Stepsibling interactions: a grounded theory approach

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Stepsibling interactions: A grounded theory approach

by

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This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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INTRODUCTION

A variety of family patterns exist in contemporary American society. One of the more prevalent family types is stepfamilies due to several trends. Remarriage due to divorce or death is the most frequently recognized mode of stepfamily formation. However, stepfamilies are also formed when a woman with a child born outside of marriage marries for the first time and when couples with children from prior relationships cohabit (Ganong & Coleman 2004). As a result of the prevalence of these diverse family patterns, approximately one-third of all children will live in a remarried or cohabiting stepfamily before they reach adulthood (Bumpass, Raley & Sweet 1995). This does not even include step-relationships of family members who reside in different households. Although not all people who are technically members of a stepfamily have regular contact with their stepparents or stepsiblings, the majority of children who enter into a stepfamily do have continuous relationships with a variety of step-relatives. Close to two-thirds of all children entering into a stepfamily will acquire either a resident half- or a step-sibling (Bumpass 1984).

In conjunction with the increased prevalence of family patterns which lead to the formation of stepfamilies, there has been a considerable amount of research conducted on this topic. The research has covered a wide range of interest areas including the marital relationship within the stepfamily, the stepparent-child relationship, and society’s acceptance of stepfamilies (Ihinger-Tallman 1988; Ganong & Coleman 2003). However, stepfamily research often fails to include stepsiblings as a research focus. The limited amount of research that has been conducted on stepsiblings has focused primarily on recognizing the complex nature of stepfamilies with stepsiblings. In particular researchers have examined the difficulty
that stepfamilies have in defining the family and family relationships (Ganong & Coleman 2004; Hetherington, Henderson, Reiss, Anderson, Bridges, Chan, Insabella, Jodl, Kim, Mitchell, O’Connor, Skaggs, & Taylor 1999; Kaufman 1993). While a few others areas have been minimally studied (gender, residence, and age), the amount of research that has been conducted on stepsiblings has been extremely limited and has produced some conflicting results. It also tends to focus primarily on children and neglects young adult stepsibling relationships. In addition, researchers have often utilized a hypothetical situation approach where a specific statement is provided to the respondent in order to understand the stepsibling relationship or have asked a parent rather than the stepsiblings themselves to describe the relationship. Both of these methods make it difficult to fully grasp an understanding of the stepsibling relationship because the stepsiblings themselves are not reporting in their own words.

Despite the lack of attention researchers have shown toward this topic, the stepsibling relationship is an important aspect of the stepfamily and deserves greater recognition. Not only are stepsiblings present in many stepfamilies, but they also have an influence on the entire family system and the relationships that exists between the members (Duberman 1973, 1975; Einstein 1982). Remarriage and the formation of a stepfamily adds complicated layers to the family situation; however, when stepsiblings are also added into the family this adds yet another complex and possibly conflict-ridden level (Mekos, Hetherington, & Reiss 1996; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley 1987).

This study focuses specifically on the stepsibling relationship by addressing it from the perspective of stepsiblings themselves. For my purposes, the term ‘stepsiblings’ is not limited to those stepfamilies formed through marriage or only to those who live together. As such,
stepsiblings who live together and those who have not are included in the study. Research has also suggested that to limit the definition of stepfamily to married couples misclassifies a significant proportion of families and underestimate both the prevalence and the duration of the stepfamily experience (Bumpass et al. 1995). Therefore, stepsiblings formed through a cohabiting relationship are also included.

In order to adequately understand the core of the stepsibling relationship, I am applying a grounded theory approach to qualitative interviews of young adult stepsiblings. Through this method, the respondents are able to provide specific information relating to their relationships with their stepsiblings through the use of stories and related details. The study focuses specifically on three issues. First, I examine the development of a sibling-like relationship and how this is associated with relationship quality. Second, I explore what specific factors, such as biological siblings, age of relationship formation, age difference between stepsiblings, residence, and relationships with parents, lead to the formation of a sibling-like relationship. Third, I examine the respondents’ use of the term "step" when describing the relationship and the connection this has to their relationship quality.

This study will demonstrate that the stepsibling relationship is an important and vibrant part of the stepfamily relationship. Not only is the stepsibling relationship different than a sibling relationship in many aspects, but it also plays a role in the stepfamily dynamics through its connection to other relationships. The need to examine the stepsibling relationship in order to fully understand the stepfamily as a prevalent form of the family is emphasized in family systems theory. This understanding will help in the development of policies for counselors, schools, and officials to better assist stepfamilies in their formation of a stable and loving environment.
PREVALENCE OF STEPFAMILIES

Although stepfamilies have always been prevalent in society, today the way that stepfamilies are formed is drastically different. In earlier times, remarriages primarily occurred as the result of the death of a partner (Ganong & Coleman 2004). However, in contemporary American society, divorce has become much more common. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 9.7% of the total population was currently divorced in 2000. Despite the increased number of divorces, however, this does not suggest that people do not wish to be married. Instead, we find people entering into remarriages because they are given the option of divorcing one person and marrying a different person, which the majority of divorced people do. Wilson and Clarke (1992) found that not only do the majority of divorced individuals remarry, but the median interval between divorce and remarriage in the United States is less than four years. As a result, about half of all marriages in the United States involve at least one previously married partner (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

It is also important to recognize that not all stepfamilies are formed when a person remarries. Some first marriages also create stepfamilies when a never married parent (usually the mother) marries an individual who is not the child’s parent (Ganong & Coleman 2004). Although this type of stepfamily is common in society, little research has been conducted about first marriage stepfamilies and, as a result, very little is known about them (Bernhardt & Goldscheider 2001). This is primarily a result of the invisibility factor associated with this type of stepfamily. Research conducted by Filinson (1986) found that these families generally do not identify themselves as stepfamilies. Regardless, it is important to include first marriage
stepfamilies in the study of stepfamilies in order to obtain a complete understanding.

In addition to stepfamilies formed through first marriages, cohabitation may also create a stepfamily. Recently, studies have indicated that cohabitation is on the rise and as remarriage rates have declined, cohabitation among the formerly married has increased (Cherlin & Furstenberg 2000). Research indicates that those who do not marry immediately after divorce often enter into a cohabiting relationship, with one-quarter of cohabiting couples marrying within the first year and another half marrying within five years (Bumpass et al. 1995). Therefore, through cohabitation, stepfamilies continue to be a prevalent family form, despite the absence of a legal marriage.

It is also important to keep in mind the potential for a stepfamily to exist despite shared residence. Although research has suggested that approximately a third of all children will live in a remarried or cohabiting stepfamily (Bumpass et al. 1995), the number of people associated with a stepfamily despite an unshared residence is unknown. Specifically, this issue arises when an individual lives with one biological parent, but has a stepparent through their nonresidential biological parent. The relationship and stepfamily status still exists in this realm, however. Therefore, a nonresidential stepfamily is another potential mode of entry into a stepfamily found in society today.

The prevalence of stepfamilies undoubtedly forms a variety of new relationships, including ones which affect children. When cohabitation is taken into account, about 30% of all children are likely to spend some time residing with a stepparent (Bumpass et al. 1995). However, it should be noted that this number does not even include the number of children who are part of a nonresident stepfamily because they live with the opposite parent. As a result of the potential to be part of a non-residential stepfamily, the exact number of stepsibling
relationships is unknown.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Family Systems Theory

A variety of theoretical approaches have been applied to better understand the prevalence of stepfamilies and their complexity. One of the most commonly employed theories is the family systems theory which provides the opportunity to examine the stepsibling relationship and its influence on the stepfamily by looking at the family as an interconnection of relationships. This theory examines the influence that internal and external factors have on individual relationships and on the entire family (Cheal 1991).

Family systems theory has a structural-functional background and was first introduced by Kanton and Lehr in 1975 who adapted it from an interdisciplinary general systems theory (Cheal 1991). Another key contributor to the formation of the family systems theory was Hill (1977) who saw the family as a system because of the interdependence that exists between the family members, in the sense that a change in one family member produces a change in the other members. Hill also contributed to the understanding of the family as a partially closed system that has internal issues excluded from society, but one that also has external issues which can be affected by society and affect society, such as the economic well-being of the nation affecting family relations.

According to Barnes, Thompson, Daniel, and Burchardt (1997) there are many advantages to using family systems theory to understand the family unit and the different forms that it may take. As such, these recognized advantages can easily be adapted to the stepsibling relationship. First, it allows for an understanding of the complex sets of
relationships in terms of patterns, rules, and beliefs. In each family certain rules are developed over time and become taken-for-granted aspects of what events occur in daily life. In a stepfamily, both families have their own pattern of everyday interaction, such as family traditions, which are merged together into one when the stepfamily forms. The theory presents the prospect of looking at the difficulty that occurs when a stepfamily is formed (Barnes et al. 1997). For example, when individuals are not open to changes in this regard, they may resent a new stepsibling entering into the family because of the changes that this brings. In addition, stepsiblings may have different beliefs because of the life experiences that they have had or are currently experiencing. Particularly when a large age difference is present, the stepsiblings have the potential to have completely different experiences which makes it difficult to find a common ground in order to form a relationship.

The second advantage is that family systems theory provides the opportunity to look at how the family unit changes with the various entrances and exits that occur from the system. In stepfamily formation the whole family system, as well as the functioning of the subsystems and individuals within the family, is altered when the two families are merged into one. It requires redefinition of the external boundaries involving who is a family member and who is not. It also requires redefinition of internal boundaries involving rules, roles, alliances, and membership within the family (Hetherington et al. 1999). Overall, the nature of the family changes as new members are added or subtracted because these changes affect the functioning position of each member and create new roles that have to be filled (Papero 1990). For instance, individuals may have specific roles based on their gender and age which change as the two families combine into one stepfamily and new children enter into the family. This can be even more complex when there are both residential and nonresidential children present,
which is often the case in a stepsibling relationship. This creates even more questions about the boundaries of the family unit in regard to defining who is a member of the family, as well as establishing what roles and functions the members fulfill (Erera 2002). This aspect can be extremely difficult for families to adjust to and has a profound effect on the interactions that occur between stepsiblings. Therefore, the family systems theory provides the opportunity to examine these issues, family definition and role changes, which research has suggested indicate the quality of the relationship as a whole (Ihinger-Tallman 1988; Levin 1993).

The third advantage is that family systems theory presents the opportunity to explore the closeness and distance that exists between all levels of analysis (Barnes et al. 1997). These types of boundaries can refer to the relationships between individuals in the family, between subsystems within the family, and between the family and its' external relationships (Freeman 1993). Separate from the family connection, stepsiblings have the potential to form coalitions for the purpose of engaging in conflict or for solidarity reasons (Schvaneveldt & Ihinger 1979). In addition, stepsiblings each have varying levels of impact on an individual's life depending on the number of stepsiblings, the stepsibling's gender, and the age differences. Stepsibling relationships also have the potential to influence and be influenced by other family relationships, suggesting that stepsiblings have an impact on the socialization and interaction process within the family unit (Burr, Reuben, Nye, & Reiss 1979). In addition, the more children that exist in a family the more permeable the boundaries are because of a greater potential for more outside influence from external relationships. Therefore, the quality of boundaries depends on the degree of permeability or flexibility, whether outsiders are allowed into the family and whether family members can develop relationships outside of the family unit (Freeman 1993).
Overall, the family systems theory is often applied to the study of siblings and stepsiblings (Hetherington et al. 1999; Burr et al. 1979; Papero 1990; Barnes et al. 1997). This is because it provides the opportunity to examine behavior from a circular viewpoint where there are reciprocal relationships and behavior is based on interactions. Family systems theory provides a comprehensive analysis that includes society, family, parts of the family, persons, and the relationships between elements at all levels (Montgomery & Fewer 1988).

**PREVIOUS LITERATURE**

As previously mentioned, the amount of stepsibling literature has been extremely limited. Although researchers have collected data on stepsiblings, the majority of it uses the parents as respondents for the actual stepsiblings or provides specific statements to respondents where they are to reflect on what the interaction would be in the given situations. However, these specific situations may not actually apply in each individual stepsibling relationship, whereas in-depth interviews with open-ended questions provide respondents with the opportunity to reflect on interactions unique to their situation. In addition, researchers have focused primarily on stepsiblings who are young children. Therefore, due to the methods used to collect data on stepsiblings and the limited population, not only have conflicting results emerged, but all conclusions should be taken with caution. However, despite the limitations, there have been some important contributions to the literature.

*Why stepsiblings are important*

Within stepfamilies there are a variety of subsystems. The interconnection between them and the influence that each has on the entire family system is the reason why it is
important to examine each relationship, including the stepsibling relationship. Specifically, previous researchers have connected the stepsibling relationship to the stepparent-stepchild relationship, stepfamily integration, and the nonresidential parent. In relation to this idea, Rosenberg and Hajfal (1985) have argued that there is a "driopolator" and "percolator" effect present in stepfamilies. The driopolator effect suggests that the relationships at the top filter down to the bottom, such as the marital relationship influencing the children, which would include the stepsibling relationship. The percolator effect is the idea that relationships at the bottom influence those at the top, such as the stepsibling relationship influencing the marital relationship and other family dynamics. It is also important to note that both driopolator and percolator effects can be present in a stepfamily. Depending on the specific family dynamics and situational factors present, relationship influence has the potential to be circular with each relationship influencing all other relationships.

Research conducted by Ambert (1986) found that nearly one-third of stepparents with live-in stepchildren and over half of those with non-residential stepchildren indicated that their marriage would be happier and more harmonious without stepchildren. In addition, Ganong and Coleman (1993) found that having both stepchildren and biological children created tension for the parents. This influence could be because of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, the stepsibling relationship, or some other factor. The majority of the research in this regard, however, has focused on the stepparent-stepchild relationship and the influence that it has on family functioning, similar to the percolator effect (Crosbie-Burnett 1984; Duberman 1973, 1975; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Lofquist 1994; Wallerstein & Kelly 1980; White & Booth 1985). In fact, Crosbie-Burnett found that stepfather-stepchild relationships accounted for 59% of the variance in overall family happiness. In addition, White and Booth
found that the presence of stepchildren is a "destabilizing influence" within remarriages and one of the main contributors to the greater risk of divorce that exists between remarried couples. Although, they specifically were not connecting the influence to stepsiblings, it is important to recognize the potential influence that could exist from one relationship to the other.

