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# **'Feeling caught' in stepfamilies: Managing boundary turbulence through appropriate communication privacy rules**

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ABSTRACT

This study used a Communication Privacy Management perspective to examine the communication patterns that foster and ameliorate triangulation in stepfamilies. The qualitative analysis of 90 in-depth interviews with stepchildren, stepparents, and parents from 30 stepfamilies revealed that enmeshed communication boundaries contributed to children feeling caught between their custodial and noncustodial parents and parents and/or stepparents feeling caught between the children in the stepfamily. The dialectical tensions of loyalty–disloyalty and revealment–concealment that comprised stepfamily members' feelings of being caught produced turbulence in their previously established communication rules. The stepfamilies responded to these tensions with boundary coordination or boundary separation. The ways the boundaries became enmeshed and the management attempts used to coordinate new boundary rules are outlined.

KEY WORDS: boundaries • communication privacy management theory • communication • dialectical theory • stepfamilies • triangulation

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One factor that has been associated with difficulty in stepfamilies is triangulation, or the loyalty conflicts that result when a covert coalition is formed, uniting one family member with another against a third person (Emery, 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). The circumstances surrounding

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divorce and remarriage enhance the likelihood that it will occur in stepfamilies. The greater complexity of relationships requires that family members negotiate new roles, status, and membership within and outside the family (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Hetherington, Henderson, & Reiss, 1999). A primary way alliances are negotiated is through redefining boundaries for appropriate disclosure and ownership of information. For instance, original family members may use disclosure to foster alliances with each other against a new family member and/or withhold information from that person as a way to show allegiance to one another. Determining what and how information is revealed between family members post-divorce could help alleviate alliances and possibly prevent their formation. Consequently, this study focuses on one kind of boundary, the privacy boundary (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002), and the ways in which stepfamilies communicatively manage the coalitional barriers that are created through the regulation of information.

Although many former spouses form cooperative post-divorce relationships, others are unable to do so. Conflict between former spouses becomes particularly problematic when it is transferred onto children and other stepfamily members. In such cases, children can become mediators for their parents' information, resulting in feelings of being caught between them (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). They may feel compelled to be negotiators because they love their parents and yet fear the repercussions of loyalty to both of them (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Johnston & Campbell, 1987). The children may be able to maintain equitable relationships with each of their parents, but endure an incredible amount of stress and guilt in the process (Buchanan et al., 1991; Gano-Phillips & Fincham, 1995).

Children of divorce, however, are not the only ones who feel caught between other family members; remarried spouses can also feel caught between their children/stepchildren. Custodial and noncustodial parent-child relationships and sibling relationships predate the stepfamily and have their own rules for revealing information. The stepparent may be perceived as an 'outsider' who is disrupting the family's previous power distribution (Golish, 2003). Children sometimes respond to this by attempting to form an alliance with their original parent against the stepparent (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990). Parents, in turn, often become mediators between the stepparent and their children (Bray & Kelley, 1999).

The formation and negotiation of alliances becomes particularly important given their potential consequences on stepfamily functioning. Children who feel caught between their parents post-divorce have been found to exhibit greater signs of anxiety and depression than children who have few or no feelings of being caught post-divorce (Buchanan et al., 1991). Research suggests that the extent to which children feel caught may predict difficulty adapting to a divorce (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Monahan, Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1993). Supportive co-parental relationships also facilitate healthy remarriages and minimize noncustodial parents' feelings of estrangement (Hayashi & Strickland, 1998; Hess &

Camera, 1979). In general, stepfamilies that are able to manage the conflict that alliances often produce tend to exhibit more positive development (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001).

Yet, little research has explored the communication patterns that create and ameliorate alliances. While researchers are aware of the significant role of triangulation in stepfamilies and its potential debilitating effect on family functioning, the interactions that contribute to them remain elusive. Examining how the regulation of information cultivates and deters triangulation may help researchers and practitioners understand the variability in people's responses to divorce and remarriage (Buchanan et al., 1991). For instance, it is possible that the divorce itself may not be as strong of a predictor of children's adjustment as much as the degree to which children are influenced by their parents' conflict and interpersonal difficulties (Amato et al., 1995; T. Afifi & Schrod, in press a). How family members communicate to one another and redistribute the power in their family during the divorce and remarriage process may partially explain why some members adapt better than others. In order to truly determine the impact of triangulation on post-divorce adjustment, researchers must first investigate the communicative processes that comprise it. One theoretical framework that provides insight into these processes is Communication Privacy Management theory (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002).

### **Communication Privacy Management theory and triangulation in stepfamilies**

Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002) begins with the premise that revealing information is risky. The foundation of CPM theory is rooted in Baxter and Montgomery's dialectical framework (see Baxter, 1988, 1990; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998). This framework argues that people often experience oppositional needs or dialectical tensions (e.g., autonomy–connection; predictability–novelty) that drive change in their relationships. A dialectical tension is the interplay between forces that are interdependent, yet mutually negate one another (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). From a CPM perspective, a primary tension is the desire to reveal information, but simultaneously conceal it. Consequently, individuals create informational boundaries by choosing carefully the kind of private information they reveal and persons with whom they share it (Petronio, 1991, 2000). In so doing, they are able to better manage the oppositional forces of both concealment and revelation. How stepfamily members regulate personal information depends upon their *boundary structures* and *rule-management systems*.

**Boundary structures and feelings of being caught.** Boundary structures describe who is (and who is not) allowed access to private information (Petronio, 1991, 2000). According to Petronio (2000), four dimensions comprise boundary structures: control, ownership, levels, and permeability. Boundary structures are typically erected because self-disclosure leaves people vulnerable. Consequently, people need a way to *control* the risk that

accompanies that vulnerability (Petronio, 2000). As Afifi and Guerrero's research on topic avoidance indicates, restricting information may shield people from evaluation and offer a sense of control in a time of uncertainty (e.g., W. Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero & W. Afifi, 1995a, 1995b). Although their research was specifically geared toward friendships, dating relationships, and first marriage families, the need for self-protection may be particularly salient in stepfamilies owing to a lack of relational history (Banker & Gaertner, 1998; Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). For instance, children's avoidance with a new stepparent may be a natural reaction to a relationship that has not yet had a chance to develop interpersonally (Cissna et al., 1990; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; T. Afifi & Schrodt, in press b).

In addition to controlling the risk related to disclosure, constructing boundaries signals *ownership* of that information. People believe that they own their personal information and have the right to dictate people's access to it (Petronio, 2000). For example, a parent may not reveal certain information about his or her divorce to the children because the information is perceived as private. Ownership rights may also be used to determine membership within a stepfamily. In more turbulent stepfamilies, perceived boundaries may divide family members along bloodlines or generations (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Although Braithwaite et al. (2001) were referring to boundaries as membership rights, privacy boundaries may serve a similar purpose. Withholding information may be one way in which people signal the degree to which one is in or out of the stepfamily.

