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A Qualitative Investigation of Young Adult Stepchildren’s Experiences of Stepfather Authority

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Abstract

Stepfamily formation can be challenging for adults and children, particularly in regard to stepparent-child relationships, which are crucial for stepfamily functioning and child well-being. Stepparent authority is a particularly challenging and ambiguous area. This thesis investigated the range of young adult stepchildren’s experiences and perceptions of stepfather authority, particularly those perceived or identified as either positive or problematic. This thesis study comprised two studies: a self-report online questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. Eighty-eight young adult stepchildren completed the questionnaire. Ten participants were selectively chosen to be interviewed from volunteers who completed the questionnaire and reported mainly positive experiences with stepfather authority. This was in order to provide insight into positive experiences of stepfather authority and processes that are associated with an acceptance of stepfather authority. Both studies were qualitative and the data was analysed using thematic analysis.

The questionnaire results indicate that most participants experienced both positive and difficult aspects of stepfather authority. Participants identified that caring and practical and emotional support, including guidance and advice, were positive aspects of stepfather authority. Perceived warmth and support often led to increased respect for the stepfather and a positive relationship developing, which for some led to an acceptance of authority. Several benefits of authority were identified, including enhanced self-esteem and gaining a ‘father figure’. Some participants identified that the stepfather having no authority was positive. Difficult experiences related to the stepfather not being a biological parent, the stepfather attempting to adopt an authority role at an inappropriate time, adjustments to a new authority figure, authoritarian and harsh discipline, and negative impacts on the parent-child relationship. There were a range of opinions regarding stepfather influence, with the majority of participants stating the stepfather could have influence if certain conditions were met, especially if a positive relationship with the stepfather had developed.

There were a range of experiences with stepfather authority identified in Study Two. Some participants reported difficulties, although all reported positive experiences overall. All participants’ mothers maintained the primary disciplinarian role initially. A number of these participants described stepfathers taking a cautious approach to discipline initially and establishing a positive relationship with them, which allowed for his authority to be accepted. A caring attitude and support from the stepfather, and support of the mother were often reported.
The disciplinary role of the stepfather tended to increase over time. Participants perceived benefits to the stepfather’s influence and discipline. Implications for stepfamily systems and clinical work with stepfamilies are discussed along with future research directions.
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# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. II

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................... IV

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES ................................................................................................. IX

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................ 1

  Background ............................................................................................................................... 1
  Definition of Terms ................................................................................................................... 3

LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................................... 5

  Demographic Trends in Stepfamilies ...................................................................................... 5
  Outcomes for Children in Stepfamilies .................................................................................. 6
  Theoretical Framework: Stepfamily Systems .......................................................................... 13
  The Stepfather-Child Relationship and the Stepfather Role ................................................... 17
    Stepfather-Child Relationship and Changes over Time ......................................................... 17
    Stepfather Role ....................................................................................................................... 21
  Ambiguity and Lack of Clarity .................................................................................................. 27
  Effects of Other Stepfamily Members on the Stepfather Role ............................................... 28
  Conclusion and Study Aims ....................................................................................................... 30

CHAPTER TWO RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ........................................................................ 32

  Research Questions .................................................................................................................. 32
  Qualitative Research ............................................................................................................... 33
  Ethics Approval ......................................................................................................................... 35
  Data Analysis ............................................................................................................................ 35
    Thematic Analysis .................................................................................................................. 35
    Content/Categorical Analysis ............................................................................................... 37

CHAPTER THREE STUDY ONE: THE ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE ..................................... 38

  Methods .................................................................................................................................... 38
  Recruitment ............................................................................................................................... 38
  Participants ................................................................................................................................. 39
  Data Collection .......................................................................................................................... 39
  Data Analysis ............................................................................................................................. 40
  Results ...................................................................................................................................... 40
  Overall Experience of Stepfather Authority .......................................................................... 41
APPENDICES ......................................................................................................................... 121
  Appendix A: Participant Information Sheets ................................................................. 122
  Appendix B: Consent Forms .......................................................................................... 127
  Appendix C: Advertisement ........................................................................................... 130
  Appendix D: Online Questionnaire .............................................................................. 132
  Appendix E: Interview Schedule ................................................................................... 134

REFERENCES ....................................................................................................................... 137
Lists of Tables and Figures

Table 1. Demographics of participants from Study One .................................................................39
Table 2. Themes from the thematic analysis of Study One .............................................................40
Table 3. Demographic details of participants in Study Two .............................................................68
Table 4. Overview of the areas identified in the interviews and their themes ....................................71
Table 5. Overview of each participant’s experience with stepfather relationship, influence and discipline ..............................................................................................................................................97
Chapter One

Introduction

This thesis aims to investigate the range of young adult stepchildren’s experiences and perceptions of stepfather authority. This thesis comprises two studies. Study One aims to investigate a broad range of young adult stepchildren’s beliefs about stepfather authority, and to investigate the experiences of stepfather authority perceived or identified as either positive or problematic. Given that there is more understanding regarding difficulties with stepfather authority, Study Two aims to investigate the processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time. This will add to the empirical and clinical body of knowledge regarding processes that enhance and are associated with effective stepfamily functioning, and particularly those experiences associated with positive stepfather authority.

Background

Research interest into remarriage and stepfamilies has increased significantly since the 1970s when divorce rather than bereavement became the main antecedent to remarriage. Stepfamilies have subsequently increased in prevalence in the population and stepparents often now face the challenge of negotiating a role while the non-residential parent remains involved in the child’s life (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Stepfamilies differ from ‘first-marriage’ families and are often thought of as ‘incompletely institutionalised’ (Cherlin, 1978). There is a lack of clarity and guidelines regarding stepfamily member roles and expectations. Stepfamily members often do not prepare for the transition into stepfamily life (Cartwright, 2010a, 2010b). Many stepparents enter the stepfamily with an ‘instant love’ myth (Visher & Visher, 1993), expecting to take on a parenting role and form a close emotional bond with the child, yet it is rare for this type of attachment to form in the early stages of the relationship (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). More commonly, particularly during the early stages of remarriage, the relationship between stepparent and child is distant or strained (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

There is evidence that relationships and family satisfaction in stepfamilies may be crucially affected by stepchildren’s responses to stepparents (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Speer & Trees, 2007). However, there is a lack of clarity around the stepparent role. The stepparent role is less
clearly defined than the biological parent role, with differing perceptions of this role by stepparents and parents compared to children (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998). Often, stepparents and parents expect the stepparent to take on an active ‘parental’ role, whereas children tend to expect them to take on the role of ‘friend’ (Fine et al., 1998). There are more likely to be difficulties within the stepparent-child relationship and stepfamily if the stepparent attempts to take on a disciplinary or authority role early in the relationship, particularly if the stepfamily forms during adolescence (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Yet some children do allow their stepparent to have authority (Bray, 1999). Some children in stepfamilies appear to benefit from authoritative stepparenting in the long-term (Bray, 1999), however for other children stepparent support, monitoring and ‘backing-up’ of the residential parent are important and beneficial (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Therefore, stepparent authority appears to be an important factor in determining the well-being of children and overall functionality of stepfamilies. Stepparent authority has been defined as: “the degree to which a stepchild grants his or her primary stepparent the power to determine, influence, and/or judge what behaviours and actions are appropriate or inappropriate for the stepchild” (Schrodt, 2006, p. 178). This definition is used in this study.

Coleman, Ganong and Fine (2000), in their decade review, suggested a need for more qualitative research that investigates the experiences and perspectives of those in stepfamilies, especially stepchildren. It is also apparent that more research is needed to investigate the processes in stepfamilies (Sweeney, 2010). In particular, there has been little research conducted on the processes and variables that lead to positive stepfamily functioning and the formation of positive stepparent-child relationships (Coleman et al., 2000). Therefore this thesis study investigates the range of young adult stepchildren’s experiences and perceptions of stepfather authority, with an emphasis on investigating the processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time. The research is guided by a family systems perspective and is from a qualitative research approach. This thesis comprises two qualitative studies. Study One involves the completion of a self-report online questionnaire by 88 self-selected young adult stepchildren in order to gain their experiences of stepfather authority and perceptions on this topic. Study Two involves follow-up individual interviews with ten participants who completed the questionnaire first and reported positive experiences with stepfather authority. This allows for an examination of positive experiences and stepparents whose authority worked well. This provides insight into positive experiences but cannot be generalised to stepchildren in general. These interviews are semi-structured and aim to
investigate the experiences of stepfather authority perceived or identified as either positive or problematic, and the processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time.

The current chapter provides an overview of the empirical context for this thesis research. It begins with a definition of the main terms used throughout this thesis and then a summary of the demographic trends in stepfamilies and an examination of outcomes for children in stepfamilies. The literature review then addresses the following areas of research: a stepfamily systems theoretical framework, the stepfather-child relationship, and the stepfather role.

Chapter Two of this thesis provides an overview of the methodology of the study. In Chapter Three the methods and results from Study One are presented, and the methods and results from Study Two are presented in Chapter Four. Finally, Chapter Five provides a conclusion and a discussion of the overall findings of the thesis and its limitations; and the clinical implications and directions for future research.

**Definition of Terms**

There are a variety of different definitions and terms used to describe a stepfamily, however the basic definition associated with ‘stepfamily’ is a family that contains one biological parent and his or her child or children, and the parent’s partner, who may or may not have children. The couple may be remarried or cohabiting. Other common terms used to describe stepfamilies in the literature are, ‘reconstituted’, ‘blended’, ‘reconstructed’, ‘combined’ and ‘remarried’ (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). There is often a lack of agreement regarding which term to use and many of these terms are used to describe multiple, different family structures. Moreover, many of these terms, particularly ‘stepfamily’ itself, are associated with negative connotations (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Further expansion on the term stepfamily has led to auxiliary terms to classify stepfamilies. ‘Simple stepfamily’ is a term often used to describe a family in which only one adult has children from a previous union (Henderson & Taylor, 1999). A ‘complex stepfamily’ is one in which repartnering has occurred and both partners have children (Henderson & Taylor, 1999). This study will use the term ‘stepfamily’.

A stepparent has been defined as, “an adult whose partner has at least one child from a previous relationship” (Ganong & Coleman, 1994, p. 9). Other labels have also been used to describe stepparents, these include ‘parent’, ‘half-parent’, ‘acquired parent’ and ‘social parent’ (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Furthermore, stepparents can be residential where they reside with
the stepchild or non-residential in which they do not reside with the stepchild. A stepchild has been defined as, “a person whose parent or parents are partnered with someone who is not the child’s biological or adoptive parent” (Ganong & Coleman, 1994, p. 9).

In this study, families in which two biological parents live with one or more children will be defined as ‘first-marriage’ families. A stepfather family will be defined as: a family in which the biological mother resides with a male partner and her biological child or children; the stepfather may have children of his own and there can be mutual children. This couple may be married or cohabiting. Therefore this study will use the terms ‘remarried’ and ‘repartnered’ respectively.

In the next section the following research literature relevant to the study will be discussed: prevalence of stepfamilies, outcomes for children living in stepfamilies, stepfamily systems, the stepfather-child relationship, and the stepfather role.
Literature Review

Research interest into remarriage and stepfamilies has increased significantly since the 1970s (Coleman et al., 2000). To establish the context of this thesis study, the remainder of this chapter addresses five areas of research that are relevant to this thesis study. These include: demographic trends in stepfamilies; outcomes for children in stepfamilies; a stepfamily systems theoretical framework; the stepfather-child relationship; and the stepfather role.

Demographic Trends in Stepfamilies

The proportion of people living in stepfamilies has increased over recent decades. There are difficulties in estimating the prevalence of stepfamilies due to the way stepfamilies are defined in demographic studies (Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013). In particular the way ‘children’ are defined in most census studies (for example, those under 18 years who reside in a household with a biological parent and stepparent) results in an underestimation of children who are part of a stepfamily (Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013). Excluded by this definition are those children who are older than 18 and still live at home, and those who reside with a single mother or father and spend time with the other parent who is remarried or repartnered (Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013). Recent United States statistics suggest that when considering the lifetime prevalence of stepfamilies, approximately one third of children under age 18, who reside with two adults, will spend some time living in a stepfamily (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Estimates also suggest that about 13% of all families in the United States are stepfamilies (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). In the United Kingdom in 2004, 10% of all families were stepfamilies (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Recent Australian statistics, taken from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, a large national social and economic survey looking in-depth at family and household formation, revealed that 11% of couple relationships included children under 18 years who were a stepchild to one of the adults (Qu & Weston, 2005).

In New Zealand there is no Census data collected about stepfamilies so information is obtained from other sources. Between 1995 and 2007, approximately one third of all marriages were remarriages, with 90% of people in remarriages previously divorced, as opposed to 67% in 1971 (Statistics New Zealand, 2008). The Christchurch Health and Development Study, a longitudinal study following children from birth to 18 years in New Zealand, found that approximately 18% of their sample had lived in a stepfamily for some time between birth and age 16 (Nicholson, Fergusson, & Horwood, 1999). The New Zealand Women, Family Education and Employment Survey (NZWFEE) was conducted in 1995 and interviewed 3017 women aged 20 to 59 years.
This study indicated that one quarter of the women in the sample had lived in a stepfamily with children from a previous union of one or both partners. Differences in ethnicity were also found with 18% of non-Māori and 29% of Māori children found to be residing in a stepfamily before age 17 (Dharmalingam et al., 2004).

Previous research into stepfamilies has tended to exclude cohabiting stepfamilies. However recent statistics indicate that cohabitation is becoming an increasingly common family arrangement, particularly before a remarriage as compared to a first marriage (Stewart, 2007). Statistics from Australia reveal that couples in stepfamilies were more likely to be in a de facto (cohabiting) relationship than couples from first-marriage families (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). There is a similar trend in New Zealand with two in five men and women between the ages of 15 and 44 reporting that they are in a de facto relationship (Statistics New Zealand, 2007).

The majority of stepfamilies are stepfather families with children typically remaining with the biological mother after divorce or separation (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Statistics from Australia indicate that 53% of non-resident fathers reported seeing their children every second week, 26% reported never seeing their children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Pryor’s (2008) review indicates an increasing trend towards more involvement from the non-resident parent, suggesting that children are increasingly faced with the possibility of including additional parental figures into their lives.

Therefore, many children are currently, or will live, in a stepfamily household. Yet research has consistently demonstrated over the past few decades that children from stepfamilies tend to do less well on a number of outcomes compared to children from first-marriage families (Amato, 2010). As these children are making up an increasing proportion of the population, it is important to examine and understand why this might be. The next section provides a summary of the literature related to outcomes for children in stepfamilies.

**Outcomes for Children in Stepfamilies**

The adjustment of children living in stepfamilies has been well-researched, yet there are inconsistencies in the literature regarding the outcomes for and reactions from children to the repartnering of their parent(s). The majority of children in stepfamilies have experienced a number of stressors and difficulties as a result of their parents separating and divorcing; typically some time raised by a sole parent/s; and then the transition into stepfamily life. Some children
show resiliency to these transitions, whereas many experience adjustment difficulties and these may affect children’s responses to their parent’s repartnering (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989).

It could be expected that a child’s standard of living may improve with the addition of a stepparent to the family; the stepfamily may be expected to have more resources, particularly an additional person to supervise and assist children (Amato, 2005). However, in a recent review of studies examining differences between children who grow up with one biological parent versus two, Amato (2005) found that, on average, the well-being of most children in stepfamilies is not improved at the formation of a stepfamily; this may be due to the relatively stressful transition into stepfamily life with possible changes in households and multiple adjustments required. A relatively recent shift in thinking about children’s adjustment to divorce and remarriage has been considering a multiple transition perspective (Amato, 2010). This perspective considers divorce and remarriage not as single events but a series of transitions that occur for the child and family (Amato, 2010). Several studies have demonstrated that the more transitions a child is exposed to during childhood, the more likely they are to experience behaviour problems, externalising problems, lower academic achievement, and decreased psychological well-being (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Hill, Yeung, & Duncan, 2001; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Therefore multiple transitions may be an explanatory factor for the poorer outcomes, on average, for children in stepfamilies compared to children in first-marriage families. This section reviews the literature relevant to outcomes for children in stepfamilies, with a particular emphasis on longitudinal studies.

A number of longitudinal studies have been informative about outcomes for children in stepfamilies; these will be introduced next. Hetherington and colleagues have conducted three major longitudinal studies that have focused on divorce and remarriage. The largest of these, The Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage (VLSDR) compared three sets of families: remarried, sole-parent, and first-marriage families over 11 years (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994) with a follow-up at 20 years (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The original sample consisted of 144 families with a target child aged four; the sample was divided equally into divorced and non-divorced families. This was expanded six years later to a sample of 180 families divided equally into non-divorced, divorced, sole-mother, and stepfather families. This was expanded again to 300 families divided equally amongst the aforementioned groups. This study indicated that adjustment difficulties for children in remarried families lasted
at least two years after remarriage. Children in remarried families tended to have lower academic outcomes, more externalising and internalising problems, and antisocial behaviours than children from first-marriage families. These findings were more apparent for preadolescent girls than boys two years post-remarriage, however these differences tend to disappear by early adolescence, yet difficulties tended to increase or emerge during adolescence (Hetherington, 1993). Findings from the VLSDR indicate that the divorce rate among children from stepfamilies in this study was slightly higher than that of the average population (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

The second longitudinal study Hetherington conducted was the Hetherington and Clingempeel Study of Divorce and Remarriage (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). This was a two-year longitudinal study of 202 families that examined White, middle-class early adolescent children aged between nine and 13, and family functioning in stepfather families in the first 26 months post-remarriage in comparison to sole-parent and first-marriage families. This study found that gender differences were less important in determining children’s response to remarriage than temperament, intelligence, self-esteem and locus of control (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Again, the children in this study who were from stepfamilies were found to have more problem behaviours and were less well-adjusted than children from first-marriage families. This study also found that in comparison to stable sole-mother families, children in newly-formed stepfamilies tended to be less well-adjusted during this period (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). This may be due to the recent transition into a stepfamily and the stressors associated with this (for example, moving house, school, adjusting to new members of the household), changes in financial resources, and potentially due to problems within the stepparent-child relationship, which tends to be more problematic during the first two years (Bray, 1999; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992).

The final longitudinal study was the National Study of Nonshared Environment (Hetherington, Henderson, & Reiss, 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). This study examined 720 families with two parents and compares siblings within these families. The target sibling pairs were aged between 10 and 18. There were a total of six family types that were compared including stepfamilies with full siblings, those with half siblings, and those with unrelated siblings. These stepfamilies were considered to be ‘stabilised’ as they had been together for an average of nine years (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Of note, no significant gender differences were found among adolescent children in stepfamilies in this study, indicating that as
stepfamilies stabilise over time these differences may disappear (Hetherington et al., 1999). Adolescents from complex stepfamilies tended to display more problem behaviours than those from non-stepfamilies or simple stepfamilies. Some of the difficulties noted in previous studies were more likely than others to be sustained in children from stabilised stepfamilies. These included problems in social responsibility, cognitive agency, school achievement, and conduct disorders (Hetherington et al., 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Possible reasons for this will be discussed in further detail below.

These findings are consistent with those from other longitudinal studies, including the Developmental Issues in Stepfamilies study (Bray, 1999; Bray & Berger, 1993). This study used a multi-method, cross-sectional design, which compared children from 100 first-marriage families to those from 100 stepfamilies across four years. The children in the stepfamily group joined a stepfamily between the ages of six and eight. A total of 180 families were re-interviewed. This study also found that children in stepfamilies had more stress, more externalising problems and less social competence compared to those from first-marriage families, and an increase in problems during adolescence. Gender differences were not as apparent as compared to Hetherington’s studies, although girls reported more stress at the follow-up. Children in newly formed stepfamilies and those in adolescence experienced the most difficulties, a finding replicating Hetherington’s studies. These difficulties appear to be more prominent for stepfamilies than first-marriage families. A number of hypotheses for why this might be have been discussed in the literature. Bray (1999) suggested that some difficulties encountered in stepfamilies when children reach adolescence or are adolescent upon stepfamily formation may be due to adolescents wanting to obtain autonomy and individuation and this process being transferred onto the stepparent instead of the absent non-residential parent, which may lead to confusion and withdrawal by the stepparent. This can impact negatively on the stepparent-child relationship, and also on child development and well-being.

A longitudinal study from the United Kingdom, The National Child Development Study, followed a sample of 17,000 children from birth into adulthood, within this sample a number of children were found to be living within a stepfamily (Ferri, 1984). This study indicated that children in stepfamilies were more likely to demonstrate problem behaviour than children in first-marriage families, particularly those in stepfather families. Children in stepfamilies also tended to demonstrate more antisocial or delinquent behaviour and have poorer school attendance. More children in stepfamilies were seen by a specialist for behavioural or emotional
problems than children from first-marriage or sole-parent families. A later follow-up with this sample found that young adult stepchildren were more likely to leave home earlier, cohabit instead of marry, experience out-of-wedlock childbearing, and have a child by age 20 than children from first-marriage families (Kiernan, 1992).

Another longitudinal study from Britain is the Avon Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood (Dunn, 2002). A sub-sample of 192 stepfamilies with children aged between four and 17 years found that children in stepfamilies tended to have more adjustment problems than children from first-marriage families on average, although Dunn (2002) notes that the differences tended to be small and many children in stepfamilies were well-adjusted.

