EXPERIENCES OF GROWING UP AS A STEPCHILD FOR YOUNG ADULTS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

By:

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Declarations

I, Unathi Siviwe Prince Mboniswa, hereby declare that this is my own work and the sources used in this work are acknowledged and referenced appropriately.

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Abstract

In this study, the qualitative approach was used to study the experiences of growing up as a stepchild. The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of growing up as a stepchild for young adults at university level. Half of the participants were male and half were females between the ages of 18 and 25. The results were presented as themes that were found to be common amongst the participants’ narratives. The themes are discussed and recommendations were made for functional stepfamily relationships and environment.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION

1.1. Introduction

Stepfamilies are an integral part of modern society. The stepchild-stepparent and stepparent-biological parent relationships are the essential defining ingredients of a stepfamily. However, these relationships do not exist in isolation. They are often part of other family subsystems which together form a stepfamily. The parent-child subsystem may consist of a biological parent. The sibling subsystem may consist of half-siblings or stepsiblings. Thus, stepparents and stepchildren are two of more participants in this kind of a family. This study focuses on how stepchildren experienced growing up as stepchildren.

Research studies have, to varying degrees of consensus, implicated stepfamily environments in negative child outcomes (Freisthler, Svare & Harrison-Jay, 2003; Härkönen, Bernardi & Boertien, 2017; Shafer, Jensen & Holmes, 2017; Kaukinen & Apel, 2017). These outcomes have included those of stepchildren. However, little is known about the process through which the aforementioned outcomes come about. Thus, the utility of the knowledge about stepchild outcomes is compromised. One research approach to the exploration of the process by which stepchildren become delinquent, drug abusing, truant, deviant and defiant is by means of an investigation of the meaning they attribute to their existence as stepchildren. It is the researcher’s contention that to achieve this, the qualitative approach would offer the best research design.

Focus on experiences is preferred for this study mainly because it purports to give insights into how stepchildren experience their world as they sometimes present with problematic or destructive behaviour. This approach is also advantageous as it allows for a neutral position which is not premised on an assumption that stepfamilies are essentially problematic. The exploration of experiences is an end on its own as far as this study is concerned. However, it is believed to have utility in the broader study of stepfamilies.
1.2. Orientation of the Study

Families are a very important part of human functioning across the globe. Each family unit provides space for warmth, development and trust for each member. While normal development is always expected in each family, it is not always the case in some family settings and structures due to a number of factors. According to Edwards (1990), families are the basic natural units of society. A family, as a unit worth attention in psychology, was considered after World War II (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). This consideration was due to a compelling need to move away from the traditional strictly individual understanding of the psychological well-being of a human being.

The family, as a unit, has been used to treat serious psychopathology by means of family therapy. Capuzzi and Gross (2007) have implicated such forms of psychopathology as schizophrenia, depression, alcoholism, conduct disorders, anorexia (Chen, Weissman, Zeffiro, Yiu, Eneva, Arlt and Swantek, 2016), childhood autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and dementia in being successfully treated through family therapy. Moreover, families are a target of some programmes aimed at prevention of psychopathology (Kluck, Dallesasse & English, 2016).

A family that develops symptoms in its individual members is believed to provide an environment that does not promote psychological well-being (Smith, 2016). Family theorists and therapists have differentiated between functional and dysfunctional families (Allen & Moore, 2017). Functional families are the families that fulfil the needs of their members. Dysfunctional families are those that do not fulfil the needs of their members. There are types of families that are predisposed to being dysfunctional. These include stepfamilies (Coleman, Ganong, Russell & Frye-cox, 2015).

Stepfamilies are the families where there are children from one or both of the spouses’ previous relationships (Burnham, 1986). The children from the spouses’ previous relationships are referred to as stepchildren (Higginbotham, Skogrand &
Torres, 2010). Stepchildren are part of the stepfamily system. This means they influence this system and that it influences them (Ungar, 2016). However, Higginbotham, Skogrand and Torres (2010) emphasise the significance of the stepparent-stepchild relationship in bringing about a functional stepfamily. The present study prioritizes stepchildren partly because they are part of a pivotal subsystem in a stepfamily system.

Stepchildren belong to families that are different from the nuclear or extended families. The families to which the stepchildren belong are predisposed to dysfunction. Henggeler and Borduin (1990) are of the view that dysfunction in these families is due to denial. They point out that members of stepfamilies tend to assume that stepfamilies are similar to nuclear families. Skogrand, Davis and Higginbotham (2011) distinguish between two approaches to stepfamily living, normative-adaptive and deficit-comparison perspectives. The former approach encourages creation of a stepfamily-adaptive culture and the latter insists on juxtaposing stepfamilies against differently structured families. The denial apparent in the deficit-oriented approach closes a gate to a fulfilling family environment for stepfamily members.

The difference between a nuclear family and a stepfamily can best be exposed through the use of family subsystems. These subsystems are the marital subsystem, the parent-child subsystem and the sibling subsystem (Edwards, 1990; Connel, 2010). In a nuclear family, except for the marital subsystem, the members of the subsystems are biologically related. In a stepfamily, the relations are different. The parent-child subsystem consists of at least one parent who is not a biological parent of one or more children (Mphahlele, 2008). The sibling subsystem consists of at least one sibling who does not share one parent with the other or the others.

The problems that may arise in stepfamilies are not only due to biological differences in members. These differences set the stage for other complex factors that are relational in nature. Stepchildren may have loyalty conflicts between biological and stepparents (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; Jensen, Shafer & Holmes, 2017). Remarriage, which is a common phenomenon in stepfamilies, may trigger unfinished emotional business in stepchildren (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). A stepparent may be compelled to be a disciplinarian in the absence of a strong emotional bond.
between him or her and the child (Henggeler & Borduin, 1990; Ganong, Coleman & Jamison, 2011). The presence of same-aged stepsiblings may lead to unhealthy comparisons and competition (Henggeler & Borduin, 1990). Certain negative outcomes are associated with stepchildren. Adolescents from remarried families were found to be at least twice more likely than their non-remarried counterparts to present with behavioural problems (Hetherington, 2003). Children who grew up in families with less conflict were found to present with less problems (Preston, Gottfried, Oliver, Gottfried, Delany & Ibrahim, 2016).

In some positive aspects, stepfamilies have been found to do better than nuclear families. According to Carr (2006), surveys have found stepfamilies to be more open in communication, more willing to deal with conflict, less idealistic and more egalitarian with respect to childcare and housekeeping. This is a view that is reinforced by Suanet, Van Der Pas and Van Tilburg (2013) in their observation that stepfamilies show capacity for internal support. This shows that stepfamilies are normal families with strengths and challenges which can be addressed when recognised and not denied.

Freisthler, Svare and Harrison-Jay (2003) found that stepchildren recognised both positive and negative aspects to their experiences of growing up as stepchildren despite their inclination to highlight the negative aspects. The former stepchildren in their study reported the following:

a) They experienced the bigger support system as beneficial.

b) They also reported financial stability and personal growth owing to positive relations with a parent with whom they were not biologically related.

However, the former stepchildren also reported emotional distress, loyalty conflicts and loss of family ties and of the nuclear family unit.

1.3. Problem Statement

With the proliferation of non-traditional unions, child birth out of wedlock, divorce and other phenomena that impose changes to family as it has been known; scholarly
attention is due to reconstituted family life. Research, in the contexts in which reconstituted families have been studied, studies show a compelling need to understand the dynamics within these families. One reason for this is how children, the relatively more vulnerable group within the family context, are affected. The effect of reconstituted stepfamilies on stepchildren is a convenient place to start as culture and literature are rich with tales of an ill-treated stepchild and a vicious stepmother. These narratives may be expected to shape both the expectations and the experiences of not just stepmothers and stepchildren but society as a whole. Thus, it became crucial to study the experiences of stepchildren.

1.4. Intended Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

The study is intended to add to the existing literature in psychology, with a special emphasis on reconstituted families. It is hoped that the results of this study will shed light on how stepchildren experience and make meaning of their familial world. The practice of family therapy and individual psychotherapy in the South African context are expected to be enriched by the findings of this study.

1.5. Summary

The chapter presented a synopsis of the current theoretical understanding of stepfamily dynamics and the rationale for this study. The next chapter deals with the local and international literature concerning the topic.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

Stepchildren function within, and their identity as such is derived from, a familial context. Well established theory concerns itself with general family dynamics within the traditional family structures. Thus, variations to the western traditional family structures are not entertained within these models. However, some helpful principles that assist in making sense of variant structures like stepfamilies can be drawn from the traditional family theory. This chapter, therefore, serves to interrogate both the traditional family theory and research findings and theory on stepfamilies.

The first scholars (including Willem Wundt) in the field of psychology saw individual consciousness as the ultimate source of truth in understanding human psychology (Dulany, 2009). However, it was later acknowledged that some needs attributed to the individual can be met interpersonally (Vorster, Roos & Beukes, 2013). These needs include respect, acceptance, warmth, empathy, belongingness, validation, autonomy, security, reliability and intimacy needs among others (Capuzzi & Gross, 2007; Bhanji, 2013). According to the humanistic perspective, meeting these needs is essential to transcendence (Murphy, Joseph, Demetriou & Karimi-Mofrad, 2017). Thus, human potential may not be realised if these needs are not met.