In regard specifically to the stepsibling relationship and its connection to other relationships and family functioning, two areas have been examined by researchers, stepparent-stepchild relationship influencing the stepsibling relationship and the stepsibling relationships' influence on the entire family. Most researchers have suggested that the stepsibling relationship is partially dependent on the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Duberman 1975). In relation to this, Ganong and Coleman (2004) suggest that when the stepparent-stepchild relationship is friendship-based this is likely to elicit opposition from anyone who otherwise might feel threatened, such as a stepsibling who feels jealous of the relationship. The potential for jealousy was a main focus within this topic; many researchers recognized that stepsiblings often compete for a variety of resources: space, possessions, and attention. Specifically, children frequently view their parents as their personal possessions; therefore, when stepsiblings appear to be winning their parent's affection, children can feel threatened and this can affect the stepsibling relationship (Beer 1991; Furstenberg 1987; Kaufman 1993; Lutz 1983; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman 1982).

The second area of focus that researchers have examined in regard to stepsibling relationships is their influence on family integration. Supporting Rosenberg and Hajfal's (1985) percolator effect, researchers have suggested that the better the relationship between stepsiblings the stronger the family (Duberman 1973, 1975; Einstein 1982).

Another possible influencing relationship that some researchers have examined is the
outside, nonresidential parent. Some researchers have put considerable emphasis on this individual and suggest that the stability of the stepfamily depends, at least partially, on how much the noncustodial parent accepts the new stepfamily (Einstein 1982; Franks 1988; Kaufman 1993; Ihinger-Tallman 1988; Visher & Visher 1985). These researchers suggest that when the noncustodial parent does not want the child to get along well in the new stepfamily, perhaps because of fear of losing the child to the new family (Visher & Visher 1985), this interference can have considerable influence on the stepfamily cohesion and the relationships that form, including stepsibling relationships. As a result of loyalty conflicts for the child as they attempt to balance a relationship with a noncustodial parent and a custodial parent, the child may not form a positive quality relationship with their stepsibling if they feel pressure from the opposite parent (Berger 1994; Rosenberg 1988). Despite these assumptions, other researchers have claimed that the relationship with the outside parent does not influence the stepfamily and the relationships within it (Furstenberg 1985; Pink & Wampler 1985). Specifically, Furstenberg found that less than 10% indicated that the nonresidential parent interfered with the stepfamily relations. Therefore, although the outside parent has the potential to be an influential character in the new stepfamily and new stepfamily relationship such as the stepsibling relationship, research has not consistently supported this theory.

Overall, many researchers have looked at the various stepfamily relationships and the influence that these relationships have on stepfamily integration, as well as the influence one relationship has on another. Research suggests that the stepparent-stepchild, stepsibling, and outside parent all have the potential to influence stepfamily cohesion. However, a greater amount of research is still needed examining the stepsibling relationship and its potential to be influenced by and to influence the other family relationships in order to have a complete
understanding of the interconnection between all family subsystems.

Are stepsiblings like siblings?

Stepfamily relationships are different than traditional family relationships, despite the fact that relationships in a stepfamily and a family both can be positive. In relation to this idea, Marsiglio (1992) used the term “fatherlike” to refer to positive stepfather-stepchild relationships. Specifically, he coined the term in relation to those stepfathers who perceive themselves as having a fatherlike role identity, which is positively related to the relationship quality between stepfather and stepchild. This research suggests that while a positive stepfather relationship is certainly possible and prevalent in a significant number of stepfamilies, the relationship is not exactly the same as a father-child relationship, instead it is “fatherlike.”

Also in relation to stressing the differences between stepfamily relationships and traditional family relationships, Rosenberg (1988) have classified nine unique characteristics of the stepsibling relationship. The first characteristic identified is the instantaneous nature of the relationship. Stepsiblings have not had the opportunity to adapt and accommodate to one another over many years as full siblings do. Second, unlike full siblings, stepsiblings lack a shared family history. Therefore, many of the customs, values, and family styles may differ. The third dimension is a commonality: stepsiblings share the loss of the original family. The struggle over this can cause stepsiblings to turn on one another in blame. Fourth, stepsiblings have to deal with conflicting loyalties, as they now have families ties connected to the old and new family. The fifth aspect of the stepfamily relationship involves the fact that often there are fluid boundaries and, depending on custody and visitation agreement, stepsiblings may not live
together permanently, but only on occasion. Sixth, the stepsibling relationship is affected by the shifts in sibling position, role, and function. The child that had been the oldest in one family may have to step down from his/her position when the new stepsiblings arrive. The stepsibling relationship is also affected by the abrupt change in family size, which involves sharing common economic and emotional resources. Eighth, sexual issues may arise in a stepsibling relationship because of the lack of guidelines associated with this area. The final area that may affect the stepsibling relationship is the incongruity between individual life cycle tasks and family life cycle tasks. For example, a child may be at the life stage where he/she is attempting to establish an identity apart from the family, while the newly remarried family needs its members to pull together. These characteristics are thought to play an important role in the interaction between stepsiblings, as well as identifying the unique relationship that exist between stepsiblings, as compared to siblings.

Quality of relationship

In regard to examining the quality of the stepsibling relationship, researchers generally have compared the relationships between sibling, halvesiblings, and stepsiblings. In general, researchers found that, compared to siblings, stepsiblings have less negative relationships (Ganong & Coleman 1993; Hetherington et al. 1999; Hetherington & Jodl 1994; Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier 2000). Initially, this is a surprising finding due to the recognition that when stepsiblings are added into a stepfamily it adds complex and possible conflict-ridden interaction (Mekos, Hetherington, & Reiss 1996; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley 1987). However, other researchers have recognized the fact that stepsiblings in general are less engaged emotionally (Hetherington et al. 1999; Ganong & Coleman 1993), which
suggests that stepsiblings have less negative relationships than siblings due to this lack of engagement.

Although there are no discrepancies in regard to the negative relationship between stepsiblings, there is inconsistency when examining the positive relationship between stepsiblings as compared to siblings. Hetherington et al. (1999) and Ganong and Coleman (1993) found that due to a lack of engagement, stepsiblings have less positive relationships than siblings. Deater-Deckard et al. (2002), however, found no differences between stepsiblings and siblings when it came to positive relationships. In this regard, although the research suggests that stepsibling relationships are less negative than other sibling relationships, few keep in mind that this is because they are less engaged.

In determining the quality of the relationship, many researchers have examined the fact that when the stepfamily is formed a stepsibling relationship is formed instantaneously. However, despite this instantaneous relationship formation, feelings between the stepsiblings are not automatic (Rosenberg 1988). There is no instant love or bond; instead, there is the perception of “us” and “them” found between stepsiblings (Beer 1991).

Stepsiblings are likely to consider one another outsiders from the outset. Each of these outsiders can be expected to vie for status and power within the framework of his or her newly expanded family network. Each new family member is likely to be very protective of his or her sphere of influence with the one person who, initially, is the only insider to them all—the remarried person. (Kaufman 1993:77)

Therefore, the general conclusion is that there is a definite distinction between the two groups when the stepfamily is first formed.

There is discrepancy in the evidence as to how stepsibling relationships change, which can affect the quality of the relationship. Many researchers suggest that stepsibling
relationships improve (Duberman 1973, 1975; Keshet 1987; Wallerstein & Kelly 1980) and that stepsiblings are important figures in an individual’s development, despite the fact that contact time may be limited (Ganong & Coleman 1993). In fact, Robinson and Smith (1993) argue that as the stepsibling relationships improve the whole stepfamily is able to relate to one another and work together in new ways. Furstenberg (1987) and Pink and Wampler (1985), however, suggest that few changes occur as time progresses and that the relationship does not become stronger over time, difficulties do not become resolved and family life, in general, does not become more harmonious. Specifically, Furstenberg found that the length of time in a stepfamily was not related to the acknowledgment of step-relations. In relation to this, Ganong and Coleman (1994) recognize the wide variation in the developmental course of stepfamily relationships and claim that the relationships do not automatically become closer over time.

Researchers also place emphasis varying degrees of emphasis on the acceptance level that individuals have of the situation in terms of the influence that this has on relationship quality. In this sense, the term "acceptance" is used when individuals have revolved their sense of loss about the dissolution of the past family and have accepted the present situation as permanent (Hetherington et al. 1999, Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman 1982, Robinson & Smith 1993). Specifically for those who claim that the stepsibling relationship does improve with time, they view stepfamily life as a process where adjustments take time. Therefore, the success of the adaptation and the time involved are dependent on whether acceptance has been reached. Those who suggest that the relationship does not improve put an even greater focus on the role of acceptance and claim that when individuals do not accept the situation this inhibits the ability to form a positive stepsibling relationship (Keshet 1987). Therefore, researchers, in general, place a considerable amount of worth on the acceptance level that
involved individuals have. They recognize that due to the instantaneous nature that many stepsibling relationships are formed, as well as feelings of loyalty for the outside parent or old family, new individuals may not be welcomed. Some researchers view this as one of many transitions that will occur as the stepfamily forms; others see it as one of the determining factors influencing the inability of a relationship to form over time.

Family Definition

Researchers have placed considerable emphasis on family definitions and have suggested that inconsistency in who belongs to the family indicates a lack of group cohesion and unity (Ihinger-Tallman 1988). In other words, there is ambiguity because stepfamily members, including stepsiblings, do not always include one another in their definition of family. This is unique to stepfamilies, as “In non-stepfamilies there is a ‘territorial’ definition of who are family members, where they live, and to which family unit they belong, but in stepfamilies it is not clear where the family ‘starts’ and ‘ends’” (Berger 1998:24). Specifically supporting this idea, Furstenberg (1987) found that 41% of children living in a stepfamily did not include one or more of their resident stepfamily members in their definition of family.

Levin (1993) argues that learning who is included in the family definition provides an understanding of the interactions and relationships between the members of the stepfamily. Although it has been assumed that a lack of cohesion within families is linked to negative relationship quality, these assumptions have been largely theoretical and researchers have not yet tested the link between family definition and relationship quality. Therefore, while research has consistently shown that stepfamily members do not always have unanimity in defining the members of the family, it is unclear whether lack of cohesion is negative.
Moderating factors

Researchers have examined a variety of factors that have the potential to influence the quality of the stepsibling relationship. Specifically, aspects such as residence, age, and gender have been emphasized.

Residence

Although not all researchers include non-residential stepsiblings in their studies, those who have examined this characteristic and its influence have found that, in general, stepsibling relationships are more positive when they live together (Ambert 1986; Duberman 1973; Einstein 1982). Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1982) and Rosenberg (1988) specifically recognized that when the children do not live together it causes problems for merging the different family cultures and in the formation of step-relationships, such as stepsibling, because issues are dealt with on an irregular basis. However, it should also be noted, that there are once again discrepancies in the research. While the majority of researchers found co-residence to be a positive attribute, Rudloff (1988) did not see it as having any sort of influence on the stepsibling relationships. In addition, Duberman (1975) concluded that while there are somewhat better relationships with those who live together, co-residence does not guarantee a positive relationship due to the fact that the individuals are not choosing to live together. Therefore, research suggests that stepsiblings who live together due tend to have more positive relationships. However, this characteristic in and of itself does not guarantee a positive relationship, nor is a positive relationship impossible without a shared residence.

Age

There is a variety of possible ways that researchers could examine the characteristic ‘age,’ such as the difference between the stepsiblings ages, the age an individual was when the
stepfamily formed, or the age order of the stepsiblings. However, the majority of researchers who have examined this variable have chosen to focus on the age of the child when the stepfamily was formed. In general, it has been concluded that stepfamily relationships are better when the child is younger (Einstein 1982; Marsiglio 1992). Specifically, Chapman (1991) recognizes adolescence as a particularly difficult time for step-relations to evolve, relating this to the idea that adolescents have a more defined concept of what a family is and, therefore, it is harder for them to adapt to new ideologies and a new culture. Also, the age of the children when the stepfamily forms influences their likelihood of having separate histories, traditions, and values, which will need to merge with the new family’s when the two different families come together (Berger 1994; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman 1982; Rosenberg 1988).

In regard to the age difference between stepsiblings, Rudloff’s (1988) research concluded that it had no effect on the quality of the stepsibling relationships. Other researchers, however, found the age order of stepsiblings to cause rivalry as they linked age order to a source of power (Beer 1991; Rosenberg 1988). Therefore, although researchers in general have concluded that age of relationship formation has an influence on relationship quality, due to the slim amount of research conducted about the other age-related characteristics the conclusions that can be made on these topics is rather limited.

**Gender**

Another characteristic that has been examined by researchers is gender; however, the limited amount of research that has been done has produced conflicting results. Beer (1991) concluded that gender was irrelevant and that positive relationships have the potential to form between opposite-sex and same-sex stepsiblings relationships. Rudloff (1988) also found that stepsibling closeness was not affected by the gender of the child; however, her results did
indicate that overall males and females both responded more favorably to male stepsiblings. On the other hand, Einstein (1982) and Duberman (1973) both discovered that opposite sex stepsiblings develop better relationships, which they contributed to the possibility of a sex interest developing into a friendship. Duberman results also indicated that if the oldest children from each original family were of opposite genders the overall family dynamic tended to be better. To conclude, although gender has been examined in regard to stepsiblings, there are few concrete results available in order to reach definite conclusions.

Methodological limitations

As mentioned earlier, the amount of previous research examining the stepsibling relationship has been scarce. Specifically, two limitations of the previous research need to be recognized. First, and most importantly, the majority of researchers have collected data through the use of a questionnaire or a questionnaire-formatted interview (Duberman 1973; Ganong & Coleman 1993; Hetherington et al. 1999; Rudloff 1988). In regard to the study conducted by Duberman, the questions asked about the stepsibling relationship were inadequate in number in order to obtain a complete analysis of the stepsibling relationship, as this was not the core focus of the research. The questionnaires used by the other researchers were more focused towards stepsiblings; however, they often consisted of asking for the response to hypothetical stepsibling situations in the form of statements. Specifically, Rudloff asked respondents to indicate on a scale ranging from “agree” to “disagree” in response to statements such as “I value this person highly” and “This person doesn’t have many qualities I would like to have.” However, because of the unique situation present in stepfamilies it can be difficult to obtain an understanding of stepsibling relationships through the use of statements
since certain situations might not be plausible in each individual specific family context. In addition, this method hinders the opportunity for stepsiblings to elaborate on the relationship and describe real-life conflicts and interactions, which are needed in order to obtain a complete understanding of each unique stepsibling relationship and how the relationship influences the entire stepfamily.

A second limitation of previous research involves who the researchers are surveying. In many studies the parents of the stepsiblings were questioned, instead of the children themselves (Ambert 1986; Duberman 1973, 1975). However, evidence indicates that parents are less insightful about the actual status of the children’s relationships than the children themselves (Elnekave 1991). Generally speaking, researchers examining stepfamilies also focus on families with minor children (Hetherington-Tallman 1988). Unfortunately, this is a very small percent of the population that is involved in stepfamilies and, while it is important, the other areas desire the same amount of attention and should not be overlooked.