A clinical longitudinal study also highlights the difficulties children in stepfamilies can experience (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). This study originally investigated the impact of divorce using a clinical sample of 60 families with children aged between three and 18 seeking divorce counselling, with follow-up interviews with parents and children one and five years later. Another follow-up was conducted resulting in this being a 25-year study (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). Wallerstein et al. (2000) found that the children in this study were less likely to attend college and more likely to engage in early sexual behaviour and take substances. It should be noted that this study uses a relatively small, clinical sample and the participants were more likely to be experiencing greater challenges (Dunn, 2002).

A New Zealand longitudinal study, the Christchurch Health and Development Study, followed a sample of 907 children across an 18-year period, 18.4% of whom lived in a stepfamily for some period of time between birth and age 16 years (Nicholson et al., 1999). Children who spent time living in a stepfamily between the age of six and 16 were more likely to demonstrate increased criminality, substance use, early school leaving without qualifications, multiple partners, and earlier sexual activity. However, many of these outcomes were found to be related to other factors that were present before stepfamily formation. Nicholson, Sanders, Halford, Phillips, and Whitton (2008) suggest that this provides some support for a selection effect; meaning that the differences between children who grow up in a stepfamily versus those who grow up in a first-marriage family are largely due to factors not related to living in a stepfamily. In saying this, they also acknowledge that some of the effects in relation to poorer outcomes on average for children in stepfamilies were explained by living in a stepfamily.
Data from the first two waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health was used to examine the impact of family transitions on adolescent well-being (Brown, 2006). This study found that any family transition experienced by an adolescent was associated with decreased well-being compared to those in first-marriage families. The transition into a stepfamily from a sole-mother family was associated with decreased well-being; this was more so for adolescents moving into a cohabiting as opposed to a married stepfamily. This provides further support for the multiple transition perspective (Amato, 2010). Data taken from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth investigated the relationships between family structure, parent-child relationships, and adolescent well-being (Falci, 2006). This study also found significant differences in psychological distress for adolescents in stepfamilies as compared to those in first-marriage families, even after controlling for family background characteristics and the quality of parent-child relationships.

Children from stepfamilies tend to experience difficulties in areas of school and academic performance, often with decreased high school completion and a lack of academic qualifications. Data from the High School and Beyond Study found that children living in stepfamilies perceived their parents to have lower educational goals for them and their parents to be less engaged with helping with schoolwork than children living in first-marriage families (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). This study also found that children living in a stepfamily had poorer educational outcomes, for example in, grade point average, attendance, and expectations for attending university, as well as lower educational attainment (such as leaving high school without any qualifications). In a questionnaire study of 10,000 high school students in the United States it was found that parent’s involvement in schooling was significantly, positively correlated with school achievement (Bogenschneider, 1997). This study also found that parents in first-marriage families demonstrated more school involvement than parents in sole-parent or stepfamilies. The involvement of the stepfather in schooling was also significantly, positively associated with school achievement (Bogenschneider, 1997). Data from a Canadian population study of over 9000 children indicated that parental separation and multiple family transitions reduce the likelihood of completing high school as compared to children who remain in first-marriage families (Strohschein, Roos, & Brownell, 2009). Some explanations for these outcomes may be due to a lack of parental attention, time and resources in stepfamilies as compared to first-marriage families.
Children in stepfamilies have also been found to have less secure attachment to their parents as found in a questionnaire study that measured attachment and well-being in a sample of university students (Love & Murdock, 2004) and another cross-sectional study of young adults (Planitz, Feeney, & Peterson, 2009). The National Survey of Families and Households found that children in stepfamilies were more likely to leave home earlier than children from first-marriage families (Aquilino, 1991; Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998).

Most children in stepfamilies have experienced parental separation or divorce preceding stepfamily formation and an increasing number of children are now born into cohabiting households (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Divorce can be associated with less effective parenting, a decline in financial resources, reduced contact with the noncustodial parent and exposure to more family transitions (Amato, 2000). The VLSDR indicates that there is often acrimony in the household before separation (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Divorce often creates a ‘crisis’ period in the family, which typically lasts one to two years (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Studies have indicated that children of divorce typically receive lower parental monitoring than children from first-marriage families both in the period preceding and following the divorce (Hetherington et al., 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Therefore even before stepfamily formation, children from separated families have been potentially exposed to a number of stressors that can impact significantly on their well-being. In addition to this, Hetherington found that for many children from divorced families, a new stepfamily is formed within five years (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In the early stages of stepfamily formation, resident mothers are more likely to adopt a disengaged parenting style (low warmth/support and low discipline/control) than mothers in first-marriage families (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Additionally, parental monitoring in stepfamilies tends to be lower than that in two-parent families (Fisher, Leve, O'Leary, & Leve, 2003). Therefore children in stepfamilies often have been exposed to a disruption of parenting, parental conflict, and financial stress before the potential additional stress of transitioning into a new family and forming relationships with stepfamily members.

Children living in stepfamilies have reflected upon a range of experiences associated with living in a stepfamily. One study asked 36 young adult stepchildren about the best and worst aspects of living in a stepfamily (Freisthler, Svare, & Jay-Harrison, 2003). This qualitative study of children in both stepfather and stepmother families found several themes regarding positive experiences in stepfamilies. These were emotional resources and support, material resources, and
personal growth. Negative experiences were categorised as conflict or emotional stress, divided loyalties between the two families, a sense of loss, changes experienced, and the sense that the stepparent was not really a parent. Therefore there can be much gained from stepfamily formation, but the challenges faced by many children are often related to parental loss and challenges associated with the stepparent.

On the other hand, children can do well in stepfamilies, especially after the initial period of adjustment. In a frequently cited meta-analysis, Amato and Keith (1991) found that children in stepfamilies tend to, on average, score below children from first-marriage families and sole-parent families on a number of measures, including academic success and behavioural and psychological functioning, a finding still consistent after another decade (Amato, 2001). However, while statistically significant, these differences are small. In fact, Amato (1994) found that 43% of children living in two-parent families score below the average child living in a stepfamily. This is perhaps due to variability in family circumstances and as such, some children living in well-adjusted stepfamilies may be better off than children in poorly-functioning first-marriage or sole-parent families (Amato, 1994). Findings from the VLSDR indicate that while children in stepfamilies are typically faced with more stressful life events and have greater adjustment difficulties, the majority are resilient and well-adjusted and some even benefit from the transition into a stepfamily (Hetherington, 2003). Some children have reflected that the transition into stepfamily life was positive and this was especially so if the stepfather was warm and supportive and his relationship with the child’s mother was good (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

However, given the poorer outcomes evident, on average, for children from stepfamilies, it is important to investigate the processes and relationships occurring in stepfamilies. An examination of the literature related to stepfamily systems follows next.

**Theoretical Framework: Stepfamily Systems**

There are a variety of theoretical perspectives used by researchers to help explain and understand stepfamily functioning. However, many stepfamily researchers are not using theoretical frameworks when conducting research in this area (Robila & Taylor, 2001). Stepfamilies have been identified as a key place to instigate research on the family and to gauge greater understanding of family systems (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). This thesis study uses the theoretical framework of family systems to guide this research.
Primary relationships and a person’s principal networks are regarded as key elements of what makes up a family in family systems theory (Stewart, 2007). In his theory of structural family therapy, based on his work with first-marriage families, Minuchin (1974) outlined a framework for family functioning. The basic tenets of this theory are that a family is a unit comprised of subsystems that interact with one another and function through different transactions. These transactions and subsystems determine family members’ behaviour and are regulated by boundaries. Subsystem membership is determined by generation, gender, interest or function and there can be parental, spousal and sibling subsystems (Minuchin, 1974). The boundaries are a set of rules that protect subsystems and the functions of subsystems within first-marriage families. These boundaries can be clear, diffuse, or rigid, with clear boundaries typically associated with effective family functioning. As part of this theory the family undertakes a series of transitions and developmental stages, which require adaptation by family members and the restructuring of systems to accommodate (Minuchin, 1974). Upon stepfamily formation a reorganisation of the system occurs and subsystems with family members outside the household (for example, non-resident parents) become important whilst new subsystems with stepfamily members are formed and negotiated (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). These can be challenging issues for many stepfamilies.

Many researchers have used a family systems perspective as a means to compare stepfamilies with first-marriage families. While some may perceive this as in line with the ‘deficit-comparison’ model (Ganong & Coleman, 1994) it is important to highlight key differences in family functioning as a lack of understanding of these differences may be contributing to poorer outcomes for children living in stepfamilies and have implications for clinical practice. Cherlin (1978) proposed that stepfamilies are incompletely institutionalised with a lack of clear guidelines and support for the relationships and challenges often faced by stepfamilies. Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) proposed that stepfamily formation impacts differently on each family member and is mediated by the developmental status and stage in family and life cycles. Stepfamily formation is viewed as a transition that results in an irregularity in the family system at first and gradual stability over time (Bray, 1999).

Some repartnered couples do little to prepare for stepfamily life perhaps because of a lack of awareness of the difficulties they might face and some stepchildren are not prepared for stepfamily living (Cartwright, 2010a; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Robertson, 2008). A sub-sample of participants from the United Kingdom New Stepfamilies Study were interviewed to
examine a range of issues related to being in a newly formed stepfamily (Robertson, 2008). This study found that issues regarding parenting, childcare and discipline typically garner little attention pre-cohabitation. Reviews of the stepfamily literature indicate that this lack of preparation may reflect the use of a nuclear family model by stepfamily members in the face of ambiguity and a lack of clear expectations for stepfamily life (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). However, stepfamily systems theorists indicate that this is not appropriate and repartnering and stepfamily formation presents a number of challenges to families that differ from those faced by ‘nuclear’ or first-marriage families (Hetherington et al., 1999). These include differences in the various family subsystems, including marital, parent-child and sibling subsystems, with different expectations regarding boundaries, both external (who is and is not a member of the family) and internal boundaries (rules, roles and membership to specific subsystems within the stepfamily) (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington et al., 1999). Boundary ambiguity, which Pasley (1987) defined as, “a lack of clarity or misalignment of boundaries within the family” (p. 206) is quite common among remarried couples. As part of a larger study of 272 remarried couples, (Pasley, 1987) found that boundary ambiguity was common among remarried couples, more so amongst those with children from previous relationships, particularly the male partner’s.

There are a number of turning points in stepfamily development and not necessarily a set pathway to becoming a stepfamily (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). This interview study of 53 stepfamilies found that there are several developmental trajectories a stepfamily can experience during the first four years of stepfamily formation, these were described as: Accelerated, Prolonged, Stagnating, Declining, and High-Amplitude Turbulent (Baxter et al., 1999).

A key challenge for stepfamilies is that there are new and different subsystems compared to the first-marriage family. The stepfamily has the new couple’s relationship, and new stepparent-child relationship forming within the context of the more established parent-child relationship. Some stepfamilies also have a stepsibling subsystem. In contrast, for first-marriage families, the parent-child relationship develops within the context of the well-established couple relationship. A leading stepfamily clinician has outlined that this can lead to differences in the middle ground, or common understanding, of stepfamilies compared to first-marriage families (Papernow, 2008).
Among first-marriage families the marital relationship is considered the foundation for a functional family (Bray, 1999). However, a small questionnaire study of White stepfather families found that the stepparent-child relationship is crucial for determining overall stepfamily happiness (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). The VLSDR also found that the stepparent-child relationship is essential for increased stepchild adjustment and stepfamily success (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). A small study of university students who identified as stepfamily members found that a positive stepparent-child relationship was associated with greater concordance within the stepfamily (Banker & Gaertner, 1998). This relationship will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

The parental subsystem within a stepfamily differs from that within a first-marriage family. It contains a parent and a non-parent and this often leads to challenges negotiating a functional parenting subsystem. Typically there is uncertainty in stepfamilies regarding what the stepparent role should be and whether the stepparent will take on an active parenting role (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Marsiglio, 2004). This will also be examined in more detail in the next section.

A common challenge to stepfamily functioning is a lack of concordance between individuals within the stepfamily and their developmental pathways and the stepfamily system developmental cycle (Bray, 1999). At a follow-up to the longitudinal Developmental Issues in Stepfamilies Study, it was found that behaviour problems and conflict in stepfamilies increased when stepchildren reached adolescence (Bray, 1999). These issues often emerged after several years of healthy adjustment to stepfamily life. These difficulties tend to be more prominent for stepfamilies than first-marriage families. A number of hypotheses for why this might be have been discussed. As discussed in the previous section Bray (1999) suggested that this may be due to difficulties within the adolescent individuation process. Another possible explanation that considers the stepfamily system is that there is often incongruence between individual life cycles and marital life cycles. For example, a newly repartnered couple may want to develop family relationships, often through spending time together as a family, whereas adolescents may find this less desirable due to an increased need for independence and time away from the family (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Therefore differences in the stepfamily system as compared to the first-marriage system may explain some of the difficulties experienced by children in stepfamilies.

Therefore there are a number of processes occurring within the stepfamily system that are unique to stepfamilies and can create many challenges for stepfamily members. In particular, the
roles and relationships for stepfamily members can be a source of confusion and conflict, therefore it is essential to examine aspects of these relationships that can contribute to successful stepfamily functioning. This thesis study therefore aims to investigate the experiences of stepfather authority perceived or identified as either positive or problematic, and the processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time. The stepfather-child relationship has been identified as crucial for stepfamily functioning, this will be discussed in more detail below.

The Stepfather-Child Relationship and the Stepfather Role

The vast majority of residential stepparents are stepfathers (Robertson, 2008) and the topic of this thesis focuses on stepfathers, therefore this section examines the literature largely related to the stepfather-child relationship. The stepfather-child relationship has been identified as important for determining overall stepfamily functioning, and in fact it has been found to be more important in determining overall stepfamily happiness than the marital relationship (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). Mothers in stepfamilies have reported feeling torn between the stepparent and child and this conflict can impact on marriage quality and stepfamily well-being (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). However, this important relationship is not freely chosen by those parties involved (Cissna, Bochner, & Cox, 1990). Visher and Visher (1993) found that many stepparents enter a stepfamily expecting to form an immediate bond with the stepchild, a process they referred to as the “instant love” myth. Yet researchers typically find that the development of the relationship between stepparent and stepchild is a gradual and challenging process. It is rare for a stepparent to form an immediate emotional attachment to a stepchild; this type of attachment tends to build slowly over time, if at all (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The establishment of a stepparent role also tends to take time. Pryor (2005) has referred to this as a “crawling occupation”.

Studies have found a range of experiences with the stepfather-child relationship and a number of processes that impact on this relationship. These will be discussed below. This section outlines literature related to the stepfather-child relationship and changes over time; the stepfather role; ambiguity and lack of clarity regarding this role; and the effects of other stepfamily members on the roles that stepfathers adopt.

Stepfather-Child Relationship and Changes over Time

This section examines literature related to the quality of the stepfather-child relationship and its development over time. The majority of studies, both longitudinal and cross-sectional, seem
to find that the stepfather-child relationship tends to be more problematic in the first two years of stepfamily formation. Children in stepfamilies have reported feeling more reluctant to engage in a positive relationship with the stepfather early in stepfamily formation when they have felt pressure to do so (Anderson & White, 1986). The Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage (VLSDR) and the Hetherington and Clingempeel Study of Divorce and Remarriage found that many stepfathers reported distant relationships with their stepchildren in the early stages of remarriage (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). The quality of the stepfather-child relationship can be impacted upon by several factors. These include the age and gender of the child and the stepfather role. In both of these studies, the researchers found that when stepfamilies are formed before the child is of adolescent age, and the stepfather does not attempt to control or discipline the child independently of the mother, there is a higher likelihood of establishing a positive stepfather-child relationship (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Stepfathers tended to have closer relationships with stepsons than stepdaughters. Studies indicate that the mother-daughter bond tends to be closer than the mother-son bond during the sole-parent phase before stepfamily formation (Papernow, 2006; Visher & Visher, 1993). Therefore there may be greater loyalty conflicts and tension from stepdaughters towards stepfathers as they ‘compete’ for the mother’s attention and affection.

These findings are similar to those from the Developmental Issues in Stepfamilies study (Bray, 1999; Bray & Berger, 1993). Stepfather-child relationships were rated as more negative in the stepfamilies that had been together for six months as compared to those together for 2.5 years. This may indicate that the relationship between stepfather and child improves over time. Bray (1999) also found that stepfather-stepdaughter relationships tended to be rated as more negative than stepfather-stepson and father-daughter relationships.

However, Hetherington found that the majority of stepfathers in her studies attempted to establish a relationship early with the stepchild (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). These stepfathers often sought to find areas of common interest with children, although many maintained emotional distance. Some tried to establish a ‘buddy’ role and many were successful in doing so. Yet Hetherington found that some children in her studies tended to display negativity and rejection towards stepfathers’ attempts at forming a relationship, particularly within the early stage of stepfamily formation (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). One quarter of children from the VLSDR were described as “aggressively resistant” to stepfathers
This negativity often impacted upon the stepfamily, the stepfather’s role and attitude towards the child.

An interview and observational study of 40 stepfamilies found that stepfathers who are treated negatively by children can become withdrawn and disengaged as a stepfather over time (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1999). It is difficult to determine the direction of effects from this study, however, Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) also observed this effect in their longitudinal study; adolescent children in stepfamilies who demonstrated more externalising behaviour tended to have stepfathers who displayed more negative, punitive, and coercive behaviour. Stepfathers in this study tended to initially act like ‘polite strangers’ towards their stepchildren while stepchildren were observed to demonstrate more hostile, coercive and conflictual behaviour towards their stepfathers than children in first-marriage families demonstrated towards their fathers. This behaviour from stepchildren tended to remain after 26 months and stepfathers tended to report a lack of affection or rapport towards stepchildren, lower monitoring and control than fathers from first-marriage families, potentially indicating that stepfathers may disengage in response to hostile behaviour from stepchildren. Conversely, Fine et al. (1999) also found that stepfathers whose stepchildren reciprocate warmth tend to establish close relationships. Hence, while many stepfathers have good intentions to form a relationship with the child, many give up after rejection and negativity from children; more negative behaviours from children are associated with more negative behaviours in stepfathers (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). However, it is only a minority of children in stepfamilies that demonstrate more extreme resistance. Many are generally cautious at first, yet findings from the VLSDR indicate that a majority of children can come to view the transition into a stepfamily positively if they face preparation before stepfamily formation, have a warm and supportive stepparent and perceive the relationship between their parent and stepparent as good (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Adolescence has been identified as a particularly challenging time for children in stepfamilies, more so than for children in first-marriage families. In the Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) study, on average, children in all family types experienced a decline in the quality of their relationship with their parents during adolescence; yet this effect was typically more pronounced for children in stepfamilies, particularly in regards to the relationship with the stepfather. Hetherington and Clingempeel, and Bray (1999) found that when stepfamilies form during adolescence there is a much lower likelihood of a successful stepfather-child relationship.
forming. Findings from the Developmental Issues in Stepfamilies Study and the VLSDR also indicate that even in those stepfamilies formed before adolescence where the stepfather-child relationship is considered positive, adolescence was often a time when difficulties emerged, even in long-established stepfamilies (Bray, 1999; Hetherington, 1993).

A New Zealand study of 100 stepfamilies supports this finding and found that both children and stepparents rated their relationship as less positive than the relationships the child had with the resident parent and non-resident parent (Pryor, 2005). Children have also reported important qualitative differences in their relationship with stepparents versus those with biological parents. In a study of 115 adolescents and young adults in stepfamilies, many participants reported purposefully refraining from discussing certain topics with their stepparents more frequently than with their biological parents (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). There were several reasons given by children as to why they tended to avoid the topics of sex, talking about the other parent and family, intimate conversations and money. These were: self-protection, relationship protection and conflict. Golish and Caughlin (2002) suggest that this may be a way that children in stepfamilies manage boundaries and that they may be creating “impermeable boundaries” with the stepparent as a means to protect themselves. Another reason suggested for topic avoidance was that stepparents were perceived by some children in this study to not have authority over them.

Other longitudinal studies, such as that by Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) add to the findings that the stepfather-child relationship is a challenging one to navigate. In follow-up interviews it was found that half of all stepfather-child relationships examined in their 25-year study were classified as distant (Wallerstein et al., 2000). It should be noted that this study uses a relatively small, clinical sample and the participants were more likely to be experiencing greater challenges (Dunn, 2002).

The National Child Development Study from the United Kingdom, found that only a minority of the children in their study reported negative relations with their stepparents and the majority reported a good relationship (Ferri, 1984), which is a contrast from other study findings and could reflect a cultural difference. In comparison, a sub-sample of 192 stepfamilies with children aged between four and 17 years (from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood from Britain), found that stepfather-child relationships were significantly less positive in simple-stepfather and complex stepfamilies than father-child relationships in non-stepfamilies.
and that stepfathers and stepmothers were less positive towards their stepchildren than their biological children (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2000).

On the other hand, some children report positive feelings towards their stepfathers (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Two studies that interviewed children and adolescents in stepfamilies found that many participants reported an acceptance of stepfathers and closeness towards them (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Funder, 1996). In both of these studies it was apparent that younger children and younger adolescents were more likely to accept a stepparent than older adolescents. The Australian study (Funder, 1996) reported that 74% of the sample of children and adolescents in stepfamilies had a good relationship with the stepfather and 56% were highly involved with the stepfather. This indicates that children in stepfamilies can perceive a good relationship with the stepfather. However it is important to note that there are differences between these self-reports and observable findings, based on observation and multiple measures in other studies; the reasons for this are unclear, although Pryor and Rodgers (2001) suggest this may be because stepfamily members want closer relationships than are possible during the early stage of stepfamily formation.