Object relations theorist Fairbairn argued that human beings develop in an interpersonal environment (St. Claire, 2003; Martino 2017). However, according to him, normal psychological development implies a change in how an individual relates to the other. This change is understood to be from dependence to interdependence relatedness. As one matures he or she is expected to move from solely having their needs met to having their needs met while meeting other people’s needs in relationships.

Failure to meet these needs may result in experience of psychache and distress. Psychache refers to emotional pain. Attempts to escape the primary psychache may result in the experience of anxiety. Anxiety is on its own an undesirable experience.
This psychic dilemma leaves the ego with a challenge of coping with the anxiety. As a protective measure against the anxiety, the ego devices defence mechanisms. Defence mechanisms may either be adaptive or maladaptive. However, they often have implications for interpersonal functioning because they serve to guard against re-experiencing of psychache.

Defence mechanisms may undermine an individual’s attempts to have their interpersonal needs met. Maladaptive defence mechanisms result in defensive interactive styles which serve the function of protecting the ego against anxiety at the expense of good interpersonal functioning. Conflict is an expectable consequence of this interpersonal dilemma in any relationship.

Familial relationships established during early childhood may be less anxiety provoking than those established later in life. This may especially be the case for children. Conflict may be expected to arise from this. Children may respond to the ambiguity of having to relate to a new parent figure with anxiety and that may result in psychological problems. To fully appreciate the experiences of stepchildren, a multimodal approach which considers both the intrapersonal and the interpersonal phenomena is needed. Any form of reductionism may result in one misconstruing important relational phenomena.

2.1. Understanding Family Life

This section covers some of the established family psychology theories. Briefly covered are the humanistic, psychodynamic and systems approaches to family dynamics. These are covered with a view to understand the literature that is peculiar to stepfamilies within the context of some general principles that apply to all families. For example, structural family theory emphasises, among other phenomena, the importance of boundaries within a family system. However, this theory often implicitly refers to nuclear families. This, therefore, implies that, while boundaries are important in stepfamilies, they may need to be negotiated differently to how they are negotiated in nuclear families. The approaches bellow have been chosen to explain the phenomena under study.
2.1.1. Humanistic Approach

The humanistic approach has various uses in individual psychology. However, in the context of this study, the focus is on family and familial relationships. Thus, the concepts generally used in, among other fields, psychotherapy are slightly adjusted for use in family psychology. One such concept is unconditional positive regard.

Unconditional positive regard is found in the value of the humanness of each individual regardless of his or her choice or behaviour. Bhanji (2013) equates the fundamental principle underlying unconditional positive regard to respect and acceptance. This basically means if respect is earned, it is earned by one’s state of being human and not necessarily his or her behaviour.

The way of thinking envisaged in unconditional positive regard encompasses an appreciation of the human conditions as embedded in contradictions, imperfections and errors. It is only when an individual feels accepted unconditionally that they can make peace with his or her condition of being human (Rogers, 1957). When acceptance is selective, one learns to discriminate his or her experiences accordingly. This results in a fragmented view of self and distress, which is an unhealthy condition.

Tyler (1999) and Proctor (2017) are of the view that the need for positive regard is more powerful than the organismic valuing process. Thus, the human innate tendency towards self-actualisation loses supremacy when positive regard is not aligned to it. This means that an individual may opt for acceptance and approval at the expense of seeking to achieve his or her goals and becoming the person he or she is meant to be. It is thus very important that positive regard is aligned with the tendency to self-actualise. This can be achieved through practicing unconditional positive regard.

People are social beings and they grow in contact with other people (Rogers, 1957). Thus, self-actualisation can be achieved through and can be thwarted by interpersonal contact. It is, therefore, important that a family environment
encourages unconditional positive regard and discourages conditional positive regard.
The unconditional positive regard has been found to facilitate the process of self-actualisation. Self-actualisation is an innate human tendency to move towards realising one’s potential. It is understood to be the basic motivational force in humanity.

An ideal family, according to this perspective would be the one that sets into motion in each individual the natural tendency to self-actualise. Stepfamilies, as is to be demonstrated later, are riddled with a lot of challenges. They may struggle to live up to the standard of unconditional positive regard.

2.1.2. The Psychodynamic Approach

Families consist of individuals with different interactive styles. There are basically two positions as far as understanding interactive styles is concerned. They are either viewed as part of crystallised ways of being or as a product of here-and-now interactions. These positions reflect the understandings inherent in the psychodynamic and systemic approaches, respectively. Contemporary family psychology researchers have started to recognise value in both these approaches. Flaskas (2005) attributes the lessening of what he refers to as rigidity to the fact that the systems approach is well established and does not need to prove its legitimacy through opposition to any approach. Arguably, a good compromise between psychodynamic and systemic approaches to understanding families is Object Relations Family Theory (ORFT).

The ORFT implies paying attention to the conscious and unconscious dynamics that occur between people due to their individual internal objects (Flaskas, 2005). This approach provides an understanding of family dynamics through an in-depth understanding of the lives of family members within and beyond their consciousness.

The object relations theorists assert that through interactions with significant others, human beings construct internal objects. Internal objects are the unconscious
internalised relational experiences with significant others. Thus, experiences with family members, especially the primary caregiver mould an individual’s perception of the world including the people with whom they relate (Stiefel, Harris & Rohan, 1998; St. Claire, 2003).

Stiefel, Harris and Rohan (1998) and Handelzalts, Fisher and Naot (2014) state that an infant is initially flexible to learning but over time it starts to construct a schema of objects that they refer to as templates. They further assert that these templates influence psychological functioning at all levels including motivation, overt behaviour, cognition, perception and emotion. When children begin forming extra-familial relationships they have already formed templates based on their relationships with family members, a process which begins in infancy.

Developmentally, through the ORFT approach, families go through two distinct stages. The first of these has as its main feature the need for intimacy with the other. And the second stage is characterised by the need for separateness in the relationship. Separation and individuation determine how boundaries will be maintained later in life. Individuation is an integral part of psychoanalytic thinking. In the family environment, the need for intimacy and individuation is seen in the need to be with the other while maintaining one’s individuality. Parents need to be intimate with each other while the children need to be independent from their parents (Stiefel, Harris & Rohan, 1998).

The core premise of object relations theory is that people seek interdependent relationships with each other in which acceptance, affirmation and other relational needs are met. People seek to meet these relational needs from infancy through to adulthood. This striving to relate to the other is an adaptive process. This process is based on the survival needs of an individual (Stiefel, Harris & Rohan, 1998).

The needs mentioned above need a “holding” environment in a family setting. Stiefel, Harris and Rohan (1998) describe this environment as that which provides the following to each family member: security, care and support. A holding environment is the one in which conflicts are dealt with in a caring and protective manner. Holding is a concept in object relations that was introduced by Donald Winnicott.
A different concept that is of high significance in object relations family theory is projective identification (Stiefel, Harris & Rohan, 1998). Projection is the process whereby a subject perceives the split off qualities, emotions, thoughts of him/herself in another. Stiefel, Harris and Rohan (1998) state that the most vulnerable group to projections are children. This, according to them is because children are dependent on their caregivers to construct reality. That means that the projection can impede the process of identity development. In fact, projection may cause the caregiver to view the child in narrow and negative ways. It is argued that the child assumes the projected image. This is due to the fact that the parent gives attention to his/her projection and the child starts to identify with it (Stiefel, Harris & Rohan, 1998).

Projection is the parent’s part in projective identification. Identification is the part that is unconsciously played out by the child. For projective identification to be complete, it is not enough for the parent to project, the child must identify with the projected image. However, for this to happen, the relationship between the parties involved must be sufficiently strong (Flaskas, 2005).

Projective identification of unwanted qualities results in conflict between family members (Stiefel, Harris & Rohan, 1998). Unwanted qualities imply that the beholder has qualities that cause internal conflict. This conflict gets externalised if the beholder represses it. The object of his or her projections becomes the beholder of the unwanted qualities through projective identification.

### 2.1.3. The Systems Approach

The systems approach looks at the relationships between the different systems in a family. Below, the different sub-approaches are discussed.

#### 2.1.3.1. Structural Approach

This approach looks at, among other phenomena, how issues of boundaries are negotiated in families. Boundary negotiation, according to this approach, is an
important feature to assess in a family. It is especially important for family structures that differ significantly from a nuclear family.

According to structural family approach, proper functioning within subsystems implies clear boundaries. It is more important that it be clear what role different family members, play than who is part of the family. For example, the formation of a stepfamily may not increase child supervision (Sweeney, 2010). Cartwright (2010) cautions against stepparents disciplining their stepchildren before forming a relationship with them.

The parent-child subsystem is the context for emotional attachment, gender identification and modelling, and where children learn to develop towards independence under parents’ authority and supervision. The sibling subsystem has been seen to provide learning for peer relationships. In this subsystem, children learn to co-operate, compete, resolve conflict, cope with jealousy, and prepare for peer related activities and friendships as they develop towards being independent adults (Vetere, 2001). This may be due to sensitivity to parental differential treatment that siblings may develop owing to issues in the marital dyad (Ponappa, Sujata (Bartle-Haring, Holowacz & Ferriby, 2017).

Boundaries may be difficult to negotiate in stepfamilies. This, according to Pasley (1996), is due to such situations as that of a stepchild belonging to two family households simultaneously. Pasley (1996) is of the view that this situation can result in role ambiguity, loyalty conflicts and feelings of guilt. A stepchild may find him or herself in a situation where belongingness is not clear. Suanet, Van Der Pas and Van Tilburg (2013) are of the view that this results from lack of clarity in social roles and responsibilities within these families. Unclear boundaries may result in dissonance.