There have also been studies that only asked the participants to answer questions in regard to one stepsibling (Hetherington et al. 1999; Lutz 1983). However, this severely limits the ability to obtain a complete analysis of the family system, considering that each subsystem influences the family in a unique way. By understanding the relationship that an individual has with each of his/her stepsiblings this will provide the opportunity to analysis what characteristics provide the foundation for a positive stepsibling relationship to develop and to compare between the relationships. Therefore, by asking participants about each stepsibling a better understand of the relationships will be obtained, as well as a more thorough examination of the stepfamily as a whole.

The most thorough stepsibling study conducted thus far was done by Beer (1991). He
conducted in-depth interviews with twenty young adults who had grown-up as a stepsibling and/or halfsibling. Despite the fact that his study does not contain the limitations indicated previously, it does have limitations. First, he only included in his sample those who had grown up as a stepsibling. Due to the fact that stepfamilies have the potential to form at a variety of different stages in an individual’s life, by limiting the sample in this way a number of potential stepsibling respondents were dismissed. In addition, comparisons could not be made in regard to the quality of relationship based on the age of relationship formation. The second limitation is that Beer only included respondents who had residential stepsiblings. Again, this severely limits the sample and dismisses any possible differences in relationship characteristics between residential and nonresidential stepsiblings. Third, the sample was limited to those stepfamilies formed through marriage. However, as discussed previously, by excluding stepfamilies formed through cohabitation, a skewed picture is presented in regard to the number of stepfamilies, as well as their duration. In short, Beer’s study does provide complete insight into the stepsibling relationship.

My study examines an often neglected issue in a new and unique way. Foremost, by utilizing a grounded theory approach through qualitative interviews respondents have the potential to describe their unique experiences with their stepsiblings. Respondents are not limited by a questionnaire format. In addition, they are not restricted to discuss their relationship with only one stepsibling; this provided me with the opportunity to compare relationships across different characteristics. Furthermore, by including those stepfamilies formed through marriage and cohabitation, as well as residential and nonresidential stepsibling, a variety of characteristics and situations will be present. Overall, through this inclusive approach, it will be evident which characteristics play a role in defining stepsibling
relationships and a greater understanding of the relationships and stepfamily dynamics will be obtained.
METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study uses a qualitative research method approach, face-to-face interviews. My sample consists of twenty-nine interviews with individuals who have at least one stepsibling. I used two specific criteria in my definition of a stepsibling in order to recruit respondents. First, respondents must be a member of a stepfamily in that their biological parents do not live together and their mother or father is remarried, or lives with another adult in a romantic relationship. The individual does not have to live with their remarried parent. Second, respondent's biological parent's new spouse or partner must have at least one child from a previous relationship. The other child may have lived with the respondent at one point in time; however, this is not necessary. The other child may also be someone with whom the respondent is in frequent contact; however, they may also be someone whom the respondent rarely sees or speaks with.

Open-ended questions were used in order to provide participants the opportunity to reflect on and discuss all possible factors influencing the relationship they have with their stepsiblings and to provide the chance for participants to discuss their stepsibling relationships in reference to all the stepsiblings that they may have. Specifically, the interviews focus on three issues. First, I explore what specific factors, such as gender, age, and residence, lead to the formation of sibling-like relationships. Second, I look at how these factors are associated with the quality of the stepsibling relationship. Third, I examine the respondents' use of the term "step" when describing the relationship and the connection this has to their relationship quality. In order to answer these questions, I used analytic induction through a grounded theory approach. This provided the opportunity to develop meaning and understanding
through the patterns and themes found throughout the data.

**Participants for study**

The participants were students at Iowa State University, a 4-year public university where the majority of students are traditional students. Iowa State University is located in Ames, Iowa and has an enrollment of 26,380 students, which is split between 21,354 undergraduate students and 4,618 graduate students. The general profile of the students indicates that 77% of the undergraduate students are from Iowa and 88% of them are white, which is a fairly good representation of the state’s race/ethnicity distribution (Iowa State University Website 2004).

The specific participants sampled for data collection were Iowa State students enrolled in the Introduction to Sociology course during the Fall of 2004. College students in general were selected for this research project because they are often a neglected group within the stepfamily literature, as previously discussed in the literature review chapter. However, I also chose this group to focus on because of their unique situation. At Iowa State University, as at many other traditional universities, the majority of students leave home to attend college. As a result, the interaction with their family has the potential to change, which indicates a potential change in stepsibling relationships as well. Therefore, by examining the stepsibling relationship during this period in an individual’s life, it allows for a unique perspective on the relationship. For instance, a respondent may have grown up living with their stepsibling; however, now that they are at college they may no longer even speak with that stepsibling, or perhaps the relationship grew even closer. Regardless of the specific outcome, this indicates something about the relationship and by examining the stepsibling relationship that students
have it allows the potential to understand a unique and often neglected subgroup of stepsiblings.

After deciding to use college students as respondents, I specifically selected the Introduction to Sociology course as the place to obtain volunteer participants for a variety of reasons. First, during the Fall semester approximately 750 students are enrolled in the course. Therefore, the potential to find students with a stepsibling who are willing to interview is high. Second, students can take the Introduction to Sociology course as a general education requirement for graduation. As a result, students from a variety of majors are enrolled in the course, which has the potential to form a more diverse group of respondents. Finally, due to the fact that the Introduction to Sociology students have the opportunity to attend and/or participant in a variety of campus activities for extra credit, I was able to offer participation in my study as a potential extra credit opportunity. Overall, the course was the ideal environment for me to find the sample that I needed for my study.

Any student enrolled in the Introduction to Sociology course who was a member of a stepfamily and had at least one stepsibling was recruited for the study. This was the only limitation put on the sample due to my desire to have participants with a variety of situations. As a result, the stepfamilies could be formed through marriage or cohabitation, the stepsiblings could be residential or nonresidential, and the stepfamily could have been formed at a variety of stages in the person’s life, just to name a few of the possible characteristics.

During the Fall semester of 2004, I initially contacted participants in the Introduction to Sociology course after permission was granted from the lecture and recitation instructors (recruitment flyer in Appendix A). After briefly explaining the study and its purpose, I invited eligible participants to provide me with their contact information through individual sign-up
sheets or by contacting me through e-mail or by telephone. I then used this contact information to provide the students with additional information about the study and to answer any questions they had about the research project. Assuming that the individual still wished to participate in the study at this point, interviews were arranged. Using this sampling technique, I was able to collect in-depth data about the stepsibling relationship.

As with any research design, issues of validity do exist. In-depth interviews, in general, require trust in the reliability and truthfulness of the information that the respondents are provide. The validity of the research can be threatened particularly in situations where the respondent may not feel comfortable disclosing personal information. However, I improved upon this by assuring confidentiality to all respondents and provided an environment of professionalism and comfort through a private room in the sociology building at the university. In addition, all interviews were voluntary; the respondents were not being forced to answer personal questions about their family life and they were reminded when initially volunteering and at the start of the interview that they can refuse to answer a question or stop the interview at any time. However, there is still the potential that those with extremely problematic stepsibling relationships did not volunteer to be interviewed or were the only ones eager to talk, which may have threatened my ability to analyze a complete variety of stepsibling relationships. Nevertheless, certain issues in regard to validity are always present in any form with research and all possible measures have been taken to validate this particular research project.

A final validity issue is the potential for Iowa State students' stepsibling relationships to be different than the experiences of other individuals in a stepsibling relationship. I have little reason to believe that the experiences of Iowa State students are different than a sample
from another similar university. The only possible difference would be in regard to my predominately white sample. Cherlin (1992) has recognized that race/ethnicity influences the likelihood of a stepfamily forming through marriage or cohabitation. In connection to this there is the potential to find differences in the stepsibling relationships formed through cohabitation and those formed through marriage. However, it should be noted that with my specific sample I found no differences between the stepsibling relationships formed through marriage and those formed through cohabitation. Therefore, I have little reason to question the validity of my results and, overall, I believe a study of Iowa State students about stepsibling relationships is a legitimate project.

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth interviews, which consisted of a variety of open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted in a quiet location in the sociology building on the Iowa State University campus. After the study was explained to the participants and any questions were answered, consent was obtained and the interviews began. With the participants’ permission, I audiotaped all interviews for later transcription.

The interview questions were developed with the assistance of my committee members. I also utilized the existing stepsibling literature in order to develop categories of questions that I was interested in learning more about for my project. The questions began with general probe questions about the respondent’s family history, in order to understand how they came to be in a stepfamily and to have stepsiblings. The initial questions also provided information in regard to the number of stepsiblings, the stepsiblings’ genders and ages and general
information in regard to the extent of contact between the respondent and their stepsiblings, such as residence information. From this point, specific questions were asked in regard to the respondents’ stepsibling relationship quality and whether the relationships are sibling-like. Questions were also asked about how the respondent would define their family and the use of the term ‘stepsibling’ or ‘sibling’ in reference to the relationship. Additional questions such as “How do you think people in society view stepfamilies?” were also asked. For a complete listing of interview questions, please refer to Appendix B.

After each question, I asked additional follow-up questions in an attempt to provide the respondent with the opportunity to elaborate on an idea or provide additional specific information relating to the response. The interviews were generally flexible and informal. When new ideas were expressed, I allowed the discussion to flow in that direction and did not limit the topics to those specifically indicated in the prepared questions. This allowed the respondent to feel comfortable expressing their experiences and opinions freely and provided me with additional insight into the dynamics of the stepsibling relationship. I personally conducted all of the interviews in order to assure reliability in this regard.

These open-ended questions were a vital part in providing validity to the conclusions that I reached. This allowed respondents the opportunity to provide me with the context and interactions that have occurred as a basis for why the stepsibling relationship exists as it does. By doing this, the specific experiences give validation to the quality of the relationship by providing numerous examples of different situations in order to allow me with an accurate understanding of the type of relationship that the stepsiblings have with one another. Therefore, when the data was analyzed, I was able to examine these specifics in order to assure that my conclusions in regard to the relationships are fully embedded in the data.
Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was conducted using a grounded theory approach, which allows the responses of the stepsiblings to be analyzed and coded throughout the data collection (Corbin & Strauss 1990). By utilizing this approach, understanding and meaning is derived from the analysis of the patterns and themes embedded in the data. Therefore, upon completion of an interview it was immediately transcribed in order to analysis and code specific categories, which were the main ideas that were continually presenting themselves in the interview. These categories were then used in relation to those found in the previous interviews and were reflected in the adaptation of the questions for subsequent interviews. In other words, new questions were developed and existing questions were evolved to reflect the new categories as they emerged in the previous interviews.

According to Glaser (1992), this methodological approach provides the opportunity to discover reality that is grounded within the data. However, it is not a "forced analysis" (Glaser 1992); instead, I was able to discover concepts and ideas about the stepsibling relationships as they arose throughout the data collection. For instance, early interviews suggested that the relationship between the respondent and their stepparent had an influence on the respondent’s relationship with their stepsiblings. Although this connection is family systems related, I had not initially questioned the students about this connection; instead I had placed focus on the stepsibling relationship having a potential influence on the marital relationship and family functioning as a whole. However, as this new relationship connection and other categories emerged I integrated them into the interviews that followed. Accordingly, this process continued to evolve when new interviews were conducted and categories were developed or dismissed. It continued until the categories were consistent and no new ideas within the data
were being discovered.

The categories were then used in order to develop concrete concepts in relation to the research topic. For example, “comfort zone” represented a category that contained stepsibling relationships in which the individuals were comfortable interacting with one another and expressing their opinions to one another. These people did not describe their experiences as awkward or uncomfortable when they spent time with their stepsiblings. This category was combined with “positive description,” which consisted of respondents’ describing their stepsiblings with characteristics such as intelligent, helpful, and friendly. These two categories and others illustrated the idea that stepsibling relationships have the potential to be a positive relationship. In addition, I analyzed the relationship quality and its connection to the respondent’s use of the term 'stepsibling' or 'sibling.'
FINDINGS

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the sample used in the study. In all, I interviewed 29 students from Iowa State University. Of the participants, 14 were male and 15 were female. The average age for the sample was 19.9, with an age range from 18 to 33. For males the average age was 20.9 and for females the average age was 18.9. The sample also consisted of 27 Caucasians, 1 male Hispanic, and 1 female African-American.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender of Respondent</td>
<td>Sample N %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14 48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15 52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race of Respondent</td>
<td>Sample N %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>27 93.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1 3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1 3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Respondent (yrs)</td>
<td>Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>18-33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study's sample is comparable of Iowa State University as a whole. This is supported in statistics from 2003 indicating that Iowa State University is 43.9% female and 88.0% Caucasian (Iowa State University 2004). Therefore, although the sample was not perfect, I believe the participants still provided valuable insight about the experience of being in a stepsibling relationship.
SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Table 2 shows the specific characteristics of the sample that relate to stepfamilies. In regard to stepfamily type, 26 were remarried stepfamilies and 3 were cohabiting stepfamilies. Twelve respondents had stepsiblings through their mother's side of the family, 10 had stepsiblings through their father's side of the family, and 7 had stepsiblings through both their mother's and father's side. Respondents had on average 2.6 stepsiblings, with the number of stepsiblings that they had ranging from one to six. On average, respondents were 9.7 years old when the stepsibling relationship formed and the age range for relationship formation was from 4 to 17.5. The average age difference between respondents and their stepsiblings was 5.4 years, with the age differences ranging from zero to 16 years. In regard to gender, 5 respondents had only male stepsiblings, 9 respondents had only female stepsiblings, and 15 respondents had both male and female stepsiblings. The total number of male stepsiblings was 27 and the total number of female stepsiblings was 43. Residence characteristics indicated that 9 respondents lived with their stepsiblings the majority of the time and 20 respondents did not.
### TABLE 2  Specific Characteristics of the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stepfamily type</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remarried Stepfamily</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting Stepfamily</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relatedness</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s side only</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s side only</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both sides</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Stepsiblings</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>1-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age of relationships formation (yrs)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>4-17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age difference between stepsiblings (yrs)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>0-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stepsibling’s gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Male</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Female</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Male and Female</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male stepsiblings</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female stepsiblings</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived with stepsiblings</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not live with stepsiblings</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RESPONDENTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR STEPSIBLING(S)**

In relation to the information presented through the interviews, I will discuss three aspects involving the respondents’ relationships with their stepsiblings. I will start with discussing how stepsibling relationships can be classified as sibling-like or neutral and the connection this has to relationship quality. From this point I specify the specific characteristics that determine that nature of the stepsibling relationship, including the presence of biological
siblings, age of relationship formation, age difference between stepsiblings, gender, residence, and relationship with parents. To end, I move towards "using the 'step' label" where the use of the term *stepsibling* or *sibling* is discussed in connection with relationship quality. Throughout the discussion of these various topics, respondents’ quotes and references to experiences that the respondents had with their stepsiblings are used to support the results that I present.