One explanation for the difficulties experienced in the stepparent-child relationship is that there may be ambiguity over the stepparent role and differing perspectives from family members on what this role should entail (Fine et al., 1998). This will be discussed below.

**Stepfather Role**

Stepfathers can adopt a variety of roles upon entry into the stepfamily, and these can change over time. Researchers have looked at the stepfather role in different ways, which makes comparisons across studies difficult (Coleman et al., 2000). However, the stepfather role, similar to a parenting role, is often conceptualised as comprising two dimensions: support, acceptance and warmth; and control and discipline (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). These dimensions comprise the parenting styles conceptualised by Baumrind, that is: authoritative (high on warmth/support and discipline/control), authoritarian (low on warmth/support, high on discipline/control), permissive (high on warmth/support, low on discipline/control), and disengaged (low on warmth/support and discipline/control) (Baumrind, 1971; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). These parenting styles can therefore translate into a variety of roles that stepparents may adopt in stepfamilies, each of which are associated with different difficulties and outcomes for children. These roles that stepfathers adopt can change over time and are influenced by various members of the stepfamily system.
Ganong and Coleman (2004) reviewed the literature on stepfather styles and discussed four roles that stepfathers often adopt in relation to children in stepfamilies. These include: parent, friend, quasi-kin, and distant acquaintance/intimate stranger. The role of ‘parent’ entails the stepparent attempting to function emotionally and behaviourally like the child’s parent. The friendship role is associated with liking and affection and is high on warmth/support but low on discipline/control. The quasi-kin role is somewhat a combination of the parent and friend role; however it involves less warmth/support and discipline/control than the parent role. The fourth role of distant acquaintance/intimate stranger is associated with the ‘outsider’ perception of the stepparent and is low in warmth/support and discipline/control. In a qualitative study of 15 adult stepchildren, Schmeeckle (2007) found that stepparent roles tend to differ according to traditional gender roles for stepparents. Stepfathers were identified as more likely to take on supportive roles (particularly financial and practical support), and stepmothers tended to adopt nurturing roles. These various roles will be explored in more detail next.

Studies have found several ways in which the stepfather may attempt to interact with the child upon stepfamily formation. In Hetherington and colleagues’ studies, the majority of stepfathers acted like ‘polite but wary strangers’ during the period up until two years after remarriage (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This entailed stepfathers who were low in affection and low in critical or controlling behaviour (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). As previously mentioned the stepfather role is heavily influenced by other stepfamily members, especially the stepchild. Stepfathers may change their role over time in response to behaviour from the stepchild. Hetherington also found a minority of stepfathers actively avoided building a close relationship with the child. These stepfathers typically had conflicted and strained relationships with children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Other stepfathers attempted to adopt an authoritative parenting role; however this was often opposed by children early in stepfamily formation (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The researchers found that stepparents who adopt a more supportive or friendship-like role, which is high on warmth and support, and low on discipline and control, tend to have a more positive relationship with the stepchild and a smoother transition into stepfamily life (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

The Developmental Issues in Stepfamilies study supports these findings (Bray, 1999). This study found that stepfathers often encounter problems when trying to adopt an authority role
early in stepfamily formation when children are aged between six and eight (Bray, 1999). Bray (1999) found that children were more likely to accept a stepfather who spent time developing a relationship without attempting to control or discipline the child. Hetherington confirms these same findings for pre-adolescent children; those stepfathers who backed-up the mother’s authority but did not attempt to have any independently were more successful at establishing a positive relationship with the child (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). On the other hand, monitoring of behaviour and activities appears to be more acceptable to children than control, and has been associated with better adjustment, both during the early and later stages of remarriage (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Hetherington found that a reasonable number of stepfathers in the VLSDR established a ‘buddy’ or friend role with the stepchild and played an important role in supporting the biological mother through monitoring children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). She suggests that a supportive stepfather is a key predictor of stepfamily functioning (Hetherington, 2003). Therefore, particularly during the early stages of remarriage it may be beneficial for the stepparent to adopt a supportive role and not attempt to establish authority with the child. Particularly for adolescent children, a warm, ‘low-key’ approach from the stepfather seems preferable, and child and stepfamily happiness is more likely (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

However, in the long-term a disengaged parenting style was the most common role found in the VLSDR (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This may have been a result of negative behaviours from stepchildren. Negative behaviours from stepchildren are associated with negative behaviours from stepfathers (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Having a stepparent and parent exhibiting a disengaged parenting style is associated with the greatest risk of problems for children in stepfamilies (Nicholson, Phillips, Peterson, & Battistutta, 2002). In addition to researchers, clinicians working with clinical stepfamily populations have investigated the roles that stepparents tend to adopt in stepfamilies and have found that many stepparents appear to adopt an authoritarian role, which tends to be hostile and firm (Papernow, 2006). Again, the stepparent role is affected by stepchildren and this type of role may be in response to negative/hostile behaviours from stepchildren. It should be noted that Papernow works with a clinical population and therefore typically experiences stepfamilies where processes are not working well.

One New Zealand study of stepfamily couples found that residential parents reported being primarily responsible for most childcare activities, while stepparents helped more with practical
activities, such as housework, transport and being involved in practical activities, such as sports (Cartwright, 2010a). This finding is similar to that from a qualitative study, which found that stepparents tended to serve as primary caregivers, for example, taking children to activities and helping with homework, but took on less of a leadership role in terms of giving advice, and setting limits, although many were still active in regards to these matters (Mason, Harrison-Jay, Svare, & Wolfinger, 2002). Ganong and Coleman (2004) have hypothesised that a positive outcome for stepfather and child can occur if the stepfather can function as a parent but also acknowledge that they are not the child’s parent and that there can be fluidity between these two positions, for example moving in and out of the parent role as necessary.

However the issue of stepfather control and authority is somewhat more complicated than this with studies finding somewhat inconsistent results. The Developmental Issues in Stepfamilies study found that during the early stages of repartnering stepparents often encounter problems when trying to adopt a parenting role (Bray, 1999). A large sample of 565 stepfamilies taken from the National Survey of Families and Households found that higher levels of perceived stepparent control were associated with decreased child well-being (Fine, Voydanoff, & Donnelly, 1993). However, in stepfamilies that had been together for two and a half years, Bray (1999) found that authoritative parenting by the stepparent was associated with positive outcomes for children. Additionally Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) found that for those children whose parent remarried during adolescence, the stepfather establishing authority quickly was associated with greater acceptance of the stepfather and better outcomes for the child. Hetherington’s studies have also indicated that authoritative parenting by the stepfather is associated with better outcomes for children and healthier stepfamily functioning in the long-term (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington et al., 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

One third of stepfathers in the VLSDR who attempted a friend role went on to establish a close, authoritative role, particularly with stepsons (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). An Australian study of 136 young adult stepchildren investigated the relationship between parenting and stepparenting style, and child adjustment (Nicholson et al., 2002). This study found that authoritative parenting by both the stepparent and parent has been found to be the least associated with negative outcomes for children in stepfamilies (Nicholson et al., 2002). When residential parents adopt non-authoritative roles in stepfamilies, then the stepparent adopting an authoritative parenting role can be beneficial to children (Nicholson et al., 2002). Hetherington also found this in the VLSDR; an authoritative stepfather was able to ‘partially buffer’ some of
the negative impacts of a disengaged residential mother (Hetherington, 1993). Therefore, although stepfather authority can be problematic if attempted too early in stepfamily formation, or if unwanted by the child, there can be many benefits to both stepfamily and stepchild functioning if the stepfather can adopt an authoritative role. It is therefore important to investigate those processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time.

**Children’s responses to the stepfather role**

Children’s responses to the stepfather role impact significantly on the stepfamily system and also the behaviour of stepparents and the stepparent role (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Therefore it is important to investigate how children respond to stepfathers and how these responses can impact on stepfamily relationships. A New Zealand qualitative study of young adults of divorce asked 18 young adult stepchildren about their experiences with stepparents (Cartwright, Farnsworth, & Mobley, 2009). Two thirds of those who had stepparents reported receiving some form of support from the stepparent, typically practical support, financial, and for some, emotional support, acceptance, and feeling cared for. These participants appeared to appreciate this support, and this corresponds to other studies that demonstrate that children are more willing to accept support than discipline from stepfathers (e.g. Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Perceptions of stepfather support and warmth have been found to differ by child gender. One study of 590 children in first-marriage, sole-divorced and stepfamilies found that boys were more likely to perceive stepfathers as equal providers of warmth and supervision, whereas girls were more likely to perceive them as providers of supervision than warmth (Kurdek & Fine, 1993).

The parenting style of the stepparent also impacts on communication and topic avoidance from children in stepfamilies. An interview study with 115 adolescents and young adults in stepfamilies indicated that an authoritarian stepparenting approach was associated with more topic avoidance and decreased satisfaction with the stepparent, whereas permissive and authoritative stepparenting approaches were associated with increased satisfaction and less topic avoidance from children (Golish, 2000).

The area of discipline appears to be a particularly sensitive area for children in stepfamilies. In a New Zealand qualitative study, young adult stepchildren identified that they preferred being disciplined by their biological parent and many felt disinclined to be disciplined by their stepparent (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Stepchildren often expressed hurt, anger and betrayal if the parent encouraged the stepparent to discipline, particularly during adolescence and the
beginning of stepfamily formation. Participants in this study also expressed that they wanted their biological parent to continue being a parent, doing the disciplining and ensuring there was fair treatment of the children; a finding also expressed in the study by Cartwright et al. (2009). Many participants in both studies expressed wanting time to get used to the transition into a stepfamily and to get used to their parent’s new partner.

Another qualitative study from New Zealand with 25 young adult stepchildren found that these participants valued practical support from their stepfather, and many approved and appreciated when their stepfather was cautious about discipline and acted judiciously (Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). Some participants in this study expressed anger and resentment over their stepfather’s attempts to impose rules or values. Findings from a similar study previously mentioned indicated that one third of stepchild participants reported significant distress or anger in relation to stepparent control or discipline; this was often associated with feelings of resentment (Cartwright et al., 2009). However Kinniburgh-White et al. (2010) found that some children did accept some discipline from their stepfather and became close to the stepfather over time.

A recent study in the United States examined 522 young adult stepchildren’s perceptions of their stepparents’ communication and competence (Schrodt, 2006). Three constructs in relation to these were found. The first was ‘positive regard’, which was defined as, “stepchildren’s general feelings of closeness, support, and satisfaction with their primary stepparent relationship” (Schrodt, 2006, p. 174). This construct was mostly associated with a positive stepparent-child relationship and with respect and esteem toward the stepparent. The second construct was ‘(step)parent authority’, which was defined as, “the degree to which a stepchild grants his or her primary stepparent the power to determine, influence and/or judge what behaviours and actions are appropriate and inappropriate” (Schrodt, 2006, p. 178). As mentioned previously, this construct is used as the definition of authority in this thesis study and was associated with stepparents who provided guidance and advice to stepchildren, enforced household rules, and disciplined children as if they were their own; and children who were more likely to refer to their stepparent as “Dad” or “Mum” when with friends. The third construct was ‘affective certainty’, which was defined as, “the extent to which the stepchild and the stepparent had communicated their feelings to one another” (Schrodt, 2006, p. 174). Schrodt further conceptualised this construct as, “the degree to which a stepchild perceives that they have a definite or settled relationship with a stepparent, one in which he or she knows how the
stepparent feels about them, and in turn, has communicated feelings to the stepparent” (Schrodt, 2006, p. 179). Many children in this study identified that affection and admiration toward their stepparent was very important and was a key factor in determining how the relationship developed. Stepparent authority was viewed as a key component of the stepparent-child relationship. Additionally, in line with other research (e.g. Bray, 1999), some children in this study appeared to grant their stepparent more authority over time (Schrodt, 2006).

**Ambiguity and Lack of Clarity**

Clinicians have found that stepfamily members often enter stepfamily life with a number of fantasies and myths regarding stepfamily roles (Papernow, 2008; Visher & Visher, 1993). The most common myths are those of instant love and adjustment, and that stepfamilies are similar to first-marriage families. Visher and Visher (1993) argued that stepfamilies that hold on to these myths are more likely to encounter difficulties than those who realise these expectations are unrealistic. The stepfather role is still poorly defined and there are often inconsistencies around the perceptions of the stepfather role between stepfamily members (Fine et al., 1998) and the types of roles stepfathers adopt (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). When the stepfather enters the family, the biological parent-child relationship has already been established; therefore the stepfather must negotiate their role in the family (Robertson, 2008). A New Zealand study of 99 stepfamily couples found that couples who repartner spend little time discussing the role the stepfather will adopt, and their role in relation to childcare (Cartwright, 2010a). This same study also found that discipline of children and the stepfather role were common areas of disagreement in stepfamilies in this New Zealand sample (Cartwright, 2010a). Other studies have also found that couples in stepfamilies often experience disagreements in relation to the negotiation of family boundaries and issues concerning children, particularly child-rearing, rules, and the sharing of resources among children (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Hobart, 1991; Pasley, Koch, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1994).

A study that compared the perceptions of stepparents, parents and children from 40 stepfamilies in regards to the stepparent role and adjustment in their stepfamilies, found that children were more likely to choose the role ‘friend’ for their stepparent, whereas adults (parents and stepparents) were more likely to perceive that the stepparent should take on the role of ‘parent’ or ‘stepparent’ (Fine et al., 1998). These discrepancies between stepparents’ and children’s perceptions and expectations of the stepparent role were linked to greater adjustment.
difficulties, including decreased stepparent satisfaction, and more distant stepparent-child relations (Fine et al., 1998).

A recent New Zealand study, which administered a questionnaire to 26 stepfamilies and interviewed another 20 stepfamilies in regards to parent and stepparent roles also found differing perceptions of the stepparent role by children and adults in stepfamilies (Mobley & Cartwright, 2013). This study found that children in stepfamilies rated the stepparent role as lower on warmth/support and discipline/control than parents and stepparents rated it. Additionally, two thirds of these children did not believe the stepparent should take a parenting role and thought that the biological parent should be responsible for discipline. Some participants indicated the stepparent could share some parenting with the biological parent but this seemed to be limited to helping with practical and household tasks, and providing some warmth and support. In contrast, two thirds of the adults believed an active parental role was ideal for the stepparent.

Stepfathers’ self-perception of their role and more specifically, the parenting role, and behaviours they engage in, has also been found to be related to several indicators of satisfaction and stepfamily functioning (Fine, Ganong, & Coleman, 1997). A study of 39 stepfathers investigated their perceptions of the stepfather role and perceived adjustment (Fine et al., 1997). This study found that greater stepfather adjustment was associated with congruence between their perceived role and how they and others expected them to behave as a stepfather (particularly with regards to warmth). Additionally, a study that compared the involvement in child-rearing between 68 stepfathers and 68 biological fathers found that stepfathers’ higher involvement in child-rearing tasks was associated with higher marital satisfaction (Adamsons, O’Brien, & Pasley, 2007). A study of 50 stepfather families found that stepfathers’ perception of a higher quality stepfather-child relationship was also associated with increased marital satisfaction (Skopin, Newman, & McKenry, 1993). The role adopted by stepfathers also impacts on their well-being and satisfaction with stepfamily life. Fine et al. (1997) found that higher engagement in parenting behaviours associated with warmth and control by stepfathers was associated with greater involvement as a stepparent, greater satisfaction with this experience, perceived success and closeness with their stepchild, and overall perceived family strengths. These were also related to lower shame in regards to their role as a stepfather.

**Effects of Other Stepfamily Members on the Stepfather Role**

The stepfather role is also affected by other stepfamily members, in particular the non-residential father and the residential mother.
Effects of non-resident fathers

Non-resident fathers are increasingly remaining involved in the lives of children following parental separation, consequently children in stepfamilies often face multiple parenting relationships, which presents the possibility of loyalty conflicts for children (Pryor, 2006). A recent qualitative study of 21 stepparents and their partners found that the absence or presence of the biological father can impact on the stepfather role (Svare, Jay, & Mason, 2004). This study indicated that a disengaged non-residential father was associated with stepfathers adopting a parenting role. Yet studies suggest that children can add additional parental figures into their lives successfully (Funder, 1996; Pryor, 2004a; White & Gilbreth, 2001). In a New Zealand study it was found that closeness to the non-resident parent is positively associated with closeness to the stepparent (Pryor, 2004a). Additionally, children who are close to both the non-resident father and stepfather tend to demonstrate the least externalising and internalising problems compared to children close to either the non-resident father, or stepfather, or neither (King, 2006). This indicates that children can move past potential loyalty conflicts and many can benefit from successfully establishing a close relationship with the stepfather, whilst maintaining a relationship with the non-resident father.

Effects of mothers

The residential mother can also impact on the stepfather role. A qualitative study with 32 remarried couples from Israel found that many residential mothers reported not entirely trusting their partner with parenting their children (Erera-Weatherley, 1996). The discipline of children is a common area of disagreement among stepfamily members (Cartwright, 2010a) and has a large impact on relationship satisfaction and stepfamily functioning (Marsiglio, 2004). Marsiglio (2004) found that the stepfathers in his study stated that they tended not to discipline their stepchildren during the initial stages of stepfamily formation. The move into a disciplinarian role was often gradual and many stepfathers are influenced by their partner in some way in determining their disciplinary role. Bray (1999) also found that biological parents may sometimes encourage their partner to take on an active disciplinary role. Cartwright (2010a) in a New Zealand study of 66 stepfamily parents found that one quarter of parents reported that they tried to share discipline of children with stepparents within the first year of stepfamily formation.

Sometimes the stepfather’s role is influenced by the parenting style of the residential mother. Researchers and clinicians have found that residential mothers in stepfamilies often adopt a permissive parenting approach, which is high on warmth/support but low on
discipline/control (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Marsiglio, 2004; Papernow, 2006). Subsequently, stepfathers tend to view their partners as not very skilled at discipline and controlling their children (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Marsiglio, 2004), which may lead to the more authoritarian parenting approach adopted by several stepfathers (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Marsiglio, 2004). A study of 84 stepfamilies found that not having a shared agreement in regards to the biological parent’s parenting style was associated with the most role strain for stepparents (Saint-Jacques, 1996). This may be due to perceived pressure on behalf of the stepparent to ‘fix’ the partner’s parenting and adopt a more authoritarian role than desired.

Therefore the stepfather role can be impacted by other stepfamily members. In particular the residential mother can have a key role in shaping the stepfather role and his authority within the stepfamily. Stepfathers therefore may face a lack of clarity regarding their role and additional pressure from other stepfamily members to engage in a certain role, whilst also having to consider their own wishes and responses from the stepchild. It is therefore not surprising that this can be a challenging role to negotiate.

**Conclusion and Study Aims**

In summary, the stepfather-child relationship is important in determining overall stepfamily functioning and well-being for children and adults in stepfamilies. Yet there is a lack of clarity regarding what role the stepfather should adopt and stepfamily members often have differing expectations of what this role should be and this can create difficulties with stepfamily functioning (Fine et al., 1998).

There is some evidence that in the long-term, stepfathers who manage to adopt an authoritative parenting style, which is high on warmth/support and discipline/control, tend to have stepchildren with increased well-being (Bray, 1999; Nicholson et al., 2002). However, if the stepfather attempts to control and impose discipline on the child too early in the relationship, and particularly if the stepfamily forms during adolescence, then this is typically met with resistance and can lead to negative outcomes for children (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Stepfamily researchers recommend that the stepparent attempts to establish a warm and trusting relationship with the child first and if satisfaction with this relationship is high, there may be an increased tolerance from children in regards to accepting discipline and some authority from the stepparent (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).
Therefore this thesis study aims to contribute to the stepfamily literature by investigating those processes associated with positive experiences of stepfather authority. The methodology allows for the exploration of this topic from the perspective of young adult stepchildren. Young adults were chosen for this study as they can still recall their experiences from childhood and adolescence, yet are able to reflect upon these experiences from an adult perspective. This study uses a qualitative methodology, which allows for unique insights and a range of experiences to be investigated. Stepfather authority is an area within the stepfamily literature with somewhat inconsistent findings; therefore this study aims to help further understand this important aspect of stepfamily systems by exploring a range of young adult stepchildren’s experiences of stepfather authority, both positive and difficult. It also aims to further investigate those experiences and processes associated with positive stepfather authority, and to identify adaptive stepfather authority roles within the stepfamily system.

Therefore the overall aim of this study is to investigate the range of young adult stepchildren’s experiences and perceptions of stepfather authority. The study aims to investigate:

i. Young adult stepchildren’s beliefs about stepfather authority
ii. Young adult stepchildren’s experiences and perceptions of stepfathers’ approaches to authority
iii. The experiences of stepfather authority perceived or identified as either positive or problematic
iv. The processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time.

This study will provide insight into processes that facilitate the development of stepfather authority from the perspective of young adult stepchildren. This will provide further insight into stepfamily processes and have relevant implications for clinical psychology practice. The following chapter provides an overview of the methodology and procedures of the study.
Chapter Two

Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology of this thesis study. This thesis study was divided into two studies. In Study One, 88 young adult stepchildren completed an online questionnaire (comprising of written narratives) that asked them about their positive and difficult experiences with stepfather authority, if authority changed over time, and their opinion regarding the amount of influence a stepfather should have with stepchildren in general. This was in order to explore both positive and difficult experiences and perceptions of stepfather authority, and if these experiences changed over time. From Study One, ten participants who described mostly positive experiences with stepfather authority were selected to be interviewed for Study Two. Study Two was conducted in order to investigate the processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time. These semi-structured interviews were structured in such a way as to assist with examining the development of stepfather authority within the stepfather-child relationship over time.

