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Shared Children in Stepfamilies: Experiences Living in a Hybrid Family Structure

Objective: *To explore the lived experiences of shared children in stepfamilies (i.e., those born into a repartnered family who live with married parents and older half-siblings).*
Background: *Shared children have been found to fare worse than other sibling groups on a variety of outcomes (e.g., educational outcomes, antisocial behavior, depressive symptoms). Little is known, however, about the lived experiences of these individuals.*
Method: *Using descriptive phenomenology, we conducted interviews with 20 shared children to answer the following research question: What is the nature of the experience of being a shared child in a stepfamily? Participants ranged in age from 19 to 30 years and lived in the same household with their half-sibling(s) for at least some time growing up.*
Results: *Shared children's experiences were shaped by living in a hybrid "step-nuclear" family; their upbringings were characterized by the tension of "reorganizing" as a nuclear unit but doing so within a larger stepfamily structure. The overriding phenomenon of participants' experiences was regulating family privacy boundaries—privacy rules existed surrounding sensitive information about family structure, marital histories, stepfamily dynamics, and more. In the absence of information, these children hypothesized about the topics that were not openly discussed in their families—a key part of their lived experiences.*
Conclusion: *Open communication with shared children surrounding family histories and dynamics may help reduce the ambiguity of living in a step-nuclear family.*
Implications: *This study is an important step in understanding what about shared children's lived experiences might put them at higher risk for negative outcomes.*

Researchers and clinicians alike have long been interested in children whose parents divorce and remarry. Many of these children gain younger half-siblings when their parents have offspring in new unions (Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2005). When compared with the children whose parents divorce and remarry, far less attention has been paid to the shared children who are born into the repartnered family (Ganong & Coleman, 1988). On the surface, shared children appear to live in nuclear families; if they were filling out surveys, they would mark that they lived with two married biological parents, and researchers would assume they live in nuclear family structures. However, because their parents had children in previous partnerships, shared children have older half-siblings. Researchers have found that shared children scored lower than other

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groups of siblings on a variety of outcomes, such as educational attainment, antisocial behavior, and depressive symptoms (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Harcourt, Adler-Baeder, Erath, & Pettit, 2015; Strow & Strow, 2008; Tillman, 2008). However, no investigation to date has qualitatively investigated the lived experiences of shared children in stepfamilies. The purpose of this study was to explore what it is like to be a shared child who grows up with married biological parents and older half-siblings. In doing so, we sought to shed light on potential explanations as to why shared children fare worse than their counterparts on a variety of developmental outcomes.

Background

Due to increases in divorce, cohabitation, and remarriage, American families are becoming more diverse and complex. In two national surveys, 42% of Americans reported being in a stepfamily (Pew Research Center, 2011), and 27% reported living with a single parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In response to changes in family structure, scholars have devoted considerable attention toward understanding the ways in which parents' marital status (i.e., never married, married, divorced, or remarried) impacts child outcomes. Although these demographic changes are important and deserve attention, the scholarly discourse on family structure seldom includes conversations about sibling structure—a critical piece to understanding the relationships and dynamics that shape a child's development. Three in 10 American adults reported having a half- or stepsibling, a number that was higher for those younger than the age of 30 (44%) and for Blacks (45%) and Hispanics (38%; Pew Research Center, 2011). Compared to research on family structure, far less attention has been paid to understanding the ways in which sibling structure may impact child outcomes or how children's experiences of family life differ depending on their sibling compositions.

Siblings

The lack of attention to diverse sibling relationships is surprising given the robust evidence that siblings are key players in family life. Scholarly interest in sibling structure can be traced back to the late 1800s, beginning with Galton's (1874) analysis of the impact of birth order on achievement. Since then, family researchers have made great strides in documenting siblings' centrality in family life. In a review of the literature, McHale, Updegraff, and Whiteman (2012) noted that a search of 1990 to 2011 abstracts for sibling relationships yielded 741 citations. During those 2 decades, researchers sought to understand variability in sibling relationship quality and the influences of siblings on personal development (McHale et al., 2012). Siblings have reported emotionally closer relationships when they are closer in age, of the same gender, have easy temperaments, and live in families with low spousal conflict and positive parent–child relationships (McHale et al., 2012). Differential treatment by parents, particularly when one parent shows preferential treatment toward one sibling and the other parent does not, has been found to create parent–child coalitions that undermine sibling relationship quality (Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008). In addition, sibling differentiation, when siblings "de-identify from one another by selecting different niches in the family and develop distinct personal qualities" (McHale et al., 2012, p. 921), has been found to protect siblings from rivalry and jealousy, leading to warmer and less conflicted relationships.

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

The majority of sibling research has focused on biological siblings in first-marriage nuclear families (McHale et al., 2012). The growing prevalence of diverse sibling relationships warrants attention be paid to exploring sibling

complexity. Specifically, because adults are increasingly having children with multiple partners, the prevalence of half-siblings is growing (Meyer et al., 2005). Unlike *siblings* (i.e., individuals who genetically share the same mother and father), *half-siblings* share a biological connection to one parent only.

