

Family Communication and Its Effects on Child Developmental Progression*

Abstract

Because divorce rates are high in the United States, the current paper assesses how stepchildren may respond to the introduction of a stepparent, and at what age this introduction may make the most impact. The current study seeks to assess the relationship between family communication in a divorced family with the recent introduction of a stepparent and a stepchild's subsequent developmental progression through Sigmund Freud's and Erik Erikson's life stages. This study also observes the association between reported closeness and levels of satisfaction within the stepparent and stepchild relationship.

It was hypothesized that participants who were introduced to a stepparent at an older age, such as adolescence or young adult, would be more impacted in their development. Results did not indicate a significant relationship between age at introduction to stepparent and subsequent relational satisfaction $F(5, 45) = .84, p > .05$. This study makes contributions toward further study in the subject of age at introduction and subsequent relational satisfaction while making suggestions for the introduction of a stepchild and stepparent.

* I would like to offer special thanks to Dr. Samantha Senda-Cook and Dr. Amanda Holman of Creighton University for their guidance in the construction of the current paper, as well as the *Quest* reviewer for further editing guidance.

Introduction and Significance

In early 2014, the divorce rate in the United States was reported at approximately 37%, and this rate has increased the number of step-families reported nationwide (Nakonezny, Shull, & Rodgers, 2014). As the structure of the nuclear family is shifting, it is crucial to assess how a divorced family reacts to a new member entering its structure. It is also important to evaluate the effects of these changes on the psychology of the children involved in order to recognize and address developmental problems that may result from transitions that occur in family communication. Such transitions are typically regarded as problematic disturbances, particularly if a stepchild's communication with his or her biological parent suffers due to the introduction of a stepparent. By addressing the possibility of consequential developmental problems, awareness of the impacts on developmental stages of affected stepchildren may provide the ability to predict how a child will be impacted in the future according to a possible disturbance.

The current paper addresses Freud's and Erikson's developmental stages, and how they can be understood through varying communicative styles in both non-divorced and divorced families. For example, non-divorced families focus more on the successful developmental progression of children involved by increasing quality and quantity of family communication (Favez, Scaiola, Tissot, Darwiche, & Frascarolo, 2011). Divorced families with new stepparents may experience more distraction from a child's developmental progression due to changes in the communication style of the family (Jensen, Shafer, & Larson, 2014). According to such noted differences in research of families both divorced and non-divorced in nature, the purpose of this study is to explore how changes in communication styles of families may impact the psychological development of stepchildren.

First, the research defines and explains developmental stages as examined by Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson to develop a general expectation of what a child typically experiences throughout development as well as the consequences of an interruption in this development. Second, the research examines communication and interactions within a non-divorced and divorced family, and the developmental effects on children involved. Last, the research evaluates how a divorced family's communication style differs from a non-divorced family's style, and how this difference may impact the successful development of stepchildren.

Literature Review

To better understand the possible impacts that the introduction of and subsequent interactions with a stepparent may have on a child's progression through each developmental stage, it is important to investigate the information relevant to such a situation. First, this paper provides the definitions and applications of Freud's and Erikson's developmental stages. Next, the interactions of a non-divorced family in relation to a child's development, and the interactions of a divorced family with step-members in relation to a child's development are explained. Furthermore, the current study asserts that differences exist between the communicative styles of a non-divorced family, and a divorced family with step-members. Thus, the change in communication styles provides subsequent contributions, or detriments, to a child's development.

Freud's and Erikson's Developmental Stages and Application

Sigmund Freud developed many concepts within the field of psychology, particularly the psychology behind personality. His construction of the development of the self during

the first two decades of life has been broadly studied and has also created stepping blocks for other psychologists. The life stages that Freud outlines and describes are referred to as psychosexual phases because Freud believed that they involved the sexual energy of the libido. Freud also outlined particular age ranges in which young children experienced these developmental stages, which will be discussed in the data and analysis section. The first stage is the oral stage, which involves the basic drive for food that an infant possesses (Carver & Scheier, 2012). According to Turiel (2010), children begin the developmental process by gaining security through support from the home, particularly from their parents. This initial sense of security is developed according to how well an infant's hunger is satisfied. Thus, this is the time that trust or mistrust will be developed between a mother and child. Next, the anal stage involves the potty training phase of a toddler (Carver & Scheier, 2012). The effects of it often revolve around the parental reactions to how quickly a toddler adapts to such changes in physical behavior (Turiel, 2010). For example, parents may potty train their child by using encouraging communication, such as praising the child, or discouraging communication, such as scolding or embarrassing the child. From this stage, a child either develops pride or shame. The development of either of these qualities is largely dependent on how a parent communicates with a child to teach him or her how to successfully achieve a goal (Turiel, 2010).