When information is co-owned between individuals, the boundaries become delineated across relationship groups or *levels* (Petronio, 2000). In a stepfamily, boundaries separate individual family members from one another, but there are also relational boundaries separating sub-systems of people within the family and across larger family networks. A remarried couple, for instance, probably shares or co-owns information with one another that they do not share with the children. Original family members may also have information that is exclusive to them (Caughlin et al., 2000). Regulating information from others helps develop privacy boundaries around those relationships.

Although these boundaries are beneficial and necessary, they may pose unique challenges to developing stepfamilies. The merging of multiple family histories combined with the impact of a divorce increases the likelihood that differences in people's privacy boundaries will emerge. Because families develop different boundaries in their development, disparities in these rules may become increasingly evident when households merge or separate. These differences may result in the formation of alliances if they are negotiated ineffectively. During the period of single parenthood that follows divorce, for instance, children often form a close bond with their custodial parent (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001). One way these bonds are developed is through self-disclosure. Feelings of jealousy and isolation may surface as stepparents watch the parent and child share intimate information without them.

The cohesiveness of the parent–child bond is also related to the *permeability* of the communication boundaries (Petronio, 2000). A strong parent–child bond can foster permeable boundaries with other family members when appropriate communicative behaviors are modeled. If the ties between a child and a parent grow too cohesive, however, the boundary around them may become increasingly impermeable to other family members or a new stepparent if they are denied access to their shared information. Establishing appropriate privacy boundaries may also be difficult for remarried couples because, unlike first marriage couples, they must develop an impermeable boundary around their relationship by communicating a unified front to their children/stepchildren as they simultaneously build stepparent–stepchild ties (Cissna et al., 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Stepfamily members may have difficulty regulating information without developing loyalty conflicts because the variance in relational histories requires differential degrees of disclosure and permeability to build specific relationships.

As the couple establishes these boundaries within the stepfamily, they must coordinate them with connections to the noncustodial family. This means creating a relatively permeable boundary with the nonresidential family so that children and noncustodial parents have access to information about one another (Thompson, 1994). Maintaining open communication between households, however, becomes difficult when former spouses have a conflictual relationship. Some former spouses may still harbor resentment over their previous marriage and the outcomes of a divorce. If they are unable to contain their aggressiveness, it can spread throughout the stepfamily (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). Children are the continuing link between parents and are sometimes used as an indirect means for parents to hurt one another (Emery, 1994).

Researchers and practitioners recognize that children can harbor feelings of being caught, but little is known about how family communication patterns contribute to them. Some clinical observations suggest that conflicts between former spouses that appear to be about the children are actually deeper relational level messages concerning ill-defined feelings of intimacy (Emery, 1994). As Madden-Derdich et al. (1999) also found, individuals who experienced high levels of emotional intensity toward their former spouse had difficulty reframing their relationship as co-parents rather than spouses. Former spouses' intense anger often represents greater intimacy, not less intimacy (Emery, 1994; Metts & Cupach, 1995). As a result, regulating information may be confusing for these parents because they are supposed to foster open communication boundaries between households, yet clinical observations indicate that they should communicate less with each other to reduce this intimacy (Emery, 1994).

Of particular concern in this study is what it means for stepfamily members to 'feel caught' and the communication patterns that contribute to this feeling. Research is necessary to decipher how the communication patterns in stepfamilies create and sustain the power imbalances that often

accompany alliances. These communication patterns are reflective of respective privacy rules within each family.

**Rule management systems and boundary coordination efforts.** Boundary structures operate within a rule management system, or decision rules created to control the dialectical tension of revealing and concealing and to monitor the flow of information to and from others (Petronio, 1991, 2000). People develop criteria for the conditions in which they will allow people access to private information (Petronio, 1991, 2000). Significant life events, such as divorce, often trigger the need for new *privacy rules* (Petronio, 2000). Rule development and implementation reflect the ways in which people manage the dialectic of revealing and concealing. When spouses terminate their relationship, they must redefine their boundaries for what information is revealed to one another (Petronio, 2000). Former spouses who relay too much personal information to one another may create confusion and jealousy for stepparents who are attempting to define the limits of the parents' relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 1994).

Because one family member's actions usually impact the entire family (Minuchin, 1974; von Bertalanffy, 1968), stepfamily members must *coordinate* their communication boundary rules (Petronio, 1991, 2000). Boundary coordination reflects individuals' attempts to negotiate ownership of information and rules for revealing and concealing with others (Petronio, 2000). Research indicates that stepfamilies are able to build cohesive relationships by setting realistic expectations and allowing bonds to develop naturally (Bray & Kelley, 1999; Visher & Visher, 1993). This development may include stepfamily members disclosing to one another at their own pace. Cissna et al. (1990) also found that creating a unified front as a couple by communicating the credibility of the stepparent and the importance of the marriage to the children deterred loyalty conflicts. Effective couple and coparental communication could help reduce alliances, which could contribute to positive stepfamily functioning.

Although family members must balance their needs for privacy and openness, some research suggests that healthy stepfamilies tend to privilege revelation over concealment (Golish, 2000, 2003; Henry & Lovelace, 1995; Olson et al., 1983). Openness may be a particularly important way for new stepfamilies to build solidarity. According to Olson et al. (1983), effective communication between couples and children in stepfamilies involves actively reframing problems rather than avoiding their existence. Coleman et al. (2001) also found that stepfamilies that were open with their feelings, directly addressed conflict, and reframed their conflict in a positive way were able to manage the conflict and power imbalances in their family. Additional research is necessary, however, that assesses how stepfamilies negotiate their communication boundaries to minimize triangulation.

Complications in boundary coordination, such as a family member who is reluctant to follow the boundary rules, represent instances when the rule management system is undergoing *boundary turbulence* (Petronio, 2000). Boundary turbulence is a disruption in one's previous rule management

system that results when perceptions for appropriate privacy rules are violated (Petronio, 2002). The transitions that accompany divorce and remarriage create turbulence in people's normal patterns of information regulation. The structural complexity of stepfamilies, for instance, makes it so that privacy and space are limited (Coleman et al., 2001). Limitations or invasions of privacy take ownership of the information away from those who previously exercised control of it (Petronio, 2000). Alliances may be a way to maintain control over this turbulence. An even greater amount of turbulence is created, however, as various sub-systems within the stepfamily vie for the emotional resources that come with sharing private information.

Despite stepfamily members' best attempts, boundary coordination does not always translate into homeostasis or produce a sense of 'normalcy' (Petronio, 2000, 2002). Ideally, former spouses should decide mutually how they are going to regulate their communication with their children to minimize the likelihood that their children feel caught. But, what happens when one or more of the co-owners of the information decide to break the rules for appropriate boundary integration? How can a parent adjust his or her rules for disclosure when the other parent is unwilling to do so? The complexity of management processes becomes apparent when boundaries are turbulent (Petronio, 2000, 2002). It is through analyzing the turbulence associated with triangulation and how stepfamilies respond to it that researchers can better understand how to manage it. The following research questions attempted to address these concerns:

*RQ1:* What communication patterns contribute to stepfamily members' feelings of being caught between other family members?

*RQ2:* What does it mean for stepfamily members to 'feel caught'?

