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# An Exploration of Stepfamily Experiences of Young People in Ireland.

Audrey McGee

*Dublin Institute of Technology, [audrey.mcgee@dit.ie](mailto:audrey.mcgee@dit.ie)*

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An Exploration of Stepfamily Experiences of Young People in Ireland.

Audrey McGee.

Submitted to the Department of Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirement leading to the award of the Masters of Arts in Child, Family and Community Studies.

Supervisor: Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny

## Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assignment on the programme of study leading to the award of Master of Arts in Child Family and Community Studies, is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic purpose, other than the partial fulfilment of that stated above.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Word count: 16,205

## Abstract

This qualitative research study conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the stepfamily experiences of ten individuals, aged eighteen to twenty four years. The findings indicated that the stepfamily brought challenges and a range of benefits to the participants' life experiences. The key difficulties pertained to issues regarding conflict, lack of communication and complex challenges. The cited benefits of stepfamily experiences included improved financial resources, an additional parental figure, a sense of stability, opportunities for personal growth and the gaining of additional siblings. One significant finding of the study was the positive enduring bonds that some individuals made with stepparents and stepsiblings. The findings also highlighted that participants identified a lack of institutional support and acknowledgement of the stepfamily in Ireland. This study examined two stepfamily theoretical models, in terms of their respective application to the findings of this research study. Although there were useful aspects to both models, neither one was considered comprehensive enough to assist in the analysis of the findings of this study. It was concluded that stepfamily research needs to be further developed, both theoretically and empirically. It was also recommended that policies and practices be put in place, in order to support stepfamily members to manage the complexities and challenges of the stepfamily system.

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In memory of my father, who inspired resilience and diligence. I hope that I did him proud.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Aims and Objectives of Study

The main objective of this study is to explore the stepfamily experiences of young people.

Key research questions include:

- What experiences do young people encounter in the stepfamily?
- What is the quality of relationships with other stepfamily members?
- Are there perceived challenges to stepfamily life?
- Are there perceived benefits to the stepfamily system?
- What factors contribute to positive and negative stepfamily experiences?

## 1.2 The Study

The study adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with ten young people who had experience of living in a stepfamily. The participants were students of the Dublin Institute of Technology. They were asked questions which covered the key research questions outlined above.

## 1.3 The Stepfamily

The term *stepfamily* originated from the Anglo-Saxon word 'Steop' meaning to bereave or to make orphan (Bray & Berger, 1992). The term was applied to children whose parents had died. Contemporary stepfamilies differ from traditional stepfamilies as they are more commonly formed subsequent to a divorce, separation or unmarried motherhood (Hetherington, 1999; Sage, 2007).

Increasingly the term *blended* is applied to stepfamilies (Gonzales, 2009). However some writers, particularly in the United States context, disapprove of the usage of this term. Wilkes Karraker and Grochowski (2006) contend that the word blended promotes unrealistic expectations, which can inhibit successful adaption to the changes that stepfamilies are faced with. Therapists and researchers propose the view that when stepfamilies try to blend; they are often likely to fail (National Resource Center, 2012).

Pryor and Rodgers (2001) suggest that one characteristic of stepfamilies that is particularly variable, is the configuration of siblings both within and outside the household. A stepfamily

might involve two remarried partners, both with children or even additional children from other relationships (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995). These same partners might have their own biological child, resulting in a *yours, mine and ours* situation (Noller & Fitzpatrick 1993, p.59). Many stepchildren can be fulltime or part-time members of the household, as they move between two stepfamily households, which were formed as a result of both their parents establishing new relationships. Some have half sibling relationships and full sibling relationships, of a wide variety of ages (De'Ath, 1992). Given the afore-mentioned, Pryor and Rodgers (2001) suggest that it is not surprising that there is significant variation in the relatedness, relationships and experiences that young people in stepfamilies have.

#### 1.4 Glossary of Terms

Stepfamily:

*'A stepfamily exists when two adults, one or both of whom already has a child, have formed a new relationship, where the new partner becomes a significant adult and parental figure to their partner's child. Such stepfamilies may arise through cohabitation, marriage or remarriage.'*

*De-facto* stepfamily: is applied to a situation where a parent acquires a new live-in partner.

*De-jure* stepfamily: is formed after remarriage.

(De'Ath, 1992)

#### 1.5 Prevalence of Stepfamilies

Many authors have discussed the pervasiveness of stepfamilies in Western Societies (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2007; Gonzales, 2009; Shalay & Brownlee, 2007; Vangelisti, 2004). According to Sage (2007), arriving at an estimate of the number of stepfamilies is a complex task, as it is contingent upon how the stepfamily is defined. She adds that most figures pertaining to stepfamilies are gross underestimates of the extent to which stepfamily living has permeated society. She suggests that limiting the stepfamily to marriage underestimates the representation of stepfamilies, since cohabitation has become increasingly common across most western societies and this includes the cohabitating stepfamily (Dunn, 2003; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Smock, 2000). Furthermore, writers in many contexts suggest that it is difficult to ascertain an accurate representation of stepfamilies, due to complications with

defining the stepfamily, and measuring stepfamilies across households (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008).

Research in the US, Europe and Australia demonstrates an increase in the rise of the stepfamily system (Sweeney, 2010). In the US, forty-two per cent of adults are found to have a step relationship (Parker, 2011). In Australia it is reported that ten per cent of couple families with children, are stepfamilies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). It is estimated that one in three individuals are involved in some sort of stepfamily in the UK (Hayman, 2005). In Ireland, Lunn & Fahey (2011), estimate that 2.5 per cent of children live in stepfamilies. Comparatively speaking, Ireland's numbers are low; however, given the dramatic increase of the stepfamily in other countries, it is arguable that this family form might continue to rise in Ireland.

Consistently writers contend that, given the fact that stepfamilies have become increasingly ubiquitous, the lack of a coherent body of stepfamily research is puzzling. It has only been in the U.S, that the stepfamily has been a significant sociological focus of interest (Allan, Crowe & Hawker, 2011; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Many writers contend that it is imperative to gain an understanding of the difficulties that stepfamilies face (Dupuis, 2010; Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995; Rigg & Pryor, 2007). De'Ath (1992) refers to the fact that much is unknown about the impact on young people, as they join or leave a stepfamily, or move between two or more households. She adds that the cumulative effects of such transitions and disruptions should to be systematically examined and explicit attention has to be given to the needs of young people growing up in stepfamilies.

## 1.6 Conclusion

Evidently, there is a lot that is unknown about the contemporary stepfamily, despite its prevalence across all industrialised societies. Although there is an acknowledgement of the changing family contexts and familial transitions for young people in Ireland (Daly, 2004; Nixon, 2011), the present study found a dearth of Irish stepfamily research. A research study in the Irish context is important, as Gorrell Barnes (1992, p.39) notes, 'in developing stepfamily research, we need to refrain from abstraction, generalization and the transfer of knowledge from one population to another.'



Thus, the present study sought to address this issue and explore the stepfamily experiences of young people in Ireland. It did not explore the stepfamily from the biological or stepparent's perspective. Its particular focus was the young stepfamily member and his or her view of their stepfamily experience. Although the cohort was of a small size, it was anticipated that the study might assist towards an enhanced understanding of the stepfamily experience of these particular individuals and the key factors which contributed to their experiences.

1.7 The following section presents an outline of the following chapters of this study.

Chapter Two: Presents a literature review of stepfamily research. This chapter introduces the most widely cited theoretical model in stepfamily literature, which is Cherlin's Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution. Another framework is then introduced which has been suggested as an alternative to Cherlin's model. This framework is termed the Multidimensional Cognitive-Developmental Model of Stepfamily Adjustment. This chapter highlights that there is consistent criticism of stepfamily research, particularly from a theoretical perspective.

Chapter Three: In this chapter, the methodology of the study is presented. The choice of research design is justified, in relation to the research question and objectives. This chapter outlines the research instrument, sample, procedure, data analysis and ethical considerations of the present study.

Chapter Four: Presents the key findings of the semi-structured interviews with participants. These findings are presented by themes, which are further divided into sub-themes to categorise key issues which emerged.

Chapter Five: This chapter provides the discussion of the findings of the interviews. Comparisons are drawn between these findings and relevant stepfamily literature. The discussion also considers the application of the two theoretical models presented in Chapter Two, to the findings of the present study.

Chapter Six: Presents a conclusion to the research study. This includes recommendations for further research, policy and practice.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a literature review on the topic of stepfamilies. It begins with a reference to the significance of the family and a brief outline of the developments which have led to the evolution of the contemporary stepfamily. Next, the section considers the main theoretical considerations, which are referred to in stepfamily research. The reader is introduced to the most widely cited model in stepfamily research, Cherlin's 'Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution' (1978). Another model is then presented, which Sage (2007) suggests as a more suitable theoretical alternative to Cherlin's model. This model is termed Fine and Kurdeck's (1994) Multidimensional Cognitive-Developmental Model of Stepfamily Adjustment. This is followed by an outline of the key issues which emerged from a comprehensive review of stepfamily literature.

## 2.2 The Family

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model suggests that a young person's development is shaped by the multiple contexts in which he or she is embedded. This theory proposes that the young person's outcomes are most strongly linked to the micro-system or immediate contexts within which the youth spends time on a regular basis (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006). Many authors note, that of all the micro systems, the family is the most significant (Nixon, 2010; Parke & Buriel, 2008).

McKie and Callan (2001) refer to the family, as the oldest and most enduring form of social grouping, which provides a sense of stability to the individual and a context for their survival, sustenance and long-term development. The authors add that the family directly or indirectly influences almost every waking moment of our lives. Allan and Crow (2001) refer to the family, as the primary context which provides the reference point for an individual's life and his or her sense of self. It is within the family that the individual is raised and socialized and establishes enduring intimate relationships which contribute to a sense of well-being and mental health (Thompson & Amato, 1999). Thus, the family is indisputably positioned as the most significant structure in a young person's life (Nixon, 2012).

### 2.3 Changing Family Contexts

In recent decades, changing patterns of partnership and parenthood have fundamentally reshaped families across many industrialised countries. Sun and Li (2011) discuss how changing rates in marriage, divorce and remarriage have dramatically altered the living arrangements of American children. The authors discuss how these developments have led to two general trends. Firstly, children's living arrangements have become increasingly diversified contexts (Brown, 2010), with a decreasing number of children living with both biological parents. Secondly young people are more likely than ever to experience structural transitions in their family during their childhood (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). These developments do not pertain to the American context alone, but are replicated across all minority societies, as families are formed, dissolved and re-configured (McKie & Callan, 2012) and non-traditional, diverse family living arrangements are increasingly becoming the exception, rather than the rule (Daly, 2004; Gonzales, 2009).

The contemporary stepfamily represents one of these diverse family structures. In recent decades, this family structure has pervaded all minority societies, due to the rise of divorce, separation and unmarried parenthood (Gonzales, 2009; Shalay & Brownlee, 2007; Vangelisti, 2004).

More recently contemporary family scholars have questioned the stepfamily system's impact upon the young person, referring to constructs such as processes, meanings and outcomes (Brown, 2010). Recent constructions of Bronfenbrenner's bio ecological model have concentrated on *proximal processes*, which refer to the enduring interactions between the individual and their context. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) Examples of *proximal processes* include discipline encounters between parents and their children and it is these typical interactions that constitute parent-child relationships. Consistently it is claimed that these within-family processes are crucial to the well-being and life experiences of young people (Nixon, 2012).

This present study sought to explore how the stepfamily and the proximal processes within this family structure, impact upon the young person. The following sections will highlight the key points that emerged from a comprehensive stepfamily literature review.

## 2.4 Theoretical Considerations

### 2.4.1 Criticism of Stepfamily Research

Consistently writers have criticised the lack of progress made to date, in terms of stepfamily research. Ganong and Coleman (1994) refer to stepfamily research as atheoretical and suggest that an absence of theories make it difficult to enhance an understanding of the stepfamily. Coleman, Ganong and Fine (2000) suggest that there is scope for a more theoretical orientation to stepfamily research. Similarly, Robila and Taylor (2001) propose the view that step scholars should utilize a broader spectrum of theoretical approaches to evolve our understanding in this field of study.

### 2.4.2 Family Systems Theory

Pryor and Rodgers (2001) present the view that Family Systems Theory has been widely used as a framework for thinking about stepfamily relationships, as it offers a means of conceptualizing the relationship dynamics found in stepfamilies, compared to those in original families. The family systems perspective advocates that each relationship between individuals in the family unit affects and is affected by all other relationships in the family.

### 2.4.3 Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution Hypothesis

According to Allan, Crowe and Hawker, (2011) the most influential hypothesis in stepfamily literature, is Cherlin's, 'Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution' (1978). Cherlin proposes that, due to a lack of institutionalized roles, with regards to the stepfamily, remarriages are a shakier family structure than traditional family forms. He contends that there are few established guidelines, available to families through remarriage, few culturally validated ways to handle the different problems they face, a lack of social regulations and adequate stepfamily models and little institutionalised support for stepfamilies. Cherlin contends that our language, laws and customs do not accommodate stepfamily relationships. Instead each stepfamily has to construct its own ways of ordering relationships within the new family, based principally on normative understandings, which have developed in the context of first-time families.

#### 2.4.4 Criticism of Cherlin's Model

Sage (2007) questions the popularity and endurance of Cherlin's hypothesis, which remains uncontested as a major theoretical guide for the past twenty five years. She suggests that although studies have demonstrated ambiguity in stepfamilies, in terms of confusion regarding the roles of stepfamily members (Fine, Coleman & Ganong, 1998; Marsiglio, 1992), it is uncertain as to whether a lack of clarity has a negative effective on stepfamily relationships. Sage argues that researchers often fail to support or to provide evidence to the contrary. Pryor (2008) contests the relevance of Cherlin's Hypothesis. He suggests that many contemporary family structures, such as cohabitating couples, lack guidelines for family roles and behaviours, and therefore labeling the stepfamily as an *Incomplete Institution* lacks logical reasoning. He adds that it also implies that the stepfamily is somehow inferior and this only serves to stigmatise the stepfamily.

According to Cherlin (1978), stepfamily functioning is reliant upon perceptions and values of broader society and that the non- traditional family is stigmatized. However, Coleman, *et al.*, (2000) suggest that it is unclear as to whether the negative perception of stepfamilies has any effect on the well-being of stepfamily members and there is very little empirical research on this issue. Similarly, Glenn (1994, p.45), argues that concern regarding non-traditional family forms being stigmatized, is frequently overstated and that 'any stigma attention to stepfamilies has declined significantly in recent years and it is unlikely that stigma ranks high among causes of stress and distress of persons in those families.' Empirical research conducted by Grizzle (2012) found no convincing argument for Cherlin's Hypothesis that the difficulties that occur in stepfamilies are due to the incomplete institution of remarriages. He contends that Cherlin's model cannot be embraced with any real confidence and cautions against claiming that difficulties in remarriages derive from institutional sources, rather than internal familial factors.