This chapter presents the research questions next. It then outlines a discussion of qualitative research, including its validity and reliability; and a discussion of the methodological considerations of this thesis study. The chapter concludes with an overview of the data analysis for both studies, which includes an in-depth description of the process of thematic analysis used in this thesis study. The methods for Study One and Two are presented in Chapters Three and Four respectively.

Research Questions

This thesis study aimed to answer a number of questions with a focus on young adult stepchildren’s experiences of relationships with stepfathers within the stepfamily. These questions were:

i. What contributes to the development of stepchildren’s acceptance of stepfather authority?

ii. What influences the positive perceptions of stepchildren in regards to stepfather authority?

iii. What influences stepchildren’s perceptions of problems in regards to stepfather authority?
Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is particularly useful for those attempting to explore and understand the way participants experience phenomena and how they perceive and interpret their experiences (Richards & Morse, 2007). A key assumption in qualitative research is that there is no single, fixed reality, but rather that participants construct and interpret reality in multiple ways and these constructions and interpretations change with circumstances and with time (Merriam, 2002). The main aim of interpretive qualitative research is, “to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (Merriam, 2002, p. 38).

Merriam (2002) outlines some key characteristics of qualitative research that are relevant to this study. Firstly, qualitative research often aims to identify how people make meaning out of their experiences and the world. This study asked participants to write and talk about their experiences and perceptions of stepfather authority. In qualitative research the researcher is the main method for collecting and analysing data (Merriam, 2002) of which there are strengths and shortcomings, which will be discussed later. Additionally, qualitative research tends to be inductive, that is, it aims to build theories to better understand a phenomenon. In Study One of this thesis, the themes were identified using an inductive approach; that is the themes were driven by the data generated by participants. For Study Two, the three main areas for thematic analysis were arrived at deductively, that is they were generated from theory, but the thematic analysis within each of these areas was inductive (this will be discussed further in Chapter Four). Finally, qualitative research typically uses smaller samples and gains ‘richly descriptive’ accounts of the experiences of the participants (Merriam, 2002).

There has also been much discussion within the literature around the reliability and validity of qualitative research in comparison to quantitative research. One contentious area in particular is validity, largely the validity of interpretations of qualitative data (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Due to the expanding research into many areas of human phenomena there now comes into question whether or not qualitative investigators capture these phenomena accurately. “Classical social scientists” suggest that the study of human phenomena should be limited to only those in which scientific, clear generalisations and conclusions can be made; however, many qualitative investigators want to move beyond this to capture a wider range of human experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This in itself creates controversy and challenges for researchers wanting to study unique individual experiences but maintain scientific validity at the same time. Despite these
criticisms there are a number of ways in which qualitative research can establish internal validity, reliability, and external validity (Merriam, 2002).

Internal validity is typically regarded as how well the findings capture reality. This may become problematic for qualitative researchers, as there is no single reality (Merriam, 2002), however the researcher is collecting and analysing the data themselves and attempting to understand and gain insight into the sense of reality of the participant, and how “real” events are experienced. Peer review is a way to ensure validity; someone familiar or new to the topic reviews the data or the analysis and determines if the conclusions drawn by the primary researcher are logical and represent the data. This method was used in this thesis study.

Establishing the reliability of qualitative research is more problematic as people’s experiences change (Merriam, 2002). However, Merriam (2002) suggests that for qualitative research, reliability should more typically be conferred if other researchers agree that the results are “consistent and dependable” given the raw data.

Establishing external validity is also somewhat challenging for qualitative research. This is because the findings often cannot be generalised to other populations as the samples used are often selectively chosen or small (Merriam, 2002). Instead, ensuring that rich, thick descriptions of the data are provided is the method primarily used to ensure external validity as readers will be able to determine how well they can identify with, or understand, what is written (Merriam, 2002).

In qualitative research the researcher is the main tool for data collection and analysis therefore there is potential for the researcher’s own assumptions to impact on these processes (Yardley, 2008). To ensure the validity of the data analysis, it is important for the researcher to become aware of their own previous experiences and to reflect critically on themselves and the various ‘selves’ one brings to the research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). For this study this included me reflecting on any assumptions I might have had about stepfather authority. I have not had any previous experiences with stepfathers; however I had become familiar with the literature on this topic before data collection. This did impact slightly on my preconceptions related to the study. I expected to find, to a certain degree, more negative than positive experiences described by participants. To reduce the potential impact of this on the data analysis I undertook a process of having my data and themes reviewed by a peer and my supervisor. The peer review indicated that there were some minor areas that were unclear in regards to how well some themes reflected
a small amount of the data. This process was particularly useful in helping with establishing validity as this peer was unfamiliar with the stepfamily literature. These discrepancies were then reviewed and when appropriate, changes were made. My supervisor and I conducted coding both together and separately; any discrepancies or disagreements were then revisited, discussed and agreed upon before the final themes were decided upon.

In terms of methodological approaches, this thesis study was influenced by an interpretive approach. Interpretive qualitative research aims to investigate how research participants understand and make sense of both their social and personal worlds, and the meanings they give to certain experiences and events (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This thesis study aimed to explore how stepchildren make sense of and interpret their world and experiences as children in stepfamilies, in regards to stepfather authority. The semi-structured interviews in Study Two were influenced by a method sometimes used by narrative researchers (Crossley, 2000; McAdams, 1993). Participants were asked to divide the relationship with the stepfather into three main stages over time: the beginning, middle, and later stage of their relationship. This was in order to explore the relationship and development of authority over time. This is described in more detail in Chapter Four.

**Ethics Approval**

Ethics approval was given by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee for both research projects (approval number 2010/237). The details of this approval were provided on the Participant Information Sheets (see Appendix A). A Consent Form was required for Study Two (see Appendix B); Study One was anonymous.

**Data Analysis**

**Thematic Analysis**

For both Study One and Two thematic analyses were used. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It is widely used and offers an accessible and flexible approach to analysing qualitative data. There are a number of advantages to this method, which Braun and Clarke (2006) have outlined. These include: its flexibility, its relative ease of use and accessibility of results to researchers and the public; the generation of often unanticipated insights; its use in summarising the key features of a data-set as well as “thick descriptions” of the data; and opportunities for social and psychological interpretations of data. Braun and Clarke
outline a series of steps to conduct thematic analysis that were used in this project. These steps are as follows:

**Becoming familiarised with the data**

This involved reading the data multiple times in an active way. This entailed noting down ideas or key points that emerged from the data. For Study One the online questionnaires were downloaded and read over several times by myself looking for initial ideas and features. For Study Two, the transcripts of the interviews were read while listening to recordings of the interview to ensure accurate transcribing had occurred.

**Generating initial codes**

This involved systematically noting down points and ideas that were relevant to the research questions and grouping data into separate codes. There are many ways in which to code data starting with simply labelling data descriptively, through to coding in a more analytic manner (Richards & Morse, 2007). For Study One five data-sets were used for analysis. Each data-set comprised the responses to one of the five questions from the questionnaire. For example, all the responses to question one became the first data-set; all the responses to question two became the second data-set and so on. Each data-set was read several times whilst noting initial codes. For Study Two, each interview was read individually and then coded. It became apparent from the results from Study One and the data from the interviews that it would be useful to divide the data from Study Two into three main data-sets related to stepfather authority. These were: the stepfather-child relationship; stepfather influence; and stepfather discipline (these are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four). The data from Study Two were therefore divided into three data-sets and a thematic analysis was conducted on these.

**Searching for themes**

This step involved organising related codes into themes. A theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data-set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). For both studies an inductive approach was taken but the analysis focused more specifically on data related to stepfather authority. In Study One a thematic analysis was conducted on three of the five data-sets. These were the data-sets that resulted from the questions that asked about positive and difficult experiences of stepfather authority, and participants’ opinions regarding how much influence a stepfather should have with stepchildren in general. In Study Two each of the three data-sets was analysed thematically from an inductive approach.
**Reviewing themes**

This step involved checking each theme in relation to the extracted pieces of data and ensuring each theme occurred frequently enough and was of relevance to the extracts. A thematic map was generated for both studies. This step also involved checking the themes against the entire data-set. For both studies the initial themes generated were checked against the entire data-set and if they captured the majority of data without a large amount of overlap then they were agreed upon as the final themes. To determine the validity of the thematic analysis, my supervisor reviewed a sample of the data that had been analysed thematically; and also reviewed each theme. A peer also reviewed a sample of the data.

**Defining and naming themes**

This involved clearly defining and naming the themes that had been identified in the data; this may include the additional identification of sub-themes, although no major sub-themes were identified in this thesis study.

**Producing the report**

The final step involved reporting examples of the data to include as quotes in the final research report. These quotes are presented in Chapters Three and Four of this thesis.

**Content/Categorical Analysis**

In two questions from the online questionnaire (‘Were the issues surrounding stepfather authority ever discussed with you, and how did you feel about that?’; ‘How did your experiences with stepfather authority change as you became older and you knew your stepfather longer?’), participants gave brief answers and the qualitative data fell into clearly defined distinct categories. Where this occurred a content analysis was used (Bowling, 2002). This employed a similar process to that used in thematic analysis; however the data was less rich and fell clearly into discrete categories.

Each theme will be discussed in more detail in the next two chapters of this thesis. Chapter Three presents the methods and results from Study One. Chapter Four presents the methods and results from Study Two.
Chapter Three

Study One: The Online Questionnaire

This chapter presents the methods and results of Study One, the Online Questionnaire. Given the central role of stepfather authority in determining stepfamily functioning and that there are often strong issues around stepfather discipline and authority it is important to understand how positive or difficult experiences of stepfather authority can develop over time, therefore Study One aimed to investigate the range of young adult stepchildren’s experiences and perceptions of stepfather authority. The questions asked in the online questionnaire also aimed to investigate the experiences of stepfather authority perceived or identified as either positive or problematic. The definitions used in this study are as follows. Authority is defined as, “the degree to which a stepchild grants his or her primary stepparent the power to determine, influence and/or judge what behaviours and actions are appropriate or inappropriate for the stepchild” (Schrodt, 2006, p. 178). Stepfather influence is defined as ways in which the stepfather guides, supports or encourages the stepchild towards certain actions, decisions, and goals; the stepfather may be considered as a role model or mentor in this regard. Stepfather discipline refers to the setting and enforcement of guidelines and rules by the stepfather.

First, an overview of the methods used in this study is presented. Next a brief summary of the results of the content analysis of the data relating to changes in stepfather authority over time is provided. Then the results from the thematic analysis of positive and difficult experiences of stepfather authority are presented. Finally the results from a thematic analysis of the data relating to the participants’ opinion on the amount of stepfather influence deemed appropriate will be provided.

Methods

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through advertising across three tertiary institutions. This included flyers around the institutions and advertising on the University of Auckland Psychology website as well as flyers in undergraduate psychology lectures (see Appendix C). Participants for both studies had to be between the ages of 18 and 30 and had lived in a stepfather family for at least two years during childhood and/or adolescence. In the advertisement, a stepfather family was defined as: a family in which the biological mother resides with a male partner and her
biological child or children; the stepfather may or may not have children and there can be mutual children.

**Participants**

Eighty-eight participants completed the online questionnaire. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 with a mean age of 20.5 years ($SD=2.9$). The participants’ age when their stepfather family formed ranged from two to 18 with a mean age of 9 years ($SD=4.4$). The total number of years that the participants lived with their stepfathers ranged from two to 19, with a mean number of 8.9 years ($SD=4.5$). The demographics of these participants are shown in Table 1 below. Sixty-eight (77.3%) participants were female and 20 (22.7%) were male. The ethnic composition of the survey sample was 75.0% Pakeha, 10.2% Māori, 9.1% Pacific Island, 5.7% Asian, and 19.3% ‘Other’. At the point of completing the survey, 79.5% of participants identified that their mother and stepfather were still together, whereas 20.5% identified that they were not.

Table 1

*Demographics of participants from Study One*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>77.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
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<td>NZ European/Pakeha</td>
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<td>Maori</td>
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<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Island</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age participant gained stepfather</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;5 years</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-11 years</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>52.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-18 years</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration participant lived with stepfather</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;2.5 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.9</td>
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<td>2.5-5 years</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20.5</td>
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<td>6-10 years</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Mother and stepfather still together?</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>79.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

Those interested in participating in the study were given a website address taking them to the online questionnaire using Survey Monkey, an online survey software and questionnaire tool. There they accessed the Participant Information Sheet and progressed onto the questionnaire. Participants were asked five questions, which aimed to identify young adult stepchildren’s experiences and perceptions of stepfather authority (see Appendix D).
their positive and difficult experiences with stepfather authority, if the issues surrounding stepfather authority were ever discussed with them, if they experienced a change in stepfather authority as they became older, and their opinion on how much influence a stepfather should have.

**Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis, as described in Chapter Two, was conducted on the data from questions one, two and five of the questionnaire. Another method of analysis, content/categorical analysis, also outlined in Chapter Two, was used for questions three and four.

**Results**

A thematic analysis was conducted on the data from the online questionnaire that asked participants about the positive and difficult experiences they identified with stepfather authority, and their opinion on the amount of influence a stepfather should have. There were a variety of responses covering a range of experiences with stepfather authority from difficult through to positive. The data were represented by three themes identified by participants as related to positive experiences with stepfather authority, four themes related to difficult experiences with stepfather authority, and five themes related to their opinion on stepfather influence. These themes are presented in Table 2 below. The number of participants who had data under each theme is provided in order to give an indication of how common these experiences were within this group of participants. Some participants provided data under more than one theme and most participants reported both positive and difficult experiences. Thirteen participants reported only positive experiences, ten reported only difficult, and 65 reported both positive and difficult experiences.

Table 2

*Themes from the thematic analysis of Study One*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Experiences</th>
<th>Difficult Experiences</th>
<th>Opinion on Stepfather Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The Importance of Stepfather Care and Support</td>
<td>1. Not my Real Father</td>
<td>1. Characteristics of the Stepchild</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Stepfather Influence and Discipline was Helpful</td>
<td>2. A New Authority</td>
<td>2. Influence of Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. No Discipline is Good Discipline</td>
<td>3. Extreme Discipline Behaviours</td>
<td>3. Stepfather’s Approach to Influence and the Stepchild</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Mum Took his Side</td>
<td>4. Living Arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5. The Benefits of Influence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall Experience of Stepfather Authority

Participants were asked to write a summary statement of their experiences of stepfather authority over time. Thirty-two (36%) participants said their experiences of stepfather authority were mostly positive and the amount and type of stepfather authority was appropriate or comfortable. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 9.1 years ($SD=4.8$), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 9.1 years ($SD=4.8$), 38.2% of all female participants and 30% of all male participants were in this category. For some in this group, the amount of authority was established at the beginning and this did not change over time. Others experienced a decrease in discipline as they became older and more independent but the stepfather’s influence remained strong and positive. Twenty-five (28%) participants reported that their experience of stepfather authority improved over time and attributed this to the relationship strengthening and the growing maturity of participants. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 9.1 years ($SD=4.7$), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 9.4 years ($SD=4.6$), 26.5% of all female participants and 35% of all male participants were in this category. For these first two groups of participants, several noted an increase in conflict that coincided with adolescence, however many were able to resolve any difficulties or noted an improvement in the relationship when they left home. Twenty-three (26%) participants reported that their experience with stepfather authority was difficult. This was sometimes due to unwanted authority being attempted by the stepfather. Several participants reported a distant, strained or difficult relationship with the stepfather. Many of these participants reported receiving minimal or no authority from the stepfather. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 9.3 years ($SD=4.1$), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 8.1 years ($SD=4.0$), 26.5% of all female participants and 25% of all male participants were in this category. Five (6%) participants reported that experiences of authority with the stepfather deteriorated over time. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 8.0 years ($SD=4.0$), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 9.2 years ($SD=5.4$), 5.9% of all female participants and 5% of all male participants were in this category. One participant in this group perceived a decrease in interest from the stepfather as they became older. Two participants reported experiencing difficulties once they entered the teenage years perhaps due to an increase in attempted authority from the stepfather and a stronger drive for independence from the stepchild.
Positive Experiences of Stepfather Authority

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis related to positive experiences with stepfather authority. The data is drawn from the question that asked: ‘What were the positive aspects of your experience of stepfather authority?’ The majority of participants (77) were able to identify positive experiences with stepfather authority. Three themes were identified from the data. These were titled: The Importance of Stepfather Care and Support, Stepfather Influence and Discipline was Helpful, and No Discipline is Good Discipline (see Table 2 p. 40). After each quote the participant number, gender and age at the time of completing the questionnaire is provided in parentheses. For example, P33, female, 22, refers to participant 33, female, aged 22.

The Importance of Stepfather Care and Support

An important theme that emerged in the data from the question related to positive experiences of stepfather authority was The Importance of Stepfather Care and Support. Thirty-four participants identified that they perceived some stepfather support and often a positive, caring attitude from the stepfather towards them. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 7.7 years (SD=3.7), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 9.9 years (SD=4.2), 41.2% of all female participants and 30% of all male participants were in this category. As they wrote about their positive experiences of authority, they linked it to care and support. There were several types of support identified including practical and emotional support. Some participants talked about how this perceived caring and support led them to respect their stepfather. The majority of these participants perceived support and caring as important in contributing to the development of a positive relationship with the stepfather.

Perceived support from the stepfather was mentioned in several ways. One form of support mentioned by participants was practical support. This often included help with homework, sports, “male jobs” around the house, and education (for example, “about the world”). One participant whose stepfather joined her family when she was nine and had a largely absent biological father said,

When I first met my stepfather, he was very supportive in everything I did, which was nice as my father wasn’t around. Like he would take me out to play sport and help me with my homework (P8, female, 20).

Another participant commented that the stepfather helping with “male jobs” around the house was positive in the absence of the biological father. Some participants reflected upon
“educational” experiences or learning they gained from the stepfather. One participant appreciated that her stepfather taught her things she would not have learnt from her father,

…My sister and I kind of got the best of both worlds by having two fathers from different backgrounds. My stepfather…was an outdoorsy kind of guy…He was more of a hands on father than my real father as he became involved within the community when it was needed. My sister and I got to learn a different world perspective from him than my dad and we learnt more about nature and the ways of the world and how it worked (P61, female, 18).

A number of participants identified the financial support they received from the stepfather as a positive experience. This may have been in the form of the stepfather providing financially for the family, providing a house, or advice on finances. For example,

…He [stepfather] gave me money and when I needed money would come up with jobs for me to do so that I could reach my savings goal target (P45, female, 19).

Several participants commented on the emotional support they received from the stepfather. This may have been in the form of “being there” for the child, for example being available for them when they needed help or were experiencing a problem. This support appeared to be appreciated by these participants and several commented on how this engendered a respect for the stepfather and that they valued his opinion. One participant said,

My experience of stepfather authority allowed me to have a role model, who was very clear on rules, behaviour etc. expected from all of the kids. Being able to turn to my stepfather when I was having trouble with anything has meant that he had more influence for me because I was respectful of his point of view, and valued what he thought was appropriate. After years of being in the same family his judgements and actions began to influence what I thought and how I behaved even more than before because I wanted to live up to expectations that he (and my other parents) had for me. Having a stepfather also means that there is an extra person to turn to when I need advice, etc. (P12, female, 19).

A number of participants commented on the advice and guidance they received from the stepfather. These participants appeared comfortable receiving advice and guidance from the stepfather, and several seemed to appreciate the stepfather’s approach to providing this. For some it appeared that the stepfather provided advice and guidance and that the participant could decide themselves whether or not to follow this; this appeared to be appreciated by participants, and several referred to the stepfather as a “role model”, for example,

I trust his judgement and thus respect his authority. In turn, he seems to trust me also, and does not tend to impose his authority on many occasions, instead guiding me to
make my own decisions by offering his own advice, in the way that any trusted adult should (P31, female, 18).

My stepfather, in my eyes, is a man who I respect and look up to as a role model in my life. He has always been there for me, supports me with all my decisions and is a huge part in my life… I believe my stepfather has as much authority as a father figure as we have established a healthy relationship based on love and trust (P73, female, 18).

Perceived support from the stepfather was interpreted by some participants as the stepfather demonstrating that he cared about them. Several talked about the significance of him displaying this supportive, caring, and at times, loving behaviour, even though he was not “obliged” to in the way a biological parent might be. Several of the participants discussed the importance of aspects of the stepfather’s personality and attitude towards them that enabled them to develop a positive relationship. The participant below talked about the positive aspects of her stepfather’s personality and his kind treatment towards her. These appeared to facilitate respect from her towards him, a close relationship between them, and an acceptance of his authority,

My stepfather was a kind, generous and entertaining individual. He was always very good to me, especially considering he already had a family from a previous marriage. Being intelligent, confident and assertive, he naturally gained respect from those around him, myself included. While I have a fondness for my biological father, I feel both closer to, and more respect for my stepfather. He in many aspects assumed the role of a father and would occasionally discipline me but never harshly and never without just cause. His authority was something I looked up to and it made me feel proud to be part of his family, it also made me more willing to approach him for advice than my actual father (P39, female, 19).