Half-Sibling Relationships

Although less is known about half-sibling relationships compared with full-sibling relationships, research on this topic is growing. In a systematic integrative review of research on half- and stepsiblings, Sanner, Russell, Coleman, and Ganong (2018) found that the research suggests small but consistent deficits associated with the presence of half-siblings in the household—lower parental involvement, educational achievement, and economic well-being (Brown, Manning, & Stykes, 2015; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Strow & Strow, 2008; Turunen, 2014); more antisocial behavior, depressive symptoms, and parent–child conflict (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Fomby, Goode, & Mollborn, 2016; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Harcourt et al., 2015; Schlomer, Ellis, & Garber, 2010; Strow & Strow, 2008); increased risk of family dissolution (Jensen & Clausen, 2003); early exit from the parental home (Aquilino, 1991); and more frequent unintentional childhood injuries (Tanskanen, Danielsbacka, & Rotkirch, 2015).

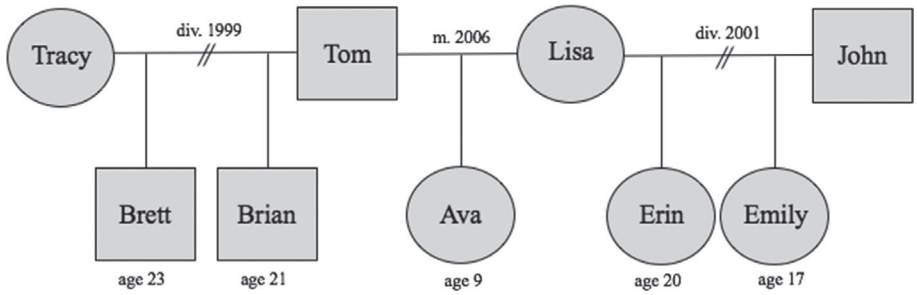
The general finding that youth with half-siblings fare worse than those without them could potentially be explained by the fact that sibling complexity may be a proxy for family instability. In other words, the presence of a half-sibling generally indicates that at least one parent has undergone multiple changes in family structure prior to the birth of a half-sibling. It may be that the experience of multiple family transitions, not the presence of a half-sibling per se, is what explains children's poorer outcomes. This explanation leaves out a critical, and often overlooked, subgroup of half-siblings: shared children in stepfamilies.

Shared Children in Stepfamilies

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

Traditional measures of family structure would classify Ava as living in a nuclear household, entirely missing the sibling structure complexity from having older half-siblings. In an innovative exploration of family structure and child well-being, Brown et al. (2015) argued that the traditional approach to conceptualizing family structure relies solely on children's relationships to the parental adult(s) in the household, failing to capture children's relationships to siblings, half-siblings, and stepsiblings. To address this shortcoming, Brown and colleagues (2015, p. 187) advocated for a measure

FIGURE 1. GENOGRAM OF A SHARED CHILD IN A STEPFAMILY. DIV. = DIVORCED; M. = MARRIED.



of family complexity that is inclusive of biological, adoptive, half-siblings, and stepsiblings in the household, a concept that "broadens the scope by shifting attention away from the parent(s) to the siblings." In conjunction with family structure, they argued that the inclusion of family complexity would allow for a more holistic understanding of the impact of family composition on child outcomes. Their findings suggested that such a conceptualization of family structure (and accompanying measurement) was necessary. Specifically, family complexity was negatively associated with children's economic well-being, but this association was strongest in children with two married biological parents and older half-siblings. In other words, in what is widely considered to be the most advantageous family structure (i.e., two married biological parents), the presence of half-siblings appeared to have the most negative consequences.

Similarly, other researchers have found that shared children scored lower than other groups of siblings on several outcomes, such as educational attainment, antisocial behavior, and depressive symptoms (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Harcourt et al., 2015; Strow & Strow, 2008). For instance, the educational outcomes of stepchildren and their half-siblings, who were the shared children of both parents in the household, were similar and significantly worse than children reared in first-marriage nuclear families (Ginther & Pollak, 2004). Moreover, sibling structure has been found to be more predictive than parents' marital status. In other words, children living with a parent and stepparent who had no half-siblings scored the same on educational attainment and antisocial behavior outcomes as children living with both biological parents who had no half-siblings. However, children living with both biological parents who had an older half-sibling displayed deficits (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Strow & Strow, 2008). Put simply, the presence of half-siblings appears to negatively impact children's outcomes, even (or especially) when children live with both of their biological parents. Why is this so? What about shared children's experiences put them at higher risk for negative outcomes? Family systems theory offers a potential lens for understanding why.

Family Systems Theory

According to family systems theory, what happens in one subsystem affects all other subsystems throughout the family (White & Klein, 2008). Although shared children appear to live in nuclear families, there is a layer of complexity that is missed by failing to recognize that their parents are in second (or third, etc.) marriages. The older half-siblings of shared children are stepchildren; they live with a biological parent and a stepparent, so although shared children themselves may not have stepparents, they may live in a household in which stepparent–stepchild relationships exist. Similarly, although shared children do not have stepsiblings themselves, if both of their parents have children from previous relationships (e.g., Ava), then their older half-siblings are stepsiblings to each other. When this is true, the dynamics of stepsibling ties surely impact the lives of younger half-siblings who are biologically related to all parties.

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

To understand the outcomes of shared children, it is necessary to understand their lived experiences. However, no investigation has qualitatively explored the lived experiences of individuals who grow up with married biological parents and older half-siblings from their parents' previous partnerships. To address this

gap, we used phenomenological methods to explore the lived experiences of shared children in stepfamilies.

Method

We used a Husserlian descriptive phenomenological method to guide data collection and analyses (Husserl, 1962). The central goal of Husserlian descriptive phenomenology is to describe and clarify the lived experience of participants (Porter, 1998). In doing so, researchers seek to identify and understand the "essential structure" of that experience and the meanings that participants attach to it (Husserl, 1962). Therefore, the lived experience can only be understood by engaging in reflexive dialogue with an individual who has direct experience or interaction with the phenomena of interest (Husserl, 1962).