#### 2.4.5 Multidimensional Cognitive-Developmental Model of Stepfamily Adjustment. (MCDM)

Fine and Kurdeck's (1994) Multidimensional Cognitive-Developmental Model examines the stepfamily as a tiered system, in which there is a continuum of adjustment to the stepfamily

system. This theory has four dimensions, the first of which considers the relations between four units of the stepfather family system; the mother, father, child or stepfather. The two person unit refers to the mother and stepfather marital system. The third unit refers to the mother, stepfather and non-residential father and the fourth tier system refers to all three persons in the three person unit and the non-residential father. The second dimension outlines the dominant cognitions, which are particularly relevant to the stepfamily; perceptions, attributions, expectancies, assumptions and standards. The issue is, to what extent are the perceptions of the family members' cognitions compatible with the cognitions of others in the unit, for example do family members have likeminded expectations of the stepfather's role? (A balanced sub-system). The third dimension describes the adjustment to a stepfamily along a continuum, from maladaptation to adaption. The issue here is the relation between the cognitions and the adjustment. The final level of analysis views the adjustment to a stepfamily process, in terms of four distinct stages; early remarriage (the dating and courtship stages); cohabitation, middle remarriage and late remarriage. The theory proposes that within the developmental stages of stepfamily adjustment, cognitions and adjustment to the stepfamily can change over the life span.

#### 2.4.6 Comments on the MCDM model

Sage (2007) suggests that one significant contribution that this theory offers is that it highlights the multidimensionality of stepfamily life. She suggests that it is surprising that stepfamily research has generally not taken advantage of this framework, offered by Fine and Kurdeck. Although a limitation of this framework is that it considers the stepfather stepfamily only (Fine & Kurdeck, 1994).

#### 2.4.7 The Challenges of Developing a Stepfamily Theory

Coleman *et al.*, (2000) suggest that stepfamily life is particularly intricate and no one *grand theory* has been developed to provide a guiding framework for stepfamily research. They add that even if such a framework was available, the lack of comprehensive data would make testing difficult. In fact, many writers propose the view that stepfamily research is unsatisfactory and empirically weak, in that it provides merely 'snapshots' of stepfamilies and that further long-term research is required to take our thinking forward. Furthermore, it

is claimed that most empirical research has also been limited to one type of stepfamily and one set of stepfamily relationships and that this one model approach is too simplistic and thus inadequate (Allan *et al.*, 2011; Coleman *et al.*, 2000; Sage, 2007).

## 2.5 Difficulties Associated with the Stepfamily

### 2.5.1 Complexity

Consistently writers suggest that there is little that is straightforward about stepfamilies but rather, the modern stepchild arrives into a family form that is inherently complicated (Dupuis, 2010; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). The rearrangement of households, with regards to stepfamilies has the potential to be remarkably complicated, as it forces the establishment of several new relationships along with the renegotiation of existing ones (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Hetherington (1999) and Newman (1999) discuss how stepfamilies are more complicated than first-marriage families, due to the multiple and complex kinship relationships, that constitute a remarried family system.

### 2.5.2 Ambiguity

Due to the various configurations and merging of individuals from previous families, Hayman (2005) likens stepfamily life to living on a sprawling estate. She suggests that stepfamily members can find it difficult to determine the perimeters of their properties or ascertain who belongs to whom and what individuals might mean to each other. Similarly, Wilkes Karraker & Grochowski, (2006) refer to the complexity of *stepfamily maps* which make it difficult for members to conceptualise who is part of their family and who is not. Consistently writers refer to the lack of cultural or legal guidelines for the negotiation of children's relationships with more than two living parents. This leads to ambiguity regarding issues such as the appropriate use of kinship terms, roles of stepparents in children's lives, and the rights and obligations associated with stepfamily membership (Allan, *et al.*, 2011; Cherlin, 1978; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Wilkes Karraker & Grochowski, 2006; Sweeney, 2010).

### 2.5.3 Unique Stressors

Many researchers concur that unique stressors can be attributed to stepfamily development and maintenance (Dupuis, 2010; Hurtwitz, 1997; Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Critical issues that arise include conflict resolution, negative alliances, boundary management, loyalty



conflict, communication issues and relationship difficulties (Gonzales 2009; Freisthler *et al.*, 2003; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Vangelisti, 2004). Fitzpatrick and Vangelisti (1995) note that conflict is intensified in stepfamilies, due to volatile relationships between stepparents and stepchildren, conflict with ex-spouses due to financial or child-rearing issues and conflict between stepparents and non-residential parents. A number of studies have found that difficulties in stepfamilies can be exacerbated, when individuals engage in coalition building where two or more family members join together in alliance against another family member (Afifi, 2008; Baxter, Braithwaite & Bryant, 2006; Koerner, 2003).

#### 2.5.4 Boundary Issues

Newman (1999) discusses how remarriage creates ties that cross traditional household boundaries. Stepfamilies boundaries may be 'biologically, legally and spatially unclear' and individuals may become confused regarding family membership and norms for behaviour (Galvin & Brommel, 1991, p.259). Koerner (2003) explicates that often internal and external boundaries in stepfamilies can become ambiguous, due to young people changing households on a regular basis, to stay with a non-resident parent. He adds that this issue can present challenges for most stepfamilies, as boundaries become blurred, due to the different rules, arrangements and relationships that need to be adapted to in each household. Hence, young people test boundaries, to establish what rules apply, to which relationship. Philipps (1986) discusses how these issues can prove problematic for families, as open permeable boundaries can emerge, through which children are able to enter and exit at will.

#### 2.5.5 Loyalty Conflict

Many authors refer to the construct of loyalty conflict, as a major issue for stepfamily members who struggle with the pushes and pulls of loyalty binds. Often young people feel that a demonstration of care for a stepparent means a betrayal in some way of the non-resident parent (Freisthler, Messick Svare & Harrison-Jay, 2003; Stoll, Arnaut, Fromme, & Felker-Thayer, 2006). Koerner (2003) noted in his research that young stepfamily members refrained from talking to one parent about the other, to avoid upsetting their parents.

### 2.5.6 Communication

Scholars concur that it is through communicative behaviour, that the family system is regulated and maintained (Galvin & Brommel, 1991; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Many writers present the view that in stepfamilies, communication issues are more important than other families, due to the challenges that threaten this family form (Koerner 2003; Vangelisti, 2004). Therefore it is suggested that communication is a key factor in meeting the challenges met by stepfamily members (Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent & Blais, 2004). Vangelisti (2004) notes, that some stepfamilies develop communication patterns that effectively deal with the challenges faced by family members. She adds that this is due to a number of factors, most of which have not been examined as, there is little research which examines communication in stepfamilies.

## 2.6 Stepfamily Relationships

Many researchers have commented on the significance of stepfamily relationships to stepfamily experiences. Researchers suggest that step kin relationships can be comparatively fragile, less cohesive and highly sensitive to stressors (De'Ath, 1992; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001) and that the survival of the remarriage is contingent upon workable step relationships (Adler-Baeder & Higgenbotham, 2004; Bernstein, 2000). In their research, Freisthler et al. (2003) found that stepfamily experiences were more related to the quality of stepfamily relationships, rather than any other factor.

### 2.6.1 Parental Relationships

Various writers have suggested that the step-parent and stepchild relationship is pivotal to the stepchild's wellbeing and perhaps the most complex of all the challenges faced by stepfamily members (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Dunn (2002) suggests that young people have more positive relationships with parents, to whom they are biologically related to, than with stepparents, and children usually have a biological parent of the same sex as the stepparent involved in their lives (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). It is suggested that this is due to the fact that there was no chance to develop bonds in early infancy and childhood, no shared history and no opportunity for mutual growth and adaptation between stepparent and child (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Pryor, 2004). As a result some writers have suggested that stepparents reported a lesser obligation to take care of stepchildren. Aquilino (2005) and

Killan (2004) found that step parents provide less financial assistance to their stepchildren, than to biological or adoptive children.

Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, (1995) suggest that because mothers are most likely to retain physical custody of children, it is frequently the case that the mother-child relationship is very close, sometimes to the point of enmeshment. Thus the introduction of a stepparent is not always welcomed, as it can potentially threaten the biological parent and child's relationship. Many young people can resent the reduced intimacy that they experience in the relationship with their custodial parent, subsequent to their parent's re-partnering (Cartwright & Moore, 2012; Stoll *et al.*, 2006).

In De'Aths (1992) research, the issue of control and discipline caused the most tension and conflict in stepparent-child relationships, as there was a belief that if relationships were not defined by blood, individuals were not entitled to make demands. Positive relationships with stepparents were earned gradually, through respect and understanding and a 'non-interfering' style of management was appreciated by stepchildren (Cartwright, 2005; Ganong, *et al.*, 2011, Moore & Cartwright, 2005; Schrodt, 2006; Schmeckle, 2007).

### 2.6.2 Sibling Relationships

Writers discuss how sibling relationships are characteristic of several features that make them a unique influence upon children's development (Hughes, 2003; McCarthy & Edwards, 2011). Hughes explains that these relationships are diagonal, as opposed to the vertical relationships that children have with parents. Sibling relationships are characterised by a reciprocal mix of sharing and competing, support and rivalry. She adds that typically these relationships are emotionally intense and enduring.

Visher and Visher (2003) suggest that the quality of stepsibling relationships is a powerful predictor of stepfamily experiences. A review of the literature found some conflicting findings in relation to stepsiblings. Ganong and Coleman (1993) found that, when compared to biological or half-siblings, step-siblings fought more. Similarly, writers suggest that stepsibling relationships provide scope for personality clashes, conflicts, rivalry, perceived injustices and other sources of family tension (Dupois, 2010; White & Woollett, 1992) and that young stepfamily members can find it difficult to cope with preferential treatment of

other siblings in the family, such as a biological child of a stepparent (Newman, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

Conversely De'Ath (1992) found that the strength of new relationships formed between kin and stepkin was one of the encouraging factors which emerged from her study of stepfamilies. Stepsiblings often brought a sense of comradeship and a sense of experience for a child's world and that it was rare to find that young people envied or resented another child born to their biological parent and stepparent. Newman (1999) suggests that many stepsiblings adjust very well and bonds and close relationships can develop, especially if there are similarities in age, sex and life experience. Interestingly, Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994) discuss how the mere existence of a blood tie does not necessarily result in individuals thinking of themselves as family. Rather kinship is typically more achieved by establishing a relationship with others, and making repeated connections.

Thus, a conflicting body of research is presented in literature regarding stepsiblings and their role in stepfamily experiences. In fact this is an area that has been identified as requiring further research, as little is known about the ways sibling relationships may affect stepfamily environments and outcomes (Sweeney; 2010).

### 2.6.3 Development of Stepfamily Relationships

Various studies have found that relationships in stepfamilies change over time. These changes are a result of previous, individual and family experiences and development issues within the stepfamily and for the individual (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright & Seymour, 2010). Hetherington (1999) contends that it is imperative to consider the multiple developmental trajectories of relationships in stepfamilies and to also attend to the factors which promote and detract from positive relational development between family members. Given the importance of understanding the processes by which these relationships develop, researchers have commented that remarkably, little research exists on this issue (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; King, 2006).

## 2.7 Perspectives on the Stepfamily

### 2.7.1 The Conservative Perspective

According to Pryor and Rodgers (2001), a conservative perspective on family change has proposed the view that stepfamilies are not good for children. Amato (2005) contends that the transition to a stepfamily can be disruptive for children's development. The comparative instability of stepfamilies and the risk of poor outcomes for young people are stated as reasons why society should be endeavouring to 'halt the growth of stepfamilies' (Popenoe 1994, p.21).

Some writers are critical of the bias towards discussions of negative aspects of stepfamily life and a consideration of the blended family as 'inferior'. They contend that, although it is imperative to acknowledge and examine the difficult aspects of the stepfamily experience, it is also essential to recognise the positive aspects (Moore, Sixsmith & Knowles, 1996; Morris 1992).

### 2.7.2 The Liberal View

Pryor and Rodgers (2001) discuss how the liberal view of the stepfamily considers the restoration of two parents and adequate income levels to formerly lone-parent households, as a positive aspect of stepfamilies. Stepfamilies can help restore economic, social and psychological resources that were strained by a divorce or single parenthood (Jeynes, 1999). These families can become cohesive, supporting and loving environments which can and frequently do nurture young people (Hetherington *et al.*, 1982; White & Woollett, 1992; Zill, 1988). According to White and Woollett (1992) the stepfamily can provide a stimulus for personal growth for family members as opportunities emerge for learning about co-operation, flexibility and sharing. Also individuals can be exposed to positive models of marriage and intimacy, that were not experienced previously (Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 1995).

Pryor & Rodgers (2011) suggest that although the stepfamily can bring challenges that are not present in original families, this does not denote that they fail their members, rather the majority of young people in stepfamilies thrive. Given the afore-mentioned, Crosbie-Burnett (1994) suggests that stepfamily research should move from comparisons between

stepfamilies and alternative family structures, to the identification of family processes that promote healthy stepfamily coping.

## 2.8 Gender and the Stepfamily

At this point it is important to note that a review of stepfamily literature exposed a predominant focus on the stepfather stepfamily, due to the majority of mothers retaining custody of children (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Sage, 2007).

Another important consideration is how gender impacts on the individual's stepfamily experiences. Schmeekle (2007) found that gendered social practices significantly impacted stepfamily relationships. Hetherington (1987) refers to the differences in the emotional experiences of males and females, particularly with regards to close relationships and the gendered management of emotions. Despite the afore-mentioned, gender scholars have conducted very little research into the specific practices that construct stepfamily relationships (Schmeekle, 2007).

## 2.9 Conclusion

This section presented the key constructs which emerged from a review of stepfamily literature. This review exposed the requirement for the theoretical and empirical advancement of stepfamily research. This chapter also illustrated the conservative and the liberal view of the stepfamily. The following chapter will outline the research design for the present study.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the chosen research methodology with regard to the core objectives of the present study. The purpose of this research was to explore stepfamily life from the perspective of the young stepfamily member. The study adopted a qualitative approach to exploring the topic of stepfamilies, using semi-structured interviews with ten participants, aged eighteen to twenty four years of age. The interviewees were students of the Dublin Institute of Technology, who had experiences of living in a stepfamily. The following sections will provide the rationale for the research design, followed by an outline of the sample selection, research instrument, research procedure, ethical issues, and data analysis method.

### 3.2 Research Design

#### 3.2.1 Qualitative Research

The research strategy employed by the researcher should be appropriately aligned to the research question (Silverman, 2010). There are two central traditions applied in social research, which are quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative approaches tend to be associated with large scale studies and these methods seek to measure phenomena, using facts and figures, which are statistically analysed. Alternatively, qualitative research seeks to understand, rather than to measure, to capture reality through the quality and texture of experience, rather than the identification of cause and effect (Denscombe, 2010; Sarantakos 2005; Willig, 2008). The qualitative approach explores the who, why and how, connected to the processes which occur in the daily lives of individuals (Denscombe, 2010; Punch, 2005).

