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Investigating Stepparent-Stepchild Interactions: The Role of Communication Accommodation

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Investigating Stepparent-Stepchild Interactions: The Role of Communication Accommodation

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This study examined the utility of communication accommodation theory (CAT) to investigate stepchildren's perceptions of communication patterns in typical interactions with their stepparents. A total of 133 stepchildren completed an online survey about their perceptions of their stepparents' accommodative and nonaccommodative behaviors. A measure of accommodation, overaccommodation, and underaccommodation was created for this study and items were tested with factor analysis. Findings indicate support for CAT's predictions: perceptions of stepparent accommodation, underaccommodation and overaccommodation predict stepchildren's accommodative behavior in typical interactions, as well as their conversation satisfaction, relational closeness and perceptions of shared family identity with their stepparents. Further, stepchildren's perceptions of shared family identity with stepparents correlate positively with their reports of satisfaction with blended family life.

Stepfamilies, defined simply as "families in which at least one of the adults has a child or children from a previous relationship" (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998, p. 101), are a prevalent family form in the United States. Because of unique differences from "traditional" or nuclear families (e.g., Burrell, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 2000), understanding the factors that contribute to the success of stepfamily functioning and the well-being of its members is an important endeavor. Unfortunately, a large portion of research on nontraditional families is atheoretical in nature (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), causing stepfamily scholars to point out the need for more theory driven work in the field (e.g., Braithwaite & Baxter, 2008; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Theories of intergroup communication may provide useful frameworks for understanding stepfamily functioning.

Surprisingly, however, despite research revealing the inherent intergroup nature of relationships within stepfamilies (e.g., Anderson & White, 1986; Braithwaite et al., 1998; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001), few intergroup theoretical frameworks have been applied to examine stepfamily relationships. Intergroup-relations perspectives are valuable theoretical lenses for stepfamily relations, as they offer an explication of the mechanism by which

perceptions of shared family identity and stepfamily harmony can be achieved (Banker & Gaertner, 1998).

The task of demonstrating the utility of an intergroup theoretical approach to examining relationships within the stepfamily context, particularly the stepparent–stepchild relationship, first requires an explanation as to why the stepfamily system constitutes an intergroup domain. Scholars call for a recurrent need to investigate "the experiences, perceptions and reflections of stepfamily members" (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000, p.1302), particularly stepchildren's perceptions of stepfamily membership (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), as processing information about stepfamily interactions can lead to adjustment (Fine & Kurdek, 1994) and perceptions of affiliation and distinction with stepfamily members. Further, given that stepfamilies have been identified as more discourse dependent than traditional or nuclear families, "engaging in recurring discursive processes to manage and maintain identity" (Galvin, 2006, p. 3), communication is a crucial means by which stepfamily members adapt to one another and forge healthy relationships and a sense of feeling like a family (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 1998; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003).

As such, the present study seeks to apply an established interpersonal/intergroup *communication* theory (i.e., communication accommodation theory) to bring together and expand on past research with the goal of better understanding stepfamily communication, as well as to test the utility of this theory in the stepfamily context. Specifically, this study focuses on how stepchildren's perceptions of stepparent accommodative and nonaccommodative behavior in typical conversations relate to conversation satisfaction, relational closeness, accommodative involvement, shared family identity, and overall satisfaction with blended family life.

STEPFAMILIES: AN INTERGROUP DOMAIN

The stepfamily system is arguably an intergroup domain. Stepfamilies, by definition, represent the union of two previously distinct families. When stepfamily members attempt to integrate their lives into the new family system, they bring with them different shared histories, familial rituals, rules and norms for interactions (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 1998; Burrell, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 1999). Unlike "traditional" or intact families, stepfamilies are faced with unique challenges, such as coping with loyalty conflicts (e.g., Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990), establishing communication boundaries between subsystems in the stepfamily (e.g., Burrell, 1995), and negotiating structures, roles, and norms that are suitable for myriad family interactions (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 1998). As they manage the tasks of developing new relationships with stepfamily kin while simultaneously maintaining existing family ties, stepfamily members may experience times during which they feel like a family, as well as times when conflict is intense and ongoing (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001).

Research on developmental trajectories during the formative years of stepfamily life (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001) demonstrates that while some stepfamilies are able to successfully achieve a sense of having forged a common familial identity, other stepfamilies develop rigid, impermeable, divisive family boundaries associated with conflict, avoidance, passive-aggressive communication strategies, decreased relational solidarity and even perceptions of "intense betrayal and . . . difficulties establishing trust in new family members" (Braithewaite et al., 2001, p. 239). Clearly, while stepfamilies may function as a common in-group with an

established collective identity, they may also be made up of perceived ingroup/outgroup (old vs. new family) or "us vs. them" distinctions (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 1998; Soliz, 2010).

Further, research on stepfamilies (e.g., Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Coleman, Ganong, & Weaver, 2001) suggests that biological[1] family members often feel closer to, identify more with, and invest more resources in one another than they do with stepfamily members. As a result, stepfamilies are often comprised of coalitions between biological family members, which creates conflict in the stepfamily household and dissatisfaction with steprelationships. In particular, the stepparent-stepchild relationship has been found to engender more conflict and to be less satisfactory than the parent-child dyad (e.g., Anderson & White, 1986; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Because the stepchild-stepparent relationship is often formed involuntarily, stepparents and stepchildren may lack the motivation to bond with one another (Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999) and to create a collective family identity.

Despite the prevalence of stepfamily research that reveals the intergroup nature of some stepfamilies—particularly the ingroup-outgroup nature of the stepparent-stepchild relationship (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2001)—few studies have applied intergroup theoretical frameworks to investigate stepparent-stepchild interactions and relational quality. In fact, to the authors' knowledge, only one such study (i.e., Banker & Gaertner, 1998) exists. Banker and Gaertner tested the utility of the common in-group identity model (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993) in the stepfamily context.

Based upon the contact hypothesis (see Allport, 1954) and social categorization, the common in-group identity model proposes that more favorable conditions of contact may reduce intergroup bias and conflict "by changing members' perceptions of the memberships from two groups to one group" (Banker & Gaertner, 1998, p. 312). The authors thus hypothesized and found through a path analysis that the more young-adult stepchildren perceived positive conditions of contact in the stepfamily household and the more positively they evaluated their relationship with their stepparent, the more likely stepchildren perceived their stepfamily as a single group. This, in turn, led to a greater perception of stepfamily harmony within the household.

Although Banker and Gaertner's (1998) study reveals that a positive relationship between a stepparent and his or her nonbiological stepchild is important for facilitating perceptions of the stepfamily as a common aggregate or collective ingroup and the stepfamily household as harmonious, the study does not address communicative issues. More specifically, the study fails to highlight the role of communication (i.e., specify communicative behaviors) that contributes to building and maintaining relational solidarity and minimizing intergroup salience in typical interactions between stepparents and their stepchildren.

