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# An exploration of the quality of relationship between step-children and step-parents based on address term usage

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**AN EXPLORATION OF THE QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
STEP-CHILDREN AND STEP-PARENTS BASED ON STEP-CHILD ADDRESS  
TERM USAGE**

by

Sierra R. Payton

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Psychology  
College of Science and Mathematics  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
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Thesis Chair: Jim A. Haugh, Ph.D.



## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father, John William Payton.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my appreciation to my thesis committee, Dr. James Haugh and Dr. Georita Frierson for their guidance and assistance throughout the completion of this thesis project.

## **Abstract**

Sierra R. Payton

AN EXPLORATION OF THE QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STEP-CHILDREN AND STEP-PARENTS BASED ON STEP-CHILD ADDRESS TERM USAGE

2018-2019

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Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling

This study aimed to examine address term usage as a communicative component of blended/step-families by examining the address terms that step-children use to address their step-parent and whether address term usage can allude to the quality of relationship reported by step-children within the step-child step-parent relationship. Rowan University undergraduate students ( $n=67$ ) were recruited to complete questionnaires on address term usage and quality of relationship using the Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI). Address term usage was the independent variable and was measured using three levels: formal, familiar, and familial. Quality of relationship was the dependent variable and was measured using the three scales of the QRI: support, depth, and conflict. Three one-way analysis of variance were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the type of address term used and the reported quality of relationship on each scale. The results indicated that for all three scales of the QRI address term usage did not make a difference or influence the quality of relationship as reported by step-children. Thus, although address term usage is a communicative component of blended/step-families, it was not found to be an indicator of relationship quality between step-children and their step-parent.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In the past century, the concept of family and family composition has changed significantly in the United States. “Family” no longer seems to be represented by, or is reflective of, a single model or prototype of related individuals collectively known as a “family.” For decades the model family, also known as the “nuclear family,” was the traditional and socially accepted type of family in American Society. The nuclear family consisted of two biological parents (mother and father), and one or more biological children that all shared a household. However, changes in family composition, particularly through the acts of divorce and cohabitation, have forever changed the family unit and the concept of the nuclear family and have contributed to what are now commonly known as blended and step-families (Nuru & Wang, 2014; Ryan & Claessens, 2013).

### **Changes in Societal Family Structure**

In the United States, about 40-50% of married couples divorce, and the divorce rate increases for second and third marriages (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018). Additionally, although not all states report marriage and divorce statistics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Health Statistics reported 2,245,404 marriages in the United States and 827,261 divorces/annulments in the year 2016. Furthermore, and contrary to popular belief, divorce rates have not steadily increased over the last decade but have instead fluctuated, and more divorces were reported in 2008 (844,000 divorces/annulments), than in 2016 (827,261 divorces/annulments) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Divorce is

considered to be one significant factor that has contributed to the increase in the number of blended and step-families. When divorced individuals decide to remarry or cohabitate with new partners blended and step-families are created (Portrie & Hill, 2005; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001).

Moreover, in addition to divorce, unmarried or cohabitating partner households also provide the foundation that may foster the development of blended and step families. Nuru and Wang (2014) suggest that many children gain step-parents through cohabitation. Furthermore, according to the Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2016), long-term changes in family composition have caused the number of children that live in households with married parents to decrease, and the number of children living in single parent households has become more common. More specifically, in the year 2012, data indicated that among children who lived with two parents, 8% lived with a biological or adoptive parent and a step-parent, and approximately 70% of children in step-families lived with their biological mother and a step-father (Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2016). In addition, it was also found that 37% of children living with either a single mother parent or a single father parent also lived with their parent's cohabitating partner (Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2016). Today, it is not uncommon for some children to grow up in a household with a parent that they are not related to biologically. Thus, there are many ways in which a blended or step-family can develop through various changes in family composition.

The terms "blended family" and "step-family" refer to families in which the biological parents are no longer together and one or both of the biological parents has repartnered or remarried (Schrodt, 2006). When remarriage or repartnering occurs, the

blended or step-family consists of a biological parent and biological child, plus a step-parent. The new family could also consist of a biological parent, a biological child, a step-parent, and step-siblings. For the purposes of this paper, these terms will be used interchangeably. Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999), it is noted that the term “blended family” is used in order to highlight the process of integration and the developmental process of the family, in contrast to the term “step-family” which can be considered belittling or derogatory. Portrie and Hill (2005) conducted a critical review of the current research on blended families including the developmental processes of blended families, relationships between blended family members, children in blended families, parental monitoring, and roles of blended family members. However, because research interest in blended families is relatively recent there is still a wealth of research that can be done in order to better understand blended families and help individuals in blended families manage the inevitable challenges and stressors that may come along with being a part of such a complex family unit.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Presently, most of the research that has been conducted on blended families has been collected with individuals from Caucasian backgrounds from large universities (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Cartwright and Seymour (2002) argue that participants in blended family research may also have had mostly positive blended family experiences and coped relatively well with family transitions. Additionally, the research on blended families has also tended to focus on families where there is a biological mother and a step-father, and the majority of the research has focused on the perspective of the step-child through retrospective accounts of their experiences as a part of a blended family. Conversely, research on blended families has not been entirely representative of more diverse populations and cultures, and fewer studies on blended families have considered the experiences and perspective of all of the members within the blended family as opposed to just using one member of the blended family.