Children may not successfully develop if they do not learn to instinctually trust their primary caregiver who is usually their mother as an infant (mistrust), or if they are teased and mocked during their potty training time as toddlers (shame) (Carver & Scheier, 2012). This emphasizes the claim of Freud that the environment in which young children are allowed to develop holds a major influence over the rest of their progress through their defined life stages. In a successful environment, young children develop trust and pride without any fixations (Garcia, 1995). These initial stages of life hold the most influence for parents because this is the time to establish a strong foundation on which children grow the capacity to gain more independence in their progress through development as they age (Wilson & Durbin, 2013).

However, Wilson and Durbin (2013) assert that as children begin through the school age life phase, parents begin to have less and less of an impact on continued progression through developmental stages. Children are becoming more independent and also feel a stronger desire to become self-sufficient. An important step toward this independence is the phallic stage. As Freud's third defined life stage, it addresses the discovery of one's reproductive parts. Freud believed that young boys developed sexual feelings for their mother, an Oedipus complex, and young girls developed sexual feelings for their father, an Electra complex. To control for such complexes, young boys and girls begin to direct this energy toward the opposite sex. Thus, children begin a more socially-oriented stage of their lives in which their communication abilities become more important (Carver & Scheier, 2012). This social aspect is further considered in Erikson's developmental stages.

Erikson outlines eight main life stages that one passes through in psychosocial development: infancy, early childhood, preschool, school age, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, and old age (Carver & Scheier, 2012). Erikson also outlined particular age ranges in which young children experienced these developmental stages, which will be discussed in the data and analysis section. These stages differ from Freud's in that they focus less on how sexual awareness contributes to the development of one's personality. Instead, the emphasis is placed on how one develops through increased intellect, which results in greater social awareness. Thus, the interest in Erikson's stages is a combination of identity development and how intimacy may influence this process (Meacham & Santilli, 1982). However, Erikson

Rainforth

uses his theory of a social and intimate combination to explain that an issue presented in childhood can be addressed by referring to external resources such as social development with peers, rather than just isolated psychological examinations (Ginsburg, 1992).

Erikson's research also addresses the importance of one experiencing a crisis in each life stage. Consequentially, one must enter and pass through Erikson's stages in a particular time frame, which was not specified by Freud. Most importantly, the ways in which one proceeds through the early phases will impact the ways in which one responds to issues that will be presented in later phases (Dunkel & Sefcek, 2009). Each of these stages holds a different life crisis that can either help one's personality develop in a positive way, or leave one's personality vulnerable in some way. This strength or weakness dilemma holds the potential for one to develop an overall positively valued characteristic to add to one's personality and move on to the next stage (Carver & Scheier, 2012). This standard is seen in both Freud's and Erikson's life stages in order to successfully continue development. Thus, while a crisis may be experienced differently by different personalities, it seems that they are necessary for one to move through the developmental process (Meacham & Santilli, 1982). Injuries suffered in childhood, whether psychological or physical, can impact the ways in which one continues to develop, which is similar to the fixation term as asserted by Freud. Psychological injuries may be inflicted by the different functions of a new step-family (Bjarnason & Arnasson, 2011).

Freud's and Erikson's Stages through Developmental Communication

Freud also breaks down the ways one develops into life stages that vary in length and strenuousness. It is understood that these combined stages are not necessarily a pathway for one to follow in the development of the self. Rather, they serve as guidelines to help understand the common, and often difficult, struggles that are addressed at each selected life phase (Garcia, 1995). It is crucial that parents understand how to guide their child through the initial life stages in an effective way because children will develop different needs as they progress through the various life stages. Parents must actively identify and respond to these changing needs in order to best address how their child is changing in order to ensure the complete development of the child: physically, mentally, and emotionally. This is done typically by meeting the child's basic and immediate needs, whether it is hunger or whether it is the need for more intellectual challenge as he or she moves through the life stages. Thus, it is important that parents feel confident and capable of meeting their child's needs. Parents who frequently communicate with their children about their needs experience the most success with their children's development as the children's needs are met more quickly and sufficiently. This type of communication may be done nonverbally, as parents recognize external signs of distress, such as anger. Parents may also speak directly to their children with the expectation that they will express their needs and wants verbally (Favez, Scaiola, Tissot, Darwiche, & Frascarolo, 2011). Therefore, learning to effectively guide a child through the first and most important stages of development is critical for a parent if he or she wants the child to develop as successfully as possible (Ticusan, 2014). This type of guidance also extends to the recognition and alleviation of the problems that arise within each stage.