Sampling

Upon receiving approval from the institutional review board, participants were recruited through e-advertisements that went to every student, faculty, and staff member at a major Midwestern university. Individuals who self-identified as a half-sibling were encouraged to contact the first author to schedule an interview. To capture a range of half-sibling relationships, the recruitment ad read: "A team of researchers is interested in speaking with you about your relationships with your half-siblings [*even if you think of them as brothers and sisters, or if you do not think of them as family at all*]." Participants were then screened for eligibility. Specifically, they were asked (a) their age, (b) about how much time they spent with half-siblings in the same household growing up, and (c) if their biological parents were married for most or all of their childhood.

Inclusion criteria for the study were that shared children were between the ages of 18 and 30 years, lived in the same household with their half-sibling(s) for at least some time growing up, and their parents had been married most of their childhood. This age range was chosen because of our specific interests in the experience of growing up as a shared child; shared children in middle and late adulthood are farther removed from this period of their lives. Reasons for including the criterion of having shared a household with half-sibling(s) for at least some time growing up were twofold: (a) without having shared a household with half-siblings, shared children would lack the familial context of interest to the study, and (b) the existing (quantitative) literature on shared children focuses on youth with residential half-siblings.

The final sample consisted of 20 shared children (five men and 15 women; see Table 1) who ranged in age from 19 to 30 ($M = 24.8$). The sample was limited in its racial diversity; 17 participants identified as White, two identified as African American, and one identified as Hispanic. Shared children had between one and eight half-siblings, with an average of 2.2. Seven had maternal half-siblings, nine had paternal half-siblings, and four had both. Eleven of the shared children had full siblings in addition to half-siblings.

Procedure

In-person interviews were conducted with each participant between the summers of 2017 and 2018. Each interview began with constructing a genogram, a pictorial representation of family structure and membership, which allowed the interviewer to collect relevant demographic information. The interview covered a range of topics using questions designed to elicit information about a variety of aspects related to shared children's lived experience. Interviews followed a semistructured format, meaning that not all questions were asked in the same order during every interview or in the same way; questions were asked within the flow of the conversation to elicit rich descriptions. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The authors read each transcript independently and completed memos to document their reactions, paying particular attention to where transcripts lacked detail or where opportunities were missed to ask follow-up questions. If one or more coauthors had unanswered questions or felt that more detailed descriptions could have been elicited from the participant, a follow-up interview was requested. We contacted 12 participants for follow-up interviews and conducted interviews with 10 participants (two did not respond).

Analysis procedures followed the systematic steps set forth by Porter (1994, 1998). The analytic goal is to "discern what participants are trying to do relative to the experience and thereby to detail intentions that are the essence of the experience" (Porter, 2008, p. 109). To achieve this,

Table 1. *Sample Description Table*

Name	Age	Sex	Race	No. of full siblings	No. of maternal half-siblings	No. of paternal half-siblings
Grace	23	F	African American	1 (M)	1 (F)	0
Ben[a]	21	M	White	0	2 (F,F)	0
Erin[a]	30	F	White	0	1 (M)	0
Jake[a]	30	M	White	0	0	2 (F,M)
Kirsten	25	F	White	2 (F,M)	0	2 (M,M)
Tammy[a]	30	F	White	1 (F)	2 (M,M)	2 (M,F)
Tori	20	F	White	0	0	2 (F,M)
Kay	28	F	African American	0	0	3 (M,F,M)
Sam[a]	25	M	White	3 (F,M,F)	1 (M)	0
Allison[a]	28	F	White	1 (F)	1 (M)	0
Josie[a]	28	F	White	0	1 (F)	7 (F,M,F,M,F,M,F)
Calli[a]	24	F	White	1 (M)	0	3 (M,F,M)
Maria[a]	27	F	White	0	0	3 (M,M,F)
Beth	19	F	White	2 (F,F)	1 (M)	0
Taylor	21	F	Hispanic	2 (F,M)	1 (M)	1 (F)
Bonnie	24	F	White	1 (F)	0	2 (F,F)
Emily[a]	21	F	White	1 (M)	2 (M,F)	0
Tyler	22	M	White	1 (M)	0	1 (F)
Elizabeth	29	F	White	0	1 (F)	1 (F)
Jimmy	22	M	White	0	0	1 (M)

Note. F = female; M = male.

[a]Indicates that a follow-up interview was conducted.

data were grouped into the following four levels: (a) actions and perceptions, (b) intentions, (c) component phenomena, and (d) phenomenon of the lived experience (Porter, 1994). In the first stage of analysis, the first author analyzed each transcript for the actions and perceptions that were central to participants' stories using the participants' own words to describe them. Exemplar actions included "completing family trees," "asking parents to explain our family situation," and "picking up on having different last names from my half-siblings." Each idea was a data analysis unit (Porter, 1994). The first author identified actions and perceptions within each transcript and compiled them into a master list.

