of outcomes within diverse family structures, and specifically that the development of a close stepparent-stepchild relationship is important to both child and family outcomes. This study was guided by several theoretical frameworks which conceptualise children and parents as active agents within the family, and which characterize the lives of those in stepfamilies as unstable and uncertain. In addition, stepparents are seen as potential attachment figures for children where the dissolution of a stepparent-stepchild relationship has the potential to negatively impact children's subsequent relationship development.

This study involved a quantitative analysis of data from the nine-year-old cohort of Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) data to gain a picture of the sociodemographic characteristics of stepfamilies in Ireland. Following this, a qualitative investigation on the development of stepfamily relationships was undertaken. To be included in the study at least two participants from the same household or family had to participate and those participants had to be a biological parent, stepparent, or stepchild who was currently in or previously had been in a stepfamily. The qualitative study included interviews with 31 children (aged between 8 and 18 years), 29 biological parents, and 11 stepparents and data were subjected to narrative thematic analyses. This sample represents a departure from previous studies of stepparent-stepchild relationship development through its inclusion of multiple perspectives within each household, inclusion of non-adult stepchildren, and the focus on relationships between children and both resident and non-resident stepparents, and on relationships with both current and former stepparents.

The findings from this research provide insight into a number of processes inherent in stepfamily formation and the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships. Parents described wanting to form romantic relationships because doing so would allow them to clarify or develop optimal relationship roles, to give their child an opposite gender role model, and could potentially increase their emotional and instrumental support. However, parents were impeded in relationship formation by their own personal characteristics, unavailability of suitable partners, limited time and

support for dating, and their beliefs about the potential negative consequences of forming a romantic relationship on their child(ren). Additionally, because of mothers' attempts to protect their children and children's threat management, mothers and children tended to approach relationships with stepparents more warily after experiencing the dissolution of one or more stepfamily relationships.

The findings also revealed that parents and stepparents negotiated either power sharing or biological-parent-in-charge role based on a number of factors. Finally, the stepparent-stepchild relationships within the sample were characterized into five major patterns: *close, detached parent figure, coexisting, wariness,* and *antipathy,* each with unique aspects to the processes underlying them. Among the contextual factors surrounding those patterns were the length of stepparent involvement with the family, children's developmental context, the residence or non-residence of the stepparent, and cultural influences.

This study has yielded new insights into the processes and factors influencing stepfamily formation and the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships. Much of the previous research on stepfamilies has been carried out in the United States, but the findings of the current study indicate that some of the family processes inherent in stepfamily formation are affected by social welfare policies and the cultural context; this points to the necessity for localized research in order to understand family processes in different contexts. Further, the findings highlight the importance of studying stepfamilies as dynamic units as opposed to assuming homogeneity of experience within families of the same structure. The diversity in the processes and patterns of relationships within the sample point to the complexity of forming stepfamily relationships, but also to the possibility of stepparents and stepchildren forming highly adaptive, close relationships.

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Hadfield, K. & Nixon, E. (2013, November). *"I don't really like new men comin' in": The impact of transitions on stepfamilies*. Paper presented at the National Council for Family Relations, San Antonio, USA.

Hadfield, K. & Nixon, E. (2012). Comparison of relationship dynamics within stepmother and stepfather families in Ireland. *Irish Journal of Psychology. 33*(2-3), 100-106.

Hadfield, K. & Nixon, E. (2012, November). *A comparison of stepmother and stepfather families in Ireland*. Paper presented at the Growing Up in Ireland Annual Conference, Dublin, Ireland.

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Introduction

This research investigates the patterns of stepparent and stepchild relationship formation, and the processes underlying those patterns, from multiple perspectives within participating families. The study involves a sociodemographic analysis of Irish stepfamilies using Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) data and a narrative thematic analysis of individual interviews with children, biological parents, and stepparents. This research attempts to address a number of gaps in the literature through its inclusion of multiple perspectives – including those of stepchildren – within a broad range of types of stepfamilies. Additionally, the study is underpinned by a conceptualisation of parent-child relationships which emphasise both parent and child as agents with power to influence family dynamics.

Much of the research on stepfamilies has been outcome-focused; particularly tending to investigate stepfamily deficits in comparison with married, two-biological-parent families[1] (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Golish, 2003). However, this research has found that, while stepfamilies perform worse on average on a number of measures than married, two-biological-parent families, there is large variation in outcomes within each family structure and the ultimate differences between the structures are small (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Jeynes, 2006). This points to the importance of studying family processes, as a focus on family processes offers the possibility of understanding why some stepfamily members have poorer outcomes and others perform as well or better than those in married, two-biological-parent families. The current study aligns itself with this family process focus by investigating parenting roles and the nature of parent-child relationships within stepfamilies, in an effort to elucidate what processes may lead to more adaptive stepfamily relationships.

The majority of stepfamily research has been conducted in the United States of America or the United Kingdom, these countries both have relatively high rates of divorce and stepfamilies make up a large minority of family structures (Teachman &

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[1] Married, two-biological-parent families refer to those families where child(ren) live with both of their married, biological parents. Although there are a number of possible ways to refer to these families – such as two-parent families (Amato, 2000), intact families (Manski, Sandefur, McLanahan, & Powers, 1992; Schick, 2002), biological families (O'Connor et al., 2001), two-parent biological families (Lansford, Ceballa, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001, 2001), first-marriage families (Coleman et al., 2000), or first-families (Zeppa & Huisinga Norem, 1993) – for the purposes of this study, Manning & Lamb's (2003), "married, two-biological-parent families" has been adopted.

Tedrow, 2008) However, the stepfamily context in Ireland may be different because the divorce rate is much lower and stepfamilies are relatively uncommon (Iona Institute, 2007; Lunn, Fahey, & Hannan, 2010; The Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth, and Family Policies, 2004). There has been limited stepfamily research in Ireland and it is not clear how these demographic differences influence the development of stepfamily relationships or the stigma associated with stepfamily membership.

This study is conceptually underpinned by three theoretical frameworks: the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997), a lens of uncertainty (Burton & Tucker, 2009), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1980). Children and parents are conceived as agents with their own perspectives and ability to influence the world around them. Their relationships are bidirectional, and are characterized by an interdependence and asymmetry in power (Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). Additionally, relationships are viewed within a lens of uncertainty, which takes into account the instability and uncertainty which characterize the lives of children and parents living in single parent families and stepfamilies (Burton & Tucker, 2009). This lens allows for an interpretation of parents' partnering and parenting which addresses the constraints which characterise their lives. Finally, stepparents are viewed as potential attachment figures for children, and the dissolution of children's relationships with attachment figures is conceived as potentially problematic for the development of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationships (Bowlby, 1980). Children experience a period of mourning after the dissolution of an attachment relationship and may have more negative expectations of stepfamilies as a result of their stepfamily experiences (Carr, 2006; Planitz & Feeney, 2009). Therefore, exploring children's experiences of stepfamily dissolution is critical to understanding how children form stepparent-stepchild relationships.

Outline of the Thesis

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the theoretical and empirical foundations of the current research. Chapter 1 describes the literature surrounding stepfamily outcomes and processes, describes why close relationships are worthy of study in a process-focused research context, explains the theoretical underpinnings of the research, and then describes the Irish stepfamily context. In addition to the review of the literature found in Chapter 1, each results chapter will introduce the most relevant literature and will detail the specifics of the sample whose data are being used for that chapter.

Chapter 2 provides a broad overview of the family life of nine-year-old stepchildren in Ireland using the GUI data. This chapter focuses on sociodemographic variables in order to provide a context for stepfamilies in Ireland; these variables were used to inform the sampling of the subsequent qualitative study.

Chapter 3 describes and justifies the methods used for the collection and analysis of the qualitative data. It outlines the qualitative research paradigm, triangulation of perspectives, and the positioning of child and adult participants in the research. This is followed by a description of the research methods and then the process of thematic narrative analysis is described.

Chapter 4 provides information about the participants and families sampled in the qualitative study, as well as context about their lives and family situation. The sample was diverse and so it is critical to have additional information about the participants in order to have a framework within which to understand their quotations and the findings in general. The chapter begins with a basic demographic profile of the children, biological parents, and stepparents and then gives contextual information about their personal and familial backgrounds.

The results presented in Chapters 5 through 8 solely draw upon the qualitative data yielded from the interviews with parents, stepparents and children. Chapter 5 describes an analysis of the benefits of and barriers to romantic relationship [2]formation for the biological parents. This chapter includes the full sample of biological parents from the study to investigate the processes of romantic relationship formation among single parents. If a parent does not form a romantic relationship then there is no stepparent-stepchild relationship, so it is important to understand what advantages parents believe that a relationship might entail as well as what impedes them from forming a romantic relationship.

---

[2] The term "romantic relationship" is used by researchers to describe a range of intimate, affectionate, or sexual relationships between adolescents or adults (Burton & Hardaway, 2012; Ivanova, Mills, & Veenstra, 2014; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010; Sassler, 2010). There is considerable variability within "romantic relationships", and they do not necessarily have to involve an emotionally close, 'romantic', or attached relationship to be called a "romantic relationship" (Villalobos, 2014). These relationships can be short-term, largely sexual partnerings or longer term partnerings with varying degrees of intimacy (Burton, 2014; Burton & Tucker, 2009; Nelson, 2004). Although other terms such as "intimate relationships" (Collett, 2010) or merely "relationships" (Hsueh, Rahbar Morrison, & Doss, 2009) have been used, this thesis is theoretically grounded in Burton & Tucker's (2009) lens of uncertainty perspective, so the author has adopted their terminology – and that of many other authors in this field – to maintain continuity.

Chapter 6 details children's and biological parents' approaches to stepfamily formation in the context of previous stepfamily dissolution. This chapter describes an analysis of interviews with children and mothers who had experienced the dissolution of a least one stepfamily. The experience of previous stepfamily dissolution is posited as a process which influences subsequent stepfamily relationships.

Chapter 7 provides a description of how roles are negotiated by stepparents, stepchildren, and biological parents in a stepfamily context. It involves two analyses: the first includes a sample of pairs of parents and stepparents to investigate what influences the types of parental roles which are negotiated and the second includes the full sample of children, parents, and stepparents to investigate how children influence the types of roles negotiated by stepparents.

Chapter 8 also involves two analyses to understand how stepparent-stepchild relationships are formed, the patterns of their relationships, and the processes and contextual factors underlying those patterns. The first is an analysis of the patterns of current and former stepparent-stepchild relationships described by children and stepparents. The second is an analysis of the interviews from families where a parent, stepparent, and stepchild all participated in the research and investigates the role of biological parents in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships.

Chapter 9 is a discussion of the findings and their contribution to the literature on stepfamily relationship development, as well as consideration of the methodological strengths and limitations of the study and future directions for research in this field.

The development and maintenance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship is critical to overall stepfamily functioning (Bray, 1999; Coleman et al., 2000). There is a need for an understanding of how family roles and relationships are negotiated in a stepfamily context. This study intends to address this gap in the literature through an investigation of these research questions:

1. What are the sociodemographic characteristics of Irish stepfamilies?
2. Do all stepfamilies readily identify themselves as such? If not, are there any differences in the characteristics of those stepfamilies that do self-identify as compared to those that do not?
3. What are the perceived benefits and barriers of romantic relationship for biological parents?

4. How do parents and children approach stepparent-stepchild relationship development after experiencing the dissolution of at least one previous stepfamily?
5. How do parents and stepparents negotiate their parenting roles?
6. What factors make stepparents more or less likely to adopt a power sharing or parent-support parenting role?
7. What role do stepchildren have in the negotiation of their stepparent(s)'s parenting role?
8. What are the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationship development?
9. What are the mechanisms underlying the development and maintenance of different patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships?
10. What is the role of biological parents in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships?

These questions will be addressed using a mixed-methods approach – initially investigating aspects of stepfamily living in Ireland using the nine-year-old cohort of the GUI data, and then using a cross-sectional, qualitative methodology to gain a more nuanced understanding of the processes of stepfamily development. Within a framework which considers families as dynamic and children as active and agentic within their families, this study aims to expand on previous research by incorporating the perspectives of middle-childhood and adolescent stepchildren, stepparents, and biological parents to answer these research questions.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

The intention of this chapter is to introduce the literature which underpins this thesis. This chapter begins by describing the literature around stepfamily outcomes and processes – such as parenting and relationship development. It follows with a discussion of close relationships generally and parent-child relationships in particular. Then, the theoretical foundations of this research – namely, the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997), lens of uncertainty perspective (Burton & Tucker, 2009), and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) are outlined. The chapter concludes with a description of the stepfamily context in Ireland and then a brief outline of the present study.

1.2 Stepfamilies

Stepfamilies are families where a parent is in a romantic relationship with someone who is not the biological parent of at least one of their children. Stepfamilies can be formed after divorce, the death of a biological parent, or after a birth to an unmarried parent. The parent-stepparent relationship can be married, cohabiting, or dating; the stepparent can be male or female; and children do not necessarily need to live with their stepparent for them to be considered members of a stepfamily (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995; Stewart, 2001). The sheer diversity of stepfamily structures presents a challenge to researchers because the long-term adjustment of the family and family members are impacted by each of these factors.

1.2.1 Theoretical Approaches: A Focus on Outcomes

Stepfamilies have been the subject of considerable research in many Western nations (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Pryor, 2008). Much of this research focuses on the outcomes of stepfamily relationships (for example, Lansford et al., 2001), on children (for example, Manning & Lamb, 2003), or parents and stepparents (for example, Shapiro & Stewart, 2011) in stepfamilies as compared to those in other family structures. Research on stepfamilies tends to come from a deficit-comparison perspective, assuming that "non-traditional families' will perform worse and have worse outcomes than 'traditional' families (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Golish). This research generally finds that those in stepfamilies have worse outcomes than those in married, two-biological-parent families in their educational attainment, sociability, initiative, and internalizing and externalizing

behaviours (Amato & Keith, 1991; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Coughlin & Vuchinich, 1996; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Hofferth, 2006; Sandefur, McLanahan, & Wojtkiewicz, 1992). Children in stepfamilies tend to perform more closely to children from single parent families than children from married, two-parent-biological families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

However, in comparison to the differences between individual children within the same family structure, the differences in outcomes across the different family structures are relatively small (Coleman et al., 2000; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Jeynes, 2006). This indicates that many children in stepfamilies will have as good or better outcomes as children from married, two-biological-parent families. The research which compares outcomes across family structures has been criticized as paying "no attention to what the environment is like, what people are living there, what they are doing, or how the activities taking place could affect the child" (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983, p. 382-383); focusing on the environmental label but neglecting contextual factors which may be critical to understanding the phenomenon at hand. Three main theories have been proposed which attempt to account for the difference in outcomes between the family structures: stress theories, economic theories, and selection theories.

1.2.1.1 Stress Theories

Stress models tend to focus on the idea that repartnering or remarriage is a stressful event that involves many changes for both children and adults (e.g., Henry & Lovelace, 1995). These theories centre on the idea that the introduction of a stepparent disrupts the equilibrium of the family, which in turn leads to stress, conflict, and the interruption of effective parenting behaviour. Changes in family structure destabilize the family environment and lead to elevated stress for five to seven years after the formation of a repartnered relationship (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Family transitions increase maternal stress and harsh parenting (Beck, Cooper, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010) and are also associated with delinquency issues, conduct problems, increased behavioural problems, psychological distress, and poorer health for residential children (Bachman, Coley, & Carrano, 2011; 2012; Bzostek & Beck, 2011; Goodnight et al., 2013; Magnuson & Berger, 2009). This instability has a continued impact across the life course; it is associated with a reduced likelihood of entrance to or completion of university, early family formation, an increased likelihood of having multiple marriages, and for men who have experienced transitions to have children

outside of marriage (Fomby, 2013; Fomby & Bosick, 2013; Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2010). However, Osborne, Berger, and Magnuson (2012) found that entering a stepfamily was associated with modest declines in material hardship and depression, indicating that some aspects of repartnering are positive for the stepfamily.

Relationships are enacted within the social rules and norms of a society (Duck, 2011) and when those norms are unclear or do not exist, it complicates those relationships. Cherlin (1978) proposed the *incomplete institutionalization hypothesis*, which postulates that there is greater stress on stepfamilies because of ambiguity surrounding societal norms for their relations. He hypothesized that stepparents and stepchildren experience more stress in their relationships because their relations are less culturally institutionalised. Further, he believed that the lack of institutionalised social support for stepfamilies adds to stress and leads to negative outcomes. Some studies appear to support Cherlin's (1978) hypothesis, finding that there is a relationship between family adjustment and role clarity, and that even within stepfamilies there is no consensus on what role a stepparent should play (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Fine, Ganong, & Coleman, 1997). However, other studies have found only incomplete support for Cherlin's (1978) hypothesis (e.g., Coleman, Ganong, & Cable, 1997). Cherlin (2004) supplemented his initial hypothesis by suggesting that all marriage has undergone a process of deinstitutionalization, and that it is not just stepfamilies that experience ambiguity surrounding cultural norms. Therefore the stress surrounding roles may not be unique to stepfamilies.

Inadequate social capital in stepfamilies has also been posited as an explanation for why stepchildren tend to be more similar to children of single parents than children from married, two-biological-parent families in terms of outcomes. Social capital is the "ability of actors to secure benefits through membership in networks and other social structures" (Portes, 1998, pp. 6). The main tenet of the *social capital model* is that stepchildren receive inadequate support from their repartnered parents and stepparents. That is, the developmental outcomes of children in stepfamilies are negatively impacted by the burdens on social capital caused by the integration of new family member(s). Mothers in stepfamilies have less social capital than mothers in married, two-biological-parent families (Ravanera & Rajulton, 2010), possibly because the transition to a new family is stressful and takes parental time away from their children (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Parents and stepparents are less involved in school-related activities, spend a smaller amount of time on schoolwork, and spend less time generally

caring for their children in stepfamilies than parents do in married two-biological-parent families (Kalil, Ryan, & Chor, 2014; Pong, 1997).

Stress-related explanations of stepchild outcomes emphasize that the events associated with stepfamily formation, such as moving, switching schools, or losing a parent figure from the home are stressful and are associated with long-term adjustment problems (Kurdek & Fine, 1993a). Additionally, the incomplete institutionalization of the stepparent role may cause stepfamily relationships to be more stressful. Finally, these explanations focus on the lack of social capital for stepchildren. Stress hypotheses are fairly well supported by the literature (Sweeney, 2010).

1.2.1.2 Economic Theories

The *economic deprivation hypothesis* proposes that children of single parents and stepchildren encounter more economic hardships than those in married, two-biological-parent families (Coleman et al., 2000) and that these hardships may help explain children's reduced well-being in stepfamilies. Single mothers and single fathers are much more likely to live in poverty than two-parent families (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Edin & Kissane, 2010; Grall, 2007). In many cases, parents and children have to move to houses in less well-off neighbourhoods and change schools in order to accommodate their diminished income after relationship dissolution. Because single parents tend to move to poorer neighbourhoods, the schools also tend to perform worse and the children lose their established peer support from friends at their former school (Amato, 2000). Additionally, reduced economic circumstances may negatively affect children through the mediating factors of higher conflict and a reduced quality of parenting as parents struggle to adjust to financial constraints (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; Miller & Davis, 1997).

Both married and cohabiting stepfamilies tend to have lower incomes and stepfathers have fewer years of schooling than fathers in married, two-biological-parent families (Anderson, 2000; Hofferth; Manning & Brown, 2006). For this reason, gaining a stepparent does not tend to improve the economic situation of children in stepfamilies to the levels of children in married, two-biological-parent families; this may help to explain why the children in stepfamilies perform more closely to children in single mother families than children in married, two-biological-parent families (Sweeney, 2010). Still, stepfamilies have higher incomes than single mother families (Sweeney, 2007) and thus the long-term adjustment for children in stepfamilies should be better than those raised by single mothers if the *economic deprivation hypothesis* was solely

explanatory. However, the economic recovery that comes to some degree when parents repartner does not always attenuate the negative outcomes of children in stepfamilies (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, & McLoughlin, 1983), which indicates that income may be a relevant variable but does not fully explain the negative effects of relationship dissolution and repartnering on children.

1.2.1.3 Selection Theories

Some of the adjustment problems of stepchildren may be due to selection factors which predate parental marriage or remarriage (Amato, 2000). Comparing children and parents in stepfamilies with those from other family structures may not be useful because children and parents from stepfamilies differ in pre-existing ways from those in other family structures (Sweeney, 2010). It is possible that children from continuously married families have fewer negative outcomes because the adults who are able to form and sustain a marriage tend to be the most balanced, well-adjusted, and affluent individuals and their children benefit from those economic and genetic contributions (Coleman et al., 2000). Through assortative mating, parents with substance abuse, antisocial behaviour, and mental health problems are at a risk of selecting a spouse with similar problems (Knight, 2011; Maes et al., 1998). These psychosocial difficulties are risk factors for marital conflict and divorce (Merikangas, 1984). Further, single mothers may "fare worse in the marriage market" (Ermisch & Pevalin, 2005, pp. 469) and be more likely to form a relationship with a partner who has less desirable characteristics (Brown, 2004; Lichter & Graefe, 2007) as a result of their status as a mother, although some research has found the opposite to be true (Bzostek, McLanahan, & Carlson, 2012). Support has been mixed for the hypothesis that outcomes which differentiate stepchildren from other children are due to factors which predate parental repartnering (Cherlin et al., 1991; Doherty & Needle, 1991; Sweeney, 2010).

Taken together, stress, economic, and selection theories indicate that there are a number of unique aspects of being part of a stepfamily which increase the risk of negative outcomes for stepfamily members. However, many researchers believe that family structure alone does not account for the outcome differences between stepfamilies and married, two-biological-parent families and that processes in these families may be more explanatory than structure alone (Simons & Associates, 1996).

1.2.2 Theoretical Approaches: A Focus on Processes

Many researchers believe that it is necessary to move beyond a deficit-comparison perspective where married, two-biological-parent families serve as the normative group and stepfamilies fare poorly in comparison (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). By investigating family processes, as opposed to a solely focusing on family structure, it is possible to identify the factors that facilitate or undermine positive family functioning. Family processes refer to the quality of interactions and behaviours within families. The term 'family processes' includes interparental-conflict, parent-child conflict, coparenting, supportive parenting, family cohesion, and other aspects of parenting, marital, or intrafamilial interactions.

Many researchers believe family processes are more important to well-being that family structure (e.g., Acock & Demo, 1994; Demo & Acock, 1996; Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, & O'Connor, 1998; Lansford et al., 2001). Those who favour this perspective believe that if families have positive parent-child and interparental relationships, then the well-being of the family will be more positive, regardless of family structure. However, while certain family processes are more strongly related to child adjustment than family structure (Acock & Demo, 1994; Demo & Acock, 1996; Falci, 2006; Lansford et al., 2001), family structure is not irrelevant to child outcomes (Simons & Associates, 1996). Many studies find a small effect of family structure even when accounting or controlling for family processes (e.g. Falci). Further, some family processes are more prevalent in certain family structures. For example, families headed by single mothers are much more likely to be economically disadvantaged (Brady & Burroway, 2012) and economic disadvantage negatively impacts parenting quality and thus child outcomes (Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, & Glassman, 2000). In the same way, the family processes involved leading up to and following a repartnering are an essential part of the stepfamily itself; forming a stepfamily impacts family processes and may influence how those processes effect each family member. As King, Thorsen, and Amato (2014) explained,

> A stepfamily-focused approach also directs attention to factors and processes that are unique to, or particularly prevalent in, stepfamilies (e.g., the nonresident father-child relationship, presence of stepsiblings, duration of the stepfamily). Focusing on differences between family structures (the more common approach) limits the analysis to variables that all family structures have in common and, consequently, makes it difficult to understand processes that are unique to stepfamilies. (p. 16-17)

Family structures relate to family processes by determining the constraints in which family members can operate and the resources from which they can draw (Steinglass, 1987). It is important to focus on the processes within each family structure to understand how those families are formed as well as what leads to cohesive families and positive outcomes. Qualitative research may be particularly useful for investigating the processes in stepfamilies, because it allows for a deep and nuanced understanding of these processes (Coleman et al., 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 2014).

1.2.2.1 Parenting in Stepfamilies

Children and parents establish routines when in a single-parent family which may be radically altered by the introduction of a stepparent. The stepparent needs to negotiate their role, and the family dynamic and parenting practices will change as a result of this negotiation. Children benefit from effective parenting practices – involving high support, high monitoring, and avoidance of harsh punishment – regardless of their family context (Amato & Fowler, 2002). However, entrance to a stepfamily has been associated with less effective parenting practices and consequently poorer child outcomes (Ram & Hou, 2003). In the following sub-sections, research on biological parents in stepfamilies – including resident and non-resident parents – will be considered, followed by a consideration of research on stepparents.

Biological Parents

The resident biological parent in a stepfamily tends to be a mother, and the non-resident parent tends to be a father (Stewart, 2001, Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Parenting practices in stepfamilies are different from those in married, two-biological-parent families because a parent has typically lived alone with their child(ren) for a time before the introduction of the stepparent in family life. Additionally, many children maintain contact with their non-resident parent (Stewart, 2010) and so stepfamilies often have more parent-figures than would traditionally be seen in a married, two-biological-parent family.

Parents in stepfamilies perceive their family life to be more stressful and their family functioning to be more negative than do parents in married, two-biological-parent families (Waldren, Bell, Sorell, & Peek, 1990). Their role is complicated because they simultaneously serve as a link between their partners and their children, but often also act to limit that relationship and to protect their children from the perceived negative influence of their partners (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Mothers in stepfamilies view being a mother as their main role (Horwitz, 2001) and may benefit

from their close connection to their child(ren) (Villalobos, 2014), but their romantic relationship formation may be at odds with these priorities – having the potential to negatively impact their parenting and their child(ren)'s well-being (Bachman, Coley, & Carrano, 2011; Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003; Williams, Sassler, & Nicholson, 2008).

Although joining a stepfamily can positively impact some aspects of family life (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010; Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Williams & Umberson, 2004; Sweeney, 2007), it tends to negatively influence parenting. Mothers gain fewer resources related to parenting when they enter a relationship with a stepfather than when they enter a relationship with a biological father of their child(ren) (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). Entering a stepfamily increases parenting stress and harsh parenting and decreases parenting effectiveness (Beck et al., 2010; Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009, Martinez & Forgatch, 2002), particularly when parents make relatively rapid transitions into and out of family structures (Cooper et al., 2009). The negative effect of transitions on parenting may be particularly important, because the relationship between family instability and child adjustment is mediated by parenting effectiveness (Martinez & Forgatch, 2002).

In the United States, non-resident parents' involvement tends to be relatively low, with Stewart (2010) finding that more than one third of children with a non-resident mother or father had not seen that parent in the previous year and more than half of the non-resident parents had not paid child support in the previous year. However, Stewart's (2010) analysis is based on reports of resident parents; when non-resident parents were asked about their involvement, 86% indicated that they had provided some economic support to their children in the past year (Stykes, 2012). Additionally, Cheadle, Amato, and King (2010) found that nearly 40% of non-resident fathers maintain stable levels of high contact throughout their child(ren)'s childhood. When non-resident parents are involved with their child(ren), they predominantly engage in leisure activities and do not tend to meaningfully participate in traditional aspects of parenting (Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012; Stewart, 1999). The parent-child communication in these relationships is hampered by the lack of co-residence (Rodriguez, 2014) and complex parenting obligations in multiple households (Manning, Stewart, & Smock, 2003). Stepchildren tend to want their non-resident parents to be actively involved in their parenting, but simultaneously resist their non-resident parent in this role because they find "communication to be awkward and

challenging" (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p.30). When non-resident parents are involved financially, this directly benefits children by positively influencing mothers' parenting and decreasing parenting stress (Choi & Pyun, 2014). Additionally, closeness to non-resident mothers and fathers is associated with fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviours (King 2006; 2007) indicating that when non-resident parents are involved – and that involvement does not occur within a hostile interparental environment (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009) – children tend to benefit.

Involvement with a stepparent can change non-resident parents' involvement with their child(ren). Non-resident fathers reduce the frequency of their visits with their children when their children's mother repartners (Amato et al., 2009; Juby, Billette, Laplante, & Le Bourdais, 2007; Stewart, 2010) and repartnering is associated with an increase in conflict between former spouses (Cartwight & Gibson, 2013). In general, married or cohabiting fathers are more likely to report infrequent visitation than fathers who are not in a relationship (Stykes, 2012); and fathers particularly tend to reduce their visits with their non-resident child(ren) when the fathers' repartnering closely follows separation from the child(ren)'s biological mother (Juby et al., 2007). In this way, either mothers' or fathers' repartnering may reduce children's contact with their non-resident parent and cause conflict between their biological parents.

Stepparents

Although there is considerable variability, stepparents tend to be less involved parents than biological parents are. In comparison to biological parents, stepfathers and stepmothers show less affection for their stepchildren and spend less time supervising them (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Kurdek & Fine, 1993b; Kurdek & Fine, 1995). Taking on a stepparent role tends to be stressful for both stepmothers and stepfathers. Stepparents experience higher levels of parenting stress than biological parents do; this is particularly true for stepmothers (Shapiro, 2014). Stepmothers have more depressive symptoms, higher parenting stress, and feel less like their stepchild(ren) accept and value them than biological mothers do toward their child(ren) (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). However, stepparents have the most positive outcomes when they frequently engage in parenting behaviours (Fine et al., 1997), indicating that the parenting role is an important one for stepparents.

There is some ambiguity about what the stepparent role should be, with children believing that their stepparent should not engage in discipline, and stepparents and parents tending to believe that the stepparent should be involved with child discipline

(Fine et al., 1998). Perhaps because of the ambiguity surrounding their parenting, stepfathers engage in higher levels of cooperation in parenting with the biological mother of their stepchild(ren) overall than biological fathers in intact families do with the mother of their child(ren) (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008). When mothers and stepfathers agree on the stepparents' parenting role, this positively affects stepparent-stepchild closeness (Jensen & Shafer, 2013), indicating that it is not just the stepparent's parenting that is important, but also how that parenting is received by their partner and their stepchild(ren).

1.2.2.2 Stepparent-Stepchild Relationship Development

It is important to understand how stepparents and stepchildren develop and maintain their relationships with one another. The stepparent-stepchild relationship is critical because it impacts stepchild well-being (King, 2006; Pryor, 2004), stepparent well-being (Schenk et al., 2009; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; White & Gilbreth, 2001), the strength of the biological parent-child relationship (King et al., 2014), stepfamily adjustment (Coleman et al., 2000), and parent-stepparent marital quality (Fine & Kurdek, 1995; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Understanding the processes involved in stepparent-stepchild relationship formation may help to explain why some stepchildren have poorer outcomes than children from married, two-biological-parent families as well as elucidating how stepfamilies can have more positive and adaptive outcomes (Lansford et al., 2001).

Most cohabitation and remarriages happen quickly after the start of the new relationship (Bzostek et al., 2011; Cartwright, 2010; Montgomery, Anderson, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1992) and children often do not get the opportunity to get to know their new stepparent before they move in (Smith, Robertson, Dixon, Quigley, & Whitehead, 2001). Smith et al. (2001) found that only 63% of men reported spending time with their partner's child(ren) prior to cohabitation. Additionally, in most stepfamilies there is no discussion of parenting roles prior to cohabitation (Cartwright, 2010; Smith et al., 2001). The stepparents and stepchildren in these families, therefore, are unlikely to know each other well or to have thought about their roles or their expectations of each other's roles before cohabitation. This may be problematic, as stepparents tend to view their ideal role with the family differently from how stepchildren view the stepparent's ideal role (Fine et al., 1998).

Stepparents tend to attempt to form close – or at least not hostile – relationships with their stepchild(ren) (Christian, 2005; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999;

Marsiglio, 2004). Gendered expectations of women's and men's roles in families are present in stepfamilies as well, with stepmothers tending to take on a mothering role toward their stepchildren and stepfathers' roles tending to involve less direct caretaking of children (Levin, 1997; Schmeeckle, 2007; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Stepmothers in particular tend to find their relationships with their stepchildren to be difficult – feeling guilty over their perception of a lack of connection to their stepchildren, highly stressed, and underappreciated by their stepchildren (Doodson & Morley, 2006; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011) – despite their efforts to form close relationships with their stepchildren (Christian, 2005).

How roles and relationships in stepfamilies are negotiated is still unclear. Although many researchers have found that stepparent-stepchild relationships tend to become more negative over time (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), not all relationships follow that pattern (Ganong et al., 2011; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). Stepchildren also tend to experience more conflict with their stepparent upon reaching adolescence and even previously positive relationships may become negative (Hetherington, 1993). At the start of their relationship, it is better for stepfathers to take on a 'friend role' rather than a 'parental disciplinarian role' (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000), because children tend to rebel against stepparent discipline. Early and continuing affection from stepparents tends to lead to warmer and closer bonds with stepchildren (Ganong et al., 1999). However, the continuation of that affection on the part of the stepparent is impacted by how the stepchild reacts to the advances of the stepparent; stepfathers withdraw from stepchildren who rebuff their friendly overtures (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Marsiglio, 2004). Both stepparents and stepchildren exercise agency in relations with each other and positive, friendly relationships appear to take effort from both sides.

Role of the Stepparent and Stepchild

There were two studies which were particularly influential to the design of the current study – Kinniburgh-White et al.'s (2010) research on stepchildren's narratives of relational development with their stepfathers, and Ganong et al.'s (2011) investigation of patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationship development. These studies both investigated the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationship formation and some factors that influenced the type of relationship formed. Both involved interviews with adult

stepchildren and qualitative analysis – thematic analysis and then narrative analysis, and grounded theory analysis, respectively.

Kinniburgh-White et al. (2010) found that in positive stepparent-stepchild relationships, children were supported by their stepfather, felt their stepfather contributed positively to family life, liked and appreciated their stepfather, and the stepfathers were conscious about their use of discipline or authority. Children who had difficult experiences were resentful of their stepfather's imposition of rules and values, thought their stepfather had not properly negotiated rule-setting and boundaries, felt their stepfather contributed to a divided family, and felt that their stepfather had a difficult personality. Kinniburgh-White et al. (2010) developed five relationship trajectories for the stepparent-stepchild relationships: *continuous positive regard, deterioration and recovery, gradual improvement, distance*, and *continuous struggle*. *Continuous positive regard* describes those families where the stepchildren had consistently positive relationships with their stepfathers. In the *deterioration and recovery* narratives, the relationships started positively, then had a sizeable decline in relationship quality, after which the relationship returned to its previously high levels of warmth. The relationships characterized by *gradual improvement* were those where there was little warmth in the beginning and a perceived lack of the stepfather's acceptance, then a continuous and gradual increase in closeness. *Distance* describes the relationships where there were consistently low levels of warmth over time, largely because the children perceived their stepfathers as being authoritarian and rigid. Finally, relationships characterized by a *continuous struggle* were those with continuously low warmth and high conflict; the children who described their relationships in this way often said that their stepfathers were physically or emotionally abusive.

Ganong et al. (2011) identified six relationship trajectories: *accepting as a parent, liking from the start, accepting with ambivalence, changing trajectory, rejecting, and coexisting*. *Accepting as a parent* describes relationships where the children viewed their stepparent as a constant parental presence in their lives. Relationships characterized by *liking from the start* were those where the stepchild immediately liked their stepparent and they formed a continuously positive relationship. *Accepting with ambivalence* described those relationships where the stepparent attempted to form a relationship with the stepchild, who eventually responded positively to their stepparent's efforts while still maintaining some

emotional distance. In the relationships that *changed trajectories*, the children either went from liking their stepparent to disliking them or from disliking them to liking them. In the *rejecting* the stepparent pattern, the children continuously disliked their stepparent and their stepparent made no effort to build a relationship with the child. Finally, the *coexisting* pattern was characterized by relationships which were not emotionally close and involved little interaction between the stepparent and stepchild. Ganong et al. (2011) developed a theory which proposes that the "degree to which stepchildren engage in relationship-building and –maintaining behaviours with stepparents is a function of stepchildren's evaluative judgements of stepparents' positive contributions" (p. 396). The stepchildren's perceptions of their stepparents' possible positive or negative contributions to the family impacted the children's behaviour toward their stepparent and thus the trajectory of their stepparent-stepchild relationship. These judgements were influenced by the context of the relationship – such as their age when the relationship began, their gender and the gender of their stepparent(s), time spent together, and input from their biological parents and other family members.

While these two models of stepparent-stepchild relationship development have some overlap, there are areas of disagreement. *Continuous positive regard* appears to correspond to *liking from the start* and *distance* appears to correspond to *coexisting*, but the other trajectories do not easily map onto one another. The *deterioration and recovery*, *gradual improvement*, and *continuous struggle* patterns do not obviously connect with the *accepting as a parent, accepting with ambivalence, changing trajectory*, or *rejecting* patterns. Although qualitative analyses are situated in a unique social and temporal context (Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003; Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001; Willig, 2012) and thus each analysis would not be expected to replicate the results of another qualitative enquiry, having some distinct patterns between the two implies that there is scope to add to the understanding of how stepparent-stepchild relationships are formed and maintained.

These two main studies on stepparent-stepchild relationship development trajectories (Ganong et al., 2011; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) acknowledged a few limitations and had several suggestions for future research, some of which will be addressed in the current study. The hope is that, by addressing these limitations and suggestions, this thesis research will provide a clearer understanding of the development and maintenance of stepparent-stepchild relationships. The two studies

were limited by their inclusion of the retrospective accounts of young adults with similar social and education backgrounds. Retrospective accounts are problematic because "life story narratives change across the life course" (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010, pp. 904) and young adults may give different accounts of the relationship than a child would. Both studies recommended that future research include more information about the family dynamics that impact the stepparent-stepchild relationship, with Ganong et al. (2011) specifically recommending the inclusion of biological parent and stepparent perspectives in order to gain a better understanding of the ways in which biological parents facilitate or hinder stepparent-stepchild relationships. Both also called for the inclusion of children from stepmother families – either residential (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) or shared custody (Ganong et al., 2011). Finally, Ganong et al. (2011) questioned how previous stepparent-stepchild relationships impact the development of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationships. The current research will attempt to address these limitations and suggestions for future research by investigating the stepparent-stepchild relationship from the perspective of stepchildren, stepparents, and biological parents currently in or previously in residential or non-residential stepmother or stepfather families.

Role of Biological Parents

Research on the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship has called for a greater understanding of the role of biological parents in the development of that relationship (Ganong et al., 2011). Biological parents appear to have a critical role in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships. They serve as the link between the stepparent and stepchild (Weaver & Coleman, 2010) and can facilitate or inhibit that relationship (Adamsons, O'Brien, & Pasley, 2007; Marsiglio, 2004). The parent may want caretaking help and want to make their partner's involvement with their child(ren) meaningful, but they may not be willing to share certain aspects of the parenting role with their partner (Nelson, 2006). Biological mothers act as defenders, gatekeepers, mediators, and interpreters in the relationship between the stepparent and stepchild(ren) (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Because biological parents are so involved in the facilitation of stepparent-stepchild relationships as well as boundary setting in stepfamilies, it is critical to include their perspectives in research on stepparent-stepchild relationships to understand the context in which these relationships form.

1.3 Close Relationships

This research builds on previous studies of the importance of family processes in stepfamilies and specifically focuses on close relationships in these families. Investigating the relationships within stepfamilies allows for an understanding of how each dyad influences the other dyads and the family system as a whole.

1.3.1 Describing and Defining Close Relationships

A relationship is "formed as dyads accumulate a history of interactions over time, subsequently creating a context for future interactions" (Harach & Kuczynski, 2005, p. 328). However, the experience of a history of interactions does not necessarily mean that a dyad will form a close relationship. There is something qualitatively different about close relationships that not all relationships feature.

Although there are a number of definitions of what makes up a close relationship – such as Aron, Aron, Tudor, and Nelson's (1991) conception that close relationships occur when one includes "other in the self" (p. 250) – Kelley et al. (1983)'s definition has been adopted for the current research. Kelley et al. (1983) define a close relationship as "one of strong, frequent, and diverse interdependence that lasts over a considerable period of time" (p. 38). In other words, close relationships are characterized by the strength, frequency and diversity of interactions as well as the duration of the relationship. Close relationships can be friendships, dating relationships, marriages, parent-child relationships, or other familial relationships. These relationships make life meaningful (Klinger, 1977) and it is important to people that their close relationships are strong (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976). This may be particularly true of close relationships which occur within the family, which are central to health and happiness (Kelley et al., 1983).

Close relationships are developed through "interdependent, enduring, and reciprocal interactions" (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997, p. 750). Relationship formation and maintenance is a complex process and does not always result in long-lasting relationships or consistently close relationships (Duck, 1994). Close relationships require work – in the form of prosocial maintenance behaviours – to continue, and a normal ebb and flow of closeness is to be expected in even the closest relationships (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2011).

1.3.2 Parent-Child Relationships

Parent-child relationships are different from other adult-child relationships in a number of ways. Parent-child relationships involve a large number and variety of

interactions, as well as a greater interdependence of behaviours, emotions, needs, and goals than most adult-child relationships (Kuczynski, 2003). Additionally, these relationships are generally involuntary (Laursen & Collins, 1994) and both parties have the expectation that the relationship will continue throughout their lifetime. Whereas voluntary relationships can be ended, in parent-child relationships, "you are stuck with them, and you have to have relationships with them whether you want to or not" (Duck, 2011, p. 19). This history of past interactions as well as the expectation that there will be considerable future interactions influences each interaction between parents and children (Lollis, 2003).

Traditionally, parents were seen as unidirectional socializing figures for their children; however, this conception has changed and it is now acknowledged that children and parents mutually influence one another (Daly, Ashbourne, & Brown, 2013; Hartup, 1978; Kuczynski, 2003). Parenting a child impacts parents' social, emotional, and psychological development (Palkovitz, 1996; 2002), with their priorities, gendered thoughts about themselves, relationships with others, and their experiences of time all affected (Daly et al., 2013). In this way, these relationships 'socialize' both parents and children, each of whom are impacted by their interactions and relationship with one another.

1.3.2.1 The Role of Continuity and Change

Unlike adult-adult relationships where a wide-ranging change in either party has the potential to drastically impact the relationship, dramatic changes are endemic to parent-child relationships because of children's continuous development (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). As children grow from infancy to emerging adulthood, they experience changes in capabilities and ways of relating to their parents. Additionally, parents' feelings toward their child(ren), attitudes, and behaviours are not static, but change throughout the course of their child(ren)'s life span. Because of these changes, it is necessary for parents and children to constantly adjust to one another's personality and capabilities. Collins and Madsen (2003) explained, "developmental changes of dyads involve mutual adjustments of both parents and children to developmental changes in each other" (p. 50).

Although in early childhood, parents dominate interactions and children depend on the guidance of their parents, children's connection to their parents increasingly moves away from dependence towards a more horizontal power structure (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Lollis, Ross, & Tate, 1992). Children's resistance strategies become

more sophisticated as they develop (Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012), which enables them to more effectively achieve their aims in their relationships with their parents. Adolescent autonomy transforms parent-child relationships by causing the relationship to become more interdependent (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986) but the communication patterns from adolescence continue into emerging adulthood (Willoughby & Arnett, 2004).

Relationships are dynamic and changing (Baxter, 2010; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In addition to changes in relationships as children and adults develop, relationships naturally change over time, requiring relational maintenance to keep the relationship at the desired level of closeness (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Dindia & Canary, 1993). Once a relationship is formed, both members of the dyad need to engage in prosocial maintenance behaviours occasionally in order to continue the relationship (Guerrero et al., 2011). While this may be less true in parent-child relationships – where the parent and child know that their relationship is likely to continue existing even without relational maintenance – these relationships are unlikely to continue at the same level of closeness without some prosocial relationship work. Stepparent-stepchild relationships, where the stepparent or stepchild may believe that their relationship is more tenuous than the biological parent-child relationship, may require more maintenance than other family relationships.

Stepfamilies in particular may also experience large changes within the familial relationships. This is because stepfamilies do not necessarily develop in a uniform way (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). Instead of following a stage-like, gradual relationship development (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005), stepfamily relationships often feature turning points, which are moments that have a critical impact on the development of the relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter et al., 1999). These turning points can be either negative or positive, and reflect the uneven course that characterizes some stepfamilies' relationship development.

1.4 Theoretical Underpinning of the Present Research

1.4.1 Power and Agency

This study is guided by the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997), which assumes that both parents and children have equal agency but asymmetrical power and that the long-term, interdependent nature of the parent-child relationship "constrains the way in which agency is manifested"

(Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012, p. 636). This framework has a dialectical orientation. Agency "means considering individuals as actors with the ability to make sense of the environment, initiate change, and make choices" (Kuczynski, 2003, p.9); agency involves autonomy, construction, and action. Children and parents want to have control over their interactions with the environment, to feel as if they are an independent self who is free from external domination, to make sense of their experiences, and to behaviourally express their agency (Kuczynski, 2003). In this way, agency involves not only the ability for children or parents to influence others through their actions, but also a feeling of control and the ability to interpret information.

Conceptualizing children as agents necessitates that researchers must "pay greater attention to children and young people's own perspective of their lives" (Payne, 2012, p. 400), and "engage with the structures which shape their lives" (Mayall, 2001, p.3). Contemporary perspectives within developmental science tend to embrace the concept of children as agents. Recent studies which view children as agents and afford them a central position in constructing and communicating their experiences have given rise to new understandings of the family life of children (for example, Hogan, Halpenny, & Greene, 2003; Parkin & Kuczynski, 2012; Smart et al., 2001). These studies have illuminated the processes through which children interpret their social worlds and negotiate changes within their families. For example, Nixon, Greene, and Hogan's (2013) study on children's accounts of growing up in a household with a continuously single parent "reflected their [children's] roles as active contributors and agents in their families, as they negotiated family roles and anticipated transitions" (p. 16). By conceptualizing children as agents and childhood as a culturally and historically situated phenomenon, it becomes critical when conducting family research to directly investigate children's perspectives and understandings. Children are not objects to be researched, but rather participants whose perspectives, experiences, and understandings are valued in their own right. This emphasis when studying parent-child relationships allows a more nuanced understanding of individual and relational functioning (Ashbourne, 2009).

1.4.1.1 Interdependent Power Asymmetry

The traditional conception of parent-child relationships is a vertical one, with power and control conceptualized as being in favour of the parent (Hartup, 1989). As Maccoby (2000, p.164) stated,

> Parents have vastly greater knowledge, control over resources, and physical strength. They can and do make demands upon children, monitor their compliance, and administer discipline for infractions. Furthermore, children's strong need for parental affection and approval gives parents another source of power: They can withhold affection and approval

However, parent-child relationships have a number of features which are more in line with a horizontal power structure, such as negotiation, mutual responsiveness, collaboration, and the cessation of conflict without resolution (Harach & Kuczynski, 2005; Kuczynski, 2003; Russell, Pettit, & Mize, 1998). Parents appear to be comfortable accepting influence from their children. For this reason, parent-child relationships have more recently been posited as being characterized by interdependent power asymmetry (Kuczynski, 2003).

The central concept of interdependent power asymmetry is that, although there are ultimate differences in power, both parents and children do have power and resources from which they are able to draw (Kuczynski, 2003). The distinctive, interdependent relationship of parents and children "makes each partner both receptive and vulnerable to each others' influence" (Goh & Kuczynski, 2009, p. 508). Parents attempt to balance the vertical and horizontal elements of their relationships with their children in order to accommodate companionship and mutual enjoyment in these relationships (Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012a). Thus, children should be viewed as holding considerable power within the family unit.

Interdependence is "manifested in frequent, strong, and diverse interconnections maintained over an extended time" (Laursen & Collins, 2009, p. 8). In interdependent relationships, both members of the dyad believe that their relationship is reciprocal and enduring, and engage in exchanges which are mutually beneficial. All close relationships have some pattern of interdependence (Guerrero et al., 2011) but parent-child relationships tend to be particularly interdependent because of their large number of diverse interactions, connections over an extended time period, and expectation that the relationship will continue to be important to both members of the dyad. It is thus useful to conceptualize parent-child relationships as involving functional interchanges between horizontal and vertical power structures, as well as being highly interdependent.

1.4.2 Lens of Uncertainty

Both single mothers and single fathers are more likely to live in poverty than single women and men who are not parents (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Christopher,

England, Smeeding, & Ross Phillips, 2002) or parents who are partnered (Edin & Kissane, 2010). A lens of uncertainty perspective (Burton & Tucker, 2009) acknowledges that low-income parents and their families are influenced by and negotiate constraints in their lives in ways that differ from parents with greater economic stability. This perspective allows for an understanding of how parents – particularly low-income mothers – successfully negotiate this uncertainty, as opposed to focusing on their deficits within traditional conceptions of parenting. Burton and Tucker (2009) explain that this perspective allows for a reconceptualization of dimensions of "women's lives that have been mischaracterized or demonized in some previous writings but are pertinent to interpreting patterns in romantic relationships and marriage" (p. 136). While a lens of uncertainty framework has traditionally been employed to understand low-income mothers' experiences (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Manoogian, Jurich, Sano, & Ko, 2013; Sano, Manoogian, & Ontai, 2012), the uncertainty and constraints which characterize their lives are applicable to many single parents and parents in stepfamilies as well due to their economic constraints (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Christopher et al.; Edin & Kissane, 2010) and stigmatized position in society (Corcoran, 2005; Hyde, 2000; Inglis, 2005).

1.4.3 Attachment Theory

Attachment theory postulates that, across the entire life span, people seek out attachment figures in order to protect themselves from danger (Bowlby, 1969). By forming stable attachments to caregivers or others, people are able to safely and securely explore their environments (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Although attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980) has generally been used to describe aspects of the mother-child relationship, it also predicts that children are able to form attachments to significant others across their development and that each of these relationships has the potential to influence children's adjustment (Howes, 1999). Children who have experienced multiple stepfamily transitions may, therefore, have had multiple attachment relationships with different caregivers during the course of their childhood. When a child is separated from an attachment figure, there is an extended period of mourning and children may take some time before they are able to form a relationship with a new attachment figure (Bowlby, 1980; Carr, 2006). Planitz and Feeney (2009) used attachment theory to conceptualize how previous relationships affected negative beliefs about stepfamilies. Stepfamily members' negative expectations of stepfamily functioning, embodied in negative or insecure working

models of attachment, may make stepfamily members less able to respond constructively to problems within their family (Planitz & Feeney, 2009). In this way, children with negative experiences with previous stepparents – either of the stepparent-stepchild relationship or of the dissolution of that relationship – who acted as attachment figures may lead to negative expectations of relationships with subsequent stepparents.

1.5 Irish Stepfamily Context

Much of the research on stepfamilies has been conducted in the United States of America, where divorce and remarriage is relatively common (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008) and 30% of children will spend at least part of their lifetime in a stepfamily (Bumpass et al., 1995). The Irish context is quite different because of its historically unusual marriage trends (Fahey & Field, 2008; Heffernan, 2005; Inglis, 2005), high fertility rate (Finfacts Team, 2010), relatively recent legalization of divorce (Family Law (Divorce) Act, 1996), low divorce rate (Lunn et al., 2010), low likelihood of getting remarried after a divorce (Lunn et al., 2010), and smaller number of stepfamilies (Iona Institute, 2007; Lunn et al., 2010; The Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth, and Family Policies, 2004).

Ireland has relatively low rates of marriage compared to the rest of Europe and other Western Nations (Lunn et al., 2010). Irish people tend to marry much later as well, with 34.7 and 32.6 years old being the average age at marriage for men and women, respectively (Central Statistics Office, 2012). Ireland's rate of non-marital childbirth has been increasingly rapidly and is currently at 36.5% (Central Statistics Office, 2013). Although unmarried motherhood is the dominant entry route to lone parenthood in Ireland (Lunn & Fahey, 2011), most of the children born to a mother who is not married or in a civil partnership are born to a cohabiting couple (Central Statistics Office, 2010), which indicates that many of those cohabiting relationships do not persist.

In order to get a divorce in Ireland, a couple has to have been married for at least 5 years, separated for at least 4 of those years, and must be able to prove that there is no chance that they would be able to reconcile (Family Law (Divorce) Act, 1996). Divorce rates in Ireland are among the lowest in Europe, with 0.8 divorces per 1000 population in Ireland, as compared to 2.6 per 1000 population in the United Kingdom, for instance (Lunn et al., 2010). The divorce rate has been estimated at 13% (Iona

Institute, 2007; The Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth, and Family Policies, 2004). However, because of the difficulty of the divorce process, researchers often look at divorce and marital breakdown together, assuming that there are many couples who are no longer living as married but who have not legally divorced. When taken together, there are 3.74 divorces and marital breakdowns per 1000 married persons in Ireland (Lunn et al., 2010), indicating that many couples separate but do not divorce. Qualitative accounts from children of divorce in Ireland implied that both they and their parents felt it was something to be hidden (Halpenny, Greene, & Hogan, 2008; Hogan et al., 2003) which seems to indicate that divorce is not considered to be wholly socially acceptable. The relative social aversion and difficulty obtaining a divorce have likely contributed to the low rate of divorce in Ireland. In addition to the relatively low likelihood of getting divorced or separated, those who have been married do not tend to re-partner, and when they do, they overwhelmingly cohabit rather than remarry (Lunn et al., 2010). Taken together with the high proportion of non-marital births (Central Statistics Office, 2013), these data indicate that stepfamilies in Ireland are unlikely to be formed through the traditional marriage-divorce-remarriage pathway. This is in keeping with American stepfamily formation processes, where most stepfamilies are not formed from a divorce followed by remarriage (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008).

As compared to other Western countries, stepfamilies remain relatively rare in Ireland. Residential stepfamilies account for approximately 13% of households in the United States (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008), nearly 13% of households in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2012), 8% of households in France (Mignot, 2008), and just over 5% of households in the United Kingdom (Office for National Statistics, 2007). Approximately 2.5% of children in Ireland are living in stepfamily at any given time (Lunn & Fahey, 2011), although more children are likely to experience living in a stepfamily at some point during their childhood (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008) and this number is likely an underestimation of the number of current stepfamilies as some stepfamilies do not classify themselves as such (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013).

There has been very little examination of the stepfamily experience in Ireland. There is only one study which focuses directly on the stepfamily experience in Ireland; it investigated stepfamily adoption through Adoption Board records (Loftus, 2003). While there have been a few other studies which have included stepfamily members while focusing on divorce or separation (Halpenny et al., 2008; Hogan et al., 2003) or

involved extended family relationships in divorced families (Doyle, O'Dwyer, Timonen, 2010), the inclusion of stepfamilies in those studies has been a by-product of looking at families who have experienced divorce or separation as opposed to a targeted interest in stepfamilies per se. Additionally, there has been some research on family structures using census data (Lunn & Fahey, 2011) or GUI data (Fahey & Keilthy, 2013), but these have not focused on stepfamilies. There have been no studies which sampled participants from Irish stepfamilies in order to understand something particular about the stepfamily experience in this country. This constitutes a serious gap in the literature; it is important to research Irish stepfamilies in order to develop support systems, understand their unique challenges and strengths, and to inform public policy.

1.6 The Present Study

The present study attempts to address these gaps through a study of the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships from the perspectives of children, stepparents, and biological parents. The research is underpinned by a conceptualization of children and parents as active agents who each contribute to their relationships and the dynamics within their family. It begins with an investigation of the GUI data in order to get a broad overview of the sociodemographic characteristics of Irish stepfamilies, and then follows with thematic narrative analyses of interviews relating to different processes relevant to the development and maintenance of stepfamily relationships. These qualitative analyses address the perceived benefits of and barriers to romantic relationship formation for parents, how the context of stepfamily dissolution shapes subsequent stepfamilies, the negotiation of parenting roles in stepfamilies, and the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships. In combination, these analyses add nuance to the understanding of how stepparent-stepchild relationships form and develop.

Chapter 2: Growing Up in an Irish Stepfamily

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a demographic context of stepfamilies in Ireland in order to inform this research. This was achieved through an analysis of a national cohort study of nine-year-old children and their families in Ireland. This chapter begins with an examination of the literature surrounding Irish stepfamilies. Following that, the details of the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) cohort study and the analyses of stepfamily data are outlined. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how these analyses can be combined with the qualitative study to provide a rich understanding of stepfamily formation processes in an Irish population.

Two publications, one paper presentation, and one poster presentation arose from analyses by the author of this thesis on other aspects of stepfamily life in Ireland using the GUI data. The first paper is entitled, "Comparison of relationship dynamics within stepmother and stepfather families in Ireland" and was published in the Irish Journal of Psychology. The second paper was published in the Journal of Family Studies and is entitled, "Including those that exclude themselves: Comparisons of self-identifying and non-self-identifying stepfamilies". The purpose of the GUI analyses in this chapter is twofold: to inform data collection for the qualitative study and to provide an understanding of the sociodemographic context of stepfamilies in Ireland.

2.1.1 Stepfamily Research in Ireland

Much of the stepfamily research has been carried out in the United States of America and the United Kingdom; there has been relatively less research on stepfamilies in other countries and almost a complete lack in Ireland. Consequently, little is known about Irish stepfamilies. Few studies give targeted data on Irish stepfamilies – those that do focus on parental separation or adoption by a stepparent rather than experiences within stepfamilies (eg. Hogan et al., 2003; Loftus, 2003) or include stepfamilies in an investigation of family structure (Fahey & Keilthy, 2013; Lunn & Fahey, 2011). The lack of Irish research on stepfamilies is accompanied by underdeveloped support systems for divorced and remarried families (Hogan et al., 2003). In order to obtain meaningful accounts of the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, it is necessary to understand gain a broader picture of stepfamily life in Ireland.

Stepfamilies in Ireland may face different challenges than stepfamilies in other Western nations. Although informal marital separations have long occurred in Ireland, divorce was only legalized in 1996 and divorces are comparatively difficult to obtain – requiring at least five years of marriage and four years of separation (Family Law (Divorce) Act, 1996). Consequently, Ireland has the lowest divorce rate in the European Union (CSO, 2010) and fewer families may become stepfamilies via a traditional marriage-divorce-remarriage trajectory. Research in other countries indicates that one of the routes to stepfamilihood is not through divorce or marital separation but rather through single-parenthood or the dissolution of a cohabiting relationship (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). More than 36% of children born in Ireland in 2013 were born to unmarried parents (Central Statistics Office, 2013), indicating that this may be a route to stepfamily formation. However, lone parents in Ireland may be relatively unlikely to re-partner (Lunn & Fahey, 2011) as compared to other countries. Because of the divorce laws in Ireland and the relative infrequency of re-partnering, it is important to investigate the frequency of stepfamilies and the experience of family structure change in Irish families rather than taking comparative information from elsewhere and applying it to Ireland.

The GUI study is the first nationally representative, cohort study of children and their families in Ireland. It aimed to "describe the lives of Irish children, to establish what is typical and normal, as well as what is atypical and problematic, in order to improve Irish policy and services" (Greene et al., 2010, p. 5) through structured interviews with thousands of children and their families. The overall GUI study included two cohorts of children – an infant cohort which began when the children were aged nine months and a child cohort which began when the children were nine years old.

The aim of this chapter is to inform the sampling and method of the qualitative research on stepfamily processes and the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships by providing a demographic context. These analyses attempt to answer three research questions:

1. How do the sociodemographic characteristics of Irish stepfamilies compare to those of other family structures?
2. Do all stepfamilies readily identify themselves as such? If not, are there any differences in the characteristics of those stepfamilies that do self-identify as compared to those that do not?

3. For children who live in residential stepfamilies, what role do non-resident parents play?

This is accomplished through an analysis of the nine-year-old cohort of the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) data.

2.2 Method

2.2.1 Participants

The GUI child cohort was selected from a nationally representative sample of Irish schools which had nine-year-old students (Murray et al., 2010). A comprehensive list of all public and private schools in Ireland was created with a total of 3177 public and private schools which had nine-year-old students in attendance. Prior to selection into the study, the schools were stratified according to five factors: county, gender mix, disadvantaged status[3], religious denomination, and the total number of nine-year-old students in the school. A random sample of 1105 schools was selected on a stratified systematic basis. Attempts were made to recruit into the sample every nine-year-old within the schools which were selected, up to a maximum of 40 students from a given school. In the 910 schools which decided to take part, 9645 households consented to participate in the study; 8568 of them produced data that could be analysed. This represents a school response rate of 82% and a household response rate of 57%. Households where the nine-year-old attended a designated disadvantaged school were slightly under-sampled in comparison to other groups, with a household response rate of 42%. The total sample makes up approximately 14% of nine-year-olds resident in Ireland between August 2007 and May 2008. No remuneration was provided to participants.

In order to compare stepfamilies to other family structures, all 8568 participating families were categorized as single-parent family, two-biological-parent family, foster family, adoptive family, or stepfamily. Two-biological-parent families (n=6507) were those where both the primary and secondary caregivers were biological parents to the study child and indicated being in a residential romantic relationship with

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[3] Schools were classified as disadvantaged by the Education Research Centre in Dublin, based on a number of factors. For primary schools, those factors were percentages of: unemployment, local authority accommodation, lone parenthood, Travellers, families with five or more children, and pupils eligible for free books. For secondary schools, those factors were: medical card data, Junior Certificate retention rates, Junior Certificate exam results, and Leaving Certificate retention rates. There are 657 primary schools (20.9% of all primary schools) and 192 secondary schools (26.5% of all secondary schools) in Ireland that are designated as disadvantaged based on the above factors (Department of Education and Skills, 2015).

one another. Single-parent families (n=1552) were those where a biological parent lived with the study child but did not have a residential romantic partner. Stepfamilies (n=297) were those where a child lived with one of their biological parents and with their biological parent's romantic partner. Adoptive families (n=38) were those where neither caregiver was a biological parent of the study child and either the primary or secondary caregiver indicated that both caregivers were adoptive parents. Foster families (n=33) were those where neither caregiver was biologically related to the study child and either the primary or secondary caregiver indicated that they were foster parents. In 141 of the participating families, participants' responses conflicted with one another in such a way that it was not possible to categorize them.

From this larger cohort of 8568 families, this analysis focused on participating children who were residential stepchildren (n=297); this represents 3.5% of the overall sample. Families were classified as a stepfamily only if the nine-year-old study child was the stepchild. In order to be considered a stepchild in this research, the child must have been living at home with one biological parent and with their biological parent's romantic partner. Of these 297 residential stepchildren, 153 were male and 143 were female. The stepfamilies had been living together for an average of 4.8 years (SD=4.0). Because the focus of the study was on intra-household relationships, it was not possible to identify non-residential stepchildren in this sample.

The majority of participating stepchildren were born in Ireland (n=267). Primary caregivers tended to speak English (n=295) or Irish (n=31) with their children. They were approximately evenly split between living in an urban area (n=145) and a rural area (n=152). These reflect the trends found in the overall nine-year-old child cohort.

Upon investigation of the GUI data, it became clear that some participating families fit the academic definition of a residential stepfamily in that they included a child who lived with one biological parent and their biological parent's romantic partner, but who did not indicate in their responses that they were part of a stepfamily. Families were considered self-identifying (n=263) if either the primary or secondary caregiver listed themselves as a stepparent or if the primary caregiver listed any member of the household as a stepparent and where one caregiver said they were the biological parent of the child and the other did not. They were considered non-self-identifying (n=34) if a biological parent said they were currently in a cohabiting relationship with someone who did not identify as the biological parent of the child. In

those cases, the primary or secondary caregiver listed the stepparent as either "parent", "adoptive parent", or "other nonrelative".

The majority of non-self-identifying stepfamilies (n=25) were those where a caregiver considered the stepparent to be a "parent" or "adoptive parent". A smaller group of non-self-identifying stepfamilies (n=9) were those where the stepparent was classified as "other nonrelative", and presumably was not considered to be a stepparent because of their lack of parental involvement with the study child. Because of the small numbers of non-self-identifying stepfamilies where the stepparent was considered an "other non-relative" and the presumption that these families may differ from non-self-identifying stepfamilies where the stepparent was considered to be a "parent", those families who indicated that the stepparent was an "other non-relative" were excluded from comparisons of self-identifying and non-self-identifying stepfamilies. As such, those comparisons in this chapter focus on households with one biological parent and his/her romantic partner who is not biologically related to the study child, where they either self-identify as a stepfamily or do not identify as a stepfamily because both identify as parents.

The data were weighted prior to analysis to ensure that the structure of the sample was consistent with that of the population. The Central Statistics Office tabulated population distributions based on the 2006 Census of Population and the weighting of the data is derived from their tabulations (Williams et al., 2009).

2.2.2 Measures

Sociodemographic information was collected through interviews with both the primary and secondary caregivers, where applicable (Murray et al., 2010). Both primary and participating secondary caregivers were asked about their age, gender, ethnicity, education, religion, religiosity, current work situation, and annual household income, among other questions. Primary caregivers were asked to indicate the nature of their relationship and the study child's relationship with each member of the household. This information was used to determine marital status, whether the stepfamily was simple (one where there are no children in the household who are stepsiblings or half siblings to the study child) or complex (one which includes resident stepsiblings or half siblings to the stepchild), and to determine self-identifying and non-self-identifying stepfamilies. This household information was further used to determine the number of resident children – this includes biological, step, adopted, and foster children. Both caregivers were asked whether they had adopted the child; if one caregiver claimed a

biological parental relationship to the child and the other said they had adopted the child, the family was classified as involving a stepfamily adoption. While adoptive stepfamilies may have established a legal relationship, many still self-identified as stepfamilies in this study, indicating that there was not a consensus about their roles or labels. Based on Stewart's (2010) finding that adopted stepchildren are relatively dissimilar demographically to other adopted children, families where the stepparent had adopted the stepchild were classified as stepfamilies in these analyses.