The issues that Freud presents in his life stages are considered to be challenges that one either passes or fails. One may approach the problem by successfully confronting it, which is considered passing it, without developing any lasting psychological issues from this particular phase. One may also approach a problem within a life stage, but not yet have the capacity or ability to successfully deal with it (Garcia, 1995). How parents guide their young children during the most critical times of development can have a strong influence on whether a child

develops a fixation or not. Those parents who take active roles in helping their child to progress often develop a strategy for success that is unique according to the learning abilities of the child.

This strategy may involve direct speaking with a child about their needs, or it may reside in a parent learning to recognize the needs of their child through his or her body language (Favez, Scaiola, Tissot, Darwiche, & Frascarolo, 2011). The continued surveillance and maintenance of the unique strategy is also important for a child's successful development through life stages. However, parents must employ strong and effective communication skills with their children to implement such an individualized plan. A parent must fully understand the child's current placement, and what the child needs to move forward. This promotes a learning environment in which children feel that they have security, which enables them to continue progressing through development. It also helps children to avoid any feelings of frustration due to lack of challenge, or too much challenge while developing (Berkovits, O'Brien, Carter, & Eyberg, 2010). Through an open communication style, children develop a sense of security and trust from their parents. They begin to understand that they can explore different things, and their parents will be there to satisfy any needs and wants (Carver & Scheier, 2012).

Freud's and Erikson's Developmental Stages in Family Communication

Non-Divorced Family

It is clear that parental stability plays an important role in the way a child develops; therefore, marital satisfaction has been considered to be a main contributor to a child's successful progression through the developmental stages (Favez, Scaiola, Tissot, Darwiche, & Frascarolo, 2011). A child relies on the trust that his or her parents will meet basic needs and wants, so a strong communication system is necessary between both parents and a child. Thus, those parents who remain married and work together to help their child develop provide a less distracting environment in which a child may positively progress through a normal development (Favez, Scaiola, Tissot, Darwiche, & Frascarolo, 2011). Those parents who do not communicate well with their child can damage successful development by contributing to a fixation.

A fixation can have long-term effects on one's cognitive, social, and developmental progress, whether it is major or minor. Because fixations are thought to be detrimental to a child's developmental progression, they are typically to be avoided, according to Freud. However, their development can be hindered or alleviated through the positive support of parents. Anna Freud found that the most effective work against a fixation in a particular life stage is through preventative action. Her preventative action included stimulating an awareness of fixations that can develop within stages along with an increased education of psychoanalytic theory (Sternberg, 2012). Parents may also increase their ability to support their child by attending parental training sessions (Graf, Grumm, Hein, & Fingerle, 2014). In a study completed by Graf et al. (2014), the effectiveness of training sessions for parents on the development of their children is important as preventative work in avoiding fixations during particular life stages. However, preventative stimulation may not be an adequate factor for parents to consider with the development of their child.

The involvement of a parent and parent-child communication in any aspect of a child's life is also dependent on the parent's existing level of competency. Thus, the more competent a parent is, the more likely that the parent will take action in the child's movement through the critical initial stages. This is typically because parents with higher

Rainforth

competence levels understand more of what is presented to them through parent training. They are better able to communicate this information back to their children so that both parties can continue to learn in an effective way (Graf et al., 2014). Parents who are actively involved in their child's development by preparation through preventative work and addressing their child's immediate needs through effective and efficient communication are remembered positively as the child ages. These positive memories indicate satisfactory development in a child as well as a more stable mental disposition as an adult (Waldron, Kloeber, Goman, Piemonte, & Danaher, 2014).

The memories that adults recall from the childhood often involve the messages that their parents used in order to teach them some sort of moral lesson. As children move through Freud's and Erikson's life stages, they are presented with crises (trust vs. mistrust, shame vs. pride, etc.). Parents in the form of some sort of verbal acknowledgement address these crises. This may include: parents talking with their child about the crises, or parents finding someone for their child to talk with about the crises. In this way, parents are active in assisting their children through the various struggles of each life stage by openly communicating with them. These children were presented with more resources to progress through a stage without developing a fixation. Adults who feel that their parents were actively involved also feel that they have more stability when it comes to dealing with problems that they now experience. Specifically, adults who report as having supportive parents also report more successful coping skills in response to stress or grief (Waldron et al., 2014). Thus, the quantity and quality of communication that parents have with their children is important to set the building blocks of development so that the children may progress into stable and functioning adults.