#### 3.2.2 Strengths of Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods have multiple strengths; they illuminate the diverse situations that people find themselves in and provide greater flexibility to achieve a more meaningful conceptualisation of the participant's personal experiences (Sarantakos, 2005). Kvale (2007) notes that qualitative approaches seek to unpick the way that individuals construct their world and what is happening to them.



### 3.2.3 Suitability of Research Design to Research Question

Sweeney (2010) suggests that qualitative studies are immensely valuable to stepfamily research, as they can broaden our understanding of the complex within-family processes and mechanisms in the stepfamily system. In view of the afore-mentioned, a qualitative approach was considered the most appropriately aligned to the research question, which was to explore the experiences of young people who have lived in stepfamilies. This approach suited an exploration of a multi-faceted, complex subject (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001) which required subjectivity and sensitivity to elicit the experiences of a small cohort, in a particular context.

### 3.2.4 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Approach

The principles of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Approach (IPA) formed the foundation for the research strategy. This approach is idiographic, in that it is primarily concerned with how individuals make sense of their life experiences (Denscombe, 2010). It is interested in what happens, when the everyday course of lived experiences takes on a particular significance for the individual, such as a major life transition. Therefore the emphasis is on what *this* experience is like for *this* particular person and this approach seeks to provide an authentic account of the individual's narrative, in a way that is faithful to the original (Denscombe, 2010; Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009).

The second major theoretical axis of this approach is that it is informed by hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. The IPA researcher is engaged in a double hermeneutic, as he or she seeks to make sense of the participant's attempt to make sense of their experience. The only access to the participant's experience is through the participant's account of it (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Denscombe (2010) notes that the interpretive aspect of the IPA accepts that our life experiences inevitably impact upon our interpretation of events, and that the researcher will bring some subjectivity and bias to the study (Roberts-Holmes, 2005). Therefore the researcher plays a key role in the interpretation and analysis of the data (Shaw, 2010).

### 3.3 Research Sample and Selection

#### 3.3.1 Young Peoples' Perspectives

It has been noted that there are few studies which have focused on young peoples' perspectives on their stepfamily experiences (Freisthler, *et al.*, 2003). Rigg and Pryor (2007) suggest that an understanding of what family means to young people is imperative, if we seek to identify how best to nurture them through family transitions and therefore giving a voice to their perspectives is paramount.

#### 3.3.2 Sample

Thus, ascribing to the view that 'young people are the best witnesses to their own experiences' (Robinson, Butler, Scanlon, Douglas & March, 2003), and in keeping with the IPA approach, which views the individual's experience, as best understood by the individual, the researcher chose to interview young people who have lived or are living in a stepfamily situation. Due to time constraints, and the challenges associated with gaining parental consent for children's participation, the study focused on young adults aged eighteen to twenty four years of age. Due to the increasing emergence of the *de facto* (cohabitating) stepfamily (De' Ath, 1992; Sage, 2007), restricting the sample to young people whose parents have remarried might have proven difficult, in terms of access. Sage (2007) contends that similar experiences emerge for individuals in stepfamilies, irrespective of whether these are cohabitating or remarried stepfamilies. Thus, the criterion for sample recruitment required a young person aged eighteen to twenty four years, who had experience of living in a *de jure* or a *de facto* stepfamily.

### 3.4 Recruitment Process

A review of previous research undertaken by students indicated that a considerable length of time was taken to recruit a sample for comparable research studies. Given the aforementioned, the researcher chose to utilize the student e-mail facility of the Dublin Institute of Technology [DIT], in an attempt to recruit a cohort of young people for the sample. Permission was sought from the relevant DIT staff member to email all students of the institution. A draft email presented a brief rationale for the study and an invitation to those

individuals who met the criterion, to contact the researcher. (Refer to Appendix G) This draft email was submitted to the afore-mentioned staff member for approval. Permission was granted and the email was sent to over 20,000 DIT students. There were eighteen replies to the email. Three students expressed an interest in participating but indicated that they were over the age limit for participation. The remainder were contacted over the following weeks and of those, ten were available to participate in the study in the available time frame. The ten comprised of six females and four males.

### 3.5 Research Instrument

Denscombe (2010) advises the researcher, when contemplating a research method to consider its validity and viability. For this study a range of options of qualitative methods were considered, such as interviews, observations and focus groups. The research instrument which was chosen was in-depth, semi-structured interviews for the reasons outlined below.

#### 3.5.1 In-depth Interviews

Denscombe (2010) suggests that interviews are best exploited as a data collection method, when applied to the exploration of a complex subject. Furthermore he suggests that in-depth interviews are particularly appropriate for the collection of sensitive and privileged information, which requires insight into individuals' opinions, emotions and experiences. Furthermore, IPA research is usually conducted by interview with a reasonably small homogenous sample, providing data to enable the researcher to examine convergence and divergence in detail (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

#### 3.5.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews provide for clear issues to be explored but also flexibility to allow individuals to elaborate on points of interest, which reflects the richness and complexity of experiences. These interviews allow the respondent to answer the questions on their own terms, while providing an appropriate level of structure for comparability (May, 2001). Structured interviews may have restricted the emergence of rich, meaningful data which was considered central to the research question and the concept that each individual's experience is unique.

### 3.5.3 Pragmatics

Given the difficulty in recruiting a large sample, coupled with the sensitive nature of the topic, it was considered appropriate to conduct interviews with a small cohort. Furthermore, due to access to students prior to the end of college term and the diverse timetables of students' work commitments, it was considered feasible to work around the researcher's and participant's schedule to meet on a one to one basis for interview (Denscombe, 2010).

Thus In-depth, Semi-Structured Interviews were chosen, as the most suitable research instrument for the present study, in view of the research question. This instrument's validity and its viability were key factors in determining its selection. The interview questions were based on the key constructs that emerged from a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to stepfamilies. The questions covered the areas of family relationships, the difficulties and benefits of stepfamily life and contributory factors to positive and negative stepfamily experiences. (See Appendix C)

### 3.6 Procedure

The interviews were conducted in one of two campuses of the DIT, located on the north and south side of Dublin City. Each participant chose the location and the researcher scheduled the interviews accordingly. Permission was sought to reserve a room in both locations for a week. Each interview was allocated a one hour time period to allow for potential delays. The interviews were digitally recorded and were transcribed verbatim. They lasted forty five minutes on average.

### 3.7 Ethical Issues

Bryman (2012, p. 113) proposes that ethical considerations must not be overlooked, as they directly relate to the integrity of a piece of research and to the disciplines that are involved. Sarantakos (2005) advises the researcher to attend to the fact that qualitative research has the potential to induce negative psychological states. Informed consent is imperative, as participants must understand what is involved, before they make the decision to cooperate (Bryman, 2012; Denscombe, 2010). For the present study the researcher was compliant with the ethical guidelines of the Sociological Association of Ireland and the Dublin Institute of Technology. A detailed information letter clarified the purpose and particulars of the

research study. (See Appendix E) Participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded and would be disposed of immediately post-transcription. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was guaranteed. Interviewees signed a form, which indicated their consent to participate. (Refer to Appendix F) All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the process at any time, without consequence and that they could refuse to answer any of the questions. This study was guided by a strong ethical position, which viewed the individual as the most expert witness to their experience (Robinson *et al.*, 2003), The researcher recognised that her role was to sensitively elucidate this experience, in compliance with the ethical principles, which are of superior consideration than the research itself (Gomm, 2004).

### 3.8 Data analysis

#### 3.8.1 Interpretative analysis

Denscombe (2010) advises the researcher to approach the analysis of qualitative data with attention to detail and rigour. He suggests that with small scale studies, the researcher is the crucial ‘measurement device’ and that data analysis is invariably a product of a process of interpretation, bound up with the self of the researcher. He notes that the researcher could decontextualize the meaning in qualitative data, when findings can be taken out of context. During the data analysis, the researcher was cognisant of the afore-mentioned and sought to be faithful to the original *truth-value* statements of the participants (Edwards, 2004).

#### 3.8.2 Thematic Qualitative Analysis

In this study, repeated readings of the interview transcripts provided a comprehensive analysis for the identification of recurrent themes and sub-themes. This enabled the researcher to identify material from the raw data and demonstrate connections between the research question and findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Colour Coding was employed to order, identify and categorise data (Denscombe, 2010). The findings were presented under the key themes which emerged. The researcher sought to make comparisons and contrasts across the data, which would inform the discussion and recommendations section.

### 3.9 Limitations of Study

The research for the present study was conducted with a small sample. Bryman (2012) identifies a limitation of this approach, is that the findings of a small sample cannot be generalized to the population. The present study did not attempt to generalise its findings, but rather to authenticate its findings according to the participants' statements (Edwards, 2004).

The participants are all third level students, who might have had a more supportive family background. It is possible that a cross section random of young people might have yielded different results. However, given the time constraints and particulars of this study, such an approach was not viable.

It was also recognised that a limitation of this approach involved a reliance on recollected experiences, which can present difficulties such as reliability, recall, distortion and post-event rationalisation (Bryman, 2012). However despite its limitations, retrospectivity can be employed as a valuable, even indispensable research tool, if events, issues, change and complex processes over time are a significant focus of the research (Bryman, 2012; Lewis, 2003; Sarantakos, 2005). As the aim of this research study was to seek participants' reflections on their stepfamily experiences, the retrospective account was considered necessary, in order to provide a sense of process, development and change in relationships and situations, over time.

### 3.10 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodology of this research study in terms of the research question. The IPA approach was presented, as an integral component of the research strategy. Although some limitations of the research approach were acknowledged, its selection was justified, due to the particular strengths of the method and its suitability to the research objectives. An account of the findings will be presented in the following chapter.

## Chapter Four: Findings

## 4.1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This study explored young peoples' experiences of living in a stepfamily. The analysis of the empirical data found key aspects of the stepfamily experience, which held profound significance for the participants. These findings will be presented in this section by themes. The themes, which will now be presented, are stepfamily relationships, dealing with complexities, conflict, communication, benefits of stepfamilies and gender. These themes will be further divided into sub-themes, to outline particular aspects of the themes which emerged from the narratives.

## 4.2 Stepfamily Relationships

Relationships with stepfamily members emerged as the key finding of this study. Participants described how their relationships with family members significantly impacted upon their experiences of stepfamily life. The next section will present the findings of relationships with stepparents, biological parents and siblings in further detail.

### 4.2.1 Relationship with Stepparents

The relationship between the stepparent and the stepchild emerged as a strong determinant of the stepfamily experience for young people. In fact, the quality of this relationship appeared to ultimately *make* or *break* the stepfamily. Some individuals reported a dramatic improvement in their life experiences, as a direct result of gaining a stepparent. These individuals described how their family experiences had improved and stabilized as a result of the stepparent joining the family. Conversely, other participants' experiences of stepparents were not so positive. These individuals depicted a situation where their family life became intolerable and relationships were strained as a result of a stepparent's attitude and behaviour. Rachel explained that she moved out of the stepfamily home, after her Leaving Certificate, due to her stepfather's behavior.

*He did everything to make things difficult for us. I tried to study, he played loud music ...I got bad points in the Leaving Certificate. It was then that I moved out.*

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<sup>1</sup>Due to the limited word count of this MA Dissertation, a profile of the family contexts of all participants is presented in Appendix A. The reader should refer to this in order to conceptualise the position of each individual as they tell their story. This account also provides a sense of the diversity of situations and experiences of the individual participants.



#### 4.2.1.1 Earning respect

Another significant finding related to the stepparent earning the young person's respect. If respect was earned by the stepparent, the relationship between the stepparent and stepchild was invariably positive. It was found that young people respected their stepparents, if they were perceived to care for them and treat them fairly. It was also important that the stepparent respected the relationship between the biological parent and the young person. Conversely, if the stepparent did not earn the young person's respect, a positive relationship did not develop between stepparent and stepchild. This finding was particularly evident with regards to the matter of discipline. Anita talked about how she would tolerate discipline from her dad's partner, but that she would not afford her mam's partner the same right, as she did not respect him.

*If Pippa were to say anything to me, I would have accepted it, because she had earned it, but if Dave said anything, I would tell him where to go.*

#### 4.2.2 Biological Parents

In this study, some interesting findings emerged regarding the development of the relationship between the young person and his or her residential parent subsequent to the formation of the stepfamily. Some individuals maintained a positive relationship with their resident parent. This was invariably the case when the young person felt that they were prioritized ahead of the new relationship. Other individuals reported a deterioration in their relationship with their resident parent, due to a preoccupation by their parent with the new relationship. In these cases the young person felt that their needs were neglected and this had a profound effect on the individuals concerned.

##### 4.2.2.1 Preoccupation with the New Relationship

*I think that my mother got caught up in loving him [stepdad] and forgot about her responsibilities... I felt that she was just messing us around, that she was really selfish. (Kevin)*

*Obviously they were newly-weds, so they used to go off and go for meals and things like that and it would be me and the two boys and we would just sort of go and do our own thing. At times I used to think, what about us? (Lisa)*

#### 4.2.2.2 Enmeshment

Three of the individuals referred to the closeness of the relationship between themselves and their mothers and a reluctance to share their mother with a new partner. Kevin spoke of the extremely close relationship that he had with his mother.

*If it is a single parent with a child, children love that. It is a really cushy life because you have got your parent all to yourself and you don't have to share them. Then, when you have to share them, that is really difficult and they just don't like that. Children hate their parent being taken away from them. (Kevin)*

#### 4.2.2.3 Loyalty Conflict

Another issue pertaining to the biological parent and child relationship was the issue of loyalty conflict, which the participants found really difficult to deal with. Rachel explained that she tried not to upset her father and felt guilty if she mentioned her stepfather in a conversation.

*I was aware that my dad wasn't happy with Keith. [stepdad] It was awkward, like stepping on egg shells... being careful telling a story ...to leave him out of it, even when we were really little. I remember slipping up and calling dad Keith and I can still remember his face.*

Similarly, Michelle explained,

*My dad doesn't like it when I talk about Adrian, [stepdad], but I don't think that is good because it is going to further complicate things and mess me up emotionally. You shouldn't have to feel guilty about having a relationship with your stepparent.*

#### 4.2.3 Relationships with Siblings

A key finding of this study was the importance of siblings to the participants' lives. This included biological siblings, siblings born to the stepfamily and stepsiblings. The potential for strong, positive and enduring relationships with stepsiblings emerged as a significant finding of the present study. One finding that was particularly unexpected was the endurance of some stepsibling relationships, subsequent to the breakup of their parents' relationships.

Kevin described how his relationship with his stepsibling endured after the breakup of his mother's and her father's relationship. *'Even though my mam and him [stepdad] are not together anymore, I still get on very well with my stepsister. We still have contact. There is a bond between us.'* Ciara also described her relationship with her stepsister as very close. She regarded her as more of a sister than her own biological sister. *'I speak to her every day. I would be closer to her in the last two years than I would be to my older sister.'*

#### 4.2.3.1 Provision of Support

Many young people referred to the shared experiences that they had with siblings and the support that they received from siblings, especially during difficult times. This support was cited as extremely valuable to all the participants as it gave the individuals a sense that they were not alone in their experiences. Matt commented,

*I was very lucky that I had an older brother through it all, because I could always go to him if I needed someone to talk to. He has always been in the same boat as me.*

Lisa discussed how her siblings reassured her when they moved to a different country.