Because everyday talk or standard communication patterns are the substance from which personal relationships are developed, maintained, and altered (e.g., Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Schrodt et al., 2007), and are important for successful family functioning when they are satisfactory for stepfamily members (Golish, 2003), it is important to attend to how communication between stepparents and their stepchildren fosters perceptions of affiliation or distinction. Banker and Gaertner's (1998) findings implicitly suggest that stepchildren's perceptions of their stepparent's behaviors as cooperative, inclusive, and personalized, as well as the perception of equal treatment of biological and stepchildren may be associated with relational solidarity.

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[1]We use the term biological to refer to nonstepfamily members throughout this manuscript. However, we acknowledge that nonstepfamily members may also include adoptive parents.

Because communication between stepchildren and stepparents was not a central focus of the study, however, this conclusion awaits an empirical test.

In addition, because of a lack of focus on communication in their study, Banker and Gaertner (1998) do not address how children might react to unfavorable conditions of contact in their communication exchanges with other members of their stepfamily, particularly with their stepparents. Although studies (e.g., Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Speer & Trees, 2007) are increasingly examining the role of stepchildren as active agents in stepfamily interaction, more studies are needed that attend to stepchildren's behavioral influence on stepfamily functioning and relational quality.

Finally, Banker and Gaertner's (1998) study does not assess shared family identity at the dyadic level; instead, the researchers examined how a positive stepparent-stepchild relationship related to stepchildren's perceptions of the stepfamily as a single group. Although dyadic relationships within the family contribute to and are affected by the family culture at the system level, each dyad within the family system is governed by its own implicit rules and patterns for interaction (Minuchin, 1988). From an intergroup perspective, then, "it is important to understand how family members manage intergroup distinctions individually, as the influence of divergent social categorization may not be consistent across all family relationships" (Soliz, 2010, p. 183). As such, for a more precise understanding of intergroup dynamics within the stepfamilies, shared family identity is more appropriately conceptualized at the dyadic level (e.g., between a stepchild and his or her stepparent) than at the system level. As a way of advancing an interpersonal/intergroup perspective on stepfamily communication, we invoke next a theory which has established some currency in the family arena (see Harwood, Soliz, & Lin, 2006).

COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY

Communication accommodation theory (CAT; Coupland, Coupland, Giles & Henwood, 1988; Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2005) is an appropriate theoretical lens for exploring typical interactions between stepparents and stepchildren for several reasons. First, the theory accounts for both intergroup and interpersonal communication (Gallois & Giles, 1998), both of which characterize interactions between stepparents and their stepchildren. Second, the theory affords an understanding of how an individual's communication strategies may be perceived, evaluated, and responded to by another interlocutor (Coupland et al., 1988), expanding on Banker and Gaertner's (1998) findings in its examination of communication patterns and their consequences within dyadic familial relationships. Third, it has been identified as "one of the best-developed theories relating to interpersonal adjustment" (Littlejohn, 1999, p. 107). Given that the ability to adjust to change and adapt to new family members has been found to help stepfamilies develop a sense of feeling like a family (Braithwaite et al., 2001), CAT is a logical theoretical framework for investigating how a stepparent's perceived ability to adjust his or her communication appropriately for his or her stepchild is associated with conversation and relational satisfaction for stepchildren.

CAT accounts for how and why individuals accommodate their communication to one another and the resultant consequences. Accommodative behaviors, when perceived as sincere and other-oriented, are those that the recipient of the behavior typically regards as contextually appropriate and a signal of camaraderie and respect (Giles, 2008). Nonaccommodation, on the other hand, refers to perceptions of over- or underaccommodative behaviors (Coupland

et al., 1988). According to Harwood (2000), underaccommodation is the perception of a failure of one interlocutor to incorporate the needs of the other in a communication exchange. Overaccommodation can be defined as the perception of "go[ing] too far in accommodating their partner's needs, for instance, by accommodating towards a stereotype of their partner rather than their actual competencies" or preferences (p. 745).

In typical stepparent-stepchild conversations, stepparent behaviors, such as demonstrating affection and attentiveness toward stepchildren who are prepared to receive it, would constitute accommodative behavior (Ganong et al., 1999). The absence of such behaviors when desired by stepchildren or behaviors that demonstrate detachment or a lack of inclusiveness may be perceived as underaccommodative. Stepparent overaccommodative behavior might be conceptualized as trying too hard to be the stepchild's friend (Visher & Visher, 1988).

A stepparent's excessive display of warmth, for instance, can cause loyalty conflicts for the stepchild who believes that amount of warmth to be appropriate only in his or her relationship with his or her natural parent (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). At the other extreme, attempting to act like the stepchild's parent, including exerting control over the stepchild's behavior, may be perceived as overaccommodative (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998) and may also produce loyalty conflicts for stepchildren (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Above all, what stepchildren perceive to be over- or underaccommodative is inherently subjective. As Thakerar, Giles, and Chesire (1982) note, it is the recipient's perception of the behavior, rather than a speaker's motives or objective qualities of the behavior, that determines whether communicative actions constitute appropriate accommodation or nonaccommodation.

CAT stipulates that an individual's perceptions of the accommodative and nonaccommodative behaviors of his or her partner in communicative exchanges influence attitudes toward that partner, as well as evaluations of the interactions themselves (Gallois et al., 2005). Perceived accommodation in interactions tends to be linked with positive appraisals of and satisfaction with said interactions, as well as with the individual engaging in the accommodative behaviors (e.g., Giles, 2008; Harwood, 2000; Soliz & Harwood, 2003; Watson & Gallois, 1998). Nonaccommodation, on the other hand, has been linked to negative evaluations of the person engaging in the behavior and decreased satisfaction with the interactions (e.g., Giles, 2008).

Although stepfamily research has not explored stepparent accommodation toward their stepchildren in typical conversations, Schrodt, Soliz and Braithwaite (2008) found that when stepparents engage in forms of everyday talk (e.g., joking around, catching up, recapping the days events) more frequently with stepchildren, both members of the dyad tend to be more satisfied with one another. Further, as previously indicated, stepparents' behaviors, such as displays of affection, are more likely to be accepted and appreciated by stepchildren when the stepchildren have come to terms with belonging to the stepfamily (Ganong et al., 1999; Visher, 1994). This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: (a) The more stepchildren perceive their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as accommodative, the more stepchildren will report satisfaction with the conversations; (b) The more stepchildren perceive their stepparents' communicative behaviors in a typical conversation as nonaccommodative (i.e., over-or underaccommodative), the less stepchildren will report satisfaction with the conversations.