When boundaries are not clearly defined in a stepfamily, the biological parent may harbour feelings of conflict between the new partner and children of prior marriage (Pasley, 1996). This basically implies virtually every member of a stepfamily has a role to play to bring about a functional family environment.
2.1.3.2. Strategic Approach

With its emphasis on human interactions, the systems approach looks into a broad range of interactional phenomena including how interactional patterns can bring about anxiety in a family. The relationship between anxiety and interactional patterns in a family is understood to be circular. Thus, there is a reciprocal causal relationship between the two. However, Brown (1999) and Smalley, Dallos and McKenzie (2017) point out that lack of awareness of relationship dilemmas causes relational anxiety.

Brown (1999) looks to Bowens model to appreciate the impact of anxiety on relational patterns in a family context. According to Brown (1999), relational patterns can develop to defuse anxiety. Anxiety often results from too much distance or too much closeness in relationships. Closeness and distance can be understood to be on a continuum with one end being extreme closeness and the other being extreme distance (Connell, 2010). Both extremes are dysfunctional and indicate a need to manage closeness and distance in relationships.

Some of the patterns that may develop to ameliorate anxiety are fusion, enmeshment and triangulation. Fusion occurs when in a relationship, there is so much focus on family members getting along that individual needs are sacrificed (Brown, 1999; Ponappa, Bartle-Haring, Holowacz, Ferriby, 2017). According to Brown (1999), in this set up, individuals react to anxiety by moving towards this costly harmony. Seeking too much closeness is seen as much a symptom of fusion as distancing.

In fusion, an individual reacts to the perception of too much closeness by not reflecting on their experience but responding to it so as to bring about the comfort of the other person (Brown, 1999). This results in an untenable situation where differentiation is discouraged. Thus, an individual’s thoughts are not identified or differentiated as that of an individual. This, however, is a different process from enmeshment. Enmeshment is not a dyadic concept; it refers to the family system as a whole.
Enmeshment, the polar opposite of disengagement, results from lack of boundaries between family subsystems (Brown, 1999). For example, this occurs when behaviour that is expected of a member of the parent subsystem is undertaken by someone from the sibling subsystem. Fusion and enmeshment differ in terms of where the boundaries are blurred, whether it is between individuals or subsystems. Sholevar and Schwoeri (2003) found that stepfathers tend to disengage in their relationships with their stepchildren. Greeff and Du Toit (2009) found boundaries to be a significant factor in family resilience. Thus, negotiation of space within the South African population was found to contribute towards stepfamily resilience.

The disengagement is probably due to the anxiety involved in forming a new parent-child relationship. When stepchildren tend to experience authoritative behaviour by their stepparents as controlling, one would expect that that would result in uncertainty and thereby provoking anxiety (Sholevar & Schwoeri, 2003). When stepparents are called upon to be an instant parent, as it is often expected of them, Sholevar and Schwoeri (2003) recommend that they be adult friends to stepchildren. This would ease the tension without compromising boundaries or triangulating.

Triangulation describes a family process whereby anxiety in a dyad is relieved by bringing a third party into the subsystem (Brown, 1999; Smalley, Dallos & McKenzie, 2017). The third party can be a family member or even an outsider. The individual serves to distract attention from problems in the dyad and the resolution of a relationship impasse. Thus, triangulation can serve to maintain tension in a relationship. Sholevar and Schwoeri (2003) make an observation that society is generally hostile towards stepparents. This can mean unhealthy community involvement can be expected in a stepfamily.

Community involvement can be to assist with one of the greatest challenges confronted by stepfamilies, parenting (Elliott, 1997). Stepfamily education programmes can also assist in this regard (Saint-Jacques et. al, 2011). Specifically, difficulties about parenting in stepfamilies are around who should parent the stepchildren and how. According to Elliott (1997), the question of parenting often results in stepfamilies denying being stepfamilies and assuming the roles undertaken by members in nuclear families. This approach can only create and maintain familial
difficulties. However, Elliot (1997) recommends that the parenting dyad be strong enough to work together to let the biological parent take primary responsibility for parenting.

2.2. Stepfamily

Stepfamilies are marked by unique structural and societal support challenges. These challenges are left almost entirely to the stepfamily members to negotiate on their own. Besides scholarly interest in the subject of stepfamily life, there are no cultural norms for stepfamilies to refer to (Suanet, Van Der Pas, Van Tilburg, 2013). Adler-baeder and Higginbotham (2004) offer a definition for what they refer to as the incomplete institution. The incomplete institution denotes the dearth of cultural norms and societal institutional support for stepfamilies. This requires that stepfamily members adopt a realistic approach to their family dynamics. In fact, successful couples in stepfamilies tend to adopt this approach (Adler-baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

The marital or couple relationship, however, is not the only relationship that determines the success of a stepfamily. The stepparent-stepchild relationship appears to impinge on the couple relationship Adler-baeder and Higginbotham (2004), making it a powerful determinant of the success of the stepfamily (Speer, Giles & Denes, 2013). This is one reason why couple dynamics in a stepfamily should not be viewed using the same prism used with couples in nuclear families. Couples in stepfamilies have unique challenges that predispose them to ties being severed (Adler-baeder, Robertson, Schramm & Adler-baeder, 2010). Adler-baeder and Higginbotham (2004) found that, with stepfamilies, relationships with former partners are an important part to negotiate as these can affect the couple relationships negatively.

Belongingness in a stepfamily is a complicated matter. This is especially true within the stepparent-stepchild dyad. Stepfamily members may not perceive each other as belonging together. This is seen in how many stepparents include their stepchildren in their personal network. Although this has improved over the years, from 63% in
In 1992 to 85% in 2009, stepmothers are still less likely than stepfathers to include their stepchildren in their personal network (Suanet, van der Pas & van Tilburg, 2013). Lambert (2010) found that most stepchildren in their study considered their stepparents to be part of their family and could provide reasons for this. The reasons provided demonstrate how within these relationships, belongingness is decided based on behaviour and not by mere residing in the same household or being identified as family.

There seems to be gender differences in stepfamily involvement among stepchildren. Schrodt (2008) found that stepdaughters were more involved than stepsons. This study also found that stepchildren who considered a stepfather as the primary stepparent were more involved and less avoidant than those who considered a stepmother as the primary parent. This reinforces the notion that being part of a stepfamily does not necessarily imply feelings of belongingness by the stepfamily members.

The very formation of a stepfamily has implications for both pre-existing and new family ties. Specifically, King (2009) found that the entrance of a stepfather had a significant influence on the adolescent-mother dyad with closeness in this relationship declining when a stepfather was cohabiting. However, pre-existing adolescent-mother closeness appeared to predict a stepfather-stepchild (adolescent) closeness. Pre-existing ties between adolescents and non-resident fathers appeared to have no consequences for stepfather-stepchild relationships.

Goldscheider and Sassler (2006) examined the role of children in the formation of a stepfamily. They found that fathers that reside with their children had an increased chance of marrying a woman with children. They also uncovered that women who resided with their children had a reduced chance of forming a union with men who do not have children. However, these women were found to have an increased chance of forming a union with men who have children. Some of the structural challenges that are experienced in stepfamilies are communicative. Koenig Kellas, LeClair-Underberg and Normand (2008) hypothesised that lack of appropriate terms for stepfamily relationships poses challenges in thinking or communicating about them. They found that stepfamily members sometimes addressed each other with
reference to a third person or made use of words prefixed by “step”. Stepfamily members also dropped the prefix and used terms used in nuclear families. However, Gibson (2013) cautions us that family as a construct is not universal. Thus, the said communicative aspects may not necessarily apply in an African context. As Dodo and Nyoni (2017) point out, within the African context, social parenting has been there for long enough to have names for social parents including stepparents.

Beyond the communicative aspects, stepfamilies have to contend with stereotypes (Planitz and Feeney, 2009) which often depict them in negative or mixed light (Leon & Angst, 2005). Leon and Angst (2005) reasoned that the way stepfamilies are portrayed by the media have an effect on how stepfamilies are viewed by society. Assumptions about stepfamily and remarriage life are made based on the images drawn by the media.

In some countries around the world, stepfamilies are assisted through stepfamily education programmes and self-help books among other entities. Saint-Jacques, Robitaille, Godbout, Parent, Drapeau and Gagne (2011) found that stepfamily approach to problems and their strategies to deal with them more aptly predicted the survival of a stepfamily than the nature, intensity or number of the problems. This is probably why stepfamily education programmes are seen as effective in improving stepfamily relationships (Higginbotham, Davis, Smith, Dansie, Skogrand & Reck, 2012).

Higginbotham et al. (2012), in their study, found that stepfathers, specifically, reported benefit from a course they undertook. The course reportedly helped them improve communication. It helped them exercise understanding and patience towards their stepchildren. It was also found to help them create a sense of family bonding. This is one example that proves that stepfamilies can benefit from assistance. Other sources of assistance are self-help books.

According to Coleman and Nickleberry (2009), self-help books had grown significantly in numbers over a space of 20 years. Coleman and Nickleberry (2009) sought to evaluate the quality of self-help books that were available in the market. From their study, they concluded that accessing high quality self-help books should
be easy for helping professionals. However, they bemoaned little attention granted to legal issues despite their prominence in stepfamily life.