Divorced Family

A step-family is created when a nuclear family is separated through divorce, and new family members eventually join by a second marriage. Research shows that in these situations, parents of the first nuclear family should remain polite and friendly for the best interest of the children involved (Bjarnason & Arnarsson, 2011). In a joint-custody situation, the cordiality is especially crucial because it puts less strain on the child. There is less tension, so a child does not feel such a strong weakening of a security base, which was an important factor in Freud's first life stage (Bjarnason & Arnarsson, 2011). This also includes the new stepparent. Environments in which initial parents and new stepparents do not engage in a positive way can create a distraction from development of the children, which often leads to a fixation within a particular life stage (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). For example, stepparents who also bring in their own children may expect that their new stepchildren behave in a similar fashion as their biological children. A stepparent may clearly articulate this expectation through manipulation, or a stepparent may leave it as an underlying desire and express frustration when the desire is not met. This can create confusion and doubt for a stepchild, eventually resulting in a fixation in an early stage of development (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013).

During the formation of a step-family, stepchildren are asked to shift and re-form interpersonal relationships with their biological parents. They are also asked to create an interpersonal relationship of sorts with their new stepparent (Schrodt & Braithwaite, in press). Throughout this process, stepchildren, on average, receive less attention during the development of their emotional and cognitive abilities. This struggle for the addressing of their immediate needs, as discussed earlier in this paper, can also hinder their development through a life stage, resulting in a fixation (Jensen, Shafer, & Larson, 2014). This change in

satisfaction of immediate needs can be referred to as a “relational turning point” in which a child feels the shift from himself or herself to the new family member. These shifts decrease the sense of family that a child feels, which also decreases their basic security foundation as discussed earlier in the paper. Specifically, stepchildren have reported that the meaningful and effective communication between family members decreased which led to increased conflict or disagreement. Thus, a child’s sense of doubt was heightened, which increased the probability of developing a fixation (Nuru & Wang, 2014).

Step-families bring much change to the structure of a child’s life, which can have negative effects on the way in which he or she develops. The simple change in environment is enough to distract the child through a sense of lost security. Particularly, if members of the new step-family do not get along with the initial members of the divorced nuclear family, conflict can arise, which is especially harmful to a young child in the early phases of development as outlined by Freud and Erikson. Further, if the change impacts the way in which a child connects to a biological parent, or if their needs are not as adequately addressed, a child can develop a fixation. Thus, research ultimately shows that stepparents do not take on as active an involvement in their stepchild’s development as a biological parent, which is typically harmful, whether in a major or minor way, to a child’s progression through Freud’s and Erikson’s life stages (Nuru & Wang, 2014).

Summary

Sigmund Freud has provided life phases on which many guidelines in the psychology field are now centered. It is important to note that Freud’s phases involve only the first twenty years of one’s life. Within each stage is a crisis that one must experience and eventually pass through. If one is not able to successfully pass through the stage, one develops a fixation. Freud also claims that one’s childhood environment and subsequent development, with the possibility of a fixation, can have a major impact on the ways in which one continues to develop in the future. Thus, it is important to evaluate the surroundings of a child in order to identify any issues that may evolve into fixations and eventual delay of development. This evaluation focuses on any change that a child may experience, which in this paper is the introduction of a stepparent to a child’s life.

Parents within nuclear families are charged with a great deal of responsibility as their child develops through the life stages. They must establish a secure home and environment in which their children can confidently begin to develop and avoid later fixations. To establish this secure foundation, parents must have the appropriate amount of competence to prepare a preventative action against fixations. Parent training, when reliable and valid, helps parents better understand the developmental process. This enhanced understanding will aid parents in creating a pathway that their children can utilize as they begin their progression. However, this type of involvement is typically only seen in active parents who both have an interest in the child’s progression. In a non-nuclear family environment, such as a step-family, the level of involvement may differ.

Erikson argues for the social-psychological development that his stages outline, rather than an internal battle through which one struggles throughout childhood and adolescence. In other words, the way in which one develops is dependent upon the social relationships that one is able to create and maintain as one progresses through particular developmental stages. Further, Erikson’s life stages last a life-time, rather than just through childhood and adolescence. Thus, research of communication according to Erikson’s developmental stages has a stronger focus on the interactional environment that may be changed and created due to the introduction of a new stepparent. It is generally thought that

Rainforth

an environment in which a stepparent has newly been introduced does not hold as much support through development for a stepchild as does the environment without a stepparent.

Erikson also defines each developmental stage as one progresses throughout an entire life span to provide a much more inclusive explanation of one's development (Hoare, 2005). This is beneficial to more fully address the reality of experiencing additional, and possibly more difficult, crises as one continues to age (Meacham & Santilli, 1982). Thus, one is better able to identify and understand a particular issue according to a certain stage (Marcia & Josselson, 2013). A timeline can be established on which when can continue the process of developing throughout a lifetime. This inclusivity is also beneficial for classification of memories about parental involvement and subsequent satisfaction in older adults. Thus, the following research question and hypothesis were posed based on past research:

RQ 1: Are the developmental stages of stepchildren impacted by the change of family communication upon the introduction of a stepparent?