H2: (a) The more stepchildren perceive their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as accommodative, the more stepchildren will report feelings of relational closeness with their stepparents; (b) The more stepchildren perceive their stepparents' communicative

behaviors in a typical conversation as nonaccommodative (i.e., over-or underaccommodative), the less stepchildren will report feelings of relational closeness with their stepparents.

Further, it is necessary to consider the interactive nature of communication and how the perceptions of each individual in the dyad influence communicative outcomes. For example, whether an individual's communicative behaviors are perceived by the recipient of the behavior as accommodative or nonaccommodative may influence the recipient's response. Harwood's (2000) study of typical conversations revealed that perceptions of nonaccommodation may result in reluctant accommodation. Reluctant accommodation can be conceptualized as socially distancing strategies aimed at removing oneself from the interaction resulting from feelings of discomfort and dissatisfaction with the exchange. Harwood also found positive correlations between perceptions of accommodative behavior and reciprocated accommodative involvement (e.g., sharing personal thoughts and feelings). It follows that stepparents' behaviors that are perceived by stepchildren as accommodative might be reciprocated with accommodative involvement as well. Behaviors perceived as over- or underaccommodative, on the other hand, should be associated with reluctant accommodation from stepchildren.

> *H3*: (a) The more stepchildren perceive their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as accommodative, the more stepchildren will report engaging in accommodative involvement; (b) The more stepchildren perceive their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as over- or underaccommodative, the more stepchildren will report engaging in reluctant accommodation.

Further, perceived patterns of nonaccommodation are often met with negative reactions, particularly in cases in which the recipient of the nonaccommodative behavior believes the speaker is doing so with malevolent intent (Giles, 2008). Perceived stepparent over- or underaccommodation, then, may go beyond feelings of restraint and a desire to terminate the conversation; it might elicit hostile reactions (i.e., counteraccommodation), or behavioral strategies that serve to disassociate the recipient of the nonaccommodative behavior from his or her interlocutor in a tense or antagonistic fashion (Gallois et al., 2005). As such, stepchildren who perceive their stepparents' communicative behavior as nonaccommodative might be likely to engage in counteraccommodative behavior, as opposed to accommodative involvement, to convey dissatisfaction with the interactions and to differentiate themselves from their stepparents. This is a logical assertion, given that research has shown that stepchildren resent and reject stepparents who attempt to enact roles that stepchildren perceive as inappropriate (Burrell, 1995; Cissna et al., 1990; Coleman et al., 2001).

> *H3*: (c) The more stepchildren perceive their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as over- or underaccommodative, the more stepchildren will report engaging in counteraccommodation.

In their discussion of CAT, Soliz and Harwood (2006) state that "perceptions of (in)appropriate accommodation . . . [are] linked to personal or group-based orientation in the interaction" (p. 90). According to these authors, perceptions of appropriate accommodation suggest that a personal orientation, or a person-centered approach, is employed and intergroup distinctions are minimized. Contrariwise, perceptions of nonaccommodation (i.e., over or underaccommodation) trigger group salience and in a familial context, minimize shared family identity.

In the context of intergenerational communication between grandchildren and their grandparents, Soliz and Harwood (2006) used CAT as their theoretical framework and found that young adult grandchildren's perceptions of their grandparents' use of personal communication (i.e., social support and self-disclosure) correlated positively with shared family identity with the grandparent. Further, Soliz's (2007) study revealed that grandchildren's perceptions of family-of-origin grandparents' and stepgrandparents' nonaccommodative behavior related negatively to grandchildren's reports of shared family identity in both relationships.

Although the stepparent-stepchild relationship is undoubtedly distinct from the grandparent-grandchild relationship, as well as from the stepgrandparent-stepgrandchild relationship, it seems probable that in typical conversations between stepchildren and their stepparents, stepparent behavior that stepchildren consistently perceive as accommodative (e.g., person-centered messages conveying involvement and attentiveness) would correlate positively with stepchildren's perceptions of shared family identity with their stepparent. The opposite should be true for stepchildren's perceptions of stepparent nonaccommodation (i.e., over or underaccommodation) in typical conversations:

H4: (a) The more stepchildren perceive their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as accommodative, the more stepchildren will report perceiving shared family identity with their stepparents; (b) The more stepchildren perceive their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as over- or underaccommodative, the less stepchildren will report perceiving shared family identity with their stepparents.

Although dyadic relationships within a family are characterized by their own idiosyncratic sets of relational qualities and behavioral norms, they cannot function independently from the larger family reality. The way the family system functions as a whole is determined by the nature of the various relationships that comprise it (Minuchin, 1988), and research has indicated that positive stepparent-stepchild relationships are crucial for successful family functioning (e.g., Anderson & White, 1986), as well as overall stepfamily happiness (e.g., Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). Satisfaction with blended family life refers to how an individual views his or her membership in the stepfamily (e.g., does being part of the stepfamily bring the individual enjoyment or does it make the individual feel miserable?; does the relationship with the stepfamily leave the individual feeling fulfilled or empty?). It follows that, for stepchildren, heightened feelings of shared family identity with the stepparent may have system-level effects (i.e., satisfaction with blended family life within and outside the stepparent-stepchild dyadic boundary).

H5: The more stepchildren report perceiving shared family identity with their stepparents, the more stepchildren will report satisfaction with blended family life.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 133 stepchildren recruited from undergraduate communication classes at a large western university. The stepchildren's ages ranged from 18 to 31 years old ($M = 19.46$; $SD = 1.68$). Eighty participants identified themselves as Caucasian (60.2%), four as African American (3%), 18 as Asian American (13.5%), 19 as Latino/a (14.3%), nine as "other" (6.8%),

and three participants did not respond (2.3%). Of the 133 stepchildren, 27 were male (20.3%), 105 were female (78.9%), and one participant failed to provide a response (.08%).

Of the 133 stepchildren, 102 reported having a stepparent that was married to their parent (76.7%), and 31 reported having a stepparent that was cohabiting with one of their parents without the umbrella of marriage (23.3%). Eighty-four participants indicated having stepfathers (63.2%) and 49 reported having stepmothers (36.8%).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate communication classes to complete an online survey. To be eligible to participate, participants were required to currently be a member of a stepfamily and over the age of 18. Participants with multiple stepfamily memberships were asked to focus on the stepparent with whom they lived most when they lived at home. The first section of the questionnaire contained a set of general questions including demographic information as well as information about the length and structure of the stepfamilies. Subsequent sections required participants to reflect on typical interactions they had with their stepparent.