Both primary and secondary caregivers were asked about the non-resident parent; the biological parents' responses were used in these analyses because they were presumed to have the most information about the non-resident parent and their child's relationship with the child's non-resident parent. The biological parent was asked about their relationship with the non-resident parent when the study child was conceived, the length of that relationship, the contact the study child has with their non-resident parent, and the driving distance to the non-resident parent from the resident parent's home. They were also asked about the custody arrangement, financial contributions, and whether they thought that they shared parenting with the non-resident parent.

2.2.3 Procedure

The Growing Up in Ireland fieldwork was carried out by trained interviewers who administered both home- and school-based interview components. Information was collected through a series of computer-assisted interviews and paper and pencil interviews with the study child, their primary caregiver, secondary caregiver, teacher, and principal. The primary caregiver interview was conducted with the residential guardian who identified that they provided the most care to and knew the most about the study child. The secondary caregiver interview was conducted with the residential spouse or partner of the primary caregiver. For the purposes of these analyses, only the primary and caregiver data was examined.

2.3 Results

2.3.1 Demographics

Children in residential stepfamilies made up 3.5% of the overall sample (See Table 2.1). More stepfamilies were cohabiting than were married (58.7% as compared to 41.3%), $\chi^2(1, N=286)=7.40, p<0.05$. They also tended to be simple rather than complex (61.2% as compared to 38.8%), $\chi^2(1, N=289)=12.88, p<0.001$. Biological parents in these families were predominately Irish (89.5%) and Catholic (80.0%). Most

of the participants had some religious belief, with 46.8% rating themselves rating themselves as being "a little" religious and 35.4% giving a rating that indicated greater religiosity, including "quite", "very much so", and "extremely" religious; the other 17.8% participants indicated no religiosity, did not know, or refused to respond.

The vast majority of the residential stepchildren had a stepfather (93.8%) as opposed to a stepmother (6.2%), $\chi^2(1, N=281)=217.11$, $p<0.001$. None of the stepfathers acted as a primary caregiver to the study child whereas 73.4% of the stepmothers were primary caregivers to the study child in the stepmother families, $\chi^2(1, N=290)=205.66$, $p<0.001$. 5.8% of the study children had been adopted by their stepparent.

Table 2.1. Sociodemographic comparisons of primary caregivers in different family types

	Stepfamily (n = 297)	Single Parent Family (n = 1552)	Two-Bio Parent Family (n = 6507)	Foster Family (n = 33)	Adoptive Family (n = 38)
Married (%)[a]	41.3	0.0	96.0	84.8	92.1
Resident Children (M (SD)	1.4 (1.2)	1.4 (1.2)	2.0 (1.2)	1.4 (1.5)	1.2 (1.1)
Ethnicity (%)					
Irish	89.5	89.7	91.8	100	92.0
Other white	7.1	5.9	5.7	0.0	0.0
African	1.7	2.7	0.8	0.0	7.9
Religiosity (%)					
Not at all	17.8	13.8	7.2	0.0	2.6
A little	46.8	42.3	36.3	45.5	28.9
≥ Quite	35.4	43.9	56.4	54.5	68.4
Denomination					
Catholic	80.0	79.8	86.5	81.2	94.7
Other Christian	5.1	6.4	5.4	0.0	0.0
No denomination	14.9	12.6	7.1	18.8	2.6
Education (%)					
Primary school or less	6.1	10.3	4.8	39.3	5.2
Lower secondary school	31.8	27.6	22.5	15.2	21.1
Upper secondary school	33.1	32.5	38.2	15.2	50.0
Some college+	29.0	29.6	34.5	30.3	23.7
Employment status (%)					
Full-time employed	52.6	49.8	54.8	48.5	60.5
Home duties	34.3	33.2	39.9	36.3	39.5
Unemployed	1.0	1.8	0.6	15.2	0.0
Student	12.1	15.2	4.7	0.0	0.0
Annual household income (€) (M (SD))	45143 (20738)	29170 (22891)	55259 (32771)	42124 (22515)	68446 (59147)

Notes. Both percentages and Ns are weighted. Not all participants responded to each question, therefore some cells differ in N.

[a] This percentage only includes couples who were married and cohabiting at the time of the interview.

2.3.2 'Step' Identification

Self-identifying stepfamilies (n=263) are those where at least one caregiver listed themselves as a stepparent, or where the primary caregiver listed a member of the household as a stepparent and one caregiver said they were the biological parent of the child and the other caregiver did not. Non-self-identifying stepfamilies (n=25) are those where a biological parent said that they were currently in a residential relationship with someone who did not identify as the biological parent of the study child; the stepparent in these cases was categorized as a "parent", or "adoptive parent". A Pearson's chi-square analysis found that non-self-identifying stepfamilies were more likely to be married (89.0%) than self-identifying stepfamilies (37.8%), $\chi^2(1, N=286)=24.96$, $p<0.001$, $\varphi=0.30$ (a medium effect). Non-self-identifying stepfamilies were less likely to be complex (7.5%) than self-identifying stepfamilies (42.4%), $\chi^2(1, N=287)=11.29$, $p<0.05$, $\varphi=0.20$ (a small effect). Non-self-identifying stepfamilies were more likely to be stepmother families (29.8%) than self-identifying stepfamilies were (3.6%), $\chi^2(1, N=280)=26.80$, $p<0.001$, $\varphi=0.31$ (a medium effect). Non-self-identifying stepfamilies were more likely to have involved the adoption of the study child by the stepparent (44.4%) than self-identifying stepfamilies (2.3%), $\chi^2(1, N=288)=71.54$, $p<0.001$, $\varphi=0.50$ (a large effect).

2.3.3 The Non-Resident Parent

Most stepfamilies were not formed after the dissolution of a marriage – only 24.9% of parents were married and living together when the mother became pregnant with the study child. Instead, parents tended to be going out but not living together (39.8%) or cohabiting (26.7%) when the study child was conceived. Some of these relationships ended before the child was born (5.8%), with a further 82.2% ending after the child was born but before they turned five years old, and 12.0% ending after the age of five.

Analysis of the contact stepchildren had with their non-resident parent showed there was large variation in the amount of contact, with a majority of children (57.4%) seeing their non-resident parent at least once every two weeks but 22.8% seeing them less than once a year or never. 44.4% of children in stepfamilies lived within a 30 minute drive of their non-resident parent, but many non-resident parents lived considerably further away, with 20.2% living outside of the country. Many non-resident parents did not have any custody agreement with the resident parent (47.4%), although some had formal (31.9%) and others had informal custody arrangements

(20.8%). Resident biological parents tended to say that they did not share parenting with the non-resident parent (69.9%).

There was considerable variation in how much non-resident parents contributed monetarily to the resident parent per year (*M*= €2587.77, *SD*= €6230.16). More than half of the non-resident parents for whom information was available did not contribute monetarily to their child at all (55.2%). The average yearly payment of those who did monetarily contribute to their child was €5773.96 (*SD*= €8278.55). Eighty-four percent of the non-resident parents who monetarily contributed paid €100 a week or less.

2.4 Conclusions

The purpose of this analysis of the GUI data was to gain an understanding of the sociodemographic characteristics of stepfamilies in Ireland and to inform sample selection for a qualitative study by investigating how the sociodemographics compare to other family structures, whether stepfamily members readily self-identify as such, and what role non-resident parents play in their children's lives. These analyses have shown that the prevalence of stepfamilies in Irish households with children is lower than the United States and other Western countries (Payne, 2013; Teachman & Tedrow, 2008), at least when comparing cross-sectional data. Stepfamily members in this sample tended to be ethnically Irish, relatively religious, Roman Catholic, and middle-income. This reflects the trends in the other family structures. Most residential stepfamilies were stepfather families and they were slightly more likely to be cohabiting than married and simple rather than complex.

Similar to other countries (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008), these data indicate that most Irish stepfamilies do not fit within the traditional conception of stepfamilies as arising from a marriage-divorce-remarriage path. Less than a quarter of the children in this sample were conceived to married parents and more than half of the stepfamilies were cohabiting. These rates of stepfamily cohabitation are higher than in the United States of America or the United Kingdom (Bumpass et al., 1995; Ferri & Smith, 1998; Payne, 2013; Stewart, 2001), possibly because of the restrictions surrounding divorce and remarriage in Irish law and in the Catholic Church. The young age of the study child may also be an explanation – stepfamilies are very likely to cohabit before marriage (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000; Robertson, 2008) and many resident parents may take more than nine years to dissolve the relationship with the study child's other parent, form a stable new relationship, and get married.

There was large variation in the involvement of non-resident parents in their children's lives. Although most non-resident parents had regular contact and lived nearby to their child, most did not contribute monetarily or share parenting with the resident parent. More than one-fifth of the study children never saw their non-resident parent or saw them less than once a year. This is worrying because non-resident parent involvement is associated with better child outcomes (King, 2006; Schenck et al., 2009; White & Gilbreth, 2001) and a sense of loss on the part of the child when there is little involvement (Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012). Because of the way the data were collected, it was not possible to investigate children's understandings of non-resident parent involvement.

These analyses of the GUI data offered some important insight into the sociodemographic characteristics of these families among a random sample of families in Ireland. However, it was not the primary goal of GUI to look into specific processes within stepfamilies. There is considerable information from the study children about their lives but, because this was a broad study of the lives of Irish children and their families, it is difficult to ascertain what the children thought about their relationship(s) with their stepparent(s). For this reason, this research did not attempt to analyse characteristics of these relationships in the GUI data. Asking children about the stepparent-stepchild relationship would enable a more nuanced understanding of how this relationship is formed (Kuczynski, 2003; Richardson, 2000).

The GUI study largely focused on intra-household relationships; thus, the analyses in this chapter did not allow for a thorough understanding of the relationships of the resident biological parent or the study child with the non-resident biological parent. The resident biological parent was asked about their relationship status with the study child's non-resident parent when the study child was conceived, what the custody arrangement is now, how far away the non-resident parent lives, how often the study child and resident parent have contact with the non-resident parent, and maintenance payments. However, GUI is a broad, national, longitudinal study, and understanding how non-resident parents influence relationships within the stepfamily was beyond the scope of the study. Relationships with the non-resident parent are generally complex (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Corcoran, 2005; King, 2006; 2007) and can have an influence on residential household relationships (Baxter et al., 1999; Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007). This points to the necessity of asking children, biological parents, and

stepparents about the role of the non-resident parent in the development and maintenance of relationships within the stepfamily.

The GUI sample focused solely on residential stepfamily relationships. If trends in Ireland mirror those in other countries (i.e. Stewart, 2001), then many of the children of single parents in the GUI sample are likely to be stepchildren as a result of their non-resident parents' repartnering. It is important to incorporate non-residential stepfamilies into stepfamily research because many stepparents do not live with their stepchildren (Nielsen, 1999; Stewart, 2001) but do interact with them on a regular basis (Doodson & Morley, 2006; Henry & McCue, 2009; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). The qualitative study should endeavour to include children in non-residential stepfamilies and non-resident stepparents in the sample in order to gain an understanding of how stepparent-stepchild relationships are formed in both a residential and non-residential stepfamily context.

A small but significant minority of the stepfamilies did not identify as stepfamilies, either because the stepparent acted as a parent or because the stepparent lacked any parental involvement. The majority of non-self-identifying stepfamilies fell into the former category – that is, they considered themselves to be a parent to the study child. The presence of non-self-identifying stepfamilies indicates many people in Irish stepfamilies do not consider themselves to be part of a stepfamily. Thus, it seems unlikely that they would respond to stepfamily-focused research. However, this group of families are stepfamilies by the generally accepted definition and inclusion of them in future research is essential to getting a comprehensive understanding of stepfamily life (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013).

The presentation of these non-self-identifying stepfamilies as 'traditional' families with two parents in the household appears to fit with Cherlin's (1978) incomplete institutionalization hypothesis. This hypothesis posits that there are fewer cultural and legal guidelines for how stepfamily members should relate to one another and this leads to uncertainty about what terms should be used to refer to one another, what level of childrearing involvement is appropriate for a stepparent, and lack of institutionalized social support (Cherlin, 1978; Coleman et al., 2000). This may be particularly true in Ireland, where stepfamilies are still relatively uncommon and the support systems for divorced and remarried families are underdeveloped (Hogan et al., 2003). Stepfamilies in this sample may have eschewed the stepfamily label because there are clearer rules for how to relate to one another in a nuclear family model

(Cherlin, 1978; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). The stepfamilies that labelled the stepparent as a parent tended to be simple stepfamilies where the parent and stepparent were married; because these families are likely to share a last name and appear to outsiders as a cohesive unit, they are probably more effectively able to 'pass' as married, two-biological-parent families and may thus have faced fewer challenges to the adoption of a nuclear family model.

Alternately, these families may have chosen not to identify as stepfamilies in order to avoid the social stigma commonly associated with membership in a stepfamily (Planitz & Feeney, 2009). While there is no research on stepfamily stigmatization in Ireland, children of divorce in Ireland attempt to hide the divorce from outsiders (Halpenny et al., 2008; Hogan et al., 2003) and some single mothers feel stigmatized (Bradley, 2014; Hamilton, 2012), indicating that being a member of a non-traditional family may be a stigmatized position. Thus these families may strategically choose not to self-identify as a stepfamily in order to avoid incurring social stigma.

The finding that there are sizeable group of stepfamilies who do not self-identify suggests that the inclusion of non-self-identifying stepfamilies is essential to getting a comprehensive understanding of stepfamily life. It seems likely that the processes underlying the creation of the two types of non-self-identifying stepfamilies – "parental" and "other nonrelative" – are disparate and the functioning in these two types of families may also be similarly distinct (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013). In this way, these GUI analyses have informed data collection, by showing the necessity of sampling self-identifying stepfamily members as well as those who do not consider themselves to be members of stepfamilies. Instead of solely advertising for participants from stepfamilies, these analyses show that research attempting to sample stepfamily members should also advertise for those in other family structures. This could involve looking for participants from "non-traditional families" or being explicit about the inclusion criteria without using labels by, for example, advertising for "parents who are dating someone who is not a biological parent to their child or all of their children". Additionally, attempting to recruit exclusively from groups which cater solely to stepfamilies may exclude non-self-identifying stepfamilies from the sample. Incorporating both self-identifying and non-self-identifying stepfamilies into the qualitative study may add nuance to the understanding of stepparent-stepchild relationship development and maintenance.

These analyses of the GUI data have provided sociodemographic information on Irish stepchildren and their families – a group about which relatively little research has been conducted. They have provided a broad context of Irish stepfamily life as well as a basis for methodological and sampling decisions in the qualitative study. Based on these analyses, it is clear that there is a significant group of stepfamilies who did not self-identify as such but should be included in the qualitative study in this thesis in order to gain a more inclusive picture of stepfamily formation. If a comprehensive view of how the stepparent-stepchild relationship is developed and maintained is to be investigated, then many different types of stepfamilies need to be actively included in the sample, as well as multiple viewpoints from each family. The chapter which follows this one will describe the methods employed in the qualitative study, as well as the reasoning behind the methodological choices.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Although there has been considerable research on stepfamilies (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Pryor, 2008) there are a number of areas which would benefit from further study. Stepfamily researchers have called for a richer understanding of the mechanisms underlying the development and maintenance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, a greater diversity of research on stepfamilies in terms of structures and experiences, and a focus on within-group studies of the factors that influence adaptive functioning in stepfamilies (Coleman et al., 2000; Pryor, 2008; Sweeney, 2010). The GUI analyses described in the previous chapter provided a setting off point for further study on stepfamilies Ireland. This chapter explains how the methods of the current study enabled the researcher to directly address those issues through a focus on lived experiences, a diverse sample, and both positive and negative aspects of stepparent-stepchild relationship development. The aim of the qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the mechanisms through which stepparent-stepchild relationships are formed. This was done by taking multiple perspectives – biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren – from within stepfamilies that were at varying levels of residency and cohesiveness. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic narrative analysis.

This chapter describes the research design, methods, and analysis used to explore the development and maintenance of stepparent-stepchild relationships. It begins with a broad outline of the qualitative paradigm and then discusses how child participants were positioned in this research. The importance of triangulating perspectives within families is then explicated. This chapter then focuses on the research methods of the current study, including access to and recruitment of the sample, interview schedules, data collection, and ethical considerations. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of thematic narrative analysis, how multiple perspectives from the same family were accommodated using thematic narrative analysis within the current study, and issues of quality in the research.

3.2 Qualitative Research Paradigm

Although analysing the GUI data was useful for gaining a broad picture of stepfamily demographics and functioning in Ireland, it became clear that there are many questions about stepfamily life and relationships that would be difficult to answer

with any large-scale surveys or quantitative accounts. Qualitative research is a field of inquiry which involves "research about *what a subject matter is* in all its real-world complexity – [it] is a necessary foundation and complement to quantitative research" (Wertz, Nosek, McNiesh, & Marlow, 2011, p. 2, emphasis original). A qualitative paradigm is well suited to situations like those in the current study – where there is little existing research, the sample group is relatively uncommon in the population, and the purpose is description rather than the verification of a theory (Willig, 2012).

Qualitative research challenges positivist accounts wherein "the world can be described in terms of measurable variables which can interact with each other in determinate ways" (Ashworth, 2008, p. 10). The underlying epistemological position of qualitative research is in opposition to a positivist paradigm which assumes that there are objective truths that can be uncovered through research. While there are vast methodological and philosophical differences between qualitative methods (Wertz et al., 2011), these methods are almost always focused on gaining an understanding of the subjective experiences[4] and individual realities of human experience.

Studies in this paradigm generally include considerably smaller samples than quantitative ones. This is because the goal of qualitative analysis is not to gain a broad understanding of a phenomenon, but rather to gain a deep and specific understanding of "the ways in which people construct and communicate meaning in social contexts" (Willig, 2012, p.22). By focusing on a rich understanding of a smaller sample, qualitative research allows for a better insight into participant's agency in dealing with issues in their day-to-day lives than research with a broader focus does (Alanen & Mayall, 2001).

Qualitative research is inductive and interpretive in nature. That is to say that research in a qualitative paradigm attempts to understand aspects of a participant's life via a bottom-up approach of understanding phenomena through the lens of the data. Participants give their interpretation of their world and researchers interpret that interpretation when analysing the data (Willig, 2012). This double hermeneutic means that there is no objective truth from which to draw but rather that meanings are impacted by the social, cultural, and historical positions of participants and researchers (Henwood & Nicholson, 1996).

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[4] Content analysis is a notable exception.

Qualitative methods can be particularly beneficial when the aim is to produce rich descriptions of family phenomena or where there has been little previous research (Gilgun, 2005). It is also useful for gaining a more thorough understanding of participant's perspectives than has been done in previous research (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). The goal of the current research is to develop a deep understanding of a range of behaviours and feelings which impact stepparent-stepchild relationship development, so a qualitative inquiry is an appropriate choice.

3.2.1 Social Constructionism

There are a number of possible approaches to adopt in qualitative research. This study takes a social constructionist approach, which assumes that the world of everyday life is constructed and the experience or description of a reality is all that can be known (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). As opposed to positivism, which assumes that scientific theory reflects reality, social constructionism assumes that knowledge is "socially mediated and that individual experiences are always the product of internalized social constructions" (Willig, 2012, p. 71).

In this paradigm, the researcher always has an influence on how narratives are constructed and how participants position themselves within those narratives. Social constructionist theory eschews the idea that there is a narrative within each participant which can simply be uncovered by the researcher. Through their dual positioning of themselves in interviews, both participants and interviewers impact the account that is produced (van Enk, 2009). In this way, "the researcher does not *find* narratives but instead participates in their creation" (Neander & Skott, 2006, p.297, emphasis original).

The stepparent-stepchild relationship is, similarly, a co-construction between the stepparent and stepchild, with some outside influences. People construct their self-identities and their perspectives on the world through selective interaction with others (Hill & Thomas, 2000). Both parents and children actively interpret the meanings of their interactions with one another and respond to those interpretations (Hinde, 1979; Kuczynski, 2003). The role of communication in shaping reality is particularly salient in the current research where all members of the family are seen as active agents in the development of their relationships with one another. Because the emphasis of a social constructionist paradigm is on the everyday interactions between people, it is particularly appropriate for studying relationships and family (Andrews, 2012;

Arendell, 2000). The social practices of participants in the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship were the focus of enquiry in the current study.

Although the literature around collecting multiple viewpoints of a relationship tends to be described as an aspect of post-positivism (Warin, Soloman, & Lewis, 2007), it is not inconsistent with social constructionism. The goal of collecting multiple viewpoints within a post-positivist paradigm is to gain a less false understanding; the goal within a social constructionist paradigm is to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding. This research includes more than one participant from each family in order to enable a multifaceted analysis. This allows for an understanding of each member of the family's perspective and how they position their role in the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

3.2.2 Qualitative Stepfamily Research

Stepfamilies have been the subject of considerable research in many Western nations (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Pryor, 2008). However, a vast majority of these studies have been quantitative and broad in nature; there is considerable scope to learn much more about the individual experiences of stepfamily members. A number of researchers have called for a greater focus on qualitative research, especially in order to understand processes within stepfamilies (for example, Coleman et al., 2000).

Although most stepfamily research uses quantitative methods, there has been a surge in qualitative (for example, Cartwright, 2012; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010; Marsiglio, 2004; Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007; Pettigrew, 2013; Weaver & Coleman, 2005; 2010) or mixed-methods (for example, Cartwright, 2010; Michaels, 2006) studies of stepfamilies. These represent a change in focus from large-scale surveys which compare stepfamilies to first or single-parent families to ground-up investigations of processes within stepfamilies. There is a need for further qualitative inquiries to help develop theories and gain a richer understanding of stepfamily structures and processes. Further, international research is lacking on this topic; most studies have been carried out in the United States or the United Kingdom, and may not be representative of the multiplicity of stepfamily experiences.

3.3 Positioning the Child in Research

An overarching conceptual framework of the current research is that children have a central role in their own socialisation and deserve to be studied in their own

right. Although this belief has proliferated in social science research and has been embraced by many contemporary developmental scientists, the underlying assumption of many studies is still that parents have more agency and more power than their children (Kuczynski, 2003). Researchers studying child psychology, in particular, "claim to place children as active beings at the centre of the developmental story (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), but in reality they still often fail to take on board the extent of children's contribution to their own development" (Greene, 2006, p. 13). The ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying an agentic model of child development has profound implications for choice of methods and analyses, as compared to more traditional models of child socialisation (Greene, 2006; Hogan, 2005).

The framework of the current study is in opposition to more traditional conceptions of socialisation which assume that children are not fully formed persons (Smart et al., 2001). The traditional conception of children takes a positivist view which assumes that there is a reality of childhood and children are investigated as if they are passive objects of socialization. Further, much research does not consider children to be experts on their own lives and parents are often asked to give details on their children's perspective either as a proxy for child participation or in order to verify accounts. In this view, children are objects to be studied as opposed to people who are the subjects of research (Hogan, 2005; James & Prout, 1990). Although it has been heavily critiqued (for example, Hogan, 2005; Kuczynski, 2003, Harach & Bernardini, 1999; Kuczynski & Lollis, 2001), this traditional view of children continues to be influential and has led to the marginalization of children's perspectives in research.

In opposition to this traditional view is an approach which consists of a respect for children's views, acknowledgement of the agency of children, use of methods meant to access the perspectives of children, and a focus on children's rights within the research process (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; Greene, 2006). This approach views children's perspectives as important in their own right and acknowledges that children are active agents in their own lives. Parents are not considered as proxies for their children. In line with this framework, the current research includes separate interviews with parents and children in order to address "children as people, whose experience of their lives matters" (Greene, 2006, p. 9).

Family research with children comes with a number of strengths – in particular, the deepened understanding of children's emotions and perspectives – but also some

challenges. Contemporary perspectives within developmental science which embrace the concept of children as agents have expanded the understanding of children's experiences of family life by drawing on children's perspectives directly (for example, Hogan et al., 2003; Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2006; Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012a; Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012b ; Nixon et al., 2013; Smart et al., 2001). When the idea that children are agents is taken seriously and reflected in how studies are designed, important information can be gained. However, it can be difficult to get children to participate in research (Campbell, 2008) and to ensure that they are engaged in and empowered through the research process (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Hill, 2006; Hunleth, 2011). By involving children in the current research, there is "the ability to connect generalizations and particularities in ways that provide investigators with a far more textured understanding of the voices of children and youth" (Malewski, 2004, p.220), but this must be done in a way which is sensitive to the needs, capabilities, and goals of the children who participate in the research.

The approach taken in the current study is that children and adults are equally agentic and the perspectives of each are deserving of study. This fits within the framework of the 'new sociology of childhood' wherein research is carried out 'with' children as opposed to 'on' children (Corsaro, 1997). The recognition that childhood is a social phenomenon and that children are participants in the formation of their own lives and the lives of others means that this framework allows for an inclusive and informative perspective to research with families and children.

3.4 The Inclusion of Multiple Perspectives

Much of the research which studies families and family functioning is based on the reports of one person within a family – usually the mother (Phares, 1992; Phares, Fields Kamboukos, & Lopez, 2005). This approach implies that the family is a homogenous unit and that there is a unified reality for each family which can be understood and explained by the participating family member. However, families do not agree on all things and produce divergent accounts (Aquilino, 1999; Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003; Wade & Smart, 2002; Warin et al., 2007).

The mother's perspective is often privileged in research because they are considered to be an expert on their families or are thought to be easier to access than fathers or children (Campbell, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2007; Phares et al., 2005). However, fathers and children also act as agents within the family (Kuczynski, 2003)

and their thoughts and actions also impact all of the relationships within their family. Each member of a household has had different experiences and occupies a distinctive social position and, as such, each member of that household will have a unique perspective (Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003; Smart et al., 2001). Asking only one person within each family privileges their view while discounting the views of the other members of their family (Finch & Mason, 1993). As such, many family researchers have called for the inclusion of multiple perspectives when investigating families (e.g. Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997; Warin et al., 2007). This call has been repeated specifically within the stepfamily literature (Baxter et al., 1999; Coleman et al., 2000; Sweeney, 2010) as the inclusion of parents, stepparents, and stepchildren allows for a more nuanced understanding of the processes within stepfamilies.

It is useful to have both perspectives on any relationship because each relationship involves bidirectional influences and is made up of the interactions and perspectives of each person in the relationship (Hinde, 1979). Both adults and children are competent social actors who are valuable informants about their own lives, experiences, and relationships. As Goh and Kuczynski (2009) stated:

> Parents and children interact as human agents within a system of culturally embedded social relationships. Bidirectional influence comes about as parents and young or adult children acting as agents interpret or construct meanings from each other's behaviours and anticipate, resist, negotiate, and accommodate each other's perspectives during interactions. (p. 508)

Both parents and children continuously adapt to one another over time and produce changes in the other and in their relationships with one another (e.g. Bowlby, 1973). Each of their perspectives on the relationship is unique and involves different conceptions of shared memories and experiences. This method is effective in the study of parent-child relationships as merging the two perspectives allows for a deeper analysis than could be gained from looking at one perspective alone because it allows for a comparison of the children's and parents' viewpoints one the same relationships, roles, and interactions (as in Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012a).

The inclusion of multiple viewpoints is aimed at triangulation of data. The idea behind triangulation was originally that, by asking different sources about the same topics or events, the researcher is likely to get a 'more true' or 'less false' account of those topics or events (Denzin, 1978). Richardson (2000; 2003) has argued that crystallisation is a more apt term because it recognizes that there is no true account that can be triangulated, but rather that every person has a unique perspective. Multiple

viewpoints are solicited, therefore, not to gain a better understanding of an objective reality, but instead to gain a deepened understanding of a phenomenon (Brannen, 1992; Ellingson, 2014; Fielding & Fielding, 1986; Richardson, 2000).

Relationships are co-constructed and should be investigated as such. Triangulation – or crystallisation – provides a means of adding depth and breadth to the understanding of a phenomenon. In order to gain this rich understanding, this study attempted to include as many members of each stepfamily as possible.

3.4.1 Multiple perspectives in stepfamily research

Despite repeated calls to include multiple perspectives when doing stepfamily research (Coleman et al., 2000; Sweeney, 2010), a majority of the research thus far has only included one participant from each participating family (notable exceptions are: Coleman et al., 2001; Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & McDaniel, 1998; King, 2006; King et al., 2014; Pettigrew, 2013; White & Gilbreth, 2001). The current research attempts to address this limitation by seeking an inclusive sample of stepparents, stepchildren, and biological parents to obtain multiple perspectives on the processes in each family.

This research attempts to include the viewpoints of both members of the relationship of interest – the stepparent and the stepchild. Investigating bidirectional influences is necessary to understanding relationship development (Duck, 1994; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). In order for the relationship to develop, stepparents need to desire a relationship with their stepchild(ren) and stepchildren need to desire a relationship with their stepparent (Ganong et al., 2011; Marsiglio, 2004). It was integral to include the perspectives of both the stepparent and stepchild(ren) in the current study because "the study of the parent to the exclusion of the child or the child the child to the exclusion of the parent is similar to studying the sound of one hand clapping" (Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997, p. 457).

Researchers often collect data about the family from resident biological mothers but there has been little investigation or understanding of the biological mother's experiences with or influences on relationships in stepfamilies (Cartwright, 2012; Horwitz, 2001; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Relationship development can be heavily influenced by people outside the relationship (for example, Cartwright, 2012; Trinder, 2008). This is especially the case with biological mothers in stepfamilies, who often have a very important role in encouraging or discouraging closeness in both residential and non-residential stepparent-stepchild relationships through gate-closing and gate-

opening behaviours (Weaver & Coleman, 2005; 2010). For this reason, biological parents were also separately interviewed to gain their perspective and understand the role they play in the stepparent-stepchild relationship development within their families.

Two studies which were particularly influential to the theory and design of this current study were qualitative investigations of how the stepparent-stepchild relationship developed from the perspective of adult stepchildren (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). While these studies revealed much about the patterns of stepparent-stepchild development, the voice of the stepparent in the co-construction of that relationship was absent. For example, Ganong et al.'s (2011) theoretical model of stepchildren's perceptions of the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship includes, "stepchild's evaluation/judgement about stepparent" and "degrees to which stepchild engages in relationship maintaining behaviours with stepparent" (p. 401) but does not indicate similar agency on the part of the stepparent. The model also includes biological parents' encouragement of discouragement of the relationship as a factor, but the study asks stepchildren about this rather than directly asking their biological parents. The current study aims to add to the findings of these two studies by investigating many of the same phenomena but with the inclusion of multiple perspectives. The hope is that, by including the perspectives of the three major influences on stepparent-stepchild development – the stepchild, stepparent, and biological parent – the current study will add to these researchers' conceptions of the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships.

The current investigation views the family as a heterogeneous unit who have multifaceted and fluid relationships with one another and where both parents and children are agents in their social world (Kuczynski, 2003). It would be difficult to gain a thorough understanding of the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship from only one perspective on that relationship because relationships are co-constructed. Every effort was made to interview the maximum number of members from each family unit. Although it was not possible to get narrative accounts from biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren from each family, there are at least two participants from each household.

3.4.2 Triangulating narratives within families

Triangulating narratives within families is a complex task (Harden, Backett-Milburn, Hill, & MacLean, 2010; McCarthy, Holland, & Gillies, 2003). It involves

collecting and analysing a narrative account from more than one member of each family and trying to create a convergent story of the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship based on the different perspectives and understandings that each person has. Families are not homogeneous units but rather groups of individuals who each have divergent realities (Perlesz & Linsday, 2003; Smart et al., 2001). As such, triangulating narratives is not an attempt to expose a unified family narrative but rather to develop the researcher's story of each family (Warin et al., 2007). The idea is that, by collecting emic viewpoints, it will be possible to better ascertain participants' understanding of and feelings about the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

3.5 Research Method

The current study investigated the stepparent-stepchild relationship through in-depth interviews with biological parents, stepparents, and children. The interview method, fieldwork, and ethical considerations are detailed in this section.

3.5.1 Interview Method

This study used a semi-structured interview method, wherein the researcher had a prepared set of general topics and focused questions, but followed-up participants' responses with supplementary clarifying questions. The goal was to capture participants' narratives of their perception of the development and maintenance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. In order to accomplish this, participants were asked general and specific questions relating to eight topics – the early relationship, the current relationship, discipline and conflict, the non-resident parent, other family, the Irish context, identification and naming, and the future of the relationship. They were also asked general demographic information and filled out a closeness map.

The framework of the current study was that parent-child relationships are inherently bidirectional (Kuczynski, 2003; Maccoby, 2007). As such, questions related to how the stepparent's feelings, the stepchild's feelings, and their interactions impacted the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. The interviews focused on the agency of the participants and their influence on the relationships around them.

The interview schedules were arranged so that participants discussed the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship in approximately chronological order. They were asked about different aspects of that relationship and other

relationships. Participants were first asked basic demographic information about themselves, and then – for those that completed it – filled in the closeness map (see the next section for a description of this tool). They subsequently discussed the history of the stepparent-stepchild relationship and how it developed, leading to the current status of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Demographic questions and the closeness map were completed first because they helped the interviewer to develop a rapport with the participant before delving into more sensitive subjects (Danby, Ewing, & Thorpe, 2011). Questions about the non-resident parent and that parent's current or former partners were asked toward the end of the interview in the hope that a trust between interviewer and participant would be built up at that point and participants would be more willing to discuss potentially challenging issues.

The interview schedules were developed with the purpose of recognizing turning points in relationships that experienced them. Turning points are transformative events that are "retrospectively viewed by blended family members as important in the early development of their respective families" (Baxter et al., 1999, p. 292). Many stepfamily members can recall moments which they believe had an enormous impact on relationship development in their families (Baxter et al., 1999). In order to address turning points in the current research, biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren were encouraged to give specific examples when answering questions. They were asked questions relating to the five dominant turning points found in Baxter et al.'s (1999) research: changes in the household or family composition, conflict or disagreement, holidays or special celebrations, quality time, and family crisis. However, not all stepfamily members will experience the same turning points and some will be more salient – either positively or negatively – for certain family members than others. Thus, in keeping with a social constructionist approach, although the interview guide included questions surrounding the dominant turning points identified by Baxter et al. (1999), it also also included a more general question which was not tied any particular turning point: "Has there been any important moment or event that had a big effect on your relationship with stepparent/stepchild? Can you tell me about that?" This enabled the participants to relate events which were of particular importance to them but had not been identified in previous research on turning points in stepfamilies.

The interview questions were asked in a way meant to elicit a narrative – with minimal interruption from the interviewer except feedback intended to encourage the participant in their responses. Participants were asked broad, open-ended questions and

then these were followed up with more specific questions where clarification or prompting was needed. For example, biological parents were asked, "What's your relationship with your child(ren)'s father/mother now?" or "How did your child(ren) react when they met [stepparent]?" The interviewer had a set of topics and focused questions in order to facilitate the interview process, with a few follow-up questions within each group of topics; those follow-up questions were asked where the participant did not elaborate much when answering the initial question. Some participants were willing to talk at length after being only asked one question, whereas others required considerable prompting with follow-up questions, but all produced narratives which were extended enough for analysis.

Additionally, in keeping with the conception that the participants' responses are attempts to answer the interviewers' question even if they do not initially appear as such (Riessman, 2008); drifts away from the main interview questions were not discouraged unless they appeared to be wholly unrelated to the broader goals of the research. This allowed the researcher to embrace participants' responses that the researcher had not conceived of asking about or focusing on when developing the interview guide. Instead of rigidly following a set of structured questions, when a participant began answering a question with a response that was not consistent with what the researcher had expected or appeared to be only tangentially related to the question – but the participant clearly viewed to be important – the researcher did not stop the participant from continuing and allowed follow-up responses. For example, one of the questions was, "Was it important for you that [child] and [stepparent] get on? Why?" A few of the biological parents gave detailed accounts of their own childhood experiences with stepparents and how their own sense of unwelcomeness made them very aware of how their child(ren) interacted with their partners or potential partners. Although parents' childhood experiences in stepfamilies was not part of the interview guide – and something that the author did not expect to find many instances of, given the relatively small population of stepfamilies in Ireland (Lunn & Fahey, 2011) – this enhanced the understanding of how those parents enacted their romantic relationships and why they valued certain characteristics in a romantic partner.

3.5.1.1 The Closeness Map

A Closeness Map (Appendix A) is a visual tool which was used to elicit information about the people that each participant felt was important in their lives (Hogan et al., 2003; Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012a; Smart et al., 2001). It is also a

measurement of the relative closeness of participants to each of those people. It consists of two concentric circles with the participant represented in the centre of the innermost circle.

Closeness Maps were used as a way of gaining an understanding of each participant's comparative intimacy with others. They allowed the researcher to discuss issues of closeness and distance with important others both inside and outside of the participant's household. A similar tool has been used in a few studies of Irish and British children's conceptions of their family relationships and instability within their family (e.g., Hogan et al., 2003; Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012a; Smart et al., 2001). It was adapted for the purposes of this research to focus on anyone that participants thought were important – whether they considered them to be family or not. The researcher showed the participants the Closeness Map, explained that the circle in the middle represented them, and then instructed the participants as follows,

> I want to know of the people in your life that are important to you, how close or distant do you feel from them? The idea is that anyone who you feel very close to would go right by you here but if you feel less close to them then they'd go further away. For example, I'm *really* close to my sister so she'd be right in here [indicating right next to the middle circle], but my brother – we don't get on with one another – so he'd be out here [indicating outside of the furthest circle]. So just anyone who's important to you – your friends, your family – you can write their names or just put an x and tell me who they are.

By focusing on 'important others' as opposed to 'family', children could include their biological parent's partners even where they did not consider them to be family; this provided a useful way of displaying the relative importance of others in the participant's eyes. Many of the children did not include their stepparents on the Closeness Map and some did not include their resident or non-resident parent – this gave the researcher a better initial understanding of the family dynamics. Participants were not prompted about who to include on the Closeness Map and were not asked about their relative closeness to anyone who was not listed on the Closeness Map when discussing it.

The Closeness Map was also a tool for building a rapport with participants. The interviews started with basic demographic questions and then participants were asked to fill out the Closeness Map, so it acted as a way of easing participants into talking about themselves and their relationships with others. Making participants feel comfortable is an important step in the interview process and can lead to the disclosure of more personal information (Dumont, 2008; Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen,

2003). The Closeness Map was intended to help participants adapt to the interview situation and to discussing their personal relationships with the interviewer.

Biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren were all asked to fill out a Closeness Map. However, due to participants' time limitations for the interview and interviewer error, 8 biological parents, 4 stepparents, and 3 children did not fill out the map. A total of 21 biological parents, 7 stepparents, and 28 children completed the closeness maps.

3.5.1.2 Biological Parent Interview Schedule

The biological parent interview schedule was made up of seven overarching sections (see Appendix B). The sociodemographics of the household were the focus of the first section, including information about the household composition, the level of educational attainment and current occupation of adults in the household, and whether they owned or rented their residence. For the second section, biological parents were asked to complete the Closeness Map and to talk about what makes them feel more or less close to each person on their map. The third section was concerned with the history of the stepparent-stepchild relationship from before their first meeting until the day of the interview. This section tended to comprise the majority of time in interviews. It included questions about the sorts of activities the stepparent and child(ren) did together and what they talked about, as well as how those aspects of their relationship changed over time. Also included in this section were questions on potential sources of conflict: biological parents were asked about rules and discipline as well as about occasions where the stepparent had disciplined the stepchild(ren) in the past. Because the biological parent was generally a significant observer and facilitator of interactions between the stepparent and stepchild(ren), they were asked for their own perspective on the relationship development as well as how the stepparent and their child(ren) interacted. The fourth section was concerned with relationships with important others, such as half or step-siblings in complex stepfamilies, as well as grandparental relationships. The fifth section related to whether the biological parent felt there was anything unique about families or attitudes toward families in Ireland. The sixth section asked about naming practices in regards to last names and how the stepparent and stepchild refer to one another when speaking to each other and to others. The seventh section concerned the non-resident biological parent – the nature of the biological parent's and stepparent's relationship with the non-resident parent as well as the stepchild's relationship with their non-resident biological parent. This section also

contained questions about the non-resident parent's spouse or partner and the stepchild(ren)'s current and past relationship with that person. This section was located near the end of the interview because during piloting it became clear that some biological parents found talking about the non-resident parent to be particularly sensitive. Finally, the biological parent was asked a question about how they would label the stepparent's relationship to their child if they were filling out the census; they were given the four relevant options from the Irish census – parent, stepparent, other relative, and other non-relative – and were asked the reasoning behind their choice. The biological parent's interview concluded with a question about their perceived strengths and weaknesses of their family structure and thoughts on the future of the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

3.5.1.3 Stepparent Interview Schedule

The stepparent interview schedule (Appendix C) had the same seven basic sections as the biological parent interview but there were a few differences between the two schedules. The stepparent interview involved less sociodemographic questioning – this information was primarily collected from the biological parent as all households had a participating biological parent. The stepparent interview also occurred in a slightly different order, with the section about the non-resident parent coming directly after the section relating to the stepparent-stepchild relationship and before the section on important others. This is because the section relating to the non-resident parent was particularly sensitive for some biological parents but appeared to be less so for the stepparents.

3.5.1.4 Child Interview Schedule

The child interview schedule (Appendix D) was largely similar to the stepparent interview schedule. The children in the current study were treated as active agents in their social worlds in the same way that stepparents and biological parents were. The child interview schedule was shorter than the stepparent interview schedule in order to retain the attentiveness of the children, but otherwise followed the same order and included roughly parallel questions.

3.5.1.5 Within- and Between-Household Focus

The majority of children with a non-resident parent have or have had a non-residential stepparent because most non-resident parents form new romantic unions (Stewart, 2001). This means that children may live most of the time with a single parent or in a residential stepfamily, but are also part of a non-residential stepfamily. This can

pose a challenge to researchers, who often focus only members of the primary household, although there have been repeated calls to investigate stepfamilies beyond the primary residence of the stepchild (for example, Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Coleman et al., 2000). Stepfamily processes are impacted both by family members within the household and those outside the household; in order to gain a comprehensive picture of how stepparent-stepchild relationships are formed, it was important to include non-residential parents and stepparents in this sample. Thus, biological parents, stepparents, and children were asked about both residential and non-residential stepparent-stepchild relationships and a group of non-resident parents and stepparents were included in the sample.

There were three households in the current research where a resident biological parent and their child(ren) were asked primarily about the relationship between the non-residential stepparent and stepchild(ren). This happened when the non-resident parent had a romantic partner and the household that was interviewed consisted of a child(ren) living with their parent who was not in and had not been in a romantic relationship – therefore the child(ren) had a non-residential stepparent. In these cases, the resident biological parent and child(ren) were asked about the development of the relationship between the child and their non-residential stepparent. In households where a resident parent was dating or married to new partner, resident parents and children were asked primarily about the stepchild(ren)'s relationship with that person, but – if the non-resident parent also had a romantic partner – the resident parent and child(ren) were also asked about the stepchild(ren)'s relationship with that non-resident stepparent.

The heterogeneity of these relationships further underscored the ambiguity and variation within and across families. It was often necessary to have extensive conversations with the biological parent before their relationship history, current relationship status, and relationship status of the non-resident parent became clear. This underlined the utility of qualitative investigation to study stepfamilies in Ireland; it would be challenging for a survey to anticipate and effectively capture the overwhelming complexity of the data.

3.5.2 Fieldwork

The fieldwork segment of this research involved access to and recruitment of the sample as well as data collection. The data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews which focused on producing narrative accounts of the

development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship from participants. The recruitment, data collection, and transcription processes took place simultaneously between January 2012 and May 2013, with transcription continuing in the months after the data were collected. Analysis began after all data had been collected.

3.5.2.1 Access to and Recruitment of Sample

This research used a non-probabilistic purposive sampling strategy; initial recruitment was done through Primary and Secondary schools and through discussion forums on an Irish parenting website. The sampling was done through schools and the website in order to get a community sample. Much of the stepfamily research in Ireland is based on samples from divorce support groups or family therapists (for example, Hogan et al., 2003), but those families who are seeking professional support are those experiencing particular difficulty (Amato & Keith, 1991). Additionally, analysis of the GUI data showed that there were a significant group of stepfamilies which did not consider themselves as such; consequently, collecting data primarily from stepfamily-focused groups may have excluded this sample. By accessing the sample through schools, it was possible to contact families that do not self-identify as stepfamilies and thus include this relevant group in the sample. There was a concerted effort to recruit a community sample in order to gain a picture of relationship development in typical Irish stepfamilies.

Girls', boys' and co-educational schools were contacted and asked if they would be willing to send letters home with all of the students in their school. The letter said that the researcher was hoping to speak to "non-traditional families (such as single-parent families, stepfamilies, and remarried families)" (See Appendix E). Eligible and interested families were asked to contact the researcher. The same letter was posted on a variety of relevant message boards on an Irish parenting website.[5] Fifty Euros were offered for family participation in the study, although not all families accepted this payment.

A total of 213 schools in the Dublin area were contacted about sending letters home, with 40 schools agreeing (33 Primary, 7 Secondary). 131 refused to participate and it was not possible to get an answer from an administrator or principal in the other

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[5] The website was www.rollercoaster.ie, which features articles and a variety of active discussion boards. The information letter was posted in the following forums: teenagers and preteens, fun activities, step parents, family relationships, special needs, miscellaneous, just for dads, stay at home parents, weddings, primary school years, and Dublin.

42 schools. The primary reasons for administrators and principals from schools refusing to participate were that the school was too busy (n=32), they were already participating in other research (n=25), there were no or very few stepfamilies in their school (n=15), and the topic was too sensitive and they would not be comfortable sending the information letter home to parents (n=14). Other reasons given were that the parents would not be interested (n=5), the students in their school were not the correct age group for the research (n=4), getting a letter would bother the parents (n=3), sending the information letter would interfere with the families' privacy (n=2), and 7 principals gave an answer that no other principal gave and that was not summarized by any of the above categories. 22 principals did not give a reason for refusing to participate.

Inclusion Criteria

Through analysis of the GUI data, it became clear that there were two different groups of families that fit within the academic definition of a residential stepfamily – that is, where a child lives with their biological parent and their biological parent's romantic partner – but who did not label themselves as being part of a stepfamily. One of these groups considered the stepparent to be a 'parent' to the stepchild and eschewed the 'step' label in favour of a solely parental label. The second group did not label the stepparent as having any parental role toward the stepchild; the stepparents were listed as having a romantic relationship with the stepchild's biological parent but were not caretakers to the stepchild. These groups appear to represent opposite ends of stepfamily experience and, because of a desire for a sample which was representative of the varied nature of stepfamily life, participant recruitment for the current study was done in an open-ended way. In order to get a sample which includes many different types of stepfamilies – including those that do not consider themselves to be stepfamilies – recruitment letters referred to "non-traditional families" as opposed to "stepfamilies".

Based on the information letter sent home through schools or posted on www.rollercoaster.ie, potential participants contacted the researcher and were vetted for eligibility. In order to be included in the study, participants had to meet three inclusion criteria. The first two of those criteria are as follows:

1. To be interviewed, the participant had to be a biological parent, a stepparent, or a stepchild.

2. Participants must currently be or have been part of a residential or non-residential stepfamily.

To be considered as being part of a residential stepfamily, the household had to consist of a biological parent, their romantic partner, and their biological child; both the romantic partner and the biological child had to spend at least half the week living in the household together. A non-residential stepfamily was one in which the romantic partner and the biological child lived in a separate household half of the days of the week or more or where the biological parent and child lived together and the parent's partner did not live with them half the days of the week or more. Former stepfamilies were also included; these are stepfamilies where the romantic relationship with the stepparent has ended.

At the start of the research, the goal was to interview a biological parent, stepparent (where the romantic relationship between the stepparent and the parent was on-going), and at least one stepchild from each family. Unfortunately, this ended up being very difficult to achieve because of participants' time constraints, lack of interest from some members of the family, emotional difficulty speaking about their experience, parental gatekeeping, or the young age of the stepchild. It was often the case that a biological parent was very interested in being involved, but explained that their partner or child(ren) were less enthusiastic and would prefer not to be interviewed; these parents asked if they could participate anyway. Presumably, stepfamilies that are less cohesive may be also less likely to have all members agree to speak about their family experiences; thus, excluding these families in favour of those where all family members agreed to participate had the potential to restrict the variability of stepfamily relationships within the sample to those with high degrees of cohesion or family unity. For the current study, where both a multiplicity of views and the inclusion of a diverse group of stepfamilies was important, this led to the third inclusion criterion:

3. At least two participants from the same household or family have to be interviewed for any of the data from that household or family to be eligible for inclusion.

Those families with only two participants were included because of a desire to maintain multiple perspectives while also including the narratives of a broad range of stepfamilies. This resulted in six households with interviews from the stepchild(ren), stepparent, and biological parent, 18 households with interviews from the

stepchild(ren) and biological parent, and five families with interviews from the stepparent and biological parent.

A total of 100 participants were interviewed from 49 households. There were many families that contacted the researcher but were not included in the analyses because they did not fit the inclusion criteria. Most of these were excluded because both they and their child(ren)'s other parent were single parents who had never been in a stepfamily, were first families with only shared biological children, or the stepchild(ren) had never met the stepparent and had not formed a relationship with them. There were also 29 participants who ended up being excluded after being interviewed either because only one member of the household agreed to participate (n=14), they refused to be interviewed alone (n=6), neither biological parent had dated anyone who had met their child(ren) (n=5), the stepchild(ren) were more than 18 years old (n=2), or the family was a married two-biological-parent family who had represented themselves otherwise prior to the interview (n=2). This resulted in a final sample of 71 participants (31 stepchildren, 11 stepparents, and 29 biological parents) from 29 households. Of these, 21 families were recruited through schools, four through www.rollercoaster.ie, and four through snowballing where participants informed their friends or relatives about the study (n=3) or the researcher asked an acquaintance to participate (n=1).

There was a concerted focus when recruiting to sample from a broad range of stepfamilies. Stepfamilies do not form a homogenous group and it is critical to include samples that vary in terms of structures, processes, and outcomes (Coleman et al., 2000; Sweeney, 2010). In order to get a diverse sample, this research includes a range of participants from stepfamilies who were cohabiting or married, residential or non-residential, stepfamilies where the stepparent does not live with their partner or their partner's resident stepchild(ren), and stepfamilies that have recently dissolved. At the time of the interviews, 11 of the households had a resident stepparent, 10 had a non-resident stepparent, and 8 households that had formerly included a resident stepparent but did not any longer. The breadth of this sample allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the stepparent-stepchild relationship develops and the mechanisms and factors that influence its development than a less inclusive sample would allow.

Participant Information

There was a total of 71 participants from 29 households. The participants covered a broad range of household structures and socioeconomic backgrounds (see Table 3.1). The average age of the adult participants was 38.2 years (*SD*= 8.2). The child participants ranged in age from 8 to 18 with an average of 11.9 years (*SD*= 2.6). Although approximately equal numbers to girls', boys' and co-educational schools were contacted by the research and letters were sent home from all of those types of schools, most of the participating children were male (n=23); there were eight participating girls.[6]

Resident and non-resident biological parents participated, as well as resident and non-resident stepparents – all discussed their perspective on the development and maintenance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Of the adult participants, there were 13 participants who were married and living with their spouse, 8 participants who cohabited with their partner, and 19 adult participants were living alone or separate from their partners.[7] All participating households were in Dublin County or within commuting distance from Dublin. All names were changed to maintain the anonymity of the sample.

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[6] This disparity in the genders of the child participants is an unfortunate outcome of the sampling strategy. It is not possible to know why fewer families with girls contacted the researcher to participate. It could be that female children may have been less willing to be interviewed and told their parent(s) not to contact the researcher. Alternately, parents of female children may have decided not to contact the researcher at higher rates from parents of male children. The unequal samples of male and female children who participated in the research resulted in it not being possible to investigate gender differences in these analyses.

[7] Four of the participants who were living alone were technically married, but had either legally separated from their spouse or had separated in practice.

Table 3.1. Participant information

Family	Name	Role	Age	Education	Profession	Relationship Status	Resident Children[a]	Relationship Length[b]	Time Living Together[b]
1	Eleanor	Res Bio Mother	44	Junior cert[c]	Hair dresser (p-t)[e]	Married	2	72	12
	Andrew	Res Stepfather	43	Third level[d]	Electrician				
	Darragh	Child	13						
	Aodhan	Child	8						
2	Brenda	Res Bio Mother	30	Third level	Teacher	Married	2	60	24
	Brendan	Res Stepfather	27	Third level	Student				
3	Éilís	Res Bio Mother	41	Third level	Homemaker	Cohabiting	3	24	21
	Charlotte	Child	15						
4	Brian	Non-Res Bio Father	35	Third level	Taxi driver	Dating	1	12	
	Aileen	Non-Res Stepmother	27	Third level	Social worker				
5	Judy	Non-Res Stepmother	27	Third level	Account manager	Cohabiting	4	48	Unclear
	James	Non-Res Bio Father	38	Third level	Unemployed				
6	Cathleen	Res Bio Mother	35	Third level	Student	Married	3	108	102
	Liam	Child	18						
7	Emily	Res Bio Mother	38	Third level	Unemployed	Dating	2		
	Evan	Child	15						
	Philip	Child	13						
8	Mia	Res Bio Mother	38	Third level	Homemaker	None	2		
	Kyle	Child	13						
	Fearghal	Child							

Family	Name	Role	Age	Education	Profession	Relationship Status	Resident Children[a]	Relationship Length[b]	Time Living Together[b]
9	Paula	Res Bio Mother	54	Primary	Student worker	Cohabiting	1	204	192
	Angus	Res Stepfather	55	Junior cert	Truck driver				
	Aiden	Child	18						
10	Amelia	Res Bio Mother	26	Third level	Childminder (p-t)	Married	1	18	15
	Asher	Res Stepfather	25	Third level	Scientist				
11	Ashling	Res Bio Mother	55	Third level	Childcare worker	Dating	1	12	
	Hugo	Child	14						
12	Jenny	Res Bio Mother	44	Third level	Masseuse (p-t)	None	3		
	Felix	Child	9						
	Leo	Child	9						
13	Mairead	Res Bio Mother	34	Third level	Care worker	None	3		
	Gavin	Child	13						
14	Albert	Res Bio Father	43	Third level	Student	Married	5	102	90
	Darina	Res Stepmother	33	Third level	Homemaker				
15	Jane	Res Bio Mother	51	Third level	Retired	None	1		
	Logan	Child	9						
16	Hailey	Res Bio Mother	35	Third level	Physiotherapist	None	1		
	Blaine	Child	9						
17	Caoimhe	Res Bio Mother	45	Third level	Graphic designer	Cohabiting	1	72	72
	Cathal	Child	9						

Family	Name	Role	Age	Education	Profession	Relationship Status	Resident Children[a]	Relationship Length[b]	Time Living Together[b]
18	Cora	Res Bio Mother	38	Third level	Guardian advisor	Married	2	96	72
	Ronan	Res Stepfather	37	Third level	Homemaker				
	Charlie	Child	10						
19	Oonagh	Res Bio Mother	43	Third level	Buyer	None	1		
	Lochlan	Child	11						
20	Roisín	Res Bio Mother	27	Third level	Nurse	Cohabiting	1	36	6
	Harry	Res Stepfather	26	Secondary	Laser technician				
	Harper	Child	11						
20	Julia	Res Bio Mother	35	Third level	Artist	Married	3	96	84
	Ryan	Res Stepfather	36	Junior cert	Butcher				
	Jace	Child	11						
21	Sorcha	Res Bio Mother	31	Third level	Unemployed	None	2		
	Bronagh	Child	12						
	Desmond	Child	11						
22	Aoibhinn	Res Bio Mother	50	Third level	Teacher (p-t)	Dating	5		
	Sadhbh	Child	13						
	Aifric	Child	11						
23	Stacy	Res Bio Mother	46	Secondary	Homemaker	None	2		
	Sadie	Child	16						
24	Aideen	Res Bio Mother	37	Third level	Student	Dating	1	30	
	William	Non-Res Stepfather	39	Third level	Student				

Family	Name	Role	Age	Education	Profession	Relationship Status	Resident Children[a]	Relationship Length[b]	Time Living Together[b]
25	Ava	Res Bio Mother	40	Third level	Student	Dating	2	24	
	Penelope	Child	14						
	Silas	Child	10						
26	Mary	Res Bio Mother	37	Third level	Homemaker	Dating	2	6	
	Fiachra	Child	11						
27	Sinead	Res Bio Mother	35	Third level	Student	None	1		
	Samuel	Child	11						
28	Katalin	Res Bio Mother	46	Third level	Teacher (p-t)	None	2		
	Tristan	Child	11						
	Willow	Child	9						

Note. Some participants who did not work outside the home identified themselves as unemployed and others as homemakers/caretakers; their self-identification is what is reported here.

[a] Resident children ≤18 years old. For non-residential stepfamilies where the non-resident parent and stepparent were interviewed, this includes any residential children as well as the non-residential stepchild(ren).

[b] Length in months

[c] Receiving a Junior Certificate indicates that the student completed the first three years of secondary school and passed qualifying exams, but then did not continue on for the subsequent two or three years of secondary school. This is sometimes referred to as "lower secondary".

[d] The participant has an undergraduate degree, a graduate degree, or took some post-secondary school courses at a college or university.

[e] The participant indicated that this was part-time or occasional work.

3.5.2.2 Data Collection

The data collection involved separate semi-structured interviews with at least two members of a household. The interviews were generally conducted in participant's homes (n=57) in a private room at Trinity College, Dublin (n=12), or in a public space chosen by the participant (n=2). The biological parent interviews lasted an average of 61 minutes (SD=19 minutes), the stepparent interviews lasted an average of 54 minutes (SD=14 minutes), and the stepchild interviews lasted an average of 25 minutes (SD=8 minutes). The child interviews tended to be considerably shorter than the adult interviews; this is because some child participants tended to generate shorter narratives, and were less well able than adult participants to attend to and respond to questions for an extended period of time. In the shortest parent and child interviews, the mother had not scheduled enough time for extended interviews and so both the mother's interviews and her two children's interviews were considerably shorter than the interviewer would have liked or was typical. The interviewer took into account the emotional climate and the attentiveness of child participants and varied the length of questioning accordingly. Eighteen of the children were aged 12 or under, and the attention span of these children tended to be shorter, resulting in briefer interviews relative to the older children.

The biological parent was interviewed first in almost all cases, this was in order to clarify the family relationships and bring attention to any areas that could be sensitive to other family members. The biological parents also tended to be the ones who contacted the interviewer with an interest in participating and who arranged any subsequent interviews, so they were a natural starting point for contact with other members of the household. They provided the majority of the basic demographic information about the family members.

After the first interview, the interviewer asked if other family members were still willing to take part. Subsequent interview(s) happened immediately following the first interview or were scheduled for a later date, depending on the availability of the participants. Families were given remuneration after the first interview so that there was no financial pressure to have subsequent family members take part. Participants were given €50 for family participation; they received the full sum regardless of the number of participants from the family.

3.5.2.3 Pilot Study

A pilot study was carried out before the full study to determine whether the interview methods and research instruments elicited the necessary information from

participants. Interviews from the first two households comprised the pilot study. Both households were residential stepfather households and the biological mother, stepfather, and stepchild all participated in the research. The interview method and schedule were amended on the basis of the pilot interviews.

In the pilot study, the researcher interviewed the biological parent and stepparent together. However, there are differences between the narratives that one person tells and the performative nature of narratives that are told by more than one person (Riessman, 2008). Based on the experiences in the pilot study, all interviews in the current study were carried out one-on-one with the interviewer.

The interview schedule was also amended somewhat on the basis of the pilot study. The two stepchildren interviewed represented much of the variation in the child sample – one was an 18-year-old boy who had an extremely contentious and sometimes violent relationship with his stepfather, the other was an 8-year-old girl who had a loving and very engaged relationship with her stepfather. Based on these interviews, some of the language was changed to be more inclusive of the broad spectrum of stepfamily experience.

The pilot study provided an opportunity to test interview techniques and to amend the methods where necessary. It resulted in a methodological change from interviewing parents together to interviewing them separately. It also allowed for the interviews to include language that was applicable to a broader spectrum of experiences in the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. The pilot participants were not included among the 31 participating households nor was their data included in the analyses described in the following chapters.

3.5.3 Transcription

Transcribing an interview is not a simple matter of writing down what was said in an interview as there are many aspects of speech which are difficult to incorporate in a written document. As with the interview itself, transcription involves interpretation (Ross, 2010; Willig, 2012). All transcripts are transformations of complex verbal exchanges and can serve only as representations of those exchanges (Riessman, 2008); they are shaped by the person doing the transcribing. As Riessman (1993) noted, "these seemingly mundane choices of what to include and how to arrange and display the text have serious implications for how a reader will understand the narrative" (p. 12). There are a number of issues to consider relating to what information should be included in a

transcription because the way an interview is transcribed impacts analysis and the presentation of the data.

The transcription style for the current study includes the interactional context of the interview as opposed to presenting speech where the interviewer's presence is edited out. This was a conscious decision to acknowledge that the self which is portrayed in interviews is co-constructed with the interviewer. Responses in an interview – which have often been presented as the personal expressions of one person – are co-constructed through the presence and responses of an interviewer (Salmon & Riessman, 2008). It is important that the co-construction of the participant's account is apparent to readers in order to understand the narrative that the participant is choosing to enact in that moment. Although many researchers using narrative analysis edit themselves out of the transcript and focus on oral features of the interview (Gee, 1991), this technique implies that the self that the participant is presenting is independent of the participant's interaction with the interviewer.

A further issue in transcription is whether to clean the speech to edit out disfluencies (Riessman, 2008). The transcripts in the current study were transcribed verbatim, including interjections, pauses, emphases, false starts, and non-lexicals. Pauses and verbal interjections can be critical to understanding the content of what someone is saying as well as the emotion behind it. Although cleaning disfluencies out of speech can make the content more compelling and easy for readers to understand, it also means that the transcript is more incomplete and involves added interpretation. Participants' feelings about the subject matter are highly important in the current study and so interviews were transcribed in a way which captured as much of the detail of the original utterances as possible.

The theoretical underpinnings of a study inform the choice of transcription method (Ross, 2010). Many qualitative studies involving family and relationships edit out the voice of the interviewer and clean the speech of participants when presenting snippets of their interviews (for example, Natalier & Hewitt, 2010; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). However, for the purposes of this transcription, both the interviewer's and participant's voices were retained along with disfluencies in the speech of both. This was both because of a social constructionist understanding of how narratives are developed and in order to be able to understand more clearly the content and emotional tone of what the participant was saying.

Qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, such as NVivo or Atlas.ti have become very common tools in the organization and coding of qualitative data. At the beginning of data collection, the author learned how to use NVivo with the assumption that this would be the best way of organizing the data. However, based on Auld et al.'s (2007) recommendations on the appropriateness of using NVivo to organize data when there is only one coder as well as a personal preference for organizing analysis in Microsoft Word, the author decided not to use QDA software for the analyses in this thesis. Instead, to organize the data, each interview was transcribed into a separate Word document, saved in both a family grouping (i.e. family 1, family 2, etc) and a role (i.e. parent, stepparent, or child) group, and then coded within each document. For triadic or dyadic analysis, the interviews from each triad or dyad were grouped together into one document and coded together to enable direct comparison of the similarities and differences in their accounts.

3.5.4 Ethical Considerations

A number of steps were taken in order to ensure that the current research involved ethical collection of data, analysis, and dissemination of findings. Research with any participants requires following strict ethical guidelines, but research with children comes with unique methodological and analytic ethical issues (Greene & Hogan, 2005; Morrow & Richards, 1996). In order to ensure that the research did not negatively impact any of the participants and was a net positive experience for those involved, the current study involved levels of informed consent and the dissemination of the research findings to participants and schools (Alderson, 1995; Hill, 2005).

This research was approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee (Appendix F). All adult participants were given an information sheet (Appendix G) and filled out a consent form (Appendix H) before the interview. After the interview, adult participants were given a debriefing form (Appendix I) and were asked if they had any questions or concerns about the study.

For the interviews with children, there was an added step to gain informed consent. Resident parents who indicated that their child(ren) might be willing to take part in the study read an information sheet about child participation in the study (Appendix J). They then signed a consent form (Appendix K) agreeing to allow their child(ren) to be invited to be interviewed. From there, depending on the reading level of the child, the interviewer either read an information sheet to the child or had the child read an information sheet (Appendices L and M). If the child was still willing to

take part after that process, they filled in a consent form (Appendix N) and were then eligible to participate in the study. As with the parents, it was made clear to the children that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable with, could stop at any time, and that their interview would be confidential unless they said something to make the interviewer worry about their safety. At the end of the interview, child participants were given a debriefing form (Appendix O) and, if they were too young to be confident readers, the information on the form was verbally communicated to them.

Although all research on families has the potential to be sensitive for some participants, the current study did not evoke a strong emotional reaction from most participants. Some of the biological parents did cry during their recollections, but this reaction to the questions was relatively uncommon and all indicated that they wanted to continue with the interview despite their emotionality. The debriefing form provided participants with contact information of support organizations and the study's researchers so that participants had options of people to contact if the research brought up any troubling issues. However, none of the participants indicated any negative impact of participating in the research.

There are further ethical challenges to consider when attempting to interpret an account of someone else's experience. The interpretation adds something to the original material and the researcher therefore always shapes the outcome of the research (Willig, 2012). Research with children has an added challenge because the interpretation of children's perspectives is almost always carried out by people who are not children (Qvortup, 1994).