A number of participants indicated that the type of support and role of the stepfather changed over time. Some stepfathers were described as providing practical support at the beginning of the relationship and adopting a role that appeared to be high in support but low in discipline/control. Some participants then described stepfathers that appeared to move into a role that was still high in support and also had some authority, for example, in the form of guidance. One participant who was aged seven when she began living with her stepfather said,

Since I was seven he was attending my sports games and encouraging me to try my best all the time… My stepdad was very helpful when it came to my homework, especially the ‘hands-on’ type work. As I got older he was often looking out for me, making sure that the people I surrounded myself around were ‘good enough’ for me and that wouldn’t be likely to influence me in a negative way. He also taught me what behaviour was acceptable and what wasn’t (P47, female, 18).
Some participants described stepfathers who appeared to adopt a role that was high in support and authority, including some guidance about their behaviour and discipline, from the beginning of the relationship. These participants appeared to accept this role and some commented specifically on elements of the stepfather’s personality and behaviour that seemed to make this role easier for the child to accept. For example, the following participant described how her stepfather’s behaviour toward her and his style of parenting, in particular his calmness and gentle approach to authority made it easier for her to accept his role,

I have very positive memories of my stepfather’s authority. While my mother was sometimes nice, sometimes angry, my stepfather was always a calming influence, very rarely raising his voice. He guided me firmly but gently and was there for me at times when others weren’t. I knew I could trust him completely… My stepfather always strived to spend lots of positive time with me, so that when it came to discipline, I think I listened to him more. I respected him. His rules were very clear (P70, female, 26).

On the other hand, some participants perceived that the stepfather demonstrated support and caring and had some authority over them, for example, in the form of influence. However these stepfathers appeared to not adopt a disciplinary role in regards to the stepchild. This was viewed as positive and appropriate by these participants and they often appreciated that the stepfather did not attempt to discipline them. Some perceived that the stepfather cared for them and commented on the benefits of his support and influence, as one participant said,

My experience with my stepfather is a very positive one… He was not necessarily very authoritative with myself and my brother but we always knew to tell him where we were going and report back to him if we had a change of plans etc. … He never hit us when we played up or raised his voice and was always mindful of our needs. But we never had any sort of intimate father-child conversations because we still had our own father around. It was quite obvious he cared for us though (P34, female, 20).

Therefore a number of participants viewed stepfather caring and support as a positive experience. These participants described stepfather support in a number of different ways, for example, practical, financial and emotional support. A number also commented directly on aspects of the stepfather’s personality and caring behaviour towards them that they viewed as positive. Some participants linked this perceived caring and support to increased respect for the stepfather and described a positive relationship with the stepfather. Several of these stepfathers appeared to adopt a role that may be described as ‘authoritative’, that is high on warmth/support and discipline/control, and this was viewed as positive by some participants. A number
maintained a supportive role that was low in discipline/control but with some influence over the child’s behaviour; this was also appreciated by these participants.

**Stepfather Influence or Discipline was Helpful**

Thirty participants reported gaining some benefit from or valuing the stepfather’s influence or discipline. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 9 years ($SD=4.6$), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 8.9 years ($SD=4.9$), 29.4% of all female participants and 50% of all male participants were in this category. For many of these participants the stepfather had established some form of authority and the participants perceived that they had gained some positive experiences and benefit from this. Not all of these participants reported that the stepfather had both discipline and influence over them; some could perceive that he had influenced them in a positive way but may not have established a disciplinary role. Others reported that the stepfather’s style of discipline had provided benefits, even if it had also provided challenges for the participant. There were a number of perceived benefits of stepfather authority for these participants. Several participants reflected that they had learnt from their stepfather and gained skills or knowledge from him. Others noted that the stepfather had taught them to take responsibility. Some noted an improvement in their family functioning, for example, the stepfather filling a father role, making them feel like a ‘normal’ family, making their mother happy, or engendering an appreciation of their mother. Others experienced individual benefits, such as enhanced self-esteem and respect.

A perceived benefit of stepfather influence identified by some participants was what appeared to be an enhancement of themselves as an individual in some way. Some participants talked about how the stepfather’s influence resulted in an increase in their self-esteem or way of thinking about themselves. Several participants reflected that the stepfather had enabled them to respect themselves or appreciate themselves and other people more, or develop a better way of relating to others. In a way it appeared that the stepfather was able to ‘repair’ some of the ‘hurt’ that may have resulted from the biological parents’ separation, or strained relationship between the participant and their parents. One participant, who had a particularly difficult relationship with her biological father, was able to reflect upon the benefits of her stepfather’s influence and noted that she did not believe she would have been as well-adjusted had he not taken up influence in their relationship,

For me one of the most positive aspects is the fact that I have learnt a ‘healthier’ way in which to interact, not only with my father figure, but with all people, especially males. I feel that I gained a lot by his influence over my behaviour. He has not only
taught me that I should be proud of who I am but that the way in which I perceive myself is always similar to how I behave and how others will perceive me (P18, female, 22).

Others perceived that the stepfather taught them values or more traditionally male roles or tasks that they may have otherwise missed out on. One participant who was five when his stepfather entered his life and had been raised until then solely by his mother discussed the benefits he perceived of his stepfather’s influence. Although this had not been easy for him to accept he was able to reflect upon the benefits of having his stepfather’s influence and his stepfather’s values instilled in him,

    My stepfather has greatly influenced my behaviour. He has influenced my work ethic and my sense of responsibility. As a child (before my stepfather became an authority in my life) I was very dependent on people to do things for me and I was lazy and sought ways to avoid helping people out. My stepfather has taught me to be responsible, take the initiative, and contribute to the family lifestyle (P21, male, 19).

Some participants directly discussed the benefits they received from the stepfather’s discipline. A number commented that the stepfather’s authority and the rules and limitations he set made their life easier in some way. There were clear expectations for behaviour and clear consequences for not following these. The majority of these participants experienced the stepfather entering their life before adolescence. One participant whose stepfather treated her with respect from the beginning shares her experience of her stepfather’s discipline,

    More like a father to me than my biological father. Gives me good advice and is fun. He sets understandable boundaries and rules that makes my life easier rather than not giving a reason and just doing something because he says so (P30, female, 18).

Two participants described their stepfather’s discipline as “strict”, however were still able to perceive benefits from this and view their overall experience of discipline as positive, for example,

    My stepfather was prepared to be my father figure. Without him, I would not have been able to have a normal childhood. He has always been a good influence on me, teaching me right from wrong. He taught me morals, and life lessons. He was a strict father, but his authority was only to show me what was appropriate and what wasn’t. If I did something wrong, I would be told, but then again, every family does that. My stepfather definitely influenced my behaviour in a good way (P88, female, 19).

Other participants appreciated that the stepfather’s discipline was at times complementary to the residential mother’s and that they were able to experience another opinion or perspective on an issue, for example,
When my mum got remarried, because we were already teenagers, it was decided that it would always be my mum who had final authority with me and my brother, and my stepfather had final authority with my stepsibling and sister. Of course we still had to listen to what he said and because he was an adult in the house he did still have authority over us. Mainly this meant that they would discuss things with each other, but then it would be Mum who talked to us about it while my stepdad talked to my stepsiblings. I really liked this way of doing things as my mum had always been somewhat overprotective of us, so having another adult in the house to counterbalance her ideas or discipline was often a really good thing, but it also meant to us, it seemed like it was still coming from Mum, which meant that it wasn’t a huge adjustment for us (P80, female, 21).

Several participants commented on the benefits they received from having both stepfather influence and discipline. A number reflected that the stepfather stepped into a “father role” that was high on warmth/support and authority, and that this was something that they perceived as missing in their life, and they were grateful for him taking this role. Most of these participants had absent biological fathers, or spent minimal time with them. They reflected that they were able to now have a ‘normal’ family life and viewed this as beneficial to them. There were several benefits noted of the stepfather entering a father role, including feeling safe, looked after and protected. As one participant whose biological father was absent from her life said,

He [stepfather] is very protective of our family, which is good because you need a father figure in your life who you know will keep you safe and away from harm. Since he has lived with us for many years, he has become my father figure and is more than just a stepdad to me (P54, female, 18).

Other benefits included having an ally and additional support,

My stepfather always stood up for me when I asked my mother to allow me to do things (such as going rock climbing when I was young or camping). He was always the one who allowed me to do new things (P26, female, 22).

Two participants were happy to accommodate both a non-residential father and a stepfather. One participant who lived with her stepfather from the age of five said,

My stepfather made parental decisions with my mother so there was authority in our household. We had pretty clear boundaries regarding my parents and my siblings. I think my bedroom was my own personal space. He was like most fathers and drove me around, helped teach me to drive, looked after me when I was sick. But I think if I wanted to ask for permission I generally asked my mum, unless she wasn’t home and then I would ask my stepdad. But I think it was good having two father figures in my life and I only saw my actual dad every second weekend, so it was good for me to have that second father figure when he was a positive role model (P33, female, 22).
Therefore there were a range of perceived benefits from the stepfather’s influence and discipline for some participants. The perceived benefits of influence included an increase in participants’ self-esteem or increased learning of values or skills considered to be traditionally ‘male’. There were a number of benefits identified in relation to stepfather discipline including boundaries and rules making the child’s life easier, an ally and support, and someone who could discipline in a style complementary to the mother. A number of participants discussed stepfathers whom they described as adopting a ‘father role’, that was high on both warmth/support and authority. They appeared to appreciate this and indicated a number of benefits from this including an enhanced family system, and increased individual adjustment and well-being. Two participants experienced stepfathers who were quite ‘strict’ and had slightly more challenging experiences with his authority. Nevertheless it became apparent that even if participants described some difficulties, many were able to reflect upon the benefits of receiving stepfather influence, discipline or both. Several commented in hindsight that while authority was challenging for them during childhood and adolescence, they could now see the benefits of this and many believed the stepfather should have authority.

**No Discipline is Good Discipline**

Fifteen participants reported that their stepfathers did not attempt to have authority in the relationship or attempted to have minimal authority through the mother (for example backing-up the mother over ‘important’ issues) and they viewed this as positive and appropriate. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 11.1 years ($SD=4.6$), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 7.2 years ($SD=4.2$), 20.6% of all female participants and 5% of all male participants were in this category. Two participants reported that this process was influenced by their mothers who decided that the stepfather would not have authority. Others were of an age (late adolescence) where authority was less needed and they thought it would have been inappropriate for the stepfather to attempt this. Two participants indicated that the stepfather did not appear to desire authority. Another described that the stepfather’s personality would have made it difficult for them to accept his authority as he did not engender respect from them, and another viewed the stepfather as an “outsider” and therefore viewed it as positive that he did not have authority.

As reported above there were several reasons from the perspectives of the participants why the stepfather did not develop authority, two participants reported having a close bond with the mother and perceived that she made the decision that the stepfather would not have authority.
over them; these participants appeared to appreciate this and view this as acceptable. As one participant said,

In my family my stepfather wasn’t allowed to influence my behaviours. My mother decided that when she met her first boyfriend after the break up with my father. Only herself and my father were allowed to tell me what to do. My stepfather has generally just been nice and helpful to me. If he’s been too strict towards me my mother told him off (P10, female, 23).

Of note, one of these stepfathers was still described as supportive, yet these participants appeared to have more distant and sometimes strained relationships with the stepfather. It is unclear whether the distant relationship impacted on the level of authority adopted by the stepfather or vice versa. Two other participants reported that the stepfather did not attempt to directly have authority with the stepchild but tried to influence them through the mother. This seemed to be a more acceptable medium of communication rather than direct commentary from the stepfather. One participant reported,

My stepfather has had little to no direct influence on my behaviours. In the past, if he has felt strongly that I should not do something for my own good he would speak with my mother, instead, and allow her to make the end decision. Since our house belongs to him, he has never been hesitant to ask for help with chores or running errands. But, in all matters beyond the household, he keeps his opinions between himself and my mother (P7, female, 20).

For other participants, they were of an older age (usually adolescence) when the stepfather joined the family, therefore it was deemed inappropriate by the participant and family for the stepfather to have authority. These participants appreciated that he took on a more supportive role in these instances. These stepfathers appeared to have a more friend or acquaintance type role, rather than a parental one. One participant, whose stepfather joined her family when she was in her late teens and had a close relationship with her biological father, describes her experience,

He left me to do my own thing most of the time, because of my age I think he didn’t feel as if he could exert much authority over me, nor did he have to… He felt like more of a friend/flatmate to me than an authoritative figure, which was good because I was and still am very close with my father, and didn’t really need anyone else to tell me what’s right and wrong (P65, female, 21).

Other participants expressed reasons why they were appreciative that the stepfather did not attempt to have authority or factors that prevented this from happening. These included the
personality of the stepfather, for example, some stepfathers acted in a way that participants deemed as impossible to respect or look up to,

He was into fun outdoors-like activities so we did a lot of that stuff as kids, like motorbiking, boating etc. He was like a child himself and therefore held no authority over us, as he used to behave worse than we did and he was an adult. So we didn’t look to him for permission or anything as we knew we weren’t allowed to do some of the things he did (P76, female, 23).

A small number of participants described stepfathers who did not appear to want to have authority, for example,

My stepfather never interfered. If I needed to be punished, he let my mother deal with it, unless he felt it necessary to step in. I think it was because he didn't want me to say, “You can’t tell me to do anything, you’re not my real dad”, so my mother was usually first to instigate a ‘telling off’ or what have you… (P4, female, 19).

Lastly, some participants identified a lack of authority from the stepfather as positive as they reported that they could not accept authority from someone whom they viewed as an ‘outsider’ or trying to replace their father. All of these participants expressed distant or strained relationships with the stepfather. One participant who had largely been raised by her sole-mother said that she had little need for her stepfather’s authority,

My mother has been both my mum and my dad so my stepdad was more of a person just living in the same house. He didn’t really know what was going on and only knew the really important information. He did not hold any power or control over me with my punishments, rewards etc., except if I was blatantly rude to him (P19, female, 18).

Therefore this small number of participants reported experiencing little or no authority from the stepfather for a variety of reasons, typically due to the mother deeming it inappropriate, the older age of the stepchild, or factors about the stepfather such as his personality or lack of desire to establish authority. These participants viewed this lack of authority as appropriate. Some stepfathers were able to be established in a more supportive or friend-like role, yet many participants in this group reported more distant or strained relationships with the stepfather than participants in other groups, and many of these stepfathers appeared to have a disengaged parenting style that was low on warmth/support and authority. It is difficult to determine the direction of this relationship, perhaps these difficult relationships reduced the likelihood that the stepchild would accept authority or the lack of authority may in some way result in a more distant relationship between stepfather and stepchild.
Summary

There were a broad range of experiences reported as positive by participants. A number of participants perceived support and care from the stepfather and felt respect for the stepfather. These participants were often able to establish a positive relationship with the stepfather in which he had a supportive and caring role. Over time some of these stepfathers established influence and discipline with the child and participants described this as positive. Many participants were able to perceive several benefits from the stepfather’s influence, discipline or both, such as an improvement in family functioning, a father figure who could instil values or teach new skills, enhanced self-esteem and respect, and clear guidelines and rules. A smaller number of participants described stepfathers who did not attempt to establish authority with them and this was viewed as positive. Of note, most of the participants discussed in this section described having both positive and difficult experiences with stepfather authority. While a number were able to accept authority it indicates that the path to this is not necessarily a smooth one and there can be challenges along the way. This section highlighted the importance of stepfather warmth and support and establishing a relationship with the child, which at times helped ease the difficulties associated with stepfather authority and often resulted in the stepfather adopting a role that was described as ‘authoritative’ (high on warmth/support and discipline/control). The next section relates specifically to more difficult experiences identified with stepfather authority.

Difficult Experiences of Stepfather Authority

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis related to difficult experiences with stepfather authority. The data is taken from the question that asked: ‘What were the most difficult aspects of stepfather authority for you?’ The majority of participants reported some difficult experiences with stepfather authority and 74 participants responded to this question and their experiences are discussed in this section. This indicates that a considerable number of participants reported both positive and difficult experiences with stepfather authority. It is important to note that while the majority of participants discussed difficult aspects of stepfather authority when asked, approximately one third (as discussed in the introduction to the chapter), indicated that overall they had a largely positive experience, and just over one quarter experienced an improvement in their experience with stepfather authority over time. Four themes were identified from the data set that addressed difficult experiences with stepfather authority. These were titled: Not my Real Father, A New Authority, Extreme Discipline Behaviours, and Mum Took his Side (see Table 2 p. 40).
Not my Real Father

Twenty-nine participants reported that a difficult aspect of stepfather authority was related to the fact that the stepfather was not their ‘real’ or biological father. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 8.2 years ($SD=4.1$), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 9.1 years ($SD=4.3$), 35.3% of all female participants and 25% of all male participants were in this category. The participants experienced difficulty in relationship to the idea or practice of the stepfather being or acting like a ‘real’ father. Some participants felt strongly that the stepfather was not the biological father therefore they could not accept his authority, or felt that he did not deserve authority due to this. Most of these participants seemed to struggle more with the concept of accepting authority from someone not related to them, regardless of whether he tried to have authority or not. This tension made accepting the stepfather’s attempts at authority difficult. A small number of participants indicated that the stepfather did not establish an authority role, however many of these participants were able to resolve this tension and accept his authority eventually.

Many participants indicated that entry into the role of stepfather did not necessarily guarantee automatic authority. One participant described his struggle with accepting his stepfather in an authority role after being used to living with his sole-mother,

> When I was growing up I found it difficult to have a man who I didn’t see as a parent treating me like he was my parent ($P21$, male, 19).

This unwillingness to accept the stepfather’s authority was sometimes unrelated to the personality or behaviour of the stepfather or the role of the biological father. Some participants mentioned that their stepfather was a nice man or supportive, but that they still struggled with accepting his authority, for example, “Yes, he was nice, however, he might be some sort of uncle for me, but not my father, they are different” ($P65$, female, 30). Others described that it did not matter if their biological father was present or absent in their life, they still could not accept the authority of the stepfather. One participant reported,

> I felt that he didn’t deserve to have so much authority over me, although my real father did not play a big role in my life ($P8$, female, 20).

Other participants reported experiencing divided loyalty between the biological father and stepfather that made it difficult to accept the authority of the stepfather. Several reported that the concept of having respect for the stepfather and granting him authority would in some way undermine the respect they had for the biological father. Others struggled to accept the authority
of the stepfather because they missed the biological father and really wanted him to be involved in their life. As one participant reported,

The most difficult [part] for me was to avoid stepping on toes. To make sure that my stepfather felt comfortable, and my mother, but also making sure my father was still kept in the picture... The most difficult thing is torn loyalties basically (P50, female, 18).

Some participants experienced differences between the approaches to authority by the stepfather and biological father. Sometimes the stepfather and father had contrasting approaches to discipline that appeared to be confusing for the child, for example, in regards to different rules for different households, and different standards of acceptable behaviour and consequences. There was also sometimes tension or competing demands between the stepfather and father that impacted on the child and sometimes rivalry between the two in regards to approaches to authority. One or two participants commented that the biological father had an issue with the stepfather having authority. These participants also deemed it inappropriate for him to have authority as they had a close relationship with the father. As one participant described,

Conflict between my biological father and my stepfather, my dad did not like my stepdad imposing rules on me even when not in my father’s house and my stepfather did not like the fact that he could not have complete control over my behaviours and could never be a real father figure to me (P36, female, 20).

Another difficulty encountered by some participants was the lack of clarity regarding the role of the stepfather and no clear guidelines or expectations for someone who was not a biological parent in regards to the amount of authority they should have. One participant thought of the stepfather as more of an uncle than a parent. Another participant said,

Having to fear that any one of us would go beyond the invisible ‘line’. The degree of authority he has is vague. He does not have many rights on criticising my behaviour as we are not really family and it is quite rude to be so straightforward. The relationship would be awkward if he goes too far as he would be breaking the balance and peace we try to keep. It is weird to be told what to do by people other than your ‘real’ family members (P51, female, 20).

Yet a large number of these participants went on to describe how they resolved this tension. Some stepfathers did not establish an authority role or stepped back from this role, and this was viewed as appropriate. As one participant who was 11 when her stepfather joined the family said,

When I was younger I knew about my mother’s rules and if he said anything to me I wanted to say, "You're not my father". I don't remember doing it though. He never really was an authority to me and if he tried to I wouldn't accept it (P10, female, 23).
Others eventually came to accept the stepfather’s authority. Some participants indicated that time and their age made this easier, others commented on realising that the stepfather influenced them in a positive way or made the mother happier. A number of participants indicated that the stepfather’s personality and caring nature made this easier, and generally the overall improvement of the relationship and knowing the stepfather better helped improve this. One participant who originally was reluctant to accept his stepfather as an authority figure said,

I have learnt how to adjust and not be afraid of things because they could turn out great. He also treated me, I believe, as close as he could, like his own biological son and I have a lot of respect for him because of that. I believe also that his good qualities, like being kind, insightful and just a great person has rubbed off on me. I learnt what I could from him as the male role model in my life and over time we formed a bond (P79, male, 18).

Therefore this theme covers experiences related to difficulties encountered due to the stepfather not being a biological parent to the child. The majority of participants here identified difficulties in accepting authority from someone who was not their father and who was viewed as not having ‘earned’ the right to authority. A small minority struggled more with the stepfather attempting to discipline early or in an inappropriate way. Some participants experienced divided loyalty between the stepfather and biological father. Others struggled with not having clear guidelines or expectations for someone attempting to adopt a parenting role. Yet despite this, some were able to resolve this tension and accept the stepfather’s authority eventually. Others continued to feel uncomfortable with the stepfather having or attempting an authority role. This links to the next theme, which describes some participants’ struggles with the stepfather’s approach to authority.