Past research on blended families has also reflected a “deficit-comparison approach” to studying blended families (Baxter et al., 1999; Schrodt, 2006). According to Baxter et al. (1999), the deficit-comparison approach considers the system of the nuclear family to be dominant - and suggests that the blended family is thought to be “deficient and problematic.” Additionally, in research on the need for policy change to reflect the interests of step-parents and step-parent relationships, Malia (2005) also addresses the fact that some family scholars consider the blended family to be less functional and more problematic than nuclear families. Thinking or believing that the blended family is deficient and problematic because it is not equivalent to the nuclear family is troubling

for understanding the blended family and blended family development from a research and clinical perspective. Additionally, it can also become troubling for individuals who are members of blended families themselves. Thus, it is important to study the family unit, traditional and non-traditional, in order to understand the developmental challenges that family members experience as the family unit serves as the foundation for producing productive and functioning members of society. Furthermore, studying the family unit and family systems is essential in order to be better prepared on both an individual and clinical level to address family issues and challenges when they arise, and to also know how to work through them when they occur. Moreover, specific research on blended families has become increasingly necessary as the number of blended families continues to grow, and also in order to better understand how to ensure that blended families can be successful family types. In an effort to ensure that blended families are not stigmatized as deficient and problematic it is necessary that research continues to be conducted on the development of this now common family type.

### **Developmental Challenges of Blended Families**

The developmental process of becoming a blended family is complex and a gradual process that occurs over time. As blended families are now more common than they were in the past, the challenges that blended families encounter are indeed different from those of nuclear families. The challenges associated with blended families involve communication within the blended family unit as a whole, in addition to communication within specific family member relationships within the family unit. (Braitwaite et al., 2001; Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Normand, 2008). In a critical review on blended family research, Portrie and Hill (2005) highlight the significance of open communication

in blended families as it relates to the family's ability to work through challenges such as role identification, boundary management, and conflict, and by doing so families embark on a healthier path to family development. Additionally, Kellas et al. (2014) argue that blended family development can be complicated by the intertwining of family systems at different stages of family development. Furthermore, Nuru and Wang (2014) suggest that many children gain step-parents through cohabitation, a primary turning point in the development of the blended family. Moreover, research on family structure changes suggests that children in blended families experience two family changes, a divorce or separation and a remarriage or repartnering (Ryan & Claessens, 2013). Thus, there are various factors that contribute to, and influence the way that a blended family develops. Each family may or may not experience the same stressors and challenges as the next family, and it is also possible that the challenges that are experienced impact families to varying degrees.

Finally, some researchers allude to the first four years of blended family life and time together being the "make it or break it" period for step-families as they learn to adjust to the many changes and challenges that blended families encounter (Kellas et al., 2014; Braithwaite et al., 2001). Thus, the research suggests that blended families do not form overnight and that blended families are in fact developmental projects whose destiny is determined by the family unit's ability to cope with, and work through, various changes and challenges that can affect all, some, or just one family member at any time.

Early research on the blended family's process of becoming a family was characterized by the stage model of blended family development. Papernow's (1993) model of blended family development is a seven-stage model in which blended family

members progress through stages of development until they achieve the point of a solid and healthy family unit (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Although informative, Papernow's model has been criticized for suggesting how blended families should behave, and not descriptive by providing information on the developmental process from the inside perspective of individuals who are members of blended families (Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001). Furthermore, the stage model has also been criticized for not recognizing the "ups and downs" of blended family development and as a result, the process model of blended family development has been found to be more appropriate and applicable to the developmental process of blended families (Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001).

Unlike the stage model, the process model of blended family development is thought to be a better representation of the actual way in which blended families develop into a family unit. The process model accounts for the "ups and downs" and as well as the complex nature of the blended family (Braithwaite et al., 2001). In research conducted by Baxter et al. (1999), "turning points" in the blended family's life were used as alternatives to the "stages" described in the stage model. It was argued that the turning points are points of developmental change and provide insight into blended family member's perception of the family's development. Turning points were then analyzed and translated into trajectories, or developmental pathways (Baxter et al., 1999), which are currently used to describe the nature in which blended families become more or less of a family unit.

The five most frequently reported turning points identified by Baxter et al. (1999) from a list of 15 total turning points that were identified by participants were as follows:



changes in household/family composition, conflict or disagreement, holidays and special events, quality time, and family crises. Other turning points that were identified also included reconciliation/problem solving, prosocial actions (friendly gestures), relocation or geographical move for the household, and unmet expectations or disappointment. Additionally, Baxter et al. (1999) concluded that overall positive turning points outnumbered negative turning points and that the subsequent developmental trajectories differed significantly based on the number of positive and negative turning points. Baxter et al. (1999) were able to develop five developmental trajectories based on their analysis of blended family member's turning points, their rating as positive or negative, the turning point's perceived degree of feeling like a family, and how blended family members approached and resolved the various turning points.

In no particular order, the first developmental trajectory identified by Baxter et al. (1999) was the *accelerated* trajectory. The accelerated trajectory is characterized by quick movement towards feeling like a family and initial mid-range levels of feeling like a family that progress with positive turning points outnumbering negative turning points. The next trajectory identified by Baxter et al. (1999) is the *prolonged* trajectory, which is characterized by a slower progression towards feeling like a family when compared to the accelerated trajectory, and in this trajectory positive turning points outnumbered negative turning points as well. The *stagnating* trajectory is characterized by lower levels of initial feeling like a family that stayed low throughout the initial four-year time period of the participant's blended family development (Baxter et al., 1999). Furthermore, research by Baxter et al. (1999) determined that in the stagnating trajectory, although positive turning points outnumbered negative turning points, they did not seem to significantly increase

the participant's degree of feeling like a family. The fourth trajectory identified by Baxter et al. (1999) was the *declining* trajectory, which is characterized by negative turning points outnumbering positive turning points and high levels of feeling like a family in the early portion of the four-year period followed by a decline in feeling like a family over time. Finally, the last trajectory is described as the *high-amplitude turbulent* trajectory and was characterized by alternating positive and negative turning points with prompt increases and decreases in the participant's degree of feeling like a family (Baxter et al., 1999). Braithwaite et al. (2001) highlight that the process model emphasizes the developmental trajectories and that relationship development in blended families is complex and quite possibly a variable process.