The second analytic stage involved identifying the intentions that underlay individual actions and perceptions. Intentions are the ways in which respondents understand and shape their experiences (Porter, 1994, 2008, p. 109). Identifying intentions, carried out by all coauthors, involved a process of data-driven "intuitive analysis" whereby the researchers interacted with the data to infer what the participant was trying to do with each experience (Husserl, 1962; Porter, 1994, p. 21). For example, consider the aforementioned exemplars "completing family trees," "asking parents to explain our family situation," and "picking up on having different last names from my half-siblings." For each of these actions, the researchers asked (of the data and of each other), "What is the participant trying to do with this experience?" The developed intention for these acts was figuring out family structure (i.e., engaging in attempts to better and more accurately understand their family arrangements). Identifying intentions was a discursive process that involved revisiting the data, conducting follow-up interviews with participants where necessary, and discussing emerging ideas as a team. All authors met twice a week to develop, discuss, critique, and refine the intentions; this was a particularly helpful practice given that we occupy different social positions and engaged in intuitive analysis from different social locations and viewpoints. Divergent views about the intentions were resolved through consensus and after extensive discussions.

In the third stage, following the identification of intentions within individual transcripts, intentions across participants were compared and grouped into a broader level of component

phenomena. Husserl (1962) advocated that identifying "component" parts of the phenomena is key to developing a richer description of the lived experience (Porter, 1994). We analyzed the intentions for links and grouped them based on their similarity or complementarity in describing a larger phenomenon. For instance, "figuring out family structure," "following family communication rules," and "suppressing curiosity about family secrets" constituted the component phenomenon "learning family histories." Similar to identifying intentions, developing component phenomena was a fluid process that involved "talking with others about the phenomena" and "filling out the phenomena by repeating the cycle of analysis and dialogue" (Porter, 1994, p. 21). From this process, three component phenomena developed.

In the final stage of analysis, the relationships among these three groups were identified to develop the fourth level, phenomenon of the lived experience (Porter, 1994). The overriding phenomenon was identified on the basis that it was pervasive across levels of data analysis and wove together the component phenomena to tell a larger story.

Results

A central feature of shared children's experiences was living in both a nuclear family and a stepfamily. Their collective family structure was a hybrid; the nuclear family (i.e., mom, dad, and shared child[ren]) existed "inside" the stepfamily (i.e., mom, dad, shared child[ren], stepchild[ren]/half-siblings, and nonresidential parent[s] of the half-siblings). The contradiction of living in a step-nuclear family shaped their upbringings, which were a mix of attempting to "reorganize" as a nuclear unit but doing so within a stepfamily structure.

The overriding phenomenon of respondents' experiences was regulating family privacy boundaries. The histories, relationships, and dynamics of shared children's families were complex, and most knew little about these dynamics. Although the openness or closedness of communication boundaries existed on a continuum, participants usually described boundaries that were closer to the "closed" end of the spectrum. In the absence of information, respondents hypothesized about topics that were not openly discussed—a key part of their lived experiences. Privacy boundary regulation impacted three key areas of shared children's lives: (a) learning family histories, (b) avoiding loyalty binds, and (d) assessing half-sibling relationship quality.

Learning Family Histories

Shared children's lived experiences involved a gradual, intricate process of learning family histories. Shared children, by definition, have at least one parent who had a child or children in a previous marriage or partnership. Therefore, the "nuclear" family that the shared child was born into is a higher-order family—one that was formed after a parental history of divorce or separation and (re)marriage or recoupling. Learning about and understanding the dynamics that developed as a result of this family history was a phenomenon that surfaced throughout respondents' interviews.

The process of learning family histories was assuaged by the degree of openness in family communication boundaries. Families varied in the extent to which information about family histories was revealed or concealed. Although some families openly shared information about prior divorces, remarriages, and resulting relational dynamics, participants described unspoken but understood family rules surrounding which topics were okay to discuss and which should be avoided. For instance, when asked about her father's divorce from his first wife and the ensuing custody battle that her half-siblings experienced, Tori replied, "I honestly don't know a whole lot about it… We don't talk about it. It's like a taboo topic in our house."

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

> No one ever brought it up. It's weird because I never questioned it back then, but now that I think

> about it, it's weird that we didn't ask him [how his time was with his dad]. No one said, "Tell us the things you did!"

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

> To this day I have never had a conversation with Natalie about her not being my dad's [biological daughter]. We've never talked about it… and we're really close! It's weird [that we don't talk about it], but I don't want to bring it up 'cause I feel awkward about it.

Why was discussing these topics uncomfortable? It was difficult for many shared children to answer this question. Family communication rules had been learned over time, and when asked to reflect on what would happen if they violated these rules, their discomfort often was visible. Kay said "I have so many unanswered questions, but I don't know that I'd ever want to ask.…I don't know why I'm so nervous. I just feel…I don't know."

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

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

Kirsten was an example of open communication boundaries about her father's first marriage. She seemed comfortable talking about her half-brother's biological mother—likely a result of amicable postdivorce coparenting relationships:

> My dad is a very genuine person, so he never holds grudges . . . . I've actually met Laurie [father's first wife] before. I've gone over to her house. …We were in Iowa and Matt and Shane [half-brothers] were with us, and they wanted to go see their mom. Dad had no problems going to visit her. I mean, she's just a friend.… It was more of a "It didn't work out" type thing. Mom has no problems with Laurie either.…We still have things in the house [from their marriage], and it doesn't offend Mom because it's a part of Dad's life.

Learning family histories also involved early attempts to understand the family structure. Shared children experienced a time, usually in middle to late childhood, when they began to "piece together" how the various members of their family were related. Sometimes, these efforts were thwarted by parents who engaged in active efforts to disguise the family structure:

> I knew he [half-brother] had a different dad, but I didn't think much about it until we were in school and they were talking about family trees, genealogy, half-siblings and stepsiblings and stuff like that. I went home and asked my mom, "so Neil would be my half-brother?" And she was like, "No. No. He is your brother." It was very "end-of-discussion." …I think she wanted to make sure that he [Neil] felt like part of our family and not like an outsider.