The final consideration was that all contacted schools, participating households, and any participants who were not eligible but expressed an interest in receiving the findings of the study, would be informed about the research findings. In order to ensure this, pamphlets outlining the basic research findings were sent to all contacted schools, participants, and those who had expressed an interested. This pamphlet also had the researcher's contact information in case any participants wanted more detailed results.

3.6 Narrative analysis

There are a number of different accepted approaches that could be used when using analysing interview data. The current study uses narrative analysis, which comes from an inductive, hermeneutic tradition in which knowledge is seen as constructed

rather than uncovered. There are a number of aspects of narrative analysis which make it ideally suited to analysis of the data in the current study, such as the focus on the subjective experience of each participant, agency, co-construction, change in meaning over time, and the use of narrative in 'doing family' (Langellier & Peterson, 2006).

There are several definitions of narrative and some are in opposition to others. Labov (1972; 1982) conceives a narrative as having a point, characters, a plot which resolves, and also believes that narratives must be linear and neatly sequenced. Unfortunately, this can impede analysis by discounting participant accounts which do not meet these criteria; some participants generate lengthy accounts that do not immediately appear to have a plot or are not organized temporally, yet they feel to the researcher as if they are narratives and can be analysed using narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). Because not all participants produce narratives which fit into Labov's event-focused definition, a relatively broad definition of narrative was adopted for this research. For the purposes of the current study, narratives are defined as, "all sequential and meaningful stories of personal experience that people produce" (Squire, 2008, p.42).

Personal narratives are "long stretches of talk – extended accounts of lives in context that develop over the course of single or multiple research interviews" (Riessman, 2008, p.6). They are ways in which people fashion an identity for themselves and convey that identity to others. Further, they allow people to make sense of events (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; László, 2008). Learning about others' narratives is important when studying family processes because:

> Stories and storytelling are one of the primary ways that families and family members make sense of everyday, as well as difficult, events, create a sense of individual and group identity, remember, connect generations, and establish guidelines for family behaviour... family stories and storytelling are central to creating, maintaining, and *communicating* personal relationships (Koenig Kellas, 2010, p.1, emphasis original)

Analysing these stories is integral in attempting to understand the lived experiences of participants.

Families are not just made up of biological relatives and kin, they are also made up of memories and narratives that they created together (Misztal, 2003). Narratives are a way in which people affirm or disaffirm their family status; people do not just have relationships, they talk about and perform those relationships (Duck, 2011). Biological parents, stepparents, and children all have their own unique story of how the

stepparent-stepchild relationship developed, but families also have shared narratives about these events. By analysing the way that participants describe their history with another person, the current research hopes to gain a richer picture of how that relationship developed.

Narrative analysis is experience-centred and views the participant as an agentic, storytelling figure. Participants provide accounts of their role in shaping the events that happen in their lives and in the lives of others; there is a focus on the perceived agency of the participants. By privileging the voice and perspective of participants, the research and analysis method itself accords agency to participants. A narrative approach de-privileges the 'expert' researcher and allows the participant to construct their story along with the researcher. Because the current study draws on the bilateral framework of parent-child relations – which characterizes parents and children as having interdependent power asymmetry but equal agency in their relationships with one another (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski et al., 1999) – it was critical that the research and analysis method drew attention to the power and agency of all participants.

Narrative analyses attempt to understand and interpret people's accounts of their lives and the lives of others. Because of the storied nature of speech and interactions, narrative analysis is often used to learn about how participants view their history and development (Riessman, 2008). This makes it ideally suited to learning about deeply personal family relationships (for example, Breheny & Stephens, 2011; Langellier & Peterson, 2006). Because narrative is a way in which people bring order and make sense of their experiences (Andrews et al., 2013; László, 2008), analysing participants' narratives can lead to considerable insight about how they understand the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship and their place in it.

3.6.1 Thematic Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is a term which "refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form" (Riessman, 2008, p.11). It is a broad term which encompasses several different ways of defining narrative and approaching the analysis. There are a number of different types of narrative analysis – including thematic, structural, dialogic/performance, and visual (Riessman, 2008). Although all of these techniques attempt to interpret and understand narrative accounts, they accomplish this in slightly different ways. All narrative analysis is interested in both what is said in a story and how that story is told (Hiles & Cermák, 2008), but some forms focus more heavily on one than the other. Thematic narrative analysis

involves attention to the content of narratives, such that it "assumes that the accounts of individuals in a group resemble each other because the accounts are organized around the same theme" (Riessman, 2008, p. 90). These categories are not wholly distinct, and researchers doing thematic narrative analysis often find it useful to look at structure as well (for example, Robichaux & Clark, 2006).

The current study was interested in content, namely how stepparents and stepchildren develop relationships with one another. For this reason, thematic narrative analysis – which primarily focuses on what narratives participants give, as opposed to primarily focusing on how they give their narrative – was utilised for this research. However, there are a number of instances where the structure of the narrative impacts the interpretation of its meaning and so this analysis has also attended to the way the story was told. This means that although this analysis primarily focused on the content of narratives, structural elements such as sequencing, specific language choices, and displays of emotion were also included in the analysis.

The first step in the thematic narrative analysis was repeated readings of the interviews. Subsequently, data relevant to the research question was organized into categories and inductively coded (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These categories contained all data pertaining to the research question and were not mutually exclusive but rather were a step to organizing the data. The codes were then re-examined, related codes were grouped together, and these codes were sorted into potential themes. As with thematic analysis in general, theme development in this narrative thematic analysis involved searching across and within the interviews to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clark, 2006; Riessman, 2008). However, in thematic narrative analysis, a particular focus is on "theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases" (Riessman, 2008, p.53) meaning that the analysis began with a search for patterns of meaning within each participants' account, and then this search was generalized across cases. Because narrative in this analysis was defined as "all sequential and meaningful stories of personal experience that people produce" (Squire, 2008, p.42), this involved reading through each participants' stories relating to the research question, theorizing from their narrative, and then looking for patterns across the participants' narratives. Thus, thematic narrative analysis *first* involves a focus on individual participants' narratives, *followed by* a search for patterns across all participants' narratives. This is slightly different from thematic analysis, where the researcher "work[s] systematically through the entire dataset … identify[ing] interesting aspects in

the data items that may form the basis of repeated patterns (themes) across the dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18).

For example, Penelope's (child, aged 14) response when asked what it was like for her when her mother and her mother's partner's romantic relationship dissolved provides an example of this process. Penelope said, "I don't know. I didn't really [pause] get what was going on. I just kinda like saw her [Penelope's former stepmother] and we were a bit sad [pause] and she just wasn't there anymore [pause] and yeah, it was just [pause] didn't get to see her for a while." Three codes resulted from this excerpt: the child did not know much about her mother's romantic relationship status, the former stepparent disappeared from the child's life, and the child did not have regular contact with their former stepparent immediately after the break-up of her mother's romantic relationship. These and related codes were grouped together to form a subtheme relating to children's lack of control over the continuation of their relationship with their former stepparents, which fit within an overarching theme of children's threat management.

3.6.2 Analysing Multiple Within-Family Narratives

As discussed earlier in this chapter, collecting multiple viewpoints on one relationship is thought to enable a richer and more intricate understanding of that relationship (Richardson, 2000). However, the analysis of data collected through triangulation – or crystallisation – comes with unique challenges (McCarthy et al., 2003; Warin et al., 2007). In order to analyse multiple within-family narratives, it is necessary to account for the convergent and divergent data that arises when participants with unique social positions and understandings share their perspectives (McCarthy et al., 2003).

The analyses of multiple within-family narratives were carried in a slightly different way from the general thematic narrative analyses. The analysis began with multiple, thorough readings of the interviews. The within-family interviews were read together, so that the researcher was able to directly compare their form and content. The interviews – still grouped by family – were then coded inductively, with the researcher noting any details of interest to the research question. Instances of divergence or convergence between family members were of particular interest; when the participants described the same event or process, these descriptions were grouped together for a more thorough investigation. The focus in the analysis was on primarily what the participants said, but the transcripts also included how they said it (Edvardsson,

Rasmussen, & Riessman, 2003; Gee, 1991; Riessman, 2007), and what the differences and similarities were between the family members in what and how they described their relationship-building process. The researcher then developed themes occurring across and within the family narratives from these codes. Finally, the grouped interviews were read an additional time and the themes were refined.

Sometimes this approach was not appropriate for answering a research question; this occurred when the focus was not on a relationship for which there were sufficient interviews from both members of that relationship. Where there were sufficient participants for a meaningful analysis of a relationship, multiple perspectives from the same family were analysed together. Because of the separate research questions for each chapter and the data available for analysis, two of the qualitative analyses in this thesis involve multiple perspectives within a family and the other four analyses look at the interviews separately. Chapter 5, which looks at romantic relationship formation among parents, involves an analysis of the data from the biological parents only because it is an investigation of their perspectives on the benefits and barriers to their relationship formation. Chapter 6 explores the perspectives of mothers and children on their former stepfamilies and how those stepfamilies shape the context of subsequent stepfamily development; in this case, the mothers' and children's interviews were analysed separately because the focus of the research question was not on the mother-child relationship. Chapter 7 investigates how parenting roles are negotiated with two analyses – the first is a within-family analysis of parent-stepparent dyads and the second is a separate analysis of the viewpoints of parents, stepparents, and stepchildren. Chapter 8 also involves two analyses; the first of the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationship formation from the separate perspectives of parents and stepparents, and the second is a triadic, within-family analysis of the role of the biological parent in the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

3.6.3 Quality

In quantitative research, reliability and validity are thought to be ways of establishing truth. Because qualitative research is focused on illumination and understanding as opposed to causal determination and prediction, there is considerable debate about the utility or applicability of these terms to qualitative methods (Golafshani, 2003; Janesick, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Many researchers have suggested replacement terms to describe concepts of reliability and validity in qualitative research (for example, Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010; Yardley, 2000).

An alternate conceptualization of quality in qualitative research was presented by Tracy (2010); it consists of eight criteria: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence. Concepts of rich rigor, sincerity, and credibility encompass many of the aspects that researchers are interested in when discussing reliability and validity in qualitative research. Techniques for maintaining rich rigor, sincerity, and credibility in the current research are discussed here.

The concept of rich rigor in a qualitative study means that the research includes sufficient and complex theoretical constructs, data, contexts, and analysis processes (Tracy, 2010). This means ensuring that the data collected are rich and the data collection and analysis have been done with care. In order to maintain rich rigor in the current research, extensive field notes were taken. The interviews cover a range of topics relating to the development and maintenance of stepparent-stepchild relationships, and those topics are covered in-depth with participants. The collected data are very rich in detail and comprises a broad range of experiences and viewpoints. Further, the transcription method was carefully considered and 19.7% of the transcripts were checked for accuracy by a separate researcher to ensure their precision. Finally, this research involved a narrative analysis which triangulated the viewpoints of members of the same family; the process of analysing the data in this way was described in earlier sections of this chapter. By collecting useful data and analysing it in a transparent way, this research has attempted to maintain rich rigor.

Sincerity "can be achieved through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and data-auditing" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841) and reflects the concept that data collection and analysis are moulded by the conceptions and biases of the researcher. Reflexivity refers to "the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as an active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome" (Berger, 2013, p.2). In order to ensure reflexivity, field notes were taken after each interview, these included the sense making and subjective feelings of the researcher as well as details about the participant. The current research has also aimed to be transparent in terms of providing "a methodologically self-critical account of how the research was done" (Seale, 1999, p. 468). This account is accessible through an examination of the methods, the representation of the analysis, and the documents in

the appendices (Appendices A through P). The current research was carried out in a way that attempted to be as self-reflective and transparent as possible.

Credibility "refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings" (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). Credibility is related to reliability, consistency, and accuracy in quantitative research; techniques for maintaining credibility include thick description, methodological triangulation, triangulation of participants, and review of the analysis by an independent investigator. The current research has incorporated thick description (Geertz, 1973) by providing direct quotes from participants. Methods have been triangulated in this research by combining a preliminary analysis of the Growing Up in Ireland data with a more in-depth qualitative study of a different group of participants. Participants' accounts have also been triangulated; as with the methodological triangulation, this was not an attempt to get a 'truer' account, but rather to better access the multifaceted nature of these relationships. Additionally, themes were co-generated with the supervisory professor. Finally, an independent investigator reviewed all of the analyses. This investigator compared the themes identified by the researcher and a random sample of blocks of text relating to those themes to ensure that the themes were developed from the text and the researcher's interpretations were credible. This research has attempted to be a credible investigation of the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship through the inclusion of thick description as well as through methodological, participant, and investigator triangulation or crystallisation (Denzin, 1978).

Access to participants, recruitment, the interview process, and the data analysis are all influenced by the social position of the researcher (Berger, 2013). When the interviewer is an "insider" in the group that is being interviewed, this is generally viewed as a way of establishing immediate rapport and a sense of openness from the participants (Gibson & Abrams, 2003; Ochieng, 2010). However, merely being a member of the in-group may not be enough to establish this rapport, and may paradoxically increase awareness of social and generational differences between the interviewer and participant (Ganga & Scott, 2006; Hoong Sin; 2007; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013; Zavella, 1996). The author of this thesis is an unmarried, childless woman whose family of origin is a married, two-biological-parent family. In this way, the researcher has limited personal familiarity with life in a stepfamily. So as not to underscore this difference in experience to the participants, the researcher offered no information on her family or home life to the participants. It is not possible for a

researcher to act as a complete 'insider' because there will always be social, cultural, or personal differences between the interviewer and each participant (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013), but the researcher attempted to limit the participants' understandings of differences between themselves and the interviewer by not offering up any personal information and only giving information about herself when explicitly asked by a participant. Participants rarely asked questions about the interviewer, so this resulted in relatively limited information about herself being revealed to the participants. Most of the participants' questions related to what city or country the interviewer came from, although she was occasionally also asked if she had children.

Although the analysis was firmly grounded in the interview data, it was also influenced by this limited personal experience of stepfamily living; awareness of this was maintained throughout and the researcher continually focused on the potential ramifications of this 'outsider' position on the research (Padgett, 2008). Access to participants, recruitment, and the interview process were likely all influenced to some extent by the researcher's Canadian accent, which immediately identifies her as being from a foreign country. The administrative assistants in schools often especially remembered previous phone calls from the researcher because of this accent and participants regularly asked where the researcher was from. Additionally, participants' responses to questions about stepfamilies in Irish culture and how they believe other cultures view their family structure regularly referenced the researcher's home country or indicated that the participant believed that the researcher was unfamiliar with Irish geography, history, or culture. In other studies, this outsider status has been viewed as a potential strength because participants give more details about the cultural context in order to make their statements clearer to the researcher (Gibson & Abrams, 2003). However, it likely also influenced how they described their perception Ireland and Irish culture – possibly by causing them to gloss over aspects which are undesirable to disclose to an outsider, such as any social stigma or prejudice they may have encountered (Gibson & Abrams, 2003).

Because the subjective position of the researcher impacts the selection, interpretation, and presentation of all forms of research (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003; Parker, 2004), this research attempted to enhance rich rigor, sensitivity, and credibility (Tracy, 2010) as opposed to reliability or validity. The focus of this research is making sense of how others understand their experiences (Riessman, 1993) and, as such, is an interpretive process within which traditional conceptions of reliability and validity are

not necessarily applicable. The emphasis is instead on trustworthiness of the findings and a systematic and transparent analysis.

3.7 Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to describe the design, methods, and analysis used to investigate the development and maintenance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship in the current study. The need for a better understanding of stepfamily processes has been highlighted in the previous chapters. This research attempts to address this gap in the literature through a qualitative research paradigm that views stepparents, biological parents, and children as having a unique perspective and impact on the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. This chapter detailed the process of accessing a varied sample – including residential as well as non-residential and current as well as former – stepfamilies via schools, a parenting forum, and snowballing. The fieldwork process took 14 months and resulted in the inclusion of 71 in-depth, semi-structured interviews from 29 families (29 biological parents, 11 stepparents, and 31 stepchildren). The next chapter will outline sociodemographic information about the participants in this qualitative study in order to provide a context in which to understand their stories.

Chapter 4: Participant Information and Family Contexts

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide demographic and contextual information about the study participants and their families. Because stepparent-stepchild relationships are developed and maintained within their broader family context, it is important to understand the diversity of circumstances contained within this sample. For a family to be included in the sample they had to meet three inclusion criteria: the participating members had to be either a biological parent, stepparent, or stepchild; at least two of those members of the family had to participate; and, at the time of the interview, at least one of the children in the family had to have or previously have had at least one biological parent with a romantic partner that was not the child's other biological parent. The participants were relatively heterogeneous in relation to family structure, history, and socioeconomic circumstances but they all met these three inclusion criteria.

This chapter begins with a demographic profile of the children, biological parents, and stepparents in the study. This includes information on their age, gender, marital status, education, and employment. Following this, contextual factors for each family are detailed. The contextual factors relate to the development of the current or most recent stepparent relationship, relationships with the other biological parent, siblings, the families' financial circumstances, and state involvement. A description of each participant's demographic data does not adequately capture the complexity and diversity of the families that participated in this research. The context of the families is critical to understanding the context of stepparent-stepchild relationship formation and maintenance. Thus, this chapter includes contextual information alongside illustrative quotations from participants in an attempt to give an understanding of the environments in which the relationships in these families are formed.

The demographic data presented in this chapter comes from the interviews of the group being discussed in nearly all instances. At the beginning of the interviews with biological parents and stepparents, they were asked to give information on their age, education, employment, their romantic relationship, and who lived in the house with them. Biological parents were also asked whether they owned or rented their house. Children were asked their age and who lived in the house with them. In this chapter, the demographic information from biological parents and stepparents comes

from their respective interviews in all instances. However, because some of the children were young when the relationships dissolved and thus did not have clear recollections of these relationships, the child information about number of previous stepparents comes from interviews with their biological parent.

4.2 Profile of Participants

As many children, biological parents, and stepparents from each household were interviewed as possible. This resulted in an average of 2.45 participants per household participating in the research. At least one stepchild, biological parent, and stepparent participated in six families; these six families come from seven households, as explained in Table 4.1. In five families both the biological parent and stepparent participated, but no stepchild participated. Finally, in 17 families, the biological parent and at least one stepchild participated but the stepparent did not. Further information about each participating household is available in Appendix P.

4.2.1 Children

The sample contained 31 children ranging in age from eight to 18 years (M=11.94, SD=2.62) from 23 households. Eight of the children were female and 23 were male. There were eight pairs of siblings in the sample; five of those pairs of siblings had the same father, the other three had different fathers but the same mother.

All of the children currently had or previously had at least one stepparent, with 16 having had at least one residential stepparent at some point and 15 having had only non-residential stepparents. Twenty-three of the children had had more than one stepparent between their resident and non-resident parent, either because both of their parents had repartnered or because one or both of their parents had been in more than one romantic relationship (M=2.5 stepparents, SD=1.2), counting current and former stepparents. Twenty-six of the children had experienced the dissolution of at least one of their parents' romantic relationships, and some had experienced up to four parent-stepparent relationship dissolutions (M=1.7 dissolutions, SD=1.3).

Table 4.1. Participant involvement for each household

Household	Child	Biological Parent	Stepparent	Total
1	2	1	1	4
2		1	1	2
3	1	1		2
4		1	1	2
5		1	1	2
6	1	1		2
7	2	1		3
8	2	1		3
9	1	1	1	3
10		1	1	2
11	1	1		2
12[a]	2	1		3
13	1	1		2
14[a]		1	1	2
15	1	1		2
16	1	1		2
17	1	1		2
18	1	1	1	3
19	1	1		2
20	1	1	1	3
21	1	1	1	3
22	2	1		3
23	2	1		3
24	1	1		2
25		1	1	2
26	2	1		3
27	1	1		2
28	1	1		2
29	2	1		3
Total	31	29	11	71

Note: The households are listed in chronological order of when they contacted the researcher about participating in the study.[8]

[a] This family involved participation from two households that shared custody – the biological mother and two of her children were interviewed in her household, then the children's biological father and his wife were interviewed in their household. Thus, this family involves interviews with two children, two biological parents, and one stepparent (n=5), but from two households.

[8] This is the case for all subsequent tables which give separate information about each participant as well, except where otherwise indicated.

4.2.2 Biological Parents

The sample contained 29 biological parents[9] ranging in age from 26 to 55 years (M=39.7, SD=7.4). Most biological parents were female and had their child(ren) living with them all or at least half the time (n=26). The three biological parents that were men either shared custody of their child(ren) (n=1) or were non-resident fathers (n=2) who had their child(ren) stay in their homes regularly. This is characteristic of Irish children, who tend to live primarily with their mothers (Williams et al., 2009; Williams, Greene, McNally, Murray, & Quail, 2010).

Seventeen of the biological parents were currently in a relationship. Seven of the biological parents were married to the stepparent, five were cohabiting with the stepparent, and 16 were living alone either because they were not currently in a relationship (n=12) or lived apart from their romantic partner (n=5). The length of the 17 current relationships ranged between half a year and 17 years (M=5.0 years, SD=4.2 years).

The biological parents were aged between 16 and 36 years when they had their first child (M=26.2, SD=5.8). When the three biological fathers were removed, the average decreased to 25.7 (SD=5.8), which is in keeping with the average for Irish mothers in general. In Ireland, the age of first time motherhood increased from 25.0 years in 1976 to 28.7 years between 1976 and 2006 (Central Statistics Office, 2005; 2006) – the years in which nearly all of the mothers in the sample had their first child. Although the average age at first birth in the sample is in line with the Irish average, the number of teenage mothers is not; six of the parents had been teenagers when they had their first child. All six were mothers. This accounts for more than 20% of the biological parents in this sample, which is considerably higher than the highest recorded rate of teenage births in Ireland: 6.2% of live births in 1999 (Central Statistics Office, 2010).

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[9] Throughout the chapter (and in subsequent chapters), the term biological parent refers to the biological parent of the child(ren) whose stepparent-stepchild relationship was being investigated. In most cases, this was a biological mother who lived with her child(ren). In other cases, this was a biological father who was a non-resident parent to his child(ren) or had shared custody. Most biological parents were questioned about intra-household stepparent-stepchild relationships (for example, where a mother is discussing her child(ren)'s relationship with her romantic partner) but in some cases the biological parent had never had a serious romantic relationship and thus was asked about their child(ren)'s relationship with the other biological parent's romantic partner (for example, where a mother is discussing her child(ren)'s relationship with their father's romantic partner).

4.2.2.1 Education and Employment

The biological parents came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Three of the biological parents in the current study had a secondary school education or less, 22 had at least some post-secondary education, and four had at least some post-graduate education. Single parents and parents in stepfamilies in the United States tend to have relatively low educational attainment (Manning & Brown, 2006; Manning & Lamb, 2003; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002); this is reflected in the Growing Up in Ireland data on 9-year-olds and their families, where 70.4% of primary caregivers in lone parent families and 71.0% of primary caregivers in stepfamilies had a secondary school education or less. The sample in this study has higher educational attainment than would be expected from a typical population of Irish parents in single parent families or stepfamilies. It is not clear why this is. Perhaps sample in this study includes people with higher educational attainment because better educated people are more likely to take part in research (Galea & Tracy, 2007). It is also possible that the education levels in Ireland have increased since the nine-year old Growing Up in Ireland data was collected in 2007 and 2008; Ireland went through an economic crisis with high levels of unemployment starting in 2008 which may have led people to attempt to gain more qualifications in order to find work. Five of the biological parents were currently in some form of post-secondary education, indicating that continued education was important or economically necessary for the participants in this sample.

Stepfamilies and families headed by lone parents have fewer economic resources than families with two resident biological parents (Kreyenfeld & Martin, 2011; Meadows, McLanahan, & Knab, 2009). Fifteen of the biological parents in this sample were employed either full- or part-time, five were students, five were unemployed[10], three were stay-at-home parents, and one was retired. Six of the eight unemployed and stay-at-home parents were living alone and only one of the students had an employed partner, which indicates that social welfare payments were the sole source of income for these families. The rates of employment in this sample are in line with the nine-year-old sample of the Growing Up in Ireland data, where 52.6% of the primary caregivers in stepfamilies and 49.8% of the primary caregivers in single-parent

[10] Parents were classified as unemployed if they responded that they were unemployed or were looking for a job when asked, "What do you do for a living?" They were classified as being a stay-at-home parent if they indicated that when asked what they did for a living.

families were employed full-time. They are slightly lower than the Irish average, where 63.3% of men and 56.0% of women were employed in 2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2011).

The 15 biological parents who worked full- or part-time were in a range of occupations (see Table 4.2). Some were managerial or required extensive training, such as a research and design analyst or a nurse. Others were in less-skilled professionals, such as a taxi driver or a child-minder. A large proportion of the biological parents was involved in some sort of care work for children or families; most of the biological parents were women and women in Ireland are overrepresented in the caring and service fields, so this is in line with employment trends (Central Statistics Office, 2011).

Table 4.2. Biological parent employment classification

Employment Type[11]	Frequency
Managers	2
Professionals	5
Technicians and Associate Professionals	2
Service and Sales Workers	5
Elementary Occupations	1
Total	15

Many of the biological parents indicated that they would like to work but were not able to do so. The chief barrier to participation in the workforce for the mothers in this sample was that they did not think it would not be economically viable to work because of the high cost of childcare. Éilís described feeling that,

> E: You're the bottom of the barrel, basically. Um [pause] there's me with third level education[12], wanting to- *wanting*[13] to go out and work
>
> I: Yeah
>
> E: But *can't*
>
> I: Yeah
>
> E: Absolutely *can't* because I can't afford to.

[11] Occupations were classified according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-8). The ISCO-8 has ten major groups of occupations; only those groups of occupations in which at least one of the biological parents were employed are shown here.

[12] Third level education refers to post-secondary school education. This could be a diploma course, an undergraduate degree, a postgraduate degree, or another course at a university or college.

[13] Throughout this document, italicized text indicates that the participant placed particular emphasis on the italicized word or phrase when speaking.

The parents found that "it's not profitable for you to go out and work" (Éilís) unless they were able to get a high paying job because their salaries would not cover their childcare costs. This was especially true for the mothers who received no or sporadic maintenance payments from the fathers of their child(ren) or where they considered the payments to be inadequate. Mary stated,

> When I had Fiachra [her son], I was in a full-time job and I only- the *only* time- I only stopped working full-time when I became a single parent because I couldn't afford the childcare cause it's so, you know. I had an agreement with Fiachra's father at the time when we split up that he was going to *pay* [pause] uh for half of Fiachra's childcare and therefore I was able to afford to work and he *reneged* on that and started paying 80 *pounds* a month when Fiachra's childcare was eight *hundred* pounds a month. So he went from paying, you know, I mean he pa-started paying ten percent of- of the childcare and that was before food, clothes, uh heat, you know, any of those things were e- were even factored in so, you know, how- how could I [pause] financially do that by myself? I *couldn't.*

For many of the biological parents, their lack of employment and inability to financially support themselves and their children was a source of frustration and unhappiness. Emily described that, "I feel like I've failed because I feel [pause] I feel that [pause] you know, they've got no one else to show them that you get up, you work." Although these parents were able to supply the necessities for their family through social welfare payments, they wanted to work but were discouraged by a lack of affordable childcare and financially viable employment opportunities.

At the other end of the spectrum, some biological parents had stable, full-time employment and were able to fully support themselves and their child(ren). These biological parents were proud of being able to provide for their child(ren). Oonagh explained that because she, "Worked so hard, we have such a nice home … He has nice holidays. He can go to the cinema. He- you know, we would do somethin' at the weekend and, you know, I'm not there goin', "Oh my god." You know? "I have to water down the milk for", you know?" Nearly all of the parents mentioned being concerned about their economic security, but the parents employed full-time were not experiencing the immediate hardships that were being experienced by the unemployed parents.

4.2.2.2 Mental and Physical Health

Four of the biological parents currently or previously had mental and physical health issues which impacted their lives. All of the biological parents who suffered from mental and physical health issues were resident mothers. One was diagnosed and

successfully treated for obsessive compulsive disorder and anxiety, one had experienced social anxiety disorder and depression when her children were younger, and two had untreated depression. One of the mothers with depression was hearing impaired and could not afford a hearing aid – a situation which had impacted her educational and career opportunities her entire life. None of the other biological parents described any mental or physical health issues that had a significant impact on their lives.

4.2.3 Stepparents

The sample contained 11 stepparents ranging in age from 25 to 55 years (M=34.2, SD=9.2). Most of the stepparents were male (n=8). Eight of the stepparents were residential or shared custody of their stepchild(ren); the others saw their stepchild(ren) weekly (n=1) or at least once a month (n=2). Two of the stepparents had children from a relationship that was not with the biological parent of the stepchild(ren), and five had shared children with the biological parent.

Two of the stepparents had not completed secondary school, one had a secondary school education, and the other eight had completed at least some post-secondary education. As with biological parents in stepfamilies, stepparents tend to have lower education levels than married two-biological-parent families (Manning & Brown, 2006). This sample, where most of the stepparents had completed secondary school and attended at least some college, is considerably better educated than what would be expected compared to American (Manning & Brown, 2006) and European (Kreyenfeld & Martin, 2011) stepfamily samples.

Table 4.3. Stepparent employment classification

Employment Type	Frequency
Professionals	2
Technicians and Associate Professionals	1
Clerical Support Worker	1
Craft and Related Trades Workers	2
Elementary Occupations	1
Total	7

Seven of the stepparents were employed either full- or part-time, two were students, and two were stay-at-home parents. Similar to the biological parents, the seven employed stepparents had a range of occupations – some were in highly skilled employment, like a research and design analyst, whereas others were in less skilled

occupations, like a truck driver (see Table 4.3). Hadfield and Nixon (2012) found relatively similar rates of employment to this sample, although the stepparents in their analysis of the Growing Up in Ireland sample were more likely to be unemployed and less likely to be a student than the stepparents in this study.

4.3 Profile of Families

In order to arrive at an understanding of the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship in diverse situations, efforts were made when sampling to interview a varied sample of participants. However, because families in this study can involve multi-partner fertility, previous stepparents, resident or non-resident stepparents, stepsiblings, and other variation, the composition of each family requires explanation to understand the context of each stepparent-stepchild relationship. A demographic overview of the participants does not adequately capture the complexity of these families and the relationships therein; Appendix P provides a summary of each stepfamily in order to provide the necessary contextual information.

4.3.1 Family History

There are a number of routes to stepfamily status (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000). The children in this sample were born to unmarried, cohabiting, and married parents. Some of the biological parents were in a dating relationship when one child was conceived and a cohabiting relationship when another was conceived; therefore, the data in Table 4.4 includes the relationship status of the biological parents when each of the children in the sample was conceived. This data was gathered from the biological parents but only includes information on the 31 children who participated in the study – it does not include the five households where no child participated. Thirteen of the children were conceived while their biological parents were dating or in a short-term relationship, 11 were conceived to cohabiting parents, and seven were conceived to married parents.

Table 4.4. Routes to stepfamily status

		Relationship between Biological Parent and Stepparent[a]				
Relationship Between Bio Parents at Conception[b]		Dating	Cohabiting	Married	No Relationship[c]	Total
	Dating	9	2	1	1	13
	Cohabiting	7	1	3	0	11
	Married	3	2	1	1	7
Total		19	5	5	2	31

[a] Refers to the biological parent's relationship with their most recent or current partner.
[b] Refers to the relationship between the biological parents when the children who participated in the study were conceived.
[c] In these families, the child is a stepchild because their non-resident parent was or is in a romantic relationship. The resident parent has not been in a romantic relationship since the child was born.

4.3.1.1 Current and Former Stepparents

This study included families where either or both the residential or non-residential biological parent had been or currently were in a romantic relationship with someone who was not the biological parent of one or more of their children (see Table 4.5). This is consistent with Ganong et al.'s (2011) research where children discussed the trajectories of their relationships with current and former as well as resident and non-resident stepparents. Some families in this sample had children with different biological parents due to multi-partner fertility and thus one family could consist of children with completely different step-parental figures because their non-shared parents each had partners.

Table 4.5. Frequency of different types of current stepparents

Type of stepparent present in family	Frequency
No current stepparent	6
Resident stepparent only	6
Non-resident stepparent only	11
Resident + non-resident stepparent	6
Total	29

Note: Households are included only once, so if any child in the household has a parent with a partner that another child in the household does not, the family is counted as involving a resident and non-resident stepparent.

The six families with no current stepparent were those where either or both the mother or father had dated someone in the past; in four of these families, only the mother had dated, in the other two, both the mother and father had previously been in a romantic relationship with a stepparent. Five of the families with a resident stepparent only involved a mother living with a stepfather, in the other family the children shared residence between their single mother's house and their re-partnered father's house

making the resident stepparent a stepmother. In seven of the 11 families with a non-resident stepparent only, the children had a non-resident stepmother because they did not live with their fathers full-time and their fathers were in a romantic relationship; in three of the families, the children's mother was in a relationship with a non-resident partner; and in one of the families the resident mother was in a non-cohabiting relationship and the non-resident father was in a relationship, so the child had two non-resident stepparents at once. In the six families with a resident and non-resident stepparent, the children lived with their mothers and thus the resident stepparent was a stepfather and the non-resident stepparent was a stepmother.

4.3.1.2 The Other Biological Parent

There was some diversity in terms of the children's contact with their other biological parent. Of the 31 children, four shared custody between their mother and father, two saw their father daily but did not live with their father, 10 had contact with their fathers more than once a month, 13 had sporadic or no contact with their fathers, and two of the children's fathers were deceased. Comparatively, the nine-year-olds participating in Growing Up in Ireland had considerably more contact with their non-resident parents, with more than half seeing their non-resident parent at least bi-weekly and 22.8% seeing them less than once a year or never. The figures in the current study are more consistent with previous American research which has shown that children with a resident parent tend to live with their mothers and that non-resident fathers have relatively low levels of involvement with their children (Stewart, 2010). It is possible that the children in this sample may have relatively lower contact with their non-resident parent because some father's contact with children tends to decrease over time (Cheadle et al., 2010) and the children in this sample are a few years older on average than those participating in Growing Up in Ireland. Alternately, non-resident fathers tend to be most involved when they pay child support, their children were born within marriage, and the mothers of their children are older (Cheadle et al., 2010); these characteristics were relatively uncommon in this sample which may explain the lower levels of non-resident father involvement.

Maintenance

Resident biological parents were asked about monetary payments from the other biological parent of their child(ren), commonly referred to as maintenance payments or child support. In Ireland, both biological parents have a legal responsibility to financially support their child(ren), regardless of their relationship with one another

until the child(ren) are at least 18 years old (Family Law (Maintenance of Spouses and Children) Act, 1976). Generally, this means that the parent who does not have or share custody of the child(ren) pays money to the parent who has custody.

In this sample, 19 resident parents described the maintenance provided by the biological parent(s) of their child(ren). Three of the participating biological parents were non-resident and thus were not asked about the receipt of maintenance payments. Five of the resident biological parents were not asked about maintenance payments because of investigator error. The other biological parent of two of the resident biological parents was deceased and thus these mothers received no maintenance. Four of the six mothers who had children under the age of 18 from more than one non-resident father were asked about the maintenance payments from two of the fathers. As a consequence, there is information about the maintenance payments paid by 23 non-resident fathers to 19 resident biological mothers.

Table 4.6. Frequency of maintenance payments

		Previous Payments			
		Paid consistently	Paid sporadically	Did not pay maintenance	Total
Current Maintenance Payments	Pays consistently	4	1	2	7
	Pays sporadically	1	1	2	4
	Does not pay maintenance	2	1	9	12
	Total	7	3	13	23

As shown in Table 4.6, many of the non-resident fathers had never paid maintenance. Less than one third currently paid maintenance consistently, and more than half currently paid no maintenance at all. This is in line with American rates of maintenance payments, where 58% of children had not received any financial support from their non-resident father in the previous year (Stewart, 2010).

After relationship dissolution, mothers are economically disadvantaged relative to fathers and thus the receipt of maintenance has important implications for mothers and children (Smyth & Weston, 2000). The most financially insecure mothers in the current sample were also those where the non-resident father(s) of their child(ren) had never paid maintenance or only paid intermittently. Some of the mothers attempted to get financial support from their child(ren)'s fathers; for example, Éilís had "been through court with all three fathers" of her three children. She described her stymied attempts to get maintenance from her youngest child's father:

E: Uh I went to court to try and get maintenance

I: Mmm hmm

E: Uh the first time, he [the father of her youngest child] never turned up … the second time he turned up and the judge just let him in late but he said he had to re-schedule it because he was late

I: Mmm hmm

E: So the third time we turned up and we got paperwork and the judge says, "Well, I can't go ahead with the case unless he has any proof- like proof of income and all that", you know? Fourth time he never bothered turnin' up so a warrant was put out for his arrest. There's still a warrant out for his arrest. I have actually [pause] sorry [inaudible] I have actually gone to the cops, I've gone back to Dolphin House [the family law courts], nobody seems to- I've basically been told for them to pick him up, they'd have to ring Mountjoy [the prison in Dublin] up and find out is there a place for him in there

I: Oh

E: So there's no way of me even gettin' money out of him.

Although other mothers had more success with court-ordered maintenance arrangements, of the six mothers who had court-awarded maintenance orders, three currently received no or sporadic payments from the non-resident father. The mothers generally had difficulty getting regular maintenance payments, with some fathers' financial involvement being contingent on contact with their child or the behaviour of the mother. Amelia stated that,

> Now he's [the father of her child] been giving money but again [pause] very irregularly and it's only dependent upon [pause] him seeing her [their shared daughter]. Um so like, it's not- i- um I don't consider that to be maintenance. I consider that to be money he gives me the odd time when he sees her. You know it's um [pause] fairly inconsistent.

Hailey similarly described that her maintenance payments were, "very iffy and um [pause] uh there were a lot of threats that if I didn't comply with his wishes, the money would stop altogether." From the perspective of these mothers, the attitudes of these fathers were consistent with Natalier and Hewitt's (2010) research showing that non-resident fathers attempt to portray the financial support of their payment as a gift that "can be withheld if the recipient is not appropriately grateful" (p. 497), rather than an entitlement of the resident parent for care of their shared child(ren).

Drug Abuse, Alcohol Abuse, and Other Mental Health Issues

Five mothers indicated that the non-resident fathers had significant mental health and addiction issues. Three of the non-resident fathers had mental health issues unrelated to addiction. One of the fathers had "got mental illness at the end so he was very much all over the place and it was a *very* hard time" (Ashling) and had committed suicide. The other two fathers' mental health issues had less acute outcomes, with

Eleanor describing that her former partner had been seeing a counsellor and Emily's relationship with her former partner ending because their relationship was unstable due to his bipolar disorder.

Two of the non-resident fathers currently had or previously had significant struggles with addiction. One of the non-resident fathers was an alcoholic; his relationship with his partner had ended due to his alcoholism and violence. Paula described that, "I was pregnant at eighteen … he'd [her former partner] kind of start drinking heavily though [pause] kind of a few years later. I'd say he started when Debbie [Paula's daughter and study child's older sibling] was born. That would have been 26 years ago. And then it really got bad". Another non-resident father had died as a result of his heroin addiction; Stacy stated that, "I was very fond of him and all but he had a habit and I didn't want to be with somebody who had a habit … And then unfortunately he passed away". In both of these cases, the mother's romantic relationship with the other biological parent had ended as a result of his addiction, but the children's relationship with their fathers had continued after the end of the parents' romantic relationship.

Abuse

Many of the biological parents in this sample had experienced physical, sexual, emotional, or economic abuse both during their relationships with their former partners and after those relationships ended. Seven families gave narratives of abuse when describing the relationship between the biological parents. Because they were not asked explicitly about it, it is not possible to know whether those seven families are the only families in the sample to experience inter-parental abuse – some may have experienced abuse but not discussed it during the interview.

Those biological parents who had experienced abuse in their relationship with their child(ren)'s other biological parent were wary of subsequent relationships and desirous for a partner who was "laid back" or "easy-going". For example, the father of Eleanor's eldest child, "was violent and everything, so it was a really bad relationship"; she was more open about her feelings in her current relationship but also more disposed to "throwing the towel in":

> E: If you see signs of any of what you *really* didn't like before, you'd be very quick to say, "Listen, you know, like I- I've I'm feeling the feeling that I" you know, or whatever or, "I didn't like the way you spoke to me" or whatever. Yeah, I suppose it does, it can-, past relationships do impact you know

I: Yeah

E: because you feel that, "Oh my god, I don't want to be back there." You know?

I: Mmm hmm

E: Wh- you know? Yeah yeah.

I: Ok. Umm.

E: I suppose he'd [stepfather] get a harder time

These biological parents with a history of abuse were particularly aware of aspects of their new partners' personalities, their partners' interactions with their child(ren), and the desire to have a relationship free from the negativity that characterized their former romantic relationship.

Most of the children who had experienced one parent abusing the other did not have contact with their non-resident parent. Sorcha described trying to get maintenance from her former partner, Niall, and "he attacked me" and now her son, Desmond, "can remember bein' in a buggy and seein' Niall attack me so I don't think there [pause] is ever going to any connection there at all, you know? He [Desmond] doesn't want to know." Desmond has had no contact with his father for many years and Desmond described that he "wouldn't like to see him". Cathleen was verbally abused by her former partner, which also caused her son, Liam, to discontinue contact with his father,

> His [Liam's] dad rang me and was like, "You fucking bitch." Like *really* angry on the phone. "Why are you fucking-, why are you on about these boots? da da da da" I just put the phone down. And, for the first time, I rang Liam … I said, "He's just rang me and he's abused me on the phone, called me a bitch" and I told him the truth and I'd never done that before … And he [Liam] said, "And I'm never gonna speak to him again until he apologizes to you." And he hasn't spoken to him since then.

For the children who continued contact with their non-resident parents after experiencing this inter-parental abuse, the experience tended to impact how they viewed their parents; Blaine described, "Well normally we [Blaine and his father] don't have a relationship. When he picks on my mom, we get in fights … he thinks everything's all fine with me but it's not." However, the relationship of one of the children with her father was not influenced by his abuse; although Charlotte does "remember times when it got a bit abusive … it got sorted out … and it's all over with now". She had always had a close relationship with her father and she did not view the abuse as having a negative impact on her relationship with him. Consistent with the finding that children often recognize abuse and reject relationships with parents who perpetrate intimate partner violence (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006; Kelly & Johnston,

2001), most of the children's parent-child relationships were negatively influenced when they perceived that parent was being abusive toward their other biological parent.

Abuse also impacted how the stepparents viewed the other parent; they were particularly protective over their partners and their partners' child(ren). Angus describes that his partner's ex-husband was an, "Abusive man, so [pause] it was very important that they [her children] didn't see that from me". One of the non-resident parents was abused by his former partner, which similarly made his current partner act protectively towards him and his children; Judy stated that, "we actually had to get a public meeting point for the kids because he [her partner] was gettin' punched and kicked in front of them at the house". Judy tried to protect her partner and the children but was stymied in this by her partner's need to continue contact with his ex-wife and a lack of regular access to the children. Being a stepparent in a family where their partner was currently or had been abused by their child(ren)'s other parent made the stepparent more protective of their partner and the children and also wary of any continued contact with the child(ren)'s biological parent.

These negative experiences coloured the parents' subsequent relations with their former partners, impacted how the child(ren) in those families viewed their biological parents, and made the stepparents more protective over their partners and their partners' child(ren).

4.3.2 Siblings

There was considerable diversity in the types of study children's sibling relationships and the amount of contact that they had with their siblings. The siblings could either be resident (living in the same house with child half the week or more) or non-resident (not living in the same house with the child half the week or more). They could be full siblings (share the same biological parents), half siblings (share one of the same biological parents), or stepsiblings (share no biological parents but be related as a result of the romantic relationship between one of their biological parents and one of their stepsiblings' biological parents). There was a total of 92 siblings to the 31 children in the sample – 22 full siblings, 23 resident half siblings, 36 non-resident half siblings, three resident stepsiblings, and eight non-resident stepsiblings. Table 4.7 illustrates the frequency of each type of sibling relationship for the 31 children in the sample.

Table 4.7. Frequency of types of sibling relationships for the study children

Type of relationship	Frequency
No siblings of any kind	4
Full sibling(s) only	3
Half sibling(s) only	10
Stepsibling(s) only	0
Full + half	8
Full + step	1
Half + step	5
Full + half + step	0
Total	31

Children had half siblings by sharing either their biological mother or father with their half sibling. Seven of the children had half siblings where they shared the same mother – all of those half siblings were resident with the child. Seven of the children had half siblings where they shared the same father – all lived separately from their half sibling. In nine cases, the children had two sets of half siblings – one set that shared the same mother and another set that shared the same father. The children who had two sets of half siblings all lived with the half siblings that they shared with their mother, except for two children who had shared custody and two whose half siblings were adults. Most of the children who had both residential and non-residential half siblings made a distinction between them. Penelope described her relationships with her half siblings by saying,

> P: U- it's different cause [pause] she's [non-residential half-sister] like, it's my little sister and she's two years old [pause] and she's there and she's really important and my dad sends me over pictures every- like every week or so [pause] and [pause] I really like her … but [pause] I don't know it's [pause] like she's not [pause] *as* a sister to me as Silas [residential half-brother] would be.
>
> I: Why do you think that is?
>
> P: I don't know her that well. I spend *way* less time with her. Yeah. I don't know her that well.

The children tended to describe loving their non-residential half siblings but feeling less close to them and spending less time with them than their residential half siblings.

Children had stepsiblings resulting either from their mother's or father's relationship with someone who had children of their own. Four of the children had stepsiblings through their stepfather – these stepsiblings were non-residential for three of the children. One had a non-residential stepsibling through his father's partner.

4.3.3 Financial Circumstances

The financial circumstances of the sample varied considerably, with the families where the parent was living alone generally describing the most constrained resources and those living with a partner tending to be in a better financial situation. The variety of financial conditions of these families was reflected in their housing situations. At the time of the interviews, nineteen biological parents were renting and ten owned their house or apartment.

Those families with one parent living alone tended to have the fewest financial resources. Eleven of the 17 parents living alone rented their housing – often renting government-owned housing from the county council. These parents were also less able to provide financially for themselves and their children. Katalin stated that she was not able to care for her children in the way she would like because of her financial constraints,

> Tristan [biological son] said to me recently, "I'm t- I don't want to be poor anymore." And I hate to think that they feel we're poor. And I'm like, "We're not poor. We're rich in love." [both little laugh] You know? But I feel like um I don't like them to feel that and I feel I've let them down or let myself down in that [pause] sense. Um [pause] but uh [pause] yeah. I- I guess too, not- me being the- the- the only parent is like, that mean- it's so much harder to get out and make money, so financially we are challenged, do you know? There's a lot more I would like them to do … now that I am doing a little bit of work, I want them to do [pause] like I want them to do piano or guitar or something. But- so I haven't really had the extra; I've had no disposable income to- [pause] to- you know, for- to- for- for that kind of [pause] recreation, you know, after-school activities and that. Um and they- that's where they feel a bit deprived being a kid, like they know they're not doin' things because [pause] we can't afford them.

Many of the biological parents described similar issues – there was little money available for anything besides necessities; "we don't have much money and we find it hard to get by" (Sorcha). Sometimes the lack of income was of great consequence, as for Éilís when she became unexpectedly pregnant with her third child and wanted to travel to the United Kingdom to terminate her pregnancy but needed to borrow money in order to be able to pay for the travel and the procedure. However, some of the single parents living alone enjoyed a relatively high standard of living, with Hailey saying, "money isn't too much of an issue, I'm lucky".

The biological parents who lived with partners generally had a higher standard of living than the biological parents who lived alone with their child(ren). However, they were no more likely to own a house together; of the 12 biological parents living

with a partner, eight lived in rented housing. Although they were no more likely to own a house, they were more likely to be employed. In six of the eleven couples living together, both adults had at least part-time employment, and in five of the couples either the stepparent or the biological parent was employed, leaving only one residential couple in this sample with no source of income. In comparison, of the 17 biological parents who lived alone, only seven worked full- or part-time, one was retired, and the other nine had no source of income. The difference that having a partner with a stable income made to the parents and children was often substantial, particularly when finances were shared. Liam (aged 18) described that his stepfather,

> L: Look he helped a lot financially like
>
> I: Yeah
>
> L: Cause it's hard when my ma had me and it was just us two. And it was hard times, like I don't mind sayin' that
>
> I: Yeah
>
> L: Like I think my ma would say that as well.

Even when the parents and stepparents did not share finances, parents often relied on short-term financial support of their partners in the form of monetary gifts, loans, paying for trips or activities for the child(ren), or giving gifts to the child(ren) that the parent could not afford. For these parents, having the financial support of a partner was often helpful, even when the financial assistance was inconsistent.

4.3.4 Government Involvement

For the families in this sample, government involvement in their lives was both a benefit and a liability. Many participants were reliant on government intervention for income, housing, and educational opportunities, but some felt the government did not value their role as a parent or people from their social class. Sorcha described that she has to,

> Make sure social services don't come and take them [children] away which isn't- shouldn't be that much of a concern but there's always that really, you know, that- if they [her children] don't do well in school they get a little astray in a bad crowd – cause we've come very close to it at times, you know, that [pause] by way of my social status and the strata of society that I am somehow, you know, more likely to be subject to [pause] the prejudices of the system. Just by-down to like [pause] the demographic that I [pause] reside in as opposed to [pause] my actual skills as a parent … and after the childhood I had, I have to say like you know, "Hooray! You've never been investigated by social services." [I little laugh] You know, "You're doin' something right!"

Other parents viewed the government more positively, as a resource for parenting and home help when it was most needed. For example, Éilís had attended college as part of a government program for people from the inner city, had a home care worker who helped in the household daily, attended parenting courses with her teenage daughter, and had brought one of her sons to counselling and a behavioural intervention at the hospital. Although she availed of these resources, it meant the increased involvement of social services in her and her children's lives, and she found out later that in addition to the report on her son, "they were actually doin' a report on me as well." For the biological parents in this sample, government involvement could contain both beneficial and detrimental elements.

Although it was generally not a concern to the resident mothers, some non-residential stepmothers felt the system was not supportive of their role or their partners' role. Judy felt that the government was biased against the rights of her partner as a father saying,

> J: I would love to say that in a few years maybe we'll get week on, week off [custody of the children], but I- I don't have enough faith in the systems over here to say that ... The hardest thing for me is that the system lets the fathers down over here.
>
> I: Yeah
>
> J: It really does. It's a complete injustice to them and I don't think um- I don't think the father should be any less important than the mother.

Some of the non-resident fathers also felt this was problematic for them; they wanted more time with their children but were not able to achieve this without the support of the children's biological mothers because the government did not provide sufficient protection for their role as a parent. William said, "Ideally I would love to have full custody of my son, but I don't think it's going to happen." Unlike mothers, fathers in Ireland do not automatically acquire guardianship rights unless they are married to the mother of their child; Irish fathers face both institutional and socioeconomic barriers to contact with their children (Corcoran, 2005).

4.4 Summary

The aim of this chapter was to provide demographic information about the participants and contextual information about their family lives. The information about these families highlights both the complexity and heterogeneity of those families sampled in this research. The negotiation of stepparent-stepchild relationships is impacted by both interpersonal and context factors; accordingly, through the inclusion

of a diverse sample of stepchildren, biological parents, and stepparents, this study allows for a more inclusive understanding of the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship than previous research. The next chapter will describe the perceived benefits of and barriers to romantic relationship formation among the biological parents in this study in order to gain an understanding of how these relationships form, why they might dissolve, and factors that influence the earliest stage of stepparent-stepchild relationship development.

Chapter 5: Romantic Relationship Formation

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to describe the processes of romantic relationship formation among single parents by investigating the perceived benefits of and barriers to biological parents' romantic relationship development. In the vast majority of this sample, the parents did not want to introduce their children to partners with whom they went on a few dates or had a short-term relationship. In this way, the development of a stepparent-stepchild relationship tends to be contingent on the successful development of a romantic relationship between a parent and stepparent. Additionally, how the parents view these relationships may impact how children respond to their stepparent and thus how stepparent-stepchild relationships form.

This chapter addresses the time period before the children meet their stepparent, when parents are motivated to date but may face considerable barriers to long-term relationship formation. It begins with an examination of the literature surrounding re-partnering and the romantic relationship formation of single parents. Then, the methods and participants for this particular analysis are described. The benefits of and barriers to the biological parents in this sample forming a romantic relationship are discussed. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of how the findings fit within the broader literature on romantic relationship formation and how they may inform understanding of the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships.

5.1.1 Relationship Formation for Single Parents

There is a strong drive to form romantic relationships. People desire the sexual and emotional intimacy that romantic relationships provide (Sassler, 2010). This is true for single parents as well: single mothers are likely to form a romantic relationship within five years of relationship dissolution or divorce (Anderson et al., 2004; Beck et al., 2010; Lunn et al., 2010; Wu & Schimmele, 2005). However, these relationships tend to be unstable (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007) or "pass through" relationships (Burton & Hardaway, 2012), with some parents actually avoiding forming long-term romantic relationships in favour of shorter-term romances (Burton, 2014). Single parents' successful formation of a long-term relationship or marriage may be particularly difficult (Lichter & Graefe, 2007; Sano et al., 2012).

Romantic relationship formation has many benefits for mental and physical health, and well-being (Braithwaite et al., 2010; Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Williams

& Umberson, 2004). Single mothers benefit from the formation of a long-term romantic relationship or marriage through reductions in material hardship, household food insecurity, and psychological distress (Hernandez & Pressler, 2012; Lichter et al., 2003; Osborne et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2008). However, the dissolution of the relationships that single mothers form can have particularly deleterious effects. When single mothers enter and then exit from a cohabiting relationship or marriage, they experience higher levels of poverty than never married single mothers (Lichter et al., 2003), as well as decreases in physical and mental health (Williams et al., 2008). Additionally, this relationship instability negatively impacts children, with each relationship formation and dissolution increasing children's anxious, somatic, and conduct problems (Bachman, Coley, & Carrano, 2011). Thus, the formation of long-lasting romantic relationships can be highly beneficial to parents and their child(ren) when these relationships endure, but their dissolution comes with the risk of damaging effects.

Research on mothers' partnership instability and marital beliefs has identified a number of factors which impede union formation and long-term success. One of the most critical barriers appears to be a lack of suitable partners (Edin, 2000; Sano et al., 2012). For mothers to consider someone to be a viable long-term partner, that person needs to be able to financially provide for themselves at least, and preferably the mother and her family as well (Edin, 2000; Nelson, 2006; Sano et al., 2012). However, single mothers struggle to find partners who are consistently employed (Sano et al., 2012); many mothers are not able to form long-term relationships because it is difficult for them to find partners who meet this criterion. Other barriers to romantic relationship formation that have been identified in the previous research are the availability of social and instrumental support, partner's problematic behaviours, a lack of trust in men, a desire to control their own finances and child-rearing, older age, lack of opportunities to meet partners, and low socioeconomic status (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2003; Edin, 2000; Sano et al., 2012). However, these barriers have been investigated from the perspective of divorced women in the context of mothers' marital expectations or of mothers' perceptions of the relationships with their child(ren)'s father(s) and thus may not be applicable to the formation of dating or cohabiting unions for single parents of both genders.

There is limited research on the barriers to relationship formation for fathers, but unwed fathers "exhibit lower age-cumulative rates of marriage than the general

population of men" (Graefe & Lichter, 2007, p. 417) and thus they must encounter some barriers to marriage that childless men do not face. It is possible that, because men are generally expected to be providers (Barclay & Lupton, 1999; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; Sano et al., 2012), their financial commitment to a child makes it more difficult to fulfil this role in a new relationship. Similarly, men may have less time to dedicate to a new relationship if they have substantial childcare responsibilities. However, as compared to mothers, fathers appear to have greater ease at attracting and forming relationships with potential partners (Guzzo & Hayford, 2010), possibly because children are less likely to live with their fathers.

The research uses both a lens of uncertainty perspective (Burton & Tucker, 2009) and concepts of reciprocity in romantic relationships (Nelson, 2004) to understand the benefits that parents hope to get from entering romantic relationships and the barriers that they perceive to this relationship formation. A lens of uncertainty perspective takes into account the instability and uncertainty that characterizes the lives of single parents, particularly low-income mothers. Single mothers are very likely to live in poverty (Brady & Burroway, 2012) and single fathers are more likely to live in poverty than single men who are not fathers (Christopher et al., 2002). Single parents face uncertainty in a number of areas in their lives because of their marginalized status. This "creates a context of insecurity for women and families" (Burton & Tucker, 2009, p. 144) which impacts their decision-making surrounding relationships as well as their child-rearing. Additionally, this research incorporates mothers' understanding of reciprocity in their romantic relationships to understand how the mothers in the study frame their relationships and what they expect of their partners (Nelson, 2004). Nelson's (2004) research indicated that mothers are more likely to view an imbalance in reciprocity between themselves and their partners as being acceptable; generally expecting their partners to provide socially, emotionally, or financially to them despite their reduced ability to provide in those ways in return.

The primary aim of this research is to gain a clearer understanding of the earliest stage of stepfamily formation – the development of a romantic relationship between a parent and someone who is not the parent of their child(ren). It is important to understand this process because it is a precursor to the development of a stepparent-stepchild relationship. Additionally, although motivations and barriers to romantic relationship formation have been studied both qualitatively and quantitatively in the past, it is not clear whether the factors relevant in these mostly American studies apply

to an Irish sample. Further, the qualitative research on this subject has exclusively focused on low-income single mothers in the United States (Edin, 2000; Sano et al., 2012). Because of this gap in the literature, it is unclear what the process of romantic relationship formation in Ireland is and what parents perceive as the benefits of and barriers to this relationship formation. This research attempts to fill this gap through a qualitative analysis of interviews with a diverse group of single and repartnered parents in Ireland.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Participants

This research attempts to address benefits of and barriers to romantic relationship formation among this sample; thus the participants for this analysis were the 29 biological parents in the broader study. Of the 29 biological parents, 26 were female. They ranged in age from 26 to 55 years (M=39.7, SD=7.4). See Table 5.1 for relationship and household information about these parents. Further information about these parents can be found in Chapter 4.

5.2.2 Analysis

This analysis was carried out as described in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3). It drew upon responses to the biological parents' questions pertaining to romantic relationship formation. These included, "What's it like to be a mother/father in a family like this?", "What was it like moving from being a single parent to having a partner?", "Do you think that your past relationships have had any impact on your current romantic relationship?", "Is it important for you that your partner gets on well with your kids?", and "What are the barriers to relationships or dating as a single parent?" Because of the semi-structured nature of the interviews, some participants were asked multiple questions about their romantic relationship formation and any barriers to long-term relationships, whereas others addressed this more briefly. The 29 interviews with biological parents resulted in 120 pages of text relevant to the benefits and barriers to their romantic relationship formation.

Table 5.1. Relationship and family information about the parents

Name	Age	Gender	Relationship Status	Biological Children	MPF[a]	With Parent of Youngest Child[b]
Eleanor	44	Female	Married	2	Yes	No
Brenda	30	Female	Married	2	Yes	Yes
Éilís	41	Female	Cohabiting	3	Yes	No
Brian	35	Male	Dating[c]	1	No	No
James	38	Male	Cohabiting	4	Yes	Yes
Cathleen	35	Female	Married	3	Yes	Yes
Emily	38	Female	Dating	2	No	No
Mia	38	Female	Not in a relationship	2	No	No
Paula	54	Female	Cohabiting	5	No	No
Amelia	26	Female	Married	1	No	No
Ashling	55	Female	Dating	3	Yes	No
Jenny	44	Female	Not in a relationship	3	Yes	No
Mairead	34	Female	Not in a relationship	3	No	No
Albert	43	Male	Married	5	Yes	Yes
Jane	51	Female	Not in a relationship	2	Yes	No
Hailey	35	Female	Not in a relationship	1	No	No
Caoimhe	45	Female	Cohabiting	1	No	No
Cora	38	Female	Married	2	Yes	Yes
Oonagh	43	Female	Not in a relationship	1	No	No
Roisín	27	Female	Cohabiting	1	No	No
Julia	35	Female	Married	3	Yes	Yes
Sorcha	31	Female	Not in a relationship	2	Yes	No
Aoibhinn	50	Female	Dating	5	No	Yes
Stacy	46	Female	Not in a relationship	5	Yes	No
Aideen	37	Female	Dating	1	No	No
Ava	40	Female	Dating	2	Yes	No
Mary	37	Female	Dating	2	Yes	No
Sinead	35	Female	Not in a relationship	1	No	No
Katalin	46	Female	Not in a relationship	2	No	No

[a] Multipartner fertility

[b] Refers to whether the parent is currently in a romantic relationship with the other biological parent of their youngest child.

[c] Indicates that the participant is in a non-residential romantic relationship.

5.3 Results

5.3.1 Benefits of Forming a Romantic Relationship

In order for the stepparent and stepchild to form a relationship, the biological parent must first form a romantic relationship. It is thus important to understand why biological parents might want to enter a romantic relationship and what benefits they think these relationships might accrue to their lives. Three themes were developed which encompass the biological parents' beliefs about the major benefits to entering a relationship – development of optimal relationship roles, the importance of other gender role models for their child(ren), and social support (Table 5.2).

Table 5.2. Themes relating to the benefits of romantic relationship formation

Themes	Subthemes
Development or enactment of preferred relationship roles	• Establishment of relationship boundaries for the other biological parent • Encourages a more hierarchical power structure for the parent-child relationship • Allows parent to have a role outside of their position as a single parent
Role models	• Importance of the child(ren) having both male and female role models
Additional support	• Emotional support and shared understanding • Childcare and household work support

5.3.1.1 Relationship Roles

Forming a romantic relationship allowed biological parents to clarify or develop new roles in their relationships with others. Parents were able to clarify roles and responsibilities and to change how their relationships were enacted to better suit themselves. The formation of a new romantic relationship clearly demarcated the role of the other biological parent, provided a more vertical power structure to the parent-child relationship, and allowed the biological parent to have a romantic role in addition to their parental role.

The first subtheme refers to the establishment of relationship boundaries for the other biological parent. The role of the other biological parent of their child(ren) tended to be less delineated than the biological parents would like. For many of the biological parents, there was a continued connection to the other parent of their child(ren) and this connection made them uncomfortable. They believed that if they formed a romantic relationship, the other biological parent would realize that their interparental romantic relationship was definitely over. Mairead explained, "because I haven't really dated *anybody*, I think it's givin' Rodney [biological father] the wrong impression as well … He thinks that I'm- maybe I'm just um [pause] I'm goin' to get back with him or something." The relationship with the other biological parent was often closer to a romantic relationship than the parents would have liked. Hailey explained that the father of her son,

> Probably lives in a bit of a [pause] a muddled world. He- he still introduces me to people as his wife [pause] [little laugh] it just- it doesn't seem to have sunk in um and [pause] that's very

> frustrating. Um he doesn't particularly want me to have my own social life; uh he gets very angry when he thinks I might have.

For financial reasons, the father of Hailey's son stayed in their house regularly, a situation which she thought would be improved by forming a relationship, because "you can't have that [a romantic relationship] if your ex-partner's going to be back and staying in the house three days a week". Forming a relationship would make it clear to her former partner that he could not continue to view her as his wife or stay in her house; it would allow her to establish boundaries in her relationship with her son's father. The formation of a romantic relationship with a stepparent was described positively because it would clearly show the other biological parent that the interparental relationship would not become romantic again. These interparental relationships were often more enmeshed than the biological parents would like, and forming a relationship with a partner was seen as a way of separating the parenting and romantic aspects of the interparental relationship.

Having a relationship also enabled clearer delineation between child and adult roles in the household. Single parents tend to form close and cohesive bonds with their children (Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012a). These bonds may lack the hierarchical boundaries that are traditionally seen in married, two-biological-parent families (Nock, 1988); instead tending to feature a less vertical and more horizontal power structure. This was described by Cathleen, who explains that her husband,

> Probably disciplines Liam [her son] better than I do [laughing] because [pause] bein' on my own with Liam – even though I'd hate to admit it – the relationship wasn't as balanced as it should be between a mother and a son. So Liam had a- more rights, I think … It's like Liam [pause] he was like a partner sometimes. I shouldn't even say that, but like, h- it's like he had, he didn't have enough of a child role.

Cathleen's relationship formation allowed her to create what she viewed as a more optimal relationship with her son by creating clearer role boundaries. She had a partner and so her child was not able to fill a "partner" role anymore. Amelia similarly described that she, "was very very very [pause] attached to her [daughter]. As parents are but in a kind of [pause] very dependent way". Amelia's relationship with her daughter did not have a hierarchical power structure. However, Amelia described her husband as being, "one of the bosses in the house" and them as "parenting her [daughter] together"; thus, the introduction of her partner reinforced her own role as a boss in the house and allowed her to create a more vertical power structure. The parents wanted to protect against

blurred role boundaries and viewed the introduction of a stepparent as having the potential to provide a more optimal balance of power.

Finally, the third subtheme refers to how forming a romantic relationship allowed parents to enact a different identity. Because of the demands of being a single parent, the biological parents in this sample often felt that their potential roles were constrained. They considered themselves a parent first and foremost, but they wanted to feel desired and to have a romantic life away from their child(ren). Sorcha described that when she starts a relationship, "it's so dreamy and nice and you kind of like forget about your role as being a mom". Aoibhinn similarly explained, "as a person, as a woman, it was good for me to *feel* um [pause] well [pause] I wasn't like completely dead and, you know, my life wasn't over in, you know, that respect." Relationships allowed them to expand their personal identity; they were not just a parent to their child(ren), but were also an adult who had their own life, separate from their child(ren). This was a role which the constraints of their life did not often allow them to take outside of the context of a romantic partnership. Aideen described, "for the first time in ages, I was with a man and I felt like a w- woman and I wanted- I didn't want to be a mother in that context … I felt quite reduced to that role anyway". By forming a romantic relationship, the biological parents were able to form an alternative identity outside of their identity as a parent. This role as partner allowed them to embrace traits that are not traditionally associated with parenting, such as desirability and sexuality.