H1: Stepchildren will be more negatively impacted by the change of family communication upon the introduction of a stepparent at an older age, which would be between ages 12 and 18, rather than a younger age.

Method

Data was collected by engaging participants in a survey that asked three main things: the age of the participant upon introduction to a stepparent, relational satisfaction with said stepparent after a particular interaction, and feelings of closeness with said stepparent after a particular interaction. The goal was to understand how the varying reported ages of participants may have influenced subsequent feelings of relational satisfaction and feelings of closeness with a stepparent.

Participants

Participants (n=47) were recruited through the Communication, Research, and Theory network of the National Communication Association. Participants were also contacted through email accounts and social media accounts, specifically Facebook. The participants were, on average, 28.19 years old (SD=8.16) with a minimum reported current age of 19 and a maximum reported current age of 58. Males represented 29.4% of the sample (n=15) and females represented 62.7% of the sample (n=32).

Procedures

Data collection

This study was designed to be inclusive of young adults who had experienced both a divorce and an introduction of a stepparent into the new family structure. A basic guideline was set for an initial selection of the participants: young adults (age 19 and older) who fit the above description. This study was not meant as a comparative analysis, so the necessity for a control group was absent. While the distribution of the survey began at Creighton University, there was no limit created as to who could and could not complete the survey aside from the set minimum age of 19. A brief survey was drafted composed of both closed and open-ended questions in regards to the introduction of a stepparent in a stepchild's life.¹

¹It is important to note that memories of feelings and interactions with stepparents may be distorted due to the amount of time that had passed. Particularly, if a participant was recalling feelings and interactions with a stepparent at a young age, their current relationship may distort this report.

The purpose of the survey was to ask basic demographic questions with a mix of open-ended questions to establish what age at which a stepchild may have been upon being introduced to his or her stepparent, and what he or she may have been feeling about the introduction based on a particular memory of an interaction with a stepparent. Participants were only asked to complete the survey once upon their own time and choice, and further communication was not necessary. A survey was chosen for this study because most participants seem more open to surveys rather than interviews or focus groups. Further, participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity before completing the survey, which aided in the quality and quantity of their responses to the qualitative questions.

Data Analysis

To examine the effect of the introduction of a stepparent on a stepchild's developmental progression, survey answers were coded quantitatively and then matched with the particular developmental stage in which the young adult claimed to be when introduced to the stepparent. Participant answers were divided according to the age indicated by each subject at the beginning of the survey. Freud and Erikson each defined specific age ranges in which developmental stages, and possible fixations, occurred. Those age ranges were used as a guideline to divide the participants in the current study after they completed the survey. This process gave an approximation as to how many participants represented each developmental stage in the current study.

Next, a question was used to measure each participant's level of satisfaction in his or her relationship with a stepparent. This study recorded the mean score reported within each developmental stage represented by the surveys. In this way, the levels of satisfaction could be monitored across the age groups that represented developmental stages, instead of observing each level of satisfaction reported by every participant. The differences in reports of satisfaction across developmental stages established a general understanding of how satisfaction changed across time and age within the stepparent and stepchild relationship. Lastly, another question was asked to better understand the level of satisfaction within the stepparent and stepchild relationship by indicating levels of closeness between the individuals. This report was also generalized to the entire age group that represented a developmental stage to determine the most common feeling that explained the satisfaction, or dissatisfaction within the relationship. Each of these three reports were used in combination to determine whether a disruption occurred within a stepchild's particular developmental stage upon the introduction of a stepparent.

Results

The research question focused on the developmental effects that a change in family communication due to the introduction of a stepparent may have on stepchildren. To first approach this question, the survey inquired about participants' age upon introduction to a stepparent. Their current levels of relational satisfaction with a stepparent were also measured. This process provided a better understanding of a possible fixation that may have occurred within a particular developmental stage upon the introduction of a stepparent.