Stepfamily as an institution has relatively well-understood internal and external dynamics. There is, however, space for improvement both in understanding the different facets of stepfamily life and understanding stepfamily life in different contexts.

2.3. Stepparenting

Stepparenting denotes the role of a stepparent in the stepparent-stepchild dyad. It happens in a relationship and this relationship is affected by the whole system. The whole system also has external factors that impinge on it. With this context in mind, this section seeks to explore stepparenting as a phenomenon. Family scholars show more consensus that stepparenting is a significant factor in stepfamily problems Schrodt (2006) and success (Bryant, Futris, Hicks & Lee, 2017).

Javangwe (2006) found that stepparents were perceived as unable to love their stepchildren. Stepparents appeared to be self-conscious. Javangwe (2006) identified the following as major stressors in stepparenting: introducing their stepchildren, cheating spouse, being called by ex-spouse’s name, relocation post divorce, and legal issues among other things. With all the above-mentioned stressors, it is understandable how stepparenting can be experienced as difficult, especially considering the centrality of the stepparent-stepchild subsystem in a stepfamily. In fact, it can understandably induce symptoms in the stepparent.

Shapiro and Stewart (2012) found that support from the stepparent’s partner, the spouse’s ex-partner and the stepchildren was associated with fewer depressive symptoms. However, they also found that spousal support was the only significant predictor. High quality co-parental communication had a positive impact on stepparents’ mental health (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). Stepparental warmth is received with difficulty within the context of a strained parent-child relationship (Gibson, 2013). The stepparent’s partner has an even more significant role to play as
a support system. Biological parents experience less stress in their parenting role than stepparents (Shapiro, 2014).

Espinar Fellmann, Carrasco Galan and Hernandez Lloreda (2008) found that stepparents’ burnout was best predicted by maladjustment related to role strain. In the same study, it was also found that stepmothers were more likely to experience burnout. However, a satisfactory couple relationship can help reduce the chances of burnout (Espinar Fellmann, Carrasco Galan & Hernandez Lloreda, 2008). This highlights the importance of the marital dyad in a stepfamily system.

Some personality factors have been identified as important in the process of stepparenting. Attachment avoidance is associated with greater issues in stepparenting; while, relationship satisfaction and stability are associated with less issues (Jensen, Lombardi, Larson, 2015; Pace, Shafer, Jensen, Larson, 2015). However, relationship satisfaction and stability are also found to be a significant mediator to the influence of attachment anxiety.

Schmeeckle (2007) found traditional gender roles to be a common feature in parenting and stepparenting. In this study, there was evidence that the stepfamilies were significantly affected by gender roles. Shapiro (2014) found stepparenting to be more stressful for stepmothers than it was for stepfathers. It was also found that lesser reliance on gender to define roles resulted in less stress associated with stepparenting.

### 2.3.1. Stepfather

Gender seems to be a significant differentiator with regards to parenting in the stepfamily setup. This, therefore, warrants attention to be invested in the different gendered parenting roles. The stepfamily system appears to interact differently with stepfathers than to stepmothers. Being a stepfather is both a role and a family identity. Moreover, it has its particular dynamics that are likely to affect the system in their particular way.
Being a stepfather is not a role that one takes by virtue of being in an intimate relationship with a child’s parent. Pettigrew (2013) makes mention of a case where a stepfather had not adopted the stepfather identity 10 years after meeting his stepson. This demonstrates how the development of the stepfather identity is not a straight forward process. Identification with the role of a father to a child that is not the stepfather’s biological child is a complicated process. However, some stepfathers seem to identify with this role more than others.

Marsiglio (2004) delineated a concept referred to as paternal claiming. This refers to the cases where stepfathers identify with the fathering role to the extent of claiming their stepchildren as their own. However, even when stepfathers claim their stepchildren, this is not a static position. Their identity may still be affected by the stepchild’s response to their fathering. Thus, if a stepchild does not reciprocate by confirming the father-daughter relationship, the stepfather may doubt his identity.

Stepfather involvement in interventions was found to be influenced significantly by absence of legal status and biological connection with the biological parent (Parent, Saint-Jacques, Beaudry & Robitaille, 2007). Thus, while caseworkers tended to not include fathers in their interventions, the above mentioned reasons for exclusion were particular to stepfathers. This may play a role in reinforcing or refuting the stepfather identity.

Stepchildren transitioning into adulthood were commonly to remain close to their stepfathers (King & Lindstrom, 2016). This shows a situation where stepfather-stepchild ties did not seem to weaken with relative independence. Thus, a social parent-child relationship stands a chance of faring as well as a biological parent-child relationship. One example of the benefits of a functional stepfather-stepchild relationship is with regards to sexual behaviour amongst adolescent stepchildren. Kapinus (2001) found that male adolescent involvement with stepfathers was associated with lesser disposition towards having sex.

This positive influence of a stepfather on their stepson does not necessarily imply a strained biological father-son relationship. King (2009) found that the formation of a stepfamily had no effect on the biological father-child relationship. However, adolescent-mother relationship was found to decline with the entrance of a
cohabiting stepfather. Close mother-child relationship prior to remarriage predicted a close relationship to married stepfather entry (King, 2009). King, Amato and Lindstrom (2015) found that both adolescent adjustment and mother-adolescent relationship were associated with the quality of the stepfather-adolescent relationship.

A study revealed an association between a positive stepfather-stepchild relationship quality and a positive couple relationship which were associated with fewer depressive symptoms in stepfathers (Bryant, Futris, Hicks & Lee, 2017). This demonstrates among other a ripple effect that takes place in a family with specific reference to the role of a stepfather.

2.3.2. Stepmother

Like the stepfather, the stepmother as a role and identity is often faced with unique challenges that are particular to the female stepparent. This section focuses on the stepmother with respect to anxieties and relationships with stepchildren.

Doodson (2014) identified the following three sources of anxiety for stepmothers. These are with respect to negotiating the relationships with the stepchildren’s biological parent and one with the stepchildren. The third one is with regards to the lack of clarity inherent in the role of being a stepmother. Doodson (2014) recommends that interventions be designed to clarify the stepmother role and improve stepfamily relationships to help improve the wellbeing of a stepmother. The stepmother-stepdaughter relationship has been shown to be the most problematic stepfamily relationship (Hart, 2009). Exploring this relationship within the context where there is an active biological mother, Hart (2009) noted three challenges that the stepmother confronts in such a stepfamily system. The stepmother has to negotiate her role while being mindful of the biological mother’s role. This means that she cannot just allow her motherly instincts to guide her; she has to try not to be seen as attempting to replace the biological mother. The stepmother, as an instant parent, has to deal with feelings of ambivalence towards being a parent secondary to her choice of a partner. Thus, she did not necessarily choose the child; the child came with the man. The stepmother also has to contend
with being a third party within a father-daughter dyad. This is in contrast to biological mothers who are part of the initial parent-child dyad which later becomes a triad with the involvement of the father. Hart (2009) is of the view that this can bring about feelings of envy and jealousy in the stepmother.

Jealousy, hostility, mistrust and hatred are seen to define the majority of stepmother-stepson relationships (Dodo & Nyoni, 2017). Dodo and Nyoni (2017) found two significant reasons for the stepmother-stepson conflict within the Shona community. The stepmother may want inheritance due to the stepson for her biological son. It was also found that both the stepmother and the stepson may not recognise their roles within the family. A struggle related to family boundaries and roles seems to be at the centre of the conflict between stepmother and their stepson within this African context.

The stepmother role appears to be uniquely compromised by struggles inherent in the stepmother-stepchild relationship and relationship with their partner’s ex-partner. These struggles can be expected to directly or indirectly influence the experience of the stepchild.

2.4. Sibling Subsystem

In a stepfamily, the sibling subsystem may consist of siblings who share both biological parents, siblings who share one biological parent and siblings with no biological connection. These are referred to as (full) siblings, halfsibling and stepsiblings, respectively. The sibling subsystem is a very important subsystem in a family. There are critical child developmental lessons embedded in this subsystem. However, in a stepfamily, this subsystem may be compromised by a number of challenges that will be discussed in this section.

Valentine and Sociale (2012) reason that, when normal sibling relationships are fraught with conflict between solidarity and rivalry, then stepsibling relationships must be marked by even more ambivalence. What further complicates this is the lack of norms to refer to for both the parents and the stepsiblings. Negotiating the structural phenomena must be complicated resulting in role ambiguity, an undesirable set of circumstances.
Conflict between siblings is necessary and instructive. However, Freisthler, Svare and Harrison-Jay (2003) found stepsiblings taught each other less than they fought. Stepsiblings also fought more when compared to biological and halfsiblings (Freisthler, Svare & Harrison-Jay, 2003). Thus, their level of conflict is beyond the functional level. The children within a family where there were stepsiblings were found to be more likely to wish for their parents to reunite than when there were none. This shows that the presence of stepsiblings added further complication to the lives of stepchildren.

One particular source of conflict among siblings is competition for parental attention and affection. This raises to the foreground of children questions of fairness in treatment by their parents compared to their siblings. Within a stepfamily, Adler-baedder, Robertson and Schramm (2010) found that biological children displayed heightened sensitivity to injustice in parental treatment compared to their halfsiblings or stepsiblings.