Braithwaite et al. (2001) extended the research that had been conducted by Baxter et al. (1999) on the developmental trajectories of blended family members by unpacking the specific experiences of blended family members for each of the five trajectories during each of the four years that the participants were asked to recall their blended family experiences. From their extension of Baxter et al.'s (1999) initial study, Braithwaite et al. (2001) were able to draw many conclusions about the developmental process of blended families. In addition to confirmation that not all blended families develop in the same way, researchers were able to conclude that family members who experienced the more constructive trajectories were more likely to recall successful and flexible boundary management (accelerated and prolonged trajectories), whereas family members who experienced the stagnating, declining, and high-amplitude turbulent trajectories had a common inability to successfully negotiate family boundaries (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Moreover, the following assumptions and generalizations were

made from the research: most individuals enter into blended families with an optimistic attitude; that difficulties were common when blended families attempted to replicate traditional (nuclear) family roles and norms; and that the actual development of the blended family begins in the earliest stages, even before marriage or cohabitation of the adults occurs (Braithwaite et al., 2001). It was also suggested that those families who were patient, expected difficulties, challenges, and changes, and understood that it would take time to feel like a family, that those families were able to become close as a family and ultimately had more positive experiences (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

**Additional challenges in blended families.** As already mentioned, blended families encounter many changes and challenges as a part of the developmental process of becoming a blended family. Some of the challenges that are experienced by blended families are experienced by either individual family members, or by the family unit as a whole. In addition to variable developmental processes, some of the changes and challenges that blended families encounter are role ambiguity, adjustment, identity formation, feeling caught in the middle, legal challenges, and challenges regarding communication (Baxter et al., 1999; Nuru & Wang, 2014; Kellas et al., 2008; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Schrodtt, 2006; Weaver & Coleman, 2010; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Malia, 2005; Braithwaite et al., 2001). Role ambiguity, adjustment, and identity formation can be some of the first challenges that blended family members experience as the blended family is new and becomes established. Baxter et al. (1999) concluded that changes in household/family composition was the most commonly reported turning point by participants. Changes in family/household composition can reflect the dissolution of one household and the

formation of another, the blended family household, while simultaneously creating a sense of feeling overwhelmed and confusion for blended family members. Additionally, Braithwaite et al. (2001) argues that role ambiguity is experienced or noticed as individuals try to adjust to, and make sense of, the different relationships in the family. Furthermore, boundaries, solidarity, and loyalty conflict become specific components of the overall challenge of adjusting to blended family development.

In addition to challenges involving role formation and adjustment, another significant challenge that blended family members may encounter are loyalty conflicts. Loyalty conflicts within the blended family can be complex as they may exist within multiple relationships found within the blended family. Loyalty conflicts, or “feeling caught in the middle,” can be found within the relationships between children and their custodial and noncustodial parents, between the biological parent and his/her child(ren) and new partner or spouse, and for a noncustodial parent who may feel that their parental role has been lessened and replaced by the step-parent (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Braithwaite et al., 2008; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). In their study on step-children’s perceptions of communication of co-parents, Braithwaite et al. (2008) found that step-children used the metaphor of “being caught in the middle” to describe exchanges between their parents following a divorce. The results of the same study indicated that children experience the dialectical contradiction of wanting to be centered in the family but not feel as if they are caught in the middle (Braithwaite et al., 2008). Children reported feeling caught in the middle when parents were too open or too closed, and being caught in the middle also allowed children to get away with things (Braithwaite et al., 2008). Conversely, feeling centered occurred when children felt they

were included in things that they need to be included on and left out of matters that would leave them feeling caught in the middle. Overall, being centered allowed children to have the desired type of relationship with their parents (Braithwaite et al., 2008).

Interestingly, step-children are not the only blended family members that experience feeling caught in the middle. Weaver and Coleman (2010) conducted research on biological mothers' role as the link between the step-father and her child(ren). Weaver and Coleman (2010) note that the women's experience as a step-mother in a blended family is unique because the biological mother/child relationship is often the oldest and closest relationship in the step-family, and the mother is generally the reason why the step-father and step-child(ren) share a household. As a result, the role of the mother in a blended family can be challenging as the mother attempts to accommodate both her spouse or partner and her own children. Weaver and Coleman (2010) suggest that most mothers in the study viewed themselves as a mother over a wife or partner, and that they considered themselves to be their children's guardians. The protective role that the mother's believed they assumed in their step-families manifested in different types of protective roles that they thought served to mediate the relationship between their children and their spouse or partner. However, feeling caught in the middle and as though it is their responsibility to foster the step-family's emotional environment and facilitate relational management can also affect the step-mother's emotional well-being (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Thus, understanding the "caught in the middle" phenomena is important as it applies to both children and parents within the blended family as well as to individuals who are extended members of the blended family, including the nonresidential biological parent. The metaphor of feeling caught in the middle serves as

one of the many challenges that blended families encounter throughout their development.