**POSITIVE/SIBLING-LIKE VS. NEUTRAL/NONSIBLING-LIKE**

As indicated in Figure 1, the interviews suggested that there are two different types of stepsibling relationships, those that are positive and sibling-like and those that are neutral and nonsibling-like. Although the potential to have negative stepsibling relationships exists, the interviews did not suggest that any of the respondents had a negative relationship. In addition, the interviews did not indicate the presence of any positive relationships that were nonsibling-like or any relationships that were neutral and sibling-like. Biological sibling relationships, however, are different than stepsibling relationships, as shown in the figure. According to the literature, regardless of the sibling-like nature of the relationship, biological siblings have the potential to have relationships that are positive, neutral, and negative (Ganong & Coleman 1993; Hetherington et al. 1999; Hetherington & Jodl 1994; Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Lussier 2000). Now that this distinction has been made, it is important to fully grasp what it means for a stepsibling relationship to be classified as either positive/sibling-like or neutral/nonsibling.
Positive/Sibling-like Relationship

Using the information provided to me by the respondents, I have classified a positive/sibling-like relationship as one that is similar to a sibling relationship. However, as previously discussed, this is not always the case for biological siblings. It is a relationship where the individuals involved have accepted the situation and are attached to one another. They have taken the necessary amount of time to get to know one another and have developed a sense of ease when they spend time together. It is not awkward because the stepsiblings feel comfortable around each other and feel free to express their own opinions and emotions.

When entering into a new family form, such as a stepfamily or a cohabiting family, individuals are going to have different levels of acceptance about the situation, as suggested by the respondents that I interviewed. From the very beginning, some were extremely unhappy about the situation, whereas others were excited to have a new family and were open to the change. The interviews suggested that the level of acceptance that the respondent had, initially and throughout the remarriage, about the changes that were occurring was an important aspect influencing the development of a positive/sibling-like relationship.

Particularly the respondents who did not have a close relationship with their
nonresidential parent or who had not had a positive experience when their biological parents were together welcomed the opportunity to have that long-awaited parental figure. These respondents were extremely accepting of the changes that were occurring and towards their new family members. This notion was particularly evident with one eighteen year-old male:

It actually made it a lot better because my real dad wasn’t a very good dad and they [mom and dad] were always in arguments and stuff so it actually helped a lot to get away from that, and my stepdad is a good dad so it changed my life a lot.

Therefore, by accepting the changes that were going on it allowed for the development of a positive/sibling-like relationship from the beginning.

It is also important to note that the majority did recognize the importance of accepting the situation if one wishes to form a relationship with the new family members. As one eighteen year-old male reflects,

I think that if you want to make it work, if you want a stepbrother or stepsister, than that helps the relationship a lot, but I guess if you don’t want one than it causes a lot of problem with fights in the family. I was fine with it. And they [stepsiblings] liked us [him and siblings] a lot and wanted a stepbrother and stepsister and that made our relationship a lot better when I saw them.

One of the primary things that the interviews suggested was that a positive/sibling-like relationship has gone through changes. Let me explain. When individuals feel neutral or unattached to their stepsiblings they don’t invest enough time or energy into the relationship to develop feelings of love or hate. However, in a sibling relationship individuals are free to express their anger and their love towards one another at various stages because they are emotionally invested enough in the relationship to have those feelings. The individuals I interviewed who had a positive/sibling-like relationship were emotionally invested and had gone through changes in their relationship. This idea is supported by one eighteen year-old
female as she talks about her relationship with her stepsiblings.

My stepsister is two years younger, so she’s 16 now. We had a really good relationship up until when she went to high school with me because then she was into the whole cheerleading and popular stuff and I wasn’t I was just more ‘chill’, she was kind of bratty and got into the party scene and kind of made a bad name for our family a little bit. There were a lot of rumors going around about her that I always got to hear but I never told her any of them and then my younger stepbrother he was five when they got married and he’s like the coolest kids in the world. It was during the first two years that he had a horrible temper and I wanted to shoot him, but he got older and got better and now he’s just the coolest kid in the world and I hang out with him and stuff.

As you see, this respondent has experienced changes with the relationships that she has with her stepsiblings and, in fact, now that she is in college instead of high school her relationship with her stepsister has changed again. Regardless of the stage that her relationships are with her stepsiblings, the fact that they have changed indicates that she is invested in the relationships with her stepsiblings.

For many respondents with a positive/sibling-like relationship, they could remember the exact occasion that changed their relationship from one that was neutral and unattached to one that was positive. As suggested by one twenty-six year-old male:

When I was younger because when people are picking on you when you’re younger you view that as more that someone doesn’t like you and I can remember when some of their friends were picking on me, but I can also remember the change, I can remember the day, I can remember the kid it happened with, and everything else when my stepbrothers laid down the law because down there my stepbrothers were the big guys, they were the tough guys and no one could whoop them, whereas at home I was the tough guy and no one could whoop me. But, I remember the day and what happened exactly when it changed from anybody can pick on me to only they can pick on me and if anyone else picked on me that was their ass. We were out playing basketball and they were picking on me, picking on me, picking on me and I got mad and tossed the basketball at a kids head and smacked him with it and well he got up and I knew that it was my ass now so I took off for home. I got about twenty feet from the back door and he tackled me and
I thought it was my butt, but my stepbrother came over and said look and tossed him off me. And that day and that event was probably a major change in the way I looked at my brother [stepbrother] and I was like, hey, well, maybe he’s not such a jerk, he just saved me from getting my butt kicked.

As the respondent, this incident was the start of a change in his relationship with his stepbrother. They were invested in their relationship, just as siblings are, and his stepbrother was protecting him from a fight because he cared about the well-being of another family member.

These changes, which indicate a positive/sibling-like relationship, do not necessarily have to take years to occur, however. In other stepsibling relationships the changes are more on a day-to-day basis. The individuals are comfortable with one another enough to express the daily annoyances when they experience them. This idea is evident as one twenty-one year-old male respondent discussed his relationship with his younger stepbrother.

He (stepbrother) likes to stay up and play Halo and I like to get my sleep, so I’ll wake up in the middle night and yell at him to go to bed and that he’s stomping. This kid, he walks with his heels and I’m in the basement right below the kitchen and he’s kind of a little overweight kid and so I always use to get on him about that. But, we’ll hang out and play paintball too, so we’re buddies sometimes too.

As the respondent expressed, these stepbrothers have a relationship based on an investment in the relationship.

As changes occur and stepsiblings are able to express both ranges of emotions towards one another at different times and in different situations, a level of comfort is expressed. This comfort around one another is also shown, however, through another form of interaction: mutual dependence. Many stepsiblings who were in positive relationships expressed their ability to depend on their stepsiblings on many occasions.
As previously discussed, many individuals come into a stepsibling relationship with separate experiences. Their life path has been different than their stepsiblings. For some this can cause separation between the stepsiblings and inhibit a sibling-like relationship from occurring. For others, however, these separate experiences can be utilized and come together to create a foundation of support for one another. This idea is noted by one twenty year-old female:

That's where the support comes along. When it was just me and my brother and then her [stepsister] life with her and her dad, so we talk about our different experiences to help each other get over what went on when we were younger. That's the most thing, I mean, we don't really sit around and talk about it every night, but when things are wrong it always stems back to when you were a kid and we won't even know we were gonna do it but we'll go out and do something and when we get back we'll just be riding in the car and we both don't get out of the car and we'll just sit there and look over at the other person and we're already crying and we get in this big long discussion about what the problem is and everything. We just always know something's wrong when it is.

In this type of circumstances, having separate experiences is used to bring the stepsisters together and to form a special bond. Another nineteen year-old female respondent indicated a similar situation with her stepbrother.

...[H]aving a brother is a whole new experience, but because my dad was an alcoholic and I've been through that they [stepsiblings] can come and talk to me about their friends drinking or one of my friends is being hit do you know anything about it, and for being able to talk to them about things and learn from what they've gone through and they can learn from what I've gone through.

Again we find that because of the different things the stepsiblings have experienced it helps them to develop a positive/sibling-like relationship. They are comfortable sharing their stories with their stepsiblings and using the separate knowledge that they have obtained about situations to bond together and depend on one another.
Going through changes of emotions and utilizing separate experiences as a way to support one another both indicate that a comfort zone has been obtained. More importantly, these feelings of comfort around one another in order to express emotions and past experiences is the foundation of a positive/sibling-like relationship and a relationship that will continue to last later in life. In that sense, this type of relationship adds another layer of stability and support into a person’s life because the individuals involved just see each other as family.

Neutral/Nonsibling-like Relationships

Now that a positive/sibling-like relationship has been defined, it is important to understand what it means to have a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship. Some of the same characteristics that helped to define a positive/sibling-like relationship can be used again in examining the neutral/nonsibling-like relationship by indicating the absence of the characteristic. However, there are also unique aspects of the neutral relationship that helped define it as such.

As discussed in regard to the positive/sibling-like relationships, respondents expressed a range of feelings in regard to accepting the new situation. As a result, those who were not accepting tended to develop a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship. However, those who felt this way did so for a variety of reasons. One reason primarily revolved around the individual not wanting things to change from the old family form to the new family form. For instance, a portion of the respondents had not yet accepted the divorce of their biological parents; as a result, they had feeling of resentment towards the new parental figure and family. This feeling of resentment was also true for those whose parents had divorced due to an affair and the new stepfather or stepmother was the person that their biological parent had been cheating with. In
general though, those who were not accepting felt so because they did not want things to change. They were happy with how things were and resented those who were coming in and changing the situation. As one eighteen year-old, female notes:

> At first I wasn’t excited and I was kind of mad about the whole thing because it’d been just me and my mom since I was 2 and they [mom and stepdad] started dating when I was 4 or 5 and then when we all moved in together I was probably 7 and I didn’t like it at first because I wanted my mom all to myself and all the attention.

Many respondents mentioned the change in parental attention that occurred after the new family formed, particularly those who were young when the remarriage occurred. This change and the resentment felt towards the new family members, including stepsiblings, that were coming in was a major factor influencing the formation of a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship.

Regardless of the specific context that influenced the level of acceptance, for some, that initial inability to accept the situation persisted throughout. For one particular respondent, her failure to accept the situation has been so strong that she fails to recognize the stepfamily and stepfamily members as even a part of her life. When asked who one nineteen year-old female would include in her definition of family, she replied,

> I honestly would not include any of my stepsiblings, even how my mom is married to [stepdad] I don’t think I’d include him in describing my family. I might say, yeah, she’s married to this guy. And I would not include [stepmom], they’re not even married. I still just seem them as dating, even though I know that they’re more serious than that.

Therefore, at the base of the relationship lays the initial acceptance of the situation. An inability to accept the situation due to resentment towards the new parental figure or a desire for the family situation to remain the change has the potential to influence an individuals’ level of acceptance, which results in the development of a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship.
In a positive/sibling-like relationship the interviews suggested that the stepsibling relationship was similar to that found between siblings. However, in a neutral relationship, the individuals distinctly recognize a difference between their relationships with siblings and those with stepsiblings. As indicated by one twenty-one year-old female:

Pretty much there is no relationship because we don’t have shared experiences, I guess, I’ve never really thought about it, but just growing up with someone and going through the stages of where you hate them and you don’t want to be around them and then all of the sudden you like them, we’ve never had that, I guess I’ve always liked them and then with my sister I hated my sister’s guts growing up with her and we’d get in the biggest fights. But I never had that and I think that’s what brings people closer because you hated each other and you grow up and you have a relationship together, you have that bond, but we never had that.

Not growing up together was a definite theme present when individuals in a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship discussed why their relationships with stepsiblings were not as good as those with siblings. Linked to this idea was the idea of family. As a result of issues such as not growing up together, respondents did not recognize their stepsiblings as being ‘family’ like their biological family is. This idea is prevalent in the comment of one nineteen year-old female as she noted:

...[E]specially in a family situation because your family is supposed to be that part of your life that you grow up with. My siblings and I have been through so much together, which is why we are so close and we’ve always supported each other through everything and for them to come into my world, it was definitely difficult and the only one that I’ve ever had any sort of close relationship with was [one stepsister] and she never really truly opened up to me. I think that I went to her with a problem maybe once or twice and she listened but it wasn’t the same because my family knew me and knew my situations.

As this respondent suggests, many respondents felt that their relationships with stepsiblings were on a lower level than their sibling relationships. The idea that stepsiblings did not truly know the respondents was prevalent thorough the interviews when discussing a
neutral/nonsibling-like relationship.

As a result of these factors which create a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship, the comfort zone that was prevalent in a positive/sibling-like relationship was absent and instead awkwardness replaced it. As one twenty year-old male specifies:

After my stepsister moved out and I moved out, the chance that my stepsister and I would see each other was really slim. Although I go home a whole lot more often than she does since I’m closer. But, when we see each other it’s just like “hi, hi, how are you doing,” we’ll have like a small conversation, but we’re always there for a reason and have got to go. And in the summer, I was always working and she was always working, so we’d hardly see each other. Since this school year started, I’ve e-mailed her once to say ‘Happy Birthday’ and she e-mailed me back, but that was the extent of our communication this year so far. But, with my sister, it’s like: “When are you coming home? I haven’t seen you forever. Come out to my house [imitation of sister]”

As this respondent describes his relationship with his stepsister and that with his sister it’s obvious that the bond he feels with his sister is not present with his stepsister. Instead, their relationship is merely based on recognition and polite conversation, similar to what you find between acquaintances.

The respondents’ blatant comparisons between their relationships with their siblings and stepsiblings, however, were not the only characteristic that indicated a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship. The respondent’s descriptions of their stepsiblings also suggested that a positive/sibling-like relationship was not present. As one nineteen year-old female suggests:

But, they’re [stepsiblings] things that they do and then we [her and siblings] just... just selfish things or things that they could do and they ask their dad to do it, we don’t say anything to them, but we know what each other is thinking when they do it.

Similar to this respondent, others in neutral/nonsibling-like relationships described their
stepsiblings in negative terms, referring to them as selfish or lazy.

In general, regardless of the specific terms used to describe their stepsiblings, the main idea is that respondents stressed the differences between themselves (and perhaps their siblings) and their stepsiblings. As indicated by one eighteen-year-old female:

...[B]ecause they see things in different way and they have different religions and different ideas about things than I do just because of how I was raised. Like my sister and I have the same, we think the same and everything and sometimes I am amazed at how much we don’t think the same with my stepsiblings. Just like back to the whole independence thing [mentioned earlier], like we were raised with my mom, I think part of the reason she did raise us to be so independent was because she was divorced and she had to do things herself and if the sink was broken she learned to fix it and stuff like that and their mom is very, she was one of those pretty high school girls just older, she’s like a cheerleader, she always has her hair done and she’s always gossiping about so and so and if something’s broken you’ve got to get the man to fix it and stuff like that and so it’s just two completely different ideas meshed together.