Three participants were in the infant/oral developmental stage upon the introduction of a stepparent. In this study, participants qualified for this particular stage if they were between ages zero through two when they were first introduced to a stepparent. The participants reported a 6.33 out of 7 mean score of satisfaction in the relationship with their stepparent. Three participants were in the early childhood/anal developmental stage upon the introduction of a stepparent. In this study, participants qualified for this particular stage

Rainforth

if they were between ages three through five when they were first introduced to a stepparent. On average, these participants reported a 4.66 out of 7 mean score of satisfaction in the relationship with their stepparent. Nine participants were in the preschool/phallic development stage upon the introduction of a stepparent. In this study, participants qualified for this particular stage if they were between ages six through eight when they were first introduced to a stepparent. On average, these participants reported a 4.44 out of 7 mean score of satisfaction in the relationship with their stepparent. Nine participants were in the school age developmental stage upon the introduction of a stepparent. In this study, participants qualified for this particular stage if they were between ages nine through eleven when they were first introduced to a stepparent. On average, these participants reported a 4.33 out of 7 mean score of satisfaction in the relationship with their stepparent. Twenty participants were in the adolescent developmental stage upon the introduction of a stepparent. In this study, participants qualified for this particular stage if they were between the ages twelve through eighteen when they were first introduced to a stepparent. On average, these participants reported a 3.31 out of 7 mean score of satisfaction in the relationship with their stepparent. Three participants were in the young adult developmental stage upon the introduction of a stepparent. In this study, participants qualified for this particular stage if they were between the ages nineteen through twenty-six when they were first introduced to a stepparent. On average, these participants reported a 4.66 out of 7 mean score of satisfaction in the relationship with their stepparent. According to these scores as represented by each developmental age of the study, the results indicate the lowest levels of satisfaction in the relationship between stepparent and stepchild in the adolescent developmental group. The correlation between relational satisfaction and age appeared to be inverse, which indicated that the older a stepchild was upon introduction to a stepparent, the less relationally satisfied they were with said stepparent. This reported decrease in relational satisfaction as age in participants increased indicated possible fixations that were more severe in nature. A an ANOVA f-test analysis was run to examine this association.

Hypothesis one was investigated upon running an ANOVA f-test analysis of the relationship between age at which a stepchild was introduced to a stepparent and subsequent levels of satisfaction in his or her relationship with a stepparent. A one-way analysis of variance of age yielded no significant differences between developmental groups in regard to feelings of satisfaction within the relationship with a stepparent $F(5, 45) = .84, p > .05$. Hypothesis one was further investigated upon running an independent samples t-test of the relationship between age at which a stepchild was introduced to a stepparent and subsequent levels of relational satisfaction in his or her relationship with a stepparent. The infant, early childhood, preschool, and school age were grouped together as one large group, labeled pre-adolescence. The adolescent and young adults groups were lumped together, labeled adolescence. The group labeled pre-adolescence did not experience a significant difference in relational satisfaction according to age ($M = 4.87, SD = 2.30$) than did the group labeled as adolescence ($M = 3.78, SD = 2.71$). This difference was not significant, $t(23) = 1.466, p > .05$.

Discussion

This study was designed in order to examine the effects of the introduction of a stepparent on a stepchild's developmental progression. As shown by Wilson and Durbin (2013), parents have less of an impact on the development of children as they age. Specifically, children begin to gain more independence through the school and adolescent age. This effect seems to have been reflected in the changes of mean reported satisfaction

scores across age groups in the data. As the age at first introduction of a stepparent increased, the reported level of satisfaction with a subsequent relationship between the stepparent and stepchild decreased. This decrease in satisfaction could have one plausible cause, according to past research.

Freud argued that the most important developmental stages of a child's life are the early stages (Wilson & Durbin, 2013) when children learn very quickly, including whom to include and exclude from his or her circle of trust. In fact, this is the crucial lesson in the very first developmental phase. Once a child has developed an understanding that his or her parents are the main sources in which to place trust, it is difficult to re-route this trust to others. This is a decision that a child must make on his or her own, and the concentration on this decision can be disruptive to a developmental stage (Bjarnason & Arnarsson, 2011). This disruption contributes to the idea that parents have less of an influence over the development of their child as he or she ages. As children age, they rely less on their parents, which results in less influence of the parents over how a child progresses through the next stages of development (Wilson & Durbin, 2013). This is evident from the results of the current paper's study.

As the age in participants completing the survey increased, the levels of satisfaction felt in the relationship with their stepparents decreased, except those who were adults upon being introduced to their stepparents. While the early stages do not appear to have been disturbed, the adolescent developmental stage seems to have been disrupted, as reported by low levels of satisfaction in the relationship with their stepparent as well as low levels of satisfaction with a particularly memorable interaction with their stepparent. According to reports from those participants who identified as adolescents upon being introduced to their stepparent, it seems that the introduction was too large of a change. One participant noted, "my biological dad was all I had ever known, so meeting stepdad was difficult." Another reported, "I have never been close with my stepmom, just glad dad settled down." These responses indicate a sort of removal from the stepparent due to unfamiliarity. Participants had long since developed an idea of who to trust and mistrust, so this introduction of a new stepparent required more mental energy on the decision of trusting or mistrusting this stepparent. Thus, it can be argued that the building blocks have already been set, which makes the acceptance of a new stepparent more difficult (Bjarnason & Arnarsson, 2011).