A New Authority

Twenty-five of the participants specifically reported difficulties with the stepfather’s approach to authority and the expectations and adjustments associated with this. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 8.7 years (SD=4.5), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 10.1 years (SD=4.8), 23.5% of all female participants and 45% of all male participants were in this category. This theme covered four main areas: the changes in rules, expectations, and lifestyle associated with the stepfather’s arrival into the family; difficulties associated with the stepfather’s actual approach to authority; stepfather authority being unwanted or undeserved in some way; and a change in the stepfather role.
Several participants reported that the stepfather’s arrival into their family was particularly difficult for them, as this often resulted in a change in authority, rules and expectations regarding their behaviour, and also a change in lifestyle. Some participants reported that the stepfather’s authority was different to the mother’s and that this was particularly challenging for them. One female participant describes the challenge of her stepfather’s behaviour, which was different, and in particular, angrier than her mother’s,

In terms of my behaviour, he would just be more angry than my mother if I did something wrong. He was always the one more ready to ‘punish’ my behaviour (e.g. take away cellphone etc.) (P26, female, 22).

Another participant who had been raised by his mother until his stepfather joined his family when he was aged five reported how this adjustment was hard for him,

I was quite uncooperative at first and got upset when my stepfather treated me as though I was his son, having only really had my mother around for so long (P21, male, 19).

Other participants reported that the stepfather had different rules and expectations from what they were previously used to and having to adjust to and accommodate these differences was particularly difficult. One participant reported how her stepfather’s expectations for how a family should function made for a source of conflict,

Naturally the dynamics in his previous family were different to mine so there were certain aspects of the way I had been raised that were not the way he would have raised a child. My table manners for example irritated him, especially in the formal situations that his job frequently involved, which I was not accustomed to (P40, female, 19).

Several participants reported that they had difficulty with the stepfather’s approach toward authority, particularly with the manner and style in which the stepfather attempted to have authority. These issues typically appeared to stem from a lack of consideration for the child’s needs and wants on behalf of the stepfather. For example, participants perceived that stepfathers had not adjusted their expectations to account for the child’s age, as one participant stated,

He didn’t seem to grasp that he had come into our lives…at an age where, a) we rarely took advice from our own parents, let alone him, and, b) we were old enough to start making our own decisions, and punishments didn’t really work or help the situation. He still wanted to treat us like we were 13 years old (P76, female, 21).

Some stepfathers attempted to take on a parental role at the beginning of the relationship or tried to exercise a higher level of authority than deemed appropriate by the child, for example
attempting a role that could be considered as ‘authoritarian’ (high on discipline/control, low on warmth/support). Some participants described stepfather behaviour that was high in control and some reported that this left them feeling unable to stand up for themselves, childlike and judged. One participant shared their experience,

Since he is the male figure in the family, he has to feel like he is always in control of what’s happening, even involving himself in situations that have nothing to do with him. This is hard because I cannot go against him because I am a child and he is the parent (P55, female, 18).

Some participants reported that they struggled with the stepfather telling them what to do as the authority was undeserved or unwanted in some way; the stepfather had not earned the right to have authority in their relationship. Some struggled with the stepfather moving into a disciplinary role, particularly if this change was sudden and quite different from before. One participant described,

The fact that he was already in my life for about six years before he suddenly was telling me what to do so that was a bit of a shock (P13, female, 20).

Some participants described not wanting any authority from their stepfather as they had already established him in a ‘friend-like’ role and therefore found it difficult to accept authority from him. Many participants reported having expectations placed on them that they believed were unreasonable and some described that the stepfather’s influence on their behaviour came about from a sense of obligation rather than from respect. One participant said,

The big problem was when he decided he was going to ‘father’ me and assume that what he said went without question. I had already established him as more a friend than a father figure and this sudden change of roles did not happen very well. I will listen to him when he instructs me to do something, however I still do not see him as a father figure and I see myself performing his required actions more as a favour to him than as a duty to him (P25, male, 26).

Other participants reported that the stepfather’s behaviour or personality made it difficult for them to respect him and this lack of respect prevented them from accepting his authority. One participant described,

The most difficult part would be him telling me what to do quite often when he doesn’t really do much himself for himself or my mother (P17, male, 20).

Therefore this theme describes some of the participants’ difficulties associated with the stepfather attempting to adopt a disciplinary role. Many of the experiences discussed under this theme appear to relate to difficulties participants had with adjusting to the stepfather’s entry into
their life. Many struggled to adapt to changes in rules, expectations and lifestyle upon the stepfather’s arrival. Many participants struggled with the stepfather telling them what to do including the manner and style in which the stepfather attempted to have authority. Several participants indicated that any attempt at authority from the stepfather was problematic as this was undeserved or unwanted. Others struggled particularly with the stepfather attempting to change his role by increasing his level of authority.

**Extreme Discipline Behaviours**

Twenty-five participants reported that the stepfather exerted a more extreme form of authority or had a dominant personality. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 10.4 years ($SD=4.5$), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 8.2 years ($SD=4.3$), 27.9% of all female participants and 30% of all male participants were in this category. The responses under this theme indicate that it was something more than the stepfather attempting to have authority that they found challenging, it was his extreme approach to authority, for example, a “controlling” style, harsh discipline, or elements of his personality, for example, “aggression” or “meanness”, that they found difficult. In many cases it was evident that the stepfather violated the rights of the child in some way and many participants here perceived that the stepfather had little or no respect for them.

Several participants described certain aspects of the stepfather’s personality and attitude and behaviour towards them that made their experience with stepfather authority difficult. Some of these included the stepfather being “judgemental”, “critical”, “nasty” or “harsh” towards them. One participant described her experience,

> Him being very judgemental and hypocritical, e.g. “Your hair looks stupid that colour, makes you look sick, you should change it” (*P37, female, 19*).

Some participants indicated that the stepfather exerted a more extreme style of authority over them, which they found particularly difficult. One participant described his stepfather’s parenting style as comparable to a “dictatorship”. Other reports ranged from the stepfather yelling or arguing with the stepchild, through to physical violence from the stepfather. Several of these participants believed that they were unwanted or troublesome to the stepfather in some way and there were often misunderstandings between the stepfather and stepchild and differences in background, beliefs and expectations that often resulted in more extreme arguments or confrontation. One participant described her experience with misunderstandings with her stepfather,
When he told me off for things he did not understand. There were a few things that I did in certain situations where my mother understood as she knew how I behaved and my stepfather did not understand as his relationship with his daughter was very different to my mother and my relationship. He would voice his misunderstanding through heated discussions and sometimes didn’t really try to understand our reasoning or thought we were wrong (P4, female, 19).

Another participant talked about violence and control from her stepfather,

He took over raising me – told me what to do and controlled me more than my mother did. Would sometimes get violent (P30, female, 21).

Less commonly some participants reported that aspects of the stepfather’s attitude and behaviour created fear in the household. This typically involved the stepfather not having respect for the child and violating their rights in some way, and also ranged into extreme situations where the stepfather was aggressive and physically violent toward the child. As one participant said about her stepfather’s aggressive behaviour,

My stepfather didn’t know how to be a positive father figure. He could be aggressive and unreasonable. We honestly feared his authority most of the time. He didn’t respect our privacy, but most of all he didn’t respect our autonomy – it was like our feelings weren’t to be considered, we were children to ‘be seen and not heard’. He used to find my diaries and read them – often this was the only place where I could vent about him as well, and him reading them only made our relationship worse (P47, female, 20).

Therefore this theme encompasses a number of particularly challenging experiences that these participants had with stepfather authority. These ranged from dealing with a more dominant or judgemental stepfather through to experiencing violence or verbal abuse. There was often a sense from participants that the stepfather did not respect them and also did not want them around. Many of these stepfathers discussed appeared to have an authoritarian parenting style, which was high on discipline/control and low on warmth/support.

**Mum Took his Side**

Ten participants described the stepfather as having a negative impact on their relationship with the mother. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 10.6 years (SD=4.2), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 8.5 years (SD=3.6), 4% of all female participants and 5% of all male participants were in this category. This negative impact was described in several ways. Some felt as though the stepfather was taking the mother away from them, “I thought he was taking away my Mum from me from the beginning” (P13, female, 20). Other participants talked about how they thought the mother took
the stepfather’s side on certain matters, particularly during conflict, and this often left them feeling betrayed by the mother and isolated. This may have been due to an expectation of more loyalty from the mother on behalf of the child. As two participants said,

Feeling that in some ways I had no rights, as I was the ‘child’. That no matter the circumstances, my Mum always took his side and vice versa, which left me feeling isolated… (*P18, female, 22*).

Authority is also bad, when Mum takes his side even when I knew he was wrong (*P23, female, 18*).

Other participants also talked about the stepfather undermining the mother or controlling her in some way. From these participants’ accounts it seems that mothers were responding to stepfathers’ attempts at authority and granting him this, seemingly against the wishes of participants. One participant described the difficulties he had with stepfather authority and his mother’s response, although his mother changed over time,

When I felt that he was undermining my mum. This didn’t happen very often however. What was more common was that Mum seemed to ‘follow the leader’ sometimes. By this I mean that she tended to adopt his opinions. She has largely grown out of this now however (*P6, male, 22*).

Participants perceived that the stepfather’s attempt at controlling the mother, making decisions on her behalf and generally not considering the interest of the child often created conflict between the child and the mother. As one participant said,

He was very controlling of what my mother did but had no interest in me or how his decisions affected me. … He ended up making it very difficult for me to spend time at my own house … It created conflict between my mother and I and my mother and father. My stepfather convinced my mother to move to an area that was far away from me and my older brother. I was very upset and angry about this for a long time and didn’t see either of them during this time. It made all my visits while he was there very unpleasant (*P41, female, 18*).

Therefore, for some participants, there were elements of the stepfather attempting to adopt an authority role that impacted negatively on the relationship between the participant and the mother. Some participants perceived that the mother took the stepfather’s side during issues of conflict, or granted him authority against their wishes. This often resulted in a strained relationship between mother and child, and participants feeling betrayed and isolated. Some participants appeared to expect more loyalty from the mother. Others struggled with the stepfather undermining or controlling the mother and some commented on having a sense that the stepfather was trying to take the mother away from them.
Summary

Hence there were a broad range of experiences with stepfather authority described as difficult by participants. It is important to note that while the majority of participants who completed the questionnaire commented on difficulty with authority, not all of these participants had a difficult experience overall. Difficulties with stepfather authority were sometimes related to issues with the stepfather not being a ‘real’ father and attempting to have authority, potentially due to the feelings of conflicted loyalty this may have raised for some participants. Other participants struggled with the adjustments associated with the stepfather attempting to have an authority role. Several commented that the stepfather had not ‘earned’ the right to authority. Some stepfathers demonstrated a more extreme style of authority or behaviour towards the child that was often authoritarian or aggressive. Some participants also experienced the stepfather as impacting negatively on their relationship with the mother. This leads into the next section where data related to the participants’ opinion on stepfather influence will be reported.

Participants’ Opinions on Stepfather Influence

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis related to participants’ opinions on stepfather influence. The data is drawn from the question that asked: ‘Keeping in mind your own experiences, what is your opinion about the amount of influence a stepfather should have? Please explain and use personal examples so that I will better understand your ideas’. Eighty-three participants answered this question and there were a range of different opinions as to whether the stepfather should have influence and if so why and what form it should take. Eleven participants clearly stated that a stepfather should not have influence. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 9.8 years (SD=4.7), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 8.6 years (SD=4.5), 10.3% of all female participants and 20% of all male participants were in this category. The remainder indicated that the stepfather could have influence if a number of conditions were met. These responses were analysed using a thematic analysis and the data fell into five key themes, these were: Characteristics of the Stepchild, Influence of Family, Stepfather’s Approach to Influence and the Stepchild, Living Arrangements, and, The Benefits of Influence. These will be briefly summarised next.

Characteristics of the Stepchild

Twenty-three participants commented on the importance of characteristics of the stepchild in determining stepfather influence. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 9.4 years (SD=5.0), the average length of time these participants lived with the
stepfather was 8.4 years ($SD=4.7$), 27.9% of all female participants and 20% of all male participants were in this category. These characteristics related to the child and encompassed factors such as the age of the child upon stepfather entry into the family, the child’s personality, and the gender of the child. The majority of participants who discussed age believed that the stepfather could “tell children what to do” if the child was a younger age as compared to an older child. For example,

I think it really depends on the family and also the age of the children. If the children are younger, as I was, then I think the stepfather should have the same type of authority as the biological father does. However I think that there is room for this to change for older children. If I had met my stepfather at the age of 15, I don’t think I would have allowed him to have as much input in my life ($P_{15}$, female, 18).

However, paradoxically many participants stated that it was important for the stepchild to be eased into stepfather influence and discipline and that it was important for the stepchild to have time to adjust to the stepfather and “make up their own mind” about him. As one participant said,

Children need time to adjust to the new changes before they are ready to trust completely and should not be forced into doing something they are not quite ready to do ($P_{61}$, female, 18).

Several stated that the longer the stepfather was in the family, the more influence it would be appropriate for him to have. Other participants also commented on the importance of the personality of the child, with several referring to their own experience of being “accommodating” and easy-going, and this resulting in increased stepfather influence, and discipline, sometimes regardless of the approach of the stepfather.

**Influence of Family**

Thirty participants discussed the important role other family members had in determining the amount of influence a stepfather has. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 9.0 years ($SD=4.5$), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 8.7 years ($SD=4.8$), 39.7% of all female participants and 15% of all male participants were in this category. Some participants believed that the mother had an important role in determining the level and type of influence the stepfather should have. Some stated that the mother should solely determine this with others stating that the mother alone should have influence and discipline and the stepfather should have none. One participant said,

A stepfather should be there to support the maternal mother - and it is up to the mother how much influence another man should have in her child’s life ($P_{29}$, female, 21).
Several participants thought that the biological father would also impact on the stepfather’s role. Many thought that if the biological father was still involved in the child’s life then the stepfather should have less influence; conversely if the biological father was absent or less involved, then there was greater opportunity for the stepfather to be more influential. For example,

If the biological father still wishes to maintain a frequent and close relationship with the child then the role of the stepfather is one of a friend. Someone who can offer advice but understands that it is not his role to tell the child what to do. He must be respectful that in the child’s eyes (especially a young one) he is the ‘Other Man’, and not the father, and so long as the father is around he will not replace him. If however, as in my case, the father is no longer interested in staying close with the child, there is no reason a stepfather cannot come to be as close, important and influential to a child as a biological parent would be. In the same role as an adopted parent (P39, female, 19).

Other participants acknowledged that if the stepfather is willing to fill the role of a biological parent then he has the right to exercise influence and discipline with the child. Some participants indicated that if the stepfather was respectful and inclusive of the biological father, then this entitled the stepfather to have more influence with the stepchild. This seemed to create more respect for the stepfather and some participants talked about the importance of not feeling as though the stepfather was trying to replace the biological father.

Stepfather’s Approach to Influence and the Stepchild

One of the key conditions of stepfather influence described by 37 participants was the stepfather’s approach towards influence and the stepchild. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily formation was 8.6 years (SD=4.6), the average length of time these participants lived with the stepfather was 9.1 years (SD=4.8), 45.6% of all female participants and 30% of all male participants were in this category. This theme encompassed data related to the personality of the stepfather, his parenting style, his attitude towards and treatment of the child, communication with the child and child’s parents, and involvement in the child’s life. One of the key comments made by several participants was in relation to the importance of the stepfather-child relationship. Several stated that the stepfather needed to be involved in the child’s life and show an interest and investment before it would be appropriate for him to have influence. It was important for the stepfather to gain respect from the child and to provide them with fair and necessary treatment. One participant discussed her relationship with her stepfather,

In my case, I believe my stepfather has as much authority as a father figure as we have established a healthy relationship based on love and trust. One of the positive
aspects of my stepfather’s authority is the way we can have fun to a point but he can
tell me when to come back to reality. Through my relationship with my stepfather I
have established a close bond and friendship through the years of living with him
(P73, female, 18).

Some talked about the importance of finding common ground and the role of positive
support and other types of influence, for example, with hobbies and sports.

Children should not be forced into liking their stepparents, but both parties should try
and find common ground (like my stepfather and I) and bond over things they both
love. Telling children that they have to listen to what their stepfathers say, is not
going to make them respect their new stepfather at all and can cause resentment
(P61, female, 18).

At least one participant also mentioned that it would be appropriate for the stepfather to
commit to taking a parental role before attempting to have high levels of influence.

Living Arrangements

Another issue considered by six participants was whose house the newly formed stepfamily
was moving into and if the stepfather provided financial support. The average age of these
participants upon stepfamily formation was 9.7 years ($SD=3.7$), the average length of time these
participants lived with the stepfather was 9.0 years ($SD=4.7$), 4.4% of all female participants and
15% of all male participants were in this category. Those moving in to the stepfather’s house
and those whose stepfathers provided financial support believed that he should have more
influence than those remaining in the mother’s house. For example,

I think the biggest determinant is living arrangements and changes. If he moves in
with you, then I’d see him as having a lot less influence. In our case, we moved from
a little rented property to his place. We went from Mum being sad a lot, to being
happy a lot. From struggling, to living ok (he’s not really wealthy, just more than we
had). So this I think plays a HUGE part. Whose house is it? If it is his, it stands to
reason that he has more influence, as he will have his own rules and you are fitting
into his life to a greater extent than the converse situation (P6, male, 22).

The Benefits of Influence

Lastly, 12 participants determined that the stepfather should have influence as there were
likely to be several benefits to the child. The average age of these participants upon stepfamily
formation was 7.0 years ($SD=4.9$), the average length of time these participants lived with the
stepfather was 11.4 years ($SD=5.1$), 11.8% of all female participants and 20% of all male
participants were in this category. These benefits included the importance of having a father
figure and additional authority to ensure the child felt secure and “safe” and that there was
“trust” in the family. One participant acknowledged the importance of having a hierarchy within a newly formed family to reduce tension,

A stepfather should be able to have quite a big range of parental authority because I’ve seen in other homes that there is so much fighting if there is not an established hierarchy between both parents and the children (P33, female, 22).

Also, there was a clear role for the stepfather to teach the child important skills and life lessons that they may otherwise have missed out on. It appeared that participants believed that the more benefits to the child then the more appropriate stepfather influence would be.

**Summary**

In sum, there were a range of opinions shared by participants regarding the amount and type of influence a stepfather should have. A small number of participants were clear that they believed that stepfathers should not have influence. The remainder tended to believe that the stepfather could have influence but this seemed to be related to a number of conditions being met. Five key areas were discussed by participants. Several believed that the stepfather entering the family when the child was young would make it easier and more appropriate for the stepfather to have influence. Many acknowledged the important role of other family members, particularly the mother and biological father in determining stepfather influence. The stepfather’s approach to influence and discipline was also deemed important as was the importance of having a strong stepfather-child relationship. Some participants believed that the stepfather was entitled to more influence if the family lived in his house rather than the mother’s. Finally, some participants talked about the benefits of influence and that the greater the benefits from this, the greater the influence the stepfather could have. This section highlighted that there were a range of opinions on the amount of influence and discipline a stepfather can have, with some people’s experiences vastly colouring their opinion, while others held a more idealistic view on this process. One thing that became apparent was that there was definitely not a ‘one size fits all approach’ to whether or not stepfathers should have influence or how influence should be established with the child. The results from this study and Study Two will be further discussed in Chapter Five.
Chapter Four

Study Two: The Interviews

In the previous chapter the results from the thematic analysis of Study One were presented, which aimed to investigate the range of young adult stepchildren’s experiences and perceptions of stepfather authority and to investigate the experiences of stepfather authority perceived or identified as either positive or problematic. In this chapter the methods and the results from the thematic analysis for Study Two, the Interviews are presented.

Given that there is more understanding regarding the difficulties experienced in relation to stepfather authority, Study Two aims to investigate the processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time. Ten young adult stepchildren who identified largely positive experiences with stepfather authority in Study One were selected for a face-to-face individual interview; these interviews comprise Study Two. The definitions used in this study were as follows. Authority was defined as, “the degree to which a stepchild grants his or her primary stepparent the power to determine, influence and/or judge what behaviours and actions are appropriate or inappropriate for the stepchild” (Schrodt, 2006, p. 178). Positive relationship referred to the development of a relationship between stepfather and stepchildren perceived by children to be beneficial and satisfactory. Stepfather influence was defined as ways in which the stepfather guides, supports or encourages the stepchild towards certain actions, decisions, and goals; the stepfather may be considered as a role model or mentor in this regard. Stepfather discipline referred to the setting and enforcement of guidelines and rules by the stepfather.

Methods

Recruitment

For Study Two a criterion sampling method (Patton, 2002) was used for recruitment as this study aimed to investigate those processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time. At the end of the online questionnaire participants had the option to indicate if they wished to participate further in an individual interview and left their email address or contacted the researcher. The questionnaire responses of those who expressed interest were then reviewed by me to see if they met criteria for a follow-up interview. The criteria for inclusion in Study Two were the report of a mostly positive
experience with the stepfather, and the mother and stepfather still together. A total of 57 participants agreed to be contacted for Study Two. Twenty-three of these participants reported mostly positive experiences with stepfather authority, 18 were female and five male. A total of 17 participants then met the criteria of the mother and stepfather still being together, 13 female and four male. Therefore around one-fifth of the female and one-fifth of the male participants from the total sample met the criteria and agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview. The participants who fit these criteria were then followed up by telephone or email and were able to ask questions about the study and were reminded of confidentiality, anonymity and consent. Not all participants responded to contact, therefore a total of ten participants were interviewed.