*RQ3:* Which communicative patterns reflect attempts by stepfamily members to adjust their privacy boundaries to minimize their feelings of being caught?

## Method

### Participants

Ninety in-depth interviews were conducted with family members from 30 stepfamilies. Multiple stepfamily members were interviewed in order to capture differences and similarities in perceptions about their communication patterns as a family. A total of 30 stepchildren (ages 17–22 years,  $M = 19$ ), 29 step-parents ( $M$  age = 44), and 31 parents ( $M$  age = 45.5) participated in the project. The participants were predominantly white ( $n = 85$ , 93%) and from the Midwestern part of the United States. Of the 30 stepchildren, only five were male (17%). The majority of the stepfamilies were custodial families ( $n = 24$ , 80%), rather than noncustodial families ( $n = 6$ , 20%). This study also reflected the trend in the general population for mothers ( $n = 26$ , 87%) to be custodial parents more often than fathers ( $n = 4$ , 13%) (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996). Consequently, twice as many stepfathers ( $n = 20$ , 69%) participated compared to stepmothers ( $n = 9$ , 31%).

The majority of the stepfamily arrangements were the result of a divorce ( $n = 27, 90\%$ ) rather than the death of a parent ( $n = 3, 10\%$ ). The length of time between the parents' divorce and a remarriage ranged from 2 months to 15 years ( $M = 5.4$  years). The length of stepfamily formation ranged from 3 months to 12 years, with the mean length of stepfamily formation being 5.3 years. Nine (30%) of the stepchildren had two or more stepfamilies because both their mother and father were remarried (and/or remarried more than once). Nevertheless, they asked the stepparent and parent with whom they most frequently resided if they would be willing to be interviewed.

### **Procedures**

Because of the difficulty recruiting multiple stepfamily members, three methods of data collection were used to recruit participants for this study. First, the principal investigator entered introductory classes at a Midwestern college to gather young adults who were part of a stepfamily. Upon volunteering for this study, the stepchildren were asked if they thought their stepparent and parent would be willing to participate. If they thought their parent and stepparent would participate, they informed them about the purpose of the study and asked if they would like to volunteer for an interview. A second form of data collection involved distributing flyers to students' post office boxes, asking for participants for a research project on stepfamily communication. Finally, network sampling was used to identify eligible friends and relatives of these students who might be interested in participating.

In-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the stepchildren by a team of six trained interviewers. The interview team was trained by the principal investigator on how to conduct interviews through simulations and example transcripts. The interviews with the stepchildren occurred at a time and place that was convenient for them, which was usually a living room or an empty dorm room. Telephone interviews were conducted with all of the parents and stepparents by the principal investigator. Telephone interviews were an effective method for accessing stepfamily members from diverse parts of the country while preserving a sense of anonymity (Buchanan et al., 1996). All of the family members were interviewed separately and in a private room. They were also reminded that their participation was completely voluntary and that none of their information would be revealed to other family members. To help ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in the presentation of the findings rather than the participants' real names. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours, with a mean interview length of 70 minutes.

The semi-structured interview protocol followed a family chronological format. Specifically, the participants were asked to discuss their stepfamily's development and the circumstances surrounding its progression, tracing how their feelings, expectations, and communication changed over time. The open-ended and time-oriented nature of the interview questions provided an understanding of the emergence of communication patterns within the stepfamilies, how each family member's communication impacted the family, and how the communication fostered or inhibited healthy stepfamily development. Interviewees were asked how they would characterize the strength of their stepfamily and the communicative behaviors that contributed to or deterred from the strength of their family. They also identified challenges they faced throughout their development and how they overcame them (if they did). Finally, specific questions were tailored toward understanding commonly avoided

topics (if any) and the topics often discussed with other family members, conflict resolution styles, parental roles, household rules, closeness, and the divorce process. Even though the stepfamily members only resided within one stepfamily, they answered questions about the siblings, children, and parents in their residential and nonresidential families.

### **Data analysis**

The interviews yielded 1,015 single-spaced pages of transcribed data. A qualitative/interpretative approach was used to capture the essence of the participants' experiences of feeling caught in their stepfamilies (Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal of interpretive studies is to make a particular phenomenon more intelligible or provide rich descriptions of a construct that is relatively unexplored (Bochner, 1985; Cissna et al., 1990). Qualitative researchers long to make sense of people's experiences, rather than predict their behavior (Cissna et al., 1990; Maxwell, 1996; Moustakas, 1994). As Creswell (1998) notes, researchers use interpretive approaches to understand, discover, describe, and give meaning to the patterns of phenomena and the unique context in which they occur.

The transcripts were first grouped by families so that the coders could assess patterns of communication within and across stepfamilies. Data collection continued until recurring themes in the interviews became apparent or a theoretical saturation point was achieved (Creswell, 1998). Although a relatively large number of interviews was conducted, this size of a sample was necessary in order to make comparisons across family types. An initial reading of the transcripts took place by the six trained research assistants and the principal investigator. In this preliminary reading, notes were taken on overarching themes that emerged in the data. The current study was part of a larger research project on stepfamily challenges and communication strengths. One of the primary, recurring challenges that surfaced in this data was triangulation. It was the prominence of this challenge and the ways in which family members responded to it that prompted the focus of the current investigation. The researchers went back to the transcripts to uncover the participants' experiences of this phenomenon in depth.

The process of detailing the underlying structure of participants' feelings of being caught consisted of four stages. In the first phase of data analysis, the principal investigator and one research assistant independently read through the data set in its entirety, taking a microscopic approach to the theme of triangulation and how it was similar or different according to the strength of the family. Notes were taken regarding the overarching categorization of 'feeling caught,' while remaining open-minded about the formation of this theme and its underlying properties. The researchers then came together and discussed the categories they generated. In the second stage of analysis, the two researchers read over the data again, but with an eye toward refining the themes and delineating their specific properties. The constant comparative method of data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to establish the themes and their properties. More specifically, open and axial coding were used to categorize the data. Open coding consisted of breaking down the data into categories and their discrete properties, closely examining their underlying meanings, and comparing similarities and differences among the properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Axial coding put the data back together by examining the larger connections among the categories and their properties, as well as the context in which

they are embedded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Throughout this process, the categories are continually compared and contrasted, adjusting them for new insights and discrepant cases (Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 1994). The researchers shared their ideas about the categorization of the data and an outline of the categories and subcategories was created.

In the third phase of the coding process, the researchers went back to the data and refined the categories, creating a coding manual. Descriptions of the categories and their properties were constructed and examples were provided for each category. The principal investigator independently went through the themes in their entirety and coded them according to the guidelines of the coding manual. The research assistant then coded 40% of the data to achieve intercoder reliability. The overall reliability of .89 and a kappa value of .85 were deemed reliable, given that kappa values over .75 are considered excellent (Fleiss, 1981).

Finally, two additional coders who were blind to the study coded the results to ensure that the researchers' perceptions were not biasing their coding decisions. The assistants were trained on how to interpret and apply the training manual to the data. The coders first coded 25% of the data to ensure an understanding of the coding manual. The coders and researcher met and clarified any coding decisions and discrepant cases. The coders then independently applied the coding schemes to all of the data to establish frequencies and intercoder reliability. This process produced a kappa value of .83 for the categories of feeling caught and the communication strategies. Discrepant cases were discussed among the coders and the principal investigator until agreement was reached. The reliability (overall reliability of .87) between the initial coding and the blind coding substantiated the findings of the original coding. Thus, the original coding was retained.

To preserve anonymity, the transcripts were given a family and individual code. The first number indicates the specific family; the second number represents whether the participant was a stepchild (1), a stepparent (2), or a parent (3), and the third number reveals the page of the transcript on which the quote can be found.

## Results

Feelings of being caught were indicative of twenty-four (80%) of the stepfamilies during some point of their development. The triangulation reported by the stepfamilies assumed two primary forms: (1) children feeling caught between their custodial and noncustodial parents ( $n = 16$  stepfamilies or 53%), and (2) a parent and/or stepparent feeling caught between the children in their stepfamily ( $n = 14$  stepfamilies or 47%). Enmeshed privacy boundaries often fostered dialectical tensions of loyalty–disloyalty and revealment–concealment. Together, these tensions constituted feelings of being caught, which can be viewed as a type of boundary turbulence. The communicative implications of these tensions are discussed later.

### **Communication patterns that contribute to feelings of being caught: Enmeshed privacy boundaries**

Feelings of being caught were largely the result of communication boundaries that became enmeshed through revealing too much personal information

(*RQ1*). Inappropriate disclosures, using a child as a peer and co-parent, and using a family member as a messenger of information were ways in which the boundaries became enmeshed. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that these communication patterns likely depend upon the length of stepfamily formation. Consequently, qualitative distinctions in communication characteristics must be couched within the fact that some stepfamilies had been formed for a greater number of years compared to others.

**Inappropriate disclosures.** One of the ways triangulation was manifested was through parents' inappropriate disclosures about the other parent and/or the circumstances surrounding their divorce to their children ( $n = 18$  stepfamilies or 60%). All of the children who felt caught mentioned that one or both of their parents revealed information that was either hurtful toward the other parent or put them in a position that made them uncomfortable. As one daughter mentioned, 'He [dad] would just tell her [mom] on the phone that Valerie is the most wonderful person he had ever met . . . and then relate it back to their marriage and why mom was a horrible wife' (12:1:3). The children overheard these conversations or became the recipients of such disclosures. Even if the children were not asked to respond to them, negative statements about one's former spouse inadvertently made them reluctant confidants.

Stephanie echoed similar sentiments about how the disclosures involved feelings of jealousy and competition between the other parent and/or his or her new partner. As she explained,

My father was nonexistent and my mother bashed on my father. I think she began to realize her own mistake. Before he married his wife, apparently they got along much better, but with my father's wife came competitiveness about not only who is the better wife, but who is the better mother or who had the better kids . . . but now they have gotten much older and mellow and realized that 'we can hurt each other or whatever, but there are people in here that shouldn't have to suffer for our personal feelings.' So now they have an extremely cordial relationship (7:1:12).

Stephanie's quote reflects how such disclosures not only affected the other parent, but impacted the family as a whole. She went on to describe how her parents' disclosures spread to her siblings and stepparent, until the stress and negativity became overwhelming. It also illustrates, however, that people can change their communication patterns and that stepfamilies that begin arduously can grow to have healthy bonds. Even though the participants were asked to describe the challenges they experienced throughout their family's development, triangulation between custodial and noncustodial parents may be more salient the first few years following a divorce when they are renegotiating their relationship with each other.

The disclosures became inappropriate when the children felt as if they were provided information that should have been kept private between their parents. The disclosures often included talking about the other parent, the reasons for the divorce, child support payments, loyalty, and custody issues. These topics were depicted by one daughter who stated about her mother, 'She would talk to me about a lot of things, what was going on with our finances, what was going on with the divorce. Cause even though the divorce was finalized, there were a couple custody battles they went through, child support, um, problems, and she would always talk to me about that' (6:1:6).

**Using a child as a peer and co-parent: Role reversals.** The inappropriate disclosures resulted in role reversals with the children becoming their custodial parents' peer or 'pseudo' parent ( $n = 15$  stepfamilies or 50%). The revelation of private information between children and their custodial parents, who were primarily daughters and mothers, was heightened during single parenthood. The bonds between them seemed to intensify because they survived the stress of divorce and financial difficulties together. The communication between the children and their mothers improved in the sense that the mothers became more open about their feelings. But, the disclosure about the circumstances of the divorce often placed too much responsibility on the children. 'It was hard,' said one daughter, 'because I was my mom's, my mom vented to me basically. She had friends also, but she came to me. So, our relationship became stronger, but it was strained on my part because I had the burden of her telling me everything and then he would tell me his side and that was just . . . um . . . crazy' (12:1:9).

The cohesiveness that developed through the parents' disclosures about the difficulties associated with their divorce created a shift in power, with the child becoming an 'adult-like figure' (12:1:9) and caretaker. The decrease in income the women experienced often required that the children assume more responsibility in the household. 'You know I was 10 years old and babysat my little sister all the time. I took care of my brother, I got ourselves to school. I made dinner and lunch and you know, I was like the mom in my family for four years' (24:1:9). The economic struggles placed additional pressure on the families to sustain themselves. Parents' confiding in their children about their difficulties served cathartic functions, 'I was so unhappy and I would wanna talk to her [daughter] and I would be maybe crying on her shoulders, which wasn't the right thing to do probably with your kids' (26:3:7).

The role reversals created and/or tightened an existing impermeable privacy boundary around the parents and children, making it seemingly more difficult for new stepparents to penetrate that boundary. The children 'liked having that power' (6:1:6) and the stepfathers were often perceived as a threat to that power and their relationship with their mothers. One daughter explained this dynamic,

During the period after her divorce and before she married Dan, mom and I were the best of friends and I think that was probably a very threatening situation to Dan when he first came in because mom would always come to me instead of going to him with whatever was going on in her life, at work, her social life, etc. . . . And Dan thought that they should be best friends . . . He values having the power in our family, and he doesn't. So I think that's a huge problem he has to overcome somehow. Thus, my relationship with my stepfather is basically nonexistent. He doesn't know anything that is going on in my life and I really don't want him to (29:1:6).

Withholding information from the stepparents was a means of communicating their lack of membership within the stepfamily. The opposition in boundaries was enhanced by the fact that 10 of the stepfathers were bachelors when they entered the stepfamily, suddenly having to share control of a household.

Because of the close bond they developed with their children, the mothers also felt comfortable approaching their children about disciplinary issues. The stepparents often felt excluded, however, when the parent and child made decisions about parenting without them. A stepfather explained this feeling,

From my perspective, I was being set up to be the bad guy. I was being set up to be the person that says no you shouldn't go when she was the good guy saying well I think it's ok that she go. . . . I felt that we should have done things right . . . recognizing that this was going to be an issue and talking about it beforehand, the two of us talking about it beforehand, coming to what I thought was a conclusion, and then we face it (8:2:6).

Although this communication pattern seemed to dissipate over time, stepparents often felt that the protective bond between the parent and child prevented them from disciplining the children as a couple. The stepparents often desired greater parental responsibility than they were granted by the child's parent.

**Using a family member as a messenger or mediator.** As the aforementioned description illustrates, another way in which boundaries became enmeshed was when a parent or child was used as messenger of information ( $n = 16$  step-families or 53%). Fourteen of the young adults noted that one parent would ask them to carry information to their other parent or request that they gather information from them. As one child noted, 'If my mom needed to tell my dad something, it was usually related either to me or my brother. Um . . . she'd tell me and then I'd have to relay that to my dad and he'd do the same thing' (2:1:5). Oftentimes they were asked to seek information about child support payments, visitation, household rules, or personal information about the other parent.

Parents often avoided confronting one another by having their child communicate to their former spouse for them. Avoiding communication with one another was a way they decreased their conflict. This pattern became problematic, however, when the burden of relaying the information was placed on the child. As Jackie noted, 'The way they keep from fighting with each other is that [they] never confront each other about anything . . . instead they use me as the messenger . . . that's become the worst problem of my life' (24:1:14). The children often indirectly became a part of their parents' stress and negotiations.

Some of the former spouses also asked their children for information to test the accuracy of the other parent's account. For instance, as a father mentioned about his lack of access to information about his children, 'The mom, my ex, was clearly going to control the communication. I mean allow whether or not we [he and his new spouse] could talk to them [his children], may or may not share information about their schedules, might know something but wouldn't tell us. So, we had to assume from that that she was going to try to control the communication and that anything we got was probably not going to be accurate' (19:3:8). Former spouses used indirect methods of gathering information from their children, because they believed the other parent was leaving out important details.

Parents also mentioned that they became messengers of information between their children and the stepparent. The stepparent and/or child would come to the parent and ask him or her to relay information to one another instead of directly confronting each other. In particular, children would often go to the parent about problems they had with the stepparent and ask the parent to solve it, rather than talking with the stepparent. Veronica explained this when she stated, 'My stepdad was frustrated too with her [mother] telling me one thing and telling him another you know, and so we didn't communicate. Well, we would communicate through my mom' (4:1:3).

In other instances, the disciplinary 'rules' that the couple created together made the stepparents feel as if they did not have the authority to directly

confront or discipline their stepchildren. Many of the couples decided that the parent would be the primary disciplinarian and the stepparent would support his or her decisions. One mother explained how she got caught in the role of messenger as a result of this decision when the topic about her daughter's boyfriend coming over at night arose, 'He [stepfather] would get really upset and of course he couldn't say anything to Terra [her daughter] because of our agreement. So, then he'd say to me, "You've got to get him [boyfriend] out of here." It would just bug him so much that the boyfriend was here . . . . That really would . . . after a while that got to me and I just thought why do I have to get stuck in the middle of this?' (18:3:4). The couple's communication rules did not allow the stepparents to access the parent-child boundary or adjust the rules when necessary.

### **Boundary turbulence: Stepfamily members' feelings of being caught**

These enmeshed boundaries fostered dialectical tensions that comprised family members' feelings of being caught, which could be viewed as a form of boundary turbulence (*RQ2*) ( $n = 24$  stepfamilies or 80%). Two dialectical tensions contributed to their feelings of being caught: (1) loyalty-disloyalty, and (2) revelation-concealment. Former spouses who were able to form cooperative relationships appeared to minimize the likelihood that their children felt caught. Interestingly, however, the parents and stepparents were often not as quick as their children to identify it as a problem. In fact, 15 (50%) of the children in these families mentioned that they felt caught between their parents compared to three (10%) of the parents and two (7%) of the stepparents who mentioned that their children felt caught. The dialectical tensions that provide insight into the participants' feelings of being caught are described below.

**Loyalty-disloyalty contradiction.** Family members felt caught between the tension of wanting to be loyal to both people with whom they were triangulated and the pressure to be loyal to only one of them and, thus, disloyal to the other. The loyalty conflicts were exacerbated by the inappropriate requests and revealing of information. For instance, Carmen noted that her brother felt as if he was forced to choose between his parents, 'Then Matt moved in with my dad. Um, it was still pretty bad because Matt was kind of like, forced in a way, because my dad kind of said that there comes a point in a boy's life when he needs to choose between his mother and his father' (8:1:4). By demonstrating their allegiance to one or both parents, they were simultaneously showing disloyalty to one of them. Another mother explained the dilemma of her son's feelings of being caught, 'I think he's trying to please each parent. I think he feels like he's in the middle of things and yet wants to . . . . Of course, he loves his mother you know. . . . He's going to love his mom, and he doesn't want to do anything that's going to upset his mom, but on the other hand, he loves his dad, too' (5:3:11).

Parents and stepparents also felt torn between loyalty to each other and allegiance to their own children. Parents wanted to listen to their new spouse, but felt that doing so meant that they betrayed their own children. 'Pam's kids would circle around her, and my daughter would circle around me, and that would drive Pam and I apart,' stated one stepfather, 'Obviously, I'm going to hear my daughter's pleas over my wife, and my wife is going to hear her

children's pleas over mine. Any coming together of her and I is perceived as a threat by the kids because I am getting in the way of their mother and I don't belong here' (13:2:9). As this stepfather alludes, the previously established parent-child relationship often inhibited the flow of information when access rights were based upon these protective bonds.

The loyalty-disloyalty contradiction was intensified because of the differing relational histories that accompany stepfamily development. As one mother said, 'I think it's exacerbated when you have a stepparent in there [because] they try and pull the biological parent in to protect them from the mean old stepparent and some of those biological feelings kind of get pulled in there' (15:3:2). Children often expected their parents to demonstrate their loyalty to original family members at the expense of the stepparent. These 'loyalty tests' were often most pronounced in stepfamilies in their first few years of formation when relational histories, roles, and privacy rules were currently being renegotiated.

**Revelment-concealment contradiction.** As a result of these loyalty conflicts, children often felt uncertain about what information they should reveal to their family members and what information they should conceal. The children wanted their parents to talk openly with them, but did not want to hear them talk negatively about the other parent. As one young adult stated, 'I kind of avoided them for a while because I didn't want to hear both sides all the time. I just felt that I was caught in the middle' (2:1:4). Or, as Gretchen expressed, 'When I talk to either one of them, I try not to talk about the other one . . . just because I don't want to sit there and listen to them talk bad about the other one' (22:1:9).

The children also mentioned that they were careful to monitor how much information they received from their parents about the circumstances of their divorce. On the one hand, they wanted to know the truth about their parents' relationship. As they also noted, however, there were often factors that led to the divorce that they would rather leave unstated. Uncertainty about the divorce was often preferable to gathering information to understand the truth. Jennifer elaborated on this decision,

Because I haven't let my mom tell me completely about the divorce, I can't say for sure other factors that go along with it. I know a couple of bits and pieces of things, I think I might have heard things that I could speculate on if I wanted to, but I choose not to. I don't want to know any of those details until I know that I'm ready and I just don't feel like I'm ready now (6:1:9).

In some cases, the children were aware that the divorce entailed relational transgressions such as adultery, illegality, or domestic abuse. Even though they wanted to know the truth, they often preferred not to know specific details about these violations and enabled their parents to withhold this information.

Remarried spouses also felt torn between wanting to reveal 'their side of their story' about the other parent, while monitoring how much information was revealed to the children. A stepmother talked about the difficulty of withholding negative information about the children's mother from them, 'The kids learned very early on that it's not okay to lie in our house about anything, but we leave stuff out. Lies of omission are all right. It's hard to keep your mouth shut. It's like, this is their mommy, so don't' (27:3:9).

**Privacy boundary coordination**

When the tension of being caught became overpowering, the stepfamilies were forced to respond to it (*RQ3*). The turbulence associated with the dialectical tensions pushed stepfamily members toward boundary coordination, with some communicative responses resulting in positive boundary integration and others resulting in completely autonomous boundaries. The valence of the coordination efforts and the types of communication praxes used to manage the tensions are discussed in the remaining sections.

**Boundary integration.** The stepfamilies often responded to such tensions with efforts to positively reconstruct appropriate communication rules. These efforts included openness and direct confrontation, communicating a unified front, creating a positive image of the other parent, and using minimizing strategies.

**Openness and direct confrontation.** One of the most useful positive coordination efforts used to minimize loyalty conflict was openness and direct confrontation ( $n = 22$  stepfamilies or 73%). The families that were able to effectively manage their privacy boundaries often learned over time to meta-communicate, or communicate about their communication (Bateson, 1951), and directly confront the person with whom there was a problem. When avoidance proved to be an ineffective strategy, children reported openly confronting their custodial and noncustodial parents about their feelings of being caught between them. As one child noted, her feelings of being caught were managed over time by learning to directly confront her mother and father, 'Sometimes they [communicate] through me. I really don't like that so much. I try to avoid it. But, then I'm like . . . well . . . why don't you call him and tell him or why don't you call her and tell her. I learned to just tell them' (17:1:11).

Direct confrontation also helped children and remarried partners minimize triangulation in their household. Carry noted that openness strengthened the communication with her stepfather as their stepfamily progressed, 'It's kind of changed to where now I go directly to him if I want to talk to him or he goes directly to me if he wants to talk to me. . . . Instead of going through my mom, cause that's what we did for a long time' (4:1:4). A mother explained the need to recognize triangulation when it was happening and adjust the family's interaction through metacommunication,

There would be a conflict between Samantha and John [stepparent] or Matt and John, and they would both be coming to me and complaining about each other . . . you can't allow yourself to be caught in that trap and that you step back and say, 'OK, you two need to talk to each other, but it was so easy to get sucked into it, to recognize that you were in that situation, and all of a sudden it would be oh, this is it.' Then I would say, 'OK John, you need to go talk to Samantha' (8:3:3).

Minimizing feelings of being caught also meant the remarried couple communicating about discipline rules with the children. 'We laid the ground rules out, he's not the dad but he's the other adult in the house, so he gets to make rules and what he says goes,' mentioned one mother about the stepfather's role in the family, 'If you're in trouble with him, you get out of trouble with him. If you're in trouble with me, you get out of trouble with me. You don't play the two against the other which you know kids will do that with their biological parents' (15:3:2). When the household rules were consistently enforced as a family, alliances were slowly diminished.

Creating family meetings was one way to establish these communication rules. Most of the family meetings involved family members within the same household. In other cases, however, all members of the custodial and non-custodial families would meet together. In some instances, the meetings across households helped reduce the tension between former spouses. As one young adult stated, 'From the beginning we would have family meetings and we would just talk about how we feel and even if they can't solve our problems they can help us work it out' (29:1:4).

**Communicating a unified front.** Another method of reducing triangulation was communicating a unified front as a remarried couple ( $n = 22$  stepfamilies or 73%). Metacommunication was used to coordinate mutual rules for privacy violations and discipline within stepfamilies. The remarried couples then enforced these rules together and protected one another from the children forming alliances between them. 'I don't know how to teach the basics,' said one mother, 'but the basic one is you have to outline privacy between the two of you and where you're gonna stand with them' (20:2:9). Sometimes, this meant delaying answers to the children's questions so that they could formulate a response. 'We had a lot of discussions to try and come up with our game plan so that if a problem or issue would twist that we would not give them an answer right away so that it would give us time to come up with an answer. It would make them really mad and that meant that we were siding together' (20:3:1).

As this mother pointed out, children often resisted this strategy because it represented a betrayal of the parent-child bond. By consulting with the stepparent, the parents were perceived as choosing the stepparent over them. This was articulated by one mother about her daughter, 'The thing that she in her anger accuses me of, "Oh mom, why can't you just make up your mind? Why do you always have to talk to Dave [stepfather] about everything?" You know. That's her way of trying to manipulate me' (4:3:7). Even though parents encouraged openness and often felt guilty for not giving in to their children's requests, establishing an impermeable couple boundary circumvented coalitions.

Creating a unified front as a remarried couple also helped coordinate communication rules between households. For example, one of the participants mentioned that her noncustodial father would leave her stepfather out of family decisions. Thus, her mother and stepfather made purposeful attempts to communicate a unified front as a couple to the other parent, while maintaining a permeable boundary with him or her. 'He [father] sent a letter to my mom just not that long ago, like a week ago, and didn't include John in it, and that's really frustrating to John. So my mom and him together worked out a response, so, they're trying to keep the communication doors open' (8:1:4).

**Creating a positive image of the other parent.** Couples and parents also coordinated privacy boundaries by creating rules for appropriate disclosures about the other parent or stepfamily. In 16 (53%) of the families, this involved not talking badly about the other parent. Parents created their own rules for revealing information, such as Karen's relationship with her former husband: 'Knowing that for Kristin's [their daughter] sake, the boundary thing about keeping my adult issues with Charlie strictly my adult issues and to not draw her into that' (4:3:4). In other instances, former spouses coordinated their rules

together. 'We divorced for the sake of the kids I like to say,' mentioned one father, 'because the conflict in our marriage was getting to the point where it was destroying not only her and I, but the boys. When we decided to divorce, we made a pledge to each, which I think we've done a fairly good job of keeping, in that we would not make our boys the pawns' (1:3:9).

In addition, some parents purposefully communicated a positive image of the other parent to the children. One face management strategy was poignantly illustrated by a father in the following narrative,

At her graduation party, my ex-wife was here you know at the house and she had a boyfriend at the time who was an alcoholic, who was supposedly sober at the time. But anyway, he came into a little kind of wine reception. He drank three bottles of wine and we didn't even know it. He was in the bathroom downstairs and he spilled wine all over the place and broke the bottle [because] it didn't want to open. My now current wife saw what was going on and quietly, in the middle of being the host, cleaned up the mess and ran over to my ex-wife and very quietly in the corner told her what had happened . . . My ex-wife drove back to our house and in the driveway she just started crying and she thanked my wife and gave her a great big hug . . . that was the number one thing that my oldest daughter [remembered]. I think after that it changed (20:2:6).

As this narrative demonstrates, the parent and/or stepparent withheld information that demeaned the other parent. With young children, they also included the other parent in conversations to make the child more comfortable talking about their parent.

**Minimizing strategies.** Even though many of the former spouses were able to form cooperative post-divorce relationships, there were clearly instances where this was not the case. When one's former spouse was unwilling to establish rules for communication or abide by the ones that were created, remarried couples who wanted to protect their children often reduced the amount of personal information and contact with the other parent ( $n = 9$  stepfamilies or 30%). They kept their conversations with their former spouse strictly about their child. As one father stated about his communication with his former spouse, 'I don't think there is any communication there other than formalities' (5:2:8).

Minimizing was difficult for parents, however, because of the intensity of the feelings that conversations with the former spouses evoked. For instance, one stepmother noted that her husband 'used to get really, really angry with her [former wife], and he's worked really hard to try and stay calm with her and just say, "okay, we need to work this out because we have joint custody"' (27:3:5). She went on to indicate that, 'he's gotten past that. Then we have a little chat afterwards. . . . Afterwards we just sit and talk about it for a while and vent and that's nice' (27:3:5). The couples would vent to one another after conversations with their former spouse as a way to relieve the stress and tension. As this stepmother revealed, however, they often did this in a private room or after the children were in bed.

Parents also used indirect methods of sending information, such as letters or e-mail, to their former spouse to reduce their own discomfort and their children's feelings of being caught. Contact was established because of their mutual connection with their children. As a mother explained, 'The last time we spoke was in August, and that was basically just to establish child support for Dan. It was extremely difficult, awkward. He sends notes every once in a while to the house and I'll reply' (8:3:13).

**Boundary separation.** In stepfamilies having difficulty forming a family, the dialectical tensions often propelled them to separate their communication boundaries rather than integrate them. Family members often became frustrated by the turbulence that the feelings of being caught produced and used avoidant and/or aggressive tendencies to disassociate themselves from others.

**Over-privileging avoidance.** When children felt caught between their parents, they typically responded with avoidance ( $n = 18$  stepfamilies or 60%). They avoided talking about the other parent/stepfamily and child support payments to protect themselves and their relationship with their parents. In some instances, avoidance served a positive protective function when it alleviated unnecessary conflict and established a healthy balance of revelation and concealment.

Nevertheless, avoidance often became the standard rather than the exception in families that were having more difficulty forming a family, especially in the early stages of stepfamily formation. Children's avoidance with their parents and the former spouses' avoidance with one another often resulted in unresolved issues. Feelings of resentment and tension built to a point where they erupted in explosive arguments, with children responding to their parents' conflict with corresponding aggression.

Stepchildren also used avoidance to separate their privacy boundaries from their new stepparent's. Oftentimes, a lack of acknowledgement through nonverbal communication was a way to separate boundaries and solidify the status within the stepfamily. This was articulated by one stepdaughter who stated, 'we've moved to the "yeah you're talking but I'm looking past you and I'm not hearing you"' (13:1:7). Her stepfather also recalled this distancing behavior, 'Karen was reading the newspaper. It had come within 15–20 minutes, whatever. Long enough to have been browsed through, and we were coming up on supertime and it was looking like rain. I said, "Karen will you help me move this trailer?" She absolutely, just plain . . . I would have gotten more response talking to the wall' (13:2:3).

The stepparents, in turn, often responded to their stepchildren's silence with similar withdrawn patterns. This same stepfather continued to explain his communication,

The things I really want to communicate [I say] in little disclaimed, soft, quiet, little statements. Instead of saying, 'well, I think you should just get a job and spend more time working and less time playing' . . . You're kind of quiet, roll your eyes a little bit and talk softly . . . there was four of them in the household and one and a half of me and my daughter . . . I had to conform . . . (13:2:8).

Stepparents often adjusted their communication patterns to accommodate the rest of the stepfamily. In doing so, however, their dissatisfaction with their stepfamily grew and relationships became more distant.

**Cycle of competitive symmetry.** Stepfamily members also created disjointed boundaries by perpetuating a cycle of competitive symmetry through reinforcing physically and/or verbally aggressive tendencies ( $n = 7$  stepfamilies or 23%). The narratives suggested that stepparents and stepchildren, in particular, sometimes vied for power in the household with corresponding aggressive actions. The children viewed the stepparent's attempts at parenting and gathering information as personal attacks and responded by verbally and/or physically attacking the stepparent (e.g., character attacks, hitting, yelling, swearing, blocking one's path; physical confrontations).

Often the stepparent and stepchild would become angry at one another because they would indirectly communicate through the parent instead of with one another. Stepparents perceived the stepchildren as concealing information or manipulating it to gain sympathies and attention from their parent. As one stepmother stated, 'We were intruders on each others' lives basically . . . She was angry . . . and I was angry that I had to deal with her . . . I just remember some of the time feeling that she just manipulated things like if she wanted something, she would go to him. I would tell her no about something and she'd go to him anyway' (25:3:3). The indirectness often resulted in a cycle of angry outbursts between the stepparent and stepchild.

In some situations, the stepparent and child attempted to 'one-up' each other, creating a cycle of competitive symmetry. Aggression was used as a means of establishing status in the household. When stepparents were perceived as requesting too much information from their stepchildren, it was viewed as an attempt to control them. Some children responded to these control attempts with aggression. However, stepparents either distanced themselves from the aggression or they responded with similar verbal or physical attacks. This pattern was expressed by a stepfather in the following account,

He [stepson] likes to be in control, and in . . . doesn't like to be told what to do. We had a physical confrontation and actually broke a pair of glasses over it. It was a rough time, but he actually just stood there in my face and said, 'come on, come on hit me,' very defiant. Then there was a time right before he went into the hospital . . . I couldn't get him to shovel snow. So, one day he . . . I got upset with him and told him to shovel and thrust the shovel into his hand, and he threw it away and got in the car and I stood in front of the car, and he tried to run me over (9:3:4).

This power struggle between the stepparent and stepson resulted in two completely autonomous communication boundaries, with the parent remaining caught in the middle to settle their disputes.

## Discussion

This study adopted a Communication Privacy Management perspective (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002) to investigate the communication patterns that perpetuate and deter triangulation in stepfamilies. The implications of these analyses revolve around two primary issues: (i) inappropriately enmeshed communication privacy structures, and (ii) the use of privacy coordination rules.

### **Enmeshed communication boundary structures and triangulation in stepfamilies**

Previous stepfamily research has focused on the psychological outcomes of coalitions that are formed between former spouses or within custodial stepfamilies (e.g., Buchanan et al., 1991; Madden-Derdich et al., 1999; Morrison & Coiro, 1999). While this research has provided considerable information about stepfamily development, there is also value in comparing the *communicative processes* that contribute to children's feelings of being caught. When individuals co-own information, all of the people involved typically share responsibility for developing rules that govern accessibility

of that information (Petronio, 1991, 2000). As numerous children and step-parents illustrated, however, they did not want to control the information for the other two family members. Disclosures about the circumstances of divorce often forced family members to assume the undesirable roles of mediators and reluctant confidants, contributing to dialectical tensions of loyalty–disloyalty and revealment–concealment.