Prior to the formation of a stepfamily, children have established roles within their family that they have come to identify with. With remarriage comes a new structure of the family which means new roles. For example, a first in the first family may now become a second or third born in the new family (Cartwright, 2010). This may lead to struggles negotiating a new family role for the children. This is a dilemma that may not necessarily be there in the absence of halfsiblings or stepsiblings.

Stewart (2005) concluded that adding a half sibling may not be beneficial to stepchildren. This, therefore, defeats the logic that adding a halfsibling would help strengthen the family bonds within a stepfamily setup. However, Sweeney (2010) found an association between poor child outcomes and having either halfsiblings or stepsiblings. This casts doubt on the notion that either of these sibling relationships is better than the other.
2.5. Stepparent-stepchild Relationship

A positive relationship between low scores on child wellbeing and stepfamily life has been established. One factor that has been understood to be responsible for this is low quality stepparent-stepchild relationship (Stewart, 2005). In fact, this particular relationship has been seen to compromise the marital dyad too (Adler-baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

Through stepfamily education programmes, the responsibility for stepfamily functioning has been placed on adults in these families (Adler-baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Thus, the agency of stepchildren in these families has been undermined despite evidence pointing to their role in the stepfamily dysfunction. Jensen and Howard (2015) identified, among others, features of stepparent-stepchild interaction as factors predictive of stepchild perception quality of stepparent-child relationship quality. In systems theory, interactions are better understood in a circular and not a linear fashion. Thus, stepchildren co-create their experiences with their stepparents.

Everyday talk between stepchild and stepparent is associated with the granting of parental authority to the stepparent, positive regard for him/her and affective certainly within the stepparent-child relationship (Schrodt, 2016). This everyday talk is often marked by small talk (Schrodt, 2016). However, it is predictive of the quality of the relationship between a stepparent and their stepchild. This also shows how the agency of a stepchild is important to understanding a stepparent-stepchild relationship.

It is, however, also true that the skill of the stepparent is critical in establishing a functional steprelationship with their stepchild. In fact, stepchildren appear to evaluate stepparent contributions towards the relationship to decide on their contributions (Ganong, Coleman & Jamison, 2011). The contributions by the stepparent are evaluated with input from biological parents and relatives. Thus, the stepparent-stepchild relationship needs support from the whole family system.
2.6. The Stepchild

There does not seem to be an agreement among family scholars on whether the stepfamily environment is good for the stepchild or not. In fact, stepchildren's account of their experiences prove this to be true (Freisthler, Svare & Harrison-Jay, 2003). However, it has proven to be possible to isolate those elements of stepfamilies that may promote the wellbeing of a stepchild from those that may bring about ill-health. The literature explored in this section proves this fact.

It is reasonable to expect parent remarriage to benefit the children involved (Sweeney, 2003). The rationale for this argument is that there are many reasons to expect remarriage to improve the lives of children. One example, is that children may enjoy better economic status if their parent remarries (Holden & Smock 1991; Peterson 1996). Economic deprivation is understood to be an important demerit for living in a single parent household. A more relational advantage that is associated with remarriage is that children get to have same-sex or opposite-sex parent figures. This allows for supervision, monitoring and role modelling. This also means shared parenting responsibilities (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994).

The above outlined advantages of living in a stepfamily system as a child may be undermined by child outcomes that are more negative. Remarriage may disadvantage the children involved. Research studies Sweeney (2003) have suggested that certain negative child outcomes are associated with living in a stepfamily. These outcomes include challenges in educational attainment, sociability, internalizing behaviours, initiative and externalizing behaviours. Children in stepfamilies may also experience poor psychological adjustment, early sexual behaviour, premarital birth and developmental difficulties (Sweeney, 2003).

It is, however, worth noting that children in stepfamilies are not a homogenous group. The outcomes associated with stepfamily life are a function of circumstances (Thorsen, 2016). According to Sweeney (2003), children who become part of a stepfamily after divorce exhibit less delinquent behaviour than those living with a divorced mother that is not married. Sweeney (2003) also found similar results when
comparing children that were part of a stepfamily after a non-marital birth with those that lived with a single never married mother.

When it comes to drug use, remarriage does not seem to benefit children (Sweeney, 2003). Children living in a stepfamily after divorce seem to be similar to those living with a single divorced mother in terms of risk of drug use. However, remarriage of a mother does benefit children who have not experienced divorce. Children in stepfamilies after a non-marital birth are less likely to use drugs than those living with a never married mother (Sweeney, 2003). Stepchildren with weak ties to resident parents were more likely to abuse substances (Thorsen, 2016).

Even though it can be reasonably expected that a stepfamily would benefit children in stepfamilies, the child outcomes contradict this expectation. It can, therefore, be benevolent to take a closer look at different hypotheses that give possible explanations for what might contribute to happiness or unhappiness of a stepchild in a stepfamily.

2.6.1. Experiences of stepchildren

Stepchildren are generally understood to be a problematic group of people. Several studies have provided evidence to prove that the stepfamily environment can be damaging to a stepchild. Several explanations have been forwarded for this. However, less attention has been paid to the processes by which the stepfamily brings about a problematic stepchild.

It seems to be the case that adjustment to remarriage by stepchildren is a function of child development. At early childhood, children are better able to adjust to remarriage than during adolescence. Peer relationships tend to be more significant for schooling children than familial relationships. However, preschool children experience familial relationships as more significant. Thus, for younger children, attaching to a stepparent may be easier (Pagani, Boulerice, Tremblay & Vitar, 1997). Stepchildren may harbour feelings of resentment for their stepparent brought about by the prospect of their biological parent reserving his or her love because of the
stepparent. Thus, loyalty issues may be detrimental to the stepparent-child relationship (Visher & Visher, 1991). According to Lawton and Sanders (1994), these fears that stepchildren may have are not unreasonable. They argue that these fears are based in reality of stepfamily life.

In stepfamilies, there does not seem to be much expression of positive emotions (Waldren, Bell, Peek & Sorell, 1990; in Lawton & Sanders, 1994). Parents in stepfamilies seem to get absorbed into stepfamily challenges and are often left with not much love to give. Conflicts and generally strenuous relationships leave stepchildren vulnerable to negative energy in the household (Lawton & Sanders, 1994).

The display of behaviour problems by stepchildren can be understood to be a response that has a function to bring about changes to unpleasant interactional patterns. Stepfather-stepchild relationship problems within the first two years of the formation of a stepfamily, is associated with adjustment problems (Cartwright, 2012). The introduction of a stepparent can result in strain in the biological parent-child relationships. These changes may be as a result of more attention being given to the stepparent by the natural parent. Thus, the stepchildren may feel ignored and act out to get attention from their biological parent. Therefore, aggressive behaviour may be a sign that stepchildren feel ignored (Lawton & Sanders, 1994).

The behaviour patterns described above may be tolerated by parents instead of being attended to (Lawton & Sanders, 1994). This may be because the parents feel it is understandable that the children react to change by showing problematic behaviour (Lawton & Sanders, 1994). It can therefore, be expected that a cycle may ensue where children use these means to seek attention and parents dismissing it as a natural reaction to a strenuous family environment.

**Summary**

This chapter highlighted part of the general family psychology theory and literature on stepfamilies and stepchildren. It elaborates on the different family psychology approaches and the research findings that different studies have provided. This
especially served to highlight the function of family in meeting human needs, how this system works in meeting these needs and how stepfamilies, with their different subsystems, function or show dysfunction.

Stepfamilies are seen to function differently from nuclear and other traditional family structures. As the literature suggests, this lack of tradition sets a stage for structural challenges with stepfamilies. Different roles are difficult to negotiate in stepfamilies due to absence of cultural norms and prescripts that people ordinarily rely on to define self and others in familial relationships.

These roles are especially difficult to negotiate for stepchildren and stepparents alike. This results in generally adverse experiences for stepchildren. Their difficulty with negotiating their complex role results in them generally presenting with problematic behaviour and painful emotional experiences.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the research technical aspects of the study. It covers the research design, sampling methods, data collection, data analysis, the research procedure, the aim of the study and the ethical considerations.

3.1.1. Design

The qualitative research design was preferred for the study. The qualitative approach to research concerned itself with deeper understanding of a studied phenomenon not generalisation of research findings. The study of experiences concerns itself with subjectivities. Subjectivities are better understood in depth rather than statistically.

According to Hallett (2003), Leedy (1997) delineates qualitative approach as the approach whose main aim is to describe, explicate and explore a phenomenon under investigation. In this approach inductive reasoning is viewed as significant. Insights are drawn from patterns of data. The participant perspective is viewed as supreme. To fully appreciate experience, it is important to understand perspective to be at least a reality.

Hallett (2003) adds that in qualitative research the design of the study is unique and develops throughout the study. This feature sheds light into the flexibility of the inquiry in qualitative studies. The study can be expected to extend from one question from which further extrapolation develops. The participants are normally expected to respond to a few questions at most from which an extensive amount of data is collected.

Hallett (2003) asserts that through this approach, research data is interpreted by drawing themes from the raw data. The themes drawn are presented as transcripts or quotes from the responses. The themes drawn pertain specifically to experience,
how the phenomenon is experienced. The researcher has an obligation to resist the temptation of including other interesting phenomena as part of the themes. Hallett (2003) reiterates the importance of social context in understanding the multiverses of different participants and what particular behaviours exhibited means in that context. This can prove to be a difficult task as the researcher is to an extent embedded in the same context as the participants. The culture that provides discourses that the participants use to construct meaning of their existence is the same culture that affects the researcher. This, therefore, means the researcher has to take heed that he does not allow this embeddedness to disallow him an opportunity to make sense of the data.