*'When we got to Greece, my brothers were looking after me. They told me that it would be ok, that we were together and not to be worrying.'*

#### 4.2.3.2 Rivalry

There was some evidence of sibling rivalry through the narratives. Ciara explains that she clashes with her sister, who is the daughter of her father and her stepmother.

*I will say 'he was my dad first'... a fight emerges...She will push my buttons... I will spill that, and it really gets to her.*

Similarly Karen referred to rivalry between herself and her stepdad's biological daughter.

*I suppose there would be a bit of rivalry with his daughter. At Christmas, I would always try and get the better present for him, which I always do, because she is useless for him. I am sure he prefers me, not being big headed.*

### 4.3 Development of Relationships

Interestingly, the development of relationships emerged as a significant finding of the present study. Many individuals reported a change in the view that they had of their stepparent from childhood to early adolescence. They explained that, as they grew older they began to see things clearer and they grew to dislike the stepparent intensely. Rachel discussed how, when she was younger she had a reasonable relationship with her stepfather but as she grew older, she thought very differently about him, which ultimately led her to rebel against him and leave the stepfamily. *'I got on ok with him for the first few years...but then when I was about thirteen I started seeing what he was really like. I couldn't stand him at all.'*

Conversely, other individuals described the strengthening of their relationships with their stepparent and stepsiblings over time. Ciara described that through a common sense of history and mutual understanding, she and her stepsister developed an extremely close bond, *'My stepsister and I didn't get on at first but now we are very close.'*

### 4.4 Conflict

The findings of the present study presented a mixed finding on the topic of conflict. Some interviewees described a low level of conflict within the home. These individuals highlighted that the conflict occurred between a parent or stepparent who lived in the home and a parent who did not. Other individuals reported a high level of conflict within the home, which was predominantly in the context of a step-parent and young person relationship. Four individuals continued to have contact with their biological father, subsequent to the formation of their stepfamily. Out of these four cases, three individuals reported conflict between their step-parent and their parent, which they found extremely difficult to deal with. In each case the biological parent instigated the conflict with the stepparent. Rachel explained *'My dad detested Keith [stepparent]. On my communion they were fighting outside. It was really bad.'* Similarly Michelle reported,

*My stepdad and my father don't like each other. Dad didn't want Adrian to think he was stepping into his place, especially when he moved in with us. That has probably been the biggest issue of all.*

#### 4.4.1 Negative Alliances

Some interviewees referred to the presence of negative alliances, which were formed and used against others in the stepfamily. Rachel described how she and her sister united together in opposition against their stepdad. *'We couldn't get along with him [stepfather]. We kind of got the attitude we are going to be as difficult as possible.'*

Ciara described how she and her stepsister formed an alliance against their parents. *'My stepmum doesn't like that in the last few years, her daughter will take my side, and we kinda ganged up on them.'*

#### 4.4.2 Boundary Issues

Boundary issues emerged across some of the narratives, which contributed to conflict within the stepfamily. These boundary issues referred to family members *playing* some family members against others. Michelle commented on how her younger brother reports stories about their stepdad Adrian to their biological father and that this places strain on the family system.

*My brother goes back to my dad and says 'Adrian did this, Adrian did that' and he exaggerates things because he is trying to play them off each other and it causes huge problems.*

#### 4.4.3 Discipline

Many individuals discussed how the issue of discipline caused much conflict in families. Kevin remarked, *'It was a major cause of arguments because at the end of the day, in my head you are not my dad. You can't discipline me.'* Similarly, Ciara commented,

*If she [stepparent] was to scream at me, I would go straight to dad and I would say 'I am not taking that. She treats me as if I am her daughter and I don't like it. She has no right to tell me what to do. I don't care if I am living in her house.'*

## 4.5 Communication

The findings of this study suggest a strong correlation between high levels of communication and positive stepfamily experiences. Conversely, ineffective communicative practice was positively associated with a negative stepfamily experience.

### 4.5.1 Lack of Communication

A particular aspect of this issue, which caused profound distress for individuals, pertained to the lack of communication with young people regarding significant issues in their lives. Ciara had spent a few months in hospital, and had not been informed that she had a new baby sister. She explains how she first found out that her dad had a child with her stepmother. Her dad came to Ireland; for a family mass and he collected Ciara in his car.

*I said, 'who owns that baby seat?'..and dad said, ' that's for my child', and I went 'ha, very funny, who owns the baby seat?' ...I fought with my mam like hell... I have always wanted a little sister and I can't believe that you never told me.*

Lisa explained how she found about her mother's remarriage. *'She came home from holidays, showed me the wedding photos and said, 'I got married'. 'It only felt that my da had died, and she is coming home and she is married.'*

Lisa commented on how this lack of communication affected her relationship with her mother. *'It would never be the same, because she just made a big decision, without considering our feelings and I'll always hold onto that.'*

The participants also highlighted the role of communication in terms of reassuring children when a stepparent enters the family. Kevin provides an insight into what the child needs in terms of communication.

*They forget to sit down with the children and make sure that the child doesn't feel that they are being abandoned or that they are not loved as much anymore or that someone else isn't coming in to take all of the attention from them.*

#### 4.5.2 Resolving Conflict

The participants also highlighted the role of communication in the resolving of conflict between stepfamily members. Michael highlighted how a lack of communication exacerbated a volatile relationship with his stepmother. *'The only real reason that I don't get on with my stepmam now, is that we don't talk. That is how you settle your difficulties with someone.'* Michael explained that his difficulties were intensified by the fact that the two individuals did not converse in the same language. *'She couldn't express herself in English. I wouldn't be able to get something across as efficiently in Italian. So when we were arguing, it was so short fused.'*

#### 4.5.3 Effective Communication

Alternatively, some of the participants of this study described effective communicative practice within their stepfamily. Michelle draws attention to her mother's role as a facilitator and mediator at family meetings, in order for issues to be addressed at a family level.

*My mam has always asked us how we feel about things. From the beginning we have had family meetings...Someone might say, 'Adrian [stepfather] is very moody lately' and mam will say, 'well the reason why Adrian is so moody is because he is going through a divorce at the moment.'*

#### 4.5.4 The Mass Media

Another interesting aspect of communication pertained to the role of institutions and the messages that are given regarding stepfamilies. Matt commented on the potential role of the mass media to *normalize* stepfamilies.

*The picture painted is of one dad, one mam, a boy and a girl happy around the table. I don't think that that is accurate at all. If people saw more of stepfamilies on the tv or radio, they would talk more and they would understand things better.*

#### 4.6 Dealing with Complexities

Another theme which emerged from the interviews pertained to the complexity of the stepfamily. Participants referred to a sense of ambiguity, regarding issues such as how they

conceptualised and introduced their stepsiblings to others. All the participants who referred to this issue usually referred to their *stepsibling* as a *sibling* to avoid having to go into any details.

#### 4.6.1 Explanation of Family

*It was really complicated in my mind. I could never really distinguish who she [stepdad's daughter] was... How do I describe this person? To outsiders, she was just my sister, because you don't have to go into details. (Kevin)*

*It is very complicated to sit down and tell someone about my family. It takes years ... Kara is not my blood, but to make it simpler when we are together, we don't say stepsister. We will just say 'that is my sister.' (Ciara)*

#### 4.6.2 Caught in the Middle

Participants highlighted that they often were faced with situations which presented complex dilemmas in which they were *caught in the middle* between family members. Michelle explained her dilemma regarding her college graduation, which she did not attend.

*I was given two invites, one for my mam and one for my dad. I would feel bad not bringing Adrian [stepfather], who paid my way through college. I would feel bad not bringing my dad, because he is my dad.*

Other individuals referred to family events, such as weddings and the various challenges that are presented regarding these occasions.

*I can't invite my stepmother or sisters to anything. If I am ever to get married, I will have to elope. I can't have my family there. That is where it is complicated. You cannot include them. (Ciara)*

Three of the participants did not view their family situation as particularly complicated. Matt remarked, *'If I was an onlooker on my situation, it would seem complicated. I have grown up with, so it is not complicated to me. You just get used to it.'* Interestingly, in all three cases, there was no contact with the non-resident parent. This finding might suggest that participants, who had continued contact with their non-resident parent found the management of having two *same-sex* parental figures in their lives, to be the key component of the complex difficulties that they experienced.



## 4.7 Benefits of Stepfamilies

All ten participants identified benefits associated with their stepfamily. The most frequently cited benefits are classified below as financial provision, opportunities for personal growth, co-parenting, a sense of stability, a sense of family and additional siblings.

### 4.7.1 Financial Provision

Six individuals mentioned that the stepparent brought more financial benefits to the household, which was particularly appreciated in former lone-parent households. Kevin explained that *‘Two incomes meant that we had a good lifestyle. I think that that was something that we probably may have missed out on, if it wasn’t a two-parent family.’*

### 4.7.2 Opportunities for Personal Growth

Five of the interviewees stated that they felt that they have grown and learned a lot through their stepfamily experiences. Karen commented on living in a stepfamily, *‘It definitely has benefitted me. It just kind of makes me look at the world a bit more broadly. I can understand people a bit better and am more independent.’*

### 4.7.3 Co-Parenting

Seven of the participants identified having another parent in the house as an advantage. The individuals provided examples which highlight the parenting assistance that the stepparent offered and how this benefitted the family.

*I think he was a huge support for her and for our foundations as a family. I do recall mam running around and not having a chance for herself when there was just the two of us. Then when he [stepparent] came it was definitely better ...I did appreciate having another parent. (Karen)*

### 4.7.4 A Sense of Stability

Eight of the participants identified that the stepparent brought a sense of security and stability to the family, which was appreciated by many family members. Michelle noted, *‘It is a much more stable and secure environment. It might not be as fun and brilliant and exciting all the time, but it is stable.’*

#### 4.7.5 A Sense of Family

Some individuals referred to having a deeper sense of family, through having two parental figures in the family home. Some participants referred to an improved sense of family through gaining additional siblings. Matt reported that both he and his brother and his stepdad's children had experience of a lone-parent household, prior to their parents' relationship.

*We always wondered what it would be like to have two parents in the house, so when my mam and John [stepfather] met, and we had a family at Christmas, this was maybe something that we had all looked forward to. It was nice.*

#### 4.7.6 Additional Siblings

All of the participants, who gained extra siblings through the stepfamily system, identified many positives of having more siblings in their family. Rachel referred to gaining a brother, as the only positive aspect of her stepfamily experience, *'I can't imagine not having my little brother, so that is a positive. Apart from that, I don't really know of anything else that was positive.'*

#### 4.8 Gender

The issue of gender emerged across all the narratives. It was suggested that gender played a key role in the emotional and cognitive processing of the individuals' stepfamily experiences. Ryan had a very practical perspective on his situation, *'I had two parents, one moved out and another moved in, so that was fine.'* Conversely, he referred to how his sister experienced the situation.

*My sister didn't find it as easy as me. Her relationship with my stepdad was more difficult... I think girls do care more, in the sense that I just don't think about it that much you know? If everything in theory is fine, then it is fine.*

Michael commented that he had never really thought about his situation. He said that during the interview he realised this.

*I never really actually thought about all this before. You kinda just plough on, and you don't really think about it too much, but the more I think about it now, it's a bit heavy.*

Alternatively, female participants were found to cognitively and emotionally process their experiences very differently to the male participants. Ciara discussed her father's extra-marital affair with her stepsister's mother. She referred to how she and her stepsister regularly engaged in replaying the sequence of events regarding the affair.

*I will ask her, 'so did you know at this stage that this was happening?'... and we will try to piece it all together ... 'well then this happened at this time', and I will say, 'well he was still with my mam at that time', and we will try to work it out.*

Another female participant gave an example of how she regularly reflects on her stepfamily. She refers to how she thinks about her stepdad's children coming to stay in her home.

*He doesn't live with his kids, so for him we are nearly as good as his kids. I often wonder how they feel, for example, today they are guests in our home, but we live with their dad. (Michelle)*

These findings go some way to suggest that there are differences in the ways in which males and females process and adjust to their experiences in stepfamilies. While male participants put more emphasis on practically getting on with things, female participants emphasise thinking about and making sense of their experiences.

#### 4.9 Conclusion

This draws a conclusion to the main findings of the present study which highlighted the most significant stepfamily experiences of the ten young people who were interviewed. These findings related to relationships with family members, the difficulties and challenges associated with issues such as conflict, communication and complexities. The findings also highlighted the benefits offered by the stepfamily system. It was also found that gender played a key role in how individuals experienced stepfamily life. Although these findings cannot be generalised, they do provide for an enhanced conceptualisation of the participant's stepfamily experiences and raise some important considerations, which will be addressed in the following chapter, in the form of a discussion.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

The aim of this research project was to explore the experiences of young people of living in a stepfamily system. This research question was driven by the argument that an understanding of what family means to young people is required, if we seek to identify how to support them through life transitions (Rigg & Pryor, 2007). The study sought to revise certain assumptions about the stepfamily which were proposed by authors such as Cherlin (1978) who proposed that remarriage was an incomplete institution and Popenoe (1994) who presented the conservative perspective that stepfamilies were not conducive to the wellbeing of young stepfamily members.

## 5.2 Theoretical Framework

This study was influenced by a number of principles contained within a grounded theory approach. A comprehensive discussion of the findings of this research requires a theoretical framework, yet there is an absence of a sound theoretical orientation to inform stepfamily research (Coleman, *et al.*, Ganong and Fine, 2000; Sage, 2007).

Thus, for this discussion, the researcher will briefly consider two theories, in view of their respective applicability to the findings of the present study. These models are 'Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution Hypothesis (Cherlin, 1978) and Fine and Kurdeck's (1994) Multidimensional Cognitive-Developmental Model (MCDM) of Stepfamily Adjustment. The following section presents a discussion of the main findings of the present study, in the context of existing stepfamily literature. The discussion will follow the outline of the findings by theme. Following this section, the afore-mentioned theories will be considered, in terms of the presented findings.

## 5.3 Stepfamily Relationships

The participants invariably discussed their stepfamily experiences in the contexts of their relationships with stepfamily members. Consistently the findings demonstrated a high correlation between the quality of stepfamily relationships and stepfamily experiences. This finding is consistent with many authors' views that positive stepfamily experiences are contingent upon on workable stepfamily relationships (Adler-Baeder *et al.*, 2004; Bernstein, 2000). Similarly, Freisthler, *et al.*, (2003) found that for young people, the experiences within the stepfamily were more significantly related to the quality of the relationships within the

stepfamily, than any other factor. The next section will discuss the relationships with family members in further detail.

### 5.3.1 Stepparents

In contrast to previous literature and research, which suggests that relationships between children and their biological parents are stronger than those between children and non-biological parents (Dunn, 2002), the present study found that it was the quality of the relationship and the frequency of contact which determined the nature of these relationships, as opposed to biological ties.