In summary, one of the benefits of forming a romantic relationship was that it allowed the biological parent to reinstate or clarify relationship roles. They were able to form the relationships that they wanted. Parents thought that by forming a new relationship, they would show the other biological parent that their shared romantic relationship was over, create a more hierarchical power structure for their child(ren), and form have an identity outside of their role as a parent.

5.3.1.2 Importance of Other Gender Role Model

A second theme which emerged in the narratives of the mothers pertained to the importance of having another gender role model for their child(ren). Although non-traditional family structures appear to have limited influence on children's gender socialization (McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003), many people believe that it is in the best interests of children that they have both maternal and paternal influences (Clarke, 2006). This sentiment was echoed by some of the parents in this sample, who felt that their children were missing out by not having role models from both genders.

Although the parents took on dual roles of "mother, father" (Jane), they did not feel that this was the same as having role models from both genders for their child(ren). Julia explained that when she began dating, "it was good, he [son] had a male body, you know, in his [pause] with him". This sentiment was repeated by Albert, whose son Felix is, "looking for a bit of a- a mother figure … he's looking for a [pause] female figure", a role which Albert's wife Darina was filling.

The parents in those families where the other biological parent was not involved or was minimally involved in the child(ren)'s life were concerned about this particularly. In these cases, forming a romantic relationship allowed parents to provide an opposite gender role model for their child(ren). The importance of a masculine influence was emphasized. Some of biological mothers in this sample thought that it was important that their son(s) were not "surrounded by a huge amount of women" and were able get "the guy perspective" (Oonagh). Hailey similarly felt that, "it's important that he [son] does have a male influence in his life." If the other biological parent was heavily involved or they had family members, then parents did not mention this as a benefit, perhaps because they felt that their child(ren) already had a stable opposite gender role model; this is explained by Mia, who said that she did not feel that her sons were "lackin' a male figure. They have my- their dad. They have my dad and they have my brothers". For the heterosexual participants in this sample who did not feel that their child(ren) had role models from both genders, forming a relationship was considered to have the benefit of filling this perceived gap in their child(ren)'s lives.

5.3.1.3 Support

The most commonly mentioned benefit of having a partner was having someone to support them and with whom they could share their lives. The parents felt "unsupported" (Katalin) and "overwhelmed with my role as a mum" (Ava); having instrumental and emotional support was seen as one of the major benefits of partnering. Although some biological parents described wanting to be able to share chores and responsibilities, most focused on wanting to share emotions and experiences with a partner.

The parents particularly wanted to have someone to discuss their child(ren) with; someone who would share in the pride that they took in their child(ren)'s accomplishments. Oonagh explained,

> It'd just- it'd be lovely sometimes just to have somebody to share. Share the highs and share the lows. Like even, you know, when he [son] started walkin' and that, it was only me. It'd be great

> to have somebody to- now you share it with other people but [pause] you know, it'd be nice to have somebody special to kinda say, "Look at the little person we've brought up."

This sentiment was echoed by Jane, who said,

> You have a birthday party for them, he [son] goes to bed and you're left sitting in the sitting room and you'd love to turn around to somebody and say, "[tsk] Wasn't that?" So it's mainly for *me*, that *I* miss [pause] support.

Jane's emphasis on the "me" and "I" is further indication that her desire for support was because she personally wanted that emotional support, as opposed to because she needed support in taking care of her children. Although they were happy with their child(ren)'s accomplishments, the parents wanted someone with whom to share their feelings of pride. They felt that no one else was as interested in their child(ren)'s accomplishments as they were, but that if they had a partner, that person would be similarly invested. Sinead explained,

> I suppose all my friends are married now and have kids, you know, and I can see the [pause] I can see [pause] that their partner is, yeah, their best friend and the dad of their child, whereas I would never have, I mean [pause] I couldn't just turn around to somebody and go, "Oh wow! Did you see what he [son] did?" And expect them to be as excited.

By partnering with someone, they were hoping to invest someone in their child(ren)'s lives who would care about their child(ren) as much as they did. The parents wanted to form a romantic relationship so that they would be able to share their feelings of pride and concern about their child(ren) with someone else.

Although most parents described emotional benefits, some focused on the applied aspects of support as well. They felt there was a "drudgery of managing everything by yourself" (Cora) and wanted a partner to help them with child care and household tasks. They explained that they did not want to take care of themselves and their child(ren) on their own; they found that having "an extra set of hands" (Mary) was an important benefit of forming a relationship. Eleanor stated that when she started dating her husband, it was advantageous because they could

> E: just share chores even, just doin' stuff together
>
> I: Yeah
>
> E: you know is really nice. I mean, "You do that while I do this" and "You do" instead of always being umm, just doing on your own- your own, you know?

Brian's girlfriend, Aileen, provides him with considerable support by taking care of his daughter, Nellie, on the nights when he has to work; "if I have to go and I need a babysitter, like Aileen is first to say, "Look, I'll mind Nellie. We'll sit in. We'll watch telly and we'll watch a movie"" When Aileen is not in town to take care of Nellie, "it

can be quite difficult" because, "I have to get babysitters and things like that if I have to go out for work". Further, having a partner meant having someone else around with a different set of skills, who may be able to fix problems that the biological parent would not have been able to fix; Stacy explained, "you've got someone to help out in the house ... cause before I had to get money together and then get someone to- the- he's good at doin' things in the house".

Although many other studies have found that single mothers particularly feel a relationship with a desirable partner will involve their partner providing for them and their child(ren) and thus will bring the benefit of increased economic security (Edin, 2000; Sano et al., 2012), this does not appear to have been a primary concern of the parents in this sample. They rarely mentioned economic benefits of having a partner; when they did, this was described in the context of other types of support, in the form of occasionally getting money from the stepparent, or generally describing that having a partner eased economic concerns. Sorcha explained that the weakness of her family was,

> Not havin' any support. It's very very hard. Um I mean like I brought the kids up on my own and for the first ten years I never really spoke about it [inaudible] being [pause] you know, I wouldn't say a burden but uh a lot of strain on me as one person to do everything from cookin' to cleaning to making money and [pause] doin' the discipline side of things, the rewarding side of things.

However, when she further explained this, she did not mention that a partner would be the one to provide financial support; instead, she focused on how she has "tried to [pause] just build on things to the best of my abilities" to find work and "get off the dole"[14].

The parents regularly mentioned having very limited resources and the uncertainty in their lives as a result, but they did not describe forming relationships in order to gain another income. When asked what it was like moving from being a single parent to having a partner, only one parent described financial support; Katalin said that her partner would "financially I- you know, he'd offer to help [pause] um on occasions" but that she "would repay him like um later". In fact, although Mary was struggling financially, she explained that the emotional and day-to-day support was

[14] "The dole" is a colloquialism which refers to social welfare payments.

more important than financial support, and her previous relationship had ended because her partner took a job in mainland Europe in order to provide for her and her children,

> I suppose that could be the blame for [pause] the breakdown of our relationship because I just felt like I was on my own and I was, you know, that I- the whole point I suppose of me moving to Bray[15] was [pause] to have his [her partner's] support while I went back to college and that he would be here and that we would be together and [pause] you know, and that we would be a family and just [pause] work got in the way of that, I suppose and he felt that he had to follow his career and he felt that he had [pause] uh earn money and [pause] my feeling was that [pause] money's not the be all and end all. Uh [pause] so that is [inaudible] I suppose that the main reason why that relationship broke down – because h- he felt that he should be earning money for the family

Other aspects of support appear to have been more important than financial support. Parents felt that forming a romantic relationship would provide them with emotional and instrumental support, but were not as focused on the monetary support as single parents in other studies appear to have been (Edin, 2000; Sano et al., 2012).

5.3.2 Barriers to Romantic Relationship Formation

Although there were a number of perceived advantages to romantic relationship formation, the parents identified considerable barriers as well; four themes were developed which encompass the major barriers described. Firstly, they believed that their personal characteristics and experiences were not conducive to forming long-term romantic relationships. Secondly, they felt that there was a lack of suitable partners. Additionally, the parents' limited time and support prevented them from dating. Finally, some the parents felt that their romantic relationship formation would have a negative influence on their child(ren) and this was a barrier to dating for them (see Table 5.3).

[15] Bray is a Southern suburb of Dublin. It is a city in County Wicklow.

Table 5.3. Themes relating to the barriers to romantic relationship formation

Themes	Subthemes
Personal characteristics	• Preference to dissolve relationships which do not meet expectations • Self-representation as a single parent • Wariness around romantic relationships based on previous negative experiences
Lack of suitable partners	• Available partners are undesirable • Potential partners do not want to date a single parent • Potential partners have to be accepting of the parents' future reproductive plans • Potential partners tend to have children from previous relationships
Limited time and support	• Lack of time available for dating • Lack of understanding from partners that the parent is busy with childcare and other responsibilities • Need a support system to watch the child(ren) in order to go on dates
Negative influence on children	• Lack of time for parent to spend with the child(ren) may negatively impact the child(ren) • Partner involvement may increase the other biological parent's involvement with child(ren) • Partner involvement may decrease the other biological parent's involvement with child(ren)

5.3.2.1 Personal Characteristics

Some of the personal characteristics of the biological parents limited their ability to form sustainable romantic relationships. Three subthemes describe the ways in which their personal characteristics prevented them from forming a long-term romantic relationship: their own inability to commit or preference to dissolve relationships rather than work through difficulties, their self-representation as a single parent, and their wariness around relationships based on negative experiences in previous relationships.

The first subtheme refers to the parents' tendency not to want to stay in relationships that they did not believe were optimal and to view themselves as individuals for whom relationships were unlikely to persist. The parents described themselves as "not the marrying type" (Éilís). For these parents, "the whole marriage thing and the movin' in together completely freaked the- the crap out of me" (Amelia). They were quick to dissolve relationships which did not meet their expectations. Sorcha

explained, "I guess I have [pause] a low tolerance for [pause] puttin' up with people's idiosyncrasies of character that don't quite match up to my expectations". Although staying in a dysfunctional relationship is problematic, many of the parents described how good they were at leaving sub-optimal relationships but none described having skills at compromising or working through relationship issues. Parents focused on the ease of relationship dissolution for themselves, as opposed to their skills at relationship maintenance. Mia explained, "I'm quite good at acknowledging something's not workin' and *briskly* finishin' it and walkin' away." Their hesitancy about relationships and lack of desire to work through relationship issues was a barrier to long-term romantic relationship formation.

A few of the parents described that their own identity development was an impediment to the formation of a romantic relationship; this constitutes the second subtheme. They had formed stable identities as single parents and did not know what would happen to their view of themselves if they formed a relationship. For some of the parents, forming a relationship would force them to expand their identity and be less independent; "I'd hate the fact that I'd be like that. That I would start to feel that I'm no longer just me … that I'm part of him as well. That I can't live without him" (Eleanor). Aideen described feeling that forming a relationship was a threat to her single mother identity,

> [When meeting other single mothers] I would think, "Ok. You're not a single mother as I am- the way I am a single mother, because I am here a- on my own.[16]" And even of course there are [pause] women who- there are- they're not in touch with the biological at all so that would be the, you know, even more single mother [laughs] than I. Um so I also saw that, "Ok. But if I have a partner then" y- you know, that was my [pause] unconscious thinking, probably, yeah? To th- "ok but then I can't be on my high horse anymore."

She described that forming a relationship made her feel that she was a "fraud". This personal representation as someone who parents alone made forming a relationship difficult because they would have to expand their own identity in order to accommodate a partner. These parents had difficulty expanding their conception of who they could be. They had formed an identity as an independent, single parent, and this was a barrier to formation of a romantic relationship.

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[16] Aideen was not from Ireland originally and had no familial support in the country. The father of her child was involved, but Aideen had primary custody.

The final subtheme refers to how some of the parents' negative dating experiences prevented them from forming subsequent relationships. These parents had been hurt badly in the past and were wary of new relationships where they might get hurt again. Emily explained that she had "an awful lot of commitment issues" because of her relationship with her children's father and, "it does impact on lettin' another man into your life." Similarly, Jane described that after having two marriages dissolve, she did not want to form another relationship; "once bitten, twice shy, twice bitten, not going there." In this way, an injurious relationship history was a barrier to the formation of new romantic relationships.

5.3.2.2 Lack of Suitable Partners

Many studies have found that a lack of suitable partners is a barrier to romantic relationship formation for single mothers (Edin, 2000). This was true in this sample as well. The parents "haven't seen anybody that I really want to date" (Mairead). Oonagh explained, "Now I have the time and the interest but there's nobody there [laughs]." The parents found that most available partners were undesirable, many potential partners would not date them because they have a child or children, potential partners had to be accepting if the biological parent did not want any more children, and potential partners were likely to have children of their own which was a complicating factor for any new relationship.

The first subtheme refers to the undesirability of the potential partners available to the single parents. Unlike in other studies where parents pointed mainly to unemployment and underemployment as reasons for the unsuitability of potential partners (Sano et al., 2012), the parents in this study focused on negative personality traits when describing why partners were not suitable. Some of the parents thought that stepparents might abuse their children or generally treat them poorly. Sorcha was worried that her partners may,

> Somehow *harm* my children. I have um experience previously um bad relationships and a lot of abuse in my family as well, so it's always been of paramount importance to me to protect the kids. And single parents um are- and young mothers especially seem to be a horrible demographic catchment area for predators so I've always been hyper-sensitive about that, you know? So far I think I've managed to do ok. I don't get very much sex but that's ok

Éilís described her former partner as "a dangerous bloke" who "looks for the vulnerable people". A few of the parents described dating someone and then finding out that they were married or in another relationship,

> There's a few people I dated afterwards that af- after a few weeks I found out they were uh either in a relationship already or married because I- I'm an easy person to date, I feel, because I can only meet you once or twice a week and I don't ask questions, I'm busy and I just- [pause] think it's very easy for people to have another life. (Sinead)

In this way, the constraints around Sinead's time as a result of her responsibilities as a single mother prevented her from being able to evaluate potential partners. The parents were prevented from dating because the people who wanted to date them were deemed to be unsuitable as long-term partners. The parents described meeting potential partners but not thinking that they were "the sort of person who I wanted to be [pause] in a father- paternal role" (Cora) and thus not pursuing a long-term relationship with them.

The second subtheme describes parents' experiences of interactions with potential partners who would not date the parents because they had child(ren). Cathleen explained that she did not tell her previous partner that she had a child,

> I was afraid that he'd [her former partner] judged me because ahh, I was young as well you see, so he was young and, this other guy, and when I did eventually tell him, he didn't- he didn't want anything to do with me again … And I think that a- can scare men away. Or maybe that's just my perception, that men can be afraid of that. Like, a woman with a child is like baggage

Similarly, Julia said, "one guy I was going out with a- and when I told him about- I had a- a baby, he hyperventilated and took a panic attack and a lot of guys wouldn't- when they heard I had a child, wouldn't come near me so I actually um didn't date". Sorcha explained, "there's somebody that I really liked for a long time and I know I wouldn't dump him after eight months or whatever if we did start goin' out [I little laugh]. Um but I think the fact that I've had children is a problem with him [pause] which means he's not even that great really." Katalin viewed this rejection by potential partners as a positive aspect, because although it limited the partners available to her and thus was a barrier to her romantic relationship formation, she felt that the people who remained interested would be better quality partners; "anybody that's not a genuinely nice person is not going to stick around with somebody who has kids". However, for some of the parents, the lack of partners willing to date a single parent lessened their own interest in dating. Stacy stated, "when you get told cause you have kids [pause] they don't, you know, they're not interested, that's not worth it anyways. So you get a bit disheartened then". Many of the parents in this sample described feeling that their partner choices were limited because so many of their potential partners did not want to date someone who had a child or children.

The third subtheme refers to the barrier of having to find a partner who did not want to have more children. Although this was not applicable to all of the parents, a few were unwilling to have further children which limited the potential partners available to them. Mary had "recently had tubal ligation" and thus could not have any more children; this was a complicating factor in her relationship with her most recent partner, who "would like to have children". Mia similarly "never wanted more children". Éilís explained that from the "very beginning" of her most recent relationship, "I had said to him [her partner], "Uh yeah, if you want kids, you may look for someone else."" Because some potential partners wanted to have biological children of their own, this refusal to have more children limited the number of suitable partners for the parents.

Finally, many of the parents were prevented from dating because they felt that dating someone who had children of their own would complicate the romantic relationship too much. They were less willing to date someone with children and this limited their potential partners. Mairead stated that, "I'd say any men my age would probably have children themselves", explaining that she felt this made the decision to date more "complex". Hailey described that she had difficulties forming long-term relationships with some of her previous partners because, "The ones that were married had their own baggage – they have kids". Hailey's partners had more complications in their lives as a result of their children from previous relationships and their continued contact with the mothers of the children; this caused Hailey to end these relationships because, "when you have a child and you're kinda looking after them mostly as the *main* parent, you don't need extra, you know, extra crap, really. You don't need that." Similarly, Cathleen described that she was happy that her husband did not have any children from previous relationships because, "I would have hated to get involved with him if he had the whole [pause], the whole drama of an ex. And this- this child. And the whole "I have to see them at the weekends."" The constraints that the parents faced because they had a child or children of their own made them feel that it would be too complicated to form a relationship with someone who also had children. This criterion further limited the available partners for the parents in this sample.

5.3.2.3 Available Resources

Single parents have significant demands on their time (Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2013; Hamer & Marchioro, 2002; Sano et al., 2012; Weaver & Coleman, 2010) and may not have the social or economic resources to form romantic

relationships. The parents in this sample explained that it was difficult for them to form relationships because they did not have time to go on dates, their partners did not understand or make allowances for their childcare responsibilities and other obligations, and they did not have someone to watch their child(ren) without payment and were not able to afford a babysitter.

Time Constraints

The first subtheme relates to the parents' feeling that their responsibilities to their child(ren) put such extreme constraints on their time that the development of potential romantic relationships was hindered. Eleanor explained, "when you have kids you just, you feel you haven't really got that spare time" to date. They were tired and did not want to add a commitment to another person to their lives. Katalin said,

> I never really go out so to be goin' out [pause] every other weekend or whatever [laughs] just seems like work to me. Um [pause] I just don't think I'd really have the time, you know? ... They [her children] just take up so much time.

The parents "didn't have a lot of time or energy to put into relationships" (Oonagh) because they had so many other commitments. Dating was seen as a further drain on their limited time.

The second subtheme refers to the potential partners' lack of understanding of the constraints on the parents' time. Sinead explained, "They'd [former partners] expect more [pause] to meet up more and stuff like that and I just don't have the time cause my son plays like three sports, music- does music. I just don't have the time." The parents found that potential partners did not make allowances for their limited time or for their responsibilities as a parent. Emily's former partner would ask, ""We go away this weekend." And I'll be, "No. I have to sort the kids out first."". Similarly, Hailey's previous partners "just didn't appreciate the fact that I wasn't free [pause] to go out three- four nights a week when it suited them." The parents' relationships had to be enacted differently from relationships with partners with no children because of the constraints of the parents' lives, which required partners to be understanding and willing to work around the parents' schedules. However, not all partners were willing to be accommodating of these time constraints and this was an impediment to romantic relationship formation.

Support Constraints

The third subtheme within the theme of limited time and support is the lack of support that the parents had for their romantic relationship formation. The parents

explained that it is necessary to "have a massive support system where you've people to take care of your child" (Amelia) in order to have one-on-one time with a new partner. They relied on friends, parents, and siblings to provide caretaking for their child(ren) at no cost; without a large support network, dating meant involving the child(ren) in their romantic relationship right away or spending money on babysitters. Mary explained,

> You almost do rely on your friends to say, "Yeah, I'll take the kids for a weekend." Or, "I'll take the kids overnight" or whatever so that you can actually maybe have a night out where you can meet somebody

When the parents had family members or friends who would watch their child(ren), this made dating much easier, but this was not a consistently available option for most of the parents. They had "nobody to babysit" (Oonagh) which meant they had to pay someone to take care of their child(ren). For these single parents, babysitters were an expense they could not afford; "I don't have extra money to be gettin' babysitters" (Katalin). A lack of social support was thus a major barrier to romantic relationship formation. By not having someone to watch their child(ren) when they went on dates, they had to pay for someone to watch their child(ren), and most of the parents did not have an income that could support paying for babysitters with any regularity.

5.3.2.4 Negative Influence on Child(ren)

The final theme developed relating to the barriers to parents' romantic relationship formation surrounds the parents' feeling that their dating would have a negative impact on their children. The involvement of a stepparent was seen as undesirable because it could take the biological parents' time away from their children or have the potential to change the other biological parent's involvement in the children's lives. These worries that their dating would negatively impact their child(ren) impeded romantic relationship formation for many of the biological parents.

The first subtheme refers to the parents' perception that dating could negatively impact their child(ren) because it further limited the time that the parent and child(ren) had together. Separate from not having the time to date, parents were concerned that if they did form a romantic relationship, this would take time away from their relationship with their child(ren). Sinead explained,

> I don't [pause] I feel that if I was to take time out for somebody [pause] um [pause] that would taking time away from my son and if it turned out that that person wasn't worth it then I don't- I think I'd resent the fact that I used the time that I could have spent with my son with somebody else

Choosing to date meant that they might spend less time with their child because they would have commitments to a partner as well, which might mean that they, "have to go up and see her [partner] in Galway on a day that I have Nellie [daughter]" (Brian); for Brian, this meant that he might have to give up time with his daughter in order to spend time with his partner which he found untenable. Many parents felt uncomfortable with this division of time because they thought spending less time with their child(ren) would have a negative impact on their child(ren). In this way, forming a romantic relationship was viewed as potentially harmful for the parent-child relationship, which was a barrier to romantic relationship development.

Changes in the other biological parent's involvement with the child(ren) were also seen as a potentially negative effect of forming a new romantic relationship. The second subtheme refers to the fear that some of the parents had that if they began dating, the other biological parent would become less involved with their child(ren). The father of one of Ava's two children,

> Was offering to help with the *kids* and we were kind of in a good um [pause] terms [pause] but I met Violet [partner], and he got pretty jealous [pause] and uh [pause] it- this has ended up very badly. So he moved. He disappeared.

Similarly, Mairead explained, "if I was datin' somebody [pause] well I'd be afraid that he'd [other biological parent] kind of neglect the boys [pause] because he wouldn't be able to cope with me being with somebody else"; as a consequence of this worry, Mairead decided not to date.

The third subtheme describes the opposite problem – parents were concerned that the other biological parent would become more involved if they started dating. These parents viewed the involvement of the other biological parent as being negative for their child(ren) and thus increased contact with the other biological parent was seen as a potential undesirable consequence of their dating. Amelia's relationship with her most recent partner, "coincided with her [daughter's] biological father taking an interest" which was frustrating for Amelia because the other biological parent's increased interest caused "turmoil" as she had "this massive amount of fear around him. Like that he'll kinda steal Hazel [daughter] or kinda [pause] like do something to ruin our lives." This sentiment was repeated by Julia, who explained that the father of her son, "didn't want somebody else, you know, with his son" and her partner's involvement caused her son's father to become more involved,

> I didn't hear from him [the non-resident father] for practically a whole year and then w- I think it was because Jace [her son] had, you know, a father figure, I suppose, in his life, his biological father didn't like that at all ... it was very traumatic. Jace was hitting his head against the wall and threw a complete fit when I collected him

Julia believed that her involvement with a new partner caused Jace's father to become more involved in his life, and that this involvement was negative for Jace. By causing a change in the involvement of the other biological parent, forming a new romantic relationship was seen as having the potential to negatively impact the child(ren).

Four themes were developed from the parents' descriptions of the major barriers that they faced to forming relationships. Their personal characteristics, a lack of suitable partners, limits on the time and support they had available, and the potential to negatively influence their children were all described as impediments to successful romantic relationship formation.

5.4 Conclusions

It is important to understand why single parents want to form relationships and what impedes them from forming these relationships in order to get a full understanding of relational instability and the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships. The formation of a long-term romantic relationship or marriage can result in reductions in material hardship and psychological distress (Lichter et al., 2003; Osborne et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2008) and may result in a stepparent-stepchild relationship which is beneficial for the children involved (King, 2006), but these relationships are not possible without parents' development of a long-term romantic relationship. In this sample, parents thought that forming a romantic relationship would be beneficial because it would allow them to clarify or develop the relationship roles that they wanted, give their child role models from both genders, and provide them emotional and instrumental support. However, they were impeded in their relationship formation by their personal characteristics, a lack of suitable partners, limited time and support, and their view that forming a relationship may harm their child(ren).

This analysis makes several contributions to the literature. Firstly, there is limited information on parents' perceptions of the formation of romantic relationships. Much of the research in this area has been on single mother's attitudes towards marriage (Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008; Edin, 2000; Sano & Manoogian, 2011), despite dating and cohabiting relationships being considerably more common among mothers than marital relationships (Beck et al., 2010; Bumpass & Lu,

2000; Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004). Although the number of fathers in this sample was small, their perspectives have tended to be overlooked in previous research on single parents' relationships. Additionally, this research adds to the understanding of stepfamily formation. Partners who form a stepfamily may hold erroneous beliefs about what stepfamily life will be like (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Ganong, Coleman, & Hans, 2006; Mahoney, 2006; Marsiglio, 2004; Sweeney, 2010), and it may cause dissatisfaction in their relationships when they experience a disparity between their expectations and the reality of their repartnering (Parent & Beaudry, 2002). The current analysis provides a framework through which to understand why parents enter relationships and what may prevent them from forming and continuing these relationships in the long-term.

Most of the parents in this sample had formed one or more relationships with someone who was not the parent of their child(ren), indicating that the barriers to relationship formation described by these parents are not prohibitive, at least for short-term partnerships. They continue to form relationships even where they face considerable personal, structural, and familial impediments to union formation. Ten of the parents were currently not in a relationship with anyone, indicating that although the parents were forming relationships, these unions often did not endure. This is in line with other Irish research showing that, while single mother families are relatively common, the number of children in a stepfamily at any given time is considerably smaller (Fahey, Keilthy, & Polek, 2012). Additionally, 15 of the 29 parents had experienced multipartner fertility. Although the sampling was not meant to be representative, these results indicate that multipartner fertility is likely an important feature of the Irish parenting landscape. This research gives some indication into what might be underlying family instability – namely, the parents' personal characteristics, a lack of suitable partners, limited time and support, and a perception that their partner or relationship may negatively impact their child(ren).

Much of the research on romantic relationship formation among single parents has been carried out in the United States, and has focused predominantly on low-income women (Cherlin et al., 2008; Edin, 2000; Sano & Manoogian, 2011). Ireland offers relatively generous cash supports for families – as compared to the United States – and, at the time of data collection, policies supported mothers acting as stay-at-home parents up until their youngest child was 18 years old, or 21 if they were in higher education (Fahey & Nixon, 2014; Gornick, Meyer, & Ross, 1996). Mothers in Ireland

are disincentivized from working by policies which do not tie receipt of benefits to entrance to the workforce, a lack of subsidized child care, and entitlements to housing and cash support to alleviate poverty (Fahey & Nixon, 2014). By contrast, the United States has tied welfare receipt to entrance to the workforce through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and spends a relatively small percentage of the gross domestic product on poverty alleviation (Smeeding, 2006). The child poverty rate in the United States is more than 20%, double what is common in other Western nations (Smeeding, 2006). Single parents in the United States are particularly impoverished in comparison to other Western countries (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Christopher et al., 2002); consequently, findings from the United States may not be applicable to parents in other countries.

Perhaps because of the greater welfare support that parents in Ireland have, as compared to parents in the United States, the parents in this sample were considerably less focused on the economic viability of their partners or of economic benefits to their repartnering than mothers in studies based in the United States. Although some did mention financial aspects, the way they framed their description of relationship formation did not indicate that this was a critical aspect of union formation for them. This finding is in line with Cartwright's (2010) research on single parents and stepparents moving in together in New Zealand; in that sample, only 6% described repartnering to gain financial support. None of the parents in this study described not dating someone or dissolving a relationship because their partner was unemployed or underemployed, whereas in other studies on this topic, which were carried out in North America (Edin, 2000; Nelson, 2006; Sano et al., 2012) this was described by parents as a reason to leave an otherwise fulfilling relationship.

Additionally, none of the parents described negotiating their relationships as a strategy to gain housing stability, something low-income mothers do in the United States (Clark, Burton, & Flippen, 2011). It is possible that because of greater social welfare supports, single parents in Ireland do not having the pressing need to find a partner who can provide financially, and thus do not need to rely on their partners to be employed or to provide economic support. This is in line with Cancian and Meyer's (2014) finding that income increases are associated with lower cohabitation rates between mothers and stepfathers because mothers are less likely to need to partner for purely economic reasons.

In order to understand stepfamily formation, it is critical to understand why parents form relationships and what might cause them to cycle into and out of relationships. Unwed parents attempt to form new relationships (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005) but may not be able to successfully do so. They see a number of benefits to relationship formation – such as enactment of their preferred relationship roles, availability of a role model for their child(ren) from both genders, and social and instrumental support – but are impeded by their personal characteristics, a lack of suitable partners, limited time, and the perception that dating with have a negative influence on their child(ren). The formation of a close stepparent-stepchild relationship is positive for children and parents (King, 2006, 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001), but this cannot happen unless the parent forms a romantic relationship. If the parent is unable to form long-term romantic relationships, their child(ren) may experience more instability, as the parent may date multiple short-term partners. As can be seen in the next chapter, this can cause children to reject relationships with subsequent stepparents or to approach those relationships more negatively.

Chapter 6: Stepfamily Relationships in the Context of Previous Stepfamily Dissolution

6.1 Introduction

Because the strength and quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships are likely to be affected by children's experiences of previous stepparents and the dissolution of their relationship with those stepparents, this chapter aims to investigate how the experience of stepfamily dissolution shapes the context of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationships. As a result of demographic shifts in relationship formation and childbearing, children are increasingly liable to be exposed to changes in family structure over the course of their childhood. 36.5% of Irish children were born outside of marriage or civil partnership in 2013, a percentage which has been increasing over the last few years (Central Statistics Office, 2013). Dating and cohabiting relationships tend to be unstable, particularly after the birth of children (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Goldstein & Harknett, 2006) and mothers are likely to date or marry within a few years of a relationship dissolution (Lamidi & Cruz, 2014; Lunn et al., 2010). These co-occurring patterns indicate that a growing number of children in single-parent families and stepfamilies have experienced stepfamily dissolution, as their parents move into and out of relationships. By investigating mothers' and children's experiences in previous stepfamilies, it may be possible to better understand the development of their subsequent stepfamily relationship development and maintenance.

This chapter begins with an examination of the literature surrounding family instability and stepfamilies. The participants and method are then outlined. Subsequently, the themes of mothers' wariness or openness to stepfamily relationships are described, followed by the theme of the children's threat management. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings in relation to the broader literature on family transitions and stepparent-stepchild relationship formation.

6.1.1 Family Transitions

Family transitions are typically considered to occur when a residential parent dissolves or enters into a romantic relationship – this can involve marriage, divorce, cohabitation, or the entrance into or dissolution of a dating relationship. A stepfamily transition occurs when a residential parent enters into or dissolves a romantic relationship with a partner who is not the biological parent of their child. Although some aspects of transitioning into a relationship are neutral or positive (e.g., Osborne et

al., 2012), in general, family transitions tend to be stressful and negative for mothers and children (e.g., Fomby, 2013; Magnuson & Berger, 2009). Transitions increase maternal stress and harsh parenting (Beck et al., 2010) and are associated with delinquency, conduct problems, increases in behaviour problems, psychological distress, and poorer health for residential children (Bachman, Coley, & Carrano, 2011; 2012; Bzostek & Beck, 2011; Goodnight et al., 2013; Magnuson & Berger, 2009). This family instability continues to have an impact on the children involved across their life course; family transitions in childhood are associated with a reduced likelihood of entrance to or completion of university, early family formation, an increased likelihood of having multiple marriages, and for men to have children outside of marriage (Fomby, 2013; Fomby & Bosick, 2013; Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2010).

The negative effects of family transitions on child and maternal outcomes in general have been well documented, but transitions into and out of stepfamilies are less well understood. It is difficult to evaluate the impact of transitioning into and out of a stepfamily because most research on family transitions consolidates all family transitions together (e.g., Bachman et al., 2011), focuses on the transition into or out of a first family (e.g., Hogan et al., 2003), or into a stepfamily (e.g., Cartwright, 2010). This is problematic because it is not just the number of family structure transitions that can impact well-being, but also the type of transition (Cooper et al., 2009). In one study that directly looked at stepfamily transitions, Osborne et al. (2012) found that entering a stepfamily was associated with neutral or positive effects for maternal well-being, whereas stepfamily dissolution was associated with adverse effects. The introduction of a stepparent to a family is associated with an extended period of destabilization and stress (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), but it is unclear how mothers and children experience the dissolution of stepfamily relationships and how this shapes the context of subsequent stepfamily relationship development.

Data from the Fragile Families study indicate that American children born to urban single-mothers and low-income families are very likely to experience at least one family structure transition within the first five years of their life (Cooper et al., 2009). Approximately 50% of the children born to unmarried mothers in that sample experienced three or more transitions by the age of five years. Of the children born to married mothers, 23.6% experienced one or more and 13.1% experienced three or more transitions (Beck et al., 2010). Approximately a third of children in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) experienced at least one transition between the

ages of 6 and 12 years (Magnuson & Berger, 2009) indicating that these transitions are relatively common in nationally representative samples as well. Considering that the likelihood of transitioning out of a marriage or cohabiting relationship or into a new relationship increases with time and that stepfamilies have traditionally resulted from couplings that contain older stepchildren (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008), it is likely that there is a significant group of children in Ireland who have experiences multiple transitions into and out of stepfamilies as well. Unlike in a transition from a two-parent biological family to a single-parent family, the person transitioning into and out of these families is not the child's biological parent – it is the stepparent. In this way, these transitions may be qualitatively different for the children involved; the experience of a stepparent's transition into and then out of a child's life may establish a different context for subsequent stepfamily relationship development than that established by the transition out of a married, two-biological-parent family.

6.1.2 Development of Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

Having a close relationship with a residential stepfather is beneficial for children; it is associated with fewer internalizing and externalizing problems, as well fewer failing grades (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001). However, many stepchildren do not develop a close relationship with their stepparent(s) (King, 2006; 2007). Difficulties relating to acquiring a stepparent have been offered as an explanation of why stepchildren tend to have lower levels of well-being than children in nuclear families (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), indicating that it is important to understand this transition. Some children are reluctant to develop a relationship with a stepparent regardless of the stepparent's affiliation efforts (Ganong et al., 1999). Ganong et al. (2011) found that some children disliked their stepparent from the start and continuously rejected a relationship with them; these children perceived that there were no benefits to a relationship with their stepparent. A number of factors appear to influence children's rejection of a relationship with their stepparent, such as child's age, the genders of the stepparent and stepchild, and children's views of the stepparents' personal qualities (Ganong et al., 2011; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). Presumably, any experience children had with previous stepparents would also have an impact on children's predisposition toward subsequent stepparents, but this has not been considered in previous research and is a gap which the present analysis seeks to address.

Mothers are central to the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). There is powerful societal pressure for mothers to act as a protector against threats to their children (Hays, 1996). Mothers see themselves as having a 'mother-in-charge' role which involves them, "directing and controlling their children's behaviour" (Nelson, 2006, p. 783) in order to safeguard them and create a positive family environment (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Mothers engage in behaviours that facilitate or inhibit stepparents' involvement in their child(ren)'s lives; this is termed gate-keeping. While gatekeeping is typically investigated in the mother-father relationship, "mothers might exert even more control over stepfather-stepchild relationships than they do over relationships between biological fathers and children" (Adamsons et al., 2007, p. 142) and so it is important to include mothers' perspectives when investigating how stepfamily dissolution shapes the context of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationship development.

This analysis employs two theoretical frameworks to understand the development of stepfamily relationships in the context of previous stepfamily dissolution. Primarily, this study is guided by the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997), which characterizes parent-child relationships as having bidirectional influences, interdependent power asymmetry, and equal agency. The analysis also drew upon concepts from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969); focusing on how previous relationships with attachment figures may affect beliefs about stepfamilies. Planitz and Feeney (2009) found that, "expectations embodied in negative working models of attachment tend to be self-fulfilling" (p. 94) in that when stepfamily members hold negative views of stepfamily functioning, they may be less able to constructively respond to family problems. If people have negative expectations of their relationships, these relationships may prove less likely to succeed (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The experience of family instability may lead to negative expectations for future stepfamily relationships, and thus understanding how these relationship transitions shape mothers' and children's views of their family and the role of stepparents is critical to understanding adaptive stepfamily development.

6.1.3 The Present Study

Family instability creates stress and is negative for mother and child outcomes (Bachman, Coley, & Carrano, 2011; 2012; Bzostek & Beck, 2011; Fomby, 2013; Goodnight et al., 2013; Magnuson & Berger, 2009), but less is known about how

having been through these stepfamily transitions impacts children's feelings about and responses to subsequent stepparent's affinity-seeking efforts or about how mothers approach subsequent romantic relationships after experiencing stepfamily dissolution. Through interviews with mothers and children who have experienced the formation and dissolution of at least one stepfamily, the current analysis seeks to elucidate how the experience of previous stepfamily relationship(s) shapes the context of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationship development. The central research question is: how do mothers and children approach stepparent-stepchild relationship development when they have experienced the dissolution of at least one previous stepfamily? Previous studies of stepparent-stepchild relationship development have not tended to take into account children's previous experiences with stepparents; by investigating children's experiences of the dissolution and formation of stepfamilies directly, it may be possible to better understand the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships.

6.2 Method

6.2.1 Participants

The inclusion criteria for this analysis was that a mother-child dyad participated, the children lived at least half the time with their biological mother, and the children had experienced the dissolution of at least one relationship between their mother and her romantic partner, where that partner was not the children's parent. This analysis includes 21 children and 15 mothers from 15 households (N=36). Because none of the fathers in the larger sample who had experienced at least one stepfamily transition also had their child(ren) participating, this sample only includes mothers and their children. The mothers ranged in age from 31 to 50 years (M=39.6, SD=7.4). The children ranged in age from 9 to 18 years (M=12.4, SD=2.4). Data from six sibling pairs were included in this analysis; two of those pairs had different biological fathers. There was an average of 2.3 (SD=1.0) children in the households, with eight of the 15 households including children with different fathers. The participating children had experienced an average of 1.9 (SD=1.1) stepfamily relationship dissolutions. For the eight children who currently had a stepparent, those relationships had lasted between 4 months and 108 months (M=32.5 months, SD=36.6 months). The other 13 children had all had a stepparent within the last five years and were aged six or older when their most recent stepfamily had dissolved. Further information about the households and participants can be found in Chapter 4.

A stepparent is the romantic partner of a parent; thus, in the current analysis, stepfamily dissolution was said to have occurred when the romantic relationship between a mother and her partner who was not the biological parent of the study child(ren) ended. Many of the children's non-resident parents had also had relationship transitions, but only the mother's relationship dissolutions were investigated for the purposes of this research. Although some studies have focused solely on cohabiting or marital transitions (e.g., Goodnight et al., 2013; Osborne et al., 2012), others have recommended that non-residential romantic relationships be included in research on relationship transitions (Beck et al., 2010; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Consequently, this sample includes mothers and children who have experienced the dissolution of at least one dating, cohabiting, or marital relationship with the mother, where the partner was not a biological parent of the child(ren).

6.2.2 Analysis

This analysis was carried out as described in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3). It draws upon responses to questions pertaining to mothers' relationships with former partners and how those relationships have influenced their and their children's subsequent relationships with their partners. Mothers were asked about former relationships, how the relationship dissolved, child(ren)'s relationship with the former partners, current contact with the former partner, and how they thought those relationships had impacted subsequent relationships. The questions they were asked included, "How did your child(ren) react when they realized you had broken up with [former stepparent]?", "Does [former stepparent] still see your child(ren)?", "What would you say [former stepparent's] relationship with the child(ren) is now?", "How do you think the child(ren) would react if you began dating?", "Do you think your and [former stepparent's] relationship had any impact on your relationship with [current stepparent]?", and "If you could go back and give yourself advice about being in a family like this, what advice would you give yourself?" Children were asked questions relating to the same topics, but were also asked whether they would like to still have contact with their mother's former partner(s) in cases where that contact had ceased. The questions they were asked included, "Do you remember when you found out that your mother and [former stepparent] weren't dating anymore? What happened? How did you feel?", "Do you still see [former stepparent]? Would you like to?", "How would you feel if your mother starting dating someone?", and "How do you get on with [stepparent]?"

6.3 Results

No children in this study were categorically positive about the introduction of a stepparent following stepfamily dissolution – their views ranged from tentative positivity to negativity. Willow (aged 9) felt guarded positivity about the idea of a stepfather, saying, "is this guy gonna be my dad and I'd hope that he's nice cause if he's not nice then I wouldn't really have a nice stepdad so I'd kinda be slightly worried". Some of the children were considerably more negative. They did not want their mothers to form romantic relationships; for example, Charlotte (aged 15) explained, "I don't like the idea of her bein' with someone" and, "I don't really like new men comin' in … and like just disruptin' everything".

If children have negative working models of attachment and negative expectations about their relationships with stepparents, this may impede or prevent the development of a close stepparent-stepchild relationship (Planitz & Feeney, 2009). Based on the loss of a relationship with a previous attachment figure, they may also be in a period of mourning and unable or unwilling to form a relationship with a new attachment figure (Carr, 2006). Children's negative reaction to new stepparents may hinder relationship development because stepparents pull away from children who do not show an interest in developing a relationship with them (Ganong et al., 1999). Thus children's openness to the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship is important. For this reason, it is noteworthy that none of children in this study were especially positive about the introduction of a new stepparent and many were overtly negative. A guiding question underpinning this analysis was: what it was about the experience of being in a stepfamily which dissolved that lead children to not be positive about the development of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationships? A narrative thematic analysis of the mothers' and children's interviews resulted in two themes: the mother's protectiveness over her child(ren) and the children's management of threats to their relationships and family dynamic.

6.3.1 Protectiveness

Mothers viewed relationship transitions as harmful for their children. Although these mothers had each had at least one dissolved stepfamily relationship and some had up to four, nearly all expressed that they "never wanted to bring people in and out of their [children's] life" (Emily) because "there's nothing worse than introducing 'em to loads of people and they keep leavin'" (Mia). The mothers' *protectiveness* emerged in the choices that they made around stepparent relationship initiation and relationship

dissolution. They took control of the negotiation of how their children transitioned into and out of stepfamily relationships, situating themselves as the decider of when and under what circumstances the stepparent-stepchild relationship developed and ended.

There were two different approaches amongst the mothers when it came to child contact with the stepparent – some were wary and limited their child(ren)'s contact with their current and former stepparent(s) whereas others were open and worked to develop the stepparent-stepchild relationship and maintain their child(ren)'s contact with their former stepparent(s) where they found it to be beneficial to the child(ren) (see Table 6.1). The dominant pattern was wariness, which included four subthemes: the mothers restricted children's contact with current stepparents, some mothers stopped dating altogether, the mothers did not facilitate contact between the former stepparent and the child(ren) after the mothers' romantic relationship dissolved, and the current stepparent was positioned as being outside of the family unit. The second theme of openness consisted of two subthemes: mothers allowed their current partners to form relationships with their child(ren) and mothers facilitated contact between the former stepparent and the child(ren) after the mothers' romantic relationship dissolved.

Table 6.1. *Subthemes relating to the mothers' protectiveness*

Theme	Subthemes
Mothers' Protectiveness	Wary of allowing stepparents to form a relationship with their children • Limit children's contact with current stepparent • Stop dating altogether after perceiving negative impact on their children • End the children's relationships with former stepparents when the mother's romantic relationship to the stepparent ends • Stepparent positioned as being outside the family unit Open to allowing stepparents to form and maintain a close relationship with their children • Allow current stepparent to develop a relationship with the children • Maintain child's relationship with former stepparents after the mother's romantic relationship to the stepparent ends

6.3.1.1 Wariness

The dominant approach of the mothers was wariness about their child(ren) meeting or developing relationships with their partners. Their experience of stepfamily dissolution had led them to view current partners as having the potential to negatively influence their child(ren) and to view former partners as being inconsequential to the child(ren)'s lives. In this sense, it was not their partners that they considered to be possibly negative for their children, but rather the possibility of relationship dissolution. Despite the considerable constraints on their ability to do so, they felt that they needed to limit contact between their child(ren) and their current and former partner(s) in order to safeguard their child(ren)'s well-being.

Mothers who were wary of the impact of stepparents based on their previous relationships tried to protect their child(ren) from the negative influence of dissolution by limiting their child(ren)'s contact with subsequent partners. They attempted to change their behaviour based on their previous experiences, which tended to mean that they were "more guarded the second time, you know that way? For the kids' sake" (Eleanor). These mothers felt that previous stepparents had generally had a negative impact on their child(ren) through their relationship dissolution and thus they were wary about contact or relationship development between their child(ren) and their subsequent partners. They viewed themselves as having considerable agency in shielding their child(ren) from negative outcomes by limiting their child(ren)'s contact with their subsequent partners.

While some of the mothers believed that changing the contact they allowed between their partner and child(ren) would alleviate negative consequences of dissolution for their child(ren), others' experiences led them to believe that they could not date without negatively impacting their child(ren). Two of the mothers did not believe that they could both fulfil their role as a good mother and develop a romantic relationship. When Mairead brought home a partner, it "really upset Brent [son]; he was cryin' the next day and everything" which "really affected me as well, and I just like kinda stopped it there and I just um I said, "No. I'll leave it until another time and I want to focus on rearin' me children."" This is consistent with an intensive mothering ideology wherein mothers are expected to put the needs of their children above their own needs and to make extensive sacrifices to ensure the well-being of their children (Hays, 1996). Although some of the children in these families indicated that they would not be upset if their mother dated, the mothers continued to believe that it was

important to their child(ren)'s welfare that they not date. These mothers felt that their previous relationships had negatively impacted their children and they attempted to protect their children by not forming subsequent romantic relationships.

The majority of the mothers believed that it was not of benefit to their child(ren) to continue the child(ren)'s relationship with their former stepparent, so made the decision – with no input from their child(ren) – to end these relationships when their own romantic relationships ended. They stopped contact between their child(ren) and the child(ren)'s former stepparent because they "didn't feel it was right that an ex-boyfriend should have a relationship" (Sinead). The mothers who terminated stepparent-stepchild contact after their own relationship dissolution tended to view the stepparent's role as being relatively immaterial to their child(ren)'s lives and as existing solely as a consequence of their own continued romantic relationship with the stepparent. Their experiences of stepfamily life led to their view that stepparent involvement was unimportant to their child(ren)'s outcomes and thus they did not think it was worthwhile for the stepparent to continue a relationship with their child(ren). These mothers did not allow for the continuance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship even when their child(ren) were vocal about wanting that relationship to continue.

Wariness around the impact of multiple partners on their child(ren) meant that many of the mothers positioned the stepparent as an outsider. Ava explains, "the children and I are the home – other people can just be there sometimes." Similarly, Sorcha described that, "I give men a chance and – a few months – and if they're not workin' out then I just say, "You know what? Ok. This isn't really workin' for us." I prefer to be on my own with the kids." In this way, the mothers positioned their connection to their child(ren) as being the primary family relationship; stepparents were either not considered to be family members at all or were considered to be non-essential family members. The mothers limited the potential roles that the stepparent could have within these families based on their experiences of stepfamily dissolution. Eleanor explained that her son, "doesn't need another father … You know, he's had enough fathers". The mothers viewed this positioning as decreasing the potentially negative impact of relationship dissolution.

Most of the mothers engaged in gate-closing toward their current partners as a result of their perception that previous relationship dissolution was damaging to their child(ren). They limited initial contact with current stepparents, stopped contact with previous stepparents, and positioned the current stepparent as being outside the family

unit. This wariness toward current and former stepparent involvement reflected the mothers' attempts to protect their child(ren) from the negative effects of family instability.

6.3.1.2 Openness

Five of the mothers believed that fostering their child(ren)'s close connection to current and former stepparents was the best way to protect their child(ren) from the negative effects of family instability. These mothers thought that if they could form close relationships between their partner and their child(ren) – and maintain those relationships after the dissolution of their romantic relationship, if it did dissolve – this would benefit their child(ren). Their experiences in previous relationships had shown them that the best strategy for stepfamily relationship initiation and dissolution was to have the stepparent be involved with the child during and after the romantic relationship.

Although most of the mothers reacted to the experience of stepfamily dissolution by engaging in more gate-closing behaviours in their next relationship, one of the mothers, Éilís decided to take the opposite approach and to, for the first time, allow her partner, Thomas, to have a role in her children's lives.

> I thought at that stage, you know, it would be too complicated to kinda let him [Thomas] in ... But then I kinda stepped back and I said, "Well hang on a minute. I done that with Caleb's [son] da. I done that with Shane's [son] da. If I take a chance it *might* actually work out ... I took a chance and I done it the opposite way to see whether it would work, because it hadn't worked you know?

Éilís had not introduced her previous partners to her children but thought she might be able to form a lasting relationship by including her partner in her family life. She believed that her current partner was a positive influence on their lives, saying that having "another male figure in their life ... is good for them". Éilís' previous relationship experience had led her to be more open to the development of her children's relationship with her current partner. She viewed her own successful negotiation of the stepparent-stepchild relationship as having the potential to protect her children and provide a more advantageous family situation for them.

Some mothers endeavoured to continue managing the emotional bonds and connections between their child(ren) and the stepparents after their own romantic relationship had ended. These mothers believed that their child(ren) should continue their relationships with the former stepparents because it would hurt the child(ren) more to discontinue contact. In this way, these mothers' stepparent-stepchild

relationship-maintenance efforts were framed as a necessity for ensuring their child(ren)'s welfare. They acted as protectors of their child(ren), attempting to ensure that the child(ren) "didn't experience any loss" (Katalin) by working to maintain the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Their experiences in previous relationships had shown them that their child(ren) were less negatively impacted when they continued relationships with stepparents. Thus, they approached the dissolution of subsequent relationships by attempting to maintain the continuity of their child(ren)'s relationship with the former stepparent. Unfortunately, despite their efforts, some of the stepparents were not interested in continuing a relationship with the stepchild(ren), leaving mothers frustrated that they could not maintain wanted continuity in their children's lives. Ava said that at the end of their relationship, her former partner Julia,

> Really was saying, "Oh, I want to see the kids" and "I would see them" or blah blah blah which actually never happened … she used to tell them that she loves them very much, that tee da ta and then no more contact, so of course he [son] takes some insecurity now.

By attempting to continue the relationships between their child(ren) and former stepparents, these mothers were hoping to protect their children from experiencing the loss of a significant relationship. In spite of this, some stepparents were not willing to continue their relationships with their former stepchildren, stymieing the mothers' attempts to maintain continuity.

Overall, this theme of *protectiveness* concerns the mothers' role as a guardian and caretaker of her child(ren). The mothers believed that their actions were critical to their children's successful development and they attempted to negotiate their own romantic relationships in a way which would have the least negative impact on their children. As in other studies of mothers' relationship management in stepfamilies (e.g., Weaver & Coleman, 2010), these mothers viewed themselves as having an integral role in the formation and maintenance of their children's relationships with stepparents. Their experiences in previous relationships led some of the mothers to be wary of contact between their child(ren) and current and former stepparents. Those experiences led other mothers to integrate current stepparents into their child(ren)'s lives and to work to maintain contact between former stepparents and their child(ren) in an effort to provide the best outcomes for their child(ren).

6.3.2 Managing Threats

This theme relates to the children's management of threats to their relationships (see Table 6.2). Four subthemes were developed which encompass the concerns which

required the children's management. Some were concerned about the threat of a loss of closeness to their stepparent; they had experienced stepfamily dissolution where they were not allowed to continue a relationship with a close person in their life, and thus were apprehensive about the idea of a new stepparent who might also be taken out of their lives. The children's previous stepfamily experiences had also led them to view the introduction of a stepparent as being a threat to their mother-child and father-child closeness. Finally, the children were concerned about changes that the stepparent might make to their routine and their family unit.

Table 6.2. *Subthemes relating to the children's threat management*

Theme	Subthemes
Children's Threat Management	Threat of loss of closeness with stepparent • No control over continuation of relationship with former stepparents • Mother assistance in continuing relationship with former stepparents Threats to mother-child closeness • Mother has less time to spend with child when dating • Mother is not open with child about her romantic relationships Threats to father-child closeness • Stepparent involvement negatively impacts father's involvement in child's life Threats to family unit • Stepparent threatens child's family dynamics and home life

6.3.2.1 Threat of Loss of Closeness with Stepparent

For most of the children, the end of their mother's romantic relationship with her partner meant the immediate termination of their own contact with the stepparent, regardless of their own desire to continue the relationship. The children learned that developing a close relationship with their stepparent might ultimately be damaging to themselves, because they had no control over the continuation of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Kyle (aged 13) described finding out that his mother was no longer engaged and he was no longer going to move house when his mother, "just said,

"Niall's [stepfather] not comin' around here anymore."" Some of the children found the immediate cessation of contact with their stepparent to be deeply troubling. These children had formed close, long-term relationships with a stepparent that ended suddenly or with little warning. They were "surprised" and "disappointed" because they "knew we weren't going to see him as much anymore" (Tristan, aged 11). The children who wanted to continue the relationship with their former stepparent but were unable to do so were frustrated by their lack of influence. Philip (aged 13) "was kind of upset, actually" that his mother was no longer dating Jude, a partner who "was always sayin', "Oh, we should build, like, a motorbike" and all that"; Philip's contact with Jude ended when his mother's relationship did and he "didn't ever get the chance" to build the motorbike with Jude.

Penelope (aged 14) similarly described when her mother's partner moved out by saying, "I didn't really get what was going on. I just kinda like saw her and we were a bit sad and she just wasn't there anymore". By stopping contact between the former stepparent and the stepchild when the stepchild wanted to continue that relationship, the mothers hindered the children's ability to control their own relationships; they felt that "the house wasn't the same when he [stepfather] wasn't there" (Samuel, aged 11), but did not have any power to change the situation. After experiencing the cessation of contact with an important figure in their life, these children realized that developing close relationships with stepparents carried a risk of loss; they attempted to obviate future losses of close relationships by not being as open to the development of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationships. This was described by Charlotte (aged 15), who explained that, based on her mother's previous relationships, she did not think her stepfather was likely to be a long-term figure in her life and she did not want to form a relationship with him because she was thinking about, "if he leaves and all". She explained, "he'd [her stepfather] want to get to know me more but I don't … So I don't really talk to him or interact with him … It's not that I don't like him. It's just I don't want to get to know him."

Some of the children wanted to maintain a relationship with their former stepparent and were assisted in this by their mothers. These children had developed close relationships with their stepparent and both they and their mothers felt that these relationships should continue. Although Willow's (aged 9) mother's relationship with Willow's stepfather, Enda, had ended a few years previous and they had moved to a city some distance away from Enda, Willow said,

> He's almost like a stepdad or something cause he's really really nice and kind and he cares for me as if I was like his own child or something. So he's really really nice and we sometimes go down and visit him and visit my old friends and all and we, whenever we go down there we don't not visit him – we always visit him because he's really special and nice.

Willow had not realized that her mother's romantic relationship had ended for nearly a year after its dissolution because of Enda's continued involvement in her life. Silas (aged 10) also continued to have a relationship with his former stepmother and they "talk about computers and stuff." Darragh (aged 13) continued to see his former stepfather, Roger, "quite a lot"; "every second weekend we'd stay in his house". These children were more positive when describing current stepparents or when thinking about the possibility of future stepparents than children who were not given the option to continue contact with their former stepparent. Tristan (aged 11) described that if his mother began dating again and her partner, "was really nice I'd probably be happy with it. Like Enda [former stepfather]". They tended to be more open to subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationship development, possibly because they felt that the future of their relationships with stepparents was less threatened or because they were not in mourning over the loss of a previous attachment relationship. In previous stepfamily dissolution(s), these children had agency to continue relationships which were important to them; thus, they tended to be tentatively positive about the idea of a new stepparent, whereas the children who had less control were more likely to be overtly negative.

Some children's stepparent-stepchild relationship was forcibly ended by the dissolution of the mother-stepparent relationship. The experiences of these children showed them that the formation of a new stepparent-stepchild relationship came with the threat of the loss of that relationship. These children were thus wary about developing new stepparent-stepchild relationships. When mothers facilitated contact between the stepparent and stepchild after their romantic relationship dissolution, children tended to be less apprehensive about the introduction of a new stepparent into their family.

6.3.2.2 Threats to Mother-Child Closeness

Consistent with previous research (Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012a), the children in this sample described their relationships with their mothers as being close and highly important to them. Liam (aged 18) described his closeness to his mother by stating, "I grew up with just me and my ma … we have a relationship that like, I don't

know. It's weird like. I just tell her anything really." Many of the children indicated that the introduction of a stepparent was a threat to this closeness. Their experiences in previous stepfamilies had shown them that their mother's dating had the potential to negatively impact their relationship with their mother, and thus they were wary about their mother's subsequent romantic relationship formation; this constitutes the second subtheme of the theme of children's threat management.

When a mother begins a romantic relationship, she may alter her parenting and find it difficult to divide her time between her partner and her child (Gibson-Davis, 2008). The mothers explained that they faced social and personal pressures to keep their children from their partners until the romantic relationship was sufficiently developed, but by keeping the two apart, the children felt that their mothers had less time for them. Penelope (aged 14) explained, "I always find it hard if she starts seeing somebody to accept it because it means that she starts having less time with us [Penelope and her sibling] and I think it makes me feel a bit less important". Similarly, when Willow (aged 9) described her concerns about her mother dating, she stated that she did not know what that would mean for her own relationship with her mother; "I would be kind of worried because I think that now my mom's gonna spend more time with him [stepfather] instead of us so I'd kinda be worried a bit." Willow described the benefit of the dissolution of her mother's most recent relationship: "now that my mom didn't spend as much time with Enda [former stepfather], she spent some time with us some more". The children viewed the loss of time with their mother as a result of their mother's dating as a threat to the closeness of their relationship with their mother. They felt that if their mother formed a new relationship, she would have less time available for them and thus were wary of subsequent stepparents.

Some of the children did not necessarily have a problem with their mother dating, but were more upset that their mother was not open with them about her romantic relationships. Aifric (aged 11) "didn't really like it" that her mother was dating because her mother, "didn't say that he [stepfather] was her boyfriend and so then afterwards then she was like sort of hinting about it and *then* I got it and then afterwards I was really upset about it". Charlotte (aged 15) did not know that her mother was dating until her mother became pregnant; she said "but when [she] did get pregnant, I was like, "Well why wouldn't you tell me?" and stuff". She explained, "sometimes it feels like she leaves us [Charlotte and her siblings] out of stuff. And like, with the way I have to find out everything for myself". Although the mothers may have

been attempting to avoid difficulties for their children by not informing them that they were dating, the result was that some of these children felt uninformed and excluded. This exclusion stood in contrast to the children's conception of an open and close relationship with their mother. Because previous relationships had threatened the openness of their relationships with their mothers, many children did not want their mothers to form subsequent relationships.

Children of single mothers tend to act as their mother's social support system and to form an intimate and cohesive parent-child bond (Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012a); when the mothers spent considerable time away from their children or were secretive about their dating, the children felt that this undermined the closeness in their relationship. The children were thus more wary of their mother dating because their previous experiences of her romantic relationships meant that they could predict that her dating would have a negative impact on the closeness of their own mother-child relationship. By indicating that they did not want their mother to date or by not being open to a relationship with their mothers' partners, the children were attempting to mitigate the threat to their own mother-child relationship.

6.3.2.3 Threats to Father-Child Closeness

Some of the children were also concerned about the impact of a stepparent on their relationship with their non-resident father. Although many of the children did not have contact with their non-resident fathers, those that did attempted to enact stepparent-stepchild relationships in ways that were not threatening to their father-child relationship, generally by limiting the depth of their relationship with their stepparent. This third subtheme within the over-arching theme of children's threat management was developed from children's narratives of loyalty conflicts and their concern that the formation of a stepfamily relationship would negatively impact their parent-child relationship.

Children's experiences in previous stepfamilies had made them believe that stepparent involvement was negative for their father; thus, they were unhappy if their mother formed a romantic relationship. Gavin (aged 13) explained, "if someone else just was dating my mom then well my dad wouldn't like him". These children did not want their mothers to form romantic relationships because their previous stepfamily experiences made them think that subsequent relationships had the potential to be destructive to their own relationships with their fathers. They felt that formation of a close stepparent-stepchild relationship would be viewed negatively by their fathers and

attempted to manage this threat to their father-child relationship by maintaining distance from any stepparents. Charlotte (aged 15) said it was easier, "for me not to have such a big connection [to stepfather] ... So that my dad doesn't feel left out."

6.3.2.4 Threats to Family Unit

Many of the children had lived alone for extended periods with their mother and siblings; the final subtheme relates to children's feelings that the introduction of a stepparent would be an intrusion into their home life. The stepparent was not just a threat to the closeness of their relationship with their parents, but was a threat to their family and their normal way of life as well. Penelope (aged 14) described when her stepmother moved in, saying, "things were changing and I was like, "Well why are they changing?" ... suddenly she [stepmother] was there and I was all like, "Well, where did she come from?" She just appeared." Similarly, Bronagh (aged 12) said:

> I prefer livin' on my own ... with my mom and my brother because if there's a fourth person there, I just like I don't feel as like comfortable as I would around like my mom and my brother... It's just really that I don't really know these people as much as I know my brother and my mom

The stepparent was someone who had the power to dramatically alter their family dynamic and their lives, as with Kyle (aged 13), whose mother's fiancé had, "wanted us to move to France or somethin' but I didn't really want to do that". A stepparent would mean "new kids and might be a new family and a new house" (Blaine, aged 9). The children had experienced the power that previous stepparents had to make changes to their routine and family unit and were guarded about subsequent stepparents as a result. They attempted to manage the threat of future stepparents and the changes that may occur in their family dynamic as a result, by excluding subsequent stepparents from family life.

Children's experiences with previous stepfamilies had generally led them to be more wary of subsequent stepparent involvement in their lives. Some children did not want to form close stepparent-stepchild relationships because of the threat of the loss of this relationship. They were also concerned about the impact of a stepparent on their parent-child relationships; viewing the introduction of previous stepparents as having a negative impact on the closeness and cohesion of these relationships. Finally, children viewed stepparents as threatening their family dynamic and way of life.

6.4 Conclusions

This analysis builds on research showing that family instability is stressful and generally has a negative impact on parents and children (Beck et al., 2010; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Magnuson & Berger, 2009). Both mothers and children

tended to respond to stepfamily transitions by being more guarded about subsequent relationship development. The strength of stepparent-stepchild relationships is important to both stepfamily and child outcomes (Coleman et al., 2000; King, 2006); both the mothers' positioning and children's responses to their stepparents' affinity-seeking efforts are critical to the formation of a close stepparent-stepchild relationship (Marsiglio, 2004; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Although some cautiousness at the start of new relationships is prudent, the continuation of this guardedness and negativity toward stepparents has the potential to negatively impact what might otherwise be close stepparent-stepchild relationships.

This analysis resulted in two themes which elucidate the influence of stepfamily transitions on the approaches to subsequent stepfamily relationships. The first theme related to mothers' attempts to protect their children – generally through increased wariness around subsequent stepparents, although a minority became more open to their child(ren)'s relationships with subsequent stepparents. The second theme was concerned with how the children reacted in subsequent stepfamilies by attempting to manage the threats to their relationships and family dynamics which they had encountered in previous stepfamilies.

Mothers tended to view themselves as the arbiter of their children's best interests, whereas the children attempted to manage perceived threats to their family relationships. These two positions created a tension over how relationships with stepparents should be approached, with the mothers' actions tending to leave the children feeling disempowered when they were not able to control their mother's dating or their own stepparent-stepchild relationship formation and dissolution in the way they would like. Although other research has shown that mothers believe their children have considerable influence over their decisions to enter into, stay in, or dissolve a romantic relationship (Sano et al., 2012; Weaver & Coleman, 2010), most of the children in this study did not feel that they had power over these decisions. The mothers may have been considering their children's needs and felt that they were responding to their children's preferences, but this did not translate into the children experiencing feelings of agency.

Some of the children had close, long-standing relationships with stepparents, which were ended by the mother at the dissolution of her romantic relationship. These children were hesitant to form a relationship with a new stepparent, possibly because they would be similarly unable to control their experience of the dissolution of that

relationship. This is in contrast to the families where mothers attempted to maintain the stepparent-stepchild relationship; children in these families tended to be more positive about the development of subsequent stepfamily relationships. Those children who felt that they were able to manage threats to their relationships and family dynamics successfully were more open to subsequent stepfamily relationships, pointing to the importance of children's sense of agency in the development and dissolution of their relationships with stepparents. It is not enough for mothers to attempt to take their children's needs into account; children need to feel agentic as well (Kuczynski, 2003).