These differences were stressed in a way to indicate that the respondent (and their siblings) was better than their stepsiblings were. Initially the idea was that they had been raised differently, but as the respondent discussed the differences it was obvious that their experiences growing up had been better, and as a result, they had turned into better people.

This idea was also evident when respondents discussed the differences in values between themselves and their siblings. One twenty-six year-old male notes:

Just like, when I was a kid, me and my sister we were in church every Sunday, there were certain ways that we were taught to talk to our parents, we didn’t ask for certain things just because we knew that it wasn’t, we weren’t supposed to. On the other hand, they [stepsiblings] weren’t made to go to church or Sunday school or anything, they didn’t necessarily get what they wanted, but they weren’t afraid to ask for certain things and kind of, I don’t know, me and my sister were brought up to be real polite and they were brought up they just didn’t know anybody and just did things.

Whereas in a positive/sibling-like relationship, respondents described themselves as having
similar values through shared experiences or separate experiences that come together, respondents in a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship stressed the differences. Although, despite the fact that these differences were stressed in a negative light, the respondents in general did not dislike their stepsiblings; instead they simply did not see how they could relate to one another. They simply saw themselves as so different from their stepsiblings that they could not possibly form close relationships with them. As a result, a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship developed.

RELATIONSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

Now that a more thorough understanding of what it means to have a positive/sibling-like and neutral/nonsibling-like relationship has been obtained, it's important to recognize what factors help to determine one relationship the other. The characteristics that seemed to play a particularly large role in distinguishing between the two types were the presence of biological siblings, age of relationship formation, age difference between stepsiblings, residence, gender, and relationships with parents. However, it should be noted that all of the characteristics do not need to be present in order to have a positive/sibling-like relationship; instead the likelihood of the relationship forming is increased by each characteristic individually. For instance, a sibling-like relationship could be present even when the stepsiblings did not share residence, just as a neutral relationship could exist even if the relationship was formed when the respondent was very young. Therefore, the relationships are formed by combining the variables in a variety of different ways in order to form the individual relationships and determine relationship quality. These variables are simply aspects of the relationships that play an influential role in one way or another.
Presence of biological siblings

An important factor that appeared to influence the development of a positive/sibling-like relationship is the presence and number of biological siblings that the individual has. The interviews suggested that those with many siblings, three or more, tended to be less accepting of the new stepsiblings, which impacted the relationship formation. They felt that they didn't need any more siblings and the tight bond that had grown between them and their biological siblings didn't want to be disturbed. As stated by one nineteen year-old female:

They've [stepsiblings] always just kind of stayed out the way, all of them, they've all just been doing their own thing and never really came into our world. I think they're scared of us [her and her siblings]. Since we all stick up for each other and they know that we'd gang up on them.

Here it is clear that a definite 'us and them' was evident from the start of the stepsibling relationships. The respondent was not open to forming relationships with her stepfamily members and particularly with her stepsiblings. With this low level of acceptance, it hinders the ability for stepsiblings to form a positive/sibling-like relationship because one or both of the individuals involved does not want to form that relationship and is not going to make an effort to become involved.

While respondents with many siblings were generally not accepting of forming a relationship with new stepsiblings, the level of acceptance of only children was more diverse. Some only children were eager to welcome new stepsiblings, as they indicated that they had always wanted a brother or a sister. They were excited about the chance to have this desired family member and anticipated the development of a close relationship. However, other only children respondents were not very accepting of new stepsiblings. They wanted all of the attention to be on them and they knew that when new people entered into the picture that a
change would occur. This was particularly evident for one eighteen year-old female:

I was kind of used to being an only child and so I was one of those really selfish little girls, I guess you could say, and so it was hard for me to learn to share all of my things. My stepdad, his daughter is the same age as me so we kind of didn’t agree with each other a lot and we fought a lot when we were little, we just now started getting along two years ago. So, it was just hard for me to adjust to having other kids around and not being the center of attention all the time.

Therefore, while having a lot of biological siblings present had a negative affect on the stepsibling relationship, the absence of siblings had a mixed affect with some welcoming the new relationships and others clinging to their only-child status. Regardless, biological siblings did impact the ability of a positive/sibling-like relationship forming.

*Age of relationship formation*

Another variable that emerged from the interviews as having an influence on the development of a stepsibling relationship was the age that the relationship formed. Generally speaking, those relationships that formed when the respondent was younger in age were more positive and sibling-like than those relationships formed when the respondent was older. This is primarily a result of the opportunity to share experiences and values through growing up together.

By talking to the respondents it became obvious that the age they were when their stepfamily began and they first met their stepsiblings influenced their ability to develop a relationship with their stepsiblings. For those that developed a positive/sibling-like relationship, generally the stepfamily was formed when the individual was at a young age. As one eighteen year-old male reflects:

The thing is to me it didn’t really change because to me it was all I knew
and for me to think about my actual parents being together I can't even imagine because I don't even remember that, so it was just kind of the way that I grew up and it just seemed natural, I guess, it was just the environment that I grew up in.

For respondents of this nature, because the stepfamily formed when the individual was young, they had not had the time to experience a magnitude of things that they brought into the new family. Instead, their new stepfamily was really the only family that they knew. In the same sense, having stepsiblings around was also something that they had grown up experiencing and, as such, they had experienced many common things with their stepsiblings. As one eighteen year-old female comments:

We [she and stepsiblings] kind of come from the same background, so I mean I hadn't experienced a whole lot before I met them and neither had they, but I think for the most part we were probably pretty much equal.

Sharing the same experiences and growing up together has created a strong bond between the stepsiblings. Their stepsiblings are a big part of their life to such a degree that they can't imagine a family without their stepfamily members. According to one eighteen year-old female:

My stepdad and mom have had problems before where they've thought about divorce and things like that and it was really hard. I started thinking about it and my stepsisters and all these people that are my family now, like I don't want to lose them, like my step-nieces and all these people that I'm use to now. I just think that'd be really hard.

As this respondent reflects on her feelings about a possible divorce between her mom and stepfather, it becomes obvious that she recognizes and embraces her stepfamily members as family. She has grown up with these people as part of her life since her stepfamily formed when she was so young and the time that they have spent together has made them very close.

For others, however, the stepfamily formed when the respondent was older and, as a
result, bonds of this nature have not developed. When the stepfamily occurred the individual had already grown accustomed to their life the way that it was. Their definition of family and what that represented had already developed. This eighteen year-old female’s new family was indeed a new family, a different family and she, like other respondents, remember what it was like before.

Having a whole different family from the one that existed originally it’s different just because you don’t know them as well as you know your biological family since you just became a part of that family.

Many respondents emphasized the idea that knowing and understanding one another was an important aspect of a family definition. For those who didn’t enter into a stepfamily until they were older, they held in high regard the bonds that occur when siblings grow up together. As this eighteen year-old female reflects:

I think that if I would have grown up with them [stepsiblings] and had a stronger relationship with them it would have made me feel closer to them and I would have been able to talk to them about certain things. But, not growing up with them and just talking to them every once in a while I don’t really know what to say to them and I can’t say things like, remember that time when you broke your leg or something like that.

Growing up with siblings, however, influences more than just the family stories that can be shared. It can also affect differences in values and beliefs. Many respondents commented about these types of differences that were evident to them when comparing themselves to their stepsiblings. Specifically, one eighteen year-old female comments:

Their [stepsiblings] values and morals were a lot less, they have a lot less morals than my brother and I do. My mom raised us different. Like my stepsister was allowed when she was fourteen to go and have sex when she was fourteen and my mom would never have allowed it to happen. They also didn’t have to work and would just get their money handed to them and I was raised, we were told that we need to work and earn our money. I think they’re values are more like, they were always given thing and we always had to earn them.
These differences in values and the ways that the respondents' stepsiblings behaved were most often linked to growing up separately. Parents raise their children to act in certain ways and believe in certain things. When the stepsiblings were older when they met, many of the values and beliefs had already been implanted and, as a result, it made it difficult for the individuals in the stepsibling relationship to relate to one another on some of these issues. As a result, not having that bond of growing up together and sharing experiences played a role in the development of the stepsibling relationships.

**Age difference between stepsiblings**

In addition to the age that the individual enters into the stepfamily playing a role in the development of a relationship, the age difference between the stepsiblings can also influence the relationship. As previously mentioned, there was considerable variability found in regard to age between the respondents and their stepsiblings. The interviews suggested that having a large age gap and a very small age difference both influence the ability to form a positive/sibling-like relationship for a variety of reasons.

Specifically in regard to having a large age gap, the interviews suggested that when a significant distance is present, the individuals are in different life stages and do not have the ability to relate to one another on a variety of issues. For instance, in relationships where the stepsiblings were young children, respondents often found it particularly hard to relate to them on personal interests and to have actual conversations with them because they had so little in common with their young stepsiblings. As a result, the ability to form a positive/sibling-like relationship is rather limited. As one nineteen year-old male respondent compares his relationship with his biological brothers, it's obvious that age plays a role in his ability to relate
to his stepsiblings.

With my brother, he’s 16, so we can have a better relationship, a talking relationship, where they’re just little and it’s different, you can’t really connect on an intelligent level. So, you just have to consider them friends because they’re so little and I’m not used to it since my brother’s only three years younger than me, so it’s kind of rough dealing with little kids and considering them siblings since they’re so small.

However, although the majority with younger stepsiblings found it difficult to relate to them, others found the age differences a positive aspect influencing their ability to form a close relationship. One twenty-one year-old male in particular remarked,

I just think since he’s younger he hasn’t really formed opinions yet and so I think he just accepts anybody and he’s very open, he’ll talk to almost anybody and he’s kind of a joker, which probably helps a little bit too because I was always the class clown too, so I think that might help out there. So, unlike them who are more opinionated about what they think and stuff.

So, in this instance, the age difference was a positive thing because the younger stepsibling had a more open attitude towards the development of a relationship. Therefore, although having a much younger stepsibling generally causes an inability to relate, it does have the potential to create a positive/sibling-like relationship.

Having much older stepsiblings is another common characteristic found to influence a relationship. This age difference can also put a strain on an individual’s ability to reach a common ground and understand what the other person is experiencing. Often when the stepsiblings were older they were at a different phase in their life. Whereas the respondents that I interviewed were all college students with that being their primary role in life, many of their older stepsiblings were married and had started families of their own. This makes it difficult to relate to one another, as one nineteen year-old female indicated by comparing her
relationships with her two stepsisters.

I’m probably closer to the younger one because [older stepsister] is married and on her own. [Younger stepsister] is on her own too, but she just graduated and we probably have more in common with her. She’s with us [her and siblings] a lot more than [older stepsister] is. We know [older stepsister], but she lives in a different state and we just have more time with [younger stepsister].

Not only does the respondent have more in common with the stepsister who is closer to her age, but she also spends more time with that stepsister due to the fact that she does not have her own family outside of the stepfamily, as the older stepsister does. In fact, many of the respondents who had older stepsiblings who were married and had began families generally found themselves forming more of a relationship with their stepsibling’s children than with the stepsibling themselves. Therefore, the age difference found when the respondent’s stepsibling was much older than them hurt their ability to form a positive/sibling-like relationship.

Although having a large age difference between the stepsiblings generally caused a negative effect on the development of a positive/sibling-like relationship, having a very small age difference also had the potential to cause problems. The primary issue associated with this nineteen year-old male was competition.

Since we [him and stepbrother] were so close in age we were involved in the same activities. My Mom tried to get me involved in sports but I was never very competitive and [stepbrother] was so competitive, so we were on opposite sides. If we were on separate teams than this caused problems.

Team sports, however, were not the only areas that competition occurred. In other close-age stepsibling relationships it was simply competing for friends and maintaining a certain image to others. As one eighteen year-old female indicates:

Because of the age I think because with having a stepsister that was just one year younger you’re kind of in the same group of friends and it’s
just really hard, it’s just weird because you have to watch what you do and worry about if she’s going to tell Dad and stuff like that.

Therefore, when stepsiblings are too close in age there can be too much intermixing of activities, particularly when the stepsiblings are the same gender, as both of these respondents were. In a relationship, stepsiblings still need to keep a separate identity from one another by having different interests and outside interactions. Without this separation the problems that respondents discussed occurring because of having a small age difference emerge. As such, the interviews seemed to suggest that a happy medium in regard to age difference needs to occur where the stepsiblings are able to share some similar interests in order to have a conversation on a personal level.

Gender

The interviews implied that the gender of the individuals involved also played a role in the development of a positive/sibling-like relationship. Despite this implication, however, most respondents did not generally recognize gender as having an influence on their relationship. Instead, they tended to identify a positive/sibling-like relationship as one based on (1) common interests and (2) mutual understandings shown towards one another. For instance, male respondents found their common interest connection with their male stepsiblings, while they found their mutual understanding connection with their female stepsiblings. Female respondents, however, were able to find both connections through their female stepsiblings.

As a result of the respondents looking for both common interests and mutual understandings, my interviews with male respondents did not seem to suggest that males have
more positive/sibling-like relationships with male than female stepsiblings. Some male respondents had a better relationship with their stepbrother. This was evident as one twenty-six year-old male reflected on the changes that occurred in his relationship with his stepbrother and how it developed based on their common interests.

I was probably a sophomore in high school, he [stepbrother] had graduated and then it was after we got older, I wasn’t just some kid, I was his stepbrother. He looked out for me like a brother would on things and showed me things, advised me on things. I guess the older we got, the more mature we got and the closer we got, when I got to high school I started to wrestle, well he had wrestled when he was in high school and so it was just another thing that we could relate on and of course girls, we both loved girls, and things like that.

For other males, however, common interests were less of a focus and instead they formed positive/sibling-like relationships based on having someone to form a closer, more personal relationship based on mutual understandings. In relation to this idea, one eighteen year-old male notes:

With [stepsister] it’s different; her and I are really close and she’s always checking up on me and making sure everything’s good. We’re just real close. She’s just like the person that I can talk to about anything and she’s say or do anything she can and we always have a good time when we’re together.

As this quote suggests, this type of relationship, which is primarily found between opposite sex stepsiblings is based on something different than the first respondent's quote indicated.

Therefore, due to the fact that the male respondents that I interviewed were defining a positive/sibling-like relationship in two different ways, some found that relationship with a stepbrother, whereas others found it with a stepsister.

With the female respondents, however, regardless of what they were looking for in a positive/sibling-like relationship, the majority found it with a stepsister. When they were
looking for an individual who shared common interests they formed a relationship with a stepsister and when they desired a relationship based on more personal sharing and trust they also turned toward a stepsister. As one eighteen year-old female suggests:

My stepsister and I we go shopping together and stuff, so it's kind of neat that way that we have stuff in common just because we're both girls and we're about the same age, the same general size so we can kind of swap clothes and stuff.