Most of the participants were reticent about the stepparent's disciplinary role. This finding correlates with De'Ath's (1992) finding, that the issue of control posed challenges to individuals, as there was a belief that if relationships were not defined by blood, individuals were not entitled to make demands. However it was found that discipline was more acceptable from stepparents where they were perceived to earn this right or entitlement. This finding correlates with those from other studies which found that young people generally rejected discipline by a step parent; however they conceded discipline, if a strong bond was formed between both parties (Cartwright, 2005; Ganong, *et al.*, 2011, Moore & Cartwright, 2005; Schrodtt, 2006; Schmeekle, 2007).

### 5.3.2 Biological Parents

According to writers, findings vary across studies as to whether mothering and mother-child relationship quality changes when biological mothers enter new partnerships (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Thomson *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, the present study's findings are inconsistent regarding this issue. Some of the participants' relationship with their resident parent deteriorated, due to their parent's preoccupation with their new partner. This finding corroborates the findings of studies that some adolescents felt jealous and resentful, due to the reduced intimacy that almost always occurred in their relationship with their biological custodial parent, subsequent to their parent's re-partnering (Cartwright & Moore, 2012; Stoll *et al.*, 2006)

In the present study, some participants reported such a close relationship with their resident parent that they vehemently rejected the introduction of a stepparent into their lives. This

finding correlates with the view of Bumpass *et al.*, (1995) who explicate that it is frequently the case that the mother-child relationship is very close, sometimes to the point of enmeshment. Therefore the introduction of a stepparent is perceived as threatening, as it can disrupt a bond that preceded the re-partnering. Although it is important to note that this finding was not indicative of most young peoples' experiences in this study. Some of the participants welcomed the introduction of the stepparent, particularly if it was managed gradually and sensitively.

Another finding related to loyalty conflict experienced by young people, primarily regarding their biological parent and stepparent. This finding is consistent with the findings that young stepfamily members carried the burden of divided loyalties between their non-residential biological parents and their stepparent (Freisthler, *et al.*, 2003; Koerner, 2003; Stoll *et al.*, 2006). Some of the interviewees of the present study discussed how they would refrain from speaking about certain topics, so as not to distress their biological parent. This is consistent with the finding of Freisthler *et al.* (2003) that young people censored their own behavior as a result of a deep sense of disloyalty toward non-residential parents.

### 5.3.3 Siblings

The potential for strong, positive and enduring relationships with stepsiblings emerged as an unanticipated finding of the present study. One significant finding, was the endurance of some stepsibling relationships, after the breakup of parental relationships. This indicated two realities, firstly that the stepparent relationship, although it has a profound effect on the whole stepfamily experience, did not seem to define all other relationships formed within the stepfamily. Secondly shared and regular experiences significantly impacted upon the closeness of relationships, rather than kinship relationships based on blood. The participants principally defined their sibling and stepsibling relationships according to the sharing of a household, regular contact and the sharing of significant experiences. This finding is consistent with the views of Cherlin and Furstenberg (1994) that the mere existence of a blood tie does not necessarily result in individuals thinking of themselves as family and that kinship is typically more achieved by establishing a relationship with others and making repeated connections.

De'Ath (1992) found that stepsiblings often brought comradeship and a sense of experience to an individual's world and that it was rare to find that children envied or resented another child born to their biological parent and stepparent. In fact, De'Ath (1992) stated that the robustness of new relationships formed between kin and stepkin was one of the encouraging factors which emerged from her study of stepfamilies. These findings are identical to the findings of the present study and contradict findings of writers such as Dunn (2003) that young people felt that they came second to new children born to the stepfamily and children of the stepparent. Nevertheless, rivalry between siblings was also found to be an issue for some participants of the present study, which correlates with other studies that suggested that stepfamily systems give rise to increased opportunities for rivalry among siblings (Dupuis, 2010; White & Woollett, 1992).

Another aspect of sibling relationships that was highlighted pertained to the supportive role that siblings played, through the sharing of familial experiences. Matt remarked,

*I was very lucky that I had an older brother through it all because I could always go to him if I needed someone to talk to. He has always been in the same boat as me.*

These findings support the view that a significant feature of sibling relationships relates to the construct of the sharing of experiences, as siblings relationships are positioned diagonally, as opposed to the vertical relationships that young people have with their parents. These relationships are characterised by a reciprocal combination of sharing and support (Hughes, 2003; McCarthy & Edwards, 2011).

#### 5.3.4 Relationship Development

Another interesting finding of the present study was the development of step relationships over time. Ciara and her stepsibling had a very volatile relationship at the beginning; however they later formed a very close relationship which superseded the relationship that she had with her biological sister. She explicated that this was mainly due to the fact that they bonded in alliance against the injustices served upon them, in the context of a shared experience and also due to a similarity in age, sex and the result of regular contact. This finding is consistent with Newman's view (1999), that despite the fundamental problems that can arise for many stepsiblings, they can adjust very well and bonds and close relationships



can develop, especially if there are similarities in age, sex and life experience. It is also consistent with findings by Stoll *et al.* (2006), that relationships developed over the different phases of stepfamily formation.

#### 5.4 Conflict

The present study found that conflict was a major issue for stepfamily members. Some individuals cited high levels of conflict within the stepfamily. Others highlighted that the conflict arose between members of the stepfamily and others in the family, for example non-resident parents. These types of situations presented tremendous challenges for young people, who felt that they were caught in the middle between their family members. These findings correlate with findings from studies that found that several young stepfamily members cited the conflict between families and within the stepfamily was the worst part of living in a stepfamily (Freisthler *et al.*, 2003; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

#### 5.5 Dealing with Complexities

The present study found that many of the participants regarded their family life as complicated. The participants frequently referred to being faced with complex dilemmas, which positioned them to choose between their stepparents and non-residential parents. These findings are consistent with literature that proposes that the complexity of stepfamily systems promote unique and complex challenges for stepfamily members (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Sage, 2007; Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Interestingly, as noted in the findings chapter the individuals who did not retain contact with their non-residential parent, found their situation to be less complicated. This might suggest that the major component of the complex challenges faced by individuals, pertained to managing the fact that they had two same-sex parental figures in their lives. This corroborates findings by Fitzpatrick and Vangelisti (1995) that issues can be more complicated for young family members, due to the difficulties which arise between the non-residential parent and the stepfamily system.

Many of the participants experienced a sense of ambiguity regarding how they conceptualised and referred to stepsiblings. Correspondingly, writers propose that stepfamily dynamics may be particularly complex when stepsibling or half-sibling relationships are involved (Ganong

& Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This finding relates to Hayman's (2005) suggestion that due to factors such as stepfamily members living in separate households and young people and stepsiblings sharing occasional residency, individuals can find it difficult to ascertain who belongs to whom and what individuals might mean to each other. It is also consistent with findings that ambiguity regarding kinship terminology can present challenges for stepfamily members (Allan, *et al.*, 2011; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Wilkes Karraker & Grochowski, 2006; Sweeney, 2010).

## 5.6 Communication

The central role which communication plays in facilitating positive interactions between family members was highlighted in the present study. The findings of this study suggest a strong correlation between low levels of communication and negative stepfamily experiences. A particular aspect of this issue pertained to the lack of communication regarding significant issues in the participants' lives. This finding is consistent with De'Ath's research (1992) which found little reported discussion with young stepfamily members about the significant issues within the family. It is also consistent with the findings of Stoll *et al.*, (2006) who found that often young people felt excluded and not consulted about important decisions regarding their family lives.

The present study also highlighted the ameliorative role of communication in the resolving of conflict between stepfamily members. One young person explained that his difficulties regarding conflict and poor communication with his stepparent was further exacerbated by the fact that the two individuals did not speak the same language. Conversely, half of the sample relayed effective communicative practice within the stepfamily. One individual provided an example of how family meetings provided a forum for dealing with issues of contention within the stepfamily. Similarly, Vangelisti (2004) found that some stepfamilies develop communication and interaction patterns that effectively deal with the challenges faced by stepfamily members.

Thus the finding of the significant role of communication within the stepfamily experience is consistent with other studies which found that communication is a central issue in stepfamilies and a key component to dealing with challenges in the stepfamily system (Beaudry, *et al.*, 2004; Vangelisti, 2004). This also could be tied in more broadly with work

by Nixon (2012) in *Growing Up in Ireland (How Families Matter)* which indicated that while family structure plays some role in influencing relationships, family processes, such as communication were more significantly associated with positive interactions.

### 5.7 Benefits of Stepfamilies

The findings of the current study indicated that all ten participants could identify positive aspects to their stepfamily. These findings corroborated findings by studies which found that almost every participant could cite positive aspects of their family situation, including improved material resources, a larger support network and a sense of personal growth (Freisthler *et al.*, 2003; Stoll, *et al.*, 2006; Sweeney, 2010; White & Woollet, 1992). In all cases, even when the relationship was negative with the stepparent, the stepparent provided financial assistance to their stepchildren. This finding controverts the finding that step parents provide less actual assistance to their stepchildren, than to biological or adoptive children (Aquilino, 2005; Killian, 2004). A significant finding also related to the advantages offered by stepfamilies to former lone-parent households. This finding concurs with the view proposed by Jeynes (1999) that stepfamilies can help to restore economic, social and psychological resources that were strained by a divorce or single parenthood (Jeynes, 1999).

### 5.8 Gender

It was found that gender played a significant role in how the participants experienced stepfamily life. Ryan described the difference between how he and his sister experienced the stepparent relationship.

*My sister didn't find it as easy as me. Her relationship with my stepdad was more difficult... I think girls do care more in the sense that, I just don't think about it that much you know? If everything in theory is fine, then it is fine.*

This was an interesting finding in light of Hetherington's (1987) reference to the *gendered management* of emotional experience and the differences in the way that men and women record experience for themselves and subsequently report these experiences, particularly regarding intimate relationships. Similarly, Freisthler *et al.*, (2003) were confident in their finding of their study on the stepfamily experiences of young people, that there were definite indications that males and female experiences of stepfamilies affected them differently. They suggested that this could be due to how men and women experience relationships as it is

possible that females are more attuned to relationships (Gilligan, 1982) and therefore more prepared to work on relationships in the stepfamily. Likewise, Schmeekle (2007) also found in her study of the gender dynamics in stepfamilies that relationships in stepfamilies were significantly affected by gendered social practices.

## 5.9 Theoretical Models

The following section will briefly consider two theoretical models in terms of their application to stepfamily research, given the discussed findings of the present study.

### 5.9.1 Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution (Cherlin, 1978)

Cherlin proposed that due to a lack of institutionalized roles and clear societal guidelines, the stepfamily suffers from a disputed model of how it ought to function. As a result, the stepfamily is an *Incomplete Institution* and at an increased risk of failure.

In this present study, the application of Cherlin's Hypothesis might prove useful in terms of its ecological focus of the external institutional factors which impact upon the stepfamily. This aspect may assist in understanding the ambiguity that was highlighted in the present study's findings regarding family membership, and kinship terminology and a lack of guidance around issues, such as how to manage the reality of having two same-sex parental figures in the family. Many participants suggested that Irish Institutions do not fully support or acknowledge the stepfamily. One participant referred to the institution of mass media when he noted,

*The picture painted is of one dad, one mam, a boy and a girl, happy around the table. I don't think that that is accurate at all. If people saw more of stepfamilies on the tv or radio, they would talk more and they would understand things better.*

However, despite the afore-mentioned, the participants indicated that the salient factors regarding their stepfamily experiences, did not relate to the lack of societal guidelines available or a lack of institutional support for the stepfamily. The young people did identify aspects, such as institutional and cultural influences on their family experiences, but they did not accept that these had a major bearing on their particular situations. It might be argued that a study which focused on the parents of stepfamilies may have yielded a different result, as parents are generally tasked with making familial decisions and therefore they may be

more reliant on support and guidance from the broader society. Thus Cherlin's model might be more relevant to a study of parents' experiences in stepfamilies.

Although Cherlin's model offers positive aspects, its potential for an enhanced conceptualisation of the young person's stepfamily experience is limited. Despite the breadth of its focus, it does not provide the mechanism for an in-depth analysis of such issues such as the formation, development and functioning of stepfamily relationships. It might not assist to explain how some siblings forged very strong relationships with stepfamily members whilst others did not. It does not provide a framework to examine how individuals experience living across two or more households. In the light of the profound shifts in the family structures of recent decades, regarding cohabitation, divorce and remarriage, it could be argued that Cherlin's hypothesis has lost its relevance, in view of the contemporary stepfamily. It is arguable that the contemporary stepfamily system is not an *incomplete institution* and that although it is subject to stresses and strains, these might be partially related to institutional factors but not to the extent that Cherlin suggests. Furthermore, contrary to Cherlin's view that stepfamilies suffer as a result of a stigmatization by general society, the present study did not find the stigma of families to be an issue for the participants. This finding is more consistent with Glenn's view (1994, p. 49) that 'any stigma attention to stepfamilies has declined significantly in recent years and it is unlikely that stigma ranks high among causes of stress and distress of persons in those families.'

### 5.9.2 Multidimensional Cognitive-Development of Stepfamily Adjustment

(Fine & Kurdeck, 1994)

Sage (2007) proposed the above named framework as an alternative to Cherlin's model. The theory proposes that within the developmental stages of stepfamily adjustment, cognitions and adjustment to the stepfamily can change over the life span through the various stages.

One of the strengths of this theory is that it provides a mechanism for the analysis of the interaction between all units in the stepfamily system. This model recognises that the individual relationships in the stepfamily ultimately impact on the stepfamily system. This family system's perspective might prove useful, given the present study's findings of the

significance of the stepfamily relationship processes and dynamics for the young person. The framework's strength also lies in the provision for analysis of the cognitions of family members. A balanced subsystem is one where the cognitions of the relevant members are consistent with one another. This emphasis is important, given the finding of the present study that many participants refused to be disciplined by the stepparent, thereby highlighting the lack of consensus on the stepfather's role. The present study also found that in some cases, cognitions changed with regards to discipline, as the stepparent earned the respect of the young person. This model provides a mechanism for analysing cognitive developments within the stepfamily. Therefore this model's focus on the cognitions of stepfamily members might assist in a study of this aspect of the stepfamily experience.

However, despite the strengths of this model, its applicability to the stepfamily is questionable. Firstly, the model presents one type of stepfamily, the stepfather system. There is no provision for an analysis of a stepmother system. There is no reference to other members of the system, such as siblings and stepsiblings, or the extended family. This is significant, given the present study's findings, which indicated the salience of sibling relationships for individuals and in light of the fact that writers have criticised that most research has been limited to one type of stepfamily and one set of stepfamily relationships (Allan *et al.*, 2011; Coleman *et al.*, 2000; Sage, 2007). Thus, when the afore-mentioned is considered, it might be suggested that this model may not suffice, as it does not provide for an analysis of the diversity of stepfamily experiences.