Both mothers and children are impacted when a mother begins to date (Beck et al., 2010; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Single mothers have significant demands on their time and resources (e.g., Burton & Tucker, 2009; Sano et al., 2012) and these demands become more strained when mothers form romantic relationships. Children of single mothers tend to view their mothers' dating as having the potential to negatively influence the parent-child relationship (Nixon et al., 2013). Moving from a single parent family to a stepfamily involves increased social and economic resources (King, 2006) but children who had experienced multiple previous transitions may have viewed these changes as being temporary and not worth the decreased time and attention from their mother. Based on their experiences of family instability, children viewed the mothers' dating as a threat to the mother-child closeness as opposed to something likely to be positive for themselves or their family.

This analysis investigated how mothers' and children's experiences of previous stepfamily relationship(s) shaped the context of subsequent stepfamily relationship development. It adds to the understanding of the processes and contextual factors influencing stepparent-stepchild relationship development. Children who have experienced at least one stepfamily transition are relatively negative about developing a relationship with subsequent stepparents, perhaps because of the tension between their mothers' protective behaviours and their own threat management. Children who felt agentic and whose mothers attempted to maintain continuity in their relationships with their former stepparents were more positive about subsequent stepparents. In this way, children's experiences in previous stepfamilies may influence the types of relationships that they are likely to form with subsequent stepparents. The next chapter focuses on how parents and stepparents negotiate their parenting roles once a stepfamily does form.

Chapter 7: Parental Role Negotiation

7.1 Introduction

It is critical to stepfamily formation that appropriate boundaries and roles within the family system are established (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Papernow, 1994; Visher & Visher, 1988). The aim of this chapter is to determine how parenting roles are negotiated within stepfamilies. Parental roles do not spring up fully formed, but rather are negotiated. All pertinent parties form the relationship with attitudes about the ideal parental and stepparental roles in mind, and then these attitudes change and are accommodated throughout an accumulation of interactions. One partner may effect change in the other or their interactions may be mutually influential (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). The role that the stepparent negotiates in their family impacts the type of relationship that they are likely to have with their stepchild(ren) (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Ganong et al., 1999) and the roles open to the parent. Thus, the negotiation of the stepparent role impacts not just the stepparent's place within the family, but also the parent's role, and the stepparent's relationship development with their stepchild(ren).

This chapter involves two analyses. The first analysis is of the parental role negotiation between pairs of parents and stepparents and the second analysis includes children, parents, and stepparents to elucidate the role of children in the negotiation of stepparents' parenting roles. The chapter begins with an examination of the literature on stepparent and parent roles in families, and then the methods and participants for the two analyses are described. Subsequently, the results of the parental role negotiation analysis are described, including how both parents and stepparents negotiate their parenting roles. Then the children's influence on stepparental role negotiation is discussed. Finally, the chapter places the results in the broader context of the stepfamily literature and explains how these findings inform understanding of the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationship formation.

7.1.1 The Role of Stepparents

When a stepparent begins a relationship with a parent, they are joining a family unit that has developed its own roles and routines. Children and stepparents often do not know each other well before the stepparent moves in (Smith et al., 2001) and there tends to be limited discussion of parenting roles prior to cohabitation (Cartwright, 2010; Smith et al., 2001). The introduction of a stepparent means that everyone has to

adjust in order to accommodate a new family member. This involves a complex 'family dance', wherein the parent, stepparent, and stepchild(ren) attempt to negotiate roles which are acceptable to all (Marsiglio, 2004). This process is important because successfully negotiated roles and boundaries are associated with feeling like a family and more positive descriptions of the development of the stepfamily (Braithwaite et al., 2001). If the stepparent and stepchild form a close relationship with high regard for one another, this leads to better outcomes for the stepchild (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001), for the stepparent (Gosselin & David, 2007; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011) and for the parent-stepparent relationship (King, 2007).

Stepparents' levels of warmth and control are highly influential in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships (Fine et al., 1997; Fine & Kurdek, 1994). Warmth is "the extent to which parents support, spend time with, and communicate with their child" and control is, "the degree to which parents set and enforce limits and monitor their child's or adolescent's activities" (Fine et al., 1997, p.505). These two dimensions are central to different stepparent roles. An authoritative parental role, for example, might be expected to be high in both warmth and control, whereas friends tend to be high in warmth and low in control, and distant acquaintances tend to be low in both warmth and control (Coleman, Ganong, & Weaver, 2001).

Although parents and stepparents tend to believe that the stepparent should be involved in discipline (Fine et al., 1998), it is generally accepted within the literature that stepparents should not take a disciplinary role for a few years after stepfamily formation because this negatively impacts stepparent-stepchild relationship development and child outcomes (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2006). Stepchildren tend to prefer that their stepparents assume a "friend" role as opposed to taking on an active parenting role with high levels of control (Fine et al., 1998). Some children are accepting of stepparent discipline, but most are not and rebel against stepparent control (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Mobley, 2011). Stepparents who are concerned with exerting control and who have 'take charge' personalities are less successful at building close stepparent-stepchild relationships than stepparents who are more 'laid back' and adopt a parent-support role (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Ganong et al., 1999). Based on these findings, therapists recommend that stepparents spend a few years developing a relationship with their stepchild(ren) before they attempt to engage in discipline (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Papernow, 2006). Once a close relationship between stepparents and stepchildren is

formed, children tend to be more willing to grant disciplinary and parenting authority to their stepparents (Schrodt, 2006), and a coparenting or power sharing role for stepparents – with high levels of warmth and control – is more acceptable to children. Parental and stepparental roles are not static, but rather change with increased closeness, time together, or changes in circumstances (Kelly & Ganong, 2011a; 2011b; Schrodt, 2008).

Parents and stepparents tend to be guided by a nuclear family ideal and believe that the stepparent should quickly adopt a parent-like role that has control over the stepchild(ren) (Fine et al., 1997; Mobley, 2011). This may be particularly true in stepmother families, where many fathers expect their partner to be "mother-like" toward the father's children (Orchard & Solberg, 1999). Most stepparents do quickly take on a disciplinary role toward their stepchild(ren), with 88% of stepparents setting standards for their stepchild(ren) soon after stepfamily formation (Funder, 1996). Although negative for stepchild and stepparent-stepchild relationship outcomes (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), stepparents may benefit from negotiating an authoritative role; Fine et al. (1997) found that stepfathers were more satisfied with their parenting role when they frequently engaged in both warmth and control behaviours toward their stepchild(ren). If the stepparent takes a parenting role, this can be positive for the parent because they are able to share more responsibilities as a caregiver. Thus, although this role may not be positive for other aspects of stepfamily life, it appears to be beneficial for stepparents to be involved in stepchild discipline and may help parents as well by reducing some of their caretaking responsibilities.

7.1.2 The Role of Biological Parents

The introduction of a stepparent into stepfamily life can be difficult for parents. They have typically formed intensive and exclusive relationships with their children which can make adjustment to stepfamily living challenging for parents, because the nature of the parent's role may have to adapt as well. If the stepparent adopts a power sharing role, then the parent's highly intense relationship with their child(ren) is likely to change as well. In this way, the role that the stepparent negotiates also impacts the potential roles available to the parent because, "how roles are negotiated in one position is very closely related to how they are fulfilled (or perceived to be) in another" (Weaver & Coleman, 2010, p.324).

Parents may want caretaking help from their partner and to make their partner's involvement with their children meaningful, yet they may also be unwilling to share

certain aspects of the parenting role (Nelson, 2006). Weaver and Coleman (2010) found that a mother identity was more salient for mothers in stepfamilies than a wife or partner identity, which led mothers to assume a protective stance within the stepfamily. Mothers in stepfather families acted as defenders, gatekeepers, mediators, and interpreters – simultaneously facilitating and limiting the involvement of their partner in family life – in order to protect their child(ren). Their assumption of these role strategies were influenced by their expectations for their family, their partner's experience with families and children, structural characteristics of their family, and their feelings of role conflict. There is some evidence that mothers are willing to allow their partners more parenting power – particularly for discipline – than they would allow other caretakers (Nelson, 2006), yet some appear to actively limit this role for stepparents as well (Coleman et al., 2001; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Some parents, certainly, do encourage their partners to be an active authority within the stepfamily (Bray, 1999; Orchard & Solberg, 1999); because of the lack of research on biological mothers and fathers in stepfamilies, it is unclear why some parents limit the stepparent's role and others prefer the stepparent to have a parenting role.

7.1.3 The Role of Children

Children tend to be seen as requiring caretaking and guidance from parents or guardians, and having less power than those parents or guardians (Kuczynski, 2003). However, the role of children within families is multifaceted. In addition to their needs as a dependent, children act as companions and intimates of their parents (Harach & Kuczynski, 2005), influence parents' values and behaviours (Daly et al., 2013), negotiate their own kin relationships (Kendrick, 2013; Mason & Tipper, 2008), and may be the de-facto heads of their households (Payne, 2012). In divorced or separated families, parents also tend to believe that their children should have significant involvement in decision-making about custody and contact with their non-resident parent (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008).

This research attempts to address a significant gap in the literature on how parenting roles are negotiated within stepfamilies. There is considerable diversity in parenting roles and obligations within stepfamilies (Braithwaite, 2001; Crohn, 2006; Svare, Jay, & Mason, 2004), but it is less clear what underlies the negotiation of these different dynamics. Most research on roles and role negotiation in stepfamilies has focused on the types of roles that stepparents adopt (Perez & Tórrens, 2009; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), which type of role leads to the best outcomes for the stepparent (Fine

et al., 1997) and the stepchild (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2006), or how children affect the stepparent's role (Speer & Trees, 2007). However, it is critical to investigate families as a unit because these aspects all influence one another. If the stepparent adopts a certain role, that will influence the roles available to the parent, as well as how everyone in the family interacts with the stepparent. Thus, it is not just the stepparent's role being negotiated but the parental role and family dynamic as well.

Previous studies have not addressed how interactions in each family subsystem influence the development of these roles at the family level. The literature has clearly shown that for the most positive stepparent-stepchild relationship development, stepparents should be taking on a parent-support role and not engaging in child discipline (Ganong et al., 1999; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992); however, many stepparents adopt a power sharing role with the parent soon after stepfamily formation. It is not clear how parents and stepparents go about negotiating these parenting roles, who is involved in that negotiation and how, or what factors within each family make stepparents more likely to take on certain parenting roles. This analysis addresses three research questions:

1. How do parents and stepparents negotiate their parenting roles?
2. What factors make stepparents more or less likely to adopt a power sharing or parent-support role?
3. What role do stepchildren have in the negotiation of the stepparent's parenting role?

7.2 Method

7.2.1 Participants

The first part of this research attempts to elucidate how parents and stepparents negotiate their parenting roles with one another. Because people are active in the construction of their roles and are also influenced by their interactions with others (Goffman, 1959), this research includes pairs of biological parents and stepparents (11 pairs, N=22). There were 8 pairs of mothers and stepfathers and 3 pairs of fathers and stepmothers; these are all of the pairs of biological parents and stepparents in the larger sample. The pairs were married (n=6), cohabiting (n=3), or in a committed relationship but not living together (n=2). They had been together for an average of 6.0 years (SD=5.9 years) and those that were married had been married for an average of 2.1

years (*SD*=1.9). The parents ranged in age from 26 to 54 years (*M*=37.0, *SD*=8.1) and the stepparents ranged in age from 25 to 55 years (*M*=34.3, *SD*=9.1). The stepparents had an average of 1.4 stepchildren (*SD*=0.7) and the parents and stepparents had an average of 0.8 (*SD*=1.0) shared biological children.

The second part of this chapter investigates the ways in which stepchildren influence the negotiation of stepparent's parenting role. Because parents' and stepparents' role negotiation is influenced by the children's attitudes to their stepparent's role and the parents' and stepparents' perception of the children's attitudes, children (*n*=31), parents (*n*=29), and stepparents (*n*=11) are included in this sample (*N*=71). Role negotiation is a dynamic process within the family system and thus there are at least two participants from each of the families in the sample. The children ranged in age from 8 to 18 years (*M*=11.9, *SD*=2.6), the parents ranged in age from 26 to 54 years (*M*=39.7, *SD*=7.4), and the stepparents ranged in age from 25 to 55 years (*M*=34.3, *SD*=9.1). This sample is the entirety of the sample described in Chapter 4, including the 11 pairs of parents and stepparents whose data were used to answer the research question above. Further information about all of the participants can be found in Chapter 4.

7.2.2 Analysis

This analysis was carried out as described in Chapter 3. The first analysis drew upon responses to the biological parents' and stepparents' questions pertaining to stepfamily formation and roles within the family. For the parents, these included, "What's it like to be a parent in a family like this?", "What was it like moving from being a single parent to having a partner?", "What role does your partner have towards your child(ren)?", "Did you discuss with your partner how they could go about developing a relationship with your child(ren)?", "Can you remember a time when having your partner there made parenting particularly easy/difficult?", "What kinds of things does your partner do to take care of your child(ren)?", "Who makes the rules for your child(ren) in your house?", "Has there ever been a time when your partner has had to discipline your child(ren)?", and other questions relating to these topics. For the stepparents, these included, "What do you think your role is toward

[stepchild(ren)][17]?", "What is it like to date someone with a child?", "What did you expect your relationship with [stepchild(ren)] to be when you first started dating your partner?", "Your partner and their child(ren) were living together before you started dating. Were there any difficulties joining their routine?", "Can you describe some of the things you do to take care of [stepchild(ren)]?", "Who normally disciplines [stepchild(ren)]?", and other questions about the stepparent's negotiation of a parenting role within the stepfamily and the parent's position in that negotiation.

The second analysis drew upon responses from the children, biological parents, and stepparents about how the children influenced the parents' and stepparents' role negotiation. The children were asked questions such as, "Can you tell me a little about [stepparent]?", "What kinds of things did/do you do with [stepparent]?", "Who takes care of you when you get home from school?", "Who makes the rules in your house for you?", "Does [stepparent] have any say in the rules?", "What would happen if you did something bold?"[18], "How would you list [stepparent] if you were filling out the census?" and other questions in the same vein. Parents and stepparents were asked questions about the child(ren)'s response to stepparent's parenting efforts; these were often questions about children's responses to specific events, such as what happened the last time the stepchild was disciplined by the stepparent. They also were asked questions such as, "What do you expect to have to do for [stepchild(ren)]?, "Does [stepchild(ren)] have any rules for you?", "Would [stepchild(ren)] come to you if they hurt themselves?", "Would [stepchild(ren)] come to you if they had a question about their homework?" and other questions related to the parent and stepparent's perception of the stepchild(ren)'s engagement with the stepparent in a parenting role.

7.3 Parenting Roles

The parenting role can include a number of features, such as responsibility, decision-making, involvement with discipline, care-taking, offering guidance, and modelling social behaviours. Parenting roles are not formed in a vacuum, but rather dynamically by all members of the family. Family members are interdependent and the

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[17] Because not all members of stepfamilies consider themselves to be in a stepfamily or self-identify as stepfamily members (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013; Koenig-Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Lamb Normand, 2008), where possible, participants were asked these questions with references to the names of family members, as opposed to their roles within the family. For example, instead of asking, "What do you think your role is toward your stepchild?" a stepparent would be asked, "What do you think your role is toward Darragh?"

[18] In the Irish context, "bold" indicates naughty or disobedient behaviour.

opinions and actions of each member of the family impact the opinions and actions all other members of the family (Bowen, 1966; Minuchin, 1974). When the couples form a stepfamily with differing expectations of their own and their partner's role, this may create difficulty in the family as they will need to adapt to the preferences of their partner, end the relationship, or continue a relationship in which they are unhappy with their role or their partner's role. When parents and stepparents cannot agree on parenting roles, this negatively impacts their relationship with one another (Fine et al., 1998). Similarly, if the child(ren) have strong opinions about acceptable parenting roles for their stepparent(s), this will influence the roles that are available to their parent and stepparent (Speer & Trees, 2007; Stoll, Arnaut, Fromme, Felker-Thayer, 2006).

7.3.1 Biological Parent-Stepparent Role Negotiation

Both biological parents and stepparents have to negotiate their roles within the family. This process is critical to the successful formation of a stepfamily. The roles that the biological parents are willing to take impact the roles available to the stepparent and vice versa. Thus, it is not just the stepparent's role that needs to be negotiated, but both roles have to be negotiated in conjunction with one another (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Two main patterns of parenting roles were identified within the families: parents and stepparents shared parenting or parents were the main caregiver and stepparents were in a parent-support role. Some parents and stepparents wanted a horizontal power structure, where they coparent any children in the household and share parental power, whereas others believed that the parent should be the primary caregiver and disciplinarian for the child(ren) and that the stepparent should either not be involved in parenting or involved as a secondary caregiver. The negotiation of these roles was an active and dynamic process with functional interchanges between horizontal (shared parenting) and vertical ("biological-parent-in-charge") parenting structures. Although some stepfamilies fit solidly into one category or the other, these were not wholly dichotomous categories; for example, a stepparent may be actively involved in discipline but not have a say in where their stepchild goes to school.

Parents and stepparents viewed the negotiation of their roles as being critical to the success of their romantic relationship. Because the stepparent is an outsider entering an established family unit, the long-term success of the new family unit is dependent on the negotiation of parenting roles that are acceptable to the parent, stepparent, and child(ren). Harry noted, "If I don't fit in there properly then there's no point in me and her [his partner] goin' on and making things awkward." Similarly, Cora's romantic

relationship with her current husband "wouldn't have gone anywhere" (Cora) if he had not been willing to take on the role that she wanted toward her son. This sentiment was repeated by nearly all of the parents and stepparents, who felt that their romantic relationships were contingent on the negotiation of appropriate familial roles and the development of close or at least not antagonistic relationships among all family members.

In some cases, the parent and stepparent had different opinions about what roles they should have within the family. Some parents wanted to share power but their partner did not want to have equal power within the relationship. Other parents wanted to retain a biological-parent-in-charge position but the stepparent felt as if they should share power. If the parent and stepparent wanted to remain in their romantic relationship, they needed to develop mutually agreed upon parenting roles either by accepting that their partner would not fulfil the role that they would prefer or by encouraging their partner to take on a role with which their partner may not initially have been comfortable. This was a difficult process for some of the parents and stepparents, who had to adjust to significant changes in their family power structure. If a parent and stepparent are unable negotiate acceptable parenting roles, then their relationship cannot continue; thus, the families in this sample are those where the stepparent and parent valued the continuation of their romantic relationship more than their idea of what their role within the family should be and were willing to change to accommodate their partner's expectations. This negotiation is a dynamic process and whether they have a power sharing or a biological-parent-in-charge role structure appears to depend on the relative importance that they give to family unity, the rights that the stepparent is understood to have earned, the perceived importance of the lack of biological relationship between the stepparent and stepchild, the parent's desire to retain their independence, and the stepparent's comfort in a parenting role.

7.3.1.1 Power Sharing

A power sharing parenting structure is one where the parent and stepparent share parenting decisions and responsibility. The biological parent does not have extra parenting power; they equitably share power with the stepparent. Five of the families tended towards power sharing between the parent and stepparent. In families that had negotiated a power sharing role for the parent and stepparent, the parents were happy for their partners to do "everything a father does" (Brenda). The parent and stepparent

decided to parent together with both partners sharing responsibility and power for the child(ren);

> I didn't want to be the enforcer of everything. I wanted him [her husband] to have opinions and have [pause] you know, so things like her [daughter] bedtime and stuff, he's kind of made rules about that and [pause] I think that's important because I didn't want to just be a parent on my own with a husband ... a lot of women or men parent alone in a relationship and I don't want to do that. I want Hazel [daughter] to see that we're [pause] a team and we're parenting her together (Amelia)

Albert explained that he and his wife, Darina, who is the stepmother to his sons, "discuss [pause] what we think is suitable and not suitable so that then it's kind [pause] I mean, I know any particular day one of us might have to make a judgement call". Darina echoed this statement, saying, "we're a bit of a tag team so we- we both do everything but we take turns to do certain things ... discipline has always been both of us." Families tended to end up in this sort of horizontal power structure if they felt that a power differential would lead to disunity in the family or if the parent thought the stepparent had earned the right to have a power sharing role.

7.3.1.2 Biological-Parent-in-Charge

A biological-parent-in-charge family structure is one in which the parent holds the power when it comes to parenting their child(ren). Six of the families tended towards a parent-in-charge role for the biological parent and a parent-support role for the stepparent. In these families, the biological parent was ultimately responsible for the caretaking of their child(ren) and the stepparent was minimally involved or played a parent-support role, rather than sharing power with the parent.

The biological parent retained the parenting status that they had as a single parent; they continued to control parenting decisions, caretaking, and discipline. In some cases, they shared parenting and caretaking responsibilities with the stepparent, but it was clear to both that the parent has more power than the stepparent. Cora explained that "there's no balance of power" with her husband, Ronan, when it comes to raising her son Charlie because,

> He [Ronan] came into the relationship when Charlie was already established and [pause] it's not that he doesn't have a say umm [pause] but I have the- I have the last word umm whereas with Oliver [their shared biological son] it's much more [pause] negotiation and [pause] um compromise, I suppose.

Ronan shared power and acted as a coparent to their shared son Oliver, but acted as a parent-support with Cora's son, Charlie. Ronan said that he "never tried to say, for

example, impersonate his [Charlie's] father or try to take over. I'm Ronan and that's my role in the family". He acted as a caretaker to Charlie, but "Ronan just kind of wouldn't have a say really" (Cora) with major decisions about Charlie's upbringing. Biological-parent-in-charge relationships are those where the stepparent "is there to support me" (Eleanor). This was described by Aideen, who said, "Zachary is my child so [pause] it will at the end of the day always be my [pause] decision if it's something crucial". These parenting roles involved a hierarchical power structure, with the parent having ultimate control over decisions for their child(ren). Couples that ended up with a biological-parent-in-charge power structure tended to do so because they valued the biological relationship between the biological parent and their child, the biological parent wanted to retain their independence over parenting decisions, or the stepparent was uncomfortable in a parenting role. For more information about each family and the role that the stepparent tended towards, see Table 7.1.

Table 7.1. *Family demographics and the involvement of the non-resident parent*

Name	Relationship Status	Relationship Length (years)	Role	Non-Resident Parent Contact with Child(ren)
Eleanor Andrew	Married	6	Bio-parent-in-charge	No involvement + weekly[a]
Brenda Brendan	Married	5	Power sharing	Biweekly
Brian[b] Aileen	Dating	1.2	Bio-parent-in-charge	Weekly
James[b] Judy	Cohabiting	4.3	Power sharing	Biweekly
Paula Angus	Cohabiting	17	Bio-parent-in-charge	Biweekly
Amelia Asher	Married	1.5	Power sharing	Biweekly
Albert Darina	Married	8.5	Power sharing	Shared custody
Cora Ronan	Married	8	Bio-parent-in-charge	Less than once a month
Roisín Harry	Cohabiting	3	Bio-parent-in-charge	Weekly
Julia Ryan	Married	8	Power sharing	Less than once a month
Aideen William	Dating	2.5	Bio-parent-in-charge	Weekly

Note. The biological parent is the first name in each pairing and the stepparent is the second name listed.

[a] Eleanor's children have two different fathers. One has no involvement and the other sees his child weekly.

[b] In these families, the non-resident father and stepmother were interviewed. Thus, those participants' regularity of contact with their child(ren)/stepchild(ren) is described in the right-most column.

7.3.1.3 Factors Influencing Role Negotiation

Stepfamilies ended up with one of two parenting roles – biological-parent-in-charge or sharing power. These roles were actively negotiated between the parent and stepparent on the basis of the significance of a number of factors to the parent and stepparent. Five themes were developed which encompass the parents' and stepparents' descriptions: the importance of avoiding disunity, the stepparent earning the right, privileging the biological relationship, the parent's desire to be an independent parent, and the stepparent's comfort in a parenting role (Table 7.2).

Table 7.2. *Factors influencing the development of a power sharing or biological-parent-in-charge family structure*

Parenting Power Structure	Themes Relating to the Negotiation of Parenting Roles
Power Sharing	Family Unity - The family would feel divided if the stepparent did not have equal power with the biological parent Stepparent Earned the Right - The stepparent's continued involvement in the family and with the stepchild(ren) shows the parent that the stepparent should have more parenting power
Biological-parent-in-Charge	Importance of Biological Relationship - The parent, by virtue of their biological relationship to the child, should have more parenting power Parents' Desire for Independence - The parent is used to being independent and is not accustomed to sharing responsibility for the child(ren) with anyone Stepparent Discomfort in a Parenting Role - The stepparent does not feel comfortable having a parenting role toward the stepchild(ren)

Family Unity

For many parents and stepparents, having a horizontal power structure indicated the unity of their family. They felt that if the parent had more control over the stepchild(ren) then it would cause a divide in the family. Darina, who is a stepmother to twin boys, explained,

> I think um [pause] from the very beginning- that's probably one of the- the main reasons why [pause] we have always worked as a family [pause] is that it was never a case of, "These are my children and- and I will discipline them and you are just my partner and that's that". Um [pause]

> it's always been a case of [pause] we're [herself and her husband] partners and [pause] the boys [her stepsons] are the children and we are the adults and we will both discipline them

She felt that if she only disciplined their shared biological children, "that would put a *instant* divide between- between the family and it's never been that." This sentiment was repeated by Judy who described her family as "very much a normal family unit" where "we [herself and her partner] both play a- an equal kinda role with them [her stepsons]." These parents and stepparents felt that, "it's important for parents to be [pause] um [pause] together" on parenting issues and present "a united front" (Asher). Parents and stepparents who believed that it would fracture the family if the stepparent and parent did not negotiate an equal role were motivated to negotiate a power sharing relationship in order to prevent their family from feeling divided. When parents and stepparents did not feel that a hierarchical power structure would cause family disunity, they were less motivated to have a power sharing family structure.

Earned the Right

Some of the stepparents negotiated a power sharing relationship by earning the trust of the biological parent. In some families, this trust was given immediately, as with Judy, "he's [her partner] *always* trusted me – from day one" or earned within the first few months, but in other families the parent was more hesitant to share parenting responsibility and required considerable time to trust the stepparent in a parenting role. By continuing their romantic relationship and taking increasing care of the child(ren), the stepparent showed the parent that they were someone who could be trusted with shared parenting power. Over time, the parent perceived that the stepparent was committed to the family and felt that they deserved to share parenting. Brendan said,

> I've taken on a lot more responsibility now than was- than was in the beginning. I kind of wouldn't have had anything to do with bringin' her [stepdaughter] to school or pickin' her up from school or, you know? Like Brenda [his wife] would have done all stuff … I suppose over, like, over time, I don't- is it Brenda's trust or something like that would, like now she trusts me more or whatever like.

Asher stated that his wife, "consciously let me be a parent to Hazel [stepdaughter]. It wasn't, "This is what has to happen." It was, "He is good with her. She loves him."" Although the parent may not have initially been willing to coparent and share power, the stepparent's continued, positive involvement with the family caused the parent to feel that the stepparent could take a power sharing role. In these cases, the stepparent negotiated more parenting power by showing their dedication to the family unit and their responsibility as a stepparent. Ronan explained the evolution of this trust in his

role as stepfather by saying, "as time wore on … I felt I had a little bit more autonomy then to kind of, yeah, I- I felt there was enough trust there for instance for me to make decisions, you know?" If the stepparent did not attempt to earn the trust of the parent then the parents tended to push for a biological-parent-in-charge role.

Importance of Biological Relationship

Parents and stepparents who privileged the parent's role because of their biological connection to the child were likely to negotiate a biological-parent-in-charge power structure. They felt that someone who is not biologically related to the child(ren) should not share parenting power with someone who is biologically related to the child(ren). For these couples, the biological relationship between the parent and child allowed for a parenting role of which the stepparent could not be part. Brian stated that he and his partner, Aileen, had not discussed that Aileen would not discipline his daughter, Nellie, but that, "I wouldn't even have to say to her not to do anythin'. She just wouldn't [discipline] herself" because Aileen "knows that she's not her daughter" and so it "wouldn't be her place" to share power with Brian. Aileen felt the same way; she said "obviously uh Nellie is his child like, do you know … So he makes the decisions." She explained that she did not want Nellie to call her "mom" or "mother", saying,

> I'm his- her dad's like girlfriend or partner or whatever like um [pause] so I'd like to be [referred to as] Aileen. I'd like to be [pause] someone that's there for her, which is with her dad … her mum and dad is there, so they can make the big decisions, so probably I'd be more of- we- fun and we could do nice things together … the big decisions, I'm obviously [pause] do you know, they won't be my decisions

Some stepparents felt the parent should be responsible for the parenting because of their biological connection; "When they're not your own kids, you know, you kinda d-, you have to try and not overstep the mark. You can't give it the sort of, the hard things, you have to zip the lip an awful lot" (Andrew). Aideen explained that although she does not privilege the biological relationship, her partner does and he does not want to be as involved with parenting her son, Zachary, for this reason;

> I kind of said, "We [Aideen and Zachary] are your family." … I had to realize though that it's not the same thing for him. I mean, he doesn't have the same bond, he says, to my son [as with his biological son], which I didn't really understand because I s- it's [pause] uh, "You have spent so much time with Zachary. Uh [pause] he loves you and you love him. Why is a biological child [pause] what's the difference?" It's- it's- it's a sperm … we're of course- of course completely opposite in this regard

Her partner, William said, "he's [pause] Aideen's son, let her decide the rules." Parents like Aideen were less tied to the importance of the biological relationship and thus were more willing to share power with their partners, although their partners were not always willing to take on this role. By virtue of the lack of biological relationship between the stepparent and stepchild(ren), some parents and stepparents felt that it would not be appropriate for the stepparent to share parenting power with the biological parent and thus negotiated a biological-parent-in-charge power structure.

Desire for Independence

If the stepparent took a power sharing role, the biological parent would no longer be able to make unilateral parenting decisions. This created a tension between stepparents who may want to share power and parents who wanted to retain their control over parenting decisions. Eleanor described that her partner's involvement has "been amazing on loads of levels but it's been difficult on a lot of levels" because "you're so totally in control when you're on your own". The parents had generally been parenting on their own for some time before they formed a relationship with a stepparent and they had developed their own parenting style. Roisín explained that "it was very hard" to move from being a single parent to having a partner;

> I'm a very independent person. Um [pause] and with Harper [daughter], even growin' up like I wouldn't like- I didn't really let other people help me with her – they did, but I'd want to do everything myself. Um so [pause] I just got used to like- had to get used to [pause] you know, um havin' someone else in my life and, you know, doin' things together rather than me goin' off and just doin' it myself or takin' it upon myself

Similarly, Cora described that being in a relationship can make parenting difficult because "as a single parent, you don't have to consult umm about decisions". When they were single parents, they were "very, very independent" and incorporating a partner could mean, "You're gonna have to give up part of [pause] your autonomy, I suppose, as a parent" which has "been a- a struggle" (Amelia). Amelia's husband, Asher, acknowledged, "Amelia has found me being there and me having opinions and not being the sole parent a little difficult". For parents who were used to independent decision-making, it was challenging to adjust to the idea of taking somebody else's opinion about the rearing of their child(ren) into account. They were not used to sharing power and did not want to have to consult their partners about parenting decisions. If the parent refused to give up their parenting independence, then this resulted in the family having a hierarchical power structure. When parents were willing to be less

independent and to consult with their partners, they left space for their partner to take a power sharing role if they so desired.

Stepparent Comfort in a Parenting Role

If the stepparent was uncomfortable parenting or disciplining their stepchild(ren), this made them want the parent to retain their parent-in-charge role. Roisín's partner, Harry, has "no authority over her [stepdaughter] or anything, like he doesn't feel comfortable with that". William similarly did not feel comfortable in a parenting role toward Aideen's son, Zachary; he said, "I was *really* very surprised at how quickly he actually kinda [pause] took on aspects of- of me as a- a kind of father figure. Um in a lot of ways I was- I was quite scared of it actually". Aideen explained,

> It's me and Zachary at the end of the day and um it- he's my [pause] responsibility and certain things I can't share [pause] um with William, even though I wanted to and I pressed for it for a while as well and that didn't go down well … I said, "I want you to be his uh social father." And he wasn't comfortable with this. Um [pause] so we took a step back [pause] and [pause] I think I'm more accepting now

Some parents wanted the stepparent to share parenting power, but the stepparents felt uncomfortable taking a parenting role and so they attempted to retain their parent support role. Alternately, some stepparents initially felt uncomfortable, but over time began to feel more comfortable in this role and negotiated more parenting power. Ronan explained that he did not feel comfortable disciplining his stepson, "for a long time" but now "I do feel comfortable disciplining him". Similarly, Ryan had originally not wanted to be "dad" to his stepson, Jace, but his wife Julia wanted him to have that role;

> R: I remember at first I was a little bit uncomfortable with it to be honest with you
>
> I: Yeah
>
> R: Because I thought [pause] from my point of view I was like, "Oh man", you know, "I'm not his dad" but, you know, I'm- this is the way- this- this- this- this- this is what their- the way Julia wanted to handle it [pause] and, you know, I was a little bit uncomfortable with it at first but then, you know, a couple of weeks in [pause] it all sort of seemed very natural. You know, the first time he called me dad was a bit weird like for me [laughs]

Although he had originally been resistant to taking on a "dad" role and did so at the request of his partner, he now prefers to be in a power sharing role. In this way, the stepparent's level of comfort in a parenting role influenced the power structure in the household; if they were deeply uncomfortable parenting their stepchild(ren) then the family would retain a biological-parent-in-charge structure, but if they were or became comfortable with parenting then they could take on a power sharing role.

Weaver and Coleman (2010) found that mothers in stepfamilies expected their partners to provide "emotional and secondary support for them in their role as mother" (p. 318); the mothers in their sample acted as protectors for their children and generally expected to control their children's discipline. In contrast, some of the parents and stepparents in this sample described the mother pushing the stepfather to take on more of a disciplinary role. As opposed to defending their children from stepparent discipline, some of the mothers encouraged their partners to be active in the discipline of their child(ren). Some stepparents felt uncomfortable with this and either did not discipline at all or attempted to discipline but still maintained a biological-parent-in-charge power structure. Harry explained that his partner, Roisín, "does tell me to stand up more to" his stepdaughter. He said,

> Roisín's always wantin' me to take a- a- a step into, "You have to be stern with her [stepdaughter]. You have to tell her things. You have to be able to say to her, 'No'." And the last while I have been able to uh- step it up a notch into sayin' like, "No" to her and stuff like that.

Roisín echoed this sentiment, saying, "He doesn't [discipline]- and I- well I try and get him to because she'll [daughter] just run away with it". She explained that "he's not comfortable doin' it – just yet, anyway" although she hoped that "in the future he will". Similarly, Paula said that although her partner will discipline his own kids, he "won't discipline the kids [her children]" and "never did. He doesn't like doin' it." The mothers attempted to negotiate a power sharing relationship but if the stepfather did not feel comfortable disciplining the stepchild then the mothers had to retain their parent-in-charge role. None of the stepmothers in this sample rejected a disciplinary role when their partner wanted them to have one; however, the sample of stepmother families in this analysis is limited (n=3 families) and so it is possible that the perspectives of those families where the stepmother rejects a disciplinary role were just not captured in this study due to the small stepmother-family sample size.

7.3.2 Child Influence on Parental Roles

Children have considerable agency in the development of roles within the stepfamily (Speer & Trees, 2007). Parents view their children as "allowing" their stepparent "to come into our family" (Eleanor); their opinion of acceptable roles for the stepparent is very important to their parents. The children generally did not mind the stepparents acting as caretakers to them; their concern about the stepparent's parental role centred around the stepparent's level of control over them. Their apprehension over this was manifested in a rejection of the stepparent's discipline (see Figure 7.1). In

cases where the parent retained a parent-in-charge role, the stepchild(ren) had less power to negotiate the stepparent's role because the stepparent was not acting as a parent and thus the stepchild(ren) could not reject the stepparent's parenting efforts.

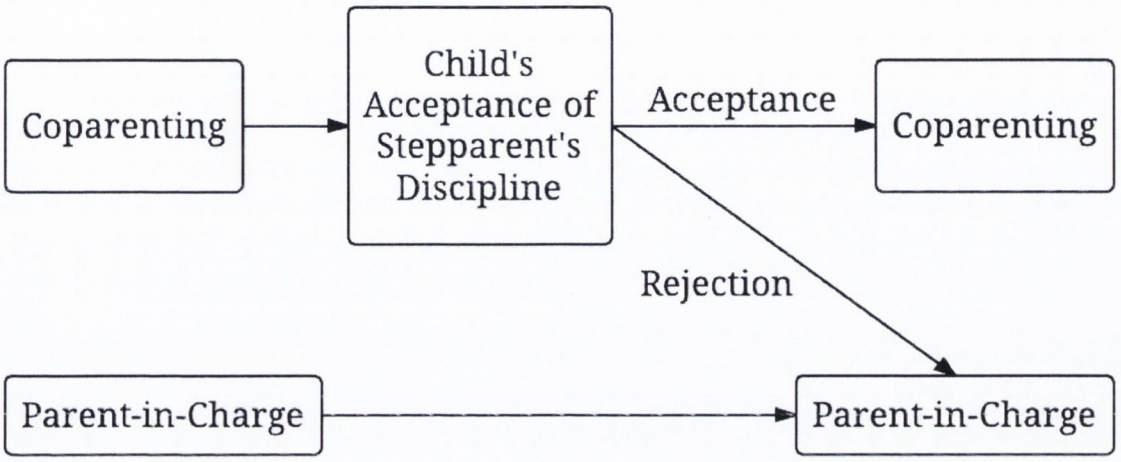

Figure 7.1. Children's influence on their parents' and stepparents' parenting roles

Many of the children were unwilling to accept being disciplined by their stepparent. They felt that only parents had the right to discipline them because the stepparent was not suitably close to them. This was either because the stepparent was not biologically related to them and thus could never be close enough to them to discipline them or because the stepparent had not been involved closely with them over a long enough period of time to be allowed to discipline them. Bronagh (aged 12) explained that if her stepfather disciplined her she would "feel like he was [pause] like an intruder coming into our home and ... I wouldn't do what he told me to do. I'd talk with my mum first." These children felt that their stepparent, "doesn't really have the right" (Sadie, aged 16) to be involved as a disciplinarian because "they're not my dad" (Evan, aged 15) and so they "wouldn't take it [discipline] from him" (Charlotte, aged 15). When their stepparents attempted to discipline them, these children "just walk out of the room" (Philip, aged 13) and repudiated the stepparents' attempts at discipline because they "don't take her [stepmother] serious at all" (Logan, aged 9).

The parents and stepparents also described that the children's unwillingness to accept stepparent discipline influenced the parental roles. Paula said that, although she would like him to, her partner does not discipline any of her children because, "he says he didn't feel right. You know? Telling them what to do ... because my daughter used

to say, "You're not my dad."" Paula had wanted to share power with him and felt that "the weakest bit" of their family was that her partner "probably didn't feel *able* to really give out, discipline them enough". Similarly, Judy is a stepmother who used to discipline her partner, James', sons but stopped because of the negative reaction of his middle child;

> It was me [disciplining] at one stage but James [child's father] more so now, you know, because um like I think we got to the point where we said, "Right." O-, you know, it t was both of us to start with and then I kinda got- I suppose I kinda took over a little bit with the food end of it [disciplining the children at mealtimes] and um would have uh kind of forced the issue with him [her stepson] that if he wasn't g- he was goin' to bed but it was kinda counter-productive at the same time because he was lookin' at me and then, you know, I- I- I guess it maybe- it might have been a bit confusin' for him that I was tellin' him instead of his dad. So we just said, "Right. Ok. From now on I'll say nothin' and ... you just tell him."

Judy had wanted a full power sharing role; she and her partner, "we don't use [pause] any kinda like, "Oh but I'm only your girlfriend. They're your kids"" but because her stepson reacted badly to her disciplining him, she was not able to take the role that she and her partner had originally wanted her to take. In this way, although some parents and stepparents agreed that the stepparent should take a power sharing role, if the stepchild rejected their stepparent's attempts at filling this role, then the parent had to take a parent-in-charge role and the stepparent had to act as a parent support.

Alternately, if the child accepted the stepparent's discipline, this validated the stepparent's coparenting and power sharing role. Some of the children felt that their stepparent had the right to discipline them based on their relationship history and were willing to accept discipline from either their parent or stepparent. Liam (aged 18) said that "if Colin [stepfather] wanted to tell me to do somethin', like he'd tell me to do somethin'. Like he has no problem doin' that ... And I'd listen to him." For these children, the stepparent "does mind me and he ... does have to tell me what to do" (Cathal, aged 9); the stepparent had the right to discipline because they were an adult in the house who had caregiving responsibilities for the child. Brendan explained that he felt comfortable disciplining his stepdaughter because she viewed him as having a parenting role; "I would [feel comfortable disciplining] like because I think she [stepdaughter] expects it too." The children validated the stepparent's power as a parental figure by accepting the stepparent's disciplinary efforts. By accepting their stepparent's discipline, the children allowed their stepparent to take a power sharing role.

Regardless of whether a parent and stepparent wanted to share parenting power with one another, if a stepchild refused to accept being disciplined by their stepparent then this limited the stepparent to a parent-support role (see Figure 7.2). In this way, parental role negotiation is not only between the parent and stepparent; the child's acceptance or non-acceptance of the stepparent in a power sharing position is critical as well. Some children believed that the stepparent did not have the right to discipline them by virtue of their limited relationship history or lack of biological connection. Other children believed that the stepparent had the right to discipline them because of their role as an adult and a caretaker, and this belief validated the stepparent's power sharing role.

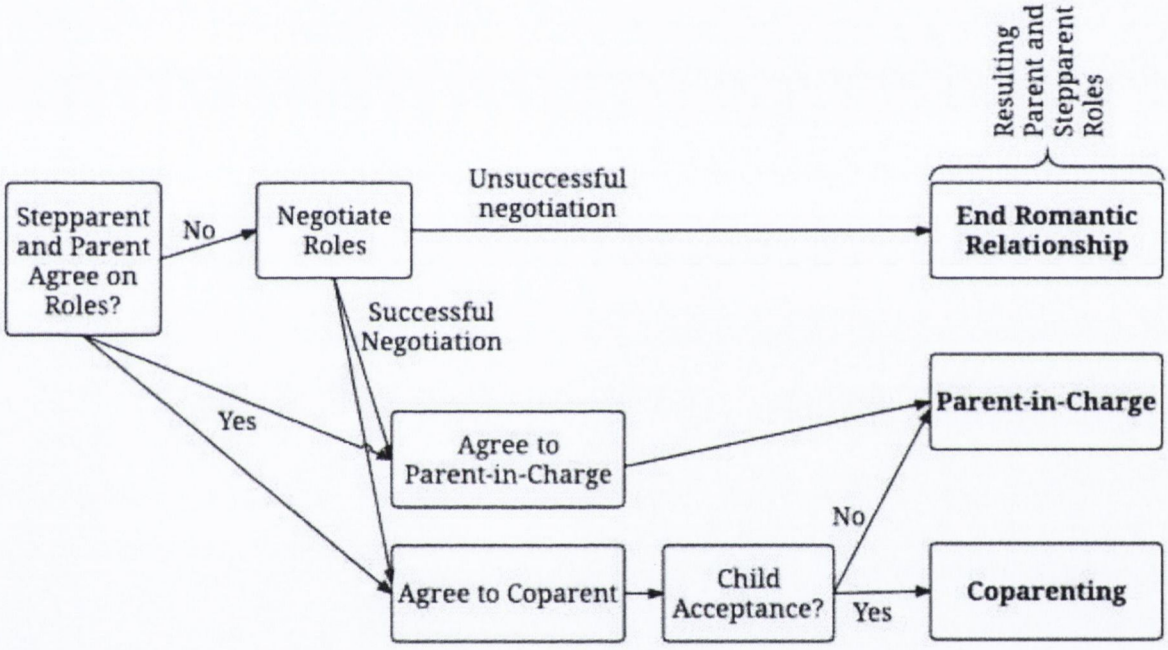

Figure 7.2. Negotiation of parenting roles

Note. Although this diagram shows children's activity in role negotiation only occurring after the parent and stepparent have already negotiated the stepparent's role, this is not the only time in which children influence role negotiation. Parents take their children's viewpoints into account when partnering and negotiating the stepparent's role (Sano et al., 2012; Weaver & Coleman, 2010), and children's attitudes towards their stepparent can influence stepparents' affinity-seeking (Marsiglio, 2004).

7.4 Conclusions

Establishing and delineating appropriate boundaries around the family subsystems is a critical adjustment for stepfamilies (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Papernow, 1994). Insight into the processes and motivations underpinning role negotiation is

critical to understanding how families transition from single parent to stepparent families. This research addresses a significant gap in existing stepfamily research by exploring the processes through which parents and stepparents – in conjunction with stepchildren – develop and adapt their roles with respect to parenting within stepfamilies. These roles are not negotiated by just one member of the family, but rather through dynamic interchange with all members of the family (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). The parent and stepparent negotiated whether the stepparent would adopt a power sharing role along with the parent, or whether the stepparent would act as parent-support and the parent would have a parent-in-charge position. Parents and stepparents who believed the stepparent had earned the right tended to take on power sharing roles and felt that by allowing the stepparent to engage in discipline, stepfamily unity would be increased. In contrast, those who believed in the primacy of the biological relationship, where the parent wanted to retain independence, or the stepparent felt uncomfortable in a parenting role tended to take on biological-parent-in-charge positions.

Studies of single parents have shown that children have considerable influence on their parent's decisions about romantic relationships (Sano et al., 2012; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Further, they appear to have an important influence on the stepparent's role negotiation (Speer & Trees, 2007). This study has shown that their involvement in stepparent's role negotiation is largely in acceptance or non-acceptance of the stepparent in a disciplinary role. The children did not tend have an issue with their stepparent's engagement in caretaking; they were mostly concerned with the level of control that the stepparent had over them. If the parent and stepparent attempted to negotiate a power sharing role for the stepparent – where the stepparent had control over the stepchild(ren) – then the stepchild(ren) sometimes rejected this and forced the stepparent to take a parent-support role against their own and the parent's wishes. In this way, it is not just biological parents and stepparents who negotiate parenting roles; stepchildren have considerable agency and influence as well.

Although researchers and therapists recommend that stepparents do not take an active parenting role where they are involved in discipline for the first few years after stepfamily formation (Bray, 1999; Browning & Artelt, 2011; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Papernow, 2006), many of the parents and stepparents in this sample pushed for the stepparent to take a power sharing, coparental role early in the relationships. Some of the parents waited until the stepparent had "earned it" through their continued,

positive involvement with the family, but even in these cases the stepparent often was considered to have earned the right to stepparent relatively quickly. Others involved the stepparent in discipline immediately because they believed that having only the biological parent discipline would cause family disunity. This finding could be used by therapists and social workers, who could focus on both of these factors to more effectively target parent and stepparent concerns about the impact of retaining a hierarchical, biological-parent-in-charge power structure.

Weaver and Coleman's (2010) research on repartnered Caucasian mothers in the United States found that mothers tend to act as protectors for their children, often by limiting the disciplinary role of stepparents. Some of the mothers in this sample did that, but others actively encouraged their partners to engage in discipline and increase their control over the children. It may be that these mothers thought sharing power with a stepparent would increase the stability of their stepfamily and thus they were attempting to protect their child(ren) by increasing the involvement of the stepparent in parenting. This may have been a strategy to get their partners to claim their children (Marisglio, 2004) by making the stepparents feel more parental. Alternately, these mothers may feel that their child(ren) would not be disciplined as effectively by only one parent, and so they pushed their partners to discipline in order to raise their child(ren) in the way they would like.

It is not clear what underpins the difference between these findings and those of Weaver and Coleman (2010), but they may be related to differences in the cultural context and gendered expectations between Ireland and the United States. More than 75% of children in Ireland live in families with married parents, of which only a very small percentage are stepfamilies (Lunn & Fahey, 2011) whereas in the United States, while this is still the predominant arrangement, it is less common (Child Trends, 2014; Kreider & Ellis, 2011). It may be that the model of family being aspired to in Ireland is different from that in the United States because of historical and contemporary differences in marriage and childbirth between the two countries. Irish families may be trying to emulate the traditional family form – which involves shared parenting between a man and a woman, including shared involvement with discipline – whereas American mothers in stepfamilies may be aspiring to a different type of family form which does not involve shared parenting. More research needs to be done to understand mothering roles in stepfamilies and under what circumstances they view stepparent involvement in discipline to be acceptable. Future research on fathering responsibilities

in different cultural contexts may also shed light on the factors underpinning the differences between the findings of this research and that of Weaver and Coleman (2010).

Developing acceptable roles and boundaries is one of the most important adjustments for stepfamilies (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Papernow, 1994; Visher & Visher, 1988). The role that a stepparent adopts impacts child outcomes, because stepparents who take on a parenting role involving discipline are less likely to form close relationships with their stepparents (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992) and may negatively impact the parent-child relationship if the child does not want the stepparent to have a disciplinary role but perceives that their parent does (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). This study has shed led on why some stepparents adopt a power sharing role and others take on a parent-support role. It has also shown the importance of children's interactions with the stepparent; their acceptance of stepparent discipline is critical to the stepparent and parent sharing parenting responsibilities.

Chapter 8: Stepparent-Stepchild Relationship Patterns

8.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to outline the patterns of relationships that stepparents and stepchildren form, as well as the processes and contextual factors that underlie those patterns. This is accomplished through an analysis of interviews with stepparents and stepchildren. This chapter begins with a review of the literature surrounding the importance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship as well as an examination of the research on the patterns of these relationships. Subsequently, the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships and the processes that are characteristic of those patterns are explained; these patterns were developed from an analysis of the interviews with children and stepparents. The contextual factors are then described, followed by a triadic analysis of the families where a biological parent, stepparent, and stepchild were all interviewed. This triadic analysis investigates the role of the biological parent in the development of the relationship between their romantic partner and their child. Finally, the chapter outlines how these results fit into the literature on stepparent-stepchild relationships and add to the understanding of stepfamily formation.

8.1.1 Importance of the Stepparent-Stepchild Relationship

Adult and authority figures have the potential to both negatively and positively impact children's experiences and outcomes (e.g. Beaman, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2012; Chassin, Pitts, DeLucia, & Todd, 1999; Edleson, 1999; Umberson, 1992). It is important to understand how children form strong and positive relationships with the adults in their lives in order to promote positive outcomes for children. The quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship appears to be particularly important and is central to stepchildren's well-being (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; King, 2006; Pryor, 2004; White & Gilbreth, 2001), with positive relationships having the potential to benefit children.

However, these relationships are not just important for child outcomes; they also influence stepparents and the stepfamily more broadly. The strength and positivity evidenced in stepparent-stepchild relationships impacts stepparent well-being (Schenk et al., 2009; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011), the strength of the biological parent-child relationship (King et al., 2014); stepfamily adjustment (Coleman et al., 2000), and parent-stepparent marital quality (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Additionally, the quality of this relationship appears to be particularly related to family functioning; the

relationship between the perceived quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationship and marital quality is stronger than the relationship between the biological parent-child relationship and marital quality (Fine & Kurdek, 1995). These findings indicate that the development of strong, positive relationships between stepparents and stepchildren can positively impact stepchildren, stepparents, biological parents, and the stepfamily as a whole.

Biological parents view the stepparent-stepchild relationship as being important as well and consequently they attempt to facilitate relationship formation while simultaneously limiting the relationship when they feel their child(ren) are threatened (Marsiglio, 2004; Seery & Crowley, 2000; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Mothers feel that they play an integral role in the successful development of a stepfather family (Visher & Visher, 1988). However, studies of the biological parent's role in developing and maintaining this relationship are limited by their tendency to include only the biological parent; it is unclear whether stepparents and stepchildren view the biological parent as being an important figure in the successful development of their stepparent-stepchild relationship or how they believe that the biological parent influenced their relationship development.

8.1.2 Patterns of Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

There have been two major studies which have investigated patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationship development. Kinniburgh-White et al. (2010) analysed narratives of relational development with their stepfathers and Ganong et al. (2011) created a theory of relational development and developed six patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationship development. Both studies involved retrospective interviews with adult stepchildren and a qualitative analysis of the interview data. Although these studies contributed significantly to the understanding of stepparent-stepchild relationship formation, both studies were limited by their reliance on the retrospective accounts of young adults from relatively uniform social and educational backgrounds. Retrospective accounts are problematic because people's perception of events and relationships changes over time (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Koenig Kellas, 2010; Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003); these changes in narrative over time mean that young adults may give a different account of their relationship than they would have as a child. Additionally, both studies recommended a greater focus on family dynamics that may influence the stepparent-stepchild relationship, with Ganong et al. (2011) particularly recommending the inclusion of additional perspectives. Both studies also

called for the inclusion of children from stepmother families. Finally, Ganong et al. questioned the influence of previous stepparent-stepchild relationships on the development of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationships.

This analysis attempts to address these issues through interviews with biological parents, stepparents, and children from a range of residential and non-residential stepfamily relationships – these span newly formed, long-term, and dissolved stepfamilies. The hope is that through a more inclusive sample, the current study will add to the understanding of the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships. The analyses in this chapter address three main research questions:

1) What are the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships?
2) What processes and contextual factors underlie the development of different patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships?
3) What is the role of biological parents in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships?

In order to address these questions, this chapter includes two analyses. The first is an analysis of the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationship development and the processes underlying those patterns from the perspective of stepparents and stepchildren. The second is a triadic analysis of interviews with biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren from the same households in order to investigate the biological parents' influence on the development and maintenance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

8.2 Method

8.2.1 Participants

This first analysis attempts to address the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships and the features that underlie those patterns. The participants for this analysis were 29 stepchildren between the ages of 8 and 18 years (M=12.0, SD=2.7) and 11 stepparents ranging in age from 25 to 55 years (M=34.2, SD=9.2). Eight of the children were female and 21 were male. Three of the stepparents were female and 8 were male.

This first analysis included two fewer stepchildren than the other analyses of the children's interview data in this thesis. Those two children were not included in this analysis because they had not had a substantive relationship with any stepparent and thus their relationship could not be characterised as having one pattern or another. Both

children had previously had a stepparent, but one had only had a short interaction with that person and thus had not developed a relationship with them and the other had had four stepparents but could not remember his involvement with them. For this reason, although the overall sample of stepchildren included in the study was 31, the first analysis here only includes 29 stepchildren.

The second analysis focuses on the role of biological parents in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships, from the perspective of triads[19] of biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren from the same families. Six triads are included in this analysis, each featuring a biological parent (n=6), stepparent (n=6), and at least one stepchild (n=8). The biological parents in this sub-sample ranged in age from 27 to 54 years (M=40.2, SD=9.2), the stepparents ranged in age from 26 to 55 years (M=38.3, SD=9.9), and the stepchildren ranged in age from 8 to 18 (M=11.1, SD=3.2). Seven of the children were male and one was female. Five of the triads include a female, residential, biological parent and her residential male partner; one of the triads includes a male biological parent who shares custody of his children and his residential female partner. The biological parent and stepparent were married in four of the triads and cohabiting in the other two triads. The romantic relationship between the parents and stepparents had lasted between three and 17 years (M=8.4, SD=4.7). Further information about the participants in both analyses can be found in Chapter 4.

8.2.2 Analysis

Both analyses were carried out as described in Chapter 3. The first analysis drew upon responses to questions relayed to the stepparents and stepchildren about the stepparent-stepchild relationship(s) and their family lives. The stepchildren were questioned about their relationship with their most recent stepparent – this was either their current stepparent or a former stepparent. Where the children's mother and father were both in relationships and the child had met their partner, children were asked about both relationships, although the questioning focused on their relationship with their residential parent's partner. The questions included, "What's [stepparent] like?", "What is your relationship with [stepparent]?", "What sorts of things do you with

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[19] The term "triad" is used here because it is describing a grouping of a biological parent, a stepparent, and a stepchild. However, two children were interviewed in two of these six families, so those two families technically represent a tetrad rather than a triad. For the sake of brevity, all of the groupings – whether they feature a biological parent, stepparent, and stepchild or a biological parent, stepparent, and two stepchildren – will be referred to as "triads" in this thesis, and the analysis will be described as "triadic".

[stepparent]?", "Has there ever been a time when [stepparent] did something that was really important to you? What was it?", "Would you say you love [stepparent]?", "Who makes the rules for you?", "Has [stepparent] ever given out to you?", "Do you think you could do anything to be closer to [stepparent]?", "Do you think [stepparent] could do anything to be closer to you?", and other related questions. The stepparents were asked about their relationship(s) with all of their current stepchild(ren). These questions included, "Can you tell me about the first time you met [stepchild(ren)]?", "What did you expect your relationship with [stepchild(ren)] to be when you first started dating your partner? Did you expect it to be as it is now?", "Can you describe your relationship with [stepchild(ren)] now?", "What sorts of things do you do with [stepchild(ren)]?", "What sorts of things do you talk to [stepchild(ren)] about?", "Can you describe some of the things you do to take care of [stepchild(ren)]?", "Who makes the rules for [stepchild(ren)]?", "Do you ever discipline [stepchild(ren)]?", "Can you tell me about a time when you felt particularly close to [stepchild(ren)]? What about particularly distant?", "What actions have you taken to try to get close to [stepchild(ren)]?", "Do you think [stepchild(ren)] has taken any actions to try to get close to you?", and other related questions. Where stepchildren and stepparents described more than one stepparent-stepchild relationship, each relationship described in depth was separately categorized into a pattern; 54 relationships were described by the 40 participants. The 29 interviews with stepchildren and 11 interviews with stepparents resulted in 285 and 233 pages of text relevant to the development and maintenance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, respectively.

The second analysis drew upon responses to questions to biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren relating to the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. In addition to the questions described in the previous paragraph, stepparents and stepchildren were asked questions on the biological parents' involvement such as, "Before you met [stepparent/stepchild(ren)] had you talked much to [biological parent] about them?", "Did you talk to [biological parent] about what it would be like after you moved in?", "Were there ever any difficulties with [stepparent] joining [stepchild(ren)] and [biological parent's] routine?", "Could [biological parent] do anything to make you closer to [stepparent/stepchild]?", and other questions in the same vein. The biological parent was asked questions such as, "Do you think it impacted [stepparents'] relationship with you at all, that s/he knew you had a child?", "Before [stepparent] met [stepchild(ren)], had you talked much to them about each

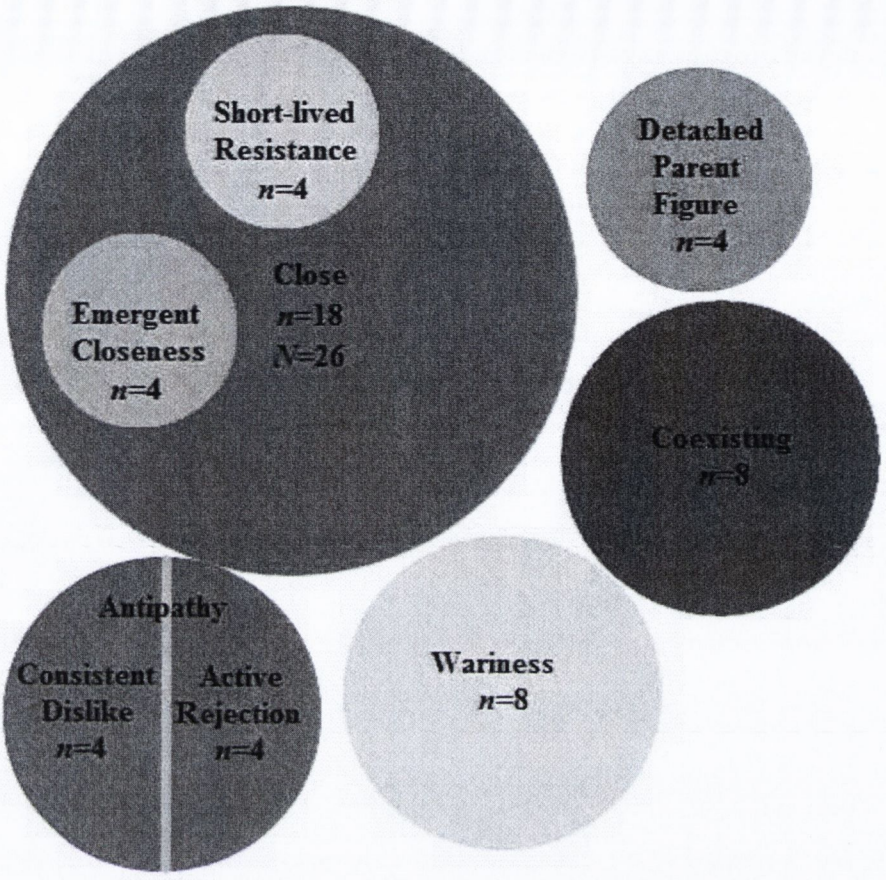
other?", "Why was [stepparent] introduced to [stepchild(ren)] at that time?", "Was it important to you that [stepparent] and [stepchild(ren)] got on with one another?", "Did you talk much to [stepchild(ren)] about [stepparent] moving in before s/he moved in?", and other questions relating to the biological parent's role in the stepparent-stepchild relationship. The 20 interviews with those biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren resulted in 493 pages of interview text.

8.3 Results

8.3.1 Relationship Patterns

This section describes the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships at the time of the researcher's interview with the stepparent or stepchild or, in the case of the stepfamilies that had dissolved, the pattern of the stepparent-stepchild relationship pre-dissolution. The five types of patterns are *close*, *detached parent figure*, *coexisting*, *wariness*, and *antipathy*. These patterns refer to the 54 current or former stepparent-stepchild relationships, as described by 29 stepchildren and 11 stepparents (see Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1. Numbers of the different types of stepparent-stepchild relationships



8.3.1.1 Close

This pattern describes those relationships that were amiable and affectionate. When stepchildren and stepparents described these relationships, they tended to be relatively effusive and clearly indicated love and affection for one another. They spent considerable time together engaging in shared activities, and had interests and hobbies in common. Stepparents and stepchildren with *close* relationships had never experienced any significant conflict. Both stepparents and stepchildren evaluated one another positively and stepchildren thought that their stepparent was of benefit to the family. The stepparents and stepchildren in these relationships had known each other from six months to nearly ten years.

Some of these relationships had followed a different trajectory – they either were on the way to being *close* but had not quite formed a full-fledged close relationship, called *emergent closeness*, or the stepchild had initially resisted the idea of a stepparent but had quickly formed a close relationship with them, called *short-lived*

resistance (as seen in Figure 8.1). The children characterized 15 of their relationships with stepparents as being *close*; of these, three had an *emergent closeness* pattern and four had a *short-lived resistance* pattern. The stepparents characterized 11 of their relationships with their stepchildren as being *close*; one these relationships had an *emergent closeness* pattern. This section will describe *close* relationships generally – including *short-lived resistance* and *emergent closeness* relationships – followed by additional information about the unique features of *short-lived resistance* and *emergent closeness* patterns.

Previous research has suggested that engaging in mutually enjoyable, dyadic activities is the most effective way of developing feelings of affection in stepparent-stepchild relationships (Ganong et al., 1999). It is thus perhaps unsurprising that the stepparents and stepchildren with *close* relationships shared interests and engaged in fun one-on-one activities relating to those interests. Harper (aged 11) said she and her stepfather, "both like the same stuff" and that neither chooses what activities they will do because "we both kind of want to do the same thing so it doesn't really matter". Penelope (aged 14) is "really alike" her stepmother, because "we're both ginger [both laugh]. She's the *only* ginger person kind of in my family… and we have kind of like the same tastes and all". She had bonded with her stepmother over these similarities as well as their shared interest in shopping:

> P: During the summer we go shopping.
>
> I: Mmm hmm
>
> P: Cause there's the sales and we both *really like* shopping [I little laugh]. So we'd do- go out for one day together, full day, and just go out and [pause] have a major shopping spree.

Shared pursuits created both a topic of conversation, as with Aodhan (aged 8) whose main activity with his stepfather is, "talk[ing] about football", and a feeling of affinity for someone similar to themselves, as with Fiachra (aged 11) who described, "we like the same things – we both like playing rugby, we both like playing sports, we both like playing video games now and again. Uh [pause] we- we both [pause] we both like exercise and stuff like that". The stepparent-stepchild relationship was independent of the biological parent in some ways because these *close* relationships involved the stepparent and stepchild doing mutually enjoyable activities on their own; the relationship was not dependent on the involvement of the biological parent.

Excluding those children whose relationships were characterized by *short-lived resistance*, the children in these relationships accepted their stepparents from the

beginning of their relationship and had never engaged in any relationship-deterring activities. They were welcoming to the stepparent and were vocal from the start about their affection for their stepparent. Harry (stepfather) described that his stepdaughter Harper's positivity and easy affection towards him made him feel closer to her,

> If she kinda [pause] didn't want me around at the start, I wouldn't feel too close to her anyway so I think it made me feel more uh confident of where our relationship was goin' and more positive about it and brought me closer to her, yeah

Harry explained that when his partner, Roisín, asked Harper about having Harry move in:

> H: So I was quite close with her [Harper] and- to the point where she was asking me, basically, to move in, so it was- Roisín would say, "What do you think of us all movin' in together?" And she [Harper] was ecstatic about it so it's not like she went, "Ahh" or "Ok", she- from the minute she mentioned "Will we move in together?" she was ecstatic and she wanted to do it straight away. So
>
> I: Yeah. How did that make you feel?
>
> H: That made me feel good. It made me feel uh welcome.