Siyothula (2004) is of the view that to build theory, the researchers conducting qualitative research need only to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The phenomenon also needs to be clearly understood. Furthermore, qualitative research targets feelings, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes. Thus, the human psyche is believed to be a composite of such attributes which it uses to construct meaning of the universe.

Therefore, this study was designed to be limited to the depth of subjectivities of stepchildren. The target was their perceptions, beliefs, feelings and attitudes in relation to their experiences of being stepchildren. This required the researcher to exercise flexibility in his enquiry to get to this end. The themes drawn from the inquiry did not gain or lose value because of repetition by participants. It was their qualitative value that rendered them useful.

3.2. Sampling methods

Snowballing sampling was used for the purposes of this study. This was due to a possible challenge in getting participants. The topic was sensitive. It could have, therefore, triggered unfinished emotional businesses. This could have led to people hesitating to participate. The sample comprised young adults that were stepchildren
within the age range of 18-25. The sample consisted of five male and five female students from the University of Zululand.

3.3. Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Open-ended questions were asked about how the participants experienced their families in order to allow for free description of experiences. Focus groups were also used to further make sense of the experiences in a shared space amongst the former stepchildren.

- Interviews

Interviews and focus groups are the most commonly used qualitative data collection methods (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). Coenen, Stamm, Stucki and Cieza (2012) found focus groups to be more time consuming than interviews. However, they concede that the two do not always serve the same purpose. Interviews are a powerful qualitative research method for data collection because they allow for rich description of the phenomena under investigation. They also allow for clarity seeking questions.

Semi-structured interviews were found to be relatively more effective in eliciting experiences and meanings attributed to them by participants (Tong, Sainsbury & Craig, 2007). This ensures that the research question is addressed while it allows enough flexibility to explore depth. The interviewer can rephrase his or her question for clarity. The interviewee can also respond directed by his or her unique experiences and not by the interviewer’s prescripts. Ogden and Cornwell (2010) found open-ended questions to be predictive of rich descriptions of studied phenomena.

- Focus Groups

Focus groups were also used to gather information from participants about their experiences from a collective position. The main reason for this was to gather how the participants co-construct the meanings of their existence. This gave ideas about how step-relationships and stepfamilies were experienced by the participants in their
context. Focus groups were also seen as complementary to the interviews because they helped validate the data collected through individual interviews.

In a focus group, participants gather in a small group to discuss a certain phenomenon with the guidance of a facilitator (Wibeck, Dahlgren & Oberg, 2007). Cyr (2016) explains that focus groups work at three levels in data collection, individual, group and interactional. Focus groups also reveal the relationships among these three levels of analysis. Thomas (2017) found focus groups to be an effective tool for data collection with a collectivist population. These are some of the reasons why focus groups were seen as an advantageous addition to individual interviews as a data collection method.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clark (2006) was used to analyse the participants’ responses. Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes relating to experiences of growing up as a stepchild and were analysed in the following fashion as described by Braun and Clark (2006):

- Familiarising oneself with the data,
- Generation of initial codes,
- Searching for themes,
- Reviewing themes,
- Defining and naming themes and
- Producing the report

3.5. Aim of the study

The aim of the study was:

- To explore the experiences of growing up as a stepchild for young adults at university level.

The objective of the study was:
- To describe the experiences of growing up as a stepchild for young adults at university level and coming up with a possible solution informed by the investigation.

3.6. Research Procedure

Posters were put up on the main campus of the University of Zululand inviting prospective participants to participate in the study. The researcher's contact details were displayed for the prospective participants who wanted to volunteer their participation in the study. Thirteen prospective participants called, one of whom was not a stepchild. The first ten prospective participants that met the criteria were selected and the last two were turned down.

Appointments were booked in the library seminar rooms for individual interviews. This is where the focus group was also undertaken. A recording device was used to record the interviews of all ten participants and the focus group interactions. The participants were provided with Informed Consent forms to sign. The content of the forms was explained before the forms were signed.

During the individual interviews, the participants were asked to describe their experiences. This was followed by follow-up questions concerning meanings of descriptions or expressions used. This was all recorded. The participants were subsequently invited to the focus group.

Before the resumption of the focus group, the researcher welcomed the participants. An icebreaker was used to get all the participants relatively comfortable with each other and ready to participate. The researcher asked the participants to briefly introduce the kinds of families they were coming from. The researcher explained the distinction between an individual interview with him and a discussion among the participants (focus group). This was to clarify why the subject of the focus group would be similar to that of the individual interviews. The participants were informed that they would be discussing their experiences amongst themselves. It was explained that the session would be recorded and that the researcher would, where
necessary, intervene in the discussion. The discussion began with a question about what it was like for each participant to be a stepchild. The discussion ensued. However, some participants were reluctant to self-disclose in the presence of others. This was overcome as soon as they observed other participants self-disclose.

3.7. Ethical considerations

The researcher recognises his responsibility to abide by the principles as set out in the University's policies which dictate that he behaves ethically throughout his research project. Therefore, the following ethical issues were observed:

- The participants were informed about the purpose of the study.
- The participants' information was kept confidential and the findings were reported anonymously.
- Informed consent to participate was obtained from the participants.
- The participants were informed of their right to withdraw their participation at any stage of the study and that the withdrawal would have no consequences.
- The rights of the participants are respected.
- If or when debriefing was indicated, it would be provided at the cost of the researcher outside of the university to a place preferred by the respondent.
- The research was conducted by the researcher with the assistance of his supervisor.
- Work by others was duly recognised through correct referencing.

Summary

This chapter served to discuss the procedural and research technical aspects of the study. It looks at literature concerning the research approach used in this study. The next chapter focuses on the results and the discussion thereof.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the responses of the research participants. They are responses to the question to describe the experiences of growing up as a stepchild. Themes were drawn from individual responses. Common themes were drawn from the individual themes. They will be discussed in-depth to give insight into the experiences.

4.2. Qualitative Data

Presented below are verbatim responses of the research participants. The emerging themes follow each of the participants’ responses. Common themes from the emerging themes are listed, thereafter.

Protocol 1
Black, female, SiSwati speaking, 21 years old,  
Themes emerging  
Good relationship with stepfather  
Stepfather avoids being firm with stepdaughter  
Confusion about who to ask for favours  
Good relationship with step sister  
Strained relationship with biological mother  
Mother against stepsister relationship  
Stepparent uncomfortable with talk about the other family

Protocol 2  
Black, female, 21 year old, isiZulu  
Emerging themes  
Controlling stepmother  
Poisoned by stepmother  
Stepmother annoyed by stepchild’s relationship with her half-siblings
Meaning—why do people behave the way they do?
Feeling left out in family relations
Blaming the biological parent for being the other child

Protocol 3
Black, male, siSwati speaking, 23 year old
Emerging themes
Favouritism
Good relationship with stepmother
Stepmother offers financial support

Protocol 4
Black, male, isiXhosa speaking, 25 year old
Emerging themes
Terrible experience
Empty space for father
Lack of support from stepfather
Strained relationship with stepfather
Blame on biological mother for son’s behaviour
Stepfather fails to treat him as his
Discrimination, oppression, cultural insensitivity, disrespect
Lack of financial support from stepfather
Stuck between the two fathers

Protocol 5
Black, female, isiZulu speaking, 21 year old
Emerging themes
Contentment
Stepfather experienced as the absent biological father
Loyalty to biological parents during family schism

Protocol 6
Black, male, isiZulu speaking, 24 years old
Emerging themes
Hard to be a stepchild
Feeling like you do not belong
Ostracised
Discriminated to inferiority
Feeling unaccepted
Feeling oppressed

Protocol 7
Black, Female, IsiXhosa speaking, 24 years old
Emerging themes
Conditional acceptance
Initial unacceptance which may have continued
Injustice – punishment for her father’s sins
Denial of difference between a stepfamily and a nuclear family
Comparison between biological and stepparent

Protocol 8
Black, male, IsiZulu speaking, 23 years old
Emerging themes
Initial idealisation of father
Anger at absent father
Distrust of stepmother
Anxiety about stepmother’s true intentions or feelings
Comparison between self and half siblings
Conditional acceptance

Protocol 9
Black, male, IsiZulu speaking, 23 years old
Emerging themes
Comparison of biological parent and stepparent
Biological parent colluding with stepparent
Disengaging/distancing from family and extended family providing refuge
Evil stepmother phenomenon
Protocol 10
Black, female, IsiZulu speaking, 21 years old

Emerging themes
Stepparent to blame for biological parents decisions
Stepparent to blame for stepchild’s troubles
Comparison of treatments by stepparent between that of self and of half siblings

4.3. Common Themes
The following are the common themes that emerged from the research.

● Frustrated belongingness and acceptance needs, being ostracised, discriminated against and disrespected

It can be argued that families exist to meet certain human needs. Some of these needs are the humanistic ones listed above. Under certain familial circumstances these needs may not be met resulting in almost immediate undesirable psychological consequences. These consequences are synonymous with frustration of interpersonal needs. The participants cited problems ranging from not being accepted as part of the family to simply being ostracised.