Another significant challenge for blended families that is noted repeatedly in the literature is communication. On the topic of communication in the blended family, Braithwaite et al. (2008) states that “communication is central to stepfamily concerns”. Nuru and Wang (2014) also address blended family communication by describing the process of how blended family members are able to construct meaning and identity through the use of communication. Braithwaite et al. (2001) suggest that at the root of blended family development many issues are established and decided upon through communicative means, and relatedly, Kellas et al, (2008) state that most of the challenges faced by blended families are communicative in nature. Furthermore, in Portrie and Hill’s (2005) critical review of blended family research, all five of the developmental trajectories of blended family development considered development satisfying when there was open communication in the family, in addition to concluding that blended family development is unique and based on a family’s pattern of communication. Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) also consider individuals outside of the immediate blended family and note that communication with “outside” members of the blended family can also be challenging. Thus, research evidence speaks volumes to the importance of communication to blended family development and blended family member’s satisfaction with the family unity.

### **Blended Families, Communication, and Relationship Quality**

Under the broad umbrella of communication challenges within the blended family, several aspects of communication are worth noting for their importance in

blended family development. Some of the specific aspects of communication within the blended family that impact overall satisfaction, development, and quality of relationships within the family are the types of everyday talk that step-family members engage in, the impact of communication competence on step-family types, and step-family address term usage. Everyday talk is common in many types of relationships but it becomes unique when applied to the blended family system because it can speak volumes about the relationships within the family (Schrodt et al., 2007). When considering everyday talk in step-families it was concluded that all three step-family members (biological parents, step-parents, and step-children) reported *catching up*, *joking around*, and *recapping the day's events* as the most frequent forms of everyday talk (Schrodt et al., 2007).

Additionally, the type of family member relationship (step-parent/step-child, biological parent/child) was found to influence the type of everyday talk in blended families (Schrodt et al., 2007). The concept of variations in everyday talk among blended family members based on relationships is not surprising considering the complexity of communication within blended families which reveals that step-family members engage in different types of everyday talk depending on what family member they are addressing (Schrodt et al., 2007). Moreover, step-family members most frequently engage in typical, mundane forms of everyday talk which further suggests that most relating in step-families occurs on this level (Schrodt et al., 2007).

Related to the types of everyday talk in blended families is communication competence. It is argued that communication in families is a factor that can help or hinder family progression on the dimensions of cohesion and flexibility (Schrodt, 2006). The impact of communication on the developmental process of blended families states that

communication behaviors manage challenges that are associated with becoming a family (Schrodt, 2006). *Communication competence* is defined as “communication that requires a certain level of assertiveness, appropriateness, social skill, patience, and flexibility...” (Schrodt, 2006), and has been used to describe step-family types, similar to the way in which perceived turning points have been used to develop developmental pathways of blended family development. Thus, research conducted by Schrodt (2006) on communication competence alludes to five different step-family types based on different step-family qualities, including the communicative patterns of step-families as they were reported by step-children. The five step-family types are *bonded*, *evasive*, *functional*, *ambivalent*, and *conflictual*. Schrodt (2006) was able to conclude that step-children from bonded step-family types (characterized by low levels of dissension and avoidance and high levels of involvement, flexibility and expression within the step-family), and functional step-families (families who experience lower levels of involvement and expression and more avoidance than bonded families, but higher levels of involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness than *evasive*, *ambivalent*, and *conflictual* families) reported the highest levels of communication competence which reflects a difference in step-family types on a communicative basis, while also suggesting that the communication skills of step-parents are crucial to step-family functioning as they contribute to how step-children perceive the step-family. Furthermore, Schrodt and Braithwaite (2011) also contribute research findings which suggest that the communication style of coparents (step and biological parent), not just step-parents, also contributes significantly to blended family functioning illustrating the importance of communication and the perception of communicative styles by blended family members.



Similarly, research conducted on step-children's perspectives of what hurts and what helps also relates to the importance of communication within the blended family as it pertains to how parents communicate information to children in blended families. Cartwright and Seymour (2002) conducted research on what general themes seem to hurt step-children and help step-children as they exist in blended family systems and attempt to maintain a relationship with their biological parent. Step-children reported not being informed and consulted with on various issues by the biological parent as a theme that hurt children in step-families. Conversely, spending time alone with the biological parent and talking about what is happening as the blended family changes and develops was described as a theme that really helped step-children in blended families (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Thus, the communicative relationships between all blended family members becomes essential to the overall functioning of the family and impacts the quality of the relationships among family members as well as how family members feel about and perceive the blended family unit.

### **Blended Family Communication and Address Terms**

Another communicative component that can also affect the development and perception of the blended family unit is the use of specific address terms. Oyetade (1995) describes address terms as "words or expressions used to designate the person being talked to while talk is in progress" (p. 515). Fitch (1991), defines address terms in the following manner:

Personal address serves a pointing function: It identifies who is being spoken to or about, and sometimes identifies the speaker as well. It constitutes a case of communication behavior which is integrally tied to cultural context, because it is

the linguistic place where nature and culture meet: where basic human distinctions such as **closeness/distance** and **power/status** take on the cultural conceptualizations of selfhood and interpersonal relationship. The “pointing” function of personal address encodes a range of identity and relationship from literal to figurative. The most literal end of the range is that which is closest to these universal distinctions. The more metaphorical the reference, the more cultural knowledge is required to understand particular address term usage (p. 269-270.)

Simply put, an “address term” is a term that is used by one individual to address another individual. The use of address terms occurs in every day interactions, can hold both literal and figurative meanings, and provides information on the relationship between the person speaking and the individual that they are addressing. Additionally, Oyetade (1995) notes that the pattern of address term chosen is determined by social factors such as acquaintance, intimacy, age, and occupational status or rank, similar to the factors closeness/distance and power/status identified by Fitch (1991).