Participants

Ten participants were interviewed. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 23, with a mean age of 19.5 years. Unfortunately more males did not volunteer to be contacted for follow-up or meet the inclusion criteria, therefore eight participants were female and two were male. The average age of participants upon stepfamily formation was 7.1 years ($SD=4.4$). The average length of time they had lived with the stepfather was 11.7 years ($SD=4.9$). All participants identified that their mothers and stepfathers were still together. The demographic details for each participant are presented in Table 3 below. Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter.
Table 3

Demographic details of participants in Study Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Age at interview)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age at parental separation</th>
<th>Age at stepfamily formation</th>
<th>Mother and stepfather relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth (20) Pacific Island/NZE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>De facto</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle (19) NZE</td>
<td>&lt;1 year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah (23) NZE</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>De facto</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefan (19) Other European</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtney (20) NZE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>De facto</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron (19) Other European</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane (19) NZE</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>14.5</td>
<td>De facto</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Lisa (18) Pacific Island/NZE</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: NZE=New Zealand European/Pakeha

Data Collection

The individual interviews were semi-structured and influenced by a method sometimes used by narrative researchers (see Chapter Two). Participants were asked to divide the relationship with the stepfather into three main stages over time: the beginning, middle, and later stage of the relationship. This was in order to encourage participants to describe their experiences of stepfather authority over time in an attempt to understand the processes that may have facilitated an acceptance of stepfather authority, and any changes or developments in stepfather authority.
over time. The interviews were conducted by myself in a room on campus and were recorded with the participants’ consent. A semi-structured interview schedule was followed using largely open-ended questions and prompts to encourage participants to expand further on their answers (see Appendix E). Each interview took between 45 and 90 minutes.

After asking some brief demographic questions, participants were then asked open-ended questions. The initial questions were designed to elicit participants’ earliest memories of the stepfather in an attempt to capture their experiences of relating to him, their perception of the stepfather, and their perception of the relationship between the stepfather and child (e.g., Could you tell me about your memory of meeting your stepfather for the first time? When you think back to the period of getting to know your stepfather before you lived together, when he was ‘dating’ your mother, what do you remember from that time?).

Next, participants were encouraged to divide the relationship with the stepfather into three main stages over time: the beginning, middle and later part of the relationship. Prompts used for each stage included quotes such as: What was your relationship with your stepfather like during this period? What were the difficult aspects of your relationship? What were the positive aspects of your relationship? Did your relationship change during this period? If so, how? What was your experience of authority like during this period? Participants were also asked about their feelings toward the stepfather and their perceived feelings from the stepfather towards them (e.g., Overall how do you feel about your stepfather? Did you and your stepfather ever talk to each other about your feelings towards one another or how you felt towards one another?). The role of the mother was also examined in terms of her impact on the stepfather-child relationship and the development of stepfather authority (e.g., When you look back, were there things that your mother did that helped or got in the way of you developing a relationship with your stepfather?). Lastly, in order to capture the participants’ overall perception of stepfather authority in general, each participant was asked to give their advice to stepfathers and mothers in relation to stepfather authority based on their own experiences (e.g., Looking back at your time in your stepfamily and your relationship with your stepfather, what advice would you give to stepfathers and mothers about the stepfather and his having authority in the family with stepchildren?).

Data Analysis

Each individual interview was recorded by the interviewer and then transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. Upon examining the data from both Studies One and Two and
considering knowledge from previous studies, it became apparent that three key areas of data emerged from the interviews. It was therefore decided deductively to divide the interview data into three data-sets for analysis. These were: the stepfather-child relationship, stepfather influence, and stepfather discipline. The interviews were also analysed using an inductive thematic analysis within each of the three data-sets as outlined in Chapter Two. Three themes were identified in each data-set (see Table 4, p. 71). An additional analysis was undertaken for each participant. This involved a brief analysis of stepfather support, the quality of the stepfather-child relationship, stepfather discipline, and stepfather influence across the three stages identified in the interview. These are presented in Table 5 at the end of the chapter. Often when participants were discussing the different stages they gave a summary to describe the relationship with the stepfather. These are also included in quotation marks in Table 5. A sample of interviews was reviewed by my supervisor to ensure accuracy. It is important to note that often when participants talked about the later stage of the relationship with the stepfather they mostly spoke about their experiences during adolescence; this experience was often different to their current experience now they are older and attending university, yet this was sometimes not captured in Table 5.

Results

In this section the results from the thematic analysis of the three following data-sets are presented: Development of Positive Relationships, Development of Influence, and Development of Stepfather Discipline. Within each of the three data-sets three themes were identified inductively, these are summarised in Table 4 below. Each of these themes is described in further detail below. At the end of the chapter Table 5 is presented, which provides a brief summary of each participant’s overall experience with the stepfather relationship, stepfather influence, and discipline.
Table 4  
*Overview of the areas identified in the interviews and their themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development of Positive Relationships</th>
<th>Development of Influence</th>
<th>Development of Stepfather Discipline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stepfather’s Friendliness and Respect towards the Child</td>
<td>He Helped me Get on my Way: Stepfather Guidance</td>
<td>Mum’s Back-up or Ally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of Communication</td>
<td>It’s Made me a Better Person</td>
<td>Navigating the Seas of Adolescence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Close and Trusting</td>
<td>What he Thinks Matters</td>
<td>He Brought Order to the Chaos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Development of Positive Relationships**

Three main themes were identified under this area: Stepfather’s Friendliness and Respect towards the Child; The Importance of Communication; and Feeling Close and Trusting. Within each theme the development of the bond over the course of time will be discussed, as each participant divided the relationship with the stepfather into three main stages over time. There was considerable overlap in the experiences of the participants in regards to the development of the relationship with the stepfather; however there were also some key differences. Half of the participants reported a close relationship with the stepfather from the early stages of the relationship; the others reported a distant or moderately close relationship. All relationships became closer over time, with a few participants directly commenting on moments of tension related to discipline around the time of adolescence. Yet all of these difficulties were eventually resolved and the vast majority of participants perceived the stepfather as a father or parent-like figure in their lives at the time of the interview.

**Stepfather’s Friendliness and Respect towards the Child**

All participants identified that there were a number of positive ways in which the stepfather related to them that contributed to the development of the relationship. This was the largest theme found in the area of the development of the relationship and all participants perceived that there were certain qualities related specifically to the stepfather that enabled a positive relationship to develop. These included aspects of his personality, his approach and attitude towards them as children and his behaviour in general. All participants, except one, commented specifically that the stepfather was friendly and nice towards them right from the moment they met him. This was perceived as important by the participants in several ways. Some participants indicated that this enabled them to like the stepfather right away and could therefore have a
relationship with him. Others reported that it enabled them to trust him. Several participants perceived that the stepfather was making an effort to get to know them and they appreciated this, they particularly appreciated it as they perceived that it was a genuine attempt by the stepfather and that he did not have to put in an effort to get to know them, but rather that he was doing so by choice, as one female participant who was in her mid-teens when her stepfather joined her family said,

…He always tried to make it really fun and really thought about me and his kids, he really made a point of trying to get us to all get along and for his relationship between me and him to work…And he did it because he wanted to, not because my mum was nagging him saying, ‘make my daughter like you’. He actually wanted everyone to get along and he wanted it to work (Danielle).

Many talked about the importance of the stepfather being able to spend time with them, and how this was one of the keys to developing the relationship. This was essential for enabling the stepfather and child to get to know each other more, and to build a trusting and respectful relationship. Most participants indicated that during the initial stages of the relationship the emphasis appeared to be on the stepfather spending time doing ‘fun’ activities with them, as one male participant whose stepfather joined the family when he was four said,

He would spend a lot of time with me and make a real effort to get to know me, through all these activities. We would make food together. Make desserts. We would have pizza nights and watch TV, stuff like that (Stefan).

Some participants perceived that there was a strong bond with the stepfather early in the relationship. Four participants described having a ‘loving’ and ‘father-like’ relationship with the stepfather from the beginning. These participants experienced the stepfather joining the family when they were a relatively young age: three, four, five and nine. Three of these participants reported infrequent contact with the biological father. One female participant, who was the youngest of four children experienced some difficulties in that her siblings did not like and want to accept her stepfather, whereas she was very willing and open to him; she was able to perceive the benefits of having her stepfather in her life and having a close relationship with him,

He has always been extremely loving though, towards all of us. He took us on as his own…Just a lot of love, which was what all of us needed. What Mum needed, what they [siblings] needed, what I needed, because we hadn’t got it before. It was like, yeah, he just brought joy to everyone (Michelle).
Other participants described the benefits to them and their family of having the stepfather spend time with them. As one female participant who had a younger brother and half-brother, and infrequent contact with her biological father said,

He used to spend a lot of time with us as a family. He would always come around to my grandparents as well and he was very social with the family and wanting to be around the family. He would spend a lot of time with us as kids. Then they would have separate time by themselves and that. But he wanted to make us feel comfortable around him. Which it did work because, since we were so little we didn’t know about different people coming into the house and he made it feel like a family relationship again (Alana).

Others also commented on the importance of the stepfather’s personality and how this eased his transition into the family and their acceptance of the stepfather,

Friendly. He’s always been a joker, he’s always making jokes and pulling your leg. Like I can remember never knowing whether he was kidding or not. And now you just know he’s kidding. But yeah he’s always sort of down to earth I guess. Yeah he’s always been friendly and made the effort (Jane).

All participants recalled that they became aware at some point that the stepfather was committed to them. This commitment was described by some participants as the stepfather taking an increased interest in the child’s life, for example, attending sports games and school productions. Some noted an increase in the amount of time the stepfather spent with them, or an increase in the quality of their interactions. One participant reported that his stepfather was busy working during the week so did not spend much time with him, which was difficult for him, however, he noticed that in the middle stage of the relationship there was an increase in the quality of his interactions with the stepfather,

Just stuff like coming to school productions and that kind of thing and taking me to sport as I was saying. That’s all the kind of things that stand out. We went on our first major family holiday in that time...That was really like, that was for like two weeks. Obviously Dad [stepfather] didn’t get a...lot of time off work and so that was a real, it was just a good time that I got to spend with Dad over a long period. It was like the first time that that really happened since leaving [home country] (Aaron).

Another participant recalled a time early in the relationship with the stepfather when he demonstrated to her that he was ‘there for her’ and she appreciated his presence in her life,

… I remember that he was always there for me. There was a time when Mum ended up in hospital for an operation - this was before he moved in. They hadn’t been going out for long. Okay maybe over six months, but for me that’s still like that initial dating time. Just being me and Mum. She had her operation...quite far away, because I don’t drive. But he was there when she came - he was there pretty much
the whole time. He picked me up from school and took me straight to the hospital, even though she was still in surgery. The operation was on Friday and the doctors said don’t bother coming until Sunday, but he still made sure I was there on the Friday to see her come out. He cancelled his whole plans…for the weekend just to make sure that I was okay for that weekend (Lisa).

This commitment appeared to facilitate a closer bond between the child and stepfather. The one participant who reported the most distant relationship with her stepfather at the beginning perceived that the stepfather becoming more actively involved in her and her brothers’ lives when she was around age six (they had been a stepfamily for about three years by this stage) resulted in a positive shift in their relationship,

…He started to want to get to know us more. Like he started to come to our sports games instead of just his own kids. I guess that’s when we started – instead of saying, “We’re going somewhere”, we would be like, “Oh, we have a performance or something, so you want to come?” (Elizabeth).

Another important element of some stepfathers’ behaviour was the respect they displayed toward the child’s relationship with the biological father and mother. Several participants who maintained a relationship with the biological father commented on how the stepfather never came across as trying to replace the biological father, one participant reported that their stepfather made an effort to know the father, and others commented on the stepfather respecting the relationship and boundaries with the mother. As one female participant whose stepfather joined her family when she was five and went on to adopt a role high in warmth, support, influence and firm discipline later in their relationship said,

I think it was really good. From what I can remember he was never in the way or anything. He was always just there but he didn’t get in the way of me and my dad or me and my mum…I didn’t feel upset that it wasn’t my dad there because I always got to see my dad in the weekends, every second weekend. Yeah and he [stepfather] didn’t get in the way of anything and make me feel upset that he wasn’t my real dad so I think it was pretty good (Courtney).

Therefore this theme captures data regarding how the participants perceived the stepfather and his behaviour that facilitated a closer relationship between them. Essentially this appeared to involve the stepfather demonstrating respect and openness to the child, for example, spending time with them and making an active commitment to being involved in their life. An active commitment was demonstrated by the stepfather expressing an interest in getting to know the child and involving themselves in the activities, schooling and interests of the child. Many stepfathers were described as respectful of the child and of their relationships with other family members, particularly the biological parents. There were different pathways to the development
of a positive relationship, with some participants experiencing a strong bond from the beginning, 
others having a gradual transition and others beginning with a more distant relationship, all were 
able to perceive that the stepfather was friendly and nice towards them and made an effort to get 
to know them as people. Participants appeared to appreciate this and many could perceive the 
benefits of having the stepfather involved in their lives.

**The Importance of Communication**

While the previous theme directly related to aspects of the stepfather’s behaviour toward the 
stepchild that enabled a positive relationship to develop, this theme discusses communication 
within the stepfamily that contributed to the stepfather-child relationship. It includes 
communication between the stepfather and child and also that from other family members, 
particularly the child’s mother.

A number of participants appreciated that there was clear communication, particularly 
consultation and information about a number of aspects related to the transition into stepfamily 
life. These were largely in relation to the stepfather’s role and the expectations the mother had in 
regards to the stepchild’s behaviour toward the stepfather, the process of the stepfamily moving 
in together, and consultation about the stepfather joining the family. Several participants 
appreciated that they were informed and consulted about these aspects. It should be noted that 
this did not occur for every participant. One participant discussed that being consulted by her 
mother in regards to her stepfather helped her to accept him,

Well she did talk to us about him in the beginning and about how he was going to be 
a part of our lives. So I guess that helped in us accepting him (*Elizabeth*).

There were two major benefits to clear communication in stepfamilies. It helped alleviate 
potential loyalty conflicts the child may have experienced, and it also helped clarify the role of 
the stepfather and reduce some of the uncertainty regarding the expected behaviour of the 
stepfather and child towards one another. One participant talked about her appreciation of a 
conversation her stepfather (a direct and “dominant” man) had with her and her sister at the 
beginning of their relationship that helped ease any potential loyalty conflict she may have 
experienced between her biological father and stepfather,

…Chris, that’s my stepdad, he gave me and my sister a big talk, I don’t know what 
age this was actually, about how he’s not going to replace our dad and he doesn’t 
want us to call him dad because he’s not our real dad but he will always treat us like 
we’re his daughters and he’s always going to do the same kind of things as Dad 
would usually do but he made it clear that he wasn’t trying to take over our dad. He
said, “I don’t want you to call me Dad, you can if you want but you don’t have to, don’t feel you have to because your dad is your proper dad”, but he made it very clear, he was very good about that (Courtney).

Other participants appreciated that the mother made the effort to consult them about the stepfather. Some recalled being asked by the mother if they wanted to call the stepfather “Dad”; one participant’s mother sought the child’s opinion as to whether or not they liked the stepfather before deciding to transition the family into becoming a residential stepfamily. Alana described this consultation process,

…Mum took it gradually; she didn’t just rush into it. She made sure we were happy first and she also went to her family and asked them what they thought. When he did move in it would have been a good two years after she met him and she just wanted to make us happy before bringing someone else into our lives…She asked us briefly, because we were just young, if we liked him and what we thought…But I really liked him and I wanted him in my life and Mum was glad that we thought this way and her family also really liked him and really thought that he was going to be good for us. So she went ahead with it (Alana).

Another participant experienced ongoing consultation from her mother and stepfather before they moved in together, which she appreciated,

Not one conversation, but just like probably in the months leading up to it they would just bring it up and we would just keep it really open. He would just ask me if there was anything I wanted to know or if I had any problems or anything like that. So they would just bring it up whenever we were together, which made talking about it easy, which made it just seem really normal (Danielle).

Some participants experienced direct communication or more instruction-like communication from their mother and sometimes their stepfather. This may have been from the mother in regards to how to behave towards the stepfather, or the stepfather and mother making a decision and communicating that towards the child. One participant talked about how her mother and stepfather’s direct approach to his transition into her life made the process easier for her and facilitated their relationship,

I guess it helped she just treated him like it wasn’t a big deal, that it was just another person and he was going to be around. The way he acted was lovely. They weren’t at all tentative about it. It was just ‘this is the way it’s going to be’ and that sort of thing. And it happened so long ago, ever since I can remember it, it’s fine (Sarah).

Therefore this theme highlights the importance of clear communication in enhancing the stepfather-child bond in a positive way. This relates to communication between the stepfather
and child and how this can help clarify roles within the stepfamily. The process of being consulted and informed was appreciated by the participants who had been.

*Feeling Close and Trusting*

This theme relates to participants’ discussions of the relationship with the stepfather and how they felt about him and perceived how he felt about them. All participants talked about this. This theme also captures participants’ accounts related to clarity of the role of the stepfather.

Four participants acknowledged that they could perceive the stepfather’s affection and clearly understood his role from the beginning of the relationship; they were able to perceive that he cared about them, they liked him and he assumed a father-like role straight away. However, the majority of participants identified that it took some time for them to perceive that they had a good and strong relationship with the stepfather. This was not a smooth process for everyone and several participants experienced a number of challenges that tested the relationship with the stepfather. Two participants indicated that this occurred at the beginning of the relationship and several experienced this during adolescence. Yet no matter the path the relationship took, all participants thought or believed that overall they had a good relationship with the stepfather, that he cared about them and that they respected and trusted him. Many directly referred to him as their father or a father-like figure and all participants at some stage described having a father-like relationship with the stepfather. There were several factors that impacted on this type of relationship developing, for example the age of the stepchild at stepfamily formation, the role of siblings, the relationship with the biological father, and the stepchild’s personality. One participant who was young at stepfamily formation and remained close to her father, described how she viewed her stepfather and the need to acknowledge both him and her biological father,

Yeah he’s more so a father figure than my dad because he’s always there but I still know because your dad’s your dad and you always love your dad but he’s raised me more than my dad *(Courtney)*.

Another participant who was nine when her stepfamily formed reported that the absence of her biological father enabled her to have a closer relationship with her stepfather,

I felt really close to him and I could trust him and it was quite special because I didn’t have that relationship with my father. And he was kind of embracing that father role and making me feel like his daughter. Which I hadn’t felt with my father because he wasn’t there…I’ve always thought of him as my father, and I always, like I trust him and he’s always there when I need him…*(Alana)*.
Participants were able to perceive that there were positive and often strong emotions towards them from the stepfather. Several stepfathers directly told the stepchild how he felt about them, as one participant said, who had a close relationship with her stepfather from age three and a largely absent father,

I used to always sit on his lap and, he actually still does this, but I remember him doing it when I was little, but say, “You’re so fabulous Michelle, you’re well behaved”, like when I was little. Just little things like that. He still does it now. He says, “I’m so proud of you Michelle, you are so wonderful, you have done so much, I’m so happy”. He’s cute (Michelle).

Some participants said that the stepfather may have been less direct in communicating his feelings towards them, but they perceived that that he cared about them, often from his actions towards them. As one female participant said,

…He just really, really cares and he would do anything and that he’s always there if I’ve ever got a problem. And I get that just from like, from really simple things like, when I go, when I’m at home and I go out to town with friends, he’s like, “If you’re ever anywhere where you don’t know where you are, if you’re ever drunk or on something else just ring me, I will come and get you…It doesn’t matter, I won’t ask, I just want you to be okay”. So things like that, which are about a certain situation, I know that that just means kind of like overall that he’s just always there (Danielle).

All participants expressed their positive feelings toward the stepfather during the interview. Many expressed feelings of respect and trust towards the stepfather and feelings of admiration and love. As one male participant who experienced mental health problems during adolescence said,

…At the end of the day he is just really worried, concerned, like he actually gives a damn. I respect him for that and just everything that he’s done for us and Mum and so there’s lots of love and respect from my part definitely (Stefan).

One participant recalled the moment in her relationship with her stepfather when she began to trust him and the significance of this for her. Her stepfather entered her life during adolescence and she struggled initially with opening up and developing a close relationship with him. Here she recalled a trip to a waterfall with her stepfather and mother,

The stream is quite a strong current and then you get to a rock pool and there is the waterfall. He went over first and he knows I have weak ankles. I’m not strong on my feet kind of thing…So he went off and I was still standing at the edge thinking ‘I’m going to fall, I’m going to crack my head’. Then he just stopped. He was already quite far ahead and he just stopped and turned around and he came back. He came back to about the second rock and put his hand out to take me across. I was like whoa – I don’t know how to explain it. Probably for me I was thinking most other men
wouldn’t do that…But for him to just remember that and come back. That whole point of just coming back for me really meant a lot…Then when we got to that final point I just felt whoa, it kind of had a symbolic meaning to me – that he’ll always come back for me, he’ll always look after me, I can trust him. Wherever I need to go he’ll kind of help me get there. So I would say at that point that’s when I fully started trusting him (Lisa).

Finally, the majority of participants specifically mentioned that they felt satisfied with the relationship with the stepfather overall. As one male participant who experienced some difficulties in his relationship with both his stepfather and mother during adolescence reflected,

…I get along better with him than just about anyone else. I think me and Dad [stepfather] have a really good relationship. He asked me to be home on certain days, certain times to help him out, I always do now. We were digging holes in the garden the other day to concrete posts…we were talking. He was asking how some of my mates were…he just seemed genuinely interested in stuff I was doing at the moment and I like talking to him. He’s got a lot of good insights on some stuff and we get along well (Aaron).