#### 5.10 Limitations of Present Study

This was a small-scale study and therefore the findings cannot be considered representative of the general young stepfamily member's experience. The study also relied on a retrospective account of the participant's experience, which poses limitations such as distortion of recall, reliability, recall, and post-event rationalisation (Bryman, 2012). This research focused on third level students, who arguably might have had more supportive family backgrounds than other young people. It is possible that a cross-sectional random sample of participants might have yielded different result. Another limitation of this study pertained to the fact that most stepfamily research was conducted in the 1980's and 1990's in the US primarily. Not so much recent work has been published and this issue proved restrictive in terms of not having access to more recent stepfamily literature and research.

## 5.11 Conclusion

This study sought to elucidate young peoples' experiences of stepfamily life. The findings provided an insight into the stepfamilies of young people and captured a sense of their varied experiences. Despite the diversity of these experiences, common themes emerged, which revealed that the stepfamily system can present tremendous challenges and difficulties for young family members such as ambiguity, conflict, loyalty and communication issues. The findings also highlighted, that for some participants, their stepfamily experience positively enhanced their lives. Thus, despite the challenges faced by stepfamily members, it was found that the stepfamily has the potential to bring about significant benefits for young family members.

In view of the consistent argument that stepfamily research is lacking a solid theoretical foundation, Cherlin's and Fine and Kurdeck's Models were briefly considered as frameworks to guide stepfamily research. Although there were aspects of both models which were considered useful, it was suggested that each model might not suffice to support a discussion of the present study's findings.

Stepfamily research needs to be further enhanced and developed (Allan *et al.*, 2011; Coleman *et al.*, 2000; Robila & Taylor, 2001; Sage, 2007; Sweeney, 2010). Undoubtedly a major component of future research is the development of a relevant theoretical framework. Coleman *et al.*, (2000) suggest that developing such a theory would prove challenging and would require the integration of factors such as structural (race, class, gender), processual (relationship quality, family style) and contextual factors (state laws governing stepfamilies, social attitudes towards stepfamilies). Despite the many challenges presented in a quest for an approved theoretical framework, an absence of a theoretical foundation ensures that future research on stepfamilies will continue to be undermined. The following chapter draws a conclusion to the present study.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion



## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter draws a conclusion to the present study. It presents the key considerations which arose from the findings of this study, as presented in chapter four.

Although this was a small scale study, the findings are significant, in that for sixty per cent of the interviewees, the stepfamily experience was positive. This is an important empirical finding, given the pre-dominant focus on the negative aspects of the stepfamily system. This finding challenges the conservative assumption that stepfamilies are not good for children (Popenoe, 1994). It is more consistent with the liberal view, that stepfamilies can and often do, nurture young people (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). A key finding was the enduring bonds that were developed between some of the individuals and stepparents and stepsiblings. However the findings also indicated that for this particular cohort, significant difficulties were also attributed to their stepfamily experiences. These related to issues of communication, conflict, loyalty, ambiguity and complexities. The participants also reported that the stepfamily was not acknowledged or supported in general society. These findings corroborated and contradicted some findings of stepfamily research to date.

The study's particular aim was to highlight the stepfamily experiences of young people in Ireland. The findings, which highlighted these experiences, are significant given that there had been virtually no research of young stepfamily member's experiences in the Irish context. It raised some important considerations, such as the lack of support, acknowledgment and guidance for young stepfamily members.

The stepfamily is a family structure that is rapidly increasing in all minority societies (Sweeney, 2010). Comparatively speaking, Ireland's numbers are low within the minority world context. However, if Ireland follows the trends of other countries, the stepfamily might be an increasing family form of the future in Ireland. This small research study and previous research on this subject, stresses the need for an increased understanding of this family form (Dupuis, 2010; Rigg & Pryor, 2007). A brief outline of the key recommendations, which arose from the findings of the present study, will now be presented.

## 6.2 Recommendations

It is recommended that stepfamily research be progressed to advance a broader understanding of the mechanisms and processes inherent to the stepfamily system and how these impact upon young people's life experiences. It is particularly important that this research be conducted in the Irish context to assist young people cope with the stressors and challenges of forming new relationships and constructing new lives in stepfamilies in Ireland.

The development of a theoretical framework is imperative to fortify research in this field. It is recommended that this framework consider aspects of the Bronfenbrenner ecological model, which would locate the stepfamily in the broader cultural and institutional contexts and it would also provide for a focus on the proximal process within the stepfamily (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A family systems component to this theory would assist the analysis of the relationship dynamics within stepfamilies.

Given the key finding of the significant role of stepfamily relationships in the participants' experiences, further studies should systematically examine relationships with biological parents, stepparents and siblings including stepsiblings.

It is recommended that longitudinal studies are conducted to examine processes over time, such as relationship development in stepfamilies and the factors which promote and detract from constructive relationship trajectories.

Future research should also examine communication in stepfamilies. Given the increase in intercultural relationships and marriages in contemporary society, it would be helpful if research also considered the cultural aspect of different languages spoken in some stepfamilies.

It is also recommended that research focuses on the role that gender plays in the stepfamily experiences of young people. This would provide for an enhanced understanding of how males and females experience stepfamily life.

Given the fact that the findings of this study indicated that the stepfamily can be a site for increased levels of conflict and unique and complex stressors for family members, it is recommended that at an institutional and political level, policies and mechanisms be put in place to acknowledge the increasing norm of the stepfamily. It is imperative that stepfamily

members are provided with support, should they require assistance to deal with difficult familial transitions and processes.

### 6.3 Conclusion

This study sought to explore the stepfamily experiences of a small cohort of young people in Ireland. It was hoped that the findings would enhance our understanding in this field of study, in order to ultimately support young people through their experiences. The findings of this study did elucidate the stepfamily experience of this particular cohort in the Irish context. These findings provided for important considerations, and recommendations were made, in terms of further stepfamily research and policy and practice. Thus the study achieved its aim of exploring the stepfamily experiences of a cohort of young stepfamily members in Ireland. It produced some findings that might prove helpful to enhance family scholarship in this field.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A: Family Contexts of Participants

**(Any identifiable information has been reframed)**

### Karen

Karen's parents separated when she was three months old. Her father moved to another part of the country. Her mother met Pete when Karen was eight years old. Karen's mother married Pete five years later. Karen has limited, but positive contact with her biological father. She described a close-bond between herself and Pete. Karen identified very positive changes as a result of the Pete coming into her life, such as an increased sense of security and support for herself and her mother.

### Rachel

Rachel's parents separated when she five years old and shortly afterwards, her mother moved to another part of Ireland with her new partner Keith, Rachel and her two sisters. Rachel said that the change of situation was very abrupt for her. She said that she did not speak for most of the time she spent in national school. Her mother and Keith had a son when Rachel was ten years old. Rachel reported a very negative relationship with her stepfather Keith. She said that, apart from her brother being born, she could not identify any other positives of stepfamily life. Rachel's relationship with her stepfather became so difficult that she went to live with her biological father, who passed away shortly afterwards.

### Kevin

Kevin's mother Ann was a lone-parent. She met her partner Graham, who moved into the home when Kevin was ten months old. His sister was four years old at the time. Graham had two children from a previous marriage. One of these children came to stay with the family at weekends. Ann and Graham married and had a son together. Kevin described his relationship with Graham as very negative and would have reported issues, such as conflict in the stepfamily. He said that, 'Myself and my sister were just tolerated, as part of the package.' Ann and Graham divorced some years ago. Kevin and his sister do not talk to Graham but Kevin's younger brother still has contact with Graham, who is his biological father.

## Michelle

Michelle is the eldest of five children. Her parents separated when she was twelve years old. Three years later her mother met her stepfather Adrian, whom she married two years ago. Adrian had a son and a daughter from a previous marriage. They stay in Michelle's home on a regular basis. Michelle described her relationship with Adrian and his children as extremely positive. Despite Michelle identifying challenges arising from conflict between her biological father and her stepfather, she describes her stepfamily experience as extremely positive and cited many advantages as a result of having Adrian as a stepparent.

## Ciara

Ciara's parents separated when she was nine years old. Her father had an extra-marital affair with Sandra, a person known to Ciara's family. Sandra lived in the same small town where Ciara's family lived. Ciara's father and Sandra moved abroad very quickly, when Ciara's father left her mother. Ciara remained in Ireland, with her mother and her older sister. Sandra had a daughter from a previous relationship, who had quite a difficult relationship with Ciara. In recent years, they have become very close. Ciara says that she has a very positive relationship with her father who married Sandra two years ago. Sandra and Ciara's father had three daughters together. Ciara describes her relationship with her sisters as very close. She refers to the relationship with her stepmother as not so close. She stays with her stepfamily during holidays and during the summer period.

## Michael

Michael was not born in Ireland. He and his father came to live in Ireland, when he was four years old. His mother remained in the country of origin. Michael was raised by his dad. When Michael was twelve years old, he went to visit his mother for the first time and when he returned to Ireland; his father informed him that he had married his partner Sarah. This came as a shock to Michael. He had met Sarah before, but had never really thought anything of their relationship. Michael and his dad moved to another location to live with Sarah. His father and stepmother had three children together. Michael described a very positive relationship with his father and siblings and a difficult relationship with Sarah. They do not speak to each other. He identified communication as a key contributory factor to his



difficulties with Sarah. Michael defined his stepfamily situation as, 'There was the family and then there was me, the black sheep.'

#### Ryan

Ryan's parents separated when he was four years old and the following year his mother met her new partner who moved in with Ryan, his mother and his older sister. Ryan's mother and his stepfather had a daughter together. Ryan describes a very positive relationship with his stepdad, who he said, accepted him as his son very quickly. Ryan explained that he had not spent any real time with his biological father since he was eight years of age. He said, 'I was not juggling two relationships. One relationship had just been replaced with another and there were no issues really.'

#### Anita

Anita's parents separated when she was ten years old. Her mother re-partnered and Anita described her relationship with her stepdad as negative. She said that his relationship with her mother was very unhealthy. He drank a lot which she said resulted in her mother's drinking escalating. Anita described her stepdad as a very odd man whom she could not warm to. Anita had the opposite experience with her father's partner Pippa, whom she also lived with. She said that Pippa is like a second mother to her and she loves her very much.

#### Lisa

Lisa was eight years old and the youngest of a family of five children, when her father died in a motorbike accident. Less than a year later, her mother returned home from a holiday in Greece and said that she had married a man from Greece called Nicos, who was not known to Lisa and her siblings. Lisa was told that she could move to Greece, to live with her mother and Nicos, or stay with an uncle in Ireland. Lisa decided to move abroad with her mother and two of her siblings. Her older sister and brother remained in Ireland. Lisa said that she always had an 'incomplete and strange feeling' when she lived in this new country. She returned home to Ireland when she was sixteen and she has been living here since. Her mother is still married to Nicos and they have two sons together. Lisa said that she has a positive relationship with her stepfather, who was always very good to her. She described an unstable relationship with her mother. Lisa said that she harbours resentment towards her

mother, for the abrupt manner in which she remarried and informed her children of the same. She has a mostly positive relationship with her two younger brothers but she did identify some challenges pertaining to the sibling relationship.

Matt

Matt's parents separated when he was one year old. His father moved to another county in Ireland and Matt's mother, Clare raised him as a lone-parent for seven years. At this point, Matt's mother met a new partner called John. John had two children from a previous relationship. Matt has a good relationship with John's children. John and Clare had a daughter together. Matt has met his biological father once, when he was 16 years old. Matt describes his relationship with his stepfather as very positive. He said that his mother and John separated briefly when he was at school and that it hurt very much, as the bond with John was particularly precious to him. Matt respects and loves his stepdad due to many factors including the fact that he supported Matt's decision to meet his biological father. Matt views his stepfamily experience as very positive, as opposed to the lone-parent situation that he had previously experienced.

Note

Four participants had an experience of a *de-jure* (cohabitating) stepfamily. Six participants had experience of a *de-facto* (remarried) stepfamily. Six interviewees had a positive experience of stepfamily life. Three young people depicted a negative experience of life in a stepfamily. One individual had experience of two stepparent situations simultaneously, as she lived between her father's and mother's household. She described a positive relationship with her father's partner and a negative relationship with her mother's partner.

## Appendix B: Sample Coding

### **Relationship with custodial parent subsequent to stepfamily formation**

*'Dad always gave me attention and I suppose it was a bit of a shift when he got married. It stopped, kind of thing.'* (Michael)

*'It would never be the same, because she just made a big decision without considering our feelings and I'll always hold onto that.'* (Lisa)

*'I actually found it very hard. It was like my mam was having her time. She wanted to be like my friend. I just wanted someone to cook my dinner or if I cut my leg, 'are you ok?' I very much resent that.'* (Anita)

### **Enmeshment**

*'You feel like you are after losing one parent so you feel you have to sort of latch onto this one. If anything happens to this one, you have nobody. That's the way it feels like.'* (Lisa)

*'If it is a single parent with a child, children love that. It is a really cushy life because you have got your parent all to yourself and you don't have to share them. Then when you have to share them, that is really difficult and they just don't like that. Children hate their parent being taken away from them.'* (Kevin)

### **Positive Relationship with Stepparent**

*'Pippa [stepmother] is such a lady. I love her to bits. She is like another mother really.'* (Anita)

*'He accepted me as his son very quickly.'* (Ryan)

*'I think everything happens for a reason. He stepped in and stepping in was positive. He was very accepting of me wanting to go up and see me dad as well, which I liked. I have so much respect for him for being able to do that. Not many people would do that.'* (Matt)

### **Negative Relationship with Stepparent**

*'She would give out to me. She would shout at me. She would lock me in my room. I suppose it was really hard; it's horrible like we can't be even in the same room as each other. We don't see eye to eye. We don't talk at all.'* (Michael)

*'It was always like he was my stepfather and he was never my father. It would always have been strained. I think that he would have just tolerated me would have been the word, not loved me yeh we were part of the package and there was no way to separate the package.'* (Kevin)

*'We haven't got that close a relationship. She would probably be really upset that I wouldn't think of her that highly and my dad thinks that we are quite close, but I wouldn't say that.'* (Ciara).