Allison's story illustrates family privacy regulation well; her mother set a clear communication boundary that asking or talking about Neil as a half-sibling would not be tolerated. Similarly, other respondents described privacy regulation surrounding information about family structure; their parents purposefully withheld information, seemingly with the thought that this knowledge would threaten the quality of the sibling relationships or their image as a nuclear family. This was likely to happen when half-siblings' other biological parent was uninvolved in their upbringings, and parents' attempts to reorganize as a nuclear unit meant omitting information that half-siblings were, in fact, half-siblings. Grace, whose biological father adopted her older half-sister before Grace was born, explained:

> My family tried to make that invisible, like "No, you guys are not half. Even though you're half-siblings, it's not the case, you guys are blood.…They never wanted us to look at each other as half-siblings…they just want us to be all a happy family, in one piece. They don't want it to be like we're broken up, or we came from different pieces.

Similarly, Emily's parents intentionally withheld the information that her sister, who was adopted by Emily's father, was her half-sister.

She recalled the moment when she learned the truth about their family structure:

> When I was 6 or 7, me and my brother, Patrick, were out to lunch with my stepgrandma, and she was like, "Yeah, your dad adopted Natalie, she's not [your biological sister] …me and Mitch went home and were so distraught, we just started crying.… I was like "No, she's my sister." It was hard to hear.…I kept thinking "Does Natalie know? And why weren't we told? Why was everybody left in the dark?" I don't think they [parents] wanted to tell us 'cause they didn't want us to think of her anything less than a sister.… I don't think my parents talked to her [stepgrandmother] for years after that.

Consistently throughout interviews, participants seemed to be making educated guesses, or hypothesizing, about why their parents purposefully withheld information about their relationships with their half-siblings. They suspected these privacy rules were to preserve family cohesion—to be a "happy family," "in one piece" (Grace), and to prevent older half-siblings "feel[ing] like family outsiders" (Allison). Organizing and identifying as a nuclear family meant omitting information threatening to this image (i.e., half-siblings had a different biological parent). For shared children, these privacy rules stalled or complicated the process of figuring out the family structure.

However, when older half-siblings spent time with their other biological parent, the process of understanding family relatedness was generally smoother for shared children. The involvement of a half-sibling's other biological parent was a catalyst for respondents to think about their relationship to their half-siblings. Shared children with maternal half-siblings said that having a different last name from their half-siblings cued them to the fact that they were not fully biologically related, which facilitated the process of learning the family history and understanding its structure.

Avoiding Loyalty Binds

Stepparent–stepchild relationships in respondents' families (i.e., the relationships between their older half-siblings and the nonshared biological parent, the half-siblings' stepparent) were consistently identified as major forces that influenced family dynamics. When these relationships were warm and familial, shared children's lives were made a lot easier. But when these relationships were cold or combative, shared children's experiences were characterized by attempting to remain neutral amid family conflict and avoid loyalty binds.

Participants were in a difficult position when their parents and half-siblings did not get along. Biologically related to all parties, they wanted family members to get along—Jake described himself as the "link between everyone in the family"—so they felt uncomfortable if they had to choose sides. When asked how he felt about the rift between his dad and his sisters, Ben replied, "It sucks. I'm almost always in the middle. I don't really try to pick sides…but it doesn't make me feel good having to go around with sides being split in between."

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

> They have a strained relationship…my dad has a temper, and my brother has a temper, so they would get into huge arguments. Rob was always the scapegoat for my dad's anger.… I think the fact that he wasn't his biological child put strain on their relationship, which spilled over into other relationships.

Sam also tried to avoid choosing sides, but because he did not want his half-brother to be kicked out of the house for fighting with his dad (which happened frequently), Sam admitted, "Seeing my dad and my brother get in such heated arguments, I was always like 'I hope my brother wins this one. I hope he doesn't have to leave again.'"

Even while attempting to remain neutral, participants recognized how conflict between their parents and half-siblings impacted their own relationships with their parents, half-siblings, or both. Erin became quite emotional when reflecting on the family dynamics of her childhood and how those dynamics had changed over time. She recalled, "My dad was the authoritarian in our house, and since he was the stepfather, there was a lot of contention between them.… I remember lots of yelling between my dad and my brother when I was around 10." Erin was close to her father, and she suspected that her half-brother's contentious relationship with her was a significant barrier to their being able to develop a relationship. Only when they were able to talk openly about these dynamics did their relationship begin to shift:

> As I got older, we started developing a relationship.…We've been able to, in recent years, talk about his relationship with my dad.…Now he says things like he appreciates that my dad was hard on him and that he understood that my dad loved him, that he saw my dad like a dad, and that was kind of, it was validating because I'm really close with my father.

However, similar to how shared children described closed communication boundaries around their parents' marital histories, participants also described relatively closed communication boundaries surrounding stepparent–stepchild issues. These closed boundaries resulted in a number of "family secrets," particularly surrounding the origin and nature of stepparent–stepchild conflict. For instance, Ben's two half-sisters from his mother's first marriage and his father did not speak, but he was unsure why:

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

A lack of communication surrounding these negative family dynamics made it difficult for shared children to make sense of them. Sam, hypothesizing, suspected that closed communication boundaries helped preserve the nuclear family image that his mother desperately wanted, although he realized they were unhealthy:

> My mom didn't like talking about problems in our family. She was in the "white picket fences, perfect home, nothing's wrong with us" kind of mind-set. She didn't want to confront the idea that our family had issues, more than other families.…There would be times when the noncommunication would start to boil, you know, if you leave the kettle on the stove too long, it's going to boil over. But if I tried to talk to my parents, they'd pretend that it wasn't a problem.