Respondents then answered a series of questions evaluating their satisfaction with the conversations, their feelings and behaviors during the conversations, and their perceptions of their stepparents' behavior during these conversations. In addition, the questionnaire included a section concerning respondents' perceptions of their relationship with their stepparent, followed by a section pertaining to their satisfaction with their respective stepfamily. The survey focused on current communication exchanges, asking stepchildren to think about conversations they have with their stepparents and not to focus on any particular interaction with their stepparents, but rather to think about how these conversations generally go.

Measures

Stepparent (non)accommodation behaviors

Because there was no existing scale in the literature, stepchildren's perceptions of their stepparents' accommodative and nonaccommodative behaviors in typical interactions were assessed with a 32-item inventory created by the authors (see Appendix A). Items included accommodative and nonaccommodative behaviors identified in research grounded in CAT, such as "shares personal thoughts and feelings" (e.g., Harwood, 2000) and "treats me like an individual" (e.g., Watson & Gallois, 1998), as well as behaviors identified in stepfamily research, such as "acts resentful toward me" (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2001), "makes negative remarks about my other parent . . ." (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991), and "comforts me when I'm upset" (e.g., Fine et al., 1998). Many items were inspired by behaviors that were prevalent in both bodies of literature, such as "compliments me" (e.g., Fine et al., 1998; Harwood, 2000; Williams & Giles, 1996) and "shows affection for me" (e.g., Harwood, 2000; Schrodt et al., 2007).

Participants ranked their agreement with each of the items on a seven point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). For three of the 32 items, a "not applicable" option was offered for participants without siblings or stepsiblings. A lower score reflected higher levels of

accommodation for positively valenced items (i.e., accommodative behaviors) and higher levels of nonaccommodation for negatively valenced items (i.e., nonaccommodative actions).

Factor analysis of stepparents' (non)accommodation behaviors

A principal component analysis with varimax rotation was performed on the 32 items of stepparents' accommodative and nonaccommodative behaviors in typical interactions in order to create scales from emerging factors that could be used to analyze the study's hypotheses. Initially, only items with an eigenvalue greater than one were used, with a scree plot that contributed to factor selection. The initial assessment produced five components. Of the 32 items, seven were found to be cross-loaded. Based upon the factor loadings, items six, 12, 18, 21, 22, 28 and 29 were removed. Generally, any variables that had a primary factor loading of less than .6 and secondary loadings of greater than .4 were considered for deletion. The factor analysis was then run a second time without the aforementioned deleted variables, producing four components.

Based upon the factor loadings of the second factor analysis, items one, three, 13, 26 and 27 were deleted. Item four was also deleted based upon the fact that it was the only variable loading strongly on the fourth factor. Once the cross-loaded items and the isolated factor were removed, the 20-item scale was re-run, producing a cleaner, three factor solution (see Table 1). The result made theoretical sense, as the items that made up each factor appeared to align with the aforementioned definitions of accommodation, underaccommodation, and overaccommodation. Together, these three factors accounted for 71.13% of the total variance explained. The accommodation factor accounted for 31.07% of the total variance explained ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.4$, $\alpha = .94$); the underaccommodation factor accounted for 26.19% of the total variance explained ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.5$, $\alpha = .92$) and the overaccommodation factor accounted for 13.87% of the total variance explained $M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.3$, $\alpha = .78$).

Conversation satisfaction

Stepchildren's satisfaction with their conversations with their stepparent was measured using a modified version of Harwood's (2000) 5-item scale, originally a shortened version of Hecht's (1978) the communication satisfaction scale. Two example items from the scale included "I am generally satisfied with the conversations" and "These conversations flow smoothly." Participants ranked the items on a seven point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), with a lower score reflecting greater satisfaction with the conversations. The scale had an alpha reliability of .94.

Relational closeness

Stepchildren's relational closeness with stepparents was measured using a modified version of two dimensions (psychological closeness and perceived similarity) of Vangelisti and Caughlin's (1997) relational closeness scale. The final modified version of the relational closeness scale contained 11 items (e.g., "My stepparent's opinion is important to me;" "My stepparent and I have a close relationship"). Participants then ranked the items on a seven point scale. The scale ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), with a lower score reflecting higher levels of relational closeness. The scale had an alpha reliability of .97.

TABLE 1
Factor Loadings and Communalities Based on a Principle Components Analysis with Varimax
Rotation for the 20 (Non)accommodation Behaviors ($N = 133$)

	Accommodation	Underaccommodation	Overaccommodation
Compliments me	.845		
Gives me useful advice	.838		
Talks about topics I enjoy	.811		
Tells interesting stories	.800		
Comforts me when I'm upset	.781		
Is supportive	.723	−.519	
Shows affection for me	.718	−.557	
Is attentive	.682		
Shares personal thoughts and feelings	.639		
Makes it clear he or she favors his or her own biological or adopted children		.833	
Treats me poorly compared to his or her own biological or adopted children		.781	
Makes negative remarks about my sibling(s) (NOT my stepparent's own children)		.773	
Treats me as if I weren't a member of his or her "real" family		.741	
Makes negative remarks about my other parent (NOT my stepparent's spouse)		.680	
Treats me like an equal (R)		.655	
Makes angry complaints		.602	
Discloses too much personal information to me			.863
Tries too hard to be my friend			.818
Gives me unwanted advice			.600
Intrudes on my privacy			.570

Note. Factor loadings < .4 were suppressed.

Accommodative involvement

Stepchildren's accommodative involvement was assessed using a modified version of Harwood's (2000) and Soliz and Harwood's (2003) six items assessing accommodative involvement in typical conversations (e.g., "I share personal thoughts and feelings;" "I talk about topics my [stepparent] enjoys"). Participants ranked the items on a seven point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Consistent with the conversation satisfaction scale, a lower score reflected higher levels of accommodative involvement in the conversations. The scale had an alpha reliability of .87.

Reluctant accommodation

Stepchildren's reluctant accommodation was measured using a modified version of Harwood's (2000) and Soliz and Harwood's (2003) five items assessing reluctant accommodation in typical conversations (e.g., "I avoid certain ways of talking;" "I avoid certain topics"). Participants ranked the items on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), with a lower score representing higher levels of reluctant accommodation. The scale had an alpha reliability of .89.

Counteraccommodation

Counteraccommodation was assessed with a 7-item scale created by the authors. The items were created based on Coupland et al.'s (1988) conceptualization of contra-accommodation (i.e., counteraccommodation) as dissociative behaviors that could be "evaluated as 'rude,' 'arrogant,' and 'insulting'" (p. 32), as well as inspired by Jones, Gallois, Callan, and Barker's (1999) examples of classifications of negative behaviors (e.g., "I express negative feelings or frustrations directed toward my stepparent;" "I argue with my stepparent"). Participants ranked the items on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), with a lower score signifying higher levels of counteraccommodation. The scale had an alpha reliability of .86.