Address terms have also been recognized to have significance from a cultural perspective. On this topic, Fitch (1991) posits that “communication is a universal process which is culturally situated. Communication takes place, in other words, in speech communities which vary in their socially constructed understandings of the nature of persons and desirable relationships between them” (p. 254). Fitch (1991) elaborates on the cultural significance of address terms by acknowledging that with address terms, speakers create personal identities and define the nature of the relationship between themselves and the person they are addressing.

Kellas et al. (2008) describes address term usage as trivial, but nonetheless a significant way that blended family members communicate with one another. In a family system, address terms may be terms such as “mom/mommy/mother,” “dad/daddy/father,” “brother/sister,” “step-brother/step-sister,” “half-brother/half-sister.” Address terms can also be reflected by the use of an individual’s first name, or title and last name (Oyetade, 1995), address terms can be nicknames, or a variation of any of any of the above. In a family unit, address terms often reflect information about the type of relationship that family members have with one another, and address terms are thought to be meaningful and have purpose in building and maintaining identity (Kellas et al., 2008). Furthermore, address terms may reflect the formality of a relationship and may progress to being more informal over time, or they may be used to please the recipient of the address term (Kellas et al., 2008).

**Address term usage and relationship quality.** Within the step-family address terms can reflect feelings about step-family relationships, such as the quality of the relationship between two members within the step-family. Kellas et al. (2008), concluded that there are three types of address terms, *formal*, *familiar*, and *familial*, and that address term usage can be *direct* (terms used to address another family member), as well as *referential* (terms used to refer to another family member when talking to someone outside of the family unit). An example of a formal term would be “Mr. John” or “my mother’s husband.” Familiar terms include first names or the word “step” in reference to parents and siblings, and the familial terms reflect address term usage that is most similar to a nuclear family by not using the “step” prefix (Kellas et al., 2008). In addition to the types of address terms, research has also revealed the circumstances under which

different address terms are used. Step-family members seem to change the address terms that they use based on the setting, audience, or the relationship with the individual that they are addressing, and when this occurs it is described as *code-switching* (Kellas et al., 2008). Thus, address terms may be perceived as a minute aspect of blended family communication but the research on address term usage reflects and indicates a great deal about step-family identity, cohesiveness, and relationship quality. More specifically, step-children are most likely to manage step-family identity using address terms to communicate solidarity or separateness in a complex family system, and in this way step-children also establish a communicative method within the family system (Kellas et al., 2008).

Thus, as blended families are complex family units that have become increasingly more common, the experience of each family member in the blended family can be different because of their position, role, and the challenges that they perceive and experience within the family unit. More specifically, being a child in a blended family can be extremely difficult as children attempt to understand and cope with the changes of their nuclear or pre-blended family life, while simultaneously adjusting to a blended family. Although blended family members encounter many challenges such as role ambiguity, identity formation, and feeling caught in the middle (for both children and adults), communication and communicative methods serve as one of the most important, yet difficult, challenges that the blended family will experience. Throughout the literature on blended families, communication has been identified as an integral component in blended family success and failure and has been identified as a primary component in uniting blended families and helping blended families to thrive.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to extend the research in blended family communication and the overall development of the blended family by exploring address term usage and the relationship between address term usage and the quality of relationship between step-children and their step-parent. This study hopes to determine if conclusions can be drawn based on the type of address terms used and their ability to reflect the quality of relationship between step-children and their step-parent. This study proposes the following hypotheses: (a) Individuals who report the use of familial address terms will report greater support and depth than those who use formal address terms, (b) individuals who report the use of familiar address terms will report greater support and depth than those who report formal address terms, (c) individuals who report the use of formal address terms will report more conflict than those who use familial and familiar address terms. If address terms potentially reflect role identities or a sense of belonging within the family then it is also possible that they may allude to, or also serve as, a means of illustrating the quality of relationship between a step-parent and a step-child. This study aims to explore the potential relationships between address terms and the quality of relationship in hopes to contribute to the current research in the fields of blended family research and family counseling and therapy.

## Chapter 4

### Methodology

#### Participants

Sixty-seven participants with a mean age of 19.07 years old ( $SD=1.07$ ; range 18-23 years old) participated in this study. The sample was composed of 32 males (47.8%), 32 females (47.8%), and 3 (4.5%) individuals who identified as “other.”

Participants were recruited from the Rowan University undergraduate population through the means of the Rowan University Psychology Department’s SONA system. A total of 128 participants initially participated in the study. Of the 128 participants, 61 participants in total were removed from the sample for not endorsing having a step-parent, or for not completing the measures in the study in their entirety. To be included in the study, participants needed to meet the following criteria: be a Rowan University undergraduate student, at least 18 years old, be a member of a blended/step-family in the role of a step-child, and must have a step-parent, or someone who served in the role of a step-parent. Participants also needed to be able to recall the relationship between themselves and their step-parent/person in the role of a step-parent.

Participants were excluded from the study if they did not endorse having a step-parent, or someone in the role of a step-parent, as they would not be able to answer questions about address term usage and quality of relationship between themselves and a step-parent. For this study, male and female study participation was equal (47.8%), a small percentage of participants identified their gender as “other” (4.5%), and participants were predominately Caucasian (55.2%); see Table 1 for demographics. The mean age of the sample was 19.07 years old ( $SD=1.07$ ), and 13 participants chose not to

report their age; see Table 2 for means and standard deviations of address terms across each scale. Participants were also asked to report their major/area of study; of the 67 participants who completed the study over 15 majors were reported including psychology, law and justice, radio/television/film, and biology.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics for Total Sample*