This sentiment was echoed by Darina (stepmother), who described getting close to her stepsons, "the boys liked me, and I think I was just keen to- to build on that and to keep them liking me". Asher (stepfather) stated that in the growth of his early relationship with his stepdaughter, Hazel, "it has always been kinda Hazel driving [pause] our relationship – my relationship with Hazel. But it was Hazel who asked to call me "daddy" and [pause] it was always Hazel saying, you know, uh [pause] you know, moving things forward." He later explained that he has "moved from being [pause] a friend to [pause] a father figure to being a father" much faster than he would have expected because Hazel had been so active and positive about the development of her relationship with him. The stepparents recognized the child(ren)'s affinity-seeking, which caused them to feel more positive about their relationship with their stepchild(ren).

Stepparents in *close* relationships engaged in affinity-seeking behaviours as well and the stepchildren who described their relationships in this way recognized and appreciated their stepparents' efforts. The stepchildren appeared to view their stepparent as someone who was a positive addition to their lives and the life of their parent, and thus attempted to reciprocate. Willow (aged 9) described that she engaged more with her former stepfather, Enda, after he demonstrated his affection for her by buying her a present:

> For my birthday I really wanted something and I think [pause] he [Enda] got me it and I thought my mom would have got me it but he did so I- I felt really special that he got me it and he's really nice and all. So [pause] I [pause] really [pause] was ever since then I really [pause] I [pause] well I always thought that he was nice and all but ever since then I would [pause] spend more time with him cause normally I'd just be like [pause] jumping around, having fun, but then I started talking to him and having fun and that's why I missed [him] more because he was more special since he [pause] umm [pause] since he [pause] got me that even though it was quite expensive – that's why my mom didn't get it – I was like, he really cared for me so.

She explained that Enda was "really really nice and kind and he cares for me as if I was [pause] like his own child or something." Similarly, Samuel (aged 11) considered his former stepfather to have been "a bit like a stepdad to me … Cause he was nice to me and he'd [pause] do loads of stuff with me and he'd cook me and my mom dinner sometimes if – stuff like that." For some children, even very minor affiliation-seeking efforts on the part of stepparent were enough to indicate that the stepparent was making an effort to be closer to the child, as with Fiachra (aged 11):

> I: Can you tell me about a time when Lucas [stepfather] did something, or has there been a time like you know, um that was really important to you?
>
> F: Well I came home from rugby one day and like I had a *massive* bruise going along my leg and it was *really* sore so [pause] he like let me put my legs up on- on where he was sitting and so he moved over and I- I thought that was very nice of him
>
> I: Yeah
>
> F: to do that.

Even when the efforts were relatively minor, the children in *close* relationships recognized that their stepparents were attempting to form a relationship with them and they reciprocated. They positively evaluated their stepparent's contribution to their family and themselves and responded positively. In this way, both children and stepparents who had *close* relationships noticed, appreciated, and reciprocated the affiliation-seeking efforts of each other.

Children who described having a *close* relationship explained that their stepparents did not discipline or disciplined at a level that they found appropriate. Only four of the 11 children who described their relationship in this way had stepparents who disciplined them, and two of those stepparents engaged in relatively low levels of discipline. However, stepparents who described their relationships as *close* disciplined more often; six of the 11 relationships described by the stepparents involved the stepparent's active engagement in discipline. In addition, one stepparent was beginning to take on a more disciplinary role and three had previously disciplined until one of

their other stepchildren rejected them in this role and so they stopped disciplining any of their stepchildren. This fits with the literature showing that children tend not to view their stepparent's role as involving discipline whereas stepparents tend to view this as an integral part of their role (Fine et al., 1998); because of this difference in expectations, it is possible that children whose stepparents disciplined were less likely to view these relationships as *close*, whereas stepparents who disciplined were more likely to view their relationships as *close*.

The children who described their relationships as *close* had consistently low levels of conflict with their stepparent and viewed their stepparents' disciplinary role as being at the appropriate level, whether the stepparent disciplined or not. Harper (aged 11) said that herself and her stepfather "never fight or anything". For some of the stepchildren, not having conflict with their stepparent was a conscious decision. These children did not want their stepparent to think badly of them and so they strategically avoided conflict or situations where their stepparent might discipline them; Willow (aged 9) described that she, "tried to act very nice around him [stepfather] because I [pause] wanted [pause] uh him to think I was a good girl … so I tried to act nice so I never did anything bold so he never had to get angry with me". When the stepparents in *close* relationships did discipline their stepchild(ren), the children viewed the punishments as being fair or reasonable, as with Charlie (aged 10) who was regularly disciplined by his stay-at-home stepfather. When asked what would happen if he did something bold, Charlie said,

> B: Well [pause] it would like [pause] I'd get a punishment kinda.
>
> I: From who?
>
> B: Both [mother and stepfather] but [pause] like one time I got – well twice I got – like grounded, but that's for being cheeky and only for one day.
>
> I: Ok.
>
> B: Like I don't get serious punishment, like for a week
>
> I: Yeah
>
> B: But like [pause] yeah like [pause] most people, they don't get the pleasures they want.

For Charlie, as for the other children with *close* relationships, their stepparent was viewed as disciplining only in appropriate circumstances or did not engage in discipline at all. In this way, the stepchildren who had *close* relationships characterised their stepparents' role as being high in warmth and featuring low control or levels of control that the children felt were appropriate.

For the most part, the stepparents were also happy with their role in discipline. They felt that there were appropriately involved with their stepchild(ren). Ryan (stepfather) explained,

> R: The buck stops with me, really, you know?
>
> I: Yeah.
>
> R: Umm [pause] yeah like it's- it's fun, you know? I like it. I like my role like
>
> I: Yeah
>
> R: but uh I do like the fact that I'm sorta head of the household, I suppose.

These stepparents felt that acting as a coparent was the appropriate role for them and felt their stepchild(ren) accepted them in this role. They were better able to feel *close* to their stepchild(ren) because their stepchild(ren) did not reject their parenting efforts. A few of the stepparents had wanted to be more involved in discipline, but one of their stepchildren with whom they did not have a *close* relationship had rejected their attempts at discipline. These stepparents had subsequently limited their role in discipline for all of their stepchildren, including the one(s) with whom they had a *close* relationship. For example, Andrew (stepfather) had a *close* relationship with his stepson, Aodhan, although he had had to stop disciplining him because of the reaction of his other stepson, Darragh, a few days before Andrew's wedding to Darragh and Aodhan's mother,

> Darragh had a bit of a snarl before it [the wedding], about three or four days before it, sayin' that I'm always givin' out to him and stuff. But ahh, and it was one of those, you know what I mean? It's like, em, N- Aodhan was like, h- h- he, Aodhan just sort of said, "Oh. He's strict but we know he's strict. Most of the time we deserve what he says so."

Andrew explained that he then had to stop disciplining and told his stepsons that he would, "not snarl as much in the future." Although they would have preferred to be more engaged in discipline, these stepparents had accepted the limits on their role and were positive about their relationships with the stepchild(ren) that had not rejected their discipline.

Of the 26 relationships described by the children and stepparents as *close*, *emergent closeness,* or *short-lived resistance,* the children describing 14 of them had not experienced the dissolution of a previous stepfamily relationship when forming the *close* relationship. This is a lower percentage than for those relationships that were characterized by a *detached parent figure*, *coexistence*, *wariness*, or *antipathy*. In eight of the relationships described, the children had experienced the dissolution of a stepfamily at a very young age – in these cases, the parents did not believe that their

children remembered these relationships and the children did not mention their former stepparents to the interviewer. Together, this is a relatively low percentage of experience with former stepparents, as compared to the other relationship patterns. As described in Chapter 6, children's subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationship development was negatively influenced by their experiences of family dissolution; it is possible that the children approached these relationships more positively because they had not experienced previous stepfamily dissolution.

In summary, c*lose* relationships were those where the stepparent and stepchild had continued, positive interactions with other another that were separate from their involvement with the biological parent. Stepchildren and stepparents in the *close* relationships described liking one another and having consistently warm interactions; they "get along *really* really well" (Penelope, aged 14) with one another. The stepchildren and stepparents viewed the stepparent's role in discipline as being appropriate and viewed their relationship as being low in conflict. Most of the stepchildren in *close* relationships had not experienced the dissolution of a stepfamily when they formed a relationship with their stepparent. This section has described all 26 of the *close* relationships generally, and the following two sections describe the two variations on the *close* pattern more specifically.

Emergent Closeness

Relationships characterized by *emergent closeness* were those where the stepparent-stepchild relationship had not quite become a close and confiding relationship, but was on a trajectory toward that sort of closeness. Thus, although the relationship was not yet *close*, the participants described it in a way that implied that they were becoming increasingly so and would one day have a *close* relationship. *Emergent closeness* is, in this way, a relationship trajectory heading toward a *close* relationship pattern. The stepparent and stepchild viewed one another as having positive traits, had low levels of conflict, and they increasingly engaged in activities together. Stepchildren described three of their relationships as being characterized by *emergent closeness* and one stepmother described her relationship in this way. Two of the stepchildren described relationships that had ended – in these cases, the child had been becoming increasingly close to their stepparent until the biological parent and stepparent ended their relationship, at which point the stepchild's relationship with the stepparent effectively ended as well. The *emergent closeness* relationships lasted between three months and nearly ten years.

These relationships featured a nascent closeness – both the stepchildren and stepparents described feeling positive about one another but not quite having a *close* relationship. When asked if she could do anything to improve her relationship with her stepdaughter, Nellie, Aileen (stepmother) explains,

> A: Um [pause] yeah, I think if we seen each other more [pause] um [pause] like we get on very well and [pause] it's great and Brian [Nellie's father] does sometimes be surprised, I think, himself like that, do you know, we've clicked so well considerin' children was never somethin' I considered and
>
> I: Yeah
>
> A: Do you know, I suppose Nellie never thought she'd have like someone else in her life like. But um [pause] yeah, I think over time it'll improve. I think [pause] yeah, it's good … I think we- yeah, we'll definitely get closer. I'd imagine.

Those with relationships characterized by *emergent closeness* felt that the other person had good qualities that made a relationship with them desirable. They had shared interests and did things together. Philip (aged 13) explained that he "got on with him [stepfather] real well" and "we'd talk about, like, cause he was always sayin', "Oh, we should build, like, a motorbike" and all that, so we'd talk about like cars and all, bikes and all … I love cars and stuff". They enjoyed one another's company and felt positively about each other. Hugo's (aged 14) stepfather was "a friend really"; he explained, "The more we talked like the more [pause] we get on or something." These relationships featured increasing levels of interaction and intimacy. Sadhbh (aged 13) described,

> Particularly near the end [of her father's relationship with her stepmother] like I was getting closer to her [stepmother] as I was growing up and I was kind of thinking that like my dad was with somebody new and [pause] that that was ok and uh I wasn't- I was kind of like more opening up and everything like that

She had begun to get to know her stepmother after her father had moved in with her, but their relationship had never become independent of her father and was only burgeoning at the time that her father and stepmother ended their relationship. These were relationships where the stepparent and stepchild liked one another and enjoyed each other's company, but had not quite formed a *close*, intimate relationship with one another.

Short-lived Resistance

Stepparent-stepchild relationships characterized by *short-lived resistance* were those where the stepchild initially had a strong negative reaction to the idea of or introduction to a stepparent, but then quickly adjusted to the idea of a stepparent. In

these relationships, positive aspects of the stepparent's personality had made having a relationship with them appealing for the child. Thus, the children's relationships with their stepparents had gone from strong negativity to being solidly *close*. The children characterized four of their relationships in this way, whereas none of the stepparents did. The *short-lived resistance* relationships had lasted between two and nine years. In three cases, the stepparent and biological parent had dissolved their romantic relationship; in these cases, the children experienced *short-lived resistance*, had then formed a *close* relationship with their stepparent, and then the stepparent-biological parent relationship had ended.

The children in this pattern had initially felt negatively about their stepparent. They were surprised and unhappy that their biological parent had formed a romantic relationship. Liam (aged 18) described what he remembered when he first met his stepfather:

> L: I remember I wasn't happy like at the time [I little laugh] when my ma told me about it.
> I: Yeah. How come you weren't happy?
> L: Just cause it was different like. It was just new, wasn't it, cause I was so used to it just being me and my mother ... I think my ma told me that he [stepfather] was gonna come and, uh, [pause] uh, stay with us. Cause I think my ma was seein' him a while before I knew about it.
> I: Ah, ok [little laugh]
> L: So like she didn't, she didn't know how to tell me cause she didn't know how I'd react ... I think I did say it was ok, but then when he was there I found it a bit weird. ... I just said I didn't want him there. Like you know when you're a kid and you start shouting like
> I: Yeah
> L: "I don't want it" like

Liam proceeded to explain that "It was a bit weird, but, I think as time went on I a-started to like it because he's into the same stuff as me" and they "got on like, I didn't mind anything else after that". These sentiments were echoed by Tristan (aged 11) who described being "shocked and a little bit like nervous" when his mother began dating but then began to feel as if his stepfather was part of the family, "like he was related, like he was an uncle or something". The children in this pattern felt negative about their stepparent, then became close to them when they found that their stepparent had many positive traits and contributed positively to family life. Discovering that their stepparent was "really nice" (Penelope, aged 14) caused them to overcome their reservations about the relationship and to form a *close* stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Close relationships were relatively common in this sample – the children (n=29) and the stepparents (n=11) characterized 15 and 11 of their relationships in this way, respectively. Considering that the children discussed 39 relationships in total and the stepparents discussed 15 relationships in total, this relationship pattern was by far the most common for both groups.

8.3.1.2 Detached Parent Figure

The *detached parent figure* pattern describes those relationships where the stepparent had an important and long-lasting role in the child's life, but they were not emotionally close or confiding with one another. The stepparents in these relationships had a caregiving and sometimes disciplinary role, but did not provide emotional support to their stepchild(ren). There was no significant conflict between the stepparent and stepchild. They did not spend much time doing shared activities and did not describe having many shared interests or hobbies. When describing their relationship with one another, the children acknowledged that the stepparent was an important, often parental, figure, but were not effusive about the closeness of the relationship. The *detached parent figure* pattern is similar to the *close* pattern in the importance and respect that the stepparent is accorded, but with less displays of affection, shared activities, or time spent alone together. These relationships had all lasted more than 10 years, with the stepparent and stepchildren knowing each other since the children were two years old or younger. Three children and one stepparent described relationships that exhibited the characteristics of a *detached parent figure* relationship.

The stepparents in *detached parent figure* relationships were important figures in their stepchildren's lives. They were described as being "like the mam of that house" (Kyle, aged 13) and "basically like a father to me" (Aiden, aged 18). The stepparents were parental figures who viewed the stepchildren as their own children; "she [stepmother] just treats like it's- like I'm her son, really" (Fearghal, aged 13). Angus (stepfather) explained that his stepson "treats me as- as his father." The stepparents were clearly described as acting as and being treated as parental figures to the stepchildren.

Although they were parental, these relationships differed from *close* relationships because of the limited time the stepparent and stepchild spent together and their lack of shared activities or interests. When asked what sorts of things he does with his stepmother, Erin, Fearghal (aged 13) explained:

F: Uh, dad just sorts of does football and stuff and she just- whooo- she just really like [pause] kind of bring, if like you were goin' to the park or somethin', that's where she'd bring you to. My dad just brings you to football matches and all.

I: Yeah. So would she bring you just like by herself to the park?

F: Nah no. Everyone. Never on me own. Like with everyone all the time.

I: So you wouldn't like just spend one-on-one time with her?

F: No. Not really.

I: How come?

F: Sometimes it's like, d- if I'm like doin'- when I'm on my own, like, we're in the kitchen or somethin', we'd talk alone together but

I: Yeah

F: That's all. Cause they're so many people in the house.

I: Yeah. So kind of like, you don't *on purpose* spend

F: No.

I: Ok. Um, would you like to or?

F: Eh. I don't know what we'd do, really.

I: No? [little laugh] Do you have anything in common with one another?

F: I don't know. Well, I like my brothers and

I: Yeah. She likes 'em too? [laughs]

F: Yeah

This was similarly explained by Angus (stepfather), whose relationship with his stepson of 16 years lacked closeness:

A: We don't talk a lot now, really, because h- he's in and out. He comes in, he eats, he's gone.

I: Yeah [laughs]

A: You know? Uh, he's off with his friends. Blah blah blah. He comes to me, eh, when he's lookin' for money or this that or the other. "How are you doing? Blah"

I: Yeah

A: But no. We get on well. We have a bit of, a bit of laugh together.

I: Yeah

A: But w- we don't socialize. We don't go to football matches or anything anymore because he has his friends now mind, he's kind of, it's all his friends now. He just comes here to eat and say hello.

I: Yeah.

A: That's everything.

I: How was it before? Did he used kind of do more things with you or?

A: Ahh yeah. When he was younger [pause] you know, h- we'd have a, we'd do a bit more. But, no, not now, I think it was, I was workin' all the time. I was working bloody fourteen hours a day sometimes, you know? And uh, so there wasn't, I didn't really have an awful lot of time for him, I suppose.

Although Angus loved and cared for his stepson, Aiden, he had never spent considerable time with him. While Aiden's tendency to spend the majority of his time with his friends could be considered a function of increasing independence during adolescence, Angus described that he never spent much time Aiden even when Aiden was a young child. Angus loved and cared for Aiden, but they had never spent any considerable time together. When stepparents in this relationship did spend time with their stepchild, it was almost never alone and generally revolved around care-taking or family activities.

These relationships were not particularly affectionate and the stepparents and stepchildren in these relationships did not tend to be effusive about their closeness or connection with one another. When Aiden (aged 18) was asked if he could describe a time when his stepfather of more than 15 years had done something really important to him, Aiden said, "[phew] I can't put me finger on it … I can't think- I can't think of anything to be honest." Similarly, he described showing his stepfather, Angus, he loved him by asking him "does he want a cup of tea any time" and said he never hugged Angus. This sentiment was also expressed by Fearghal (aged 13) who explained that his stepmother does not do things that are, "really important to me. They're just normal things, I think" and says that although his stepmother tells him she loves him "all the time whenever I leave", he "wouldn't really do that". Fearghal said that he does not tell his stepmother that he loves her "cause, you know, I'm thirteen … I'm at that age" but when asked whether he used to tell her he loved her more or less earlier in their relationship, he said, "No, not really", indicating that his lack of demonstrative affection has been a consistent feature of their relationship.

Half of the *detached parent figure* relationships involved discipline. None of the children expressed any concerns about their stepparent taking a disciplinary role. In Angus and Aiden's case, Angus had negotiated a parent-support role because of the negative reaction of one of his other stepchildren to his early attempts at discipline; thus, he had never disciplined Aiden. Kyle and Fearghal's stepmother disciplined them, but neither child viewed this as being outside her role. Kyle (aged 13) explained that "mom, dad, Erin [stepmother]" would discipline him if he had done something wrong and that "all three of 'em" had the right to discipline him. In this way, all of the children who characterized their stepparent as being a *detached parent figure* expressed comfort with their stepparent's level of disciplinary involvement.

The three children who described a stepparent-stepchild relationship in this way had all experienced the dissolution of at least one stepfamily, but their relationship with their *detached parent figure* predated those dissolutions. This is because the children's other parent formed and then dissolved relationships with partner(s) while the children's relationship with their other stepparent remained constant. The children did not describe these dissolutions as impacting their *detached parent figure* relationship.

The *detached parent figure* relationships were characterized by a lack of emotional closeness and time spent together, but the stepparent was treated as a parent figure by the stepchild. Their role as a parent revolved around their position as someone who had engaged in caretaking as long as the children could recall, rather than being based on their closeness to or engagement with the children.

8.3.1.3 Coexisting

The *coexisting* pattern describes stepparent-stepchild relationships that were described by participants as having low closeness, low conflict, and a general detachment from one another. The stepparents and stepchildren in *coexisting* relationships had no relationship with one another independent of the biological parent. They described their relationships in neutral terms – exhibiting neither high nor low levels of positivity, but rather a general lack of interest. The stepparents and stepchildren in these relationships had known each other from a few months to six years. Eight relationships were characterized in this way by the stepchildren; no stepparents described having a *coexisting* relationship. Two of the relationships characterized in this way were residential and the other six were non-residential.

Coexisting relationships were neither close nor confiding – the children were apathetic about these relationships and described that the presence of their stepparent had little influence on their lives. Cathal (aged 9) felt "sort of" close to his residential stepfather, Desmond (aged 11) "didn't really mind" when his mother started dating, and Fearghal (aged 13) thought that having his stepfather move in would be, "just [pause] an extra person in the house really." In these relationships, the stepparent and stepchild were essentially living separate lives but with a connection through the biological parent.

Coexisting stepparent-stepchild relationships involved little interaction between the stepparent and stepchild and never involved outside-the-home dyadic activities. Sabhdh (aged 13) explained that "maybe like every second weekend" she, her sister, and her mother had spent time with her former stepfather but that it was "more like my

mum and him would do stuff" and she never spent any time with him on her own. Similarly, Evan (aged 15) described his involvement with his mother's former partner by saying, "Well he was just in the house, so I like watched films with my ma and him and stuff ... I think he took us out once, for dinner or something." In addition to limited interaction, these relationships involved few or no shared interests and hobbies. Thus, when the children did interact with their stepparent, the interaction was rarely interesting or particularly positive for the stepchild. When asked what kinds of things he spoke to his residential stepfather, Anthony, about, Cathal (aged 9) stated,

> C: Umm [pause] I ask him questions sometimes about umm [pause] cooking and cars and stuff.
>
> I: Does he know about those things?
>
> C: Yeah.
>
> I: Yeah. Are you interest- interested in those things or?
>
> C: Mmm well not really.

When asked what kinds of things he did with his former stepfather, Desmond (aged 11) said, "we like to talk about games. Umm that was really [pause] that was it" indicating although they had one interest in common, they did not share any other activities or interests. This is similar to what Darragh (aged 13) described when asked the same question; "sometimes he [stepfather] comes out and plays a little bit of football with us [Darragh and his brother]. We go on walks with him sometimes and, eh, [pause] that's- that's really it." When the stepchild and their stepparent in a *coexisting* relationship spent time together, they did so mostly as part of a group with their biological parent and any siblings. The time that they did spend alone together was limited and involved little effort on the part of either the stepchild or the stepparent.

The stepparents in *coexisting* relationships did not take a disciplinary role. They tended to act as parent-support or to be completely uninvolved in parenting. In *coexisting* relationships, the stepparent would tell the child's biological parent if the child was disobedient and the biological parent would handle discipline; "If he [stepfather] was minding me and I did something bad she'd- he would tell my mum" (Cathal, aged 9). The children in these relationships did not believe that their stepparent was in a role where the stepparent had a right to discipline them. Evan (aged 15) explained that his former stepfathers had not disciplined him and he, "wouldn't think they had the right to ... Because [pause] like they wouldn't really know me or [pause] like they're not my dad and stuff like that." In two of these cases, the stepparent had previously disciplined the child but had stopped and the child did not view them as

having a disciplinary role anymore. The stepparents in *coexisting* relationships were not viewed by the stepchildren as having a role within the family that allowed them to be involved in discipline.

Half of the relationships described as *coexisting* involved children who had experienced the dissolution of their mothers' previous relationship(s) with a stepparent. Darragh's mother had worked to maintain contact between himself and his previous stepfather, but the mothers of the other three children had discontinued contact between the children and their former stepparents. It is possible that these children may have formed *coexisting* relationships because they lacked control in their previous stepparent-stepchild relationship(s) and thus may have been less interested in becoming close to their subsequent stepparent, although it is not possible to ascertain this from the collected data.

The *coexisting* relationships share features with some of the other patterns, but are distinct in their general apathy. For example, the *detached parent figure* pattern similarly features limited engagement between the stepparent and stepchild, but those with *detached parent figure* relationships felt that the stepparent was an important, parental figure who was part of the child's past and future family landscape. In contrast, children who characterised their relationships as *coexisting* did not describe their stepparents as being an important or parental figure. The difference between *coexisting* relationships and the other patterns was that *coexisting* relationships featured neither high nor low levels of positivity or negativity, the stepparent and stepchild had limited interactions outside of those involving the biological parent, and the relationships were described in a way which indicated little personal connection or feeling between the stepparent and stepchild.

8.3.1.4 Wariness

The *wariness* pattern describes those relationships where either the stepparent or stepchild were sceptical about forming a close stepparent-stepchild relationship. This wariness was not because of the personality of the other party, but was rather because of outside forces, unhappiness with the stepparent's role, or previous negative experiences. These relationships were characterized by ambivalence – there was a tension between the positive and negative aspects of their relationship formation. The *wariness* pattern describes five of the stepchildren's relationships and three of the stepparents' relationships.

The biological parent who was not a partner to the stepparent was often a source of negativity about the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Many children did not dislike their stepparent as a person, but encountered loyalty conflicts and thus did not feel as positive or open to developing the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Aifric (aged 11) described her relationship with her stepmother Siobhan,

> Umm she was fine. At the start I didn't [pause] really [laughs] um I didn't really like see her often, and then I saw her more and then [pause] like she was just [pause] she was just fine, like she wasn't mean or anything [laughs] she was just, I think she tried to be really nice and tried to connect with us and she had some daughters as well so – the daughters were much older so. And um we did fun stuff and [pause] and then like [pause] we never like [pause] I just, I was never like- when I was like talking to her, she was just like [pause] I don't know, she was, like, [pause] it was sort of, I don't know, in the room I wouldn't start a conversation or anything. It was just maybe I felt shy around her or something like that.

When asked how she felt about her father and her stepmother moving in together, Aifric responded, "I was always worried about how my mum would feel and I didn't- I didn't- I think I was really protective [little laugh] of my mum at the same time but [pause] I didn't really like it. But then I just- I just thought, "I have to get used to this"". She repeatedly described her stepmother's affinity-seeking efforts and how her stepmother was "always really friendly" but how she never formed a close relationship with her because of this loyalty conflict. Judy (stepmother) similarly described that her stepson, Oscar, was wary of forming a relationship with her because of his biological mother,

> J: The middle child [Oscar] when we- he [husband] introduced me and said my name, straight away the reaction was, "Oh I have to call my mom. She told me I have to call her as soon as we meet anybody called Judy" so
>
> I: Ah
>
> J: he knew straight away.
>
> I: Yeah
>
> J: You know? Um not exactly the reaction we'd hoped to [laughs]
>
> I: Yeah
>
> J: but he was fine. Like I mean, I probably had the- the hardest time gettin' on with him ... we have our ups and downs. We're *a lot* better now than we were then. It's taken a long time because I'm workin' against the- the- the argument, you know, and I have to deal with the bad stuff he's been told.

Although Oscar did not reject a relationship with her and "has his moments where he will try" to get close to her, her description of their stepparent-stepchild relationship

clearly reflected the conflict he felt between remaining close to his biological mother and forming a loving relationship with his stepmother.

Some of the children with relationships characterized by *wariness* took issue with the stepparent's disciplinary role. The stepparents in these relationships were seen to be overreaching when they took on a disciplinary or supervisory role; this role was viewed by the children as being overbearing. Felix (aged 9) explained that his stepmother was, "nice but most of them time she's- we usually spend two hours on homework ... If I even get a little bit wrong she rubs out the whole sentence. Well, not really." Felix viewed his stepmother as a "close person of our family", but also took umbrage with his stepmother's role as the person responsible for making him do his homework. Some of these families had negotiated a stepparenting role that the child(ren) were uncomfortable with, and this role made them wary of their stepparent in general as, for example, in the case of Judy, who had negotiated a parent-support role in response to her stepson's rejection of her in a disciplinary role. However, Judy's stepson's wariness around her continued after she stopped being actively involved in discipline, possibly because he was experiencing loyalty conflicts as well. In some of these *wariness* relationships, the children were ambivalent about their stepparent because they liked their stepparent as a person, but did not want their stepparent to take a disciplinary role; the stepparents' attempt to negotiate this role created tension in the stepparent-stepchild relationships. This wariness around discipline was similarly described by Fine et al. (1998) – children generally prefer their stepparents to act as friends to them as opposed to acting as a disciplinary or parent figure.

For some of the children and stepparents who were in a relationship characterized by *wariness*, their previous family experiences had caused them to have some ambivalence about forming a close stepparent-stepchild relationship. For example, Darragh's biological father was intermittently involved in Darragh's life, and Andrew, Darragh's stepfather felt that this, "made him [Darragh] very untrusting anyway ... he [Darragh's father] said- he's- he's- he'd do things and he's never done them". This previous experience of his father's sporadic involvement, coupled with the dissolution of his mother's relationship with her subsequent partner, "defo"[20] made Darragh more wary of forming a relationship with Andrew; "he's a bit of- sort of- em,

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[20] "Defo" is a short-form of the word "definitely".

people sort of bein' there and leavin', so he's- like he did- he needs the stability". Bronagh (aged 12) also had no relationship with her biological father and had experienced the dissolution of a few of her mother's relationships, including an abusive relationship; consequently, she preferred living alone with her mother and half-brother and was wary of the involvement of a stepparent. Bronagh explained that when she met her stepfather "at the first I didn't really talk to him as much" because "I don't really like talking to people I don't really know." She thought "he was nice" and she "played games with him sometimes", so she did not reject a relationship with him, but she was cautious and distrusting about viewing him as "anything more than just my mom's boyfriend". As described in Chapter 6, children's lack of a sense of agency during the development and dissolution of their previous stepparent-stepchild relationship(s) negatively influenced the development of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationships. This was true for the children whose relationships were characterized by *wariness* – those that had experienced stepfamily dissolution explained that this caused them to be more wary of their parents' subsequent partners. In a similar vein, William's (stepfather) experience of briefly breaking up and then getting back together with his partner made him realize that the continuation of his relationship with her son, Zachary, was more precarious than he had originally believed,

> We broke up last year for three or four months things just weren't working out and- and um [pause] I really really missed him, you know? ... When we got back together this time, I kinda eased off a little bit before I got kind of as much into Zachary's life. I said, "Look, we need to kinda ease off a little. Um maybe not me spend as much [pause] the whole days with you and stuff like that." Because I actually found it quite difficult when we weren't together [pause] that, you know, he was just kinda torn out of my life. I actually found that quite difficult I must admit.

These previous experiences were not negative experiences between the stepparent and stepchild and yet they contributed to wariness around the relationship that hampered the development of a wholly positive stepparent-stepchild relationship.

In relationships characterized by *wariness*, the stepparents and stepchildren did not dislike one another, but were concerned about the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship because of loyalty conflicts, the nature of the stepparent's role, or previous negative experiences.

8.3.1.5 Antipathy

Relationships characterized by *antipathy* were those where the stepparent or stepchild had an aversion to stepparent-stepchild relationship formation. The stepparent or stepchild opposed a close stepparent-stepchild relationship either because they

rejected the idea of that relationship on principle regardless of the personality of the stepparent or stepchild, or they actively disliked the stepparent or stepchild. These two types of antipathic relationships are described below as *active rejection* and *consistent dislike*.

The children described eight relationships characterized by *antipathy*. No stepparents described having an antipathic stepparent-stepchild relationship. Perhaps this is because stepparents who rejected a relationship with their stepchild or strongly disliked them were unlikely to continue a relationship with the stepchild's biological parent. Alternately, stepparents in relationships characterized by *antipathy* may have continued a relationship with the stepchild's biological parent but been less eager to participate in research on their relationship with their stepchild(ren) because of the social undesirability of a strained stepparent-stepchild relationship. Seven of the stepparents with relationships described in this way were non-resident stepmothers or were former stepparents and thus could not be accessed by the researcher. One of the stepparents was a residential stepfather and thus would optimally have participated in the research, but he was not present in the home when the other interviews were taking place and although the researcher left information on the study for him, he did not get in contact. One of the stepparents in the pilot study had an *antipathic* relationship with his stepson which involved such *consistent dislike* that the stepparent and stepchild refused to be in the same room together, indicating that some stepparents were willing to participate and disclose negative information about their families despite the socially undesirability of such disclosures. Of the eight relationships described by children as being antipathic, four were characterized by *active rejection* of the stepparent-stepchild relationship and four featured the stepchild's *consistent dislike* of their stepparent. Except for one of the children who had refused to meet her stepparent because of the intensity of her negative feelings, the children had known their stepparent between two and 11 years.

Active Rejection

Active rejection relationships were those where stepchildren rejected the idea of a relationship with a stepparent. None of the stepchildren who described the *active rejection* of their stepparent explained that they did so as a result of their stepparent's personality, actions, or familial role. Rather, it was the stepchildren's ties to their biological parents and history of lack of agency in family instability that caused the stepchildren to refuse the formation of a stepparent-stepchild relationship. They did not

necessarily view their stepparent as having a negative personality, but they did not believe that their stepparent would positively contribute to the family. The stepparents in these families had developed a relatively disconnected role within the family and did not act as a parent toward their stepchild(ren).

The children rejected the stepparent-stepchild relationship because of loyalty conflicts and a feeling of the importance of biology. They actively rejected a closer stepparent-stepchild relationship because of a preference for relationships with biological family members. When asked about his stepmother, Lochlan (aged 11) stated "I don't really like her" and he did not want to have a relationship with her because "I love like [pause] people who are *part* of my family, not like someone who's my stepmom cause I feel like I'm the only one. So I just really like my own family, rather than some- a stepmom." He felt as if a growing involvement with his stepmother would have a negative impact on his biological mother and her family,

> I: Um [pause] do you think you'd ever want to get closer to your stepmom?
>
> L: No, not really. I don't really want to [pause] cause then, if I do that then [pause] my family will feel like they're left out. So I don't want t- that to happen to them.
>
> I: Yeah yeah.
>
> L: So I don't want to.

Sadie (aged 16) describes her stepfather as "a good man and all" but she never formed a close relationship with him; Sadie explained that she was "real like distant and all" and she, "wouldn't look on him as a f- like a father figure to me because I know that I have my dad". Even though her biological father died before she met her stepfather, she rejected a stepparent-stepchild relationship because she viewed her social connection to her former stepfather as being ultimately unimportant in comparison to biological relationships. She explained that she would never have a close relationship with him,

> I think it's just cause like I still look at him as like- he's not, like, family like. He's not related to me or anything ... I think it [the stepparent-stepchild relationship] didn't change cause like [pause] I di- I didn't want it to change, if you get me. Like I wouldn't look on him as a dad, so I wouldn't, you know, treat him as a dad or anything, so I wouldn't expect him to treat me as a daughter or anything so

Although she had known her stepfather for nearly a decade, Sadie did not want to be close to him because of his lack of a biological connection to her; consequently, their relationship never became at all close or loving on either side. These relationships were negative in large part because of the importance children placed on the biological connection. They either did not want to pursue the relationships because they were not

interested in becoming close to someone who was not biologically related to them, or because they felt that greater closeness to their stepparent would negatively impact their relationship with their biological parent.

Only one of the four relationships characterized in this way was preceded by the dissolution of a former stepfamily. Charlotte (aged 15) had little agency in either the development or dissolution of her mother's previous relationships. She actively rejected forming a relationship with her current stepfather, Thomas, because she did not trust stepfathers to maintain long-term relationships with her mother, her half-brothers, or herself.

C: He [stepfather] does little things

I: Yeah?

C: For us to get closer.

I: Ok.

C: But I don't really take interest.

She explained that, "I don't really want to be a part of this, cause eh, in case he hurts my mom or my brothers in some way". She thought that, as with her mother's previous partners, this partner was unlikely to continue his relationship in the long term; she believed that "if he leaves and all … And my brothers are like, "Oh where's Thomas?"", that would have a significant negative impact on her brothers. However, this was not the case for the other children who characterized their relationships in this way; prior to their relationships with their stepparents, they had not experienced the dissolution of either of their parents' relationship with a stepparent. Thus, although this was a critical factor in Charlotte's rejection of a relationship with her stepfather, the other children had different reasons for characterizing their relationships in this way.

The children who *actively rejected* their stepparent were not disciplined by their stepparent – this was either because themselves or their stepparent did not view discipline as being part of the stepparent's role within the family. Sadie (aged 16) explained that her stepfather had never disciplined her because "he doesn't think that that's his role to do. He doesn't think that he has the right to" and she also felt that he did not have that right. Similarly, Lochlan (aged 11) said that his stepmother "doesn't tell me what to do". Charlotte (aged 15) described a time when her stepfather, Thomas, had unsuccessfully tried to discipline her; she felt that instead of Thomas, her mother "should have said it to me. He's [Thomas is] nothing to me". Except for Charlotte's stepfather's rebuffed attempt at discipline, the stepparents did not do anything at all that

implied to the children that they wanted to take on a parenting role. They generally did not engage in discipline, decision making, caretaking, or attempt to participate in shared activities. Still, some of the children viewed their stepparent's non-parental, relatively uninvolved role as being too large; even though Lochlan's stepmother did not discipline him, participate in much caretaking, or spend significant time with him, he still saw her role as being bigger than it should be. He explained that she had "a few rules" which made him feel like an "assistant" who was "not really loved or cared". Because of the reliance on once-off interviews and the absence of the view of stepparents who characterised their relationships as *antipathic* in this study, it is unclear whether the stepparents did not engage in discipline or take on a parental role because they did not want this role within the family, the stepchildren refused to accept them in this role, or both.

These children did not feel that having an intimate and attached stepparent-stepchild would be of benefit to them or their families. They did not value this relationship and thus they rejected the formation of a close stepparent-stepchild relationship. All of the children characterized their relationships in this way because of their perception of the importance of the biological relationship or loyalty conflicts. The stepchildren had a very limited view of the role they considered appropriate for their stepparent and actively rejected an increased connection or closeness.

Consistent Dislike

Other children who rejected a relationship with their stepparent did so not because of loyalty conflicts or their family relationships, but rather because they disliked their stepparent's personality, lacked positive interactions with their stepparent, and felt that their stepparent engaged in too much discipline. None of the children had experienced the dissolution of a stepfamily when they met their stepparent and thus this did not influence their relationship development. The four children who characterized their relationships in this way were describing relationships with non-resident stepmothers. These relationships were all long-lasting, starting when the children were aged seven years or younger and lasting between eight and 11 years, although some of the children no longer interacted with their stepmothers because they had discontinued contact with their non-resident father.

The children felt that their stepparents did not attempt to engage with them and put little or no effort into forming a relationship. All of the stepparents had disciplined the stepchildren, but none of the children described affinity-seeking on the part of their

stepparent. These stepparents had developed a role which was low in warmth but high in control and involved limited stepparent-stepchild interaction. Logan (aged 9) described his relationship with his stepmother, Eimear, of nearly nine years by saying,

> L: We don't really do anything together. Um [pause] I don't really like her in all fairness yeah. Emm [pause] yeah we just don't talk at all. We'd see each other – we just say "Hi" "Bye" and that would it- be it. Yeah. Um I don't really feel anything for her, you know?
>
> I: Yeah. You've known her for a really long time?
>
> L: Yeah.
>
> I: Yeah. But you never really?
>
> L: No. Never did.
>
> I: Do you think that's because she doesn't want to or because you don't want to?
>
> L: Umm in all fairness I don't think she likes me in all fairness [pause] but like, I don't like her either so like.

Logan explained that, "she's usually out [pause] most of the time" but that when Eimear was there and had disciplined him, he did not "take her serious at all" because, "I don't like her. Yeah, I don't like her. That's it." This sentiment of dislike was shared by Fiachra (aged 11) who said, "I didn't really get on that much with her [stepmother]". Some children had always disliked their stepparent and rejected an increased closeness in the stepparent-stepchild relationship, but Evan (aged 15) and Philip (aged 13) had originally liked their stepmother and then had begun to dislike her over time. This was largely because of her role in discipline and her lack of positive interactions with them. Philip explained,

> P: I hate her.
>
> I: [little laugh] How come?
>
> P: She's just so like [pause] she snaps at you for everything you do... I liked her at first, like she seemed nice. But then like, [pause] after a little while, she was just kind of [pause] always in a bad mood and stuff.

Evan similarly explained that "she's like always moaning". In all of these cases, the children felt that their stepparent was uninterested in spending quality time with them. Their stepparents' only involvement with them was regarding discipline, something which the children resented.

The children who characterized their relationships in this way rejected the idea of a stepparent because of perceived negative aspects of their stepparent's personality. They *continuously disliked* their stepparent because they did not have warm and loving interactions with their stepparent. Their stepparents focused on discipline and did not

engage in affinity-seeking behaviours. Table 8.1 outlines the differences between the five different relationship patterns.

8.3.1.1 Contextual Factors

The previous chapters have discussed a number of factors which influence the types of relationships that stepparents and stepchildren develop and these have been related to each relationship pattern above. However, there are a number of contextual factors which are also important to consider. These include the length of stepparent involvement with the stepchild(ren), the developmental context of the child, the child's gender, the residence or non-residence of a stepparent, and the cultural context.

Table 8.1. Differences between the relationship patterns

Pattern	Number of Relationships Characterized in This Way		Length (years)	Residence[a]		Key Features
	Children	Stepparents		SP Resident	SP Non-Resident	
Close	15	11	0.5 - 9	16	10	- Relationship is amiable and affectionate - Both stepparents and stepchildren tend to be relatively effusive about their love or fondness for one another - They have interests and hobbies in common - They do not have significant conflict
Detached Parent Figure	3	1	13 - 16	2	2	- The stepparent has an important and long-lasting role in the child's life - The child views the stepparent as being a parental figure - The stepparent and stepchild are not emotionally close or confiding with one another - The stepparent is a caregiver, but does not provide emotional support to their stepchild - They spend limited time alone together - They do not have significant interests and hobbies in common

Pattern	Number of Relationships Characterized in This Way		Length (years)	Residence[a]		Key Features
	Children	Stepparents		SP Resident	SP Non-Resident	
Coexisting	8	0	0.7 - 6	2	6	- There are low levels of closeness between the stepparent and stepchild, but also low levels of conflict - The stepparent and stepchild are generally detached from one another - The relationship is described neutrally, with neither high nor low levels of positivity - There is a general lack of interest in becoming closer or strengthening the stepparent-stepchild relationship
Wariness	5	3	1.5 - 9	3	5	- The idea of forming a close relationship with the other person is characterized by a tension between positive and negative aspects - They view the other person (stepparent or stepchild) positively, but are wary of becoming close to them for other reasons - They express positive feelings about the other person and do not reject a relationship with them, but are wary of becoming too close
Antipathy	8	0	2 - 11	1	7	- They do not want to be close to the other person - They choose not to have a relationship either because they actively dislike the other person or because of outside factors - The stepparent and stepchild spend limited time together

[a] Indicates the number of the relationships characterized in this way which were with a resident or non-resident stepparent.

Length of Stepparent Involvement in the Family

Some studies have found that stepparent-stepchild relationships tend to become more negative over time (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), whereas others suggest that relationship duration may positively impact stepparent-stepchild relationships through greater opportunities for relationship-building (Arránz Becker, Salzburger, Lois, & Nauck, 2013; Kalmijn, 2013). In the current study, the length of stepparent involvement in the families in this study was not necessarily indicative of the closeness of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, but there was a broad trend for longer-term relationships to be described by children as being less close (see Table 8.2). The *close* and *coexisting* relationships described by the children had lasted for the shortest time on average. By contrast, the *wariness* and *antipathy* relationships described by the children were nearly twice as long. However, this trend is not present for the relationships described by the stepparents and the *detached parent figure* relationships also do not conform to the general pattern of closer relationships tending to be shorter and less close relationships tending to be longer.

Table 8.2. Length of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, by relationship pattern

	Length of Stepchildren's Relationships[a]	Length of Stepparent's Relationships[a]
Close	3.8	5.2
Detached Parent Figure	14.0	16.0[b]
Coexisting	3.3	–[c]
Wariness	5.6	4.0
Antipathy	7.2	–[c]

Note. The length of the relationships for stepchildren and stepparents differ both because the children and stepparents did not always characterise their relationships in the same way and because not all stepparents and stepchildren who participated did so as a stepparent-stepchild dyad.

[a] Refers to the length of these relationships in years.

[b] This is based on only one relationship.

[c] No stepparents characterized their relationship in these ways.

What these data do show is that children did not necessarily have to have a long relationship with their stepparent to feel very close to them. When asked what his relationship with his stepfather of six months was, Fiachra (aged 11) said that he "would treat him as my dad basically". Similarly, a relationship does not have to be long to be *antipathic*, with Charlotte (aged 15) explaining "I don't really get on with him" when talking about her stepfather of two years. Thus, the closeness of a stepparent-stepchild relationship appears to be somewhat related to the length of that relationship, but the trend hides substantial individual differences. Other factors – such

as children's experiences with former stepparents or the role that the stepparent negotiated within the family and how they negotiated that role –appear to be more directly associated with the types of relationships formed than is the length of the relationship.

Developmental Context

Children experience significant developmental changes and changes in their relationships with their parents between the ages of eight and 18 years (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Mann, Borduin, Cone, Borduin, & Sylvester, 1992; Piaget, 1928; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). The age at which a child meets their stepparent is important to the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships, with younger children tending to be more accepting of stepparents than older children (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1988; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). However, there was limited support for this in the current sample, with only small differences in the age at which children met their stepparents and the types of relationships that they formed. The only substantial difference was between the children and stepparents who describe the stepparent acting as a *detached parent figure*; in these cases, the children were infants when they had met their stepparent whereas the children in all other groups tended to be school-aged when they had met their stepparent (see Table 8.3).

Table 8.3. *The age at which the children met their stepparent*

	Age (years)
Close	5.6
Detached Parent Figure	1.0
Coexisting	7.5
Wariness	4.6
Antipathy	6.0

Note. These are the ages of the children when they met their stepparent. They are based on the average age for the 39 relationships that the children described and the 15 relationships that the stepparents described.

Children generally tend to become less close to their stepparents (Hetherington, 1993) and parents (Steinberg, 1988; Youniss & Smollar, 1985) as they enter adolescence. This finding plays out somewhat in this sample, with the differences in age between the children who described their relationship as *close* – including *close, emergent closeness*, and *short-lived resistance* – and those who described their relationship as being characterised by *antipathy,* with children in *close* relationships being younger (M=11.9 years) than those in *antipathic* relationships (M=13.3 years). Although this is in line with

previous research and thus it is possible that this is a systematic difference in the types of relationships that stepparents and stepchildren, because of the reliance on once-off interviews, it is difficult to evaluate whether the children in this sample had become less close to their stepparents over time or whether this was merely random variation.

Child Gender

There have been mixed findings in the literature around the relationship between children's gender and closeness to stepparents. Some studies have found that stepdaughters have more difficulties and lower closeness to parental figures than stepsons (Amato & Keith, 1991; King, 2006) whereas others have found stepsons have poorer functioning and less close relationships to some parental figures than stepdaughters (King, 2007; Schrodt, 2008). Still others have found no difference in outcomes (Fine & Kurdek, 1992; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), likelihood of being adopted by a stepparent (Stewart, 2010), or feelings of family belonging (Stephens Leake, 2007), indicating the influence of children's gender on their outcomes and relationships with their stepparents is still unclear.

Eight of the children in this sample were girls and 21 were boys. The girls described twelve stepparent-stepchild relationships and the boys described 27 stepparent-stepchild relationships. Despite the ultimate differences in the number of children of each gender and the small sample size, a number of interesting differences in the patterns emerged (Table 8.4). The girls in this sample were relatively unlikely to have a *coexisting* relationship, none characterized their stepparent as a *detached parent figure*, and the girls were more likely to describe a relationship characterized by *wariness* than were the boys. Levels of *closeness* and *antipathy* were relatively similar between the genders.

Table 8.4. Patterns of child relationship characterization by child gender

	Male (%) (n=27 relationships)	Female (%) (n=12 relationships)
Close	37.0	41.7
Detached Parent Figure	11.1	0.0
Coexisting	25.9	8.3
Wariness	7.4	25.0
Antipathy	18.5	25.0

Notes: The data indicate the percentage of that pattern of relationship separately for each gender. Because of rounding, the percentages do not add necessarily exactly to 100.

The sample size of stepparents was relatively small at only 11 participants describing 15 relationships, so it is difficult to determine whether their stepparent-stepchild relationship patterns by child gender follow the same trends as children's descriptions of those patterns by gender. The four stepparents describing relationships with stepdaughters all characterized their relationships as *close* (see Table 8.5). The gendered nature of parenting roles and suspicion surrounding male sexuality has been posited to influence the types of relationships that stepfathers may form with their stepdaughters (Marsiglio, 2004), but the stepfathers of stepdaughters in this sample (n=3) did not mention this as a factor which constrained the closeness of their stepparent-stepchild relationship or contributing to any wariness around the relationship. Although this may have been a function of the small sample size, the stepparents indicated that more of their relationships with their male stepchildren were *wary* whereas than male stepchildren did not indicate that their relationships with their stepparents were characterized by *wariness* as often.

Table 8.5. Patterns of stepparent relationship characterization by child gender

	Male Stepchild (%) (n=11 relationships)	Female Stepchild (%) (n=4 relationships)
Close	63.6	100.0
Detached Parent Figure	9.1	0.0
Coexisting	0.0	0.0
Wariness	27.3	0.0
Antipathy	0.0	0.0

Notes: The data indicate the percentage of that pattern of relationship separately for each gender.

Residence and Non-Residence

Although many studies of stepfamilies define a stepparent as someone who lives as a romantic partner with a child's parent, children described few differences between their residential and non-residential relationships. All five patterns of relationships included both residential and non-residential stepparent relationships. Children whose stepparents lived with them rarely ascribed particular importance to their co-residence, although they tended to say that moving in together was more important than their parent and stepparent's marriage, if they were married.

One third of the *close* stepparent-stepchild relationships that the children described were non-resident. Stepparents' residence or non-residence was not necessarily indicative of the type of stepparent-stepchild relationship that formed or how close the stepchild and stepparent felt to one another. Fiachra (aged 11) felt "pretty

close" to his non-resident stepfather and was "happy" when his stepfather referred to him as "my girlfriend's son" because "my mum's his girlfriend" and "it makes me feel like I'm his son as well"; he felt that his stepfather was like a parent to him although they had never lived together and his stepfather currently resided in a different country. Willow (aged 9) explained that her former non-resident stepfather "was like a stepparent to me cause he was really nice and kind to me" and that he had been "like a dad for a while" while he was in a relationship with Willow's mother. Tristan (aged 11), similarly, would have said his former non-resident stepfather, Enda, was "a relative because we were so close" although the relationship had diminished since the end of Tristan's mother's relationship with Enda. The closeness of these relationships and the importance that some children ascribed to their non-resident parent and stepparent indicates that co-residence is not of critical importance to the closeness of a stepparent-stepchild relationship. Studies which focus solely on residential stepparents may be ignoring stepparents that are highly important, significant figures in their stepchildren's lives and whose involvement with the child(ren) influences the entire family system.

Cultural Influences

The cultural context in which a family is formed impacts all interactions in that family (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). Ireland's stepfamily context has some features that make it unique within the Western world. There are relatively small numbers of stepfamilies: census data indicates they account for 2.5% of families (Lunn & Fahey, 2011) as compared to the 7% found in the United States (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008) – although both these estimates may be underestimating the number of stepfamilies since many do not self-identify (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013). Additionally, Ireland's sexual and family culture has historically been guided by Roman Catholic beliefs (Inglis, 2005); the Roman Catholic Church does not sanction divorce or childbearing before marriage. Coupled with this cultural context wherein married, two-biological-parent families are normative, the numbers of stepfamilies in the GUI data who do not self-identify appear to indicate an incomplete instutionalization of stepfamilies in Ireland (Cherlin, 1978) and that they may feel stigmatized. This incomplete institutionalization may have influenced how the stepparent-stepchild relationships were formed in this sample through a lack of cultural consensus about the use of kinship terms in stepfamilies, the rights and obligations of stepfamily members, and the optimal role of the stepparent in caring for the stepchild.

The relative lack of stepfamilies and a cultural history of non-acceptance of non-traditional families had a direct negative influence on the development of some of the stepparent-stepchild relationships in this sample, but the majority of stepchildren did not believe this was a salient factor in their relationship development. When asked about whether they knew other children in the same situation, the children in this study tended to say that they "didn't really mind" (Darragh, aged 13), "don't really care" (Aodhan, aged 9), and that if they did not know other children with a similar family, they still "don't really like feel bad or anything about it" (Jace, 11). The children generally did not describe their relationship with their stepparent(s) as being influenced by a lack of stepfamilies or any other aspects of the cultural context. However, the relationship of one of the children, Lochlan (aged 11), with his stepmother was impacted considerably by his concerns about his status as a member of a stepfamily and about the possibility of others discovering his family structure. Lochlan explained, "not a lot of my friends have [pause] like s- stepmom. Like I don't really know anybody who has a stepmom". When asked how he would introduce his father's wife to his friends, Lochlan said,

> I wouldn't say anything. I literally wouldn't say anything. I don't want them [pause] to sort of say things about me. I d- I just don't want to I- I'm not just gonna say anything cause I don't [pause] cause I know nobody wants to know that [pause] yeah, that [pause] you're a stepson or somethin' … So I just say "nothin', none of your business."

He hoped that his stepmother would similarly avoid talking about their situation to other people because, "I wouldn't say anything so if she said somethin' [pause] I'd be really annoyed". He was adamant that he did not want to develop a closer relationship with her, "because I love like [pause] people who are *part* of my family, not like someone who's my stepmom cause I feel like I'm the only one. So I just really like my own family, rather than some- a stepmom." Although most of the children's relationships with their stepparents were not radically affected by the relative infrequency of stepfamilies in Ireland, at least one of these relationships was significantly hindered by the cultural context.

The stepparents also did not tend to feel that the development of their relationship with their stepchild(ren) was influenced by the cultural context. None of the stepparents described an incident where the cultural context had significantly impacted their relationship with their stepchild(ren). Aileen (stepmother) explained that,

> A: I know times have changed from [little laugh] when I was a child but um [pause] yeah, she's [stepdaughter] very acceptive of it, do you know, she understands that her mom lives in one house and I'm her dad's girlfriend
>
> I: Yeah
>
> A: She understands what girlfriend is … I suppose that shocked me the most, that she was so fine with the relationship

Because Nellie is only four, she has limited experiences with which to compare to having a stepmother, but this pattern of a relatively inconsequential cultural influence was repeated by stepparents with older stepchildren as well. As with Aileen, most of the stepparents described that stepfamilies either used to be or were currently taboo, but none indicated that this had caused difficulties for the development of their relationship with their stepchild(ren).

However, despite most stepparents and stepchildren describing that the cultural context had no influence on their stepparent-stepchild relationship development, many described behaviours which indicated that the cultural context had influenced how their stepfamily relationships were enacted. Many stepfamily members felt that using stepfamily terms did not reflect the closeness that they felt and attempted to supplement these terms with references to nuclear family bonds. For example, Brendan (stepfather) said, "I just kind of say it, 'I've got a stepdaughter, Caroline, but, you know, she's my daughter.'" He then explained that he will avoid telling people that she is his stepdaughter by saying he has "two daughters" or "I have two daughters. But one of them is my stepdaughter", again indicating to others that his relationship with Caroline is more adequately expressed without 'step' terminology. Darina experienced censure from other mothers when they perceived that she had taken this avoidance of 'step' terminology too far:

> For the first few years [the mothers at her stepsons' school] wouldn't even look at me type thing, you know? Quite- treated quite poorly, I would say. Uh it didn't help that one of them, for whatever reason, seemed to think that I had said to her that the boys were my children, and went and told all the other parents this … we [Darina and her husband] were given a bit of a- a bit of a tough time by the other parents, you know?

She explained that it was difficult to decide how to present their relationship to others because, "for them [her stepsons] and for me, I am more than just a stepparent, do you know?" Darina's stepson Felix similarly described his difficulties with using 'step' terms;

F: Leo [Felix's brother] introduce- introduces her [Darina] really badly. I introduce her [pause] like she's re- really- [pause] like she's kind of one of our relatives or something. He just says, "Oh this is our stepmum."

I: Ah. And how do you introduce her?

F: Eh [pause] N- not with saying uh stepmum so that just makes it look like she's [inaudible] close person of our family.

I: So you think kind of saying stepmum, it seems like she's not part of the family?

F: Yeah.

This concern with appealing to nuclear family terminology in order to accurately reflect stepparent-stepchild bonds indicates that the cultural context did play a part in how stepparent-stepchild relationships in this sample were formed, despite the stepparents' and stepchildren's insistence on its lack of influence on their relationship development. In this way, many children and stepparents described aspects of Irish culture which appear to have impacted the development of their stepparent-stepchild relationships but very few described their relationship formation as being directly influenced by the cultural context. It appears that at least some of the stepfamilies perceived stigma surrounding their stepfamily status and this may have indirectly affected how they enacted their stepfamily relationships. This is in line with research by Nixon et al. (2013) which found that children raised in continuously single mother families in Ireland viewed their family situation as normative but a small number reflected feeling stigmatized.

8.3.1.2 Differences between Siblings

There are some features that tend to underlie more positive or more negative relationship patterns, but there was considerable variation in the type of relationship between siblings describing the same stepparent as well. This indicates that individual differences are critical to the types of stepparent-stepchild relationships that are formed. Eight sibling pairs took part in this research and described their relationship with 11 of the same stepparents; of these 22 separate relationships, less than half characterized their stepparent-stepchild relationship in the same way (see Table 8.6). This variation shows that the children's and stepparents' personalities and individual interests contribute to the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship just as the processes such as the experience of stepfamily dissolution, views on the appropriate

role of the stepparent, and the influence of the other biological parent impact the ways in which that relationship develops.

Table 8.6. *Confluence and dissonance in sibling's characterizations of their stepparent-stepchild relationships*

Elder Sibling Pattern[a]	Stepparent	Younger Sibling Pattern
Coexisting	Resident stepfather	**Close**
Coexisting	Former non-resident stepfather	**Emergent Closeness**
Antipathy – consistent dislike	Non-resident stepmother	Antipathy – consistent dislike
Coexisting	Former non-resident stepfather	Coexisting
Detached parent figure	Non-resident stepmother	Detached parent figure
Wariness	Shared custody stepmother	Wariness
Wariness	Former non-resident stepfather	**Coexisting**
Coexisting	Former non-resident stepfather	**Wariness**
Emergent closeness	Former non-resident stepmother	**Wariness**
Short-lived resistance	Former resident stepmother	Short-lived resistance
Short-lived resistance	Former non-resident stepfather	**Close**

Note. Cases where the siblings did not share the same pattern of relationship with their stepparent are bolded.
[a] In the two cases of twins, this refers to the pattern of the twin whose name comes first alphabetically.

8.3.1.3 Differences between Children and Stepparents

Children and stepparents have different expectations of the stepparent role and the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Fine et al., 1998; Schrodt, 2006). This was true in this sample as well, where three of the eight stepparent-stepchild pairs interviewed described relationships that would be classified in a different way depending on whether the stepparent or stepchild was interviewed (see Table 8.7).

Some of the stepparents appeared to view aspects of their relationship in a different light than the stepchildren did. What indicated a good relationship to a stepparent, for instance, might indicate a poorer relationship to a stepchild. For example, although to Darina treating her stepsons in the same way that she treated her biological daughters was a sign that there was no divide in her family, her stepsons Felix and Leo (both aged 9) did want her to be in a disciplinary role. Darina described, "they do treat me and see me as a mother figure and they do [pause] do w- do what I- what they're told, you know?" In contrast, Felix said that "most of the time she's [Darina] a bit annoying" because although she's "nice" she also makes him do his homework. By attempting to treat her stepsons in the same way that she treated her biological children, Darina felt *close* to her stepsons; however, the effect of this was to make her stepsons feel *wariness* around their relationship with her. These discrepancies may reflect some of the differences in expectations between stepparents and stepchildren about what makes a positive stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Table 8.7. *Comparison of children's and stepparents' depictions of their stepparent-stepchild relationship*

Child	Stepparent	Child's View	Stepparent's View
Darragh	Andrew	**Coexisting**	**Wariness**
Aodhan	Andrew	Close	Close
Aiden	Angus	Detached Parent Figure	Detached Parent Figure
Felix	Darina	**Wariness**	**Close**
Leo	Darina	**Wariness**	**Close**
Charlie	Ronan	Close	Close
Harper	Harry	Close	Close
Ryan	Jace	Close	Close

Note. Cases where the stepparent and stepchild characterised their relationships differently are bolded.

8.3.2 The Biological Parent's Role in Stepparent-Stepchild Relationship Development

Weaver and Coleman (2010) interviewed mothers in stepfamilies and found that they served as a link between the stepparent and stepchild and engaged in protective behaviours when there was conflict between their partner and their child. This analysis adds to those findings by involving interviews with a triad of a biological parent, stepparent, and stepchild from the same family in order to elucidate the influence of

biological parents on the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships. Four themes about how parents influence stepparent-stepchild relationships were developed from this triadic analysis which add to Weaver and Coleman's findings: that stepparents learn about stepchildren through the biological parent, the parents' obligations and responsibilities allowed the stepparent to build closeness through increased caretaking, parent-child conflict provided opportunities for the stepparent to comfort and bond with the children, and finally, parents undermined the stepparent in front of the child(ren).

The first theme relates to how biological parents facilitated stepparents' stepparent-stepchild relationship through talking about the child(ren) to the stepparent before the stepparent met the stepchild(ren). The stepparents were able to learn about their stepchild(ren) before they met them, and therefore knew something about the child's personality and interests upon meeting. Roisín (mother) explained that she talked about her daughter, Harper, "all the time" and had talked to her partner, Harry, about Harper before Harper and Harry were introduced to one another. Because of this advance knowledge, upon meeting Harper, Harry immediately began talking about things that Harper was interested in. Roisín explained, "like they both love Lego so he knew that so he started talking about Lego and her and her friends were gigglin' away and he's very good with kids so he was makin' them laugh and things like that." Similarly, Ronan (stepfather) said, "I was curious to hear about him [stepson, Charlie] um and felt I kind of [pause] was getting to know him through Cora [mother] before I actually met him so, yeah, Cora would have, you know, apple of her eye, she would have talked about him *a lot*". Cora explained that when Charlie and Ronan met, "Charlie was being very shy and Ronan [pause] was sort of interacting with him really appropriately and Charlie kind of really- he was shy of all the people and not with Ronan". These stepparents were able to gather information about their stepchild(ren) from their partner and this information enabled them to start their relationship with their stepchild(ren) on a positive note. Before meeting, the stepparents knew the developmental level of their stepchild(ren) and they knew some of their stepchild(ren)'s interests, so they were able to start interacting in a positive way immediately with the child(ren). Some of the parents also talked to their child(ren) about the stepparent before the child(ren) met them, but this does not appear to have had the same relationship-building effect. The children tended to hear that their parent was dating at the same time that the stepparent was introduced or told about the relationship after a

few months of being told that the stepparent was a 'family friend' and thus the children did not tend to learn a lot about their stepparent from their parent before they met.

As described in the chapter on parents' romantic relationship formation, parents are busy and have a number of responsibilities to manage. The second theme describes how the stepparents were able to get closer to their stepchild(ren) as a result of the parents' other obligations and responsibilities. When the parents were busy, they asked their partners for help with the child(ren) which, in turn, allowed the stepparents to spend more time with their stepchild(ren). Thus, the parents' busy schedules allowed the stepparents to participate in care-taking and to spend more one-on-one time with the children. Darina (stepmother) said that her husband,

> goes off to College so then I'll pick them [stepsons] up from school [pause] um [pause] home, take the dog for a walk, they get changed, um we do homework, we cook food, um [pause] basic needs that all children need, you know? To be clothed, fed, watered, loved

She explained that, "when you end up changing nappies and, you know, helping sick kids, it's- they [stepsons] become your own, you know?" Her husband's busy schedule meant that she needed to do additional caretaking, which enabled her to spend more time alone with her stepsons and thus get to know them better. This added involvement in caretaking made the children 'her own'. Her husband, Albert, said,

> A: I think they [stepsons] [pause] they value her and [pause] you know, I think see her as part of their [pause] the landscape and their [pause] maybe their mental map … because see at the moment [pause] logistically umm [pause] Darina's having to pick them up from school
>
> I: Yeah
>
> A: So, you know, so there, you know, there are aspects there that [pause] you know, she's the one who's coming to get them, you know?
>
> I: Yeah.
>
> A: She's cooking their dinner and making them do their homework, you know?

Because Albert was currently a student and was not able to take care of his sons after their school, Darina had to do more caretaking and spend more time away from their father with them. This caretaking and time alone with the children meant that Darina established a parenting role. In Darina's case this was not necessarily positive because this extra time together meant Darina was more involved in the children's school work which they found to be "horrible … because [pause] uh [pause] if you- if you have to do homework with her, it takes ages" (Leo, aged 9). When asked whether Darina was involved in his homework, Felix (aged 9) said, "Not here [his mother's house], no. Thank god" indicating his happiness that Darina's involvement was limited to her

household only. However, in the case of stepparents less involved in discipline, this extra time together provided an opportunity for positive, one-on-one interactions which would not normally happen if the parent was at home. Ronan described that,

> I remember the first time I felt like kind of profoundly close [to stepson] … he got chicken pox and Cora [wife] said, "Look can- can you come and stay with him for, you know, for a few days cause he can't go to crèche[21]?" … it was the first time that I- I- I can recall us being very tactile – being able to cuddle up together … it was lovely it w- I- I felt there was a real connection. I felt, as well, that he felt really secure and really safe with me and that was really- that was really nice. You know?

For most stepparents, this extra time alone together because of the parents' other responsibilities allowed for a deepened connection with their stepchild(ren).