### **Relationships with Stepsiblings**

*'Even though my mam and him [stepfather] are not together anymore, I still get on very well with my stepsister. We still have contact. There is a bond between us.'* (Kevin)

*'I speak to her every day. I would be closer to her in the last two years than I would be to my older sister.'*(Ciara)

### **Development of Relationships**

*'Me and my stepsister didn't get on at first.....we have become really close to a point where I would see her as a sister figure. She is like the person I would go to, if I had a problem or something.'* (Ciara)

*'As time went on, he earned my respect.'* (Lisa)

*'At the start it was alright, kinda thing, but now we don't see eye to eye. We don't talk at all.'* (Michael)

*'I think that we have developed as close a bond as a grown man and a girl of my age could do. We would have a lot of respect and consideration for each other.'* (Karen)

*'She didn't like having a stepdad, 'No I have grown up twelve years without a dad. I don't need you.' Now they would be as close as father and daughter would be, to a point.'* (Ciara)

*'I got on ok with him for the first few years but then, when I was about thirteen I couldn't stand him at all.'* (Rachel)

### **Complex Dilemmas**

*'Me and my brother were on opposite sides, because he really wanted his mam and dad to be together because that is normal. That is the family unit. But because he was not my dad, I didn't really want them to be together.'* (Kevin)

*'I always feel a sense of dread when I think of my wedding day. My stepdad has been there since I was twelve. He has watched me grow up. I couldn't have him walk me down the aisle. That would be just a horrible thing to do to my dad.'* (Michelle)

*'I don't know what I would do if I needed someone to walk me up the aisle. I don't know who I would choose. It is tricky.'* (Karen)

## **Conflict**

*'It didn't help that, from the get go; my stepdad and my father didn't like each other. That has probably been the biggest issue of all.'* (Michelle)

*'Dad will always pull us apart, when I argue with my stepmum.'* (Ciara)

*'I was not going to play happy families anymore in my head, so we didn't really talk at that time either. It was ultra- strained because I wasn't really talking to either of them [mother and stepfather].'* (Kevin)

*'My dad detested Keith [Stepparent]. On my communion they were fighting outside. It was really bad.'* (Rachel)

## **Discipline**

*'We kind of got the attitude like you are not our dad. You can't tell us what to do.'* (Rachel)

*'It was hard to get to a point to where my mam said that Adrian was allowed to discipline us. My mam said that he is living here. This is his home now as well. He provides for you and you have to give him respect'.* (Michelle)

*'If Pippa [stepmother] was to say anything to me I would have accepted it cos she has earned it. But if Dave [stepfather] did, I would tell him where to go.'* (Anita)

*'I would see him [stepfather] as a father figure in fairness, cos he has been there for seven years and if he did say anything, I would feel nearly that it was his place to say it, that would nearly be his right at this stage. He has cared. He has earned it.'* (Karen)

*'I think that would have been a major cause of arguments because, at the end of the day, in my head 'you are not my dad. You can't discipline me.' He [stepdad] would have had no status, which I think he would have found quite difficult as well because why shouldn't he discipline me?'*

(Kevin)

*'I would go straight to dad and say that she has no right to tell me that I am 18 years of age I don't care if I am living in her house'* (Ciara)

## **Loyalty Conflict**

*'Up until I was thirteen, I was aware that my dad wasn't happy with Keith. [stepfather] It was awkward, ...like stepping on egg shells ..being careful telling a story ....to leave him out [stepfather] of it. I remember slipping up and calling him [father] Keith and I can still remember his face.'*

*'My dad doesn't like it when I talk about Adrian, [stepfather] but I don't think that is good because it is going to further complicate things and mess me up emotionally. You shouldn't have to feel guilty about having a relationship with your stepparent'* (Michelle)

*'I would feel guilty trying to please both sides of the coin...like a torn page I still feel till the day that I die that I am torn between my mum and my dad.'* (Anita)

## **Rivalry**

*'It was probably selfish of me. In my head it was me or him. There was massive rivalry always between us. I don't think that I was really jealous of anything between them, but I always would think that she would choose us over him.'* (Kevin)

*'I will say he was my dad first. [to sister].. a fight emerges...She will push my buttons... I will spill that and it really gets to her.'* (Ciara)

*'I suppose there would be a bit of rivalry with his daughter. At Christmas, I would always try and get the better present, which I always do, because she is useless for him. I am sure he prefers me, not being big headed.'* (Karen)

## **Communication**

*'A lot of times in families, things are swept under the carpet, everything will be grand. I was never asked at the time how I felt about things, if I thought things were fair or anything.'* (Lisa)

*'We were dragged from here to there and nobody stopped and said 'this is what is happening.' It is important that they listen to children, because nobody listens to the child.'* (Rachel)

*'If they both sat me down and talked about it, I think both myself and my sister would have handled it better, but my dad is one of those people that pushes things under the carpet.'* (Ciara)

*'If people saw more of stepfamilies on the tv, they would talk more and they would understand things better.'* (Matt)

*'If we talked like over time, I would probably forget that she wasn't my actual ma. I wouldn't even care. The only real reason that I don't get on with my stepmam now is that we don't talk. If there was one thing that I would definitely recommend is just talk.'* (Michael)

*'A lot of people get caught up in the moment. They might forget to sit down with their children and make sure that the child doesn't feel that they are being abandoned or that they are not loved as much anymore.'* (Kevin)

*'My mam is very level headed. She is very intuitive. She would always ask us how we feel about things.'* (Michelle)

## **Benefits of Stepfamily Experience**

### **Opportunities to Learn**

*‘Is it better for parents to stay together, when they are not getting on? No, you grow up with a bad sense of what a relationship should be. I have learned a lot from looking at my mam and dad and looking at my mam and Adrian [stepfather] and asking what do I want in a relationship?’ (Michelle)*

*‘I definitely think that having Pippa [stepmother] in my life has been great. She hasn’t gone out to teach me anything, but you pick up on things and the way she carries herself. She is such a real good role model, whereas I do think that I would have been a very different person, if I had have only had my own mother as my role model.’ (Anita)*

*‘I think it has definitely made me more self-sufficient and it definitely has benefitted me. It just kind of makes me look at the world a bit more broadly and I can understand people and the world a bit better. I am a little bit more independent.’ (Karen)*

### **Financial Benefits**

*‘When you have got two parents, you have got two incomes so you have got a nice house you have got nice holidays. We never wanted for anything. I think that that was something that we probably may have missed out on, if it wasn’t a two parent family.’ (Kevin)*

*‘There were two breadwinners in the house. It wasn’t just mam financially.’ (Michelle)*

*‘My stepdad did bring more financial security to the family.’ (Ryan)*

*‘My mam was great for those few years, but it was definitely tough in terms of finance. He was a great support for my mam financially’. (Karen)*

### **A Sense of Stability**

*‘My dad was a brutal timekeeper. If he said he would be here at five, he will be here at half-eight. I think my mam really appreciates the stability she has now with Adrian. [stepfather] She can totally rely on him like, say if she was in work and if she said to Adrian will you collect the kids from school? ... She knows it’s sorted. (Michelle)*

*‘My stepdad brought a bit more reassurance. It was definitely more calm or something. A sense of security, definitely’. (Karen)*

## **Co-parent**

*'Obviously it is a lot of strain for one parent to bring up a family, so I think in that sense it was more positive for us.'* (Kevin)

*'Mam was much more content and much more relaxed, when she knew that there was a man in the house, whereas she wasn't just the only one in the house responsible for anything going wrong. There was someone there.'* (Michelle)

*'Well I suppose the workload in terms of parenting was 50-50 and that was pretty instant as far as I can remember. Definitely split down the middle.'* (Ryan)

*'I think he was a huge support for her and for our foundations as a family. I do recall mam running around and not having a chance for herself, when there was just the two of us. Then when he [stepparent] came, it was definitely better ...I did appreciate having another parent.'* (Karen)

*'When my stepdad came along, it gave my mother more opportunities, so she could work fulltime. He helped with minding us.'* (Matt)

## **Gaining Siblings**

*'It's pretty good to be honest, to have siblings.'* (Michael)

*'I can't imagine not having my little brother, so that was positive. Apart from that, ... I don't really know.'* (Rachel)

*'I love having extra sisters. I always wanted a big family so I love being in a big family. It is probably the thing I feel best about when we are all together... and my younger sisters, I wouldn't live without them to be honest. I wouldn't take back my parents to get back together, no'.* (Ciara)

## **Gender**

*'Fellas don't usually talk about stuff like this.'* (Matt)

*'You know an older man [stepparent], and a younger girl. It's always going to be a bit strange. We hadn't got a lot in common.'* (Karen)

*'I don't know whether it is an old fashioned thing, that you have to have a dad in the family to be a family, but when I am with my dad I feel like I am having fun. I am with my family.'* (Ciara)

*'When I was changing my clothes and things like that, I would have been locking the door. It was a bit strange, living with this man, who I never met before.'* (Lisa)



### **Lack of Acknowledgement of the Stepfamily**

*'The picture painted is of one dad, one mam, a boy and a girl, happy around the table. I don't think that that is accurate at all. If people saw more of stepfamilies on the tv or radio, they would talk more and they would understand things better.'* (Matt)

*'In advertisements and stuff they always have the traditional family. I think it takes a long time for society to change its view on things but the reality is that nowadays it is more surprising if parents stay together.'* (Michelle)

*'I don't think that general society acknowledges or understands stepfamilies.'* (Lisa)

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

*At the outset the purpose of the research was stated and the participants were given time to read the information sheet and the consent form. Once the interviewee was happy to proceed and had signed the consent form, the researcher began to ask the following questions.*

Could you tell how you had experience of a stepfamily?

How did you find out about your new family situation?

Could you tell me about how you experienced the adjustment to life in a stepfamily?

What comes to your mind when you think of this time in your life?

What were the particular difficulties/challenges?

How did you experience not living with one of your parents or sharing living arrangements with one of your parents?

How did you experience new additions to your household/family?

How did it affect your relationship with your parents?

How did you deal about your parent's new relationship with a new partner?

Any difficulties or issues arise which you would like to share.

Step parent? What was that relationship like?

Where there any difficulties of your stepfamily experience that you would like to talk about?

Where there any positives to stepfamily life for you?

What was your experience of step siblings if applicable?

How did this experience compare to your previous family life experience?

Did you feel your family was different?

Is there anything that could have been done at that time that might have helped you?

What do you think we need to know in order to help children going through similar situations?

What is helpful?

What is not?

Is there anything else you would like to add that you think might be important for us to know in order to understand how children experience stepfamily life?

Thank you so much for your time.

Note: These were semi-structured interviews which provided for guidance, but not dictation of the interview process and therefore the participant was provided the flexibility to expand on issues that they felt were significant aspects of their experiences.

## Appendix D: Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Could you tell me how you had experience of a stepfamily?

Participant: My mam and dad split up, over ten years now. My dad cheated on my mam with this woman and she now is my stepmom. They married two years ago and she had a daughter from another relationship, who I actually get on very well with now. We never did as kids. They have since gone on and had three other children.

Interviewer: What age were you at the time?

Participant: I was eight or nine, young but I remember most of it, so I wasn't that young.

Interviewer: What comes to your mind when you think of this time in your life?

Participant: I had an older sister and she found it much more difficult. She doesn't speak to my father at all. My older sister is ten years older than me and she was just out of school when it happened. She took it harder than me. I was always a daddy's girl. They were married for twenty five years, when they broke up. For about three years beforehand they weren't really getting on anyway. I didn't really understand it anyway, that my dad is gone. It was, 'oh well, I can still see him whenever I want.'

Interviewer: Can you remember how you were told about the situation?

Participant: It was done really badly to be honest. My dad moved to Scotland with his then girlfriend, and her daughter was left behind. They were all from the same town as me and her daughter was left behind with the nanny. She refused to go. She was twelve at the time. She kicked up murder. She never had a dad, so she rebelled more than I did. I thought that we were all moving to Scotland, that the whole family were going. I was going to live with my dad and that is the way it is going to happen. Then I kinda copped it myself that we weren't going.

Interviewer: Could you tell me about how you felt at this time?

Participant: I remember I was really upset because I didn't realise that he was moving. That wasn't in my plan and I used all the names and stuff and I told my dad that I was never going to speak to him again. My mum was so upset about it. Dad would come over to bring me to

Scotland and I would refuse to go and I would only tell him when he had gotten to Ireland. Until I was about 15, I refused to see my dad, unless my mam was in view. I wouldn't get on that boat. I wouldn't go. I got very like separation issues from mam. I couldn't leave her. I slept in her bed until I was about twelve after that but other than that, that is the way it affected me emotionally. I was stuck to my mum. I wouldn't leave her side. Now I am grand, but until I was about 15 or 16, I was like that. That is when I first made the trip at about 13 or 14 over to see my dad in Scotland and that was horrendous. I never went again for like three years. I couldn't. At night, I would get real upset and I would ring my mam. I was ringing her constantly, 'are you ok?' I used to get very panicky that something was going to happen to her while I was away. I would be hysterical on the phone. About three times a year dad would come over and I couldn't go with him. I would say I am going and then come the night, I would freak out but he always spoke to me every week on the phone nonstop. I would say that I am quite close to my dad. I was 17 when I really started going over there regularly because of my little sister. I felt like I was missing out by not going to see them.

Interviewer: How did you feel about having a new sister?

Participant: My dad had his first child and I wasn't told about her until she was a year old, because at the time I was in hospital when she was born. I was in fifth class, about ten or eleven and my dad had come over. My auntie had died. My dad had a baby seat in the car and he had taken me in the car. My mum knew about it, but she didn't know that the baby seat was in the car. My sister knew about it, but I wasn't told about it. So I was in the car and I said, 'who owns that baby seat' and he went, 'that's my child' and I went, 'ha very funny who owns the baby seat?' He said, 'no that is my child.' That day they came and took me and I fought with my mam like hell. I can't believe that you didn't tell me. I can't believe that I wasn't told about it. That is the one thing, that I have always wanted was a little sister. I can't believe that you never told me. So that year then I went to see my dad, because I was angry with my mam over it.

Interviewer: What was most upsetting about this situation for you?

Participant: I was mad into babies when I was younger. I used to look after my little cousins who are actually the same age as my little sister, born around the same time. I was like, 'why wasn't I informed of this information?' I remember my mam got very upset over it and said 'I

wanted to tell you my way. You are too young. You wouldn't comprehend it. I just was like I am best off dropping it and I would tell you in a few years time.' So that is when I backed down and wasn't so angry about it. For my sister, that was the end for her. She was never going to contact him again. She never spoke to him from the day he left. I think the most upsetting thing for her, was not the cheating, but the fact that he did not inform her that he was going to leave the family, he just left. As much as I wouldn't have understood it, I probably would have been able to deal with it more if they had both sat me down, instead of one person telling me and the other person being on the phone. I have always said that to my dad, why didn't you just sit us down and tell us that you were leaving instead of just upping and leaving the country and not informing us?' Because then it was like we couldn't even see him. I then had to speak to him on the phone the only way I had to speak to him again.

Interviewer: Could you tell me about visiting your dad in Scotland?

Participant: The only reason I went for the first time, was because my little sister was born. I loved being there and my little sister was 18 months at the time. My stepsister, when she used to live near me, she was from a poorer background than me. She knew me, but I didn't know her. She will say it now that she was jealous of my situation, so she didn't like when I came over there. She was like, 'no what are you doing here' and she rebelled. She was dragged over to Scotland and she rebelled big-time. She would go out at night and not come home. She didn't like having a stepdad, 'No I have grown up twelve years without a dad. I don't need you.' Nowadays, they would be as close as father and daughter would be to a point. It was uncomfortable in that kind of way, when I was there, me and her were not getting along. She thought that it was my fault that she was uprooted and moved to Scotland.

Interviewer: How did you feel towards her because she was now living in a house with your father?

Participant: I never felt jealous of her. I would have had more issues with my little sister. She is like ten or eleven, so there is ten odd years between us. Me and her get into blazing rows. I will say, 'he was my dad first' and we are really alike, so we always go on like that, clash and if a fight emerges and she will push my buttons. I will spill that.

Interviewer: Can I ask you what did you call your stepsister?