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Characteristics	Total (n = 67)
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	32 (47.8%)
Male	32 (47.8%)
Other	3 (4.5%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Caucasian	37 (55.2%)
African American	19 (28.4)
Bi/Multi-Racial	4 (5.9%)
Hispanic	3 (4.5%)
Asian	2 (3%)
Native Indian/Alaska Native	1 (1.5%)
Middle Eastern	1 (1.5%)
<b>Age</b>	
18 years old	19 (28.4%)
19 years old	18 (26.9%)
20 years old	14 (20.9%)
21 years old	1 (1.5%)
22 years old	1 (1.5%)
23 years old	1 (1.5%)
Prefer not to answer	13 (19.4%)

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Table 2

*Means and Standard Deviations for Address Terms across Social Support, Depth, and Conflict Scales of the Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI)*

Address Term	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Support Scale</b>		
Formal	2.63	.64
Familiar	2.77	.74
Familial	2.97	.87
<b>Depth Scale</b>		
Formal	2.66	.47
Familiar	2.59	.79
Familial	2.92	.90
<b>Conflict</b>		
Formal	1.96	.46
Familiar	1.98	.81
Familial	1.94	.73

## Measures

**Address term usage survey.** The Address Term Usage Survey is an assessment that was developed by the author of this thesis, Sierra Payton, for the purpose of this study. The first part of the survey consists of 4 demographic questions that request participant information including age, gender, major/area of study, and racial/ethnic background. The second part of the survey consists of 11 multiple choice questions. The questions in the survey were specifically designed to elicit information on address term usage and the circumstances surrounding step-children’s usage of address terms. An address term is a term used by one family member to address another family member. More specifically, in this study, address terms are defined as the terms that step-children use to refer to their step-parent. In the Address Term usage Survey, participants were

asked to report how they identify their step-parent based on address term categories that have been found in the literature on address term usage. Kellas et al. (2008), identified *formal*, *familiar*, and *familial* address terms as three categories of address terms. The Address Term Usage Survey asked participants to report how they refer to their step-parent using the same three categories of address terms.

**Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI).** The Quality of Relationships Inventory assesses the quality of relationships (Pierce, 1994; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991). The QRI assess the supportive and conflictual aspects of close relationships (Pierce, 1994). More specifically, the QRI is designed to measure perceptions of available support, perceptions of interpersonal conflict, and perceptions of relationship depth within relationships. Each QRI subscale is defined for clarity of what the scale is designed to assess. Supportive relationships are defined as those in which individuals are sensitive to each other's needs (Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, Solky-Butzel, & Nagle, 1997). The conflict subscale of the QRI focuses on feelings of anger and ambivalence that often accompanies conflict in different types of relationships (Pierce et al., 1997). Lastly, to assess the depth of a relationship, the QRI explores the importance of the relationship in the participants' life (Pierce et al., 1997).

The QRI has high internal consistency for each of the scales, with Cronbach's alpha in the .80s and .90s (Pierce, 1994). Additionally, the QRI scales are valid and reliable measures of the quality of close relationships which suggests that the QRI scales are relationship specific (as opposed to being indicative of general perceptions of social support), and provide a thorough understanding of the quality of specific relationships (Pierce, 1994). Pierce (1994) notes that the QRI and the three scales of support, conflict,

and depth were designed to be applicable to a broad range of relationships including peers, family members, and romantic partners/spouses.

Participants of this study completed the QRI in order to determine if conclusions can be drawn about the type of terms that step-children use to address their step-parent and the quality of the relationship between step-children and their step-parent. The QRI is a self-report questionnaire composed of twenty-five questions. The depth scale consists of 6 questions, the support scale consists of 7 questions, and the conflict scale consist of 12 questions. Participants are instructed to answer each question based on a four-point Likert scale (from *A - not at all*, *B – a little*, *C – quite a bit*, *D – very much*; *A= 1*, *B=2*, *C=3*, *D=4*). The scores for each scale can range from 1-4.

### **Procedure**

The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Rowan University. All participants were recruited from the Rowan. Participants were recruited through the use of the Department of Psychology's SONA system where participants were provided with a description of the study. If interested in the study, participants were then directed to a link via Qualtrics, an online software and questionnaire tool. Informed consent was obtained prior to completing the two measures that were a part of the study. After providing consent, participants were asked to complete the Address Term Usage Survey and the Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI). Participants received course credit for their participation.

### **Data Preparation and Analysis**

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for analyzing the data. After exporting the data from Qualtrics, the data was screened for incompleteness. Of the

128 participants who completed the study, 61 participants were excluded in the data calculations due to not endorsing having a step-parent, or for not completing one or both of the measures in the study. The data was coded and organized into SPSS in order to run statistical analyses. To address the hypotheses, three between subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted in order to determine if significant differences exist between the term used by step-children to address their step-parent and the quality of the relationship. In addition to the ANOVAs, Levene's test of homogeneity was also conducted along with each ANOVA to determine if the data reflected a normal distribution and the necessity of additional post-hoc analysis. For each ANOVA, the independent variable was how step-children address their stepparent – using either a formal, familiar, or familial address term, and the dependent variable was a sub-scale of the (QRI). The type of address term – formal, familiar, familial – was defined in the same way that address terms are defined by Kellas et al. (2008). When completing the Address Term Usage survey, participants identified how they address their step-parent. Participants identified using either a formal title or prefix to address their step-parent (formal address term), addressing their step-parent on a first name basis or using the “step” prefix (familiar address term), or not using the “step” prefix to address their step-parent (familial address term), and were grouped accordingly.

## Chapter 5

### Results

Analyses were conducted in order to examine (a) the relationship between the three scales of the QRI, and (b) if there were any significant differences between how step-children refer to their step-parent (type of address term) and each scale of the QRI.