Children are also developing their own skills for decision-making that are often outside the guidance of their parents, especially in the adolescent stage. This may be an act of independence, but it may also be explained as a way to counteract, or react, to a disruption in a developmental stage (Wilson & Durbin, 2013). This phenomenon could also explain why the adolescent stage group reported the lowest level of satisfaction and the least desire to have further interaction with their stepparent. It may be a result of the sudden block toward independence to which the stepchild may be working (Wilson & Durbin, 2013). A stepchild may be less satisfied with the introduction and development of a relationship with a stepparent in the adolescent stage because he or she is progressing toward independence. The disruption of this process may decrease the levels of cooperation that are needed to foster a budding relationship. While the decrease in relational satisfaction as age increased indicates some sort of issue within the stepparent and stepchild relationship, this study did not reveal that this issue was necessarily a fixation that hindered the stepchild's subsequent development. Thus, it would be considered as an area for further research. Further, the analyses did not reveal a significant relationship between age of a stepchild at introduction to a stepparent and subsequent levels of relational satisfaction with said stepparent.

Rainforth

The current study held three main limitations. First, only forty-seven participants responded to the survey. With a small response rate, the survey does not hold a strong external validity that would be necessary to strengthen the assertions made. For further study, a larger sample would need to be surveyed. This may contribute to the issue of power within the study, as significance was not found between age of introduction and subsequent relational satisfaction between a stepchild and stepparent. Second, 12 percent of the respondents were age five and younger upon the introduction of a stepparent. Thus, their memories of a particular interaction with said stepparent are not very reliable. In a future study, it would seem to be more effective if toddlers and possibly infants could be studied upon the introduction of a stepparent. Specifically, their estimated developmental stage could be recorded and their reactions to a stepparent could be recorded for a more accurate documentation of how a phase may be disrupted. Last, the adolescent population was the most represented and most disrupted age group reported in the study, which may be due to a few confounds. To control for this in a future study, a more representative sample of all age groups should be gathered. In an area of further interest, it may be interesting to include a stepchild's relationship with his or her biological parent in comparison to his or her relationship with the stepparent in question.

Significance of the Study

This study into the effects of the introduction of a stepparent on the developmental progress of the stepchild is important for two crucial reasons: 1) It indicates that age may be a relatively influential variable to consider; and 2) It provides information to further study this subject to create a way to introduce a stepparent to a stepchild's life without the worry of a stepchild developing a fixation.

As shown by the results of the survey the age group that represented the adolescent developmental stage reported the lowest level of satisfaction with their stepparent. According to prior research, the adolescent stage is a particularly difficult group. At this age, children are less influenced by their parents and are developing their own sense of independence according to the mindset that they have already developed from personal experience and guidance from their parents (Wilson & Durbin, 2013). According to Bjarnason and Arnarsson (2011), so long as parents and stepparents meet the adolescent's immediate needs, such as physiological and safety needs, the transition will be easier. Further, tension may be inevitable in the introduction of a stepparent, but if this tension is kept to a minimum, a stepchild may have an easier time with the change. The stepchild's sense of independence may also be less threatened. A combination of these two positive effects may reduce the risk of disruption within the adolescent developmental stage, thereby reducing the risk of a harmful fixation.

Conclusion

Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson lay out two developmental paths through which one is understood to pass as part of the aging process. The two paths are similar in that they both emphasize the importance of successful development in the initial phases: oral/infant and anal/early childhood. Successful development is understood by both Freud and Erikson as passing through a phase without a fixation, or psychological damage. If one fails to pass a developmental stage without a fixation, it is thought that one will struggle with the lack of the characteristic that did not develop as it should have in a particular phase. However, the two paths differ in that Freud focuses more on the sexual energy that defines each developmental stage, and Erikson holds more interest in the social intimacy that one uses to

progress through each stage. Freud's path is also much shorter, ceasing after the first approximately twenty years of life, while Erikson's path extends throughout the entirety of life (Carver & Scheier, 2012).