“Black sheep of the family” are the words that one participant used to describe her feelings of being an outsider in her family. The same participant referred to being “excluded from family things” citing, as reason for this, her struggle to relate well to people she only got to know later in her life. The particular struggle pointed to struggle with integration into a new family system. This integration does not only refer to the family system being adjusted to accommodate a new family member but the new member also being able to adjust to the new environment.

In some cases, in stepfamilies, it can be questioned overtly whether one belongs to that family. Clan-based patriarchal family values seem to drive this particular stepfamily struggle. A male participant claimed he was ostracised by his family because he could not carry his stepfather’s clan-name. Due to this, it was generally believed that he did not belong to that family even though his mother was married into it.

A different male participant did not necessarily refer to being considered an outsider. However, he did point to injustice in terms of treatment as an insider. He claimed “there is no equality when you grow up in this family with a stepfather” referring to equality to his stepsiblings. This leaves a situation perhaps where one questions the
entirety of his belongingness with a presumption that those who “belong more” get better treatment than those who do not.

“Discrimination” was used to refer to circumstances where stepchildren’s experience of being set aside as being different and getting inferior treatment.

Frustrated humanistic needs result in unpleasant psychological experience. Aggression is one way that these frustrations are expressed. Aggression, which can be directed inward or towards others, is both interpersonally and intra-personally destructive. The Fairbairnian perspective on aggression holds that it is an experience that resides as potential in psychic life and is activated by unpleasant interpersonal experiences (St. Claire, 2003). Therefore, it can be expected that part of what the participants did not articulate is this aggression which could underlie their experiences.

Apart from the Fairbairnian psychoanalytic perspective, there is a perspective that purports to account for experience subsequent to frustrated humanistic needs (St. Claire, 2003). The humanistic perspective holds that when there are disruptions to the natural process of self actualisation, psychache results. According to this perspective, good fulfilling relational life is a prerequisite to self actualisation. When this cannot be attained, psychological life loses its spontaneous ability to self actualise.

If people grow in contact with other people (Rogers, 1957), and that growth happens where there is unconditional positive regard (Bhanji, 2013), then the psychological or emotional development of these stepchildren is compromised. Their capacity to discriminate phenomena that facilitate growth from that which does not is compromised. The need for positive regard is so powerful; it overrides the organismic valuing system.

● **Strained relationships and ill-managed conflicts**

Problems in a family system may manifest as strain in relationships between members. In a stepfamily environment, these problematic interactions may be experienced in any subsystem. Closely related to strained relationships is poor conflict management. The above mentioned two qualities of relationships can be seen as direct indices to the nature of interactions between individuals in relationships.
Stepchildren seem to experience relationships between them and their stepparents as defined by authoritarian parental attitudes. They experience this as being due to lack of genuine care and malice. One participant described her stepmother as “controlling and not a nice person”. These are sentiments shared by a male participant who felt that his stepfather was reluctant to take parenting responsibility in his life and that “even if he does, he does it by controlling you and dictating what you can and cannot do”.

Stepparents’ authoritative behaviour tends to be experienced as authoritarian by stepchildren (Sholevar & Schwoeri, 2003). It is also important to note that this is described by both male and female stepchildren referring to same-sex stepparents. The normal dynamics between children and their same sex parents can be difficult to manage within the context step-relationships.

Stepparent-child relationships seemed to be generally strained. Partly what could account for this is that there seems to be a pattern that stepchildren attribute their familial struggles to their stepparents. This could be due to a stereotype that stepparents do not have healthy relationships with their stepchildren (Javangwe, 2006). Stepfamilies are often portrayed in a negative light and stepparent-stepchild relationships are the most frequently portrayed relationships (Leon & Angst, 2005).

It can be argued that a relationship can be considered strained if conflict is not well managed. This makes conflict management crucial in negotiating good relationships. However, a whole is bigger than the sum of its parts. Therefore, to fully appreciate conflict in a family environment, one has to look beyond individual relationships and assess the potential of the whole family to deal with conflict. To this end, object relations theorists advance a concept from object relations, holding environment (St. Claire, 2003).

“Holding environment” places the responsibility for healthy conflict resolution outside individual family subsystems (Stiefel, Harris & Rohan, 1998). Thus, it takes the whole family to deal with individual conflicts. The family system must be managed in such a manner as to allow for conflict to play its role without negatively impacting family members. In any human system, absence of conflict in a space inhabited by a
number of individuals means it is internalised by one member. That member may experience psychological pain due to the internal conflict. Unresolved conflict results in such phenomena as projection and projective identification. Projection and projective identification maintain and exacerbate interpersonal conflict. Thus, partly the strain experienced by stepchildren is a direct consequence of unresolved conflict.

- **Parents against Good Sibling Relationships**
  Sometimes in a stepfamily environment, good sibling relationships are discouraged especially amongst half-siblings or stepsiblings. Stepsiblings or half siblings find themselves having to protect their relationships from at least one of their parents. One participant reported that “So me and my sister are very close. I try by all means that my mom does not break that spirit”. The other participant put it this way: “…I got closer to my half brothers and sisters and that made her angry…” For any subsystem to function properly in a family system, it needs to be supported by the whole system. In this case, the sibling subsystem is compromised.

Parents hold the power of authority in families. This power is both scientifically and culturally validated. Stepparents are no exception to this norm as their legitimate place in families is understood to be that of authority even in the face of defiance. This, therefore, means that parents’ encouragement or discouragement of good relationships can influence the nature of relationships in a stepfamily.

Sibling relationships are central to psychological health. Disruptions in the development of these relationships may result in struggle in coping with peer relationships outside the family structure. Thus, stepchildren seem to be at a disadvantage when it comes to dealing with peer relationships.

Parents could communicate their dissatisfaction with the introduction of stepchild as a family member through encouraging conflict between siblings. This could be a form of triangulation (Brown, 1999).
•Role Confusion and Uncertainty

The stepfamily has been considered by some, the family structure that is different to the natural. This may not be a valid statement as it is debatable whether there is a natural family structure or not. However, the discourse of the abnormal stepfamily permeates society and may be presumed real even in societies other than those of the western world. This assumption sets a stage for a situation where culture is seen as impotent in clarifying roles in a stepfamily (Suanet, Van Der Pas & Van Tilburg, 2013). Stepfamily members find themselves having to deal with role confusion.

The problems that the participants in the study had to deal with ranged from questioning whether they could legitimately ask for help from their biological parents to their stepparents avoiding responsibility as far as they were concerned. One participant feared that his biological mother would be misunderstood as giving him an unfair advantage if he asked for anything from her. For him this was because his biological mother would be accused of abusing his stepfather’s money to assist her “favorite”.

For one female participant the dilemma was such that she felt that her parents communicated their disapproval of her requests by speaking in a manner that she found confusing. She argued that her stepfather avoided “such things as saying no to me” and would consult her biological mother whenever she needed approval to do something. For this participant the role confusion resulted in uncertainty.

The above mentioned uncertainty may be experience shared by other members of the stepfamily. Uncertainty results when roles are not clarified (Vetere, 2001). It does not only have implications for communication but it also causes anxiety. For example, it should be clarified who a child can communicate certain needs to or who he or she should not.

•Conditional Acceptance into the Family

There seems to be a general sense that in stepfamilies, stepchildren may only be accepted if they conduct themselves in a certain way. It seems to be the case that for stepchildren, as they experience it, a stepfamily is an environment where they are less equal than their half-sibling and stepsibling counterparts.
One participant described her experience of having to take caution to not make a mistake as follows: “I feel like if I make a mistake, I will be kicked out”. It has been explained how conditional acceptance can be damaging and how it impacts on a family environment. Unconditional positive regard makes family environment healthy and encouraging of development.

Stepchildren experience this state of affairs as alienating in that they have to worry about how an undesirable side to them may jeopardise their relationships. I get along with my half siblings but I wonder if we would get along if I were to start drinking again. The experience described by this participant gives insight into how one can be in a state of anxiety owing to an unfulfilled need to belong.

It is important to note that feeling accepted conditionally may be an individual experience that is not necessarily derived from real non-acceptance. However, step-relationships appear to not be automatic relationships but rather to take effort. Most stepchildren consider their stepparents to be part of their family with reasons (Lambert, 2010). Therefore, stepchildren may not see certain behaviours that may give them reasons to feel accepted.

**Denial of the Differences between Stepfamily and Nuclear Family**

Some of the problems and complications experienced by stepchildren in stepfamilies may be due to a tendency not to recognise the unique nature of a stepfamily (Henggeler & Bordium, 1990). This results in a situation where unfair comparisons are made and expectations unmet. It has been explained how the denial of the differences between the two kinds of families may result in lack of fulfilling family experience.

One participant referred to her stepmother as her second mother. This shows an attitude that would not be tolerant to any difference in terms of treatment between her and her half siblings. It can be argued that treatment cannot be the same, no matter how much the stepmother and her stepchild try to make it. This, therefore, leads to a situation where both parties are set up for disappointment.

“My stepmother has never treated any of her kids like she treated me”. These were the sentiments of one participant who also did not appreciate that a stepfamily is different and so are relationships within it.
Henggeler and Borduin (1990) attribute dysfunction in stepfamilies to denial. Acknowledging the difference of stepfamilies has many implications. These include the ability to judge familial relationships without expecting nuclear family dynamic to play out.