Table 3

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Scales of the Quality of Relationship Inventory (QRI) (N=67)*

	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Support	2.79	.75	-	-.33**	.77**
2. Conflict	1.94	.73	-	-	-.24
3. Depth	2.66	.78	-	-	-

*Note.* \*\* $p < .001$

A Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between the support, conflict, and depth scales of the QRI. Results suggest that there was a relationship among some of the subscales. There was a significant, negative relationship between the support and conflict scales of the QRI,  $r(65) = -.33$ ,  $p = .006$ . Feeling supported by your step-parent is associated with less anger. Furthermore, there was a significant, positive relationship between the depth and support scales,  $r(65) = .77$ ,  $p = .0001$ . Feelings of greater depth in the relationship with a step-parent was associated with greater feelings of support. Finally, there was no significant relationship between the depth and conflict scales,  $r(65) = -.24$ ,  $p = .054$ .

Three ANOVAs were conducted in order to determine if significant differences exist between the term used by step-children to address their step-parent and the quality

of relationship. The first ANOVA was conducted to examine the significance between the type of address term used and quality of relationship using the support scale of the QRI. Levene's test of homogeneity was not significant:  $F(2,64) = 1.12, p = .334$ , indicating that the data was normally distributed. The ANOVA was not significant,  $F(2,64) = .58, p = .56$ , which indicates that there is no significant difference between the type of address term used (formal, familiar, familiar) by step-children to address their step-parent and the degree of support that they report feeling between themselves and their step-parent.

The second ANOVA was conducted to examine the significance between the type of address term used and quality of relationship using the depth scale of the QRI. Levene's test of homogeneity was not significant:  $F(2,64) = 2.42, p = .097$ , indicating that the data was normally distributed. The ANOVA was not significant,  $F(2,64) = .92, p = .40$ , which indicates that there is no significant difference between the type of address term used and the reported amount of depth between step-children and their step-parent.

The third ANOVA conducted examined the relationship between the type of address term used and quality of relationship using the conflict scale of the QRI. Levene's test of homogeneity was not significant:  $F(2,64) = 1.89, p = .16$ , indicating that the data was normally distributed. The ANOVA was not significant,  $F(2,64) = .38, p = .67$ , which indicates that there is no significant difference between the type of address term used (formal, familiar, familiar) by step-children and the reported amount of conflict between step-children and their step-parent. The results of the three ANOVAs indicate that regardless of the type of address term used (formal, familiar, familiar), there was not a significant difference in the quality of relationship among any of the scales in the QRI.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussion**

As the literature suggests, blended families have proven to be a complex family system due to the multiple factors that influence and contribute to blended family development, family member's perceptions of "feeling like a family," blended family communication, and overall family success. As the number of blended families continues to rise as a result of factors such as divorce and cohabitation, continued research on all aspects of blended family development is necessary in order to better understand this growing, yet unique family type. The purpose of this study was to further examine an aspect of blended family communication through the use of address term usage which was explored by Kellas et al. (2008).

Kellas et al. (2008) concluded that although address terms are a part of basic everyday communication, address terms affect and reflect relationships and relationship quality. This study aimed to further explore address term usage as a communicative component within the blended family. More specifically, this study aimed to examine if there were any significant differences between how step-children address their step-parent (type of address term) and each scale of the QRI, and this study also aimed to explore the relationship between the three scales of the QRI.

It was hypothesized that (a) individuals who reported the use of familial address terms would report greater support and depth than individuals who use formal address terms, (b) individuals who reported the use of familiar address terms would report greater support and depth than individuals who use of formal address terms, (c) and individuals

who reported the use of formal address terms would report greater conflict than individuals who used familial or familiar address terms.

The results indicated that for all three scales of the QRI (support, depth, and conflict), that there were no significant differences between the type of address term used (formal, familiar, familial), and the quality of relationship between step-child and step-parent. Thus, regardless of the term that step-children use to address their step-parent, participants did not report experiencing any more or less support, depth, or conflict, which may allude to the fact that address terms may not always reflect the quality of relationship between two individuals. However, the literature suggest that address terms still hold significance with the family unit. Address terms serve as a critical part of family communication, and are also culturally significant and serve as a means of illustrating closeness/distance, role identities, and can allude to different step-family types (Oyetade, 1995; Fitch, 1991; Kellas et al., 2008; Schrodt et al., 2007; Braithwaite et al., 2008; and Nuru and Wang, 2014).

Furthermore, Fitch (1991) argues that “use of a particular address term does not have a specific ‘meaning’.” It is the selection of that address term, rather than others which might have been used, which conveys meaning.” Fitch (1991) explains that a specific address term does not hold as much meaning as the choice of one address term over another. Additionally, when addressing the fluidity of address terms and the fact that address terms can change over time, Fitch (1991) notes that the negotiation and redefinition of relationships can occur through address term usage. Therefore, based on this study it can be concluded that although significant to blended family communication, specific address terms do not allude to the quality of relationship as defined by the QRI



and experienced in the step-child/step-parent relationship. The results of this study replicated address term usage categories comparable to those identified by Kellas et al. (2008), but unsuccessfully illustrated that terms that step-children use to address their step-parent correlate with quality of relationship. Thus, from this study it can be concluded that address term usage does not correlate with quality of relationship, but that is not to suggest that address terms do not hold importance in other ways, such as those identified by Fitch (1991).