Shared family identity

Shared family identity was assessed with a modified version of Soliz and Harword's (2006) six-item scale, altered to measure shared group identity with a stepparent rather than a grandparent. Additionally, the measure was modified from a 5-point to a 7-point scale in order to capture more variance. Sample items from the scale include "I am proud to be in the same family as [my stepparent]" and "My shared family membership with my [stepparent] is NOT that important to me" (R). Participants ranked their level of agreement with the six items on the 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), with a lower score reflecting a stronger perception of shared family identity. The inventory had an alpha reliability of .96.

Stepfamily satisfaction

Overall satisfaction with stepfamily life was assessed using a version of Huston, McHale, and Crouter's (1986) Marital Opinion Questionnaire that was modified to fit the stepfamily context. The measure was a semantic differential scale, consisting of 9 bipolar adjectives (e.g., "very miserable" to "very enjoyable"). The items were ranked on a scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), with a lower score reflecting greater satisfaction with one's stepfamily membership. The inventory had an alpha reliability of .95.

Control Variables

Married versus cohabitation status, length of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, and stepparent and stepchild gender were all tested as possible control variables. Of all of these control variables, there was only one significant main effect: gender of the stepparent on shared family identity, $F (1, 127) = 7.05$, $p < .01$. As a result, gender of the stepparent was included as a control variable in the hierarchical multiple regression used to test H4.

Analyses of the Hypotheses

To acquire a broad sense of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, a correlation matrix of the 10 variables was examined (see Table 2). As can be seen from Table 2, underaccommodation is highly correlated with both accommodation and overaccommodation

TABLE 2
Intercorrelations Between all Predictor and Criterion Variables for Stepchildren

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Underaccommodation	—									
2. Overaccommodation	.647***	—								
3. Accommodation	−.702***	−.492***	—							
4. Conversation Satisfaction	−.740***	−.557***	.840***	—						
5. Accommodative Involvement	−.650***	−.503***	.839***	.846***	—					
6. Reluctant Accommodation	.695***	.607***	−.731***	−.698***	−.713***	—				
7. Counteraccommodation	.693***	.616***	−.689***	−.722***	−.703***	.593***	—			
8. Relational Closeness	−.747***	−.649***	.874***	.883***	.833***	−.768***	−.735***	—		
9. Shared Family Identity	−.716***	−.591***	.784***	.801***	.799***	−.649***	−.654***	.892***	—	
10. Stepfamily Satisfaction	.735***	.577***	−.787***	−.824***	−.768***	.627***	.691***	−.856***	−.832***	—

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

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(−.702 and .647, respectively). VIF and tolerance statistics indicated that underaccommodation might have multicollinearity issues (VIFs > 2.5, tolerance > .4). However, this is not necessarily problematic or unexpected given that underaccommodation and overaccommodation are both forms of the more general construct of nonaccommodation, and the three factors are correlated in the expected directions. Furthermore, Tabachnick and Fidel (2007) point out that "statistical problems created by . . . multicollinearity occur at much higher correlations (.90 and higher)" (p. 90). Because underaccommodation correlates with accommodation and overaccommodation at −.702 and .647, respectively, there is not concern that these correlations have caused statistical problems in the analyses.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis proposed that the more stepchildren perceived their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as accommodative, the more stepchildren would report satisfaction with the conversations; conversely, perception of nonaccommodation (i.e., over-or underaccommodation) would predict decreased satisfaction with the conversations. To test this hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis was run with stepchildrens' perceptions of stepparent accommodation, underaccommodation, and overaccommodation as the independent variables and conversation satisfaction as the criterion variable. Results indicated that the three independent variables together accounted for 75.5% of the variance in conversation satisfaction, $R = .87$, $R^2 = .76$, $F (3, 129) = 132.85$, $p < .001$. Perception of stepparent accommodation and underaccommodation entered the regression equation as significant predictors of conversation satisfaction; perception of stepparent overaccommodation, however, was not a significant predictor. Perception of stepparent accommodation was a positive predictor ($\beta = .62$, $t = 10.19$, $p < .001$) and perception of stepparent underaccommodation was a negative predictor ($\beta = −.24$, $t = −3.46$, $p < .01$). Perception of stepparent overaccommodation was not significant ($\beta = −.09$, $t = −1.64$, ns). These results indicate partial support for hypothesis one.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis predicted that the more stepchildren perceived their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as accommodative, the more stepchildren would report feelings of relational closeness with their stepparents; conversely, perception of nonaccommodation (i.e., over-or underaccommodation) would predict decreased feelings of relational closeness. A multiple regression analysis was run with stepchildrens' perceptions of stepparent accommodation, underaccommodation, and overaccommodation as the independent variables and relational closeness as the criterion variable. Results indicated that the three independent variables together accounted for 83.4% of the variance in relational closeness, $R = .91$, $R^2 = .83$, $F (3, 129) = 215.34$, $p < .001$. Perception of stepparent accommodation, underaccommodation and overaccommodation all entered the regression equation as significant predictors of relational closeness. Perception of stepparent accommodation was a

positive predictor ($\beta = .67$, $t = 13.30$, $p < .001$). Perception of stepparent underaccommodation was a negative predictor ($\beta = -.12$, $t = -2.05$, $p < .05$), as was perception of stepparent overaccommodation ($\beta = -.24$, $t = -5.14$, $p < .001$). Hypothesis two was thus supported.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3a suggested that the more stepchildren perceived their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as accommodative, the more stepchildren would report engaging in accommodative involvement. This hypothesis was tested with a bivariate correlation. Perception of stepparent accommodation correlated positively with stepchildren's reports of accommodative involvement ($r = .84$, $p < .001$), indicating support for hypothesis 3a.

Hypothesis 3b predicted that the more stepchildren perceived their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as nonaccommodative (i.e., over- or underaccommodation), the more stepchildren would report engaging in reluctant accommodation. To test this hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis was run with stepchildrens' perceptions of stepparent underaccommodation and overaccommodation as the independent variables and reluctant accommodation as the criterion variable. Results indicated that the two independent variables together accounted for 52.6% of the variance in reluctant accommodation, $R = .76$, $R^2 = .53$, $F (2, 130) = 72.11$, $p < .001$. Perception of stepparent underaccommodation and overaccommodation both entered the regression equation as significant predictors of reluctant accommodation. Perception of stepparent underaccommodation was a positive predictor ($\beta = .52$, $t = 6.58$, $p < .001$). Perception of stepparent overaccommodation was also a positive predictor ($\beta = .27$, $t = 3.41$, $p < .01$). These results offer support for Hypothesis 3b.