In contrast, Calli's open family communication made the process of understanding family dynamics easier, even when those dynamics were difficult. Similar to other respondents, she identified the relationship between her biological mother and paternal half-siblings as salient to her lived experience. Similar to other shared children, she felt caught in the middle when stepparent–stepchild ties were strained; however, Calli's parents spoke openly with her about these dynamics and helped her understand them:

> When my [half-]sister's prom was coming up, I remember my mom [the half-sister's stepmother] kept asking, "Hey, are you going to prom?" My sister was like, "Yeah, I want to go, but I don't have a dress."…It got closer and closer to prom, and her mom hadn't taken her. She could tell my sister was upset about it, so my mom was like "Okay, I'll take you then." So they went dress shopping, and the whole time my sister was throwing a fit and being mean to my mom and calling her names and stuff…It really upset me. … My mom [explained], "I know she wasn't actually mad at me. She just wanted her mom to be doing it, not me." She always took the approach of, "We're gonna talk it out, talk about our feelings, even if it's hard."

Assessing Half-Sibling Relationship Quality

Finally, the respondents reflected on the extent to which their family structure impacted their relationships with older half-siblings. First, in assessing half-sibling relationship quality, shared children considered age differences between themselves and half-siblings. Because it took time for parents to divorce, meet second spouses, and have children with them, there were usually large age gaps between half-siblings (average age difference between half-siblings was 9.7 years, with a range of 4–15 years). The older half-siblings were when shared children were born, the less time they shared the household. As a result, some shared children, even when describing relationships with half-siblings as close, said those relationships resembled family ties more characteristic of extended family bonds due to the generational age gaps, especially when they were young. Jake said, "She [half-sister] was sort of a mother figure when I was an infant, you know, helping take care of me and babysitting and stuff." Tammy described:

> I grew up with Kevin and Debbie in more of an aunt and uncle role, even though they're my brother and sister. …I knew they were my siblings, but they were adults, and I was a kid…so it didn't feel like the [sibling relationships] that I saw my friends have.…It was just a different dynamic.

When half-siblings were closer in age, shared children generally described closer

relationships. Also, when they had more than one older half-sibling, shared children more likely said that they were closer to the younger of their older half-siblings, primarily because there was more shared history from having spent more time in the household together.

Perceptions of gender operated in different ways. Some respondents said that having same-gender half-siblings facilitated closer relationships, and others said it created greater competition. Emily used both age and gender to explain why she was closer to her half-sister than her half-brother:

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

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

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

Beyond characteristics such as age or gender, larger family dynamics shaped shared children's relationships with their half-siblings. Their lived experiences included the sometimes emotionally taxing process of understanding why relationships with half-siblings had developed as they had. When relationships were distant, this process could be uncomfortable. For instance, some respondents hypothesized that older half-siblings resented having a more difficult upbringing than the shared child(ren), which negatively impacted relationship quality. Maria stated, "I think she's always been upset that she didn't grow up with her mom and dad living together.…I think that's always been the root of her problem with me." Kay had similar experiences:

> What I know now is that she was just really jealous…that I was raised by our father and she wasn't,… He was a great dad to me,… I openly admit he…was not a good dad to his other children, but it wasn't my fault, so don't punish me for it,… It hurts really bad, which is why I'm still emotional.

Shared children who thought they had been favored by a parent vacillated between understanding they were not at fault and feeling guilt about their privilege. They spent a lot of time reflecting on, understanding, and dissecting the resentment they felt from their older half-siblings. Not all shared children empathized and understood the complex upbringings of their half-siblings, though. Some participants were seemingly unaware of how their half-siblings' difficult journeys may have impacted their feelings or relationships. For instance, Grace's half-sister, Ciara, was born elsewhere and moved to the United States when Ciara's mother met her stepfather when she was 10. The move severed her relationship with her father and extended family. These familial and geographic transitions could have affected Ciara's reactions to her mother's remarriage, but Grace gave minimal thought to how or why these transitions may have affected the contentious relationship between them. In attempting to identify the origin of their strained relationship, Grace hypothesized, "Maybe it's because our backgrounds are so different, or maybe she's fucked up about her dad or something and that's why we don't get along. I can never figure out what it is. Me and her just don't click." Similarly, Emily was not close to her half-brother, whose father died when he was a child. Emily suspected that his father's death played a role in why their relationship was distant:

> I feel like Marc has never really been involved in our family. I think he's very angry.…Because he knew his dad and had memories with him and stuff, and then he [died]… so I think he's just hurt and messed up. I don't know. I don't understand him.

Shared children such as Grace and Emily believed that agency lay with older half-siblings when it came to steering the development of half-sibling ties. They wanted these relationships to be close, but if their efforts to bond with their older half-siblings were rebuffed, they were unlikely to keep trying. Two shared children, neither of whom had biological siblings, desperately wanted to be close with their older half-siblings but felt this desire was unrequited.

Jake, who had close relationships with his older half-siblings, agreed that older half-siblings steered the ship when it came to relationship development:

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

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

> I think even when he was living with us, like if you were to draw a Venn diagram, he'd be in that gray area, like kind of overlapping but not really.…When they [parents] would make him leave, in their anger, they would try to make us think of him differently. They'd say, you know, "He's not really part of the family." They would tell us not to call him. They just really tried to restrict [access to him] …they kept him in this gray area, like he wasn't a permanent fixture in our family.