Another eighteen year-old female also supports this by indicating:

...[M]y stepsisters are, I've been in one of their weddings, the one that is married I was in her wedding and we have more of a traditional sister relationship, which is really strong. Where we talk about things and stuff. But, with the boys [stepbrothers] it's harder just because they are more resistant to us [her and siblings]...

Therefore, in general the male and female respondents that I interviewed were looking for one of two different types of stepsibling relationships, those based on common interest or those based on mutual understandings. The difference is that for males they were able to find one of the types in a stepbrother and the other type they found in a stepsister. For females, however, both types of relationships were discovered in a stepsister.

**Residence**

When stepfamilies form, a portion of the stepsiblings end up living together, whereas others see each other every other weekend, or even only a couple times a year. The respondents' interviews indicated that the amount of time stepsiblings spend together increases the likelihood of developing a positive/sibling-like relationship, particularly when coupled with other characteristics discussed above. Specifically, I discuss how increased interaction provides the opportunity for shared experiences, similar values and beliefs, and general shared
knowledge about one another. Through these, the ability to form a positive/sibling-like relationship arises.

In relation to the notion of increased time, one nineteen year-old male respondent commented how his relationship grew closer and developed into a positive/sibling-like relationship with the two stepsiblings with whom he lived and spent a considerable amount of time. However, he did not develop as close of relationship with the stepsiblings that he did not live with.

[Stepbrother] and [stepsister] I refer to as brother and sister. I think when I was Junior High and I’d meet new people and introduce them I’d say stepbrother or stepsister, but that kind of wore off once I got into high school because we went to the same high school and if someone said that they saw my brother or sister and it wore off on me and they turned into brother and sister. Other three [nonresidential] are stepsisters. I don’t think I’ll ever refer to them as sisters, I can’t see myself making more of a relationship than what we have right now, more of a serious relationship.

Respondents suggested that the ability to develop a positive/sibling-like relationship with residential stepsiblings was because of their shared experiences through increased interaction. However, when stepsiblings do not live together they are unaware of what is happening in that person’s life on a day-to-day basis and may not even know about major occurrences in their stepsiblings’ life. As one eighteen year-old male respondent reflected on the difference between his relationship with his sister and that with his stepbrother it was quite obvious that the shared experiences siblings normally have were not present in his relationship with his stepbrother, whom he did not live with.

I haven’t really experienced what he’s [stepbrother] experienced so I don’t know nearly as much about him like I can see what my sisters are doing so I know how they are with acting and everything, I can see gradual changes, but with him, he’s probably changed and I don’t really even know. I did see him this summer and he was going to get a
motorcycle, but that’s probably one of the main reasons for us growing so far apart because we’ve just been so disconnected and we don’t know what each other’s doing and stuff like that.

Not living together also causes differences in how the stepsiblings grow up, which influences their beliefs and values. This idea was discussed earlier in regard to the age that the individual is when the stepfamily forms and how this can cause individuals to grow up differently. Not living together; however, regardless of the age that the stepfamily formed, can also cause people to grow up differently and not have a common understanding and connection. Recognizing this influence, one nineteen year-old male respondent recalled how different he was from his stepbrother due to the fact that they grew up in different neighborhoods.

...[T]he guy [stepbrother] had his problems in school and getting in fights and stuff and I’d never really been around anyone like that and I know when we’d hang out he’d just want to cause trouble and it was just awkward to me and I definitely think that we had different views and they came from more of a poor setting as opposed to a more regular setting, kind of a rougher neighborhood. I was so young I didn’t know and then when I got older... I think definitely they [stepsiblings] have different views than I have and it’s weird when they’ll like clash together and I’d say something and they’d make fun of me and stuff. I think it’s still weird sometimes. I think a lot of times that dates back to just growing up different.

Not only are shared experiences missing in a non-residential stepsibling relationship, but general information that stepsiblings who live together know about one another is also missing. When individuals are living together and growing up they see the times that the other person got in trouble for this or got grounded for that. However, as many respondents noted, when you don't live with the person you aren't going to freely tell them about the bad things that happen. One specific thirty-three year-old male noted:

I guess you’re always more than willing to share the good stuff that happens in your life, but what separates us for others is that if I do something wrong or get in trouble or something unless the parents
brought it up, you don’t have that full disclose with both sides of it and I’m sure they’ve done stuff that I’m not aware of.

Not having the full disclosure that comes with residential stepsiblings hurts the ability to form a complete relationship with the other person because it limits the ability for a person to truly know their stepsibling. Instead, a skewed perspective is formed and relationship quality is affected, which results in the emergence of a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship.

Relationships with parents

The final variable influencing stepsibling relationship quality is perhaps one of the most prominent. Parental influence may include influence of the residential biological parent, the stepparent, or the nonresidential biological parent. All of these connections have the potential to influence the formation of a positive/sibling-like or neutral/nonsibling-like relationship.

First, the relationship between the respondent and their residential biological parent influences the respondent’s relationship with their stepsibling. This is primarily linked to the fact that when a person does not have a positive relationship with their biological parent they are often unattached to the family in general. As a result, this affects the amount of time that they spend with their stepsiblings, which in turn influences the stepsibling relationship.

The second way that parental influence has an effect on the stepsibling relationship is through the stepparent, which was a persistent theme throughout the interviews. Many respondents discussed the issues that occur between themselves and their stepparent and how that in turn influences their relationship with their stepsiblings. As one specific twenty year-old male noted:
...[F]or awhile when I hated my stepmom, well, I didn’t really hate her, but when I wasn’t getting along with her and the way that she was treating me. But, now I’ve been able to sit down and talk to her and now my stepsister’s like, oh, okay, he likes my Mom now and I can talk to him just fine.

In this case, and in others, it is evident that when one stepsibling does not get along with their stepparent this causes problems between the stepsiblings because of the ‘us and them’ that develops. The respondents were generally very protective of their biological parent and valued their relationship with that parent. As a result, if their stepsibling acted disrespectful towards the respondent’s mom the respondent took it as a personal insult and retaliated by not forming a positive relationship with that stepsibling.

The interviews suggested that unless both individuals in the stepsibling relationship got along with the respective stepparent that there was very little hope for a positive/sibling-like relationship to form. This idea was recognized by many, as one nineteen year-old female respondent notes:

...[W]ith [stepdad] I was not welcoming him into the family at all and then like, his daughter [stepsister], is cool, but I was never really open to having a huge relationship with her because I was always hostile with the whole situation. But, [stepmom]’s always been cool and so I was always okay with her kids [stepsiblings].

As this instance indicates, respondents who did not have a positive relationship with their stepparent are not open to having a positive relationship with that stepparent’s child, the respondent’s stepsibling.

As discussed, having a negative relationship with a stepparent has a negative impact on a stepsibling relationship; however, surprisingly, having a positive relationship with a stepparent also has the potential to have a negative affect on a stepsibling relationship. This was found to be the case when the relationship between the individual and their stepparent was
extremely positive and resulted in feelings of jealousy by the stepparents’ biological child. The jealousy can emerge for different reasons, all of which affect the stepsibling relationship. One of the possible reasons for jealousy to emerge is because of the amount of time that the individual is spending with the stepparent. This is particularly evident when the stepparents’ biological child does not live in the same house with their parent and stepsibling. As a result, the stepparent-stepchild relationship has the potential to grow close, which can cause feelings of jealousy and resentment by the nonresidential child. This idea is supported specifically by one eighteen year-old female who comments:

I think they [stepsiblings] might be jealous because we’re [her and siblings] actually living with him [stepdad] and so, I don’t know, I think that they’re just jealous that we’re living with him and he’s helping us, like he helped my brother buy a truck and he helped me buy a car, but we pay him back and I think they just see him buy things for us and don’t see us paying him back, so I think they’re jealous because he doesn’t do that for them.

As this respondent indicates, her close relationship with her stepfather has an impact on her relationship with her stepsiblings, as the respondent’s stepsiblings feel that their father is giving his stepchildren more help as a parental figure. The jealous feelings that are present in this situation is causing a divide between the stepsiblings and thus impacting their relationship.

Jealousy, however, is not only present between nonresidential stepsiblings. It can also cause problems for the stepsibling relationship when a residential stepsibling develops a close relationship with the biological parent of their stepsibling. These types of issues most often arise out of competition for the parent, which is exactly how one particular eighteen year-old female respondent replied when I asked her a follow-up question regarding the competition that she felt between her and her stepsister.

Sometimes it [competing] was for my dad, most of the time it was,
because my dad’s a doctor and [stepsister]’s real dad is not a nice guy at all, like he was really nasty, but so, she immediately started saying things like, my dad’s a doctor, my dad’s a surgeon, my dad is rich and stuff like that and so like it always go to me because I was like, no, he’s my dad and she’d always be like, oh, my dad’s getting me this for Christmas and stuff like that and I was just like, shut up. So, I think that’s mostly what it was.

Once again we see a divide coming between stepsiblings based on one individual forming too good of a relationship with a stepparent. This finding indicates that although not getting along with the stepparent is detrimental to the stepsibling relationship there is a fine line to cross where the relationship goes from being a positive influence on the stepsibling relationship to having a negative effect because feelings of jealousy arise.

The relationship that an individual has with the nonresidential biological parent can also influence the stepsibling relationship. The interviews suggested that the nonresidential parent of the respondent’s stepsibling can also affect the relationship in two different ways. First, the nonresidential parent has the potential to cause a negative effect on the stepsibling relationship. This is primarily found when the nonresidential parent influences their child to think negatively about the new stepfamily. The child then brings these thoughts and opinions into the stepfamily and, as a result, is not open to developing a relationship with the stepfamily members, including stepsiblings. As suggested by one nineteen year-old female:

My stepsister it’s a little bit different because her mom [nonresidential] kind of puts bad ideas in her head and so she kind of resents us [her and stepfamily] sometimes. I think it has a lot to do with their mom because, for example, she sent my stepsister this e-mail supposedly from [stepdad] saying that if she had never been born than they’d probably still be married to one another. So, it’s really psychotic and she was asking me about it because she was like, I can’t talk to dad about it and I told her that it didn’t seem like something he’d write, but she didn’t think that her mom would do something like and so she just plants ideas in her head and it just really strains our relationship.
In this situation it is evident that her stepsister's mom has influenced her stepsister's desire to be part of the stepfamily and to form a relationship with the stepfamily members.

Second, the nonresidential parent has the potential to be a positive addition to the new stepfamily and actually help the development of a positive/sibling-like relationship between the stepsiblings. Sometimes the outside parent recognizes and appreciates the benefits that the stepfamily is bringing to their child and, as a result, works to keep those positive relationships in their child's life. As one eighteen year-old female comments:

A lot of times my stepdad will just say no and deal with it, my stepdad is just like my dad, even my dad is glad that I have such a great stepdad and that he’s doing just as good of job as if my dad was there and he doesn’t let me get away with a lot of stuff.

With this particular respondent, her father was extremely supportive of the situation. This type of support helps to ease the transition and acceptance that the individual has about their situation, which has a positive affect on all relationships, including those with their stepsiblings. Therefore, although most respondents discussed the relationships with their parents having a negative influence on stepsibling relationships, it does have the potential to be a positive situation with beneficial consequences.

**USE OF THE “STEP” LABEL**

As discussed above, the interviews suggested that two different types of stepsibling relationships exist. Surprisingly, however, which type of relationship, positive/sibling-like or neutral/nonsibling-like, the relationship falls into has very little impact on the respondent’s use of the word ‘stepsibling’ as opposed to ‘sibling’ in reference to their stepsiblings. One might initially expect that in a positive/sibling-like relationship the stepsiblings refer to one another
as brother and sister, whereas in a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship the stepsiblings refer to one another as stepbrother and stepsister. However, it seems that there is something completely different determining the use of the word ‘stepsibling.’

**Factors associated with the stepsibling label**

The majority, about two-thirds, of the respondents used the stepsibling label in reference to their stepsiblings. However, there was not one specific reason linked to the label usage, instead it was used for a variety of reasons. The first reason was an intentional action used to define the relationship as different. These people generally had close relationships to biological siblings and, therefore, out of respect to those relationships, they felt the need to define their relationships with their stepsiblings as different than those with their siblings. They did this by keeping the stepsibling label, as opposed to using an all-exclusive sibling label. As suggested by one twenty year-old male:

> It’s weird, like when I’m talking in general I’ll just say my sister, but when I’m talking specifically I’ll have to say my stepsister because people will start thinking it’s my real sister. I don’t know, it’s really weird, because I don’t know, it causes confusion and I have to explain things.

Despite the fact that many people have more than one biological sister or brother and have no problem using the sister or brother label in reference to more than one person, with stepsiblings it was different. As one nineteen year-old female respondent indicates, because of her close relationship with her siblings it is basically an insult to think of another person as deserving the label of sibling.

> Because like I said [mentioned previously], I am so close to my siblings, I adore them, when I see them, we are just in a little clique and to have someone else being labeled as my sister just doesn’t fly with me, unless I’m really close to them.
In this sense, because of the close bond that she has experienced with her siblings, she does not use the term sibling loosely. Instead, it is something that has to be earned.

The second reason that some respondents chose to use the stepsibling label had to do with their inconsistency of relationship closeness to all of their stepsiblings. Depending on the characteristics previously recognized, it is certainly possible for a respondent to have a positive/sibling-like relationship with one of their stepsiblings and a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship with another stepsibling. In connection with this, many respondents claimed to think of some of their stepsiblings as siblings, whereas others were still thought of as stepsiblings. This idea is supported by one specific eighteen year-old female:

...[S]he’s [one stepsister] just around more often, she’ll always just show up and we’ll talk for a while, it’s just more of a sister relationship, than distant cousins like it seems with the others. Or maybe even acquaintances. [One stepsister]’s a sister, but the others are more steps. With the others having kids now and they’re always saying that my Mom is grandma and I’m just like ‘no’ and so I’m always the one thinking step in my head and I always have to attach that.

Therefore, this type of situation illustrates differences in relationship quality and generally when this occasion occurred, the respondent chose to keep the stepsibling label since they did not feel comfortable using the sibling label in relation to all of their stepsiblings. This idea is evident as one twenty-six year-old male talks about his use of stepsibling label for both of his brothers, despite the fact that he is closer to one stepbrother than the other.

...I can’t really say, well this is my stepbrother and this is my brother, well, he’s really my stepbrother, but I just get along with him better, so yeah, it just works out easier to put it that way.

Thus, in this situation the respondent is intentionally using the term stepsibling because they attach meaning to the word. Despite the fact that they might have a positive/sibling-like relationship with one of their stepsiblings, they do not feel that it is appropriate to use the term
sibling when describing all of their stepsiblings. To these respondents the terms sibling and stepsibling represent the definition of a relationship.