Hypothesis 3c predicted that the more stepchildren perceived their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as nonaccommodative (i.e., over- or underaccommodation), the more stepchildren would report engaging in counteraccommodation. To test this hypothesis, a multiple regression analysis was run with stepchildrens' perceptions of stepparent underaccommodation and overaccommodation as the independent variables and counteraccommodation as the criterion variable. Results indicated that the two independent variables together accounted for 52.9% of the variance in counteraccommodation, $R = .73$, $R^2 = .53$, $F (2, 130) = 72.86$, $p < .001$. Perception of stepparent underaccommodation and overaccommodation both entered the regression equation as significant predictors of counteraccommodation. Perception of stepparent underaccommodation was a positive predictor ($\beta = .51$, $t = 6.41$, $p < .001$). Perception of stepparent overaccommodation was also a positive predictor ($\beta = .29$, $t = 3.66$, $p < .001$). These results offer support for hypothesis 3c.

Hypothesis 4

The fourth hypothesis suggested that the more stepchildren perceived their stepparents' communicative behaviors in typical conversations as accommodative, the more stepchildren would report perceiving shared family identity with their stepparents; conversely, perception of nonaccommodation (i.e., over- or underaccommodation) would predict decreased perception of shared family identity. To test this hypothesis, a hierarchical multiple regression was run with shared family identity as the criterion variable. To control for variation among the gender of the

stepparent, the gender of the stepparent was entered into the first step. Stepchildrens' perceptions of stepparent accommodation, underaccommodation, and overaccommodation were entered into the second step.

The overall model demonstrated that the gender of the stepparent significantly predicted shared family identity in step one, $R = .25$, $R^2 = .06$, $F (1, 130) = 8.56$, $p < .01$, indicating that female stepparents, regardless of stepchildren's perceptions of their behavior as accommodative or not, were generally regarded as more important members of one's stepfamily than were male stepparents. In step two, the three independent variables significantly predicted additional variance in shared family identity, $R = .83$, $R^2_{change} = .63$, $F_{change} (3, 127) = 84.92$, $p < .001$. Results indicated that after controlling for the gender of the stepparent, the three independent variables together accounted for 67.8% of the variance in shared family identity. Among the three independent variables, perception of stepparent accommodation was a positive predictor ($\beta = .56$, $t = 8.11$, $p < .001$). Perception of stepparent underaccommodation was a negative predictor ($\beta = -.17$, $t = -2.07$, $p < .05$), as was perception of stepparent overaccommodation ($\beta = -.18$, $t = -2.80$, $p < .01$). These results demonstrate support for hypothesis four.

Hypothesis 5

The fifth hypothesis suggested that the more stepchildren perceived shared family identity with their stepparents, the more stepchildren would report satisfaction with blended family life. This hypothesis was tested with a bivariate correlation. Shared family identity with stepparents correlated positively with stepchildren's reports of satisfaction with blended family life ($r = .83$, $p < .001$), indicating support for hypothesis 5.

To explore this relationship further, an analysis was conducted to test for possible mediation effects of perceived shared family identity using a simple mediation model (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Specifically, we examined whether or not the relationship between perceived stepparent accommodation, underaccommodation, and overaccommodation and satisfaction with blended family life is mediated by perceived shared family identity. To test this relationship, we used Preacher and Hayes' SPSS macro for bootstrap analysis of a single proposed mediator. We conducted the analysis using a 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval and tested the models using 5000 bootstrapped resamples to analyze the relationship between accommodation (independent variable), perceptions of shared family identity (mediating variable), and satisfaction with blended family life (dependent variable).

This same model was run two additional times, with underaccommodation and overaccommodation as the predictor variables. For all three models, a significant effect was found, indicating that the independent variables (i.e., accommodation underaccommodation, and overaccommodation) and satisfaction with blended family life are indirectly related through perceptions of shared family identity. Because zero is not included in the 95% confidence interval for any of the models, it can be concluded that the indirect effect is significantly different from zero at $p < .05$ (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). When the indirect effects are significant, mediation has taken place (Mallinckrodt, Abraham, Wei, & Russell, 2006). However, because the relationship between the independent variables and dependent variable is still significant after including the mediator, only partial mediation has occurred. The results and coefficients for all three models are presented in Figure 1.
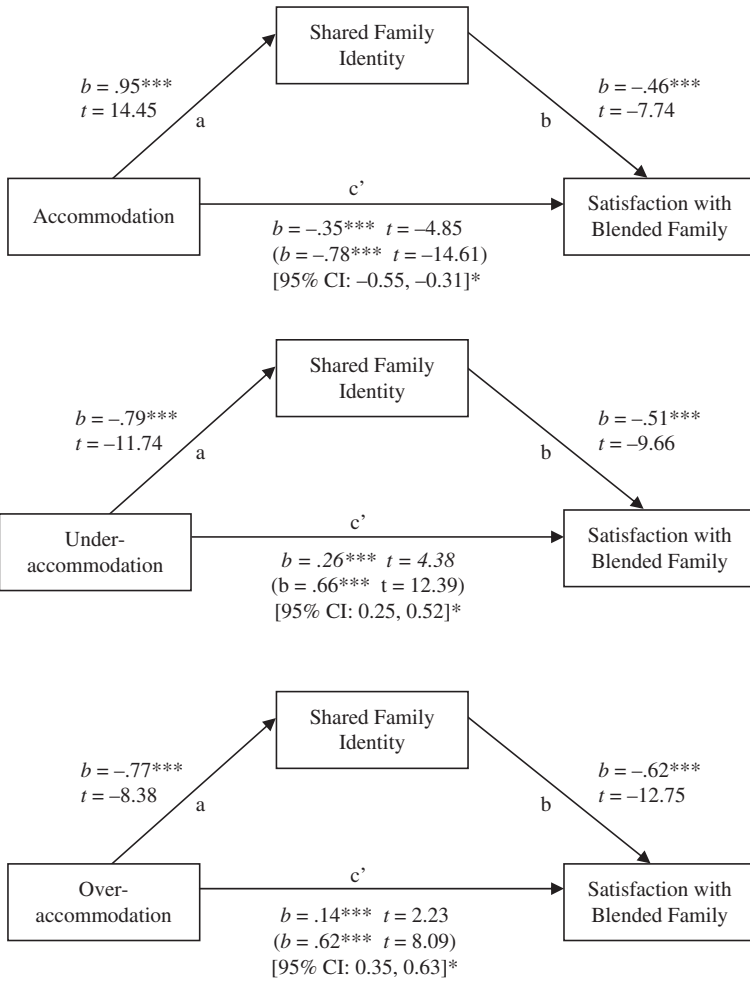
FIGURE 1 Mediation model of accommodation, underaccommodation, and overaccommodation on satisfaction with blended family life through shared family identity.