Participant: When we are together, we say sisters, because we have only really got along in the past two years, before then, we barely spoke. I started regularly going over there, from the time I was seventeen, so in the past two years I would basically live in her house when I am over there. She will come over here to me, so we always say that we connected in a bond where we would bitch about the situation we have been put in. We would go into the fact that we were never told. She got uprooted and I got left. We always go into that. We will sit there some nights and be like, 'so did you know this stage that this was happening?' and she will say stuff like that and I will say 'ah yeh', and we will try to piece it all together, cos I have never spoken about it to my dad and he won't. He will give me a different version of events and my mam will give me a different version. My stepmam will give me a complete different version. I'll be like, 'where are we going to get the truth?' So me and her will then try and piece it out, well then this happened at this time and I will say 'well he was still with my mam at that time' and we will try and work it out, that type of way.

Interviewer: Could you describe what it was like to live over in Scotland in the house?

Participant: My stepsister would throw fits. She would say that I had stolen things out of her room. I was quite shy at that point and whenever I was over there, I wouldn't have felt comfortable like this was my house, an outsider in a way. If dad went anywhere, I went with him. I wouldn't stay in the house alone with my stepmom. I will tiptoe around her, as she has quite a bad temper. If she would scream at me, I would go straight to dad and I would say something like, 'I am not having that. I am not having her speak to me like that.' She will treat me as if I am her daughter and I don't like that. I am not allowing her the disciplinary role. Some nights, like for the past two summers I went over there, because they own a pub so I work there. She would be in charge of me and we would have banter, but if I wanted to go out at night and she told me that I wasn't allowed, I would go straight to dad and say that she has no right to tell me that. I am 18 years of age. I don't care if I am living in her house

Interviewer: Do you feel like it is her house?

Participant: Em to a point, obviously I don't live there fulltime, but I would be just as comfortable there now when I am over there. I don't really care to be honest. I would go into the fridge, as I would go into the fridge at home, whereas when I was younger, I was like, 'thank you very much for the dinner, that kind of way.'

Interviewer: Could you tell me how this situation developed?

Participant: Yeh, it was more so seeing them very regularly and obviously my little sisters grew up. I know two years ago, my dad was chuffed to bits that I went and stayed for the summer and that is when I got very close to them as a family, and to the point where I was like I don't want to come home. I was having that much fun and like I got on with them very well. My dad loves it because he still calls me his baby. I am very close to my dad. I wouldn't feel uncomfortable now, well it depends, if we have a row, then I feel uncomfortable and I say, 'I want to go home. I don't want to stay here. I don't feel comfortable in this presence.' My dad will never fight with me. He will never allow fights to go on, cos he is older and stuff. He pulls us apart. I argue with my stepmum. She doesn't like in the last few years that her daughter will take my side, and we kinda ganged up on them.

Interviewer: What is your relationship like with your sisters?

Participant: My three younger sisters, I never call them half-sisters and I get very angry when anyone who says half-sisters, cos to be honest, there are people that don't understand. There are people that come into the pub and say 'that is not your real sister' and even though I live in Ireland and I have a different mum there is no point, I don't like the label of half-sister. They are my sisters. My friend has two stepsisters. Her dad has two other children in another relationship and she does not like to call them sisters or brother or half. I would say 'they are your dad's kids. They are your blood' and she says 'no they are not. I have never lived with them; I have never been out with them. I know them through family gatherings alone'. My sisters are my blood, whereas Kara [stepsister] is not my blood, but to make it simpler when we are together we just say don't say stepsisters because it's like going into the whole it's just too complicated, so we will say just that is my sister. I love my sisters. My eldest sister in Scotland would skype me nearly every day, and she would be blabbing on and the other two would come into the room and we would talk. Otherwise I wouldn't speak to them before I would go over.

Interviewer: Can you remember how you met your dad's new partner?

Participant: I met her the day I met my younger sister, when my aunt had died. They came for the month's mind. I don't think I even spoke to her. I just remember being in the kitchen and I went to my younger sister and I played with her and that was it and then she was



brought then to the rest of my family and that was so uncomfortable, because my cousins are very close to my mum. My dad's sister's kids lived in our house for years because we lived close to each other. They took more offence to her being there, because they were older. We went into a pub and my cousins were there and my cousins would not speak to her. They would speak to the child, that is no problem, but they still don't speak to her at all. I think that they said to my dad 'We can't believe that you are bringing her into this family.' My cousins are all older than me quite a bit, so after the breakup, they all rallied around my mother and helped her so they are real close to my mum. When they got married and stuff, they invited my dad and him only. He was told strictly that no one else was to come because my mam was coming and she gets first place. If he doesn't want to come alone, well then he is not coming at all. So most of my cousins took my mam's side, so my dad doesn't speak to that side anymore.

Interviewer: What is your relationship like with your dad's partner?

Participant: I never refer to her as stepmother. I will always say my dad's wife. She will refer to me as her stepdaughter. It is ok. It's kinda like she is a friend's mother. That is how close. We will get along. We will have fun. We will laugh but she will scream at me, if I do something bad. There's no hesitancy in disciplining me whatever, so in that way she is not tiptoeing around me, but I am tiptoeing around her. If she does discipline me, I will accept it at the time but after I will speak to my dad about it and say 'she can't discipline me. I am not listening to her and because I have become more argumentative in the past few years, I have more confidence. I would fight back and I say 'no, I want to go out tonight. You have no business telling me that I can't go out tonight. I'll see you later.' So in that kinda way, we have become kinda strained, because I am fighting back. Lately I'd be more argumentative, so in that kind of way she backed off because I am arguing against her. At Christmas it blew up and me and my stepsister took each other side and she doesn't like that, because my stepsister can be quite harsh, so she would be tiptoeing more around her than me. I will get the brunt of it and that's why my dad would say 'stop telling you stepsister stuff, before you tell me it because she is then on the phone and she is telling us this and I am like, I haven't heard this'. That is because I speak to her everyday email or text every day and I would be closer to her in the last two years than I would be to my older sister, cos there is ten years between. My older sister gets told nothing.

Me and my stepmum really haven't got that close a relationship. She would probably be really upset that I wouldn't think of her that highly and my dad thinks that we are quite close but I wouldn't say that. The only reason I would text her, would be if my dad wasn't answering his texts or if I rang the phone, I would make small talk and ask her to put my dad on. I would never ring her, just to speak to her, or anything like that. She sees me as my dad's daughter and someone she has to be civil with, to keep my dad happy. It is a bit awkward at times with her. If she was in her room watching the tv or anything and if I had anything to say to her, I would wait until she is finished.

Interviewer: What do you find difficult about your family situation?

Participant: It is very complicated, to sit down and tell someone about my family. It takes years, like there is so many of us and it is so hard to explain to people. Generally I will simplify it. I will always say sisters. 'My dad got remarried and he had three kids and I have four sisters from that.' It is complicated in a way. I will still feel, to the day that I die that I am torn between my mum and my dad. My graduation is coming up now and my mum doesn't want me to invite my dad, but I feel like he is 60 so I feel like I will be the only one that he will get to see graduate, so I feel I have to ask him to come. My mum would say 'but he didn't pay for you to go to college.' Well I would say 'well I supported myself through college, so it was nothing to do with either of you.' But when it comes to the point that they have to sit together, then it becomes complicated.

And I can't invite my stepmom to anything, as much as we do get along, she cannot come. My three younger sisters cannot come to anything. My granny passed away about 4 or 5 years ago and it was my dad's mother but my mum looked after her and obviously we were all there. My stepmom came and the three kids came and everyone felt that it was so wrong that my dad brought them. Now they weren't married at the time but they had been together 8 years at that stage. You would expect her [dad's partner] to come. It was weird. My cousins thought it was awful that my dad brought her. My sister took offence. It gets complicated cos she can't come to anything and I don't know how she feels about it. She They couldn't attend my 21<sup>st</sup>. I can't invite them to my graduation. If I am ever to get married, I will have to elope. I can't have my family there, cos it is just too complicated and it is the same for my stepsister. When she got married, her dad and her mum don't get along but she wanted them at the wedding. She wanted to have her half brother and sister from his

family, as her bridesmaid and her mum didn't turn up to the wedding. So it is always complicated. You cannot include them. They are not family at the end of the day. That is the way everyone sees them.

Interviewer: Are there any other things that you would like to share about the difficulties you encountered?

Participant: My parents only got divorced four years ago, so when that was coming up, I took my mums side you know. I was angry with my dad for asking for what he was asking for. 'It is not mam's fault. It is your fault. Also there is jealousy there, like my stepsister thinks that I can wrap my dad around my little finger and I can get what I want. She will always say 'if you will ring him and ask him for money, he will drop and everything for you.' My stepmam will put her foot down. She won't allow me to get around my dad as much anymore. I will go behind her back and I will ask my dad directly, or I will ring him or email or text, so she can't see it. I was living in America last year and I rang and told him that my bankcard got stolen and I needed money. She made a fact of making me pay it back when I came home, and dad wouldn't have done that. I said 'what do you mean I have to pay it back?' So I said it to her daughter, and she said it to her and it got back to my dad and my dad said 'no, she doesn't need to pay it back. It was only a 100. She needed it.'

Interviewer: Did you talk to your mam about your experiences in Scotland?

Participant: If my mum asks me about how I got on in Scotland, I would be very hesitant to tell her, just to the point that I feel that it is hurting her by me talking about it. My dad still wants a civil relationship with my mum but my mum won't allow it and just in the way that my dad just kinda wants everything to disappear my mam can't allow it, so I am very loyal to my mum. I can't not take my mam's side.

Interviewer: Is there anything that could have been done that would have helped you with the difficulties you encountered?

Participant: Communication that is all I could say. If they both sat me down and talked about it, I think both myself and my sister would have handled it better. But then looking at it, if that was my husband and he cheated on me, I wouldn't sit down with him and tell the kids. In fact, I would probably make him tell the kids but my dad is one of those people that pushes

things under the carpet, so he would never have done that knowing him as a person. He doesn't like to talk about it whatsoever and the only way you can get into my dad's brain is if you give him a few drinks and lately I have been doing that a lot more because I have become more interested in my family and kinda wanted to know about my aunties and uncles and stuff like that. So I'll go into stuff, and then he will spill more and then with Kara and stuff we would try and figure it out how exactly it happened. I wouldn't bring it up with my mum, for the pure fact that I don't like to hash it all back up for her. So it would only be my dad that I would do that with and my stepmam, she isn't very honest so I wouldn't ever ask her, so communication definitely.

If I was in the situation myself, I would make sure that it broke down civilly. I would be more aware now coming through it that I would be aware of the problems quite fast. It has thought me how to recognise when something is not working and if I did have children I would break up civilly cos I see how other people do it civilly and they still have their dad around. I am not torn, but there is conflict that I come across, when it comes to certain stuff happening.

Interviewer: Could you tell me what you like about your stepfamily experience?

Participant: When all of us are together, like at Christmas and stuff and my stepsister is there with her kids, my dad is definitely the most happiest, because he loves that everyone is around us. I feel like it is more of a family, whereas when I am at home, it is just like me mum and sister. I don't know whether it is old fashioned thing, that you have to have a dad in the family, to be a family, but when I am with my dad, I feel like I am having fun because I am with my family, so I do see them as my family as well as my mum.

Having extra sisters, I always wanted a big family so I love being in a big family it is probably the thing I feel best about when we are all together. Me and my stepsister have become really close to a point where I would see her as a sister figure. She is like the person I would go to if I had a problem or something. She is a friend. We would joke and have a drink, and will share each other problems, like if she is having a problem with her husband, I'll be the one she talks to. She doesn't have anyone her age to talk to, so I will be the person that she will contact. She even said, in the past few years that I feel more like a real sister to her. She can kind of lean on me and she can tell me stuff that she wouldn't tell her mam, because her mam would kill her and her kids would call me aunty Ciara. They see me as an

aunty. They wouldn't know that I am not biologically their aunty. I like the fact that I became closer to her and then my younger sisters I wouldn't live without them to be honest. If I had to take back my parents to get back together, 'no.'

## Appendix E: Information Sheet

**Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.**

My name is Audrey McGee and I am a studying for a Masters Degree in Child, Family and Community Studies in the Dublin Institute of Technology. I am required to complete a research dissertation and I wish to conduct an explorative study of the stepfamily experiences of young people in Ireland. My research supervisor is Ann Marie Halpenny. She is based in DIT, Mountjoy Square.

**Purpose of this research:** The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the young people's experiences of stepfamily life. It is hoped that through a greater understanding of these experiences, that services will be better placed to support individuals and families who might experience difficulties and challenges in adjusting to a new family. It is also important to explore the positive aspects of stepfamilies.

**Time Required:** The research will be carried out through an interview with the researcher. This will require up to an hour of your time. This interview can be arranged at a time and place that suits you. Following the interview the researcher might be in touch with you to verify information.

**What is involved:** The interview will cover three main areas:

1. The relationships within the stepfamily
2. The main challenges and difficulties for young people in the stepfamily
3. The positive aspects of living in a stepfamily

**Confidentiality:**

Your identity will be kept strictly confidential at all times. Your information will be assigned a code name and any personal identifiable information will be reframed to protect your identity. Your name or any name you mention will not be used in the study.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time from the study and do not have to give an explanation for this. You may also refuse to answer all or any of the questions that the researcher will ask you. You can contact the researcher or researcher supervisor at the numbers or addresses given on the consent form.

Thank You,

Audrey McGee.

Appendix F: Consent Form

I have read the information and understand the purpose of the research and what is required of me. I have been provided with the opportunity to ask any questions that I might have. I voluntarily agree to participate in the study and understand that I can withdraw at any time without consequence. I understand that the information I give will be kept in strictest confidence, except in the event of child protection concerns being raised, or the threat of harm to myself or others. I agree to have the interview recorded, via a digital recording device and I understand that no identifying information will be transcribed. I also understand that the recording will be destroyed after the transcription.

I have received a copy of this information.

Participant:

Phone number:

Date:

Researcher:

Date:

Research Contact Details:

**Researcher:**

**Research Supervisor:**

Audrey McGee

Ann Marie Halpenny

Student of MA in Child, Family

Dublin Institute of Technology

and Community Studies

School of Social Sciences and Law

School of Social Sciences

40-45 Mountjoy Square

40-45 Mountjoy Square

Dublin 1

Dublin 1

Ph: xxxxx

Ph: 01-4024255

Email: xxxxxx

Email: xxxxx



## Appendix G: E-Mail to Students

Dear fellow students,

My name is Audrey McGee and I am a studying for a Masters Degree in Child, Family and Community Studies in the Dublin Institute of Technology. I am required to complete a research dissertation and I wish to conduct an explorative study of the stepfamily experiences of young people in Ireland. It is hoped that this research might enhance our understanding of the stepfamily experiences of young people, so that services might be better placed to support young people through their experiences. I need to interview individuals aged eighteen to twenty-four years, who have had experience of living in a stepfamily. If you fit the above criteria and wish to participate in this study, please email me at xxxxxxxx. Your assistance would be gratefully appreciated. If you have any queries regarding this research, please contact me,

Regards

Audrey McGee.