Other respondents who also use the term stepsibling, however, justified their use of the term for a very different reason. For these respondents, it was not a deliberate usage of the word, instead it was merely out of habit and the respondents gave very little, if any, meaning to the word. As one eighteen year-old female respondent indicates, the label does not define the relationship.

I don’t really think it defines a relationship, so I don’t think much of it. Just because we [her and stepsiblings] know what we are to each other, so it doesn’t really matter how we define it to other people. I think we all do about the same thing.

Therefore, these respondents are not using the stepsibling term to define the relationship because, for them, the label does not define it. It is simply a habit and nothing more. As one thirty-three year-old respondent suggests,

I think it’s more just a force of habit than a label. I’m not going out of my way to label them.

This respondent and others chose to use one label over another, but it does not mean that the relationship quality can be determined based on that label.

Overall, while the majority of respondents did attach the stepsibling label, they did so for a variety of reasons. Some used the label to define the relationship as one that was different than their relationships with their siblings. Others, despite the fact that they had a positive/sibling-like relationship with one or more of their stepsiblings, did not have the same type of relationship with all of their stepsiblings and, therefore, used the term stepsibling. In both of these circumstances, the stepsibling label has meaning and it is generally thought of as being less than the sibling label and, as a result, the label is deliberately applied or not applied
to define the relationship. However, with other respondents, the stepsibling label was simply a term with very little meaning. They blatantly recognized that their use of the stepsibling label did not define their relationships, nor did it indicate the relationship quality.

Factors associated with the sibling label

Similar to the idea that those who use the stepsibling label do so for a variety of reasons, respondents also had many different reasons for using the sibling label. Foremost, it should be noted that the vast majority of those who used the sibling label had formed a relationship with their stepsiblings at an early age. However, not all respondents who entered into a stepsibling relationship at an early age used the sibling label. Therefore, this is by no means the determining factor in regard to the usage of the stepsibling or sibling label. As one eighteen year-old female expresses, however, her desire to use the term sibling is directly related to the positive/sibling-like nature of the relationship that developed over time:

...I think at first before they were married, when they were engaged and it was a known thing I think I called them stepbrothers, but after the fact it just felt like it was just normal to call them brothers, it was just our family and I can’t really imagine it any other way.

Other respondents, however, used the sibling label for a different reason. As discussed previously in regard to the use of stepsibling, some respondents gave very little meaning to the two terms, stepsibling and sibling, and chose to use the stepsibling label. Similar to this idea, some respondents chose to use the term sibling because they also attached very little meaning to the word. As one twenty-one year-old female suggests:

I just don’t think there’s anything different between steps and regular, I guess you make of it what you want to and to me there’s no use of saying my stepbrother and stepsister where I can have a brother and sister that I’m not that close to because they are so much older but I
wouldn’t call them my stepbrother or stepsister. I guess that’s just my reasoning to it, I think it’s just a waste of breath to say stepbrother or stepsister; it’s just easier for me,

As indicated, this respondent chose not to use the word stepsibling because she saw no point to it; it did not define the relationship. Therefore, a level of ambivalence was given to the term by some respondents.

Overall then, my interviews did not reveal a specific reason why approximately one-third of the respondents chose to use the term sibling in connection with their stepsibling relationship. Yes, duration of relationship was evident; however, the effect of this was only recognized by a few respondents who expressed their use of the term because they had grown up with their stepsibling and thought of them as family and as siblings. Also, many respondents expressed the idea that the stepsibling and sibling labels have little meaning. Whereas some chose to use the stepsibling label because it did not define the relationship, others chose to use the sibling label for the exact same reason. Evidently, a significant proportion of respondents feel that the labels do little to define their relationships and relationship quality with their stepsiblings.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Overall, the interviews suggested that there are two different types of stepsibling relationships, which are associated with the relationship quality. The first is a positive/sibling-like relationship. The relationship consists of individuals who have accepted the new family situation and are emotionally attached to one another. In addition, this type of relationship is found between people who are comfortable interacting with one another and have developed a relationship based on a balance of shared experiences and support through
separate experiences. The second type of relationship can be classified as a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship. This is characteristic of stepsiblings who have more of an acquaintance type relationship. They have not accepted the situation for a variety of reasons; in addition, emotional investment is not present and instead we find an awkward, occasional greeting, but not a true dependable relationship.

A variety of characteristics determine which type of relationships the stepsiblings will lean towards. The presence and number of biological siblings plays a vital role, as does the age the respondent was when the stepfamily formed and the age difference between the stepsiblings. Also having an effect on the relationship is the gender of the stepsiblings, whether they shared residence and the relationship with parents. These characteristics, in a variety of ways and combinations, all have an influence on which type of relationship is present.

Although the characteristics help determine which relationship will develop, relationship quality appears unrelated to the use of the word ‘stepsibling’ versus ‘sibling.’ Some use the word deliberately to define the situation, giving the word ‘stepsibling’ a very different meaning than that given to ‘sibling.’ Others, however, give very little power to the word and feel that their choice is more out of habit than anything else. As a result, positive/sibling-like relationships do not automatically mean the use of the word ‘sibling,’ nor do neutral/nonsibling-like relationships automatically assume ‘stepsibling.’
DISCUSSION

As previously discussed, the lack of research that has been conducted about stepsiblings has produced conflicting results and has severe limitations. As a result, I did not have many expectations about what I would discover through doing this project, which is why it is primarily an exploratory study. With this in mind; however, the results can be linked to the previous literature and theoretical assumptions in both supporting and conflicting ways.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE

As discussed in the literature review section, a variety of topics relating to stepsiblings have been briefly examined by researchers. In regard to the quality of relationships, while other researchers have compared siblings, halfsiblings and stepsiblings, I chose to focus solely on the stepsibling relationship. Consistent with previous researchers (Ganong & Coleman 1993; Hetherington et al. 1999; Hetherington & Jodl 1994; Deater-Deckard et al. 2000), I found that stepsiblings, in general, do not have negative relationships. As a result, when I classified the relationships, as indicated through my interviews, I found only positive/sibling-like and neutral/nonsibling-like relationships.

Previous research has been mixed in regard to whether or not positive stepsibling relationships are possible because the individuals involved are not emotionally engaged. In connection with the conclusions reached by Deater-Deckard et al. (2002), my interviews suggested that positive relationships are certainly possible and frequently present. As previously mentioned, one of the types of stepsibling relationships that I classified was a positive/sibling-like relationship. Sibling relationships are generally described as possessing a
bond that unites people together where their identities influence one another and are associated with a sense of obligation and agreement (Bank & Kahn 1997). I found this type of bond between many of my respondents and their stepsiblings; therefore indicating the presence of a positive/sibling-like relationship.

My results suggest that stepsiblings are different than biological siblings because of the presence of only positive/sibling-like and neutral/nonsibling-like relationships. I believe that I did not find any negative relationships with my respondents and their stepsiblings due to the semi-voluntary nature of the relationship. Let me explain. In order to have a negative relationship, the individuals must still know one another and have feelings directed towards that person. In a stepsibling relationship, however, the individuals do not actually get to know one another unless there is a desire to get to know the person to form a positive relationship. No one gets to know someone in order to have a negative relationship. Therefore, depending on the necessary characteristics, if the individuals put effort forth to form a relationship it develops into a positive/sibling-like relationship. However, if they do not put forth the effort needed to get to know their stepsiblings than a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship develops.

Another issue is whether stepsibling relationships improving over time. Previous research has also been conflicted on this issue, with some researchers (Duberman 1973, 1975; Keshet 1987; Wallerstein & Kelly 1980) holding optimistic outlooks in claiming that stepsibling relationships do improve, while others (Furstenberg 1987; Pink & Wampler 1985) suggesting that they do not. My research, however, was more in connection with the conclusions reached by Ganong and Coleman (1994) who recognized that there is variation in the developmental course and that relationships do not automatically improve. With the respondents who had a positive/sibling-like relationship, their relationship had gone through a
series of changes in order to evolve into one of mutual dependence. This is similar to a biological sibling relationship where, regardless of the nature of the relationship, the importance that it plays in each individual's life is still present (Atkins 2000). However, the positive/sibling-like relationship is also different from this because of the fact that attachment and feelings of family love towards a stepsibling are not automatic when the family forms (Rosenberg 1988); therefore, an even greater amount of evolving and changing occurs in a stepsibling relationship. Despite this idea, however, the evolvement was not always present with my respondents and their stepsiblings. Specifically, interviews suggest that the positive/sibling-like relationships change and evolve over time, whereas the neutral/nonsibling-like ones do not.

The topic of residence has also been examined by past researchers. As a result of research indicating the influence that residence has, when deciding on a sample, I chose to include both stepsiblings who lived together and those who did not. My own results complimented the majority of other researchers (Ambert 1986; Duberman 1973; Einstein 1982) on this specific topic as I too found that stepsiblings have closer relationships when they live together. By doing the interviews, I was also able to understand specifically why the shared residence has a positive influence. Specifically I discovered that when residence is shared stepsiblings spend more time together and see each other as individuals with a connected relationship.

In regard to age and stepsiblings, previous research has been extremely limited. Through my interviews, however, two difference aspects related to age emerged. I found that the age difference between stepsiblings does have an influence, with those being very far apart in age or very close to the exact same age having more problems than others. However,
Rudloff (1988), the only other researcher that I found who looked at this exact issue, had found no influence in this regard. I also discovered that the respondent’s age when the relationship is formed plays a role in relationship formation. This was in connection with previous literature, which in general has recognized the difficulties that older children, particularly adolescence, face when coming into a new stepfamily (Einstein 1982; Marsiglio 1992; Chapman 1991). Therefore, I found that my own results conflicted with previous literature on age difference, yet support research done on respondent's age at relationship formation.

As previously discussed in the results chapter, my research suggests a unique finding in regard to gender because of the potential for individuals to be looking for one of two things, common interests or mutual understandings, in a stepsibling. Based on these two aspects, I did not find a strong gender preference for my male respondents, due to them most often finding mutual understanding with a female stepsibling, but common interest with a male stepsibling. Therefore, the respondents were split, which resulted in concluding that there is no strong gender preference overall among males. Among female respondents, however, I did find a gender preference. Regardless of the specific aspect that female respondents were looking for the vast majority of them found it in a female stepsibling. Previous research on stepsiblings and gender has been very conflicting, with some researchers (Beer 1991; Rudloff 1988) finding no gender differences and other researchers (Duberman 1973; Einstein 1982) citing opposite-sex stepsiblings more positive. I believe that I was able to identify, through the interviews, the two different aspects that individuals were looking for and, through this, explain some of the conflicting past results. Previous researchers grouped all of their respondents together and did not recognize the unique characteristics that each same-sex and opposite-sex relationship can bring a respondent. I believe that the conflicting results found by
previous researchers only further exemplify the need to look at the relationships more closely with qualitative methods.

In the previous literature chapter a considerable amount of attention was given to research surrounding the influence that relationships have on the entire family. However, the majority of this research, as discussed previously, has looked at the stepparent-stepchild relationship and its influence on the entire family. Although, the small amount dedicated to the stepsibling relationship has found results that complement my own. Both Duberman (1975) and Ganong and Coleman (2004) noted the influence that the stepparent-stepchild relationship can have on the stepsibling relationship. As I previously explained, this was one of my primary findings, as it was a topic that emerged consistently throughout the interviewing process. While Ganong and Coleman did recognize the potential jealousy that can arise when the stepparent-stepchild relationship is too close, my research takes this one step further. While I also found the potential jealousy situation, the main influence that I discovered comes from when the stepparent-stepchild relationship is a negative one. In this realm, feelings of “You don’t like my mom/dad, why should I like you?” tended to emerge and, as a result, a neutral stepsibling relationship was present. Therefore, while this specific topic has been minimally examined previously, by using a qualitative approach, my research finds an important connection that other researchers had neglected. The outside parent’s influence has also been examined by previous researchers, although not specifically in connection with the stepsibling relationship. However, my own research also took this topic a step further than previous researchers, as the interviews suggested a connection here also.

Overall, while some aspects of my own research are congruent with that done by other researchers, the majority of the topics they examined have been expanded on with my study.
Primarily associated with the limitations of what had previously been done, especially in regard to the lack of qualitative research, the conclusions that had been reached were minimal. However, through the interviews, my own research takes these topics and extends them. As a result, a more complete understanding of the stepsibling relationship can be made. Therefore, while I am not dismissing the research done by previous researchers, from this discussion is it evident that what had previously been discovered was simply the beginning and a more thorough understanding has been needed.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Due to the complex nature of stepfamily relationships, as well as the emphasis others have placed on the family systems theory and its usefulness in understanding stepfamilies, I chose to also put primary focus on this theory. In the literature review section I briefly outlined the benefits of using this theory, as identified by Barnes et al. (1977). These recognized advantages were also evident throughout my own research and emerged frequently while I conducted the interviews. However, this theory is not without its own limitations and, as such, certain aspects of the theory were not present in my research, as will be discussed. This suggests that perhaps family systems theory is not the best theory to adapt to the study of stepsiblings and instead a theory specifically addressing stepfamilies needs to be developed.

The first advantage recognized by Barnes et al. is in regard to the merging of patterns, beliefs and rules and how the family systems theory allows for the analysis of this interaction. This type of interaction and its influence on the stepfamily was present with many of my respondents. As noted in my results chapter, different ideas, beliefs, and rules were frequently an area of discussion when it came to stepsibling relationships. However, this was only under
certain circumstances. As previously noted, I did not limit my sample to residential stepsiblings, which is where I primarily found interactions as suggested by this first advantage. Although it is possible to have a positive/sibling-like relationship with a non-residential stepsibling, the majority of non-residential stepsiblings had very little interaction with one another and, as a result, formed a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship. For a portion of my respondents, due to the little amount of time that they spent in their stepfamilies interacting with their stepfamily members, the rules and patterns that each had did not merge. Instead, these different ideas were kept separate and not shared with one another. Despite the fact that this interaction did not occur, however, the respondents were still technically members of a stepfamily. Therefore, this advantage relies on the assumption that these interactions and merging of differences occurs in all stepfamilies. Due to the complexity of stepfamilies, however, this is not always even present, which the family systems theory fails to identify.

The second recognized advantage is the ability to see how the family is altered as new members enter and exit into the relationship. This is an important aspect that can definitely be related to my own research. This allows for the recognition of complexity and the ability to consider stepfamilies that are both residential and non-residential. Simply because someone is not living with a stepfamily does not mean that they are not a member of one. This also allows for the ability to recognize the influence that the outside parent has on the stepfamily, which both previous research and my own results have suggested. Therefore, this is an extremely important and prevalent aspect of the family systems theory.