**The Evil Stepparent Phenomenon**

It can be argued that central to the stepchild predicament is the notion that a stepparent can only be abusive towards his or her stepchild, the perception that he or she is unable to love his or her stepchild (Javangwe, 2006). Most of the participants, in describing their experiences, made reference to the stepparent-stepchild relationship as though it was the only defining relationship for their experiences. This may reflect one of two things. It may be that their stepparents are that central to their experiences or it can be that they are conditioned to understand their familial world like that. The stepparent-stepchild dyad has been seen as a central relationship in deciding the functionality of a stepfamily (Schrodt, 2006).

The latter can be seen in the dichotomy where the biological mother is described as almost being perfect and the stepmother entirely bad. “My (biological) mother would feel for me. My stepmother does not care”. It can be argued that this way of thinking may diminish any good qualities the stepparent may possess or any help she may extend.

The dichotomy can also be seen where the biological parent is freed of all responsibility concerning decisions where the stepchild is involved. “She (stepmother) is the reason my father sent me to boarding school”. Here it is clear that the feelings of abandonment that are sometimes experienced by children who attend boarding school are attributed to the stepparent.
Focus Group Common Themes
Focus group themes also emerged and presented below.

● **Frustrated belongingness needs**
As emerged in the individual interviews, it appeared to be a shared experience among the participants to not feel like they were part of their families.

● **Expectation to treat stepparent like a biological parent**
It appeared that stepchildren were expected to behave as though they belonged in a nuclear family. Stepfamily denialism appeared to be a common approach to stepfamily life. It has long been recognised within family studies that some of the challenges stepfamilies face are due to denial of their special circumstances and the tendency to treat them as though they were nuclear families (Henggeler&Bordium, 1990). It is owing to this that Adler-baeder and Higginbotham (2004) recommend that stepfamilies adopt a realistic approach in dealing with their challenges.

● **Feeling monitored by family**
The focus group participants also felt like they were being monitored by other family members in terms of their treatment of stepparent, stepsibling(s) or halvesibling(s). This can be a function of role confusion where one is uncertain about their performance of their family role. This can lead to projection of their uncertainty. Structural dilemmas are probably some of the most critical issues to negotiate within stepfamilies. Suanet, Van Der Pas and Van Tilburg (2013) explain how stepchildren may struggle with belongingness and negotiating their role within the family. It can therefore be expected that this would result in self-consciousness and feeling monitored.

● **Interest in your wellbeing by community**
Communities seem to feel a responsibility to protect stepchildren. This stance is not necessarily problematic. However, communities’ interest in the wellbeing of stepchildren seems to arouse suspicion in stepchildren and an expectation of victimisation. Communal involvement seems to be premised on an assumption that
stepchildren are victimised by their stepparent. This seems to turn a good concern into a detrimental one.

It is not uncommon for communities to evaluate and adopt interventions based on stereotypes. It is, therefore, not surprising that the communal interventions in this case are based on the understanding of a linear relationship between stepparent and stepchild, with the stepparent single-handedly managing and abusive relationship between the two. If the way stepfamilies, and the relationships therein, are portrayed by the media affects how they are viewed by society (Leon & Angst, 2005), it can be expected that the images drawn by the media will affect the stepfamilies. This explains the communities’ interests in intervening by protecting the stepchildren. However, this has the effect of affecting the stepchildren’s expectations of stepfamily life.

● Uncertainty about stepparent’s love

For stepchildren, it seems to be difficult to be sure of stepparental love as the stepparent-stepchild relationship comes only secondarily to the stepcouple relationship. This is uncertainty that stepchildren do not seem to tolerate well. Widely, stepchild experience has been attributed to the behaviour of the stepparent. This results in a situation where there is too much investment in the stepparent-stepchild relationship, resulting in too much anxiety surrounding this relationship. Anxiety is often associated with intolerance of uncertainty. Stepparents are perceived to be unable to love their stepchildren (Javangwe, 2006). The stepparent-stepchild relationship is so significant in a stepfamily that it has been seen to be one relationship that can compromise that functioning of the marital dyad (Adler-baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). It has also been found that how stepparents are perceived by stepchildren depends on this relationship (Jensen & Howard, 2015). Therefore, when stepchildren are uncertain about their stepparents’ love, this may affect the relationship between the stepparent and the stepchild. This relationship may in turn affect the remarriage or the marital dyad in a stepfamily.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction
This chapter focuses on the analysis and the synthesis of the findings of the study. Stepfamilies are part of the norm in contemporary society. This fact is a consequence of different circumstances under which families are formed and changes in societal values which promote such decisions as divorce and cohabitation as viable options in dealing with relationships. This gives impetus for exploration of this facet of family life. Subsequently, family scholars have offered insights into the functioning of stepfamilies.

The stepchild, which is the focus of the study, is seen as the subject in stepfamilies that can both benefit or suffer from the stepfamily environment depending on circumstances. It has been theorised that stepchildren may benefit from a second income and a second parent in a household. However, studies tend to look at disadvantages of stepfamily life than the more positive side to them.
To, among other things, avoid this bias towards negativity, in the study the qualitative approach was employed to study the experience of a stepchild. The qualitative approach allowed for a description of the experience from the participant’s reference point. It also accommodated the qualities that characterise experience; contradictions and obscurity. However, the results reflected the aforementioned bias.

5.2. Conclusion
Common themes among participants showed a general frustration of humanistic needs. The frustration of these needs makes some of the stepfamily environments necessarily dehumanising. In fact, unconditional positive regard is not encouraged in such environment (Bhanji, 2013). Strained relationships were also found to be shared by the participants. Some parents were found to not be supportive and sabotaging in their approach to sibling relationships. This is seen to result from triangulation (1999). Role confusion was one of the challenges that the study managed to unearth. It is affects clarity as to who one is in a family or what his or her role is (Suanet, Van Der Pas & Van Tilburg, 2013). Stepchildren experienced their
families to only accept them conditionally which means they did not experience unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957). The study also found that the differences between stepfamilies and nuclear families were generally denied. This denial results in role confusion (Henggeler & Bordium, 1990). Stepparents were generally viewed stereotypically as the members around whom adverse stepchild experiences were centred. Stepchildren were expected to treat their stepparent like their biological parent. They felt their behaviour was monitored by their families. There was concerning interest in their wellbeing by their communities. Stepchildren experienced uncertainty about their stepparents’ love.

The findings of the study revealed both disturbing experiences and problematic stepfamily dynamics that compromised the stepchildren. These stepfamily dynamics appeared to be involved with the experiences the stepchildren reported in the study. Therefore, the findings and their implications can best be understood both structurally and experientially. Thus, though the experiences of stepchildren need to be honoured as such, the structural elements alluded to in their descriptions of their experiences are critical in understanding their experiences.

The findings of the study generally concurred with the findings explored in the literature review. However, there were a few peculiarities that could be accounted for by the context that the in which the study was conducted. Thus, while most of the studies explored in chapter 2 were conducted in the Western world, some of the results may be understood through the prism of the African culture. For instance, it is a normal tendency within the African context for members of a community to be involved with each and every individual within that community.

However, generally, it is found that stepchildren in the study shared their experiences with other stepchildren elsewhere in the world. This necessarily implies that interventions that have been found to be useful elsewhere in the world may be tested within the study’s context. Thus, if the dynamics experienced by stepchildren within the study’s context are similar to other contexts, it can be useful to explore if interventions used in those context may not work within the context of the study.
Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Stepfamilies be equipped with functional conflict resolution strategies
- Egalitarianism be promoted and open communication be encouraged between different generations
- Roles be clearly defined
- It be recognised that the stepparent-child relationship is part of the bigger family system and therefore cannot be understood in isolation
- That good relationships be actively rewarded and not punished
- Stepfamilies be taught about acceptance of their particular nature and how to work with that
- Stepchildren be taught how to own their fears and not attribute them to other people
- Stepfamilies be educated on how to take in communities’ feedback without allowing the destructive elements of it to ruin their familial relationships
- Studies be conducted that explore stepfamily interventions and their usefulness within the South African context.

The limitations of this study are as follows:

- The study was limited to a student population and the results can be viewed to represent student intersubjectivity of stepchildren
- A small sample was used for qualitative research purposes and, therefore, generalisations may not be made about the larger community of stepchildren
- The participants narrated their stories in retrospect. Perhaps richer narratives could be obtained from children who experience stepchildhood.
References


Research Participants’ Information Letter

Dear Potential Research Participant

I am a student engaged in my Masters of Arts degree. As part of the academic programme I am engaged in, I am conducting research. The aim of the study is to explore the experiences of growing up as a stepchild. I ask that you partake in this endeavour by becoming a research participant.

Should you wish to honour this request, please be aware of the following information about your identity will be kept confidential and the research findings will be reported anonymously. You have a right to withdraw your participation at any stage of the study without any consequences.

I hope you give consideration to my request as you will contribute towards a better understanding of stepchildren.

Yours Faithfully

___________________

Unathi S. P. Mboniswa

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS’ INFORMATION LETTER
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PLAN

Gender:  
Age:  
Home Language:  
Race:  

How many are you at home?  
How many stepchildren are there at home?  
Are both your biological parents alive?  
Do you have a stepmother or a stepfather at present?  
Do you have half-siblings? If so, how many are they?  
For how long have you stayed with your stepmother/stepfather?  
Under what circumstances did you become a stepchild? Please explain briefly.  
Please reflect on and describe your experiences of growing up as a stepchild.  
Do you believe that the experiences you have described above impact in any way on your relationship with your stepparent? If so, how?  
Thank you for your participation in this study!