This study also examined the relationship between the three scales of the QRI. The results indicated that there was a relationship among some of the scales of the QRI. The significant, negative relationship between the support and conflict scales indicated that support and conflict have an inverse relationship. Furthermore, the significant, positive relationship between the depth and support scales indicated that depth and support have a direct relationship. Therefore, although this study was unable to conclude that the type of address term used by step-children to address their step-parent can provide information on the quality of relationship, this study was able to examine aspects of relationship quality to better understand which factors of relationship quality correlate with one another. With an understanding of relationship qualities and how they correlate with one another, additional research can be conducted in order to help better understand blended family development and the degree of “feeling like a family.” Since research suggests that blended family development is a developmental process that occurs over time (Kellas et al., 2014; Braithwaite et al., 2001), knowledge of the factors that can help or harm quality of relationship in blended families can help in formulating the concepts and practices that can lead to successful blended family development.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to the present study. The first limitation to the present study is that data collection was concentrated only on step-children in blended families. However, additional data on relationship quality from step-parents could have provided a more well-rounded picture of relationship quality between step-child and step-parents. Kellas et al. (2008) also notes that including other step-family members in the research process would “provide a richer understanding of this communicative process” (p. 261), when referring to understanding the use of address terms.

The next limitation to the present study is the measure used to assess quality of relationship. With previous literature citing that there are contradictions between the importance and nonimportance of step-family address terms (Kellas et al., 2008), results that reflect a significant relationship between address term usage and quality of relationship could be dependent upon how quality of relationship is measured and assessed. It is possible that the QRI may not have been the most appropriate measure to use for this study. Instead, a measure specifically designed to assess the relationship quality of family members/blended family members in parent-child dyads may have been more appropriate and warranted more significant results due to the specificity of the measure and the population on which it was developed to assess.

Another limitation to the present study is that the present study did not consider additional variables that may contribute to the choice of particular address terms over other address terms. Fitch (1991) address the fluidity and evolution of address terms. If address terms can change over time then it is also possible that variables such as (a) how

old the child was when their family became blended, or (b) how much time a child spends in their blended family, that these variables could influence address term usage either initially or over time, and possibly also impact relationship quality. This study did not assess for these variables and their potential significance on address term usage or quality of relationship and therefore not controlling for, or assessing these variables is another limitation of this study.

Additional limitations to this study are that this study did not consider gender differences among address term usage or among reported relationship quality. This study did not examine the data for differences between reported quality of relationship for step-mothers in comparison to step-fathers. Furthermore, this study did not examine the data for gender differences among step-children and address term usage. Differences among reported relationship quality for step-mothers compared to step-fathers, and differences in address term usage by males and females could potentially exist due to the differences in how males and females communicate with one another and how they perceive relationship quality.

Lastly, one of the most significant limitations to the present study is the selection of data analysis. Three ANOVAs were completed in order to determine if significant differences exist between the type of address term used by step-children and the quality of the relationship between step-children and their step-parent. Initially, the completion of a power analysis was necessary in order to determine the appropriate sample size in order to appropriately and successfully proceed with statistical analysis. However, with the determination of not enough power, an omnibus test would have been more appropriate for statistical analysis. An omnibus test, such as a Multivariate analysis of

variance (MANOVA), makes it less likely to find an effect due to chance, or when an effect does not exist. A MANOVA would have tested whether or not significant differences existed between the independent variable of type of address term used and the composite variable of relationship quality (dependent variable). Additional research considering the limitations of this study would significantly contribute to the field of blended family research and its utility in counseling settings.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Areas for Future Research**

Continued research on blended families is essential because blended families are an increasingly more common family type. Previous research on blended families has focused on specific aspects of blended families such as development and the challenges that blended families encounter (Braitwaite et al., 2001; Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Normand, 2008; Kellas et al., 2014; Baxter et al., 1999, Braitwaite et al., 2008; Nuru & Wang, 2014; Weaver & Coleman, 2010; & Schrodt, 2006). Although the challenges that blended families experience are important, the research in those areas should also be applied to understanding blended families in counseling and therapeutic settings. Due to the complexities of blended families, future research on blended families could be extremely helpful in therapeutic settings. It would be unfortunate for clinicians who work with blended families to lack knowledge of the general circumstances and experiences that contribute to the a blended family's development and challenges.

The results of this study indicated that there were no significant differences between the type of address term used and the quality of relationship. These findings were also supported by the idea that the use of a particular address term does not hold a specific meaning (Fitch, 1991). Additionally, Fitch (1991) addressed the ambiguity and fluidity of address terms. Thus, it would be beneficial for future research to examine how and why address terms change over time, and what the change of address means for the relationships within the blended family.

Furthermore, additional research on relationship quality would be helpful in understanding the relationships between blended family members and what factors

contribute to greater relationship satisfaction. To do this, it would be helpful for future research to focus on perspectives of all blended family members. Research involving blended family members in all roles (biological parent, child, step-parent, step-child, step-sibling), and the factors that contribute to relationship quality will prove to be helpful in counseling settings and helping families address conflict and concerns regarding adjustment, experiences that are different in blended families due to family composition.

Overall, in order to better help and understand blended families, additional research in blended family communication is important, as communication is fundamental to basic human interaction and is applicable to all types of relationships (Fitch, 1991; Oyetade 1995). Research on blended families should include diverse blended family experiences (positive, negative, and neutral) in order to better understand blended family development and its success – or failure. Areas of future research should address not only the challenges that blended families encounter, but also what families have done in an effort to overcome challenges. Furthermore, along with research on what families have done to overcome challenges, there is also a need for research on which strategies have worked and which have not, and why, if different strategies were unsuccessful. If research focuses on the challenges of blended families and what helped and what hurt, that information can prove to be invaluable for blended family members who are seeking counseling and therapeutic services for family issues, as well as for conceptualizing and treating blended family members who seek counseling services for family issues.

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