Maria's mother (her half-siblings' stepmother), drew similar family boundaries: "Growing up, I always felt like I had a nuclear family. My mom always made it feel like it was just the three of us, and these other players [older half-siblings] would sort of come and go."

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

> I never felt like that they [half-siblings] were excluded or were a separate part of the family.…It wasn't like "Okay, here's my mom's stepkids, and then there's us." When I was growing up, my mom would say, you know, "They aren't just my stepkids, those are my kids, and I love them the same amount as I love you and Ian." …So, for my whole life, I would explain "Oh, I'm like one of five kids." I do not feel any differently towards them than I do towards my [biological] brother.... So I do not feel like it's a stepfamily, but I would not consider it to be like a nuclear family either—something in between.

Discussion

Interest in shared children in stepfamilies is growing; researchers have found that shared children score lower than other groups of siblings on a variety of outcomes, including educational attainment, economic well-being, antisocial behavior, and depressive symptoms (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008; Brown et al., 2015; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008; Harcourt et al., 2015; Strow & Strow, 2008). The reasons underlying these findings, however, are unknown. This study offers potential explanations for why shared children they may be at higher risk for poor developmental outcomes than other groups of siblings.

Shared children's lives are complex. Although on the surface they appear to live in nuclear families, their experiences are shaped by dynamics characteristic of stepfamilies. As Calli described, they do not quite live in stepfamilies, but they do not live in nuclear families either—their reality is "something in between." The "step-nuclear" hybrid is contradictory largely due to the oppositional nature of cultural messages attached to nuclear families and stepfamilies. Societal values that celebrate and support nuclear families clash with those that marginalize and stigmatize stepfamilies (Cherlin, 1978). Because shared children live in both of these family structures at once, their experiences are contradictory and complex. For example, they live with stepparents but do not have stepparents. They have parents who are divorced, but they do not have "divorced

parents." These contradictions manifest in complicated ways; shared children are exposed to nonresidential parents, stepfamily dynamics, coparenting relationships, and more, even though they are not central to or involved in these operations.

Family Systems Theory and Family Privacy Regulation

These findings are well understood through the lens of family systems theory. Shared children, although living with married biological parents, are nested within a larger web of complexity, and the dynamics of this larger web impact their lived experiences. The family histories that precede them (their parent's first marriage, divorce, stepfamily origin story, etc.) shape the dynamics of the web before shared children are even born. As they age, they continue to be impacted by the dynamics in various family subsystems. The extent to which shared children's older half-siblings have relationships with their nonresidential biological parents matters; parents are more likely to try to disguise the family structure and "pass" as a nuclear family if nonresidential parents are not involved. The quality of relationships between shared children's parents and their older half-siblings also matters; when these relationships are strained, it spills over into the shared child's subsystem and creates the potential for shared children to be put in loyalty binds. The interconnectedness of family systems is clear from these findings, but a family systems concept that became particularly salient throughout the course of the study was that of boundaries, particularly with regard to the flow of information between family subsystems.

Managing private information is a major task that families face, as it involves "both the management of information among family members across internally constructed privacy boundaries and the flow or protection of private information to those outside the larger family privacy boundary" (Petronio, 2010, p. 176). Indeed, members of step-nuclear families seem to be grappling with the place of privacy in family life as they make decisions about revealing or concealing information, and the regulation of privacy boundaries between family insiders and family outsiders appear interconnected. Shared children who describe closed boundaries of internal family communication also describe parents who are committed to the maintenance of a nuclear family image to family outsiders. Ironically, efforts to conceal information or safeguard family secrets seem to add to family complexity rather than reduce it.

The component phenomena reveal that there are a number of topics around which privacy boundaries exist in shared children's families. Within the phenomenon of "learning family histories," secrets exist surrounding parents' marriages, divorces, ex-spouses, older half-siblings' family structure transitions, and information about how family members are related to one another (e.g., that half-siblings have another biological parent). Within "avoiding loyalty binds," secrets exist surrounding the origin and nature of stepparent–stepchild conflict; shared children may grow up households in which a parent and half-sibling do not interact, but they do not know why—an awkward and uncomfortable position for the shared child who feels linked to all parties. Topic avoidance also affects their ability to "assess half-sibling relationship quality." Some shared children question if their half-siblings resent them, which is a painful experience. Tissues were used liberally when half-siblings grappled with issues of privilege and vocalized thoughts that they did not share with family members.

The prevalence of privacy boundaries is clear, but the purpose of these boundaries is less clear. Why are certain topics avoided or certain information concealed? Our findings suggest that controlling information helps preserve family cohesiveness or protects the quality of kin relationships, but why is certain information perceived as threatening to familial closeness? As Petronio (2010, p. 197) explained, "People dictate the flow of information [when] there are risks if others acquire that information." Privacy rules do not exist by accident—they are constructed to serve some purpose.

Nuclear Family Ideologies

Dominant cultural messages about family life shape the ways in which individuals "do family" (i.e., construct and define family roles and relationships through interaction). Although families are increasingly complex, the family structure that continues to be most supported, recognized, and revered in North American culture is that of the nuclear family, characterized by two first-married, different-sex parents and their shared biological children (Allen, Lloyd,

& Few, 2009; Smith, 1993; Zartler, 2014). Smith (1993) called this the Standard North American Family and argued that it represents the quintessential American version of kinship.