NOTE: Path values represent unstandardized regression coefficients. The value outside of the parentheses represents the direct effect, from bootstrapping analyses, of IV on DV after the mediators are included (c'-path). The value in parentheses represents the total effect of IV on DV prior to the inclusion of the mediating variables (c-path). *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

DISCUSSION

There were two important objectives of this study. The primary goal of this investigation was to employ an interpersonal/intergroup theoretical framework (i.e., communication accommodation theory) to examine stepchildren's perceptions of general communication patterns in typical interactions with their stepparents. More specifically, this study sought to explore the relationship between such perceptions and stepchildren's reports of conversation satisfaction, relational closeness, and perceptions of shared family identity (i.e., stepchildren's perceptions of their stepparents as an ingroup or outgroup family members) with their stepparents. A secondary goal of this project was to test communication accommodation theory in a new context. To the authors' knowledge, this study constitutes the first attempt to apply CAT to the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

Stepparent Accommodation, Underaccommodation, and Overaccommodation

An important contribution of the present study is the introduction and testing of a three-factor measurement to assess accommodation, underaccommodation, and overaccommodation in the context of stepfamily interaction. Consistent with family communication research using CAT as a theoretical framework (e.g., Harwood, 2000), as well as behavioral strategies identified in the stepfamily literature as useful for building rapport with stepchildren (e.g., Ganong et al., 1999), stepparent accommodation involves behaviors that demonstrate immediacy in conversations (i.e., warmth and attentiveness), as well as appropriate topic management.

In contrast with accommodative behaviors, stepparent underaccommodation generally consists of behaviors that downgrade the stepchild's status (e.g., unequal treatment of the stepchild) in typical interactions. Finally, the overaccommodation factor consisted of items that demonstrate perceptions of the stepparent overadjusting his or her communication style to converge toward a stereotype of what the stepchild might want or need. In stepparents' interactions with young-adult stepchildren, overaccommodation appears to be a sign of communication incompetence, particularly a violation of relational boundaries and perception of inappropriate role enactment and discourse management (e.g., "tries too hard to be my friend"; "gives me unwanted advice").

Testing CAT in Stepparent-Stepchild Interactions

CAT proposes that when an individual is perceived as accommodating the conversation and relational needs of his or her fellow interactant, the recipient of the accommodating behavior will be more satisfied with the interactions and evaluate the accommodating individual more favorably (Gallois et al., 2005; Giles, 2008).

Further, perceptions of accommodative behavior have been shown to elicit positive reactions (e.g., Harwood, 2000) and trigger perceptions of common social identities (e.g., Soliz & Harwood, 2006). In contrast, CAT stipulates that perceptions of patterns of nonaccommodation, be it over- or underaccommodation, and the person engaging in such behavior, are likely to be evaluated unfavorably and reacted to negatively, particularly if the recipient perceives the speaker to have negative intentions (Giles, 2008). Rather than perceptions of affiliation, perceived nonaccommodation activates awareness of intergroup distinctions (Gallois et al., 2005). As indicated by the data, stepchildren who perceived their stepparents' behavior as appropriately

accommodative during typical interactions were more satisfied with the conversations (H1), reported higher levels of relational closeness (H2), and were more likely to view their stepparents as members of a common familial ingroup (H4) than stepchildren who perceived their stepparents' behavior as nonaccommodative.

Perceptions of stepparent accommodation also correlated positively with stepchildren's reports of their own accommodative involvement (H3a), whereas perceptions of stepparent over- and underaccommodation correlated positively with reluctant and counteraccommodation (H3b and H3c). Finally, the more stepchildren perceived their stepparents as a member of their common familial ingroup, the more satisfied they were with blended family life (H5). Further analyses also revealed that the relationship between accommodation (as well as under- and overaccommodation) and satisfaction with blended family life is partially mediated by shared family identity. In future studies, it may also be useful to more directly explore whether stepchildren's accommodative and nonaccommodative behavior follow a similar path, eliciting accommodation, reluctant accommodation, and/or counteraccommodation from the stepparent.

Although causal claims cannot be inferred with certainty from survey data, these findings have important implications. Previous research on stepfamily communication has revealed that willingness and ability to adapt to new family members are crucial for forging healthy stepfamily relationships (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 1998; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003). Stepfamily members who disregard the need to adjust to one another, or who attempt to forcefully forge a family climate that fails to satisfy one or more of the members' needs, may ultimately face the disappointment and frustration of unmet expectations, and put a strain on themselves and other family members (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999). This study's findings reinforce the importance of attuning one's communication to the needs of others to enhance relational development and satisfactory encounters with stepfamily members.

The results of this study also contribute to stepfamily communication research in that they suggest an explication of the mechanism by which shared family identity (i.e., perceptions of belonging to a common familial ingroup) is developed and maintained, which correlates with increased satisfaction with blended family life. These results highlight the importance of every-day talk, which has been relatively unexplored in the stepfamily context (Schrodt et al., 2007), suggesting that perceptions—rather than adherence to prescriptions—of appropriate communication patterns are essential for successful interaction and relational enhancement. In line with the tenets of CAT (see Gallois et al., 2005), when stepparents are perceived as appropriately adjusting their communicative behavior to their stepchildren's needs and preferences in typical interactions, particularly in such a way that reinforces and even enhances the stepchildren's personal and social identities, perceptions of similarity to and liking of the stepparent increase.

The results of the present study suggest that in the stepparent-stepchild relationship, accommodative communication behavior on the part of the stepparent involves appropriately enacted emotional expression (i.e., warmth and immediacy) and topic management. Such pro-social behavior likely signals to stepchildren that they are worthy of respect, care, and attention; in turn, this behavior may not only elicit reciprocated pro-social behavior and satisfaction with the interactions, but may also enhance stepchildren's sense of self. This pattern may facilitate relational closeness and perceptions of their stepparents as valued familial ingroup members, which have a favorable, system-level effect.

Perceptions of stepparent nonaccommodation do just the opposite. Stepchildren's perceptions of being rejected by their stepparents, having their personal identities threatened and their social

identities marginalized, or being treated in such a way that suggests their stepparents do not know or care about who they are relates to increased perceptions of differentiation from their stepparents. This may create dissatisfaction with the encounters, foster antisocial patterns of communication between stepparents and stepchildren, impair relational closeness, and reinforce perceptions of stepparents as devalued outgroup members. The result is a negative system level effect: general dissatisfaction with stepfamily membership.