The final advantaged that Barnes et al. recognizes revolves around the boundaries within the family, particularly in regard to the closeness and distance between the family members and external relationships. This aspect can also be applied to my own results as
boundaries relate to whether outsiders are allowed into the family, which I refer to as acceptance. As previously mentioned, my research indicated that when individuals are not accepting of the new family situation and new family members that it does have a negative affect on the stepsibling relationships. Also, as discussed earlier, the outside parent can have an influence on the relationships within the stepfamily and the parent-child and stepparent-stepchild relationship can have an influence on the stepsibling relationship. Therefore, for the most part, the closeness and distance between relationships in a family influencing the other relationships in the family was extremely prevalent within my own research.

However, Barnes et al. (1977) and Burr et al. (1979) both suggested that, according to the family systems theory, all relationships in the stepfamily impact all other relationships. Although I did note a considerable amount of influence between the relationships, my results did not support the percolator effect (Rosenberg & Hajfal 1985). This is the idea that stepsibling relationships have an influence on the other relationships in the family and on the entire family system. This is a primary idea of the family systems theory, as well as being incorporated into the third advantage recognized by Barnes et al. Although I had initially expected to find support for this, the vast majority of the interviews did not suggest that stepsibling relationships have an influence on the other relationships in the family or on the family in general. Therefore, this indicates that all relationships in the family are not connected.

This discovery limits the use of family systems theory as applied to my research. Although I only interviewed one member of the stepfamily, very few respondents felt that their relationships with stepsiblings impacted the family, particularly in comparison to the number
of respondents who felt the impact of other relationships on the stepsibling relationship. The exact reasons for why I did not find the stepsibling relationship connection as suggested by the family systems theory cannot be answered in certainty; however, speculations can be made. First, keeping in mind the semi-voluntary nature of the stepsibling relationship, perhaps the stepfamily in general and the other relationships are putting little emphasis on the stepsibling relationship, which inhibits it from influencing other relationships or the entire family system. Another possible explanation lies in the influence that other stepfamily relationships, such as the relationships with the stepparent, residential parent, and nonresidential parent, have on the stepsibling relationship and on the family system as a whole. Perhaps because of the emphasis placed on these other relationships it overrides any potential influence that the stepsibling relationship could have on the stepfamily.

Although I was able to apply family systems theory to certain aspects of my study, there were also many limitations. Family systems theory was developed in order to explain the interactions between family members in traditional families; however, researchers have attempted to adapt the theory to include stepfamilies as well. Perhaps though, since society lacks institutionalized norms and expectations for stepfamilies and stepfamily relationships the ability for a stepfamily to interact as a traditional family is hindered (Cherlin 1987). Walker and Messinger (1979) even discovered that it is better for a stepfamily to keep family boundaries at least partially open, suggesting that spaces in the interconnections of individuals and subsystems is a positive aspect of stepfamilies. Specifically, perhaps this is the foundation for why my results suggest that the stepsibling relationships fails to influence other relationships and the entire family functioning, contrary to what the family systems theory predicted. This indicates that family systems theory lacks the ability to fully explain
stepfamily and stepsibling relationships and another theory specifically geared towards
stepfamilies needs to be developed.
CONCLUSION

Important Findings

Stepfamily relationships are unique and bring an additional dimension to the stepfamily structure. Since this area of research has been previously neglected, I have emphasized the need to study stepsibling relationships in order to gain an inclusive understanding of the stepfamily. Specifically, my research highlights three major findings.

My primary finding focuses on the quality of stepfamily relationships. The results indicate that these relationships possess the potential to be a positive aspect of an individual’s life by creating a companion to rely upon through a sibling-like relationship. Despite this potential, however, not all stepsibling relationships become positive and sibling-like; other stepsibling relationships can be considered neutral due to the unattached nature of the relationship.

My second finding is related to the first in that the quality of the stepsibling relationship is dependent on specific characteristics, which influence the development of a sibling-like or neutral relationship. Specifically, the results stress the relevance of the presence of biological siblings, age of relationship formation, age difference, gender, residence, and relationships with parents as contributing to relationship quality. Although all of the characteristics do not need to be present in order to have a positive/sibling-like relationship, each characteristic individually increases the likelihood of a positive relationship forming. Therefore, each is important in the overall formation of the stepsibling relationship.

The final finding relates to the use of the term ‘stepsibling’ or ‘sibling’ in relation to a respondent’s stepsibling. My results indicate that the basis for using one term over the other is not related to relationship quality. A positive/sibling-like relationship is not associated with
the use of 'sibling,' nor does a neutral/nonsibling-like relationship automatically suggest the use of the term 'stepsibling.' The results did not provide an explanation for the use of one term over the other. Instead it appears that the use of the term is dependent more on whether the individual has biological siblings and how much meaning, if any, is given to the two terms.

Limitations

While not wanting to de-emphasize the importance of the three findings that have emerged in regard to stepsibling relationships, it is necessary to recognize and address some of the limitations of my research. The first limitation revolves around my selection of a sample. I utilized a convenience sampling method in which I sampled students from the Introduction to Sociology course at Iowa State University located in Ames, Iowa. Although I did justify my use of this particular sample in the methods chapter, it still needs to be recognized as a limitation. Due to the fact that there is the possibility that students enrolled in this course at this particular college are not representative of college students as a whole or young adults more generally the results should be analyzed with this limitation in mind.

The second recognized limitation also involves the sample; however, the focus is placed on those who volunteered rather than my own sampling method. Specifically, it is possible that I did not obtain a representative sample of stepsiblings. One of two things could possibly occur: either respondents who have primarily positive relationships with their stepsiblings could volunteer or respondents who have primarily negative relationships could volunteer. Although my results do not support the idea of a homogeneous sample, I did not find negative stepsibling relationships, which could potentially be a result of my sample. Therefore, it is important to recognize this potential limitation and to take it into consideration,
although I do not believe that my results were affected by this.

The final limitation that needs to be addressed is the fact that the interviews were conducted by one individual. While there are some benefits to this method, such as issues with consistency across the interviews; there are also limitations to it. As such, the analysis of the results and the development of the project was primarily the result of one individual’s outlook. It is possible that aspects deemed important by one individual may not have received as much attention from another or that different aspects would have emerged if the interview would have been conducted by another person, due to different interviewing styles. Therefore, the findings for this project are the result of one individual’s analysis, which has the potential to be a limitation.

Policy Implications

Despite these potential limitations, however, the findings of this project are important additions to provide a better understanding of stepsibling relationships and the stepfamily as a whole. I am confident that these limitations have not hindered the important recognition that stepsibling relationship quality can be positive and an important aspect of one’s life, which needs to be related to the current family policy procedures.

Many researchers have recognized the fact that society’s attitudes about stepfamilies have a profound impact on the family legal system (Cherlin & Furstenberg 2000; Fine 1989; Mason, Fine, & Carnochan 2001; Skeen, Covi, & Robinson 1985). As such, these assumptions lead to a family system that emphasizes biological family ties, while dismissing the potential relationships that may exist in stepfamilies. Cerlin and Furstenberg argue specifically in regard to parenthood and the need to recognize the potential relationships that exist between
stepparent and stepchild. This is also related to Marsiglio’s (1992) recognition of the potential father-like relationships that may exist between stepfather and stepchild. Specifically, these researchers recognize the fact that stepfamily relationships have the potential to be an important and positive aspect of one’s life and should not be limited by society due to the emphasis placed on biological ties.

My own research makes a similar argument in regard to stepsiblings, as they too can be of a positive nature. Therefore, keeping in the same mindset as Cherlin and Furstenberg I expand their argument against the use of biological ties to define a family. Not only do stepparent-stepchild relationships have the potential to be positive, but stepsibling relationships also do. As such, both need to be recognized as legitimate family connections, despite the absence of biological ties. In general, the rights and obligations of stepfamily members within the family legal system need to be based on the actual nature of the relationships.

Another important implication revolves once again around society’s perception, but also touches on issues for practitioners. One primary finding is the diverse nature of stepsibling relationships compared to sibling relationships. As such, although stepsibling relationships have the potential to be positive and sibling-like, the relationship is not exactly the same. In addition, the development of a positive/sibling-like relationship is not absolute, as many stepsiblings develop neutral/nonsibling-like relationships instead. Therefore, not only do society and practitioners need to recognize the diversity of stepsibling relationships compared to sibling relationships, but also the diversity between the different individual stepsibling relationships. Keeping in mind the specific characteristics that I discussed previously, it needs to be emphasized that there is no mold in which a stepsibling relationship
forms into. Although certain characteristics do increase the likelihood of a positive/sibling-like relationship, such as shared residence and young age at relationship formation, not all stepsiblings are going to have a positive relationship despite the potential to be positive.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

While I do believe that this study contributes a great deal of understanding about stepsiblings to the literature, there are still questions which remain unanswered. Primarily due to the extreme neglect previous researchers have given to this topic, future research in general is needed in order to test my own findings. As the basis of this study was exploratory in nature, its purpose is to provide a glimpse of understanding in order to provide future researchers with a better direction of where to continue the study of stepsibling relationships. Specifically, while future qualitative research would also be beneficial, a quantitative look at the issue also has the potential to be important. Now that some initial aspects have emerged, researchers should take these ideas and expand them into a large quantitative study, which would provide the opportunity to test the results that I found through the interviews.

In addition, there are a few specific issues that arose in my study that I believe deserve further attention in order to reach a complete understanding of stepsibling relationships. First, future research could examine the use of the term ‘stepsibling’ and ‘sibling’ to determine in absolute what the reasoning is behind using one term over the other. My own research discovered the absence of a connection between term usage and relationship quality. There are indications that term usage is dependent upon the individual’s number of biological siblings and the amount of meaning attached to the term; however, the exact reasons for using each
term are still largely unknown.

A second issue that needs to be expanded upon relates specifically to the family systems theory. As previously discussed, the interviews did not suggest a connection between the stepsibling relationship and the other family relationships and overall family functioning, despite the fact that this is a primary aspect of the theory. Although I did suggest that a specific stepfamily theory needs to be developed, before completely dismissing family systems theory and its potential usefulness in understanding the stepfamily, future research should look at this possible connection. One way to do this would be to interview all members of the stepfamily to see if the other family members feel the connection, despite the stepsibling’s recognition of it. In others words, perhaps other stepfamily members are impacted by the relationship quality between the stepsiblings and the respondents that I interviewed were simply unaware of the affect that they have.

Overall, my research is simply the start of developing a better understanding of stepsibling relationships, which will lead to a more complete analysis of the stepfamily. I have emphasized on numerous occasions previously the fact that this topic has been extremely neglected in the literature. However, obviously from the findings that I have presented, this is an important topic which deserves proper recognition by researchers and within society in general. Hopefully, the ideas that I have presented will be expanded upon and an awareness of the stepsibling relationship as a potential positive aspect of one’s life will be obtained.
APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYER

Stepsibling Interactions:
A Grounded Theory Approach

Purpose:
This is a research study designed to learn more about the relationships between stepsiblings.

Volunteers are needed!

How do you qualify to participate in the study?
You must meet three criteria:
1. You have to be a member of a stepfamily
   Your biological parents do not live together and your mother or father is remarried, or lives with another adult in a romantic relationship.
   - You do not have to live with your remarried parent.
2. You have at least one stepsibling
   Your biological parent’s new spouse or partner has a child (or children) from a previous relationship.
   - This other child may have lived with you at one point in time; however, this is not necessary.
   - This other child may be someone that you have frequent contact with; however, they may also be someone that you rarely see or speak with.
3. You have to be at least 18 years old

Your participation would involve:
-Scheduling an interview with me to talk about your experiences with your stepsibling(s). The questions will relate to your experiences in a stepfamily and with your stepsibling(s).
   - You may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.
   - The interview will last approximately one hour and would be tape-recorded.
   - Your confidentiality can be assured: others (family members, the school, etc.) will not have access to the information gathered.

For your participation you would receive:
Extra Credit towards your Introduction to Sociology grade
(Other extra credit opportunities are available if you do not wish to participate or do not meet the necessary criteria)

If you feel you meet these criteria and you would want to schedule a time to talk:
1. Sign up after class with me OR
2. Contact me later to sign up:

Megan Farmer
402.672.6780 (cell) or 515.294.8012 (office) meganf@iastate.edu
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions for Thesis:

Although the main focus of my interest is on stepsibling relationships that exist within a stepfamily, in order to fully understand the stepsibling relationship it’s important to also have a brief background about your family history.

1. Tell me about the history of your parent’s relationship.

2. Describe how your family changed when you became a member of a stepfamily.

Now that I have an understanding of your family history, we can move on to talk about your relationship(s) with your stepsibling(s).

3. Tell me about your stepsibling(s). Describe them to me.

4. Tell me about the first time that you met your stepsibling(s).

5. Describe each relationship that you have with your stepsibling(s) to me.

6. In thinking about your future relationships with your stepsiblings, what do you see?

7. Do you think that your relationship(s) with your stepsibling(s) have an effect on the entire family? In what way?

Another topic that I am interested in learning about is how you define your family and the members of that family.

8. If someone would ask you who the members of your family are, who would you include?

9. If you were listing the individuals in your family by name and relationship to you would you refer to your stepsibling as (name), my stepsister/stepbrother or would you just refer to her/him as your sister/brother?

I am also interested in learning more about the influence that society has on your experience in a stepfamily.

10. How do you think that people in society view stepfamilies?
11. When you first became a stepfamily did you know many other people who were in a stepfamily?

12. (If the person has been in a stepfamily for a long time) Do you think that society’s perspective about stepfamilies has changed since you first became part of a stepfamily?

Thank you so much for your time and contribution to this project and to learning more about the stepsibling relationship. Is there anything else that you think is important that you want to add about your experience with your stepsibling(s)?

Potential Questions (if time permits):

One of the unique things about a stepsibling relationship is that often the stepsiblings lack a shared family history in the sense that you have experienced things in your life and with your biological family that your stepsibling(s) do not know about and they have experienced things that you don’t know about.

1. Have you experienced this with your own family? Do you feel that you and your stepsiblings lack a shared family history?

2. What about when the two families merged and had to combine different aspects of the family. What types of difficulties did you experience in regard to this?

Another issue that is prevalent in stepfamilies and can create issues in regard to the stepsibling relationship is the fact that often times an individual, in a stepfamily, had conflicting loyalties. For instances a person can have a family through his/her father, which may consist of a stepmother and stepsiblings, and a family through his/her mother, which may also consist of a stepfather and stepsiblings.

3. How does your stepsibling(s) relationship with another parent that you are not related to and your relationship with a parent that your stepsibling(s) are not related to affect your relationship with your stepsibling(s)?

When stepfamilies initially form changes can occur involving the roles and functions of the individual members.

4. Were their certain roles or functions that you held in the family that changed when the stepfamily was formed?
REFERENCES


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