Research shows that parents who are more involved in the positive and successful development of their children leads to less fixations as children progress. Involvement is defined as how attentive parents are to the immediate needs of their children, as well as their level of competency as to how to go about tending these immediate needs. Thus, as parents involve themselves more often through effective need satisfaction of their children, the less likely it is that a child will develop a fixation in a particular stage (Garcia, 1995). This level of awareness also extends to the divorced family and the levels of interaction that may exist. If tension is detected by a child between biological parents and stepparents, it may cause a distraction in development resulting in a fixation. Parents must be sensitive to the basic needs of safety and esteem within their child in order to help him or her progress successfully through the developmental stages (Bjarnason & Arnarsson, 2011). It is also important that parents effectively address their children's needs early in life because that is when the actions are the most crucial (Wilson & Durbin, 2013). There are also a few limitations posed by the study that may provide further areas of study.

Overall, the decreased levels of satisfaction in the relationship between stepchild and stepparent served as an indication of a disturbance in a developmental phase. This study did not reveal significance in this relationship, which promotes the idea of further study within this particular subject. However, it is important to remember that parents and stepparents can take certain steps to avoid such a disruption, such as meeting the child's immediate needs and reducing the tension in the situation. This is an interesting diversion that would allow room for further study. The limitations listed would also provide a solid basis for further study to determine if the adolescent phase is disturbed so strongly, or if the current study produced a skew in the results.

Paige Rainforth
Creighton University

Works Cited

- Bjarnason, T., & A. Arnarsson. (2011). "Joint physical custody and communication with parents: A cross-national study of children in 36 western countries." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 42(6), 871-890.
- Cartwright, C., & K. Gibson. (2013). "The effects of co-parenting relationships with ex-spouses on couples in step-families." *Family Matters*, 92, 18-28.
- Carver, C., & M. Scheier. (2012). *Perspectives on psychology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Dunkel, C., & J. Sefcek. (2009). "Eriksonian lifespan theory and life history theory: An integration using the example of identity formation." *Review of General Psychology*, 13(1), 13-23.
- Favez, N., C. Scaiola, H. Tissot, J. Darwiche, & F. Frascarolo. (2011). "The family alliance Assessment scales: Steps toward validity and reliability of an observational assessment tool for early family interactions." *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 20(1), 23-37.
- Garcia, J. (1995). "Freud's psychosexual stage conception: A developmental metaphor for counselors." *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 73(5), 498-502.
- Ginsburg, H. (1992). "Childhood injuries and Erikson's psychosocial stages." *Social Behavior and Personality*, 20(2), 95-100.
- Graf, F., M. Grumm, S. Hein, & M. Fingerle. (2014). "Improving parental competencies: Subjectively perceived usefulness of parent training matters." *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, 23(1), 20-28.
- Hoare, C. (2005). "Erikson's general and adult developmental revisions of Freudian thought: 'Outward, forward, and upward'." *Journal of Adult Development*, 12(1), 19-31.
- Jensen, T., K. Shafer, & J. Larson. (2014). "(Step)parenting attitudes and expectations: Implications for stepfamily functioning and clinical intervention." *Families in Society*, 95(3), 213-220.
- Marcia, J., & R. Josselson. (2013). "Eriksonian personality research and its implications for psychotherapy." *Journal of Personality*, 81(6), 617-629.
- Meacham, J., & N. Santilli. (1982). "Interstage relationships in Erikson's theory: Identity and intimacy." *Child Development*, 53(6), 1461-1467.
- Nakonezny, P., R. Shull, & J. Rodgers. (2014). "The effect of no-fault divorce law on the divorce rate across the 50 states and its relation to income, education, and religiosity." *National Council on Family Relations*, 57(2), 477-488.
- Nuru, A., & T. Wang. (2014). "She was stomping on everything that we used to think of as a family: Communication and turning points in cohabiting (step) families." *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 55(2), 145-163.
- Schrodt, P., & D. Braithwaite. (in press). "No longer understudied, but still misunderstood: Expanding communication scholarship on stepfamily relationships." In K. Floyd & M. T. Morman (Eds.) *Widening the family circle: New research on family communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sternberg, J. (2012). *Lines of development: Evolution of theory and practice over the decades*. London, England: Karnac Books.
- Ticusan, M. (2014). "Communication and education, reciprocity in the parent-child relationship." *Proceedings of the Scientific Conference AFASES*, 2, 661-666.
- Turiel, E. (2010). "Domain specificity in social interactions, social thought, and social development." *Child Development*, 81(3), 720-726.

- Waldron, V., D. Kloeber, C. Goman, N. Piemonte, & J. Danaher. (2014). "How parents Communicate right and wrong: A study of memorable moral messages recalled by Emerging adults." *Journal of Family Communication*, 14(4), 374-397.
- Wilson, S., & E. Durbin. (2013). Mother-child and father-child dyadic interaction: Parental and child bids and responsiveness to each other during early childhood. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 59(3), 249-279.

Rainforth

This page intentionally left blank.