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

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

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

In addition, shared children demonstrate nuclear family ideologies in the language they use to think about and describe half-sibling relationships. They consider their half-siblings to be kin, and they reject the prefix "half-." Intellectually, they understand that the label "half-siblings" is a way in which social scientists differentiate sibling relationships based on genes that are shared between them, but emotionally they are often resistant to or defensive about a label that suggests the relationship is anything less than fully familial. Of course, it is important to note that shared children in this sample were required to have spent at least some time with their half-siblings growing up. It is possible (indeed, likely) that shared children with nonresidential half-siblings attribute different meaning to this prefix. For shared children who lived with half-siblings growing up, however, nuclear family ideologies seem to contribute to their rejection of the label "half," which they perceive as indicative of relationships that lack closeness, familiarity, and warmth. This finding poses challenges to researchers who study half- and stepsiblings; it is critical that researchers are sensitive to the ways in which kinship is socially constructed, particularly within complex families. Recruitment advertisements, for instance, should reflect the family realities of potential participants.

Practical Implications

The findings from this study yield practical implications. One of the more striking aspects was the extent to which some shared children feel caught in the middle of family conflict, particularly between stepparents and stepchildren. As the shared children, they are biologically linked to all parties, and it is incredibly difficult if they feel torn between parents and siblings. Although a sizeable body of literature has explored feeling caught in the middle between divorced parents (e.g., Amato & Afifi, 2006; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), this phenomenon has not been explored among shared children, who seem uniquely positioned to experience loyalty binds, even while living with married biological parents. Parents should consider the extent to which their relationships with their stepchildren are affecting their children's ability to develop warm and supportive relationships with their older half-siblings. Parents play a pivotal role in encouraging those ties, and when they have warm relationships with stepchildren, shared children are likely to feel closer to their half-siblings.

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

Parents can help in other ways too, such as assisting shared children in the process of understanding their family structure. Unlike their older half-siblings, shared children have to solve a slowly revealed puzzle about family history, connections between family members, and the roles of family "outsiders" who nonetheless are related to half-siblings (e.g., half-siblings' nonresidential parents). They are not given all of the puzzle pieces at once and are not assisted much by parents in solving the puzzle. Perhaps this is because family history and kin connections are not a mystery to anyone else in the family, or perhaps it is because nuclear family ideologies prevent parents from sharing this history with shared children. Either way, more open communication with shared children surrounding family histories and connections is likely to reduce the confusion they experience in figuring these things out for themselves.

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

Limitations and Future Directions

There are limitations to this study. First, the retrospective nature of our data introduces concerns. It is possible that the more time has passed since shared children lived with their half-siblings, the greater chance of inaccuracy in their reported memories. Second, because participants were recruited through e-advertisements at a university, the sample consists of college students and university employees who have been relatively successful in their lives. Given that interest in this topic derived in part from findings that shared children are at greater risk to struggle (e.g., academically, socially) when compared with others, a more educationally and socioeconomically diverse sample might provide more insights into the range of experiences in shared children's lives. In addition, the sample lacked diversity in gender (three quarters of the respondents were women) and race (all but three participants were White). In a recent exploration of African American mothers, Dow (2016) found evidence of cultural expectations that challenged dominant hegemonic ideologies of family and motherhood. Because family relationships and experiences cannot be understood outside of the larger social contexts in which they are situated (e.g., Dow, 2016), shared children from various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds may experience being a shared child differently. Future research should investigate these differences through a culturally diverse lens.

It is also important to note this study included the purposive eligibility criterion of having shared a household with half-siblings for at least some time growing up. Many shared children, however, never share a residence with older half-siblings. Research on nonresidential half-sibling relationships is virtually nonexistent but could provide valuable insight regarding nonresidential half-sibling ties. For instance, some individuals who expressed interest in this study but did not meet our inclusion criteria were those who learned of the existence of their half-siblings in adolescence or adulthood and were slowly developing familial relationships. Explorations of these topics would be welcomed additions to the sibling literature.

In addition, research is needed on the perspectives of older half-siblings. Shared children in this study spent a lot of time hypothesizing about the feelings of their older half-siblings, but talking to older half-siblings themselves seems like the logical next step in filling out our collective understanding of half-siblings' experiences and relationships. Researchers should also consider the extent to which social mobility by marriage may impact shared child outcomes or half-sibling relationships, such as when half-siblings grow up in different socioeconomic contexts. Social inequalities within families is an avenue ripe for future research.

Finally, we encourage researchers to use these findings to inform measurement selection in quantitative investigations of shared children. Adding measures of family dynamics that appear to be prevalent in shared children's lives (e.g., "feeling caught" between conflict, feeling guilty about privilege, feeling frustrated with lack of familial communication) may help unpack the questions surrounding why shared children fare worse than other groups of siblings on various outcomes. At the same time, it is critical to implement research designs that ask questions pertaining to resilience and functionality in step-nuclear families. Focusing on the negative

outcomes at the expense of the positive ones further perpetuates the deficit-perspective that is all too often used in stepfamily research. Rather, we advocate for the use of the normative-adaptive perspective in studying shared children's experiences (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Although this perspective does not deny the possibility of problems in stepfamilies or attempt to mask stepfamily challenges, it seeks to avoid focusing solely on negative dimensions of stepfamily life by examining both positive and negative experiences. Better understanding of shared children and their families without further stigmatizing the complexity of their experiences remains an important scholarly task moving forward.

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