The above findings reiterate the importance of subjective accounts. It is the stepchildren's perception of their stepparents' behavior, irrespective of their stepparents' behavioral intentions, that determines whether the behavior is regarded as appropriate. Effective communication, then, is not an objective phenomenon, but requires establishing a shared, contextually-bound understanding of what constitutes appropriate behavior. These findings reinforce the importance of engaging in metacommunication, or talking about talk, to reduce uncertainty or confusion about how to attune one's communication to new family members; this corroborates extant research that has identified metacommunication as a crucial strategy for facilitating the development of conversational rules and norms that are satisfactory for stepfamily members on particular occasions (e.g., Burrell, 1995; Cissna et al., 1990; Golish, 2003).

Although each of the study's hypotheses was generally supported, the analyses of the data produced some unexpected findings. First, while perceptions of stepparent accommodation and underaccommodation predicted stepchildren's satisfaction with the interactions, stepparent overaccommodation was not a significant predictor. An explanation for this finding can be drawn from the conceptualization of overaccommodation. By definition, overaccommodation is a recipient's perception that a speaker has overcompensated in his or her communicative adjustment toward the recipient, perhaps in an attempt to converge toward a stereotype about the recipient (Coupland et al., 1988). Although stepparents who try too hard to accommodate stepchildren in typical interactions may be perceived as communicatively incompetent, it is possible that stepchildren are more forgiving of such behavior than underaccommodation because it represents an effort on the part of the stepparent.

A second unexpected finding had to do with the effect of the stepparent's gender on stepchildren's perceptions of shared family identity with the stepparent. The gender of the stepparent was found independently to be a significant predictor of shared family identity, such that female stepparents were generally viewed as more important members of one's stepfamily than were male stepparents, irrespective of stepchildren's perceptions of their behavior as accommodative or nonaccommodative. This was initially surprising, given that research has shown that stepmother families are more conflict ridden than stepfather families (e.g., Fine, Voyandoff, & Donnelly, 1993), and suggests that stepmothers may be perceived as intrusive, particularly by female stepchildren (Clingempeel, Brand, & Segal, 1987), who made up the majority of this study's sample. Stepmothers have also been found to attempt to be more nurturing and involved in their stepchildren's lives than stepfathers (e.g., Clingempeel & Segal, 1986), which could explain why they were rated more highly as important family members irrespective of perceived accommodation.

Several limitations of this study are important to mention. First, the sample consisted entirely of university students. Many young adult stepchildren enrolled in a university are living outside their stepparents' household; given their age and potentially less frequent contact with their stepparents, they may be less affected by their stepparent's over- and underaccommodative behavior, as they have substantially more freedom and independence. Perhaps perceived

stepparent nonaccommodative behavior would be more unpleasant and damaging to the relationship if stepchildren were consistently exposed to such treatment in their adult lives (i.e., if a larger portion of the sample reported currently living in a stepfamily household). An interesting future research endeavor, then, could involve replicating this study with a sample of younger stepchildren from diverse stepfamilies to determine if stepparent over-or underaccommodation share a stronger negative correlation with relational closeness and shared family identity when the stepchild may have more direct contact with his or her stepparent.

A second limitation of the study is the homogeneity of the sample with regard to the stepchildren's gender and ethnicity. Although the gender of the stepchild did not appear to affect the relationship between perceived stepparent accommodative and nonaccommodative behavior and the criterion variables, it is plausible that there may be interesting differences between stepchildren of different ethnicities and from different cultures. For example, Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, and Ota (1995) explain that members of collectivistic cultures belong to fewer ingroups and maintain stronger, more impermeable boundaries in terms of inclusiveness than members of individualistic cultures; they are more likely to perceive intergroup distinctions in encounters and react more negatively to perceived overaccommodation. This poses interesting implications for how stepchildren from collectivistic (e.g., Latino) cultures might react to perceptions of stepparent nonaccommodative behavior as operationalized in this study. Stepchildren in collectivistic cultures might have higher ingroup identification to the family of origin and evaluate the underaccommodation factor items that deal with marginalizing these family members more negatively. This could potentially strengthen the negative correlation between perceived stepparent underaccommodation and conversation satisfaction and relational closeness, as well as strengthen the positive correlation between underaccommodation and reluctant accommodation. An interesting future research endeavor would be to examine what stepchildren perceive to be nonaccommodative behavior in typical interactions with stepparents in different cultures, and how that relates to the solidarity variables in this current study.

Finally, it is important to mention that this study relied on self-reports from stepchildren about their own accommodative behavior. While self-reports are an appropriate methodology for assessing stepchildren's perceptions of stepparent nonaccommodation, relational closeness, shared family identity and satisfaction with blended family life, as these are inherently subjective phenomena, they are less accurate for assessing how stepchildren actually behave. This limitation, however, points toward an interesting future direction: incorporating the perspectives of multiple stepfamily members. The incorporation of the stepparents' perceptions of stepchildren's accommodative and nonaccommodative behavior would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of perceptions of accommodative behavior in the relationship, as well as the ability to assess if the magnitude of discrepancies in perceptions between stepparents and stepchildren correlate with the criterion variables. Using an intergroup approach combined with a systems approach, then, would be a fruitful future research endeavor.

CONCLUSION

These data provide support for using communication accommodation theory (an interpersonal/intergroup theoretical framework) to investigate relationships within the stepfamily context. In particular, this study illuminates the stepfamily system as an intergroup domain in which

typical communication patterns may foster, sustain, or result from perceptions of affiliation and distinction between stepparents and stepchildren. Although this study constitutes a preliminary step in investigating how intergroup dynamics within stepfamilies are communicatively managed, it calls attention to the value of using communication-focused intergroup theoretical lenses for developing a deeper understanding of how stepfamily members may attain relational solidarity through making appropriate adjustments in their interactions with one another.

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APPENDIX A

In general, I find that **my stepparent**:

1. Treats me like an individual:
2. Treats me like an equal:
3. Shows respect for me:
4. Controls the conversation:
5. Intrudes on my privacy:
6. Lets me express my own opinions:
7. Shares personal thoughts and feelings:
8. Is attentive:
9. Is supportive:
10. Compliments me:
11. Shows affection for me:
12. Talks down to me:
13. Treats me like a little kid:
14. Gives me unwanted advice:
15. Tells interesting stories:
16. Makes angry complaints:
17. Talks about topics I enjoy:
18. Says things that offend me:
19. Treats me as if I weren't a member of his or her "real" family:
20. Gives me useful advice:
21. Tries to boss me around:
22. Treats me like an adult:
23. Tries too hard to be my friend:
24. Discloses too much personal information to me:
25. Comforts me when I'm upset:
26. Criticizes me:
27. Tries to manipulate me:
28. Acts resentful toward me:
29. Makes negative remarks about my other parent (NOT my stepparent's spouse):
30. Makes negative remarks about my sibling(s) (NOT my stepparent's own children):
31. Treats me poorly compared to his or her own biological or adopted children:
32. Makes it clear that he or she favors his or her own biological or adopted children: