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Development and validation of the Stepfamily Life Index

Paul Schrodt

University of Kansas

ABSTRACT

Using schema theory, this study explored the knowledge structures that stepchildren hold about their stepfamilies. Two studies developed a reliable measure of six themes of stepfamily functioning. In Study 1, 251 adult and adolescent stepchildren completed a pilot inventory. Factor-analytic results reduced the pilot inventory from 192 items to 65 items and demonstrated that each dimension could be measured empirically. In Study 2, 586 adult and adolescent stepchildren completed the revised inventory and produced a new, multidimensional measure: The Stepfamily Life Index (SLI). Evidence of internal reliability and discriminant validity for the SLI is offered, and implications are discussed.

KEY WORDS: avoidance • dissension • expressiveness • flexibility • involvement • schema • stepfamily life

Over the last two decades, the stepfamily has captured the attention of social researchers across various disciplines. Defined by Ganong and Coleman (1994) as families in which ‘at least one of the adults has a child or children from a previous relationship’ (p. 8), stepfamilies involve relationships that vary considerably in form, structure, and complexity. Although the amount of published research on stepfamilies tripled during the 1990s (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000), the bulk of this research reflects a deficit-comparison approach (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). This deficit view relies on a model of the conventional ‘nuclear’ family as the...
conceptual framework against which the stepfamily is found to be deficient and problematic.

Given the theoretical and pragmatic assumptions associated with a deficit-comparison approach, however, family scholars have warned against seeing stepfamilies as inherently problematic and inferior to other family forms (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Golish, 2003; Kurdek, 1994). ‘Rather than become pre-occupied with what is wrong with stepfamilies, researchers should turn their attention to the behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that enhance and hinder stepfamily development’ (Golish, 2003, p. 42). As Gross (1987) argued, the rigid structure of the nuclear model lacks the flexibility necessary for accommodating the fluid and permeable boundaries of the stepfamily. Thus, an alternative way of exploring the lack of fit between the nuclear model and stepfamily processes is to reexamine the supremacy of the model (Gross, 1987).

Schema theory is one perspective that is particularly useful for exploring the beliefs and attitudes that members have about their stepfamilies (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Wicks, 1992). This theory focuses researchers’ attention on the knowledge structures that family members use to communicate and exchange ideas. Although family scholars have recently adopted a process view of stepfamily development (e.g., Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a, 2003b; Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Golish, 2003), much less is known concerning the cognitive outcomes, or knowledge structures, that emerge as members manage the ambiguity and complexity associated with stepfamily relationships.

In addition, researchers have emphasized the perspective of parents in stepfamilies, leading some scholars to call for greater attention on the experiences of children in stepfamilies (Amato, 1994; Baxter et al., 2004; Gamache, 1997). Consequently, this study extends previous research by examining the knowledge structures, or schemata, stepchildren hold about their stepfamilies and use to communicate and exchange ideas with other family members. As such, the principal goals of this research are twofold: (i) to identify and describe the relational constructs that may contribute to stepfamily schemata, and (ii) to develop an empirically reliable inventory that assesses which dimensions emerge in the stepchildren population.

**Theoretical perspective**

Defined as ‘cognitive structures that represent organized knowledge about a given concept of a type of stimulus’ (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 139), schemata organize knowledge about the social world that facilitates understanding and social interaction. According to schema theory, people are active processors of information from their environment, and the need for schematic thinking stems from the need for cognitive economy (Wicks, 1992). Fiske and Taylor (1991) define schemata as part of a general typology that includes
person, self, role, and event schemata. *Person schemata* refer to an understanding of typical or specific individuals, composed of traits and goals, that help them to categorize others and to remember behavior. *Self schemata* refer to an understanding of one’s own psychological and behavioral tendencies; they are easily accessible and guide information processing about the self. *Role schemata* provide an understanding of the appropriate norms and behaviors for social categories, based on age, race, sex, and occupation. Finally, *event schemata* provide an understanding of the typical sequences of events in standard social occasions (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Extending Fiske and Taylor’s (1991) typology, researchers have argued that there is a fifth general type of social schemata: *Group schemata* (cf., Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). People have basic understandings of group memberships and of what it means to belong to different types of groups (e.g., professional organizations, social organizations, families, etc.). Group schemata, in turn, guide, direct, and influence both information processing and communication with members (and nonmembers) of the group. Thus, family schemata (a particular type of group schemata) help direct our interpretations of what it means to belong to a ‘family’ and these organized knowledge structures, in turn, influence our communication behavior within and outside of the family.

Schema theory posits that, once formed, highly evolved schemata (e.g., ‘family’ schemata) are much more difficult to alter than are simple schemata (e.g., ‘table’ schemata) (Wicks, 1992). This is important because stepfamilies likely involve shifts in ‘family’ schemata. Some stepfamilies develop by assimilating the family members’ new stepfamily experiences into their existing ‘family’ schemata. Other individuals likely struggle to assimilate their new stepfamily experience into their existing schemata, and thus find the developmental process more challenging and problematic (cf., Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001). In four of the five stepfamily developmental pathways identified by Baxter et al. (1999), stepfamily members described various relational challenges to their preexisting expectations about stepfamily life. These challenges led to family experiences quite unlike those reported by stepfamily members who adopted traditional family roles and norms. Given that cognitive systems guide, direct, and alter conversational behavior (Kellermann, Broetzmann, Lim, & Kitao, 1989), schema theory could reveal the ways in which stepfamily members interpret their new experiences and develop new concepts of ‘family’ through communication.

Based on these fundamental assumptions of schema theory, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) proposed that ‘family communication behavior is largely the result of cognitive processes that are determined by family relationship schemas’ (p. 87). To date, however, researchers have not examined the family schemata that emerge as stepchildren work to manage the challenges associated with stepfamily relationships. Understanding beliefs about the stepfamily may be useful in establishing healthy norms, and predicting difficulties that arise, for both children and adults as they adjust to stepfamily life (cf., Keshet, 1990).
To assess stepfamily schemata, however, researchers must develop an instrument that approaches stepfamilies using information that pertains to their own beliefs and experiences. The instrument should assess critical dimensions associated with stepfamily relationships and enable researchers to identify stepfamily schemata and classify different types of stepfamilies. Consequently, this study works to extend family communication research by (i) synthesizing empirical stepfamily research relevant to stepfamily functioning; (ii) identifying and describing the dominant themes (or dimensions) that emerge; and (iii) developing a scale assessing those themes or dimensions.

**Themes of stepfamily functioning**

To develop a scale that assesses dimensions associated with stepfamily schemata, I reviewed existing empirical research on stepfamilies using a method similar to the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Six relational themes emerged as critical components related to stepfamily functioning. These themes are likely important to the development of different stepfamily schemata: (1) stepfamily cohesiveness, (2) adaptability and change, (3) stepfamily rituals, (4) conflict, (5) stepfamily boundaries, and (6) metacommunication among stepfamily members (for a detailed review of each theme, see Schrodt, 2003). These six themes were examined for clarity and consistency by several family researchers from both Communication and Family Sciences. In general, they concurred that the themes were comprehensive.

The first two themes to emerge from a synthesis of the stepfamily literature were stepfamily cohesiveness and adaptability. Not only are both constructs fundamental to other models of family functioning (cf., Olson, 2000; Olson, Sprengle, & Russell, 1979), but both constructs are critical components of stepfamily functioning. Historically, researchers have reported that remarried families are less cohesive and adaptable than first-married families (e.g., Peek, Bell, Waldren, & Sorell, 1988; Waldren, Bell, Peek, & Sorell, 1990). In more recent research, however, Braithwaite et al. (2001) suggested that most people enter into stepfamilies wanting to be part of a family and to feel like a family. Likewise, the degree to which family systems can adapt and change to their surrounding environment is one of the most influential elements in family development (e.g., Klein & White, 1996; Nussbaum, 1989).

The third theme to emerge from the stepfamily literature was stepfamily rituals, or communicative events that pay homage to an object that is sacred (Goffman, 1967). Braithwaite, Baxter, and Harper (1998) reported that the most productive rituals enabled stepfamily members to embrace their new family while still valuing what was important from their old family. Likewise, Golish (2003) found that spending quality time together and establishing family rituals built a sense of cohesiveness and solidarity.

The fourth theme that emerged from an examination of the stepfamily literature was conflict. Baxter et al. (1999) concluded that conflict-related
events are the single most important discriminator among stepfamily developmental pathways. Early clinical reports suggested that stepfamilies were inherently dysfunctional, either due to the general stigma attached to divorce and remarriage (Ganong & Coleman, 1997) or to their structural complexity (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001). Coleman et al. (2001) noted, however, that conflict is a functional and necessary component to the survival of social systems. Compared with those that are struggling with the developmental process, strong stepfamilies typically resolve their conflicts through family meetings, open communication, and compromise (Golish, 2003). Therefore, the extent to which stepfamily functioning is characterized by conflict may serve as a critical component in the development of stepfamily schemata.

The fifth theme identified in the stepfamily literature was the negotiation of stepfamily boundaries. The term ‘boundaries’ serves as a metaphor for highlighting the borders that mark ownership, so issues of informational and relational control are clearly understood (Petronio, 2002). The types of boundaries negotiated in stepfamilies include physical boundaries (Baxter et al., 1999), emotional boundaries (Afifi, 2003; Golish, 2003), relational boundaries (Fine & Kurdek, 1995), and informational boundaries (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Coleman et al. (2000) noted that boundaries among subsystems in stepfamilies may be differentially permeable (i.e., flexible and/or rigid) for different stepfamily members, and thus, stepchildren’s perceptions of their stepfamily systems may inherently be tied to boundary issues.

The final theme identified in the stepfamily literature involved metacommunication (Bateson, 1951). Specifically, ‘the reorganization of the stepfamily involves communicating at points perceived to be critical in the development of the relationships that comprise the stepfamily. That is, the members of the stepfamily engage in talk with one another about their relationship’ (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990, p. 45). In their investigation of stepfamily relationships, Cissna et al. reported that family members cited both relationship and episodic metacommunication during the reorganization process, as family members were involved in explicitly defining their relationships. In addition, Golish (2003) noted that stronger stepfamilies dealt with feelings of being caught between different family members by directly confronting the person with whom they were having difficulty and by communicating about their communication.

Schema theory suggests that stepchildren will communicate with family members based on their organized knowledge structures concerning the stepfamily (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Although stepchildren’s perceptions of their stepfamilies are tied inherently to issues of cohesion, adaptability, rituals, conflict, boundaries, and metacommunication, it is unclear which, if any, of these constructs emerge as part of their stepfamily schemas. Further, these six themes are not mutually exclusive, as family cohesiveness is facilitated in part by rituals and conflict, while adaptability is inherently tied to the negotiation of boundaries and to metacommunication. Given that stepfamily members, and particularly stepchildren, process information related to their experiences and that these cognitions are related to
communication and adjustment in stepfamilies (Fine & Kurdek, 1994), the principal goal of this research project was to develop a measure of the primary dimensions that stepchildren identify as part of their stepfamily schemata.

Two separate studies were conducted to determine if and how the six themes identified in the stepfamily literature would emerge from an empirical examination in the stepchildren population. In Study 1, I developed a pilot instrument reflecting these six themes. In Study 2, I analyzed the pilot instrument using factor analysis, and I provided initial evidence of discriminant validity for each subscale.

Study 1

Method

Participants. Participants were 251 adult and adolescent stepchildren from the Midwest who were predominantly White (94%), including 96 males and 155 females, ranging in age from 13 to 47 ($M = 21.84, SD = 4.66$). When asked how long it had been since their parents had divorced, responses ($n = 227$) ranged from 1.5 months to 32 years ($M = 13.29$ years, $SD = 6.04$). Likewise, 174 participants reported that their parent and stepparent had been married from 2 months to 38 years ($M = 6.2$ years, $SD = 5.80$). Participants were also asked to report their age when their stepfamily began (ranging from 1 month to 30 years, $M = 11.8$ years old, $SD = 5.59$), as well as the length of time they had been a member of their stepfamily (ranging from 4 months to 38 years, $M = 9.51$ years, $SD = 6.67$).

Data collection included both direct and indirect sampling techniques. First, participation was solicited from students in undergraduate classes at a large, Midwestern university. Students had to ‘be a member of a stepfamily’ in order to participate. (Additional instructions clarified that stepfamilies often include ‘a family in which your biological (or adoptive) parents are no longer together, and at least one of your parents has a new relational partner.’) Students completed the questionnaire in class.

Second, network sampling was employed (Granovetter, 1976). Students who were not members of a stepfamily (as well as faculty members, friends, and fellow community members) were asked to identify participants who met the study criteria. Participants were asked to provide a phone number to verify participation, and they were instructed to return their questionnaires in sealed envelopes. Of the 150 questionnaires distributed, 85 of them were returned, producing a response rate of 56.7%. A randomly selected group of 25 respondents verified their participation.

Instrument development. An initial pool of over 210 items was drawn from the stepfamily research. Each item corresponded with one of the six conceptual domains outlined earlier. The domains and the initial set of items were examined for clarity and consistency by a focus group of 6 adult stepchildren, as well as by several prominent family researchers from both Communication and Family Sciences. When the redundant and the ambiguous items were eliminated, 192 items remained. A large number of items were included in the initial
Procedures. The questionnaire included 192 Likert-type items and 19 demographic questions. For items referring to the stepfamily system, the directions asked participants to respond to each item while thinking about ‘different aspects of your stepfamily as a whole. If you are no longer living with your parents/stepparents, please answer the questions as they pertain to the stepfamily with whom you have lived with the longest.’ Responses to the Likert-type items were solicited using a 7-interval scale ranging from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree.’ Most participants took approximately 45 minutes to complete the pilot survey. Participants were asked to think carefully about each item, to ask questions when necessary, and to take breaks if needed. Several respondents either could not complete the survey and/or commented on the ambiguity surrounding a few of the items. Specifically, some stepchildren no longer had two biological parents, while others did not have a nonresidential parent and/or stepsiblings, preventing them from answering some questions. Given that the principal goal of this research was to derive an instrument that all stepchildren could complete, items referencing specific family members (i.e., stepparents, nonresidential parents, biological parents, stepsiblings, etc.) were excluded from analysis. Based on this decision, 130 of the original 192 items (referencing the ‘stepfamily as a whole’) were retained for item analysis.

Data analysis. Upon completion of the initial item analysis, 17 items were eliminated for failing to demonstrate monotonic trace within their respective conceptual domains (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The remaining 113 items were submitted to a series of exploratory factor analyses (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Although factor analyzing the entire set of items simultaneously would have been statistically ideal, the sample size ($N = 251$) necessitated analyzing each conceptual domain separately. Each subscale was submitted to a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation (McCroskey & Young, 1979). For conceptual domains that produced multiple factors worthy of interpretation, oblique rotations (using Promax) were used to obtain simple structure.

Results
Of the six sets of items submitted to principal components factor analysis, five produced a unidimensional factor structure, including stepfamily cohesiveness, conflict, rituals, metacommunication, and boundary turbulence, with stepfamily adaptability producing a three-factor structure (i.e., decision making, flexible rules, and openness). These factors included 65 of the 113 items originally analyzed. Each subscale of the pilot instrument produced acceptable reliability estimates ranging from .74 to .96, and the subscales were moderately to strongly correlated with each other (with inter-correlations ranging from –.13 to .86).

Although one of the conceptual domains factored into three dimensions, overall, the results from Study 1 provided empirical evidence that each of the six domains could be measured. An important limitation of Study 1, however, was the inability to simultaneously factor analyze the entire set of items. Given the magnitudes of the correlations among the six conceptual domains (ranging as high as .86), Study 2 was designed to determine whether the inventory could
be reduced into a more parsimonious factor structure (and scale). Nevertheless, the item analysis and factor analysis from Study 1 reduced the total number of items in the pilot inventory from 113 to 65 items and provided initial evidence that each conceptual domain could be measured empirically in the population of interest.

Study 2

Methods

Participants. Participants included 398 adult and adolescent stepchildren from the Midwest, and 188 adult and adolescent stepchildren from the Southwest (US). Participants included 239 males and 347 females, ranging in age from 13 to 55 ($M = 21.62, SD = 4.80$). The majority of participants were White (82.6%, $n = 484$), though 8.0% ($n = 47$) of the participants were African American, 5.3% ($n = 31$) were Hispanic American, and 2.0% ($n = 12$) were Asian American. A majority of the participants reported having divorced parents (88.4%, $n = 518$), and when asked how long it had been since their parents divorced, responses ranged from 6 months to 37 years ($M = 13.52$ years, $SD = 5.93$). Likewise, 82.8% ($n = 485$) of the participants reported that their parent and stepparent had been married anywhere from 1 month to 40 years ($M = 8.78$ years, $SD = 5.79$). Forty-six participants reported that their parent and stepparent had been living together anywhere from 3 months to 17 years ($M = 6.85$ years, $SD = 5.06$). When asked to identify their primary stepparent (i.e., the stepparent whom they lived with the longest, or known the longest in the event they had never lived with their stepparent[s]), 65.2% ($n = 382$) identified a stepfather and 34.5% ($n = 202$) identified a stepmother.

When asked who their primary caretakers were growing up, 48.8% ($n = 286$) reported living with their biological mother and stepfather, 21.5% ($n = 126$) with their biological mother, 13.3% ($n = 78$) with their biological father and stepmother, and 5.8% ($n = 34$) with their biological father, with the remaining 4.6% ($n = 27$) spending time between both of their biological parents and 6.0% ($n = 35$) reporting ‘other.’ In addition, 36.7% ($n = 215$) of the participants reported having no stepsiblings, 27.3% ($n = 160$) reported having two stepsiblings, 16.9% ($n = 99$) reported only having one stepsibling, and the remaining 18.2% ($n = 107$) reported having three or more stepsiblings. Participants also reported their age when their stepfamily began (ranging from 6 months to 43 years, $M = 11.5$ years, $SD = 5.38$) and length of stepfamily membership (ranging from 1 month to 44 years, $M = 9.40$ years, $SD = 6.06$). The reported frequency with which participants visited their nonresidential parent ranged from ‘never’ to ‘twice a week,’ with most of the visitations occurring on either a weekly (35.5%) or monthly basis (30.4%).

Instrumentation. Participants completed the final pilot inventory and two additional instruments. Participants completed a modified version of the Marital Opinion Questionnaire (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986) to assess stepfamily satisfaction ($\alpha = .97$) and Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch’s (1991) ‘Feeling Caught’ Scale, which assesses how often participants feel caught between their parents ($\alpha = .91$). Thus, a final questionnaire consisting of 65 items from the pilot inventory, the family satisfaction scale, the Feeling Caught Scale, and 14 demographic questions was administered.
Procedures. Procedures for Study 2 replicated those implemented for Study 1, with one important exception. Faculty at three separate universities participated in the data collection. Again, participants were asked to respond to the pilot items while thinking about ‘different aspects of your stepfamily as a whole,’ and responses were solicited using a 7-point scale ranging from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree.’ The survey took approximately 35 minutes to complete.

Data analysis. Data analysis for Study 2 consisted of submitting the entire set of items retained from Study 1 to a principal components factor analysis with promax, oblique rotation because the scales in Study 1 were moderately to strongly correlated with each other (Gorsuch, 1983; McCroskey & Young, 1979).

Results

Primary analysis. Sixty-five items referencing stepchildren’s perceptions of their stepfamily were submitted to an oblique factor-analysis using promax rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was acceptable (.98), and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(2080) = 28186.64, p < .001$, suggesting the appropriateness of factor analysis on these data. The oblique analysis produced a five-factor solution accounting for 66.09% of the variance, with 34 of the original 65 items loading on one of the five dimensions. Kappa was reduced from 4 to 2, producing the simplest structure with the smallest interfactor correlations (Gorsuch, 1983). Table 1 presents the structure and pattern loadings, item-total correlations, interfactor correlations, eigenvalues, and percentages of variance accounted for in each of the five dimensions. Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and alpha coefficients for each factor.

The first factor to emerge from this analysis accounted for 50.2% of the variance. Although 11 of the 15 items represented stepchildren’s perceptions of stepfamily conflict, 4 of the items represented perceptions of stepfamily cohesiveness. Therefore, the first factor was labeled stepfamily dissension. Stepchildren with higher levels of dissension perceived other family members as experiencing difficulties, negotiating their differences, respecting each other, being thoughtful of each other, and generally avoiding any opportunities to spend time with each other.

The second factor to emerge from the analysis accounted for 4.99% of the variance. Four of the six items that loaded on this factor reflected the stepfamily’s tendencies to honor family rituals, and the remaining two items reflected a sense of stepfamily cohesiveness. Thus, the second factor was labeled stepfamily involvement, and higher scores on this factor represented a greater commitment to family traditions and celebrations, as well as a greater level of participation and involvement in family activities.

The third factor accounted for 4.31% of the variance. When compared with the other four factors, the eight items in the third factor were the most eclectic. The common theme among the items that loaded on this factor was a general aversion to, or avoidance of, stepfamily relationships. Therefore, this factor was labeled stepfamily avoidance. Stepchildren with higher scores on the avoidance factor perceived both themselves and other family members as evading discussions of stepfamily relationships (including controversial stepfamily issues).
TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Item-total r</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension 1: Stepfamily dissension</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I get sick and tired of all the fighting that occurs in my stepfamily</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I have a peaceful stepfamily*</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Overall, we really get along as a stepfamily*</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. When problems arise in my stepfamily, we have a hard time finding a compromise</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In my stepfamily, we are able to negotiate our differences*</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Members of my stepfamily do not respect each other’s right to privacy</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Members of my stepfamily feel loyal to each other*</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. I feel a sense of ‘family’ in my stepfamily*</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. In my stepfamily, family members try to be thoughtful of each other*</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. There is a lot of conflict among family members in my stepfamily</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Members of my stepfamily respect each other*</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I do not enjoy spending time with my stepfamily</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. There is a lot of tension in my stepfamily</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Spending time with my stepfamily is really stressful for me</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Members of my stepfamily do not enjoy spending ‘quality time’ together</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension 2: Stepfamily involvement</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Members of my stepfamily couldn’t care less about family traditions*</td>
<td>−.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I am committed to members of my stepfamily</td>
<td>−.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. We expect all of our family members to attend family celebrations in my stepfamily</td>
<td>−.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. In my stepfamily, family members tend to go along with what the family decides to do</td>
<td>−.67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. When we have a family celebration, everyone in my stepfamily participates</td>
<td>−.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. We honor everyone’s birthday in my stepfamily</td>
<td>−.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Items marked with an * indicate significant contributions to the respective dimension.
### TABLE 1
Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Item-total r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension 3: Stepfamily avoidance</strong>&lt;br&gt;22. In my stepfamily, we avoid talking about our relationships with each other</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. We do not have a sense of ‘togetherness’ in my stepfamily</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. It is easier to discuss my problems with people outside of my stepfamily than with other family members</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. As a stepfamily, we do not value openness among family members</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Family members tend to avoid discussing controversial issues concerning the family in my stepfamily</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. In my stepfamily, family members keep to themselves</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. In my stepfamily, I feel closer to people outside the family than to other family members</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. I would rather talk about my problems with members of my stepfamily than with people outside of my stepfamily*</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension 4: Stepfamily flexibility</strong>&lt;br&gt;30. My stepfamily tries new ways of dealing with family problems</td>
<td>–.76</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. In my stepfamily, family meetings are important for discussing problems we have with each other</td>
<td>–.73</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. In my stepfamily, the parents tend to negotiate the rules with the children</td>
<td>–.67</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension 5: Stepfamily expressiveness</strong>&lt;br&gt;33. In my stepfamily, family members tend to speak what is on their minds</td>
<td>–.90</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Members of my stepfamily say what they want to say</td>
<td>–.91</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interfactor correlations**

| Factor 1: Dissension | – |
| Factor 2: Involvement | .43 – |
| Factor 3: Avoidance | .42 .56 – |
| Factor 4: Flexibility | .34 .33 .28 – |
| Factor 5: Expressiveness | .35 .32 .32 .29 – |

λ: 17.08 1.70 1.47 1.16 1.08
% Variance accounted for: 50.2 4.99 4.31 3.41 3.16

*Note.* Extraction Method: Principal Component Factoring. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization (Kappa = 2). Pattern loadings are in parentheses. * Items are reverse-coded.
The fourth factor to emerge from the analysis accounted for 3.41% of the variance. Participants with higher scores on the three items in this factor perceived their stepfamily as trying new ways of dealing with family problems, using family meetings to discuss such problems, and having parents who were willing to negotiate family rules with the children. Thus, the fourth factor was labeled *stepfamily flexibility*, with higher scores representing greater degrees of family flexibility.

The fifth factor to emerge from the oblique analysis accounted for 3.16% of the variance. This factor, composed of two items, was characterized by the degree to which stepfamily members could discuss what was on their minds and say what they wanted to say, and thus, the fifth factor was labeled *stepfamily expressiveness*.

Following identical procedures outlined in Study 1, coefficient *alphas* for each of the five subscales were obtained (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). With the exception of the *flexibility* subscale (α = .59), each of the 4 remaining subscales demonstrated acceptable reliability estimates, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .83 for *stepfamily expressiveness*, to .96 for *stepfamily dissension*. Given that each dimension reflects a different aspect of stepfamily life, this scale was labeled the Stepfamily Life Index (SLI). Total scores were calculated for each subscale by averaging the items retained within each scale, and Pearson product–moment correlations for each of the five subscales of the SLI were calculated (see Table 2).

**Concurrent and discriminant validity.** To establish concurrent and discriminant validity, evidence suggesting that different aspects of stepfamily development both contribute to, and hinder, feeling like a family in stepfamilies (e.g., Baxter et al., 1999; Braithwaite et al., 2001) must be provided. Given that feeling like a family is an affective evaluation of stepfamily life, stepfamily dissension and avoidance should be inversely associated with stepfamily satisfaction, whereas involvement, flexibility, and expressiveness should be positively associated with satisfaction. Such was the case. Pearson product–moment correlations revealed that stepfamily dissension (r = –.78, p < .001) and avoidance (r = –.70, p < .001) were inversely associated with stepfamily satisfaction. Involvement (r = .66, p < .001), flexibility (r = .44, p < .001), and expressiveness (r = .48, p < .001) were positively associated with stepfamily satisfaction. A multiple regression

### TABLE 2
Simple statistics, Pearson product–moment correlations, and alpha reliabilities for the five subscales of the Stepfamily Life Index (SLI) (N = 586)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stepfamily dimensions</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Dissension</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Involvement</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>–.75</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Avoidance</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>–.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Flexibility</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>–.54</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Expressiveness</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>–.50</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. All correlations are significant at p < .001. Means represent averages for each subscale based on responses ranging from (1) ‘Strongly disagree’ to (7) ‘Strongly agree.’*
model using the five subscales of the SLI as predictor variables and stepfamily satisfaction as the criterion variable produced an F-ratio that was significant, $F(5, 571) = 195.73, p < .001$, accounting for 63.2% of the shared variance in satisfaction. Stepfamily dissension ($\beta = -.53, t = -10.66, p < .001$), involvement ($\beta = .14, t = 3.60, p < .001$), avoidance ($\beta = -.13, t = -2.71, p = .007$), and expressiveness ($\beta = .08, t = 2.70, p = .007$) were significant predictors of stepfamily satisfaction. Thus, the direction and magnitude of these relationships is as expected, providing initial evidence of concurrent validity for the SLI.

Not only must the SLI correlate in the appropriate direction with conceptually related scales, it is also important that the magnitude of the correlation not be so strong that the scales are redundant. In this study, the amount of shared variance between the five dimensions of the SLI and the stepfamily satisfaction scale ranged from 19% to 61%, suggesting that the SLI is not entirely redundant with the satisfaction scale.

The SLI should also be differentially correlated with other measures that may not have as strong a theoretical link to perceptions of stepfamily life, such as feeling caught between parents (Affi, 2003; Affi & Schrodt, 2003a; Buchanan et al., 1991). Although feelings of being caught between parents do mediate the impact that divorce has on children’s perceptions of avoidance and satisfaction with their parents (Affi & Schrodt, 2003a), such feelings may or may not have as strong an association with perceptions of stepfamily life, especially given that such feelings are located primarily within a specific subsystem of the larger stepfamily system. Thus, the associations among dimensions of the SLI should not be as strongly correlated with feelings of being caught as with stepfamily satisfaction. As expected, for feelings of being caught, there were small, positive associations between stepfamily dissension ($r = .25, p < .001$) and avoidance ($r = .23, p < .001$), as well as negligible, inverse associations among involvement ($r = -.16, p < .001$), expressiveness ($r = -.11, p < .01$), and flexibility ($r = -.09, p < .05$). A multiple regression model using the five subscales of the SLI as predictor variables and stepchildren’s feelings of being caught as the criterion variable revealed that stepfamily dissension was the only significant predictor of stepchildren’s feelings of being caught ($\beta = .26, t = 3.33, p = .001$). When compared with the associations for stepfamily satisfaction, the results provide initial evidence of discriminant validity for the SLI.

**Discussion**

The primary goal of this research was to synthesize the stepfamily literature and develop a valid and reliable measure that assesses stepchildren’s perceptions of their stepfamilies as a group. Using schema theory (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), six themes relevant to stepfamily life were described and a new measure, the Stepfamily Life Index (SLI), was developed. Study 1 results provided initial evidence that stepchildren could think about, and report on, each of the six themes identified in the stepfamily literature. Study 2 indicated that stepchildren’s perceptions of their family schemata are represented in their perceptions of five dimensions of the SLI, including stepfamily dissension, involvement, avoidance, flexibility, and expressiveness.
Of the five dimensions in Study 2, the first, and most salient dimension was stepfamily dissension. Stepfamily dissension is conceptualized as the degree to which relationships are characterized by discord, stress, conflict, and tension. Stepfamily dissension is broader than conflict such that it incorporates aspects of cohesiveness (e.g., emotional closeness or distance). As such, the dissension dimension assesses the degree to which stepchildren have come to accept conflict, strife, and discord as common ways of relating. This is consistent with Baxter et al. (1999), who claim that conflict-related events are the single most important discriminator among five different developmental pathways that stepfamilies take in their first 4 years. As an extension of their findings, however, the results of this study suggest that some stepfamilies continue to follow conflict-laden developmental pathways until the conflict becomes normative.

The second dimension to emerge from this analysis was stepfamily involvement, conceptualized as the degree to which stepfamily members are drawn toward, or included in, stepfamily activities. In stepfamilies, productive ritual enactments enable stepfamily members to embrace their new family while still valuing what was important in their old family (Braithwaite et al., 1998). Stepfamily involvement is a much broader construct than stepfamily rituals, however, as involvement is both a sufficient and necessary condition for the enactment of family rituals. As such, stepchildren’s perceptions of stepfamily involvement are bound, to some extent, with perceptions of stepfamily bonding (i.e., cohesiveness). As Golish (2003) noted, a number of communication strengths differentiate strong stepfamilies from struggling stepfamilies, including spending time together, creating common ground, and communicating a sense of inclusion. Consistent with her research, stepfamily involvement emerged as an additional dimension of the schemata that stepchildren hold about their stepfamilies.

The third dimension to emerge from this analysis was stepfamily avoidance. There is a growing body of literature documenting the nature of topic avoidance in stepfamily relationships (e.g., Afifi & Schrodt, 2003a, 2003b; Golish, 2000; Golish & Caughlin, 2002), as stepchildren often resort to topic avoidance strategies to protect themselves, to prevent conflict, and to maintain a sense of privacy (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). The present data suggest that stepchildren engage in both conversational avoidance (particularly about stepfamily relationships) and physical avoidance (i.e., avoiding spending time with other stepfamily members and developing closer relationships with outsiders). Therefore, stepfamily avoidance is conceptualized as the degree to which stepfamily members stay clear of, and/or refrain from, communicating with each other and spending time with each other. This dimension is consistent with Golish (2003), who recently reported that avoidance was a primary means by which some stepchildren protect themselves.

The fourth dimension to emerge was stepfamily flexibility. Although this dimension produced the poorest reliability among the five dimensions of the SLI, the factor loadings for the flexibility dimension and the correlations with other factors suggest that the construct is indeed a viable and
meaningful dimension. As Braithwaite et al. (2001) noted, while stepfamily members are initially unsure of expectations for individual and collective behavior, as time passes, some stepfamilies are able to adapt and change more readily than others. Evidently, change can have a profound influence beyond the first 4 years of stepfamily development.

The final dimension to emerge from the results of this study was expressiveness. Golish (2003) recently identified openness as one of several communication strategies that stepfamilies use to manage relevant challenges. Likewise, Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1994) identified expressiveness as one of three dimensions of family communication schemata, and, more recently, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) argued that family relationship schemas include a conversation orientation (among other factors). To the extent that some stepfamilies communicate more openly than others, expressiveness becomes an added dimension by which researchers can more fully understand the types of knowledge structures that guide social interaction within the stepfamily.

The present results also provide initial evidence in support of the validity of the SLI, as four of the five dimensions predicted unique variance in stepchildren’s perceptions of stepfamily satisfaction, whereas only one of the five dimensions (i.e., dissension) was meaningfully associated with stepchildren’s feelings of being caught. Collectively, then, these five dimensions help bring a degree of synthesis and order to previous efforts at exploring stepfamily functioning, thereby extending the tenets of schema theory to the stepfamily context.

Theoretical implications
Schema theory suggests that people actively process information from their environment. Schemas organize knowledge about the social world and provide guidelines for understanding and social interaction (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The results of these two studies provide initial evidence that stepchildren can, in fact, think about and report on their stepfamilies as a whole, or as a group. Each dimension of the SLI may represent one aspect of the family schema that stepchildren hold about their stepfamilies. Whereas a claim can be made that the SLI captures perceptions rather than the larger knowledge structures that stepchildren hold about their stepfamilies, schemas include a particular way of perceiving complex stimuli. To the extent that the SLI captures a stepchild’s knowledge about his or her stepfamily, it becomes a useful tool for examining the diverse range of experiences he or she may face in managing intrafamily relationships. These schemata, in turn, provide basic understandings of stepfamily membership that may guide, direct, and influence both information processing and communication with members (and nonmembers) of the stepfamily.

The dimensions represented in the SLI are unlikely to be unique to stepchildren. Specifically, the results of the current studies parallel existing research efforts on family schemata. For example, in Fitzpatrick and Ritchie’s (1994) research, patterns of conversational and physical avoidance and expressiveness also emerged as critical elements of family life.
Other dimensions of the SLI, such as involvement, flexibility, and dissen-
ston could be compared to aspects of structural traditionalism and
conformity orientation (e.g., flexibility), as well as intimacy and affection
(e.g., involvement and dissenston).

Historically, researchers have approached perceptions of family co-
hesiveness, adaptability, communication, and conflict as separate dimen-
sions of family functioning (e.g., Olson, 2000). By contrast, in the present
studies, dissenston reflected aspects of cohesion and conflict, whereas
involvement reflected aspects of cohesion and rituals. In addition, avoid-
ance emerged as a critical component in stepchildren’s perceptions of step-
family schemata, and although researchers have investigated avoidance of
conflict in previous schema research, to date, this is the first investigation
that combined both conversational and physical avoidance. Whereas the
conceptual domains comprising family schemata may transcend family
contexts, the specific empirical manifestations of those domains in families
may differ, depending on the specific experiences and unique challenges
that different families face.

Limitations and directions for future research

Even though the results of these studies are theoretically interesting, there
are limitations worth noting. First, the flexibility subscale of the SLI
produced relatively weak reliability. Because this construct is well docu-
mented in the stepfamily literature (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish,
2003; Henry & Lovelace, 1995), future research should increase the number
of items that assess willingness and ability to adapt to change.

A second, and perhaps more important, limitation of the present studies
involves sampling. Both direct and indirect sampling techniques were
employed to gather a sufficient sample size to conduct appropriate statisti-
cal procedures. In doing so, however, a degree of generalizability was sacri-
ficed by gathering information from predominantly white, college-educated
stepchildren. The results, then, should be interpreted within the limitations
of the sample and future research should examine the SLI with a variety of
samples.

Despite these limitations, the results extend our understanding of some of
the relational dimensions that underlie stepchildren’s stepfamily schemata.
Family scholars should continue investigating dimensions underlying step-
family schemata, further building a foundation for examining similarities
and differences in communication behaviors among different family forms.

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