Arguments between the parent and their child(ren) provided an opportunity for the stepparent to discuss issues with the stepchild(ren) and to develop their relationship further; this constitutes the third theme. When the parent and stepchild argued, some of the stepparents sought out their stepchildren to discuss it further or their stepchildren came to them to give vent to their feelings. Ryan (stepfather) explained,

> R: Sometimes when he [stepson] has [pause] uh if he has a moment with Julia [Ryan's partner] now, he'll- he'd [inaudible] up to me a bit more now, you know
>
> I: Yeah
>
> R: Definitely if he- if- if they've been [inaudible] rows or somethin' [pause] he might then, you know, he would come out with stuff and
>
> I: Yeah
>
> R: and of course then he, you know, you see how vulnerable they are, you would feel automatically close to them then, you know?

When a child sought out their stepparent to discuss their feelings about their argument with their parent, these interactions strengthened the relationship and caused the stepparent to feel closer to their stepchild. Harry (stepfather) said, "If her [stepdaughter] and her mammy had a fight, she'd come to me … I'd just let her know that [pause] maybe like I'd say what she done was wrong or stuff like that, but I'd kinda comfort her as well." These conflicts between the parent and child caused the children to turn to their stepparent for comfort or the stepparent to seek the stepchild out to comfort them, which in turn deepened the stepparent-stepchild relationship or added additional positive interactions to an already close stepparent-stepchild relationship.

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[21] Crèche is another word for day care.

The final theme relates to the potential negative impact of biological parents on stepparent-stepchild relationships through an undermining of the stepparent or their relationship to the stepchild(ren). In these six families, only one clear case of this type of undermining was described. Felix (aged 9) described an incident where his stepmother, Darina, made "dung soup" for dinner,

> F: Dad- dad w- gave us no- no tv cause we [himself and his siblings] complained it was really bad but then he ca- when he ate it, he went [pause] behind Darina's back he was not- his back was facing her and her back was facing him
>
> I: Yeah
>
> F: He went [makes a disgusted face]
>
> I: Oh, he made a face?
>
> F: Yeah. And all of us so- we knew we had tv.

Although there were rules in the household against being disrespectful to their stepmother, Albert (father) undermined her position by validating the children's complaints and by retracting his promised punishment for their complaints about her cooking. When asked what Darina does that makes her like a stepparent to his sons, Albert said, "picking them up from school, cookin' their dinner, doing their homework. I mean, I think that's very much, you know, it's – what's the word? – it's- it's guardian, if it's not the parent. It's parent or guardian." Her identity as a parent was tied to her role as a caretaker and cook for the family; he undermined this parental role somewhat by validating the children's complaints that she was not successfully fulfilling her responsibilities in this role.

This triadic analysis led to four themes which add to the understanding of how biological parents in stepfamilies influence the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Three of these tended to have a positive influence on the stepparent-stepchild relationship: parents told stepparents about their stepchild(ren) and this gave the stepparent information which aided in the positive development of their relationship, parents were busy and their need for help from the stepparent gave the stepparent an opportunity to spend more time with the child(ren) on their own, and stepparents comforted stepchildren when the stepchildren had conflicts with their parents. The final theme was more negative, involving the biological parent undermining the stepparent's role in the family. The inclusion of stepparents and children in research on the role of the biological parent in stepfamilies allows for an understanding of how the parents' influence extends in ways that the biological parents

do not directly observe or are socially undesirable aspects of their influence which they may not bring up in an interview context.

8.4 Conclusions

The development of a positive stepparent-stepchild relationship is beneficial for children (King, 2006), stepparents (Schenk et al., 2009; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; White & Gilbreth, 2001), and biological parents (Coleman et al., 2000; King et al., 2014). It is thus important to understand how and in what ways these relationships are developed and maintained. This research addresses a significant gap in the literature by developing patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships based on interviews the stepchildren and stepparents in this sample, as well attempting to uncover the factors underlying the development of those patterns. The stepparent-stepchild relationships fit into five major patterns – *close, detached parent figure, coexisting, wariness,* and *antipathy*. Additionally, this analysis adds to research on the biological parent's role in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships.

Close relationships were by far the most common stepparent-stepchild relationship pattern, accounting for 27 of the 54 relationships described. Close relationships encompass three types of closeness – *close* relationships characterised by positivity and affection; those labelled as *emergent closeness* which were on their way to becoming *close* but had not quite developed a deep, personal relationship between the stepparent and stepchild; and *short-lived resistance* which were relationships where the child initially resisted the stepparent but then quickly stopped resisting and developed a *close* relationship with them. Both stepparents and stepchildren mostly commonly characterised their relationships as being close. Relationships classified as *coexisting*, *wariness*, and *antipathy* were all equally likely, comprising eight relationships each. No stepparents described a *coexisting* or *antipathic* relationship, whereas three stepparents described their relationship with their stepchild as being characterised by *wariness*. Only four relationships were classed as a *detached parent figure* relationship – three of these were described by stepchildren and one was described by a stepparent.

Each pattern had somewhat unique processes underlying it and was described by the stepchildren and stepparents in different ways. Those relationships where the children had experienced a former stepfamily – and particularly a lack of agency in the dissolution of that stepfamily – tended to be more negative about their stepparent-

stepchild relationship. Children who characterised their relationships as *close* were relatively unlikely to have experienced stepfamily dissolution, as compared to the other relationship patterns. Unhappiness with the stepparent's disciplinary role was described by children with *wariness* and *consistent dislike antipathy* relationships. Finally, some of the children and stepparents described aspects of the children's relationship with their non-resident parent as impacting their stepparent-stepchild relationship. Some children – particularly those who described *wary* and *active rejection antipathic* relationships – approached the idea of a relationship with their stepparent more warily because of loyalty conflicts; they were concerned that it would hurt their parent if they formed a close relationship with their stepparent.

Most of the children who described their relationship as *close* were not disciplined by their stepparent, whereas most of the stepparents who characterised their relationship as *close* did discipline their stepchildren. This incongruity points to the differences between stepparents and stepchildren in their perception of the ideal stepparent role. Stepchildren tend to not want their stepparents to discipline them, particularly before they have developed closeness in their relationship, whereas stepparents tend to believe that they should discipline their children and that it is an appropriate manifestation of their role within the family (Fine et al., 1998; Schrodt, 2006). It is possible that stepparents who disciplined their stepchildren were more likely to feel that their relationship was *close* because they felt that they were fulfilling the 'correct' role for a stepparent. Similarly, children who were unhappy or uncomfortable with their stepparent's disciplinary role may have been less likely to characterise their relationship with their stepparent as being *close* and this may account for the relative lack of children who describe being close to stepparents who discipline them.

In this sample, the more negative patterns comprised relationships that had, on average, lasted for a longer time. This is consistent with the literature showing that these relationships tend to become more negative and feature increased conflict over time – particularly during adolescence (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). However, because of the once-off nature of the interviews, it is not possible to know whether this is true of the relationships in this sample. It is possible that the children and stepparents had maintained their relationship pattern over time and the differences are merely caused by sampling variation. These data are a snapshot in time; following stepfamilies longitudinally would help to

illuminate how and if stepparents and stepchildren transition between relationship patterns.

This was an investigation of how the biological parent influences the stepparent-stepchild relationship and thus it was pertinent to include the perspectives of parents, stepparents, and stepchildren to get the clearest picture of the parents' role. Biological parents had an important role in the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. In addition to the protective roles described by Weaver and Coleman (2010), this analysis revealed that biological parents influenced the stepparent-stepchild relationship through talking to stepparents about their child(ren) before the stepparent met the stepchild(ren). They also asked for caretaking help and thus gave the stepparent the opportunity to spend more time alone with the child(ren). Additionally, when there was conflict between the parents and their child(ren), this allowed the stepparent to comfort the stepchild(ren). Finally, biological parents had the potential to negatively influence the relationship by undermining the stepparents' role. Aside from the parents' active relational work, they appear to have had a number of indirect influences on relationships within the family. The biological parent influenced the relationship in ways which they may not have directly observed or been conscious of and thus would not have been able to describe to an interviewer, or in socially undesirable ways which they may choose not to describe to an interview. The inclusion of viewpoints from biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren from the same household allowed for an understanding of additional aspects of the biological parents' influence to those found in prior research on parents in stepfamilies (e.g., Weaver & Coleman, 2010).

This first analysis presented in this chapter builds on those studies which relied on retrospective accounts of adult stepchildren to identify patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships (Ganong et al., 2011; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) by incorporating the perspectives of both children and stepparents, by including stepchildren who are still child-aged as opposed to young adults, and by including a variety of types of stepfamilies at various stages in stepfamily history. Additionally, the analysis of the biological parent's role from the perspective of family triads allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how each family member interpreted the biological parent's involvement and gave a different viewpoint from the previous literature on the parents' roles in stepfamilies. Taken together, these analyses add to the understanding of how stepparents and stepchildren form relationships with one another, what types of

relationships they form and why, and the nature of the role played by outside figures and contextual factors in the development of their relationships.

By understanding how relationships between stepparents and stepchildren are developed and maintained, practitioners and others who work with single parents and stepfamilies can better direct these families to facilitate the development of the most adaptive relationships. These patterns and the processes underlying them indicate that stepparents and stepchildren appear to have the most positive relationships when parents allow their children agency in continued contact with former stepparents and when the other biological parent shows the stepchild that it is acceptable for the stepchild to form a relationship with their stepparent. However, although these are the general trends, there was considerable variability even between siblings, indicating that personality and other factors have an important influence and need to be considered as well.

Chapter 9: Discussion

9.1 Introduction

Children in stepfamilies, on average, perform worse on a range of outcome measures than children from married, two-biological-parent families (Coleman et al., 2000; Jeynes, 2006). The similarity of their performance on these measures to children from single parent families led McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) to conclude that stepfathers do not have a substantive effect on child outcomes. However, the differences between stepchildren and children from married, two-biological-parent families are small and there is more diversity in child outcomes within each family structure than there is between them (Amato, 1994; Coleman et al., 2000). For this reason, many researchers focus on family processes as opposed to family structure; investigating what underlies the diversity in outcomes within each family structure (Lansford et al., 2001). King (2006) explained that there is a "need to go beyond examining family structure differences and to take the quality of children's relationships to all their parents, regardless of residence, into account" (p. 16).

The stepparent-stepchild relationship is important for child and family outcomes (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; King, 2006; Pryor, 2004; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Children who form close relationships with their stepfathers have fewer externalizing behaviours, internalizing behaviours, and failing grades in school (King, 2006). This appears to be less true when children form close relationships with stepmothers (King, 2007); although children do describe some benefits of their relationships with their stepmothers (Crohn, 2006; Ganong et al., 2011). In addition to benefiting children, the strength and positivity of the stepparent-stepchild relationship is related to stepparent well-being (Schenk et al., 2009; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011), stepfamily adjustment (Coleman et al., 2000), parent-stepparent marital quality (Weaver & Coleman, 2010), and the strength of the biological parent-child relationship (King et al., 2014). Given the centrality of the stepparent stepchild relationship to a range of positive outcomes within stepfamilies, understanding more about the nature and development of step-parent stepchild relationship is imperative. Previous research on the stepparent-stepchild relationship has tended to include one member of the family in analyses (for example, Jensen & Schafer, 2013; Marsiglio, 2004) or be based on the retrospective accounts of adult stepchildren (for example, Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006; Schmeeckle, 2007) although there are notable exceptions (e.g., King et al., 2014). This

is also true for research on stepparent-stepchild relationship patterns, which has been investigated exclusively from the perspective of adult stepchildren (Ganong et al., 2011; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010).

The current research attempted to address these gaps from a theoretical perspective which views relationships as bidirectional and family structures as dynamic and changeable, and which values both children and parents' perspectives on their relationships. The inclusion of non-adult stepchildren, stepparents, and biological parents in these analyses represents a departure from previous investigations of the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationship development and the processes and factors underlying stepfamily formation. Additionally, this study included stepmother and stepfather families, residential and non-residential stepfamilies, newly-formed and long-term, and current and former stepfamilies; sampling such a broad range of stepfamilies allowed for a more complex picture of stepparent-stepchild relationships than sampling a targeted group would have allowed.

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the sociodemographic characteristics of the stepfamilies in the nine-year-old cohort of GUI?
2. Do all stepfamilies readily identify themselves as such? If not, are there any differences in the characteristics of those stepfamilies that do self-identify as compared to those that do not?
3. What are the perceived benefits and barriers of romantic relationship for single biological parents?
4. How do parents and children approach stepparent-stepchild relationship development after experiencing the dissolution of one or more previous stepfamilies?
5. How do parents and stepparents negotiate their parenting roles in a stepfamily context?
6. What factors make stepparents more or less likely to adopt a power sharing or parent-support parenting role?
7. What role do stepchildren have in the negotiation of their stepparent(s)'s parenting role?
8. What are the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationship development?
9. What are the mechanisms underlying the development and maintenance of different patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships?

10. What role do biological parents play in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships?

The aim of this chapter is to place the findings of this thesis in the context of the broader literature on stepfamily relationships. The chapter begins with a review of the key findings from the GUI and qualitative analyses. The findings are considered in light of previous research on stepfamily structures and processes, and the broad implications and potential future research directions arising from the findings are discussed. The theoretical implications of this research are then described. Finally, the methodological strengths and limitations are outlined.

9.2 Review of Findings

The aim of the first research question was to characterise the sociodemographic features of stepfamilies in Ireland. This was achieved through an analysis of data collected from the first wave of the child cohort of GUI, the first national longitudinal study of children in Ireland. There is limited research on stepfamilies in Ireland. The GUI study employed random sampling and data were weighted to the census to ensure that the data reflect the population of nine-year old children and their families in Ireland as a whole.

The analyses of the GUI data showed that, at any given time, the percentage of children in residential stepfamilies in Ireland (2.5%) is lower than the United States (13%) and most other Western countries (Lunn et al., 2010; Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Stepfamily members tended to be ethnically Irish, Roman Catholic, relatively religious, and middle-income; these were similar to the demographic trends of the other family structures in the GUI data. In line with other Western nations, most residential stepchildren lived with a stepfather rather than a stepmother (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008; Stewart, 2001). Cohabitation was more common for the stepfamilies in the GUI sample than in the United States or United Kingdom (Bumpass et al., 1995; Ferri & Smith, 1998; Stewart, 2001), where marital stepfamilies are more common. Additionally, there was considerable diversity in children's contact with their non-resident parent, with 57.4% seeing them at least once every two weeks and 22.8% seeing them less than once a year. Although most of the non-resident parents had regular contact with their child(ren), they tended to be less involved financially – more than half did not contribute monetarily to their child(ren)'s care at all.

An important finding from this analysis was that many stepfamily members did not identify as being part of a stepfamily. Many biological parents and stepparents listed the stepparent's relationship to the focal child as being a "parent", "adopted parent", or "other nonrelative" as opposed to a "stepparent" (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013). This is noteworthy because researchers often attempt to recruit stepfamilies or stepparents into their study by saying that they are looking to speak to stepfamily members, yet this finding shows many people in stepfamilies may not consider themselves to be stepfamily members. As a result of this findings, the recruitment strategy for the qualitative study described in this thesis was altered: instead of "stepfamily" being on the recruitment materials, the recruitment letter referred to, "non-traditional families (such as single-parent families, stepfamilies, and remarried families)". While some eligible participants still may not have considered themselves to be or have been part of a non-traditional family and thus not contacted the researcher, this strategy appears to have been at least somewhat effective because many of the participants included in the qualitative study indicated that they did not consider themselves to be part of a stepfamily. Some of the parents in the qualitative study continued to describe themselves as single parents, despite being in a committed relationship, and others considered themselves to be in a "normal" family and eschewed the stepfamily label. In this way, the findings from the GUI analyses informed the recruitment strategy for the qualitative study.

The presence of non-self-identifying stepfamilies in the GUI sample may be indicative of the incomplete institutionalization of stepfamily life in Ireland (Cherlin, 1978). This theory suggests that living in a stepfamily is stressful because of the uncertainty about which kinship terms are appropriate to adopt, absence of a culturally sanctioned role for stepparents in caregiving, and a lack of institutionalized social support. The relatively small number of stepfamilies in Ireland coupled with a lack of resources and support for stepfamilies may have lead some of the stepfamilies to drop their stepfamily identity and to adopt a nuclear family model as a guide for how they should interact with one another. Some researchers have hypothesized that the stress levels inherent in forming and maintaining a stepfamily underlie the differences in outcomes between children in stepfamilies and married, two-biological-parent families. It is possible that non-self-identification is associated with lower stress and better outcomes because these families have adopted a nuclear family model and thus would have fewer uncertainties surrounding their kinship terms and optimal relationships with

one another as well as having greater social support through 'passing' as a 'traditional' family. Alternately, these families may experience more stress because they attempt to eschew their stepfamily status but are not protected socially or legally in the same way that a married, two-biological-parent family would be. Future research could clarify whether self-identification or non-self-identification is more stressful for stepfamily members and how this influences child and family outcomes. A further analysis of the GUI data, for example, which investigated changes in self-identification as a stepfamily member and stress levels longitudinally, might help to elucidate this link. Additionally, research investigating the causes of non-self-identification would clarify whether it is the stress associated with the incomplete institutionalization of stepfamily living or another underlying factor which may lead stepfamilies to stop identifying as such.

The GUI study has a broad focus on all aspects of the lives children in Ireland and their development. Given that GUI is the first national longitudinal study of children ever undertaken in Ireland, the focus of the study is necessarily broad. The research questions on stepfamilies to be addressed in this thesis required a deeper analysis of the processes within single-parent and stepfamilies; this analysis was beyond the scope of the data collected as part of GUI. Specifically, the lack of detailed information from the perspectives of stepparents and stepchildren about the development of their relationship meant that it was not possible to understand the patterns of their relationships or the processes underlying those patterns. Further, it was not possible to investigate the biological parents' role in stepfamily formation or the development of this relationship using the GUI data. Analyses of the GUI data were employed in response to the first two research questions.

A biological parent's romantic relationship formation is necessary for stepfamily formation. Without the formation of a romantic relationship between a biological parent and a partner, it is not possible for there to be a stepparent-stepchild relationship. Children's responses to their stepparent and the way in which stepparent-stepchild relationships form are likely to be influenced by how parents approach their romantic relationships. For this reason, the third research question was concerned with the process of romantic relationship formation for single parents. Theoretically, a lens of uncertainty perspective (Burton & Tucker, 2009) and concepts of reciprocity in romantic relationships (Nelson, 2004) were invoked to investigate parents' perceptions of the benefits and barriers to romantic relationship formation and maintenance.

Without understanding why parents want to enter romantic relationships, what they hope to get from these relationships, and what may be stopping them from maintaining relationships, it is not possible to understand the earliest phases of stepfamily formation. A parent's expectations of the benefits a romantic relationship may provide directly influences whether they will be satisfied if they form a romantic relationship and thus whether the relationship is likely to continue. If a biological parent continuously has difficulty forming stable relationships and regularly cycles through partners, this creates a different context for stepparent-stepchild relationship formation than if the biological parent forms one stable relationship early in a child's life. Because partnering and the dissolution of a partnership increase maternal stress and harsh parenting (Beck et al., 2010) and are associated with internalizing and externalizing problems for children (Bachman et al., 2011; 2012; Bzostek & Beck, 2011; Goodnight et al., 2013; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Magnuson & Berger, 2009) it is important to understand what parents hope to get out of relationship formation as well as what might be preventing them from forming or maintaining these relationships in the long-term.

The parents in this study described many benefits to romantic relationship formation, but also considerable barriers to relationship formation and maintenance. The analysis yielded three themes relating the beneficial aspects of forming a romantic relationship: they could clarify or develop their preferred relationship roles, give their child an opposite sex role model, and being in a relationship would increase the emotional and instrumental support available to them. Four themes were developed relating to the impediments to their relationship formation: their personal characteristics, a perceived lack of suitable partners, and their feeling that a romantic relationship had the potential to harm their child(ren). Additionally, the uncertainty of their lives (Burton & Tucker, 2009) limited the available time and social support to accommodate dating, which resulted in many of the parents being unable to maintain a relationship or losing interest in dating altogether.

Because previous research on the attitudes of single parents have largely focused on the marital expectations of low-income mothers (e.g., Burton & Tucker, 2009; Edin, 2000) some of the aspects which were previously found to be important – such as enhancement of respectability through marriage – do not necessarily apply to this analysis which focuses on dating expectations or attitudes. However, some of the findings are broadly in line with Cherlin et al.'s (2008) research which found that

externally-imposed constraints, such as a shortage of marriage partners, negatively influence the likelihood of marriage in much the same way that they appear to impede romantic relationship formation generally in this sample.

One important difference from previous research appears to be the relative lack of importance that parents placed on partners' employment or earnings. In other research, mothers believed that their partners must be in stable employment and earn more than minimum wage in order to be a suitable marriage partner (Cherlin et al., 2008; Edin, 2000), whereas this was not framed as an important factor of romantic relationship formation for the parents in this study. This may be because of cultural and social differences between the Ireland and the United States – where most of the previous research in this area was carried out. Ireland's social policies focus on alleviating poverty and supporting the role of the mother as a stay-at-home parent through relatively generous cash supports and entitlements to housing (Fahey & Nixon, 2014; Gornick et al., 1996) whereas a relatively small percentage of the gross domestic product in the United States is spent on poverty alleviation and welfare receipt is tied to entrance to the workforce (Smeeding, 2006). This creates quite a different context for family formation in Ireland and other countries with similar social policies than in the United States, which has higher rates of child and single parent poverty than other Western nations (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Christopher et al., 2002; Smeeding, 2006). The findings of the current study imply that the economic viability of partners is much less important to single parents in Ireland than in the United States. Similarly, the parents in this study did not describe negotiating a romantic relationship in order to gain housing, whereas this is a strategy described by mothers in the United States (Clark et al., 2011). While research on many family processes may be relatively unaffected by differences between the cultural and social contexts of Western nations, these findings imply that some caution is warranted when applying American research in an Irish context. There appears to be some diversity in how family processes manifest in contexts with a different social policy focus. Since single parents in the United States describe ending otherwise fulfilling relationships as a result of the unemployment or underemployment of their partner (Edin, 2000; Nelson, 2006; Sano et al., 2012), the family policy in Ireland may be helping parents to form longer-term relationships by allowing parents to focus on non-economic or housing-related factors of partners through relatively generous social welfare policies. Cross-cultural comparisons which investigate the links between social policies, parents' relationship

formation and dissolution, and the employment status of parents' partners would help to elucidate this link.

There has been relatively limited research on the earliest time period of stepfamily formation – that is, parents' romantic relationships. This analysis provides a framework through which to understand why parents may enter romantic relationships and what may be preventing them from forming relationships or successfully maintaining those relationships in the long-term. Most of the parents had formed at least one relationship since the dissolution of their relationship with their eldest child's other parent, but many were not currently in relationships, indicating that these unions often do not endure. As seen in the analysis in this thesis which investigated how stepfamily dissolution shaped the context of subsequent stepfamily relationships, family instability is stressful and has a negative impact on both parents and children (Bachman et al. 2011; Osborne et al., 2012). These findings based on the perspective of biological parents give some indication of the processes and factors which may be underlying this instability. Further understanding of the processes involved in romantic relationship formation appears to have the potential to elucidate aspects of stepparent-stepchild relationship development.

Research on relationship formation would be enhanced by a greater focus on the men and women who date single parents, as opposed to focusing exclusively on the single parents as was done in this analysis. There is considerable information about the demographic characteristics of men who date mothers (Lichter & Graefe, 2007), the factors that make them more likely to form close relationships with their partner's children (King, 2006; King et al., 2014), and the types of relationships they form with the children (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010), but less is known about why they form these relationships. Understanding stepparents' expectations at the start of the relationship would help relationship strengthening programs target differentials between relationship expectations and the reality of stepfamily living.

The fourth research question was addressed through an analysis of interviews with mothers and children who had experienced stepfamily dissolution which was presented in chapter six. Family transitions negatively impact children (Bachman et al., 2011; Bzostek & Beck, 2011; Goodnight et al., 2013; Magnuson & Berger, 2009), parents, and overall family functioning (Beck et al., 2010). Previous experiences with stepparents are likely to influence how children and biological parents approach relationships with subsequent stepparents. Experiences with former stepparents may

influence how parents act in their romantic relationships, which may also impact how the children position their subsequent stepparent. The dissolution of children's relationships with stepparents who acted as attachment figures may also impact how open children are to developing a relationship with their subsequent stepparent(s) because children tend to experience a period of mourning after experiencing the loss of an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1980).

After experiencing the dissolution of one or more stepfamilies, both children and mothers tended to be more guarded about subsequent stepfamily relationships. The mothers attempted to protect their children, most often through an increased wariness around new romantic partners, although a minority of the mothers attempted to protect their children through an increased openness to stepparent involvement. The children who had experienced previous stepfamily dissolution were concerned about changes to their family unit and attempted to manage threats to their relationships; this included threats to their mother-child and father-child relationships as well as the threat of a loss of closeness to their stepparent. This propensity toward increased guardedness by both the mothers and children is noteworthy because stepparents discontinue affinity-seeking when their stepchild(ren) do not reciprocate or respond negatively to their attempts at relationship formation (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Marsiglio, 2004). By acting more cautiously toward the stepparent, mothers and their children may be shaping a different context for the stepparent-stepchild relationship than they would if they were more open to the stepparent's entrance into the family.

This research shows that in addition to well-established negative impacts on child and family outcomes (Bachman et al., 2011; Beck et al., 2010; Bzostek & Beck, 2011; Goodnight et al., 2013; Magnuson & Berger, 2009), stepfamily transitions may also negatively influence the strength of subsequent stepfamilies. The children felt that the introduction of a stepparent was a threat to their parent-child closeness as opposed to something likely to positively affect themselves and their family. This appears to be one factor influencing stepparent-stepchild relationship development, having emerged as a key reason why those who characterized their relationships as *antipathic* approached their relationships in this way. However, some children who had experienced stepfamily dissolution developed a *close* relationship with a subsequent stepparent, indicating that the connection between family instability and stepparent-stepchild relationship quality is not always straightforward. This analysis also adds to the understanding of children's feelings of agency in their parents' relationship choices;

although mothers believe their children have considerable influence over relationship decisions (Sano et al., 2012; Weaver & Coleman, 2010), the children in this study tended to feel that they had minimal influence. This points to the importance of incorporating multiple perspectives, as children's understandings of their influence on the processes within their families differed at times from parents' understandings.

The results of this analysis appear to indicate that children display a diversity of responses to stepfamily dissolution and these differences may account for how they form subsequent stepfamily relationships. Many of the children perceived a lack of agency in their parents' romantic relationship formation or dissolution. Although the number of children was small, those who continued relationships with their former stepparent(s) when they wanted to continue that relationship were less negative about subsequent stepparents than those who were not able to continue contact with their former stepparent(s). The findings relating to the influence of former stepparents provide a tentative hypothesis that the ways in which stepfamily relationships are enacted and dissolved may be important to child outcomes and the strength of children's subsequent relationships, rather than just the number of transitions being important. Future research which investigated the link between responses to relationship dissolution and subsequent relationship formation might shed light on how multiple family transitions underlie positive or negative outcomes for children.

Longitudinal methods would be particularly valuable in the investigation of parents' and children's experiences of stepfamily development and dissolution. The investigation of age-related changes was not possible with the available sample, but these changes may be important. Family transitions experienced before the age of five may have more of an effect on child outcomes than those experienced after the age of five (Goodnight et al., 2013), but it is not clear what influence the timing of stepfamily transitions has on children's subsequent relationship development. Younger children may be less impacted because they have fewer memories of their former stepparent (Peterson, Grant, & Boland, 2005) or may be more impacted by the early loss of a significant relationship (Howes, 1999).

Similarly, it is unclear whether the strategies which mothers adopt with respect to relationship formation and dissolution – in an attempt to protect their children – have any value toward limiting children's negative outcomes in the context of family instability. Given that each relationship transition is an additional risk factor for children (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007), it seems likely that these protective measures

are not successful, but more research could help clarify this. Because the stress of these transitions has been posited as a source of the negative outcomes associated with family instability (Bachman et al., 2011), it is possible that mothers' attempts to reduce the stress of relationship dissolution for their child(ren) by facilitating the continued connection between their child(ren) and former partner(s) may moderate the relationship between family instability and child outcomes. Mixed-methods research which followed children and their parents over time might help to elucidate how the strategies mothers adopt surrounding their relationship formation and dissolution influence outcomes; incorporating interview research with survey, cortisol, and DHEA stress measurements would allow for a strengthened understanding of the processes through which family transitions influence subsequent relationship development as well as child and parent outcomes. It is possible that certain strategies on the part of the mothers may be effective at limiting the negative effects of relationship transitions on children, whereas other strategies may be ineffective or even harmful. If these strategies were shown to reduce the negative effects of family instability, this would give family therapists a tool through which they could more effectively help their clients adjust to stepfamily transitions. Longitudinal research involving several interviews with parents and children over time would shed light on these issues and allow a better understanding of the processes through which relationship transitions impact family relationships and outcomes.

How parenting roles are negotiated was investigated in Chapter 7, which addressed the fifth, sixth, and seventh research questions relating to how parents and stepparents negotiate their parenting roles, what factors make stepparents more of less likely to adopt a parenting role, and what role stepchildren have in the negotiation of stepparents' parenting roles, respectively. One of the most critical adjustments for stepfamilies is the development of acceptable roles and boundaries for all stepfamily members (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Papernow, 1994; Visher & Visher, 1988). However, this adjustment is difficult because the roles for stepparents, parents, and stepchildren are not always well-defined (Cherlin, 1978). When stepfamilies attempt to model themselves on nuclear families – particularly when they attempt to duplicate a nuclear parent-child bond between the stepparent and stepchild – this can lead to problematic interactions between stepfamily members (Mills, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1988). If acceptable roles cannot be negotiated, the romantic relationship between the parent and stepparent cannot continue in an adaptive manner; thus, the negotiation of parenting

roles is critical to the continuation of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, as well as to what type of relationship is formed.

An analysis of pairs of biological parents and stepparents was conducted to understand the types of parenting roles which were negotiated in stepfamilies. These analyses showed that the development of parenting roles in stepfamilies involves functional interchanges between horizontal and vertical parenting structures – with the role adopted by the parent impacting the roles available to the stepparent and vice versa. In some families, the parent and stepparent shared parenting and in other families the parent was the primary caregiver and the stepparent was in a parent-support role.

A few of the mothers in this sample tried to actively engage their partners in the discipline of their child(ren). Some mothers did this even when their partners were hesitant to take on a disciplinary role and where their children were hesitant to accept the stepparent in that role. Although mothers tend to see discipline as part of the stepparent role (Fine et al., 1998), they tend to portray themselves as protectors of their children, often limiting the stepparent's disciplinary role (Burton & Roy, 2007; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Relatively little is known about mothers' roles in stepfamilies, so it is unclear how mothers reconcile their goal of protecting their child(ren) from their partner with a simultaneous desire for the stepparent to be more actively involved in their child(ren)'s discipline. The mothers in Weaver and Coleman's (2010) research protected their children "by doing what they could to create the best possible (or better) family situation" (p. 313) but it is not clear in the current study how the mothers felt that involving their partners in discipline would protect or provide a better family situation for their child(ren). It may be that the mothers believed sharing power with their partners would increase the stability of their family and so they involved their partner in discipline to protect their children from family instability. The mothers may have believed that their partners would be more likely to claim their children as their own (Marsiglio, 2004) if they felt more like a parent. Alternately, the mothers may have felt that they were unable to discipline effectively on their own and thus pushed their partners to be more active in disciplining the child(ren) in order to protect their child(ren) by providing 'better' discipline. Future research into why some mothers in stepfamilies actively encourage their partners to discipline would add nuance to the literature on mothers' understanding of their roles within stepfamilies.

The sixth research question dealt with the factors which influenced stepparents' adoption of a power sharing or biological-parent-in-charge parenting role. Beliefs that

the family would feel divided if the stepparent did not have equal parenting power and a feeling that the stepparent had earned the right to parent tended to lead to shared power between parents and stepparents. The perception of the biological primacy, parents' desire for independence, and the stepparents' comfort in a parenting role tended to lead to the stepparent in a parent-support role. It was beyond the scope of this analysis to investigate what processes or characteristics lead parents and stepparents to value certain factors over the others.

The finding that some parents view the stepparent as a coparent with whom they want to share parenting power seems to be slightly at odds with the finding that mothers described their child(ren)'s relationship with their former stepparent(s) as being superfluous and were wary about involving subsequent stepparents in their child(ren)'s life. The mothers who had experienced stepfamily dissolution generally had a 'mother-in-charge' attitude in which they attempted to manage their child(ren)'s relationships. Of those five couples who wanted a horizontal power structure, only one of the parents had been in a romantic relationship which had dissolved prior to forming their current stepfamily. Thus, it is possible that parents are more willing to share parenting power when they have not had the experience of the dissolution of their relationship and the affirmation of their role as a parent which may result from that dissolution. In this way, the two findings may reconcile because parents who have not experienced dissolution may be more likely to believe that the family would feel divided if the stepparent did not act as a coparent and that the stepparent had earned the right to parent, whereas those who have experienced dissolution may be less likely to feel this way. More research on this role negotiation would help to clarify the factors which influence the adoption of parenting roles in stepfamilies; the findings of this investigation tentatively suggest that the dissolution of a stepfamily may influence parents' perception of their own role and of optimal stepparent roles in subsequent stepfamilies, but more research is necessary in order to clarify this process.

Data from biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren were analysed to explore the role of stepchildren in the negotiation of their stepparent's parenting role, which constituted the seventh research question. The inclusion of children's perspectives illuminated the pivotal role that children can play in how parenting roles are negotiated in stepfamilies and illustrates how children can position themselves as influential agents in their families. The children did not tend to mind their stepparent having significant caretaking responsibilities, but rather focussed on their stepparent's

level of control and disciplinary role. When the parent and stepparent both believed that the stepparent should be in a power sharing role, then the stepparent would attempt to discipline their stepchild(ren). However, if a stepchild refused to accept the stepparent in a disciplinary role, then the stepparent would have to alter their role to one of parent-support. This was a simultaneous, dynamic process, with parents and stepparents considering how the child(ren) was reacting and might react in the future throughout. The stepchildren's direct involvement was manifested in their repeated acceptance or non-acceptance of the stepparent in a parental role; they were important figures throughout the negotiation of parental roles. This is in line with Speer and Trees (2007) finding that children's behavioural attempts to gain autonomy influenced how parental or disengaged stepparents' roles toward their stepchild(ren) were.

There has been some research on stepmother roles (Doodson & Morley, 2006; Hart, 2009; Henry & McCue, 2009; Weaver & Coleman, 2005) but information on fathering roles in stepmother families is limited. Because of gendered expectations of mothering and fathering in stepfamilies (Levin, 1997), it seems likely that father-stepmother role negotiation is different from mother-stepfather role negotiation. Future research involving a larger sample of father-stepmother pairs would build upon the findings in this research and elucidate unique features of their role negotiation process.

These analyses added to the understanding of stepparent roles in stepfamilies by elucidating the processes through which some stepparents adopt a coparenting role and others adopt a parent-support role. This negotiation is a dynamic process involving all members of the family. While parents and stepparents tend to believe the stepparent should ideally be involved in child discipline (Fine et al., 1998), the children in this study mirrored the findings of other studies in tending to believe that their stepparent(s) should not initially be actively involved in their discipline.

Addressing the final two research questions revealed five distinct patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships and the role of the biological parent in the development of those relationships, as presented in Chapter 8. The patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships were investigated from the perspective of stepparents and stepchildren and the triadic analysis of the biological parent's role in the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship was investigated from the perspective of biological parents, stepparents, and stepchildren from the same households. Five patterns of relationships were developed from the participants' narratives: *close*, *detached parent figure*, *coexisting*, *wariness*, and *antipathy*. *Emergent*

closeness and *short-lived resistance* relationships were those that seemed they would become *close* but had either ended or had not yet reached that point at the time of the interview. There were two different types of *antipathy – consistent dislike* and *active rejection*. The relationship pattern described most commonly by both stepchildren and stepparents was *close*, accounting for half of the relationships described.

These five overarching patterns – *close, detached parent figure, coexisting, wariness*, and *antipathy* – map onto some of the patterns identified by Kinniburgh et al. (2010) and Ganong et al. (2010), but some important differences remain. Liking from the start (Ganong et al., 2011) and continuous positive regard (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) directly correspond to each other and to the *close* pattern in this research. Coexisting (Ganong et al., 2011) and distance (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) also match with the *coexisting* pattern as as three feature "distance and little warmth in the early stages and little change in relationship quality over time" (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010, p. 901). *Coexisting* also fits with Ganong et al.'s (2011) coexisting pattern in that most of the stepchildren who described their relationships in this way in both studies were describing relationships with non-resident stepparents. Rejecting (Ganong et al., 2011) corresponds with *antipathy*.

However, some of the patterns identified by Ganong et al. (2011) and Kinniburgh-White et al. (2010) do not directly map onto the children's and stepparents characterizations in this analysis. Most of the patterns matched one another in some aspects, but featured other areas of disagreement. Accepting from the start (Ganong et al., 2011) has some aspects of *close* relationships, but their participants described "periods during adolescence in which they [the children] argued with their stepparents and challenged the stepparents' authority as parent figures" (p. 403), whereas a *close* relationship in this study would indicate that the child and their stepparent have minimal conflict. The younger age of the participants in the current study as compared to Ganong et al.'s (2011) study may account for this difference somewhat, as more conflict in the parent-child relationship is a normative part of adolescent-parent relationships (Steinberg, 2001) and the children in this research were an average of 12 years of age. In this way, it may not that the children in the current study conceptualised closeness differently or would not one day describe their relationships in way consistent with Ganong et al.'s (2011) accepting from the start relationships, but the conception of closeness in this study may be more of a function of their younger age. The accepting from the start pattern (Ganong et al., 2011) also has some aspects in

common with the *detached parent figure* pattern in that the children in their sample viewed their stepparents as parent figures who had been around them their entire lives, but accepting from the start appears to indicate a closer connection between the stepparent and stepchild than in the *detached parent figure* pattern. The changing trajectories pattern (Ganong et al., 2011) corresponds quite well with *short-lived resistance* except for the one participant whose trajectory changed from a positive to a negative relationship and thus obviously does not fit. However, the experiences of the one child whose relationship changed trajectories from positive to negative matches very well with the experiences of some of the children in the *consistent dislike antipathy* pattern, whose stepparents did not engage in any affinity-seeking of their own and ignored children's attempts at affinity-seeking. The description of continuous struggle in Kinniburgh-White et al.'s (2010) paper corresponds well with *antipathy*, but a key feature of their pattern appears to have been indications of physical or emotional abuse, whereas this was not indicated by any of the participants in this research. Deterioration and recovery (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) does not match with any of the patterns identified in this research. However, the children in their study tended to describe the recovery of their relationship with their stepparent as being related to their own "maturation" into adulthood, something which those in the current study had not experienced as a result of the sampling of only non-adult children. Finally, the gradual improvement pattern (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) did not fit with any of the patterns at all.

The lack of correspondence between the patterns identified in this study and those identified in Ganong et al.'s (2011) and Kinniburgh-White et al.'s (2010) research is perhaps a result of differences in method and sampling between the two studies. Kinniburgh-White et al. (2010) focused on narratives as a whole and attempted to describe the trajectory of the relationship based on those narratives, resulting in multiple patterns indicating change over time. However, because the current study employed a thematic narrative analysis and only interviewed participants at one time point, it was not appropriate to describe longitudinal changes in the individual stepparent-stepchild relationships. Additionally, the inclusion of both stepparents and non-adult children in this sample appear to have influenced the patterns in many ways. For example, adult children with negative or ambivalent relationships toward their stepparent may distance themselves from their stepparent and view the relationship less negatively as a product of diminished opportunities for conflict, whereas non-adult

children may be unable to influence their custody arrangements or schedule in this way. Similarly, older children – whose relationships with their stepparents may have changed significantly as a result of their own "maturation" – were not included in this sample. In this way, the patterns described may change as children age, but investigation of this change was beyond the scope of this analysis.

Finally, children may have characterised their relationships as close for reasons that are distinct from why stepparents characterised the relationships as close. Most of the relationships described by children as *close* did not involve discipline, whereas most of the relationships described by stepparents as *close* did involve the stepparent disciplining the stepchild. Children appear to have a different conceptualization of closeness to their stepparent than stepparents do, and studies which include only children's perceptions of closeness (for example, Jensen & Schafer, 2013; King, 2006, 2007) ignore this aspect of the dyadic nature of this relationship.

Each relationship pattern had somewhat different processes underlying it. Although there was considerable variation within each pattern, these differences in processes help to clarify why some relationships were more positive than others. The relationships where the children had experienced stepfamily dissolution – and particularly those where they perceived limits to their agency to continue stepparent-stepchild relationships after dissolution – tended to be more negative than those where the children had not experienced stepfamily dissolution. Children whose relationship with their stepparent was characterised by *wariness* or *consistent dislike antipathy* tended to be unhappy with their stepparent's disciplinary role. Children in relationships characterised by *wariness* or in *active rejection antipathy* relationships were often concerned that their other biological parent would be hurt if they formed a close relationship with their stepparent and thus they approached these relationships more negatively than children who did not experience loyalty conflicts. This is in line with previous research which has found that loyalty conflicts are a source of conflict in stepfamilies (Coleman et al., 2001) and may cause children to avoid communicating with their stepparent (Golish & Caughlin, 2002), both of which are aspects of the relationships characterized by *antipathy*.

These general patterns in the processes underlying the stepparent-stepchild relationship patterns seem to provide some guidance for how to form positive stepparent-stepchild relationships. Although it is not a possibility for all parents due to constraints on how their relationships are enacted (Burton & Tucker, 2009), it seems to

be beneficial for stepparent-stepchild relationships if parents are able to form their romantic relationships away from their child(ren) in a way that does not make their child(ren) feel excluded at least until the parents are sure about the long-term suitability of the partnering. Similarly, if parents end a romantic relationship, children appear to be more open to the development of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationships if their parent facilitates continued involvement with their former stepparent when the child and stepparent desire that contact. Additionally, although stepparents tend to characterize their relationship as *close* if they discipline their stepchild(ren), stepchildren who characterize their relationships as *close* do not tend to be disciplined by their stepparent: there is tension between these positions, with stepparents and stepchildren appearing to have different criteria for what makes a positive stepparent-stepchild relationship. This is perhaps a distinction between the stepparents' ideal of what a close relationship with a child would entail as opposed to their ideal of what being a parent entails. The children's conception of closeness appears to be more in line with the literature, stepparent-stepchild relationships generally being poorer when stepparents discipline (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2006). Many of these processes have been described in the stepfamily literature in the past, but this research builds on those studies by connecting patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships with the processes underlying those patterns.

These processes reflect those described by Ganong, Coleman, and Jamison (2011) in that children appeared to evaluate their stepparents' contributions to themselves and their families when determining the extent to which they should engage in relationship-building and maintaining behaviours. The present research builds on this theory by focusing on stepparent relationship-building and maintaining behaviours. From the analyses, it appears that stepparents' evaluative judgements of the stepfamily situation and their stepchild(ren)'s personalities influence how they behave toward their stepchild(ren). Stepparents did not necessarily expect their stepchild(ren) to positively contribute to their own well-being – although stepparents with close relationships with their stepchildren tended to describe their stepchild(ren) as being a positive force in their lives. However, their relationship building behaviours were contingent on their evaluations of their stepchild(ren)'s likely positive responses, as well as their beliefs about the likelihood that the stepfamily would dissolve.

The final research question related to the role of biological parents in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships. This analysis indicated that

biological parents have an important role in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships. Parents enable stepparents to start the stepparent-stepchild relationship positively by talking to the stepparent about the stepchild before meeting, by asking the stepparent to take on more caregiving responsibilities and thus allowing the stepparent to spend more one-on-one time with the child(ren). Additionally, when parents have conflict with their child(ren), this gives the stepparent the opportunity to comfort and bond with the child(ren). Parents may also negatively impact the stepparent-stepchild relationship by undermining the stepparent and their role within the family in front of the child(ren).

Previous research on the role of the biological parent in stepparent-stepchild relationship formation has focused on resident mothers (Cartwright, 2012; Smith, 2008; Weaver & Coleman, 2010) and non-resident fathers (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007). These studies have largely been from the perspective of one family member – primarily the resident biological mother. Although this work has contributed greatly to the understanding of the biological parent's role in stepparent-stepchild relationship development, including the perspectives of children and stepparents adds nuance and a broader perspective. This analysis showed that – in addition to acting as child protectors – parents both deliberately and inadvertently enabled the stepparent to be involved in their child(ren)'s life, in ways viewed as both positive and negative by the stepparents and stepchildren.

9.2.1 Theoretical Implications

The conceptual and theoretical framework of this research was underpinned by the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997) which conceives children and their parents as having equal agency in their interdependent relationship, despite ultimate differences in power. A lens of uncertainty perspective (Burton & Tucker, 2009) was also employed; this lens acknowledges the constraints that characterize low-income parents' lives and focuses on how parents attempt to negotiate these constraints. Finally, attachment theory underlay understandings of children's relationships and how they might react to the dissolution of relationships with attachment figures (Bowlby, 1980; Carr, 2006). These theories were useful as a guide for both the methodology and interpretation of findings.

The bilateral model of parent-child relations guided methodological decisions about the participants which should be included in the current study through the importance placed on both children and parents in the model. The bilateral model of

parent-child relations suggests that both children and parents are active agents who contribute to the parent-child relationship through their mutual interactions (Harach & Kuczynski, 2005; Kuczynski & Lollis, 2004; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). When children and parents are both viewed as important contributors to their relationship with one another, it becomes necessary to involve children in research on their relationship, as opposed only including the perspective of their parent as has often been done in previous research (Campbell, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2007; Phares et al., 2005). For this reason, children were sampled in the current study in addition to their parents and stepparents. Additionally, this focus guided the decision to include accounts from both parents and children from the same families. The inclusion of both child and adult perspectives added nuance to the findings because direct comparisons between their accounts could be made. Finally, much of the research on parental and stepparental role negotiation has been solely from the perspective of stepparents (Current-Juretschko & Bigner, 2005; Doodson & Morley, 2006; Fine et al., 1999; Orchard & Solberg, 1999; Weaver & Coleman, 2005) or stepchildren (Speer & Trees, 2007) (see Fine et al., 1998 for a notable exception). Incorporating the perspectives of children, biological parents, and stepparents allowed for an understanding of how children directly and indirectly influence the development of parental roles. The inclusion of these perspectives gave insight into some stepfamily processes, such as the dialectical tensions between the parents, stepparents, and stepchildren in the role of discipline in conceptions of closeness.

The bilateral model of parent-child relations positions the relationship between parents and children as being developed through a series of interactions to which both parents and children contribute (Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). The interview guide in the current study was guided by this framework. The interview guide included questions about how both children and stepparents contributed to their relationship with one another, with a focus on both everyday interactions and interactions which acted as a turning point in the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

This theoretical model was useful for understanding a number of areas of parent-child relationships. By focusing on how children's agency was constrained as well as how they exercised it, it was possible to gain a better understanding of the processes through which stepfamily relationships are negotiated. For example, in the analysis of how experiencing the dissolution of a previous stepfamily relationship shapes the context of subsequent stepfamily relationships, mothers indicated that they

took into account their children's perspectives and feelings in their romantic relationship formation and dissolution. However, the children did not tend to feel agentic. Mothers and children also often disagreed about the stepparents' post-dissolution stepparent-stepchild relationship, with many of the children wanting to continue that relationship and most mothers believing that it should not be continued. Also in line with this theory, there was an interdependent asymmetry in power between the parents and children in this sample. The parents attempted to form families which their children would find acceptable and the children had considerable input into the structures of those families. An example of this can be found in the negotiation of parenting roles; the children had a great deal of influence over whether there was a horizontal or vertical parenting structure. If children did not accept their stepparent in a parenting and disciplinary role, then this constrained the type of parenting role that they could enact within the family. The findings of this analysis illustrate the concepts described by the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997) in operation in stepfamilies and thus provide additional support for the utility of this theory in conceptualizing parent-child relationships.

While a lens of uncertainty framework has traditionally been used to understand low-income mothers' experiences (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Manoogian et al., 2013; Sano et al., 2012), the uncertainty and constraints which characterize their lives are applicable to single parents and many parents in stepfamilies as well. Single parents are overwhelmingly low-income (Brady & Burroway, 2012; Christopher et al., 2002; Edin & Kissane, 2010) and stepfamilies also tend to have lower economic well-being, particularly unmarried stepfamilies (Manning & Brown, 2006; Sweeney, 2010). This theoretical orientation strengthened the understandings of the benefits of and barriers to romantic relationship formation. For example, it is clear from the mothers' narratives that they viewed relationship formation as having the potential to dramatically improve a number of areas of their and their children's lives and thus this was something which many strove for and worked towards. The formation of a long-term relationship was important for many of these women because of their focus on providing an optimal family situation for their children and their view that a romantic relationship would confer many benefits. However, the decision by some mothers to forego relationships altogether, the short-term couplings of many of the mothers, and the prevalence of multi-partner fertility within the sample run counter to this focus. Through an emphasis on the gendered and social constraints which characterised the lives of the participants,

it was possible to better understand how they perceived and negotiated their romantic relationships in the context of insecurity. By acknowledging the uncertainty and limitations in the parents' lives and looking for the ways in which they dealt with those constraints, it was possible to better understand aspects of their romantic relationship formation.

Attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969, 1980) was used in this research as a guiding framework for understanding children's relational development. Attachment theory posits that children form relationships with a small number of close carers, and that the children should ideally view these carers as providing protection, comfort, and stability (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969). It suggests that experience of loss may impact the later social relationships of children (Bowlby, 1969, 1980). An attachment framework was thus used to understand how previous experiences of loss may impact upon future relationship development. Attachment theory helped to guide the types of questions which the researcher asked to fill out the children's narratives of their stepparent-stepchild relationship development. However, attachment theory was not invoked to understand stepparent-stepchild relationships more generally; rather, it was used to interpret how children experienced and reacted to stepfamily dissolution and subsequent stepfamily relationships.

Some of the children in this research formed secure, long-standing attachments to their stepparents – attachments that tended to be abruptly ended when the mother's romantic relationship with the stepparent dissolved. Many of the mothers believed that it was not appropriate or important for their child(ren) to continue a relationship with the child(ren)'s former stepparent; they generally did not value the continuation of this relationship. Because children who are separated from an attachment figure take some time before they are able to form an attachment with another figure and relational competence is influenced by previous attachment patterns (Bowlby, 1980; Carr, 2006) the finding in this research that children reacted relatively negatively to subsequent stepparents following the cessation of their relationships with their former stepparents could be interpreted from the perspective of attachment theory. However, not all of the children in the sample had formed a close, long-lasting relationship with a former stepparent and yet none were positive about subsequent stepparents, indicating that the loss of an attachment relationship with a stepparent is not necessary for this wariness towards subsequent stepparents.

While the bilateral model of parent-child relations (Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997), lens of uncertainty perspective (Burton & Tucker, 2009) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980) were useful for guiding the methodology and interpretation of the findings, other theories, such as family systems theory (Bowen, 1970, 1978) have aspects that may have added to the understanding of the development of stepfamily relationships in this sample as well. Family systems theory posits that the family is an interactional system and every member of a family is interconnected (Bowen, 1970). In family systems theory, the family is viewed as a 'system' composed of a number of different relationship dyads (Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989). Subsystems within each family are interdependent and thus each subsystem influences the functioning of the other subsystems and the family as a whole. Although this theory has been used in studies of stepfamily communication (Golish, 2003; Schrodt et al., 2007), marital transitions (Hetherington et al., 1992), to understand the boundaries that separate 'family' from 'non-family' (Stewart, 2005), and a number of other areas related to stepfamily relationship development or maintenance, it is most commonly utilized in family therapy.

Family systems theory was not employed for the currect study because of a number of limitations outlined by previous researchers. Noller and Fitzpatrick (1993) indicated that family systems theory should be seen as a metaphor for thinking about the family rather than a theory as such. It also comes from a positivist tradition where the researcher is positioned outside the system, looking into the system in a search for a truth about that system (Turner & West, 1998). Finally, many scholars have criticized family systems theory for basing the family system model on a heterosexual, married, two-biological-parent family despite their a number of alternative models of successful family functioning (Dore, 2008; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2003). The current study was underpinned by a social constructionist framework, focused on a type of family outside of the married, two-biological-parent family upon which family systems theory was developed, and the key conceptual focus was on the stepparent-stepchild relationship, so other frameworks that focus on dyadic relationships were deemed to be more suitable for this research. However, some of the findings in this research indicate that the adoption of a family systems approach may have been useful. For example, in line with family systems theory, biological parents were an important influence on the development and maintenance of stepparent-stepchild relationships; parents' relationships with their child(ren) appeared to affect the stepparent-stepchild

relationship even when a parent was not directly intervening in interactions between a stepparent and stepchild. Thus, family systems theory may be a useful framework for future research on stepparent-stepchild relationship formation or in research which employs multiple perspectives to investigate relationship processes.

9.3 The Methodological Strengths and Limitations

9.3.1 Community Sample

The qualitative study used a non-probabilistic purposive sampling strategy; contacting a random subset of schools in the Dublin area and asking them to send letters home to the parent(s) of every child in the school and then securing participants from the eligible families who contacted the researcher. This sampling strategy is beneficial because it allows for a sample of stepfamilies who may never have contacted stepfamily-focused services, gone through divorce or mediation, or have seen a counsellor about family issues. Those stepfamilies who engage with professional support services tend to be having particular difficulty (Amato & Keith, 1991) and so processes in these families may differ from those in stepfamilies who have not contacted professional support services.

However, a relatively small percentage of the contacted schools agreed to send information letters home to parents (19%). Two of the main reasons for refusing to participate were that the principal thought that there were no or very few stepfamilies in their school or that the topic was too sensitive to contact parents about. For example, one administrative assistant indicated that there was only one "foreign" stepfamily in the school and the other families were all "good, stable, Church of Ireland, D6[22] families". However, as seen in the analysis of the GUI data, many stepfamily members do not identify themselves as such. Even if they do self-identify, parents may be loath to disclose these sorts of details to principals and administrators who may hold negative stereotypes of stepfamilies – for example, if they view stepfamilies as not being "good" or "stable", not fitting within a Protestant Christian tradition, or as being a family unlikely to have the wealth to live in the school's catchment area. Additionally, some members of the stepfamilies in the current study referred to one another without 'step' labels because of the negativity and division that they believed were inherent within

[22] D6, or Dublin 6, is the postal code for an area of South Dublin which includes Dartry, Milltown, Ranelagh, Rathgar, and Rathmines. The South side of Dublin has a reputation for being more prosperous than the North side, and Dublin 6 in particular encompasses areas of affluence (Haase, 2010).

those labels. This indicates that gatekeepers to potential participants in research may not always be aware of the biological relatedness of all members of the children in their schools.

None of the schools that sent out the information letter received any complaints and the parents who did participate in this research tended to indicate a lack of resources and a feeling that they were an under-researched population. Principals may believe that there are no stepfamilies in their school or that parents would be unhappy to receive a letter about research on non-traditional families, but this study points to the lack of transparency between many parents and the principals in their child(ren)'s school about the child(ren)'s family structure as well as to the desire of many parents for more stepfamily research in Ireland. This may have impacted the current study because principals did not tend to send out the letter unless they believed there to be stepfamilies or non-traditional families in their school and thus those areas where parents were less forthcoming with this information to their child(ren)'s principal were less likely to be included in this research.

9.3.2 Inclusion of Multiple Perspectives

This research attempted to better understand the stepparent-stepchild relationship by sampling multiple perspectives within a family. Including multiple perspectives and focusing on children's experiences constitutes a significant strength of this research because it illuminated dialectical tensions that may not have been uncovered had one perspective been considered in isolation. Although some chapters involved an analysis from only one perspective, where a relationship was investigated, at least two participants were included in an attempt to prevent privileging one viewpoint over another (Finch & Mason, 1993). Inclusion of the perspectives of parents, stepparents, and stepchildren added a richness and depth to the understanding of processes within each family that would not have been possible with a sample of only one family member.

An example of the importance of including multiple perspectives can be found in the analysis of stepparent-stepchild relationship patterns, where some of the children and stepparents described their relationships in the same ways, while others had quite different characterisations. Children who characterized their relationships as being *close* did not tend to be disciplined by their stepparents, whereas stepparents who characterized their stepparent-stepchild relationship(s) as *close* tended to discipline their stepchild(ren). In the case of Felix and Leo whose relationship with their

stepmother, Darina, was characterized by *wariness*, their main complaint was that Darina was too involved in discipline and their homework; however, this involvement in discipline was something that made Darina feel as if their family was unified and influenced her perception of her relationships with Felix and Leo as being *close*. Had one perspective been considered in isolation, a very different portrait of the processes in Felix, Leo, and Darina's stepfamily formation and functioning would have been gleaned. Relying solely on one perspective when investigating stepparent-stepchild relationships would have meant ignoring potentially important differences in the experiences and histories of the children and stepparents. These differences are critical to understanding stepfamily formation.

This study had some recruitment issues which impacted the analyses that were possible using data from multiple perspectives. Originally, the qualitative study was meant to include only triads of parents, stepparents, and stepchildren. By including these triads, it would have been possible to gain a rich understanding of the processes within the stepfamily and of the perspectives of all family members on those processes. However, it was difficult to recruit triads, so participation was opened up to families where at least two members agreed to participate. This meant that most of the participating families were mother-child dyads, with the second most common being parent-stepparent dyads. This sampling criterion influenced the variability of the sample and the types of analyses by enabling certain analyses and limiting others.

Although the inclusion of families where only two participants were interviewed limited some of the analyses, it also allowed for a broader range of participants. Presumably, in stepfamilies which are not cohesive, all stepfamily members are less likely to agree to participate in research on their family life. Thus, including stepfamilies where some members refused to participate may have resulted in a greater variability in the types of stepfamily relationships captured in these analyses. Additionally, it allowed for the inclusion of former stepfamilies by including families where a parent and child(ren) agreed to participate. Of the 15 households which were included in the analysis on the impact of stepfamily dissolution, only two were from families where a parent, stepparent, and stepchild all participated; it is unlikely that such rich data about relationships with former stepparents would have been gained if only those households where a parent, stepparent, and stepchild had been included.

One example of how the exclusion of certain perspectives limited the possible understanding of aspects of stepfamily formation can be found in the analysis of the

benefits and barriers to single parents' romantic relationship formation. Mothers' interviews were analysed but it was not possible access a sample of their potential partners or former short-term partners. Because the stepparent is one half of the romantic relationship dyad, it is critical to understand what benefits stepparents perceive from forming a relationship with a person with a child and what barriers might be preventing them from forming long-term relationships with partners. Although the overall sample for the qualitative study included 11 stepparents, they had already formed long-term relationships with the biological parents and were thus giving accounts of successful relationships that were sustained over time. For this reason, these stepparents were not included in this analysis. A study which followed newly partnered parents and their partners over time would provide important insights into why these relationships are formed and why they might dissolve. By following couples longitudinally, it would be possible to understand how parents and stepparents view the benefits of and barriers to their relationship formation across the development and possible dissolution of their relationship.

In addition, the children and stepparents viewed the biological parent as being actively involved in the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, but there were only six parent-stepparent-stepchild triads in the sample and this limited the analyses possible of biological parent involvement in stepparent-stepchild relationship development. Although researchers often collect data about stepfamilies from the perspective of the biological parent, investigations into how parents influence relationships within stepfamilies is limited (Cartwright, 2012; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). The current research included a triadic analysis of biological parents' role in the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships which indicated that the biological parent was an importance influence on the way that the stepparent-stepchild relationship developed. However, these analyses are necessarily tentative because of the relatively small sample of families. Although the data provided by the participants was rich, it is possible that a larger sample would have produced examples of additional ways in which parents influence stepparent-stepchild relationship development and maintenance.

Finally, because of difficulties obtaining a sample of parent-stepparent-stepchild triads, the analysis of stepparent-stepchild relationship patterns was only able to include eight stepchild-stepparent pairs. Because the unique experiences and perspectives of each stepparent and stepchild influence the development and maintenance of their

shared relationship, the inclusion of only eight stepparent-stepchild pairs out of a total of 56 relationships described is problematic. To capture a more comprehensive picture of the processes involved in stepparent-stepchild relationship development, future research should include pairs of stepparents and stepchildren instead of sampling them separately.

9.3.3 Interview Method

This research was restricted by its reliance on once-off interviews. While this technique has been used in other qualitative studies of stepparent-stepchild relationship patterns (Ganong et al., 2011; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) and processes (for example, Carr & Wang, 2012; Nuru & Wang, 2014; Saint-Jacques et al., 2011), it impacts the types of research questions which can be answered. The negotiation of parenting roles and development of relationships are complex processes involving accommodation from all members of a family. By following families from early in the parent and stepparents' romantic relationship, it would be possible to gain a better understanding of how partners respond to one another's role preferences, how children influence role development over time, how children views on role development may shift as the children develop, and how each family subsystem influences the development of other subsystems.

This study employed a closeness map as a tool for both helping participants to become comfortable in the interview setting and for gaining an understanding of the participants' perspectives on the relative closeness of important others. Similar maps have been used to the same end in other studies of children's conceptions of their family relationships (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Hogan et al., 2003; Nixon et al., 2012a; Smart et al., 2001). After completing the maps, what made them feel close to the people whom they drew physically close to them on the map, and what made them feel less close to the people whom they positioned further away from them on the map. Although the Closeness Maps themselves were not explicitly analysed, the participants' talk about others that were important to them when describing the map was incorporated into the analyses. Because the instructions for the Closeness Map only asked for "people who are important" to be included, not all of the children or biological parents included the stepparents in their Closeness Map. This is consistent with other research using Closeness Maps to represent children's relationships (Blake, Casey, Jadva, & Golombok, 2014) and provided additional information to the researcher about how the stepparent was positioned in the family lives of the children and their parents.

Semi-structured interviews are flexible and allow for questions to be adapted when necessary. Some participants were clearly uncomfortable discussing certain topics and so these topics were avoided by the interviewer even when their perspective on that subject may have yielded valuable data. A few of the children appeared to find discussing certain subjects particularly distressing – for two it was their parent's homosexual relationships, one appeared uncomfortable discussing his mother's contentious relationship with his non-resident stepmother, and another did not seem to feel at ease discussing his stepmother at all. Although avoiding these topics may have reduced the richness of the data, participant comfort with the research process was of utmost importance. Generally, however, participants appeared relatively comfortable discussing deeply personal aspects of their lives with the interviewer. Perhaps because of the relative rarity of stepfamilies in Ireland (Lunn et al., 2010) and the lack of stepfamily supports available (Hogan et al., 2003), many participants seemed to view the interview session as a welcome opportunity to discuss their experiences with someone who had some understanding of stepfamily living but who was not intimately connected to them.

9.3.4 Inclusion of Structurally Diverse Stepfamilies

This research purposefully sampled from a broad range of stepfamilies in order to include the variations in structures, processes, and outcomes that are a feature of modern stepfamilies (Coleman et al., 2000; Sweeney, 2010). The goal of this sampling was to ensure that the wide range of experiences and behaviours would be incorporated into the analyses, leading to richer findings (Hutchinson, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The inclusion of cohabiting and married, residential and non-residential, as well as current and former stepfamilies is an important strength of this study which allowed for an understanding of a wide range of experiences with stepfamily relationship formation and maintenance. However, it also presented some challenges and resulted in some limitations to the types of comparisons that can be made to other stepfamily literature.

Some researchers believe that a narrower sample is more beneficial for understanding social processes than a diverse sample (Morse, 1998). These researchers argue that because qualitative research is an aggregate of perspectives on a topic, the inclusion of some participants who only have limited experience with that topic or process will lead to an understanding of the topic that is similarly limited (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A narrower sample which included only, for example, residential, heterosexual stepfamilies may have yielded a richer understanding of the processes

within residential, heterosexual stepfamilies. However, because the current study was attempting to shed light on the development and maintenance of stepfamily relationships as a whole, the inclusion of participants from structurally diverse stepfamilies was appropriate (Cutcliffe, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Still, this sampling may have obscured potentially important distinctions between structural variations in stepfamilies; the researcher attempted to obviate this by providing context for each family and household, but it is possible that a narrower focus would have resulted in a deeper understanding of how specific structural contexts affect stepfamily relationship development.

An additional issue with including a diverse group of stepfamilies is the comparability of the findings in this analysis with other research on stepfamilies. Traditionally, research on stepfamilies included only married, heterosexual stepfamilies, but within the last twenty years this has been expanded to include cohabiting, residential, and homosexual stepfamilies as well as those where a stepparent has adopted their stepchild (Bumpass et al., 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Stewart, 2001; Stewart, 2010; Sweeney, 2010; Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Despite a consensus about the structural diversity inherent in stepfamilies among researchers, there is still some variability between studies in how stepfamilies are defined;

> Studies vary in whether the label "stepfamilies" is applied to specific family types such as unions formed through nonmarital cohabitation, between same-sex partners, or when relationships between parents and children span multiple households. (Sweeney, 2010, p. 671)

Some of this variability in samples between studies is as a result of sampling restrictions of large-scale surveys which tend to sample within households, thus excluding stepparents who do not live with their stepchildren and the stepparents who are partners of children's non-resident parents (Stewart, 2001). Thus, while there is consensus among most family researchers about the definition of a stepfamily – and this definition is in line with how stepfamilies were defined in the current research – many studies include only a subset of stepfamilies in their samples. The inter-household focus in this research makes comparability to much of the survey research on stepfamilies difficult.