The circumstances of divorce may also intensify the communicative boundaries between children and their custodial parents during single parenthood. This study supports research that has found that parents sometimes form peer-like relationships with their children following divorce (Aquilino, 1994; Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000; Mann, Borduin, Henggeler, & Blaske, 1990). These bonds were tightened, however, because of the poverty that often accompanies divorce for women (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). They were also established, solidified, and maintained through the revealing of personal information with one another about these circumstances. Custodial parents and their children often create cohesive, positive relationships following divorce (Amato, 2000). There may be situations, however, in which the communication between the parent and the child produces negative rather than positive coping. When children become confidants about the divorce process, parents' loss, and conjoining financial difficulties, this can place demands on them for which they may not be developmentally able to cope. Parents' stress, particularly if there is not another parent to act as a buffer, may 'spill over' onto their children if it is managed ineffectively (Larson & Almeida, 1999). Because most of these relationships in the current study involved mothers and daughters, further research is necessary to decipher the extent to which such disclosures differ according to the sex of the parent and child.

The ensuing parentification made it difficult for new stepparents to penetrate the boundary between the custodial parents and their children. As Petronio (2000) notes, the strength of the communication network influences the control that confidants have over one another. Mothers often felt guilty and wanted to 'protect' their children from the stepparent, falling prey to what Coleman et al. (2001) refer to as a 'guard and protect ideology.' The role reversals resulted in the formation of two completely autonomous boundaries between the stepparent and the stepchild, with the stepparent and stepchild both vying for power and attention. The turbulence in boundaries was magnified by the fact that many of the stepfathers had never been married and did not have children prior to the remarriage. Future research ought to determine the degree to which stepparents' expectations of child-rearing and living arrangements prior to stepfamily formation influence their interaction patterns, flexibility, and feelings of isolation.

### **Establishing positive privacy rules and coordination**

In addition to the type of interactions that contribute to the formation of alliances, this analysis concentrated on the coordination efforts used to

manage them. The findings emphasize the importance of parents establishing appropriate privacy rules through monitoring the amount and type of information they reveal and conceal to their children. Many parents and stepparents did not recognize their children's feelings of being caught. Parents may not realize that their disclosures make their children uncomfortable because the children avoid talking about it (Golish & Caughlin, 2002; T. Afifi & Schrodt, in press b). When two or more people are involved in coordinating their communication boundaries, each has to provide enough information to clarify their expectations for privacy management (Petronio, 2000). Unlike parents, however, children might feel more pressure to sustain their mediating role because of their subordinate position. This was reflected in children's use of avoidance rather than more positive boundary integration strategies. It is also probable that younger children may not have developed the necessary skills to articulate their feelings of being caught to their parents. Parents also have to consider certain behaviors problematic before they can progress toward a cooperative relationship with their former spouse and minimize their children's feelings of being caught.

The question then becomes, how much openness is necessary to prevent unhealthy alliances from occurring? The existence of strong biological parent-child coalitions has been associated with dysfunction in stepfamilies and first-marriage families (Anderson & White, 1986; Banker & Gaertner, 1998). In comparison, a strong relationship between the stepparent and the stepchild has been found to be characteristic of positive stepfamily functioning (Anderson & White, 1986). Overall, the current findings also support the conclusion that metacommunication, open communication, creating a unified front, and directly confronting issues are paramount to minimizing feelings of being caught (Cissna et al., 1990; Golish, 2000; Peek, Bell, Waldren, & Sorell, 1988). In some cases, however, more conscious information regulation attempts, such as communicating a positive image of the other parent and keeping the type of information revealed to the other parent strictly about the child, may become more salient when communicating across households. Regardless of the family type, minimization strategies may be effective when there is a high degree of interparental conflict (Amato & Rezac, 1994).

### **Theoretical contributions and conclusions**

This study extends CPM theory by examining further the role of dialectical tensions in stepfamily members' boundary coordination efforts. The dialectical tensions associated with stepfamily members' feelings of being caught produced boundary turbulence. The communication management strategies, whether they were positive or negative, were intended to reduce the dissonance that the tensions produced. As Petronio (1991) notes, however, because boundary coordination requires negotiation to succeed, instability may ensue when stepfamily members have contradictory goals. The current research sheds light on the turbulence that can result when boundary rules and efforts are incompatible. For instance, avoidance and

more covert communication management strategies may ensue when a reluctant confidant does not have the power to deny others' disclosures. How such unwanted disclosures and boundary turbulence translate into privacy coordination efforts merits further attention. Does boundary turbulence lead to coordination efforts? Or, how might attempts at boundary coordination produce boundary turbulence when integration efforts are unsuccessful?

Although the current study focused exclusively on triangulation in stepfamilies, it should not be concluded that alliances do not exist in first-marriage families or that they are inherently dysfunctional. The functionality of alliances depends upon appropriate power distribution and the developmental stage in which they occur. Presenting a consistent and authoritative front as a couple has been found to be characteristic of effective parenting regardless of family type (e.g., Fletcher, Steinberg, & Sellers, 1999). Given that children, particularly daughters, have been found to self-disclose more to mothers than to fathers (e.g., Youniss & Smollar, 1985), it is also possible that alliances are more a function of sex differences and primary caregiver attachments than family type. If this is true, some biological fathers in first-marriage families could feel a similar type of boundary (e.g., Mann et al., 1990). The cohesiveness of mother-child relationships post-divorce may then simply be a continuation of pre-existing alliances. The complexity and developmental differences in post-divorce families and the hierarchical structure of single-parent households, however, may make it easier for children to assume greater power in these families.

Future research efforts are also necessary to analyze stepfamily formation as an interpersonal process by tracing the communication dynamics within and across families as they transition into blended family households. Researchers must recognize that stepfamilies often take three to five years to build solidarity (Hetherington, 1993, 1999). Examining stepfamilies that have been formed for a number of years may shed light on the interaction patterns that facilitate healthy stepfamily development. The circumstances of a remarriage may also contribute to family members' experiences of feeling caught. For instance, three of the stepfamilies were formed post-bereavement. Although stepchildren in these families could not report feelings of being caught between households, these parents and stepparents did point to similar feelings of being caught with their children. Nevertheless, post-bereavement families may not experience the same degree of triangulation within their stepfamily because of a lack of competing loyalties between a stepparent and former spouse. Also, given the greater number of stepfather families in this study, it is impossible to discern whether stepmothers face similar difficulties establishing themselves as authority figures. Stepmothers may actually experience greater difficulty vying for power in a stepfamily because the assumed nurturing responsibilities of stepmothers contradict the already prescribed caregiving role of the biological mother (Ganong & Coleman, 2000; Kurdek & Fine, 1993; Nielsen, 1999). Despite these limitations, the findings point to the importance of studying post-divorce families as interlocking systems in

which alliances are created, maintained, and minimized through interaction.

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