9.3.4.1 Inclusion of Stepmothers

The majority of research on stepfamilies has been on stepfather families. This is likely because stepchildren tend to live with their mother (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008)

and thus large-scale surveys which investigate children's households do not tend to access a suitably large sample of stepmothers for analyses. When analyses of the stepmother role and her relationships are possible, they tend to investigate resident stepmother families (e.g. Lansford et al., 2001), although non-resident stepmothers are considerably more common (Stewart, 2001). This study attempted to include residential and non-residential stepmothers in the sample in addition to children from residential and non-residential stepmother families. However, as with other studies, accessing a non-residential stepmother sample is difficult, and only three of the 11 stepparents sampled were stepmothers; two of these were non-residential stepmothers and one had a shared custody arrangement.

While the number of stepmothers included in this sample does not represent a radical departure from previous stepfamily research, children were also asked about their relationships with residential and non-residential stepmothers and described a total of 16 relationships with stepmothers. One key pattern revealed by asking children about their relationships with their stepmothers mirrors Ganong et al.'s (2011) – that is, that children who characterize their relationships as *antipathic* because they feel that their stepparent has not attempted engaged in affinity-seeking behaviours tend to be describing relationships with non-resident stepmothers. Stepmother-stepchild relationships tended to be characterized more negatively in general – nine of the 26 *close* relationships were stepmother-stepchild relationships, whereas four of the eight *wariness* and six of the eight *antipathy* relationships were stepmother-stepchild relationships. This focus on relationships with both stepmothers and stepfathers allowed for a broader understanding of the patterns of stepparent-stepchild relationships than if only stepfathers had been included (as in Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010), but as the current sample included only a small sub-group of stepmothers, there are limits on what can be said about stepmother's perspectives on their stepfamily formation.

9.3.4.2 Inclusion of Residential and Non-Residential Stepfamilies

Close relationships involve high levels of interdependence and frequent interactions over an extended period of time (Kelley et al., 1983); living together does not necessarily bring about closeness and living apart does not preclude it. Although most studies of stepfamilies incorporate only residential stepfamilies, non-residential stepfamilies account for just under half of stepfamilies (Stewart, 2001) and excluding

them ignores diversity among stepfamilies. There have been calls to include the partners of non-resident parents in stepfamily research (Stewart, 2001), but the non-cohabiting partners of parents do not tend to be included in analyses despite the acknowledgement of their influence on children and parents (Beck et al., 2010; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). To address this, participants from both residential and non-residential stepfamilies were included in this study. There were two types of non-residential stepfamilies: where a child lived primarily with one parent and their other parent had a romantic partner, or where a child lived primarily with one parent and that parent had a romantic partner who did not live in the same household at least four days a week.

Some of the children viewed their non-resident stepparent as a parent or described having a close relationship with them, indicating that residence does not necessarily reflect the stepparent's role within the family or the strength of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Two of the children characterized their relationship with their non-resident stepmother as being *close* and two characterized their non-resident stepmother as a *detached parent figure.* This pattern was repeated with the children who lived with their mothers and had a non-residential stepfather – four children characterized their relationships as *close.* This points to the importance to some children of the dating partners of their parents. If some children view their non-resident stepparents as important figures in their own lives and within their family, it behoves researchers to consider the influence and perspectives of these non-resident stepparents in future research as well.

Non-resident stepparents may also feel connected to their stepchildren. Although these relationships are generally seen as more distant and challenging (Doodson & Morley, 2006; Henry & McCue, 2009), the few non-resident stepparents in the sample tended to describe their relationships with their stepchildren in positive terms. Five of the seven relationships described by the non-resident stepparents were characterized as being *close* and the stepparents often indicated that their stepchild(ren) was important to them. Two of the non-resident parents felt that they played an integral role in their stepchildren's lives. This indicates that residence is not a necessity for close relationships to form; non-resident parents – both stepmothers and stepfathers – and children from non-resident stepfamilies should be included when studying stepfamily relationships.

9.3.4.3 Inclusion of Participants from Dissolved Stepfamilies

How children and parents view former stepparents and what role they expect them to have within the family was elucidated by incorporating dissolved stepfamilies in this research. Studies of stepparent-stepchild relationships have thus far focused almost exclusively on current stepfamilies, but stepfamilies – particularly cohabiting stepfamilies – are relatively likely to dissolve (Beck et al., 2010; McLanahan & Beck, 2010) which means that including only current stepfamilies may bias the sample towards those stepfamilies that have succeeded in forming close relationships and appropriate stepfamily roles. The hope was that including both current and former stepfamilies would capture the processes which cause dysfunction and lead to stepfamily dissolution as well as those processes that lead to a cohesive stepfamily. However, people continue to develop relational narratives after a relationship has ended (Cupach & Metts, 1986; Koenig Kellas & Manusov, 2003) and thus the participants' perspectives on their former stepfamily experiences are likely to be different from their feelings about the relationship at the time of or prior to dissolution.

A limitation of the analysis of the influence of former stepfamily relationships on subsequent stepfamily relationships was that, while the research illuminated tensions between the protective stance of mothers and children's threat management, stepparent perspectives were not included. No dyads or triads including a former stepparent were included in the sample, so the data on stepparent-stepchild relationships in former stepfamilies is solely from the perspective of biological parents and children. Some of the former stepparents were actively involved with their stepchildren. Gaining their perspective on the dissolution of their romantic relationship and their relationship with their stepchildren would add to the understanding of how the former stepfamilies were dissolved and the roles of the stepparent, biological parent, and stepchild(ren) in maintaining or discontinuing the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

In addition, it would be useful to include current stepparents who had experienced previous stepfamily dissolution in future studies. The development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship is not only consequent on the actions of the child: the stepparent needs to be interested in forming that relationship as well (Ganong et al., 2011). It is unclear how stepparents react to stepparent-stepchild relationship formation after experiencing transitions into and out of stepfamilies. Former stepparents are sometimes still considered family members (Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengston, 2006) and it is possible that some stepparents may have competing

responsibilities to their former stepchildren in the same way that some biological parents do (Manning et al., 2003). Conversely, their experiences of having a stepparent-stepchild relationship and having that relationship end may make them more wary of subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationships in much the same way that they did for the children in this sample. Involving the perspective of stepparents in research on family instability would add a more nuanced understanding both to the family transitions and stepfamily research.

As with most of the research on family instability (see Gibson-Davis, 2008, for a notable exception), the analysis on stepfamily dissolution was limited in its lack of inclusion of father's relationship transitions. Many children spend considerable time with their non-resident fathers and form close relationships with their non-resident stepparents (King, 2006) and some live with their biological fathers (Fahey et al., 2012; King, 2007), so it seems likely that fathers' relationships have an important influence on their children. Presumably, fathers' relationship transitions shape the context of children's subsequent stepparent-stepchild relationships just as mothers' do, but this analysis did not investigate the influence of fathers' relationship transitions. Children were not queried in any depth about their fathers' former partners and none of the biological fathers who took part in the study described dissolving a relationship with someone other than their child(ren)'s mother, so it was not possible to address fathers' relationship dissolutions. Future research on family instability would be greatly enhanced by a focusing on both fathers' and mothers' relational instability, instead of solely investigating processes within the mothers' households.

9.3.4.4 Inclusion of Non-Resident Biological Parents

Non-resident parents have an important influence on child outcomes (King, 2006, 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001), family processes (McNamee, Amato, & King, 2014), and the development of stepparent-stepchild relationships (Afifi, 2003). However, limited research has investigated the non-resident parent's role in stepfamily formation from the perspective of non-resident parents themselves. In current study, loyalty conflicts played a significant role in some stepparent-stepchild relationships; if the perspectives of more non-resident parents had been included then it might have been possible to gain insight into the roots of these loyalty conflicts. Non-resident parents may attempt to ameliorate these conflicts or they may contribute to the child(ren)'s conflicted feelings directly by being negative about the stepparent or telling their child(ren) that they should not become close to their stepparent. Because few non-

resident parent perspectives were included, it is not clear how non-resident parents influenced these loyalty conflicts or how they perceive and influence other aspects of stepparent-stepchild relationship development.

9.4 Concluding Remarks

This thesis primarily used qualitative methods to investigate the development and maintenance of stepparent-stepchild relationships in Ireland. Unlike many studies of the patterns of this relationship development and their underlying mechanisms, this research included non-adult children and multiple perspectives from within the same families. The findings from the study highlight the importance of investigating stepfamily processes as opposed to assuming there is a homogeneity of experience within the stepfamily structure. The diverse experiences of stepfamily members explored in this work point to the complexity of forming a stepfamily – a process which involves accommodation from all family members, each drawing from their own experiences and relationships – amid a changing cultural landscape for non-traditional families.

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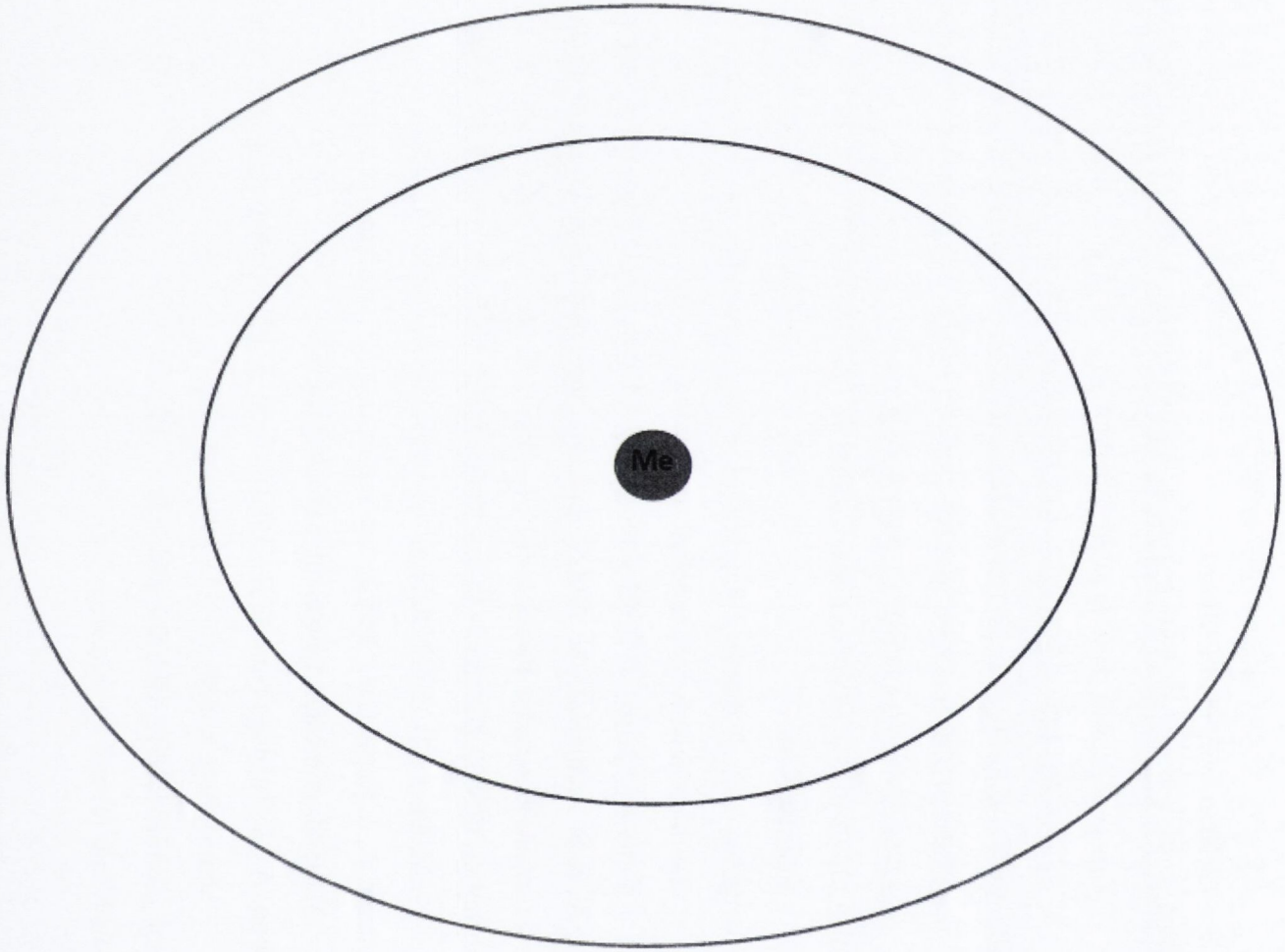
Appendix A



Appendix B

Personal Information

For the audio records, can you please tell me your name?

What do you do for a living?

What is your highest level of education?

And how old are you?

Who lives in the house with you?

> You have [children] living here with you. Are they all your biological children? Are any of them [stepparent's] biological children?

How old is [stepparent]?

What does [stepparent] do for a living?

What is [stepparent's] highest level of education?

Do you own your house/flat or rent here?

How old are [children]?

Are you married to [stepparent]?

How long have you been with [stepparent]?

Family chart

Getting to Know Each Other

What is it like being a parent in a family like this?

When [stepparent] met you, did s/he know that you had a child?

> Why did you choose to tell him/her/not tell him/her?

Do you think that impacted his relationship with you at all?

Before [stepparent] met [stepchild], had you talked much to [stepparent] about him/her?

Had you talked much to [child] about [stepparent]?

Was it important for you that [stepparent] got on well with [stepchild]?

Can you remember the first time that that [stepparent] met [stepchild]?

What did [stepparent] and [stepchild] do when they first met?

How did you introduce [stepparent] to [stepchild]?

Why did you decide to introduce [stepparent] to [stepchild] when you did?

How did [stepchild] react when s/he met [stepparent]?

Did you talk to [stepparent] about [stepchild] before you moved in together?

What did you say?

How did he respond?

Did you talk to [stepchild] about [stepparent] before you moved in together?

What did you say?

How did s/he respond?

What kinds of things did [stepparent] do with [stepchild] before you moved in?

Do you think that having [stepparent] move in impacted [stepchild's] relationship with you?

How? What was good about it? What was difficult about it?

Do you think that having [stepparent] move in impacted [stepchild's] relationship with [stepparent]?

How? What was good about it? What was difficult about it?

How did [stepparent] get on with [stepchild] when you moved in together?

How long did [stepparent] know [stepchild] before you moved in together?

Do you feel like [stepparent] knew [stepchild] well before you moved in together?

What did you expect [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchild] would be like when you started dating [stepparent]?

Did you expect the relationship to be like it is now? How is it different?

If married

Can you tell me about your wedding with [stepparent]?

Did you talk to [stepchild] about your marriage before you got married to stepparent?

Did [stepchild] have any say in whether you go married?

Did [stepchild] participate in the wedding?

How did you tell [stepchild] that you were planning to get married?

Do you think that your marriage to [stepparent] changed things much in your relationship with [stepchild]?

Do you think that your marriage to [stepparent] changed things much in [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchild]?

Do you think that your marriage had a big impact on your family?

Before you moved in with [stepparent], did you and [stepparent] discuss how s/he would develop a relationship [stepchild]?

Did you and [stepparent] have any specific ideas for what [stepparent] could do to get close to [stepchild]?

What was it like moving from being a single-parent to having a partner?

Can you remember a time when it made parenting particularly hard?

Can you remember a time when it made parenting particularly easy?

When [stepparent] first started living with you, do you think there was anything that surprised him/her about being a stepparent?

Do you think that s/he was prepared for it?

Obviously, you and [stepchild] were living together before [stepparent] joined the family. Did [stepparent] have any difficulties joining your routine or your relationship?

How did that make you feel?

Do you think that things are different now?

How was [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchild] in the early days of you moving in?

Current Relationship

Can you describe [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchild] now?

Would you say it is close? Why/why not?

Has anything changed in [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchild]?

How have things changed?

Can you give me a specific example of something that has changed?

What types of things does [stepparent] do with [stepchild]?

Is that different from what s/he did at the beginning?

Does s/he have any say in the things that s/he does with [stepchild]?

What does [stepparent] do to take care of [stepchild]?

Does s/he do chores to take care of [stepchild]?

Do s/he take care of [stepchild] when you're not around?

Is that different from what [stepparent] did at the beginning?

Does [stepchild] ever come to [stepparent] with school questions?

Did [stepchild] used to come to [stepparent] with school questions?

Does [stepchild] ever come to [stepparent] when they are upset?

Did [stepchild] used to come to [stepparent] when they were upset?

Does [stepchild] ever come to [stepparent] when they're very excited about something?

Did [stepchild] used to come to [stepparent] when they were excited about something?

What actions has [stepparent] taken to try to get close to [stepchild]?

What actions has [stepchild] taken to try to get close to [stepparent]?

What does [stepchild] do when s/he wants to show [stepparent] that s/he loves him/her?

When was the last time that [stepchild] did something to show [stepparent] that s/he loved him/her? What did s/he do?

Does [stepparent] ever do anything to show [stepchild] that s/he loves him/her?

What does s/he do?

When was the last time that stepparent did something to show [stepchild] that s/he loves him/her? What did s/he do?

Can you think of one thing or event that had a huge impact on the relationship between [stepparent] and [stepchild]?

Discipline and Conflict

Who makes the rules in your house?

Does [stepparent] have any say in what rules [stepchild] have to follow?

Is that different from how it was in the beginning?

Who normally disciplines [stepchild]?

Has there ever been a time when [stepparent] had to discipline [stepchild]? What happened?

What did [stepparent] do?

What did [stepchild] do when [stepparent] disciplined them?

How did it make you feel?

Do you think that [stepparent] feels comfortable disciplining [stepchild]?

If [stepchild] was being bold to [stepparent], what would you do?

Would you generally be on one side or the other?

If [stepchild] was being bold to you, what would [stepparent] do?

Can you think of a time when this has happened? How did you react?

Do you think that there is much conflict between you and [stepchild]?

What about between [stepchild] and [stepparent]?

Is that different from how it was at the beginning?

Other Family

If in family with stepsiblings

[Stepparent] brought children to come live here with you and [stepchild], is that correct?

Do the [stepsiblings] live here all of the time?

Do you think that [stepsiblings] get on with [stepchild]?

Have you noticed any change in the relationship between the [stepsiblings] and the [stepchild] since you and [stepparent] moved in together?

Has it impacted your relationship with [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchildren] to have [stepsiblings] here?

Can you think of a time when they had an impact on his relationship with [stepchild]?

Has it impacted your relationship with [stepparent] to have [stepsiblings] here?

Can you think of a time when they had an impact on your relationship with [stepparent]?

If in family with half siblings

You and [stepparent] had [half siblings] together, is that correct?

Do you think that [half siblings] get on with [stepchild]?

Have [half siblings] impacted your relationship with [stepchild]?

Did things change after [half siblings] were born? What changed?

Can you think of a time when they had an impact on your relationship with [stepchild]?

Can you think of a time when they had an impact on [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchild]?

Have [half siblings] impacted your relationship with [stepparent]?

Can you think of a time when they had an impact on your relationship with [stepparent]?

Since having [half siblings], have you noticed any difference in [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchild]?

Do you think that having [half siblings] made [stepparent] feel any different toward [stepchild]?

Do you see [stepparent's] parents often?

Do they have a relationship with [stepchild]?

What about with [stepsiblings] or [half siblings]?

How do [stepparent's] parents feel about [stepchild]? Do they view them as their grandchildren?

What do [stepparent's] parents do with [stepchild] when they see them?

Does [stepchild] see [biological father's] parents very often?

What do you think about that?

What do you do to celebrate [stepchild's] birthday? Do you have an arrangement with [dad]?

If [stepchild] had a birthday party, would any of [stepparent's] family members would go?

How do you organize Christmas for [stepchild]?

Does [stepchild(ren)] spend any of Christmas with [dad]?

What do you think about that?

Would you change anything about [stepchild's] Christmas arrangement if you could?

Irish Context

Have you met many other stepfamilies?

Are any of the kids in [stepchild's] class part of a family like this?

Do you think that matters to [stepchild]?

Do you think it matters to [stepparent]?

Do you think that it is different to be in a family like yours in Ireland than it is in other countries?

If yes Why? What makes it different?

Have you ever noticed anyone treating [stepparent] differently because s/he isn't [stepchild]'s biological parent?

Do [stepchild's] teacher or principal know that [stepparent] is not [stepchild's] biological parent?

Would you generally tell people that [stepparent] is not [stepchild's] biological parent?

Naming

Does [stepchild] have the same last name as [stepparent]?

When did they happen? Who decided that [stepchild] should take/should not take [stepparent's] last name?

When [stepparent] is telling people about [stepchild], how does s/he introduce [stepchild]?

Has he always introduced him/her that way?

If changed Why did s/he change how s/he introduced them?

What does [stepchild] call [stepparent]?

Non-Resident Biological Parent

[Children] are not [stepparent's] biological children. Can you tell me about their biological mother/father?

What was your relationship with him/her when you got pregnant? Was [stepchild] planned?

When did you split up with him/her?

How often does [stepchild] see [biological parent]?

Do you have any say in it?

Does [stepchild] see [biological parent] more or less than [stepchild] used to?

What do you think about that?

When did you last see [biological parent]? When did [stepparent] last see [biological parent]?

How do you get on now?

Does s/he pay any maintenance? Do you pay any maintenance?

How does [child] get on with him/her?

How do you feel about that?

Is there anything that you would like [biological parent] to change about the way s/he interacts with [stepchild]?

Do you share parenting with [biological parent]?

How do you feel about that? Would you like him/her to do more/less parenting?

Has the relationship between [child] and [biological parent] changed at all?

How does [stepparent] get on with him/her?

Do you remember the first time that [biological parent] and [stepparent] met?

How did that go?

Has the relationship between [stepparent] and [biological parent] changed at all?

Does it matter to you if [stepparent] gets on with [biological parent]?

Do you think that your relationship with [biological parent] bothers [stepparent] at all?

Do you think that [stepchild] does different stuff when they're with [biological parent] than they do with you?

Do you think that [stepchild] feels more comfortable talking to [stepparent] or to [biological parent]?

What impact do you think [biological parent] has on your relationship with [stepchild]?

> Can you think of a specific situation where [biological parent] has impacted your relationship with [stepchild]?

What impact do you think [biological parent] has on [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchild]?

> Can you think of a specific situation where [biological parent] has impacted [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchild]?

Does [biological parent] have an impact on your relationship with [stepparent]?

> Can you think of a specific situation where [biological parent] has impacted your relationship with [stepparent]?

Is [biological parent] living with or dating anyone?

> (if not) Has s/he ever lived with or dated anyone?
>
> How do you get on with [him/her]?
>
> How does [stepchild(ren)] get on with him/her?
>
> How does [stepparent] get on with him/her?
>
> Do you think that s/he disciplines [stepchild(ren)] when they're over there?
>
> What do you think are the differences between his/her role and [stepparent's] role in [stepchild(ren)'s] life?

Census

On the census, you have to list how each person is the house is related to one another. If you were filling out the census and listing how [stepparent] and [stepchild] were related, what would you list? They can be listed as "parent", "stepparent", "other relative", or "other nonrelative."
Why? What makes them that? What would have to be different for you write that [stepparent] was a stepparent?

Future of Relationship

What do you think the strengths are of a family like yours?

What do you think are the weaknesses of a family like yours?

Have you and [stepparent] ever talked about him/her adopting [stepchild]?

Given the way things are now, what do you think will happen with your family in the future?

What do you think will happen in [stepparent's] relationship with [stepchild]?

What do you think that [stepparent] could do to improve his/her relationship with [stepchild]?

What do you think that [stepchild] could do to improve their relationship with [stepparent]?

What do you think that you could do to improve the relationship between [stepchild] and [stepparent]?

If you could go back and give yourself advice about being in a new [family like this], what advice would you give?

Appendix C

Personal Information
For the audio records, can you please tell me your name?

And how old are you?

Who lives in the house with you?

Are you married to [partner]?

How long have you been with [partner]?

Have you adopted [stepchild(ren)]?

Family chart
Why did you put partner/children there? What do they do that makes them feel closer or less close to you?

Getting to Know Each Other

What is it like to be in a family like this?

When you met [partner], did you know that s/he had child(ren)?

How did you feel about that? *Or:* When did you find out? How did that make you feel?

Before you met [stepchild(ren)], had you talked much to [biological parent] about him/her?

Do you think that it was important for [biological parent] that you got on well with [stepchild(ren)]?

How did you feel before you met [stepchild(ren)]?

Can you remember the first time that you met [stepchild(ren)]?

Did [partner] introduce you?

How did s/he introduce you to [stepchild(ren)]?

Why did [partner] decide to introduce you to [stepchild(ren)] when s/he did?

How did [stepchild(ren)] react when s/he met you?

What did you do together when you met?

Did you talk to [partner] about [stepchild(ren)] before you moved in together?

What kinds of things did you do with [stepchild(ren)] before you moved in?

Do you think that your moving in impacted [stepchild(ren)'s] relationship with their mother/father?

How did you get on with [stepchild(ren)] when you moved in?

How long did you know [stepchild(ren)] before you moved in?

Do you feel like you knew [stepchild(ren)] well before you moved in?

What did you expect of a relationship with [stepchild(ren)] when you started dating [partner]?

Did you expect your relationship to be like it is now?

If married

Can you tell me about your wedding with [partner]?

Did [stepchild(ren)] have any say in whether you go married?

Did [stepchild(ren)] participate in the wedding?

How did you tell [stepchild(ren)] that you were planning to get married?

Do you think that your marriage changed things much in your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

Do you think that your marriage had a big impact on your family?

Before you moved in, did you have any thoughts or ideas of how you would try to develop a relationship with your [stepchild(ren)]?

Before you moved in with [partner], did you and [partner] discuss how you would develop a relationship [stepchild(ren)]?

Did you and [partner] have any specific ideas for what you could do to get close to [stepchild(ren)]?

When you first started living with [partner], was there anything that surprised you about being a stepparent?

Do you think that you were prepared for it?

If you could go back and give yourself advice about being a stepparent, what advice would you give?

Obviously, [partner] and [stepchild(ren)] were living together before you joined the family. Were there any difficulties joining their routine or their relationship?

How did that make you feel?

Do you think that things are different now?

How was your relationship with [stepchild(ren)] in the early days of you moving in?

Current Relationship

Have things changed in your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

How have they changed?

Can you give me a specific example of something that has changed?

Can you describe your relationship with [stepchild(ren)] now?

What types of things do you do with [stepchild(ren)]?

Is that different from what you did at the beginning?

Do you have any say in the things that you do together?

What do you do to take care of [stepchild(ren)]?

Do you do chores to take care of them?

Do you take care of them when [partner] is not around?

Is that different from what you did at the beginning?

Does [stepchild(ren)] ever come to you with school questions?

Did [stepchild(ren)] used to come to you with school questions?

Does [stepchild(ren)] ever come to you when they are upset?

Did [stepchild(ren)] used to come to you when they were upset?

Does [stepchild(ren)] ever come to you when they're very excited about something?

Did [stepchild(ren)] used to come to you when they were excited about something?

What kinds of things do you talk to [stepchild(ren)] about?

What kinds of things do you expect to have to do for [stepchild(ren)]?

Has this changed at all?

What kinds of things do you expect [stepchild(ren)] to do for you?

Did you expect different things at the beginning?

Can you tell me about a time when you felt particularly close to [stepchild(ren)]?

What about that situation made you feel close?

Did the [stepchild(ren)'s] behaviour make you feel more close/less close?

Can you tell me about a time when you felt particularly distant from [stepchild(ren)]?

What about that situation made you feel distant?

Did the [stepchild(ren)'s] behaviour make you feel more distant/less distant?

What actions have you taken to try to get close to [stepchild(ren)]?

What actions has [stepchild(ren)] taken to try to get close to you?

What does [stepchild(ren)] when s/he wants to show you that s/he loves you?

When was the last time that [stepchild(ren)] did something to show you that s/he loved you?

Do you ever do anything to show [stepchild(ren)] that you love him/her?

What do you do?

Last time that you did something to show [stepchild(ren)] that you love him/her, what did you do?

Can you think of one thing/event that had a big impact on your relationship with [stepchild]?

Discipline and Conflict

Who makes the rules in your house?

Do you have any say in what rules [stepchild(ren)] have to follow?

Is that different from how it was in the beginning?

Who normally disciplines [stepchild(ren)]?

Has there ever been a time when you've had to discipline [stepchild(ren)]? What happened?

What did [partner] do?

What did [stepchild(ren)] do when you disciplined them?

How did it make you feel?

Do you feel comfortable disciplining [stepchild(ren)]?

If you got in an argument with [stepchild(ren)], what would [partner] do?

Do you think that s/he would be on your side?

What do you think about that?

If [partner] got in an argument with [stepchild(ren)], what would you do?

Would you generally be on one side or the other?

If [stepchild(ren)] acted very bold towards you, what would you do?

Can you think of a time when this has happened? How did you react?

Do you think that there is much conflict between you and [stepchild(ren)]? What about between [stepchild(ren)] and [partner]?

Is that different from how it was at the beginning?

Non-resident father

How often does [stepchild(ren)] see [other biological parent]?

Do you have any say in it?

When did [stepchild(ren)] last see [other biological parent]?

When did you last see [other biological parent]?

Do you think that [stepchild(ren)] does different stuff when they're with [other biological parent] than they do with you?

Do you think that [stepchild(ren)] feels more comfortable talking to you or to [other biological parent]?

Is there anything that you would like [other biological parent] to change about the way he interacts with [stepchild(ren)]?

Do you get on with [other biological parent]?

Do you see much of [other biological parent]?

Does [partner] get on with [other biological parent]?

How does that make you feel?

Do you talk to [partner] about [other biological parent]?

Is it ever awkward for you that [other biological parent] is still in [partner's] life because of [stepchild(ren)]?

Have you ever felt uncomfortable having [partner] talking to and seeing [other biological parent]?

What impact do you think [other biological parent] has on your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

Can you think of a specific situation where [other biological parent] has impacted your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

Does [other biological parent] have an impact on your relationship with [partner]?

Can you think of a specific situation where [other biological parent] has impacted your relationship with [partner]?

Is [other biological parent] living with or dating anyone?

(if not) Has s/he ever lived with or dated anyone?

How do you get on with [him/her]?

How does [stepchild(ren)] get on with him/her?

How does [partner] get on with her?

Do you think that s/he disciplines [stepchild(ren)] when they're over there?

What do you think are the differences between his/her role and your role in [stepchild(ren)'s] life?

Other Family

If in family with stepsiblings

You brought children to come live here with you and [partner] and [stepchild(ren)], is that correct?

Do the [stepsiblings] live here all of the time?

Do you think that [stepsiblings] get on with [stepchild(ren)]?

Have you noticed any change in the relationship between the [stepsiblings] and the [stepchild(ren)] since you and [partner] moved in together?

Has it impacted your relationship with [stepchild(ren)] to have [stepsiblings] here?

Can you think of a time when they had an impact on your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

Has it impacted your relationship with [partner] to have [stepsiblings] here?

Can you think of a time when they had an impact on your relationship with [partner]?

If in family with half siblings

You and [partner] had [half siblings] together, is that correct?

Do you think that [half siblings] get on with [stepchild(ren)]?

Have [half siblings] impacted your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

Did things change after [half siblings] were born? What changed?

Can you think of a time when they had an impact on your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

Have [half siblings] impacted your relationship with [partner]?

Can you think of a time when they had an impact on your relationship with [partner]?

Since having [half siblings], have you noticed any difference in your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

Did having [half siblings] make you feel any different toward [stepchild(ren)]?

Do you see your parents often?

Do they have a relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

What about with [stepsiblings] or [half siblings]?

How do your parents feel about [stepchild(ren)]? Do you think that they view [them] as their grandchildren?

What do your parents do with [stepchild(ren)] when they see them?

Does [stepchild(ren)] see [other biological parent]'s parents very often?

What do you think about that?

How do you sort out [stepchild(ren)'s] birthday party?

Does [other biological parent] go to the party?

How do you organize Christmas for [stepchild]?

Does [stepchild(ren)] spend any of Christmas with [other biological parent]?

What do you think about that?

Would you change anything about [stepchild's] Christmas arrangement if you could?

Irish Context

Have you met many other families like yours?

Are any of the kids in [stepchild(ren)'s] class part of a family like this?

Do you think that matters to [stepchild(ren)]?

Do you think that it is different to be in a family like this in Ireland than it is in other countries?

If yes Why? What makes it different?

Have you ever noticed anyone treating you differently because you aren't [stepchild(ren)]'s biological parent? (parent-teacher interviews, etc)

Naming

When you are telling people about your family, how do you introduce [stepchild(ren)]?

Have you always introduced him/her that way?

If changed Why did you change how you introduced them?

Census

On the census, you have to list how each person is the house is related to one another. They can be listed as "child", "stepchild", "other relative", or "other nonrelative." If you were filling out the census, what would you list [stepchild's] relationship to you as? Why? What makes them that? What would have to be different for you write that they were your stepchild?

Future of Relationship

What do you think the strengths are of a family like yours?

What do you think are the weaknesses of a family like yours?

Given the way things are now, what do you think will happen with your family in the future?

What do you think will happen in your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

What do you think that you could do to improve your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

What do you think that [stepchild(ren)] could do to improve their relationship with you?

What do you think that [biological parent] could do to improve your relationship with [stepchild(ren)]?

Appendix D

Personal Information

Can you tell me your name?

How old are you?

Who lives in the house with you?

Can you tell me a little bit about the people who live in the house with you?

Family chart
Why did you put your mom/dad/stepdad/siblings there? What do they do with you that makes them more/less important to you?

Getting to Know Each Other

Can you remember the first time that you met [stepparent]?

What did you do together when you met?

Did you talk to your mother/father about [stepparent] before s/he came to live with you?

What did you think about that? How did that make you feel?

What kinds of things did you do with [stepparent] before s/he came to live with you?

How did you get on with your mother/father after [stepparent] came to live here?

How did you get on with [stepparent] when s/he came to live here?

Before [stepparent] came to live here, what sorts of things did you do with your mother/father?

After [stepparent] came to live here, what sorts of things did you do with your mother/father?

How do you feel about that?

If married

Can you tell me about your mom and [stepparent's] wedding?

What did you do in the wedding?

Did you have any say in the wedding?

Did you talk to your mother/father about them getting married before they did?

Did you talk to [stepparent] about them getting married before they did?

Did things change a lot for you after they got married?

How do you feel about that?

Current Relationship

What types of things do you do with [stepparent]?

Do you have any say in the things that you do together?

Does [stepparent] take care of you during the week? What does s/he do?

How do you feel about that?

Does [stepparent] take care of you on the weekend? What does s/he do?

Do you have any say in who takes care of you on the weekend?

If you had a problem with your homework and you wanted help, who would you ask?

Would you ever ask [stepparent]? Why/why not?

If you hurt yourself, who would you ask to make you feel better?

Would you ever ask [stepparent]? Why/why not?

If you wanted to talk about a fun thing you did, who would you talk to?

Would you ever ask [stepparent]? Why/why not?

What kinds of things do you talk to [stepparent] about?

Who drives you to school?

Who makes your dinner?

Who takes care of you when you get home from school?

Do you have any say in it?

Can you tell me about a time when [stepparent] was really important to you?

Do you ever do anything to show [stepparent] that you love him/her?

What do you do?

When was the last time that you did something to show [stepparent] that you love him/her?

Does [stepparent] ever do anything to show that s/he loves you?

What does s/he do?

When was the last time that [stepparent] did something to show you that s/he loves you?

Can you think of one time that made a really big difference to your relationship with [stepparent]?

Discipline and Conflict

Who tells you what chores to do?

How does that make you feel?

Who makes the rules in your house?

Do you have any say in it?

If you didn't want to do your homework, who would make you do it?

If you did something bold, what would happen?

Who would give out to you?

Would [stepparent] ever give out to you?

Who do you think should give out to you?

Do you have any say in it?

Does [stepparent] ever get mad at you for being bold?

Can you think of a time when [stepparent] gave out to you?

How did it make you feel?

What did you do?

Do you think that it is ok for [stepparent] to give out to you?

If you did something bold and [stepparent] gave out to you, what would your mother/father do?

How do you feel about that?

If you got in a fight with [stepparent], what would your mother/father do?

Would your mother/father stick up for you or for [stepparent]?

What do you think about that?

If you got in a fight with your mother/father, what would [stepparent] do?

Would [stepparent] stick up for you or for your mother/father?

What do you think about that?

If [stepparent] did something to make you mad, what would you do?

Can you think of a time when [stepparent] has made you really mad? What did you do?

Do you and [stepparent] ever argue?

About what?

Who starts the arguments?

If you and [stepparent] were arguing, how would you make up?

Do you normally try to make up with him/her or does s/he normally try to make up with you?

Non-resident father

How often do you see [other biological parent]?

Do you have any say in it?

When did you last see [other biological parent]?

What did you do together last time you saw [other biological parent]?

What kinds of stuff do you normally do with [other biological parent] when you're with him/her?

How does that make you feel?

Do you do different stuff with [stepparent] than you do with [other biological parent]?

What's different about spending time with [stepparent] as opposed to [other biological parent]?

If you had something really exciting to talk about, would you want to talk about it with [stepparent] or with [other biological parent]?

If you had something really scary to talk about, would you want to talk about it with [stepparent] or with [other biological parent]?

Do you ever feel like [biological parent/stepparent] would be upset if you wanted to talk to [biological parent/stepparent] instead of him/her?

How does that make you feel?

Do you miss having [other biological parent] living in the house with you?

Do you think that [stepparent] and [other biological parent] get on?

What do you think about that?

Do you think that your mother/father and [other biological parent] get on?

Do you have any say in it?

Would you like them to get on better?

Is your mother/father living with or dating anyone?

(if not) Has s/he ever lived with or dated anyone?

How do you get on with [them]?

How does your mother/father get on with him/her?

What kinds of things do you do with him/her?

Does s/he tell you what to do when you're staying in your mother/father's house?

Do you ever argue with him/her?

Other Family

You live in the house with [siblings], is that right?

Stepsiblings

When [stepparent] started to live with you, s/he brought [siblings] with him, is that right?

Did you have any say in that?

How did that make you feel?

Do you like living in the house with [siblings]?

What sorts of things do you and [siblings] do together?

If you were scared or upset, would you ever go talk to [siblings]?

What sorts of things do you talk to siblings about?

Half-siblings

When your mother/stepmother had [siblings], how did that make you feel?

Do you like living in the house with [siblings]?

What sorts of things do you and [siblings] do together?

If you were scared or upset, would you ever go talk to [siblings]?

What sorts of things do you talk to [siblings] about?

Do you see your grandparents a lot?

When do you see them?

Which grandparents do you see? Your mom's parents? Dad's parents? [Stepparent's] parents?

What do you think about that?

Do you have any say in which grandparents you see?

What do you do for your birthday? (What does your mother/father do to celebrate it? What does [other biological parent] do?)

What do you think about that?

What do you do for Christmas?

What do you think about that? Do you have any say in your Christmas plans?

Irish Context

Are any of the kids in your class in a family like yours?

How does that make you feel?

Would you want to meet with other kids living in a family like yours?

Have you ever gone to Rainbows?

Naming

You call [stepparent] "[stepparent]"; why do you call him/her that?

Have you ever called him/her anything else?

When you are talking to your friends, what do you call him/her?

When you introduce him to grownups, what do you call him/her?

When you are talking to [other biological parent], what do you call him/her?

What does [stepparent] call you when s/he introduces you to other people?

How does that make you feel?

Census

On the census, you have to list how each person is the house is related to one another. They can be listed as "parent", "stepparent", "other relative", or "other nonrelative." If you were filling out the census, what would you list [stepparent's] relationship to you as? Why? What makes him/her that? What would have to be different for you write that s/he was your stepparent?

Future of Relationship

What do you think that you could do to get closer to [stepparent]?

What do you think that [stepparent] could do to get closer to you?

Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Appendix E

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN | THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN
COLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE

Dear parent,

I am a PhD student in the School of Psychology at Trinity College Dublin and am writing to tell you about a research study I am doing. Through this research, I am hoping to better understand parent-child relationships. There are a growing number of non-traditional families (such as single-parent families, stepfamilies, and remarried families) in Ireland. I am hoping to learn about the varying experiences of these families because there has not been much research in Ireland on this topic. This information will be used to better serve and support these families.

[Principal's name] has kindly agreed to facilitate this research by giving letters to all of the parents of the children at [school's name] on my behalf. I am hoping to talk to fathers/mothers, and possibly their spouses/partners, in these families. I am also hoping to talk with children about their experiences. As a thank you for participation, €50 will be given to each family.

Participating in this research would consist of hour long interviews. If possible, I would like to have a separate interview with mothers/fathers, spouses/partners, as well as one with your child, if they decide they'd like to have a chat with me. These would take place in your home, at Trinity College, or another location which is convenient for you. All information gathered would be completely confidential; there would be no way to identify your name or information in anything written about the research. Everyone who participates will be sent a copy of the findings from the study after it is completed.

If you are in a family like I described above, and think that you might be interested in finding out more about the research, I would be very grateful if you could contact me by text or telephone call at 086 725 6164, email me at hadfielk@tcd.ie, or write to me at the address below.

Thank you very much for your time!

Sincerely,
Kristin Hadfield
Áras an Phiarsaigh
School of Psychology
Trinity College, Dublin
086 725 6164
hadfielk@tcd.ie

Appendix F

COLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE, BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH | TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

19th December 2011

F.A.O. Kristin Hadfield

School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

Dear Kristin,

I am pleased to inform you that your application entitled "Development of stepfather-stepchild relationship" has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Tim Trimble
Chair
School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY
Aras an Phairsaigh
Trinity College
Dublin 2

Scoil na Síceolaíochta,
Dámh na nEolaíochtaí Sóisialta agus Daonna,
Áras an Phiarsaigh, Coláiste na Tríonóide.

School of Psychology,
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences,
Áras an Phiarsaigh, Trinity College.

T 353 (0)1 896 1836
F 353 (0)1 671 2006
psychology@tcd.ie

Appendix G

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
COLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE
THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN

What is the study about?
This study aims to improve our understanding of what adults and children do to get to know one another. We hope to find the ways in which these relationships develop. We are especially interested in families where the child lives with their biological parent and their parent's spouse or partner; these are sometimes referred to as stepfamilies.

Who are the study researchers?
Kristin Hadfield, a PhD student in the school of Psychology and Dr. Elizabeth Nixon, a lecturer in Developmental Psychology at Trinity College.

What happens if I agree to take part?
You will be asked to answer questions about your family, to give specific examples of important relationship moments, and to give demographic information. The interview will consist of questions about what you and your family do together, what you talk about, and generally how you get on. You can skip any questions that you don't feel comfortable with and can choose to stop the interview or take a break at any time.

Each interview should take about an hour. Some people may choose to talk for a much longer time or some may take much less time. The interview will be held in a place which is convenient and comfortable for you. It should be somewhere that we are unlikely to be interrupted – your home or Trinity College would probably work the best.

We hope to interview parents and children from the same family separately so that we can understand what part each of them has played in developing their relationship. Parent interviews would happen separately from child interviews.

What will happen to my information?
Everything that you say will be completely confidential. Although Kristin will be interviewing both parents and children, information from this interview with not be shared any other members of your family. Your interview will be audio-recorded and given a reference number so that nobody else will know who said what. Your interview will be transcribed and analysed along with interviews from other participants. The results will be written up as part of a PhD thesis. Quotes might be taken from your interview, but your identity will never be linked to the quotes. The original record of your interview will be stored exclusively in Trinity College in a secure location.

This research has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any questions, please contact:
Kristin Hadfield on 086 725 6164 or email hadfielk@tcd.ie or
Dr. Elizabeth Nixon, on 01 896 2867 or email enixon@tcd.ie

Appendix H

I have read the information sheet and agree to participate in an interview with Kristin Hadfield, a PhD student in the School of Psychology at Trinity College Dublin. ☐

I understand that taking part in this study will involve a one-on-one interview with Kristin Hadfield about family relationships. This interview will focus on questions about what my family does together, what we talk about, and generally how we get on. ☐

I understand that everything I say will be confidential and will be used only for the purpose of the research, except if I disclose information of a criminal nature. Information will not be shared with other members of my family. ☐

I understand that I can stop the interview at any time and do not have to answer any questions that I do not want to. ☐

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

If you have any questions about this study, please contact either:
Kristin Hadfield
(Primary Researcher)
hadfielk@tcd.ie
086 725 6164
or
Dr. Elizabeth Nixon
(Research Supervisor)
enixon@tcd.ie
01 896 2867

The School of Psychology, Áras an Phiarsaigh, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
http://www.psychology.tcd.ie/

Appendix I

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
COLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE
THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN

Thank you for taking part in this study, which is being conducted by a PhD student as part of a doctoral thesis for the School of Psychology at Trinity College, Dublin.

Everything you have said is confidential. The researcher has recorded your interview, and will assign you a reference number so that nobody else will know your identity. Your interview will be transcribed and analysed along with the stories of the other participants, and the resulting themes will be written up as part of a PhD thesis. Quotes may be taken from your interview for the research, but your identity will never be linked to the quotes. The original record of your interview will be stored securely in Trinity College for ten years.

If you feel that you have been emotionally affected by any of the issues raised in this research, please contact the researcher or research supervisor directly, or contact the following services, which are here for your support:

National Association for Parent Support (NAPS): Day – 0502 61666, Night – 0502 20598

Parentline: 1890 927 277

Treoir National Information Centre for Unmarried Parents: 01 670 0120, www.treoir.ie

Parenting advice website: www.rollercoaster.ie

If you have any questions, please get in touch with Kristin Hadfield at 086 725 6164 or email her at hadfielk@tcd.ie. This research is being carried out under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Nixon, who can be contacted at 01 896 2867 by email at enixon@tcd.ie.

The School of Psychology, Áras an Phiarsaigh, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
http://www.psychology.tcd.ie/

Appendix J

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN | THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN
COLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE

What is the study about?
This study aims to improve our understanding of what adults and children do to get to know one another. We hope to find the ways in which these relationships develop. We are especially interested in families where the child lives with their biological parent and their parent's spouse or partner; these are sometimes referred to as stepfamilies.

Who are the study researchers?
Kristin Hadfield, a PhD student in the school of Psychology and Dr. Elizabeth Nixon, a lecturer in Developmental Psychology at Trinity College.

What happens if I agree to my child taking part?
We are asking parents for permission to invite their children to take part in our study. Children whose parents sign a consent form agreeing for them to participate will then be asked to decide for themselves whether or not they would like to take part in the study.

What happens if my child agrees to take part?
If your child agrees to take part, he or she will have a one-on-one interview with Kristin. Your child will be asked to give specific examples of important relationship moments and asked questions about what your family does together, who your child talks to when they have a problem, and generally how your child gets on in the family. They do not have to answer the questions, can skip any questions that they do not feel comfortable with, and can choose to stop the interview or take a break at any time. Each interview should take about an hour. Some people may choose to talk for a much longer time or some may take much less time. The interview will be held in a place which is convenient and comfortable for you and your child. It should be somewhere that the interview is unlikely to be interrupted – your home or Trinity College would probably work the best. We also hope to interview stepfathers, but these interviews will happen separately from the child interviews.

What will happen to the information?
Everything that your child says will be completely confidential. Although Kristin will be interviewing parents and children, those interviews will be kept private from each other. Your child's interview will be audio-recorded and given a reference number so that nobody else will know who said what. Your child's interview will be transcribed and analysed along with interviews from other participants. The results will be written up as part of a PhD thesis. Quotes might be taken from your child's interview, but your child's identity will never be linked to the quotes. The original record of your child's interview will be stored exclusively in Trinity College in a secure location.
This research has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact:
Kristin Hadfield on 086 725 6164 or email hadfielk@tcd.ie or
Dr. Elizabeth Nixon, on 01 896 2867 or email enixon@tcd.ie

Appendix K

I, _____, have read the information sheet and agree for my child, _____, to be invited to participate in an interview with Kristin Hadfield, a PhD student in the School of Psychology at Trinity College Dublin. ☐

I understand that taking part in this study will involve my child having a one-on-one interview with Kristin Hadfield about family relationships. This interview will focus on questions about what my family does, what we talk about, and generally how my child gets on in the family. ☐

I understand that everything child says will be confidential – unless they reveal something that causes Kristin to worry about them – and will only be used for the purpose of the research. Information from my child's interview will not be shared with other members of my family. ☐

I understand that my child can stop the interview at any time and does not have to answer any questions that they do not want to. ☐

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

If you want to ask questions or get more information, please contact:

Kristin Hadfield
(Primary Researcher)
hadfielk@tcd.ie
086 725 6164

or

Dr. Elizabeth Nixon
(Research Supervisor)
enixon@tcd.ie
01 896 2867

The School of Psychology, Áras an Phiarsaigh, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
http://www.psychology.tcd.ie

Appendix L

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
COLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE
THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN

What is the study about?
This is a study about how families make relationships with one another. We hope to see what children and parents do that makes them feel closer or more distant from one another. We are especially interested in families where a child lives with their biological parent and their parent's spouse or partner; these are sometimes referred to as stepfamilies.

Who are the study researchers?
Kristin Hadfield, a PhD student in the school of Psychology and Dr. Elizabeth Nixon, a lecturer in Developmental Psychology at Trinity College.

What happens if I agree to take part?
What will happen is that you and I will chat alone and I will also chat alone with your other family members. I will ask you about your family. We hope to see what sorts of things you and your parents do together, what you talk about, and generally how you get on.

If, after we start talking, you decide that you don't want to do it, you can stop at any time. You only need to talk about what you want to talk about. If you don't want to answer a question, but you want to keep chatting with me, you can just tell me and I will move on to the next question.

There are no right or wrong answers. It is a not a test; I just want to know what you think and feel about things in your family.

What will happen to my information?
Everything that you talk to me about will be private and I will not discuss the information with anybody else except for my supervisor. I will be recording the interview so that I can listen to it later and type out everything that you've said, but I will use a number instead of your name so that nobody will know who you are or what you said except for you and me.

If you tell me something that makes me worry about your safety, I will have to discuss this with someone who looks after you, like a parent or another grown-up. I won't do this without telling you first. If you don't tell me anything that makes me worry about you, then everything that you say will be completely private.

If you have any questions, please get in touch with:
Kristin Hadfield on 086 725 6164 or email hadfielk@tcd.ie or
Dr. Elizabeth Nixon, on 01 896 2867 or email enixon@tcd.ie

Appendix M

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN | THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN
COLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE

You have been invited to take part in a study about families in Ireland. It is for a project which is being carried out by Kristin Hadfield, a student from Trinity College. This is a study about family relationships. It hopes to see what children and parents do that makes them feel closer or more distant from one another. I want to see how you get on with your family.

What will happen is that you and I will chat alone and I will also chat alone with your other family members. I will ask you about your family. Everything that you talk to me about will be private and I will not discuss the information with anybody else except for my supervisor. I will be recording the interview so that I can listen to it later and type out everything that you've said, but I will use a number instead of your name so that nobody will know who you are or what you said except for you and me.

If you tell me something that makes me worry about you, I will have to discuss this with someone who looks after you, like a parent or another grown-up. I won't do this without telling you first. If you don't tell me anything that makes me worry about you, then everything that you say will be completely private.

If, after we start talking, you decide that you don't want to do it, you can stop at any time. You only need to talk about what you want to talk about. If you don't want to answer a question, but you want to keep chatting with me, you can just tell me and I will move on to the next question.

There are no right or wrong answers. It is a not a test; I just want to know what you think and feel about things in your family. You can also ask me if you want a copy of what we have said after it has been typed up.

If you have any questions, please talk to:
Kristin Hadfield at 086 725 6164 or email hadfielk@tcd.ie, or
Dr. Elizabeth Nixon at 01 896 2867 or email enixon@tcd.ie

Appendix N

I have read the information sheet or had the information sheet read to me. ☐

I am happy to have a chat with Kristin about my family. ☐

I understand that I don't have to talk about anything that I don't feel like talking about. ☐

I know that my family will not get to see what I have said. If I tell Kristin something that makes her worry, she will have to tell my parent or teacher, but not without telling me first. ☐

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

The School of Psychology, Áras an Phiarsaigh, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
http://www.psychology.tcd.ie/

Appendix O

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
COLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE
THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN

Thank you for taking part in this study, which is being conducted by a PhD student as part of a research project for the School of Psychology at Trinity College, Dublin.

Everything you have said will be kept private. Kristin has recorded your interview, and will assign you a number so that nobody else will know what you said or that you talked with her. Your interview will be written down and studied along with the interviews of the other participants. The result will be written up as part of a PhD thesis. Kristin may include some of the things that you said in what she writes, but no one will know that you said it. Who you are will never be linked to what you said.

Sometimes children can feel a little bit upset after talking about their family, but not all children do. If any of the things that you talked about today have made you feel sad or upset, please talk to a parent, a grown-up that you can trust, or call any of the numbers below and they will do their best to help you.

You can also call Kristin or her supervisor if you wish.
Childline: 1800 666 6666
Children at Risk in Ireland Foundation: 1890 924 567 or 01 830 8529

If you have any questions, please talk to:
Kristin Hadfield on 086 725 6164 or email hadfielk@tcd.ie or
Dr. Elizabeth Nixon, on 01 896 2867 or email enixon@tcd.ie

The School of Psychology, Áras an Phiarsaigh, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
http://www.psychology.tcd.ie/

Appendix P

HH[a] Number	Interviewed Family Members	Number of Resident Adults	Number of Resident Children[b]	Number of Non-Resident Children[c]	Information about the Family
1	Eleanor, Andrew, Darragh, Aodhan	2	2	1	Eleanor (age 44) and Andrew (age 43) are married and have no shared children. Eleanor has two residential children – Darragh (age 13) and Aodhan (age 8). Previously, Eleanor had long-term, cohabiting relationships with both Darragh and Aodhan's fathers. Andrew is a non-resident father to an 18-year-old son, Ezra. Darragh has no contact with his biological father. Both Darragh and Aodhan have regular contact with Roger.
2	Brenda, Brendan	2	2	0	Brenda (age 30) and Brendan (age 27) are married and have a shared daughter, Ella (age 8 months). Brenda has a resident daughter, Caroline (age 8) from a previous long-term cohabiting relationship with Max. Max has subsequently married and had two other children. Caroline has regular contact with Max and his wife.
3	Éilís, Charlotte	2	3	0	Éilís (age 41) is living with her partner, Thomas (age 43) and her three children – Charlotte (age 15), Caleb (age 6), and Shane (age 2). The three children all have different fathers; neither Caleb nor Shane has any contact with their fathers but Charlotte has frequent contact with her father, Fergus.
4	Brian, Aileen	1	0	1	Brian (age 35) is a non-resident father to his daughter, Nellie (age 4). He is dating Aileen (age 27); they are not currently living together but intend to in the near future. Brian has regular contact with his daughter. Nellie lives with an older half-sister that Brian previously acted as a stepfather to but now has no contact with.

5	Judy, James	2	1	3	James (age 38) is dating and living with Judy (age 27). They have a shared son, Braden (age 10 months), and Judy is a non-residential stepmother to James' three other sons – Wesley (age 11), Oscar (age 8), and Diarmuid (age 4). Wesley, Oscar, and Diarmuid live with their biological mother and see James and Judy regularly. Wesley, Oscar, and Diarmuid have a stepfather who has been living with them for two years.
6	Cathleen, Liam	2	3	0	Cathleen (age 35) is married to Colin (age 35) and they have two shared children, Adrian (age 7) and Daithi (age 4). Cathleen has a son, Liam (age 18), from a previous, residential relationship as a teenager. Liam's biological father is married and has another child. Liam has no contact with his father or his father's wife.
7	Emily, Evan, Philip	1	2	0	Emily (age 38) is in a non-residential romantic relationship. Emily had a long-term, residential relationship with the father of her two sons, Evan (age 15) and Philip (age 13). Their father has subsequently married and has three other children. Evan and Philip have no contact with their father or his wife.
8	Mia, Kyle, Fearghal	1	2	0	Mia (age 38) is a single mother to Kyle (age 13) and Fearghal (age 13). Mia was in a non-residential relationship with Kyle and Fearghal's biological father. Their father has subsequently married and has three other children. Mia dated a few people seriously and was engaged to one, but none were residential. Mia is not currently in a relationship. Kyle and Fearghal split their time equally between living at their father's and at Mia's.
9	Paula, Angus, Aiden	2	1	0	Paula (age 54) in a long-term, cohabiting relationship with Angus (age 55). Paula was married to Aiden's (age 18) father and they had five children together, including Aiden; they split up soon after Aiden was born. Aiden's father was in a long-term relationship but is not any longer. Aiden has regular contact with his father.

10	Amelia, Asher	2	1	0	Amelia (age 26) is married to Asher (age 25); they have no shared children. Amelia has a residential daughter, Hazel (age 5) from a previous, long-term, off-and-on relationship with Benjamin.
11	Ashling, Hugo	1	1	0	Ashling (age 55) is the resident mother of Hugo (age 14) and is in a non-residential romantic relationship with Emmett (age 57). In addition to Hugo, Ashling has two adult daughters. Ashling was married to Hugo's father. Hugo's father died when Hugo was 11. Emmett is divorced and has adult children from his former marriage.
12	Jenny, Felix, Leo	1	3	0	Jenny (age 44) is a single mother to Felix (age 9), Leo (age 9), and Owen (age 6). Jenny was in a long-term, cohabiting relationship with Felix and Leo's father, Albert. Jenny was in a short relationship with Owen's father, Elijah. Albert has married his subsequent partner, Darina, and has had three further children. Elijah is in a committed, cohabiting relationship with a subsequent partner, Nisha. Jenny has had non-residential romantic relationships since her break-up with Elijah, but is not currently in a relationship. Felix and Leo have frequent contact with Albert, Darina, and their children – their custody is split between Jenny and Albert. Owen has sporadic contact with Elijah and Nisha.
13	Albert, Darina	2	5	0	Albert (age 43) is married to Darina (age 33); they have three shared children, Holly (age 5), Erin (age 2), Victoria (age 1). Albert has two children, Felix (age 9) and Leo (age 9) from a previous long-term, residential relationship with Jenny (age 44). Felix and Leo spend half of their time with Albert and Darina and half of their time with Jenny. Jenny also has a son from a subsequent relationship, so Felix and Leo have half-siblings in both households.
14	Mairead, Gavin	1	3	0	Mairead (age 34) is a single mother to Harry (age 16), Gavin (age 13), and Brent (age 9). Mairead was married to the father of her children, Rodney. Mairead had one short-term relationship since she and Rodney split up. Harry, Gavin, and Brent have frequent contact with their father but live with Mairead. Rodney has not dated anyone since he and Mairead separated.

15	Jane, Logan	1	1	0	Jane (age 52) is a residential single mother to Logan (age 9). Jane was in a long-term, residential relationship with Logan's father, Timothy. She also has a non-resident son, Rhys (age 25), from a previous relationship. Timothy has subsequently had a son, Jaden (age 7), with his residential partner, Eimear. Logan has regular contact with Timothy but sporadic contact with Eimear.
16	Hailey, Blaine	1	1	0	Hailey (age 35) is a residential single mother to Blaine (age 9). Hailey has been separated from Blaine's father for 6 years, but for financial reasons they share a household when Blaine's father is in town. Hailey has had four non-residential relationships since her separation but is not currently in a relationship. Blaine's father is not currently in a relationship.
17	Caoimhe, Cathal	5	1	0	Caoimhe (age 45) is in a residential romantic relationship with Anthony (age 52); they have no shared children. Anthony has three resident adult children from a previous relationship, Cormac (age 22), Gabriel (age 25), and Aurora (age 21). Caoimhe has one son, Cathal (age 9) from a previous residential relationship with Brian. Brian is in a cohabiting relationship with Li-Hua and they have a daughter (age 10 months). Cathal has regular contact with his father and Li-Hua.
18	Cora, Ronan, Charlie	2	2	0	Cora (age 38) is married to Ronan (age 37) and they have one child together, Oliver (age 2). Cora has a son, Charlie (age 10) from a previous marriage to Faolán. Faolán had three children with a subsequent partner and is now living with another partner, Elizabeth, and her son, Graham. Charlie has sporadic contact with his father.
19	Oonagh, Lochlan	1	1	0	Oonagh (age 43) is the single mother of Lochlan (age 11). Oonagh was in short-term, non-residential relationship with Lochlan's father, Michael. Michael subsequently married Cecilia. Lochlan lives with Oonagh but has regular contact with Michael and Cecilia. Oonagh has not had any serious relationships since Lochlan was born.

20	Roisín, Harry, Harper	2	1	0	Roisín (age 27) is cohabiting with Harry (age 26); they have no shared children. Roisín has a residential daughter, Harper (age 11), from a short-term teenage relationship with Chad. Harper has regular contact with Chad. Chad has had a few romantic relationships since Harper was born but is not currently in a relationship.
21	Julia, Ryan, Jace	2	3	0	Julia (age 35) is married to Ryan (age 36) and they have two daughters, Leah (age 5) and Meaghan (age 4). Julia has a residential son, Jace (age 11) from a previous residential relationship with Colm. Colm was in a residential relationship that has dissolved and he is currently single. Jace has sporadic contact with Colm.
22	Sorcha, Bronagh, Desmond	1	2	0	Sorcha (age 31) is a single mother to Bronagh (age 12) and Desmond (age 11). Bronagh and Desmond have different fathers. Sorcha had a short-term relationship with Bronagh's father as a teenager and was in a cohabiting relationship with Desmond's father, Niall. Neither Bronagh nor Desmond have any contact with their fathers. Sorcha has had both a residential and non-residential relationship since splitting up with Niall but is not currently in a relationship.
23	Aoibhinn, Sadhbh, Aifric	3	3	0	Aoibhinn (age 50) is a single mother to five children: Russell (age 20), Vincent (age 20), Naoise (age 18), Sadhbh (age 13), and Aifric (age 11). Aoibhinn was married to Daire when the children were born. Subsequently, Daire cohabited with Siobhan for many years but their relationship recently dissolved. Siobhan has two non-resident adult daughters. Daire has regular contact with all five children. Aoibhinn was in a non-residential romantic relationship with Erwin, who has five children of his own, but their relationship recently dissolved.
24	Stacy, Sadie	1	2	0	Stacy (age 46) is a single mother to Sadie (age 16), Joshua (age 6), and three adult daughters. Stacy and Joshua live with Stacy and have different fathers. Stacy was in a short-term non-residential relationship with Sadie's father. He had a child with another woman shortly after Sadie was born. Sadie's father died a number of years ago. Stacy was in a long-term non-residential relationship with Joshua's father, Jerry, but that has

					recently dissolved. Jerry has regular contact with Joshua but only sees Sadie when he visits Joshua.
25	Aideen, William	1	1	0	Aideen (age 37) is in a non-residential relationship with William (age 39); they have no shared children. Aideen has a residential son, Zachary (age 5), from a previous non-residential relationship with Tomm. William has a non-residential son, Ryan (age 10 months), resulting from an affair he had during his relationship with Aideen. Zachary has regular contact with his father.
26	Ava, Penelope, Silas	1	2	0	Ava (age 40) is a single mother to Penelope (age 14) and Silas (age 10). Penelope has sporadic contact with her father, Fabian, and Silas has no contact with his father, Alain. Ava was in a short-term non-residential relationship with Fabian. Fabian is in a cohabiting relationship with Sarah; they have an infant daughter together and Sarah has a son from a previous relationship. Ava was in a non-residential relationship with Alain that switched to an on-off residential relationship with him until Silas was 7. Alain is also the father of Ava's sister's two older children, Susan and Evelyn. Ava has been in two residential lesbian relationships – with Violet and Julia. Ava is still in a romantic relationship with Julia but they are no longer cohabiting.
27	Mary, Fiachra	1	2	0	Mary (age 37) is in a non-residential relationship with Lucas (age 37); they have no shared children. Mary has two children from previous relationships, Fiachra (age 11) and Bobbi (age 4). Mary was in a long-term cohabiting relationship with Fiachra's father, Walter, and had a short-term, non-residential relationship with Bobbi's father. Walter is married and has had four subsequent children. Fiachra has sporadic contact with Walter. Bobbi's father had another child shortly before she was born and has no contact with her. Mary was in a long-term, residential relationship with Isaac prior to

					her relationship with Lucas. Bobbi calls Isaac "daddy" and has sporadic contact with him, but Lucas only has contact with him when Isaac picks Bobbi up for time together.
28	Sinead, Samuel	1	1	0	Sinead (age 35) is a single mother to Samuel (age 11). Sinead was in a short-term, non-residential relationship with Samuel's father, Don. Sinead was in a residential relationship with Atul when Samuel was younger but had not been in any serious relationship since. Don was in a non-residential relationship with Jessica which has dissolved. Don is now in a non-residential relationship with Florence. Samuel has sporadic contact with Don.
29	Katalin, Tristan, Willow	1	2	0	Katalin (age 46) is the single mother of Tristan (age 11) and Willow (age 9). Katalin was in a short-term, casual relationship with Tristan and Willow's father, Gary. Gary has two non-resident adult children – Travis and Madison – from a previous relationship. Tristan and Willow have sporadic contact with Gary. Katalin was in a non-residential relationship with Enda, but this relationship has dissolved.

Note: For purposes of this chart, "frequent contact" is every day or few days, "regular contact" is weekly or bi-weekly contact, "sporadic contact" is every month or less but at irregular intervals, and "no contact" means that the child(ren) do not currently have any contact with their non-resident parent. Some of these families have had different patterns of contact over time – this table refers to their level of contact at the time of the interview.

[a] HH = household

[b] Resident children are adopted, step, or biological children aged 18 and under who live at least half the week in that household.

c Non-resident children are adopted, step, or biological children aged 18 and under who live less than half the week in that household. They are only counted as a non-resident child if they are the child of one of the adults living in the household. For example, a household would have a non-resident child if the stepparent had a child from another relationship who primarily lived in another household.