Therefore there were a number of experiences shared by participants but overall all perceived that the stepfather cared for them and they in turn trusted, respected and cared for the stepfather. It took varying lengths of time for each participant to develop a close relationship with the stepfather, yet all described him in some way as having a father-like role. It is of interest to note that the majority of participants had not directly discussed the relationship with their stepfather, yet it was apparent that both participants and stepfathers (from the participants’ perspective) perceived strong positive feelings toward each other.

**Summary**

In conclusion this section related to factors that enabled the development of a positive relationship between stepfather and stepchild. Three important themes emerged from the interviews: Stepfather’s Friendliness and Respect towards the Child, The Importance of Communication, and Feeling Close and Trusting. There were several different paths to establishing a positive relationship, yet all participants eventually reached this stage. There were sometimes changes in the relationship over time including challenges, yet the majority of participants reported feeling satisfied with the relationship overall. The next two sections address the two main components of authority: influence and discipline.

**Development of Stepfather Influence**

This next section examines experiences related to the development of the stepfather’s influence on the child. Influence was defined as ways in which the stepfather guides, supports or
encourages the stepchild towards certain actions, decisions, and goals; the stepfather may be considered as a role model or mentor in this regards. For many participants stepfather influence increased over time and often developed when a close relationship between stepfather and child was established; potentially this may help navigate any difficulties associated with the stepfather increasing his influence. Three main themes were identified under this area: He Helped me Get on my Way: Stepfather Guidance; It’s Made me a Better Person; and What he Thinks Matters. These themes capture not only the factors that contribute to the development of influence, but also the perceived benefits and the stepchild’s response to the stepfather as a result of his influence. These are discussed as they develop over time.

**He Helped me Get on my Way: Stepfather Guidance**

This theme addressed experiences shared by participants that were related to the stepfather’s approach or behaviour that enabled the development of influence. The majority of participants indicated that the stepfather had low levels of influence during the early stage of the relationship. This was reasonable as the stepfather was a new figure in the child’s life. However, for three participants (Michelle, Courtney, and Alana), the stepfather demonstrated a high level of influence from the beginning. These participants responded favourably to his influence. Michelle and Courtney appeared to have stepfathers with more ‘dominant’ personalities and Alana had known her stepfather for several years before they began living together. Yet, no matter the time it took to establish the stepfather’s influence all participants indicated that there was something about the way in which the stepfather approached influence that increased their receptiveness to this.

All participants reported that at some stage in the relationship the stepfather was available for them and made an effort to get to know them and be involved in their life. As discussed in previous themes, this often led to mutual respect and trust and enabled the child to be more receptive to support and guidance from the stepfather. This theme has parallels to the theme ‘Stepfather’s Friendliness and Respect towards the Child’, yet differs slightly, largely in regards to the type of support the stepfather had. In this theme it became apparent that the stepfather started by providing practical support and then shifted into providing more emotional support and advice and engaged in a role that was more than a supportive friend, one that could be thought of more as a role model or guide.

All participants perceived that the stepfather often initially provided them with practical support, for example, taking them to activities, helping with homework, and attending sports
games. Several participants commented on this support and that they perceived that the stepfather was dependable and reliable due to this. One participant appreciated the time and effort her stepfather put into her extra-curricular activities,

He was always very supportive. He would always tell me that I could do well at whatever I wanted. He would always talk to me about things if I was having trouble, especially when it came to school. Like when it came to ‘I don’t know what I want to do after high school’, he would give me suggestions. I would say, “No, I don’t want to do that, blah, blah”, but whatever. But no matter what I chose he would support me. He drove me to Rotorua for a drama audition, which I didn’t make, but he took me there and he was always very supportive. He let me practice in front of him, when I had a class show he would do my lines with me and stuff like that. Just, he was always there for me when I needed him to be (Michelle).

This perceived practical support from the stepfather appeared to develop over time. Participants could perceive that the stepfather adopted a more influential role over time and that he often started providing guidance, for example influencing the child’s decisions and activities. The increase in influence seemed to be related to the development of the relationship between the stepfather and child. Most participants reported an increase in stepfather influence during the middle stage of their relationship. This was usually several years after stepfamily formation. By this stage participants typically described a close relationship with the stepfather; this may have facilitated an increase in stepfather influence or enabled participants to be more receptive to this. One participant talked about the importance of mutual ground and that after this was established between her and her stepfather it became easier for them to discuss issues related to acceptable behaviours and limits for her. This participant was now open to the stepfather’s opinion on her behaviour and it became apparent that he had some influence over her decisions at this stage in the relationship. She was a teenager when she began living with her stepfather,

We would just talk about it. He would say what he thinks. I would say what I think. But what he says he doesn’t force on me. He would say like, “Look Lisa, I know you’re old enough, you’re a smart girl, I don’t force what I say to you. I just hope that you understand where I’m coming from and that you might use what I say. Whatever you need. I just want you to be safe out there”. We just kind of talk about it. He talks about what he thinks. I talk about what I think. We both kind of agree on a mutual ground and then we go on from that (Lisa).

Another participant commented on the value she placed on the stepfather being more involved in her life and how this was associated with an increase in her receptiveness to his influence. She illustrated in this quote how the increase in perceived support from the stepfather was associated with her being open to his guidance,
It was nice to have somebody there. If we won any sort of sports awards or anything he would take us out to dinner to celebrate or, yeah just be more supportive of us. I think that’s what it was. He was just more supportive and we were more willing to listen (Elizabeth).

Participants described a link between an increase in stepfather influence and a change in his role. It is difficult to ascertain the direction of this relationship but several participants described that an increase in stepfather influence was associated with a shift from being more of an ‘acquaintance/friend’ to becoming a ‘father figure’. Some participants commented that the stepfather influenced their behaviour, for example, modelling certain behaviours and they would not have acted in this way or participated in certain activities had it not been for the stepfather,

I guess that’s part of the reason he became more my dad because he also became more of an authority figure…Yeah and I think I started following more of his work behaviours through that time. Helping out in the garden kind of thing, which I wouldn’t have bothered doing before that. I think it’s something he got me to do (Aaron).

Many participants commented that the stepfather had guided them and influenced significant decisions and activities in their lives, for example study and career choices. This level of influence typically took some time to develop and for most participants developed during adolescence. One participant commented on the many areas her stepfather influenced her life,

…I started working in this time, and he was the one who took me to work and picked me up and he has tried to find me more jobs and he helped me do my CV. He’s taking a role in my life, which I can just depend on and I know he’ll always be there. So it’s not like I can just fall, because he’ll probably catch me, kind of thing. And with the whole transition to uni he’s helped me and helped me get on my way. It’s been good because with Mum and my stepfather there, I can just depend on them. I can come home and dinner is ready and my stepfather will check my car over for me… (Alana).

For the majority of participants the stepfather modified his approach to influence in accordance with the stepchild’s age. These participants perceived that the stepfather still had a high level of influence in their lives but it had changed slightly due to their transition into young adulthood. As two participants said,

…He’s still a father figure but it’s kind of now I’m at the age where I don’t really need a father figure any more so I’m much more independent. He still gives me advice if I ask he can see maybe if I need it or he just wants an opinion he’ll still give it to me and all that stuff (Courtney).

…I’m at this stage in my life where…I am able to make decisions for myself regarding certain things like uni and work and sport and whatnot. I’m not able to do
this and that I think the thing for him is it’s for me to start learning. So if I make a mistake I can learn from it. There will be guidance there, but I think it’s a learning game at the moment (Stefan).

Not all participants had positive experiences with stepfather influence however. One participant struggled with the stepfather attempting to exert more influence than appropriate for the strength of their relationship or her developmental stage. She shared that her stepfather adopted the same approach to parenting her as he had his biological daughter who struggled with a number of difficulties during her adolescent years. This impacted negatively on how much she discussed with her stepfather, she said,

…He lectures, but not in an angry way, but he’ll sit there and give you these big discussion full length talks about things. If it was his daughter she would sit there and be like, “Yeah, yeah whatever Dad”, kind of thing. But for me I would take it in and get even more upset. So he was trying to make me feel better but he should have been doing it in a different way. That’s because I always react to the situation in a different way. So in that part, I didn’t hate him or resent him or anything, but I just felt like, I would kind of just talk about surface things with him. I would just be like, “Oh yeah, school was dumb, or this boy was mean to me”, or whatever. But if there was something I was actually upset about I would go to Mum, because she knew me a whole lot better with different aspects of how I am than he did, and he would address it wrong, but he didn’t mean to… (Danielle).

All stepfathers eventually established a level of influence with the child and guided them and provided advice and role modelling. Some stepfathers had high levels of influence from the beginning of the relationship, whereas for the majority this took some time to develop and depended upon a positive relationship being formed first. Many stepfathers were able to influence their stepchildren in a number of significant ways.

It’s Made me a Better Person

This theme captures the benefits and gains the participants perceived as a result of stepfather influence. Several participants commented specifically on the gains they had received from having the stepfather influence them. This included increased knowledge and for some a broader understanding about life in general. For example, one participant gained increased knowledge of her culture and her stepfather’s culture, gained another family and learnt to trust men after difficult experiences within her family of origin,

I learnt how to trust…How a man should act. It kind of raised my expectations of what – say future relationships with guys. He reintroduced me into religion…I learnt a whole new aspect of Pacific Island culture. I’ve never had that before…I learnt that side of me. Which helped me to grow in my schooling…I kind of developed my own
moral...Definitely learnt how to be more humble...I gained another family out of it (Lisa).

Other participants appreciated that the stepfather’s influence added something additional to the influence they received from their mother and sometimes their biological father. Often this was complementary to the mother, but sometimes filled a gap in her knowledge or skills. One participant talked about the benefit of having the additional opinion of her stepfather,

I trust his judgement...He’s stuck up for me and he’s always been supportive of my decisions and things...My dad is sort of like, “Oh, just do it, if you want to do it then do it”. Whereas he’s [stepfather] very like, “Well you need to find out about this”. So it’s always been good having him when decisions come along and Dad will just say, “Go with your gut, if you want to do it then do it”. Mum doesn’t really trust her own judgement, she’ll say, “Oh yeah, oh yeah”. And then he’s [stepfather] always like, “Okay well yeah you might want to do it but you need to consider A, B and C. Go ahead and find out about those things”. So he’s kind of cautious, which is good, but it’s also annoying. So yeah, it’s good. It’s worked out well (Jane).

Another participant appreciated that her stepfather took a more supportive stance while her mother was pushing her harder in a certain direction. This fostered a stronger bond between her and her stepfather,

Well there was the move from school to college and our relationship grew closer because Mum was the one who was pushing for the best grades and he would be the one who would say, “You’re doing your best, just keep at it and you will do your best”. So he was really supportive while Mum was the one pushing us to do better (Alana).

Some participants reflected upon the impact the stepfather’s influence had on their personality and behaviour. They realised that they had come to adopt a number of his sayings or could reflect that the choices they had made were directly related to the stepfather. At least one participant mentioned that they had chosen to pursue the same career as the stepfather. One participant talked about how her stepfather impacted her personality and behaviour,

...I was at work the other day and I was leaving work and I was like, “I’m out of here like a bald man”. That’s something he would say...just little sayings that I find myself saying them. Also I guess from him and Mum I like to treat people well and that’s because they both treat people well. I guess it’s influenced my personality as in the way that I behave, of course, because your parents do. The way that I treat others...I’ve also learnt from him my behaviour around certain people, especially different people who are at different stages of authority to me...Because before Mum and Ryan [stepfather] came together we were all just wild, all of my brothers and sisters. We hadn’t had that. We hadn’t had someone show us because Mum was just trying to feed us all, keep us all in the same room, you know (Michelle).
Another participant captured how her stepfather had influenced her and how this had impacted on how she felt about herself in relation to him,

…I do sometimes feel like, and I’ve told them as well, that even though I’m not blood related to him, when I do things I can see his qualities in me, even though I don’t have any of his genes. And I think that’s because of how it was all so open and because of like me being able to see his side of things, which I think is cool that I am half his daughter even though we’re not blood related (Danielle).

Therefore many participants perceived that there were a range of benefits from the stepfather’s influence and that they had gained a lot and grown as people from having him involved in their lives.

**What he Thinks Matters**

In this final theme for this section, participants identified the importance to them of what their stepfather thought. They had reached a place in their relationship where he had influence and they valued what he thought and wanted to live up to his expectations. It was apparent for these participants that they respected the stepfather and what he thought was important to them. Many perceived that he had good intentions and wanted good things for them.

Some participants talked about how they respected the stepfather and valued his advice. They appreciated that they could turn to him for help and advice. One participant said,

> Often if I am at home or I am staying there for the weekend I will address him and ask him a problem or ask him his opinion, even if it’s something unrelated. I do modelling and even though he knows nothing about it I valued his opinion to ask him as well as my mum but separately. So I do value things like that… (Danielle).

One participant reflected upon the shift in her relationship with her stepfather when they had developed a close relationship and she appreciated that his opinion and influence was important, she had acknowledged the important role he had in her life, she said,

> But definitely a lot more aware of what he expected of us. We wanted to fulfil that expectation. Which is, I guess, something typical of a normal teenager with their own parent. So I guess that’s the change that sort of happened. We wanted to do better to impress him… (Elizabeth).

Michelle reflected upon the importance of having her stepfather’s approval of certain areas in her life, for example her boyfriend,

> I don’t know if it is an influence, but like with [boyfriend], having my dad’s [stepfather] approval of my partner it’s a big thing, which he does. Took him a while but he got there (Michelle).
Another participant noted that as her relationship with her stepfather became closer she took more notice of what he thought until it became of significant importance to her,

Since we’ve gotten closer – when I want to talk or he wants to – usually it’s me – I’ll just kind of brief him on what’s been going on. Definitely when I was going out with my boyfriend last year – just to keep him in the loop. And that’s when our discussions would happen. So I guess in comparison with the beginning. Where I wouldn’t really listen to what he was saying – now I take in to account what he is saying… (Lisa).

Therefore this theme captured some reflections that participants made about the importance of the stepfather’s influence and the shift they made to value his opinion on matters in their life.

Summary

This section examined data related to the development of influence. For the majority of participants it was necessary for there to be an established stepfather-child relationship before stepfather influence would be accepted by the participant. All participants reflected that the stepfather demonstrated support, encouragement and guidance and many reflected upon the benefits this had given them and their families. Several went further to mention that they highly valued what the stepfather thought and were able to appreciate his opinion and his influence. It was apparent that many stepfathers had high levels of influence, impacting on some of the study and career options of some participants. The next section addresses the data-set related to the second element of authority; discipline.

Development of Stepfather Discipline

This section addresses the development of stepfather discipline. All participants eventually accepted at least some discipline from the stepfather. As will be seen, the majority of participants reported that the stepfather had no or minimal discipline at the beginning of the relationship, often engaging in a support or ‘back-up’ role to the mother. Several stepfathers maintained this role over time and a number appeared to establish a role that may be considered ‘authoritative’, being both supportive but also where the stepfather disciplined as a team with the mother. For a small number of participants (Stefan and Aaron; both the only male participants), the stepfather became the primary disciplinarian. Three themes emerged from this data-set, they were: Mum’s Back-up or Ally; Navigating the Seas of Adolescence; and He Brought Order to the Chaos. The development of stepfather discipline typically accompanied the development of influence. There were several pathways to the development of discipline. This section includes more negative experiences than the previous two sections as the area of discipline was typically associated with
more difficulties in stepfamilies than other areas. Despite these difficulties though, all participants reflected that overall the experience with stepfather authority had been a positive one. Several were able to appreciate the stepfather’s authority and could see the benefits it had brought to them and their families.

**Mum’s Back-up or Ally**

All participants discussed the stepfather’s discipline in relation to the mother. For all participants the mother maintained the primary disciplinarian role with the child during the early stages of stepfamily life. The disciplinary role of the stepfather tended to change over time. During the initial stage of the relationship with the stepfather, five participants described stepfathers who appeared to adopt a ‘support’ role; these stepfathers were described as demonstrating warmth towards the child and disciplined in the form of maintaining and enforcing rules set by the mother. Two participants described stepfathers who could be considered as ‘authoritative’; these stepfathers were described as demonstrating high levels of warmth, influence and discipline. Three participants reported stepfathers who did not discipline at this stage. The stepfather role tended to evolve over time with two stepfathers moving into a ‘support’ role, two maintaining this role, and four moving into an ‘authoritative’ role (of which the two male participants had stepfathers that became the primary disciplinarian). For some participants the stepfather could have disciplined more but chose not to.

Most participants identified that the stepfather had a minimal disciplinary role at the beginning of their relationship or that he mostly backed-up and enforced the mother’s rules. These participants deemed this to be appropriate and several commented that they would not have accepted the stepfather attempting to take on a greater disciplinary role or attempting to discipline them without the support of the mother. One participant indicated that she would not have accepted the stepfather’s discipline initially as their relationship was not strong enough and if he had attempted this it would likely have been detrimental to their developing relationship. She still maintained a strong relationship with her biological father and recalled that she was initially worried her stepfather might replace him,

He [stepfather] didn’t have a lot. No. Because I was, in particular, I was Mum’s daughter not his daughter and it worked both ways. Mum couldn’t have the authority over Rachel [stepsister] and later on in that stage I guess he probably would have more authority but it would be a mutual thing. Whereas Mum would tell me off first and he would be there sort of, if I argued back or whatever he would be backing her up. But no, not a lot of authority. I guess yeah, we didn’t have a positive enough relationship for him to … that would sort of, what’s the word, if he was going to be
authoritative over me then I would be less likely to trust him and that’s not something that he would want in the long term. If I was already not trusting him, so yeah, not a lot of authority at all (Jane).

The mother often impacted on the role taken by the stepfather. Those participants whose stepfathers adopted a support or authoritative role tended to have mothers that encouraged this role. One participant recalled how her mother had a direct conversation regarding the support role her stepfather was going to adopt,

Of course my mum had a talk with us - he’s sticking around you need to listen to him when she’s not there. She didn’t exactly say that he was our dad, but he was someone that we had to respect on that level. So we were good kids. We listened to our mum (Elizabeth).

Other participants recalled being aware that they needed to respect the stepfather, although knew that the rules he was enforcing were not coming directly from him but were from the mother. This seemed to be an acceptable form of discipline and was often perceived as a flexible form of authority, for example, the rules were maintained and enforced but not in a strict or ‘over-the-top’ manner. One participant described how this was a positive experience for her and enabled her to establish a close relationship with her stepfather while at the same time navigating the roles that each of them would have, she said,

In that time my mother had most authority, but he maintained her rules, but he didn’t push us. He laid them down and we respected them. It was kind of like the relationship with our mother but we were just establishing it with him. So we were kind of testing the waters, both of us (Alana).

For two participants the stepfather was established in a disciplinary role that was supportive of the mother early in the relationship. This was more than a ‘back-up’ or ‘support’ role; these stepfathers were able to set some limits, however it was apparent that the mother still had the ‘final say’, particularly over highly important issues. These two participants formed a stepfamily at an early age; however one still had close and frequent contact with the biological father. Of note, both of these participants’ siblings were perceived as having a more difficult relationship with the stepfather than the participants had, potentially indicating that these participants were more open and receptive to the stepfather; both participants described themselves as ‘easy-going’ people. Courtney described the dynamic her mother and stepfather adopted in relation to discipline,

Well she’s just a nice balance like they’d always back each other up and if my sister was rude, I always go back to my sister because they’re the only examples, if my
sister was rude to my mum and my mum told her that she can’t be rude to her like that, my stepdad would jump in more. He’s kind of more a discipline side than my mum but mum always supports it and always goes with it (Courtney).

These two participants whose stepfathers established a disciplinary role early in the relationship commented on the stepfather having a particularly strong or dominant style of personality. Sometimes the mother had to intervene to balance out the discipline style of the stepfather. As one participant commented,

Sometimes it’s over the top but my mum kind of balances things out sometimes. So yeah in terms of authority he’s quite a strong authority figure (Courtney).

Another participant said that the stepfather and mother disciplined different aspects of their behaviour; these aspects appeared to fall along more traditional gender lines. Michelle commented that her mother was responsible for ‘emotional’ problems, whereas her stepfather regulated problem behaviours. It was apparent that her mother had a permissive parenting style and the stepfather stepped into a role with ‘strict’ authority early on,

It depends what aspect … like what was getting disciplined. So if it was just like misbehaviour, it would be Ryan [stepdad]. If it was something more mental or emotional like my sisters teasing me or me saying something to someone or whatever it would be Mum. So yeah, because Mum’s very emotional, but she would never do anything about the behaviour, so that’s when he stepped in (Michelle).

During the middle stage of the relationship with the stepfather, several participants experienced the stepfather shifting into a disciplinary role that was described as of equal, or approximately equal, authority to the mother. It is not exactly clear what enabled this to occur for these participants as compared to others. Of note, all of these participants were no older than nine when their mother became involved with the stepfather and all reported that he was involved in their life and put in an effort to get to know them. They all perceived him as a caring person with a pleasant personality, and all reported that the mother encouraged them to build a relationship with the stepfather and encouraged the stepfather to have a disciplinary role. All but one had minimal or no contact with the biological father. However, that is not to say that these factors were not apparent for other participants whose stepfather maintained a support role.

Those participants who eventually experienced the stepfather disciplining as an ally with the mother appeared to appreciate this situation, particularly if the stepfather’s discipline was accompanied by good communication and clear explanations of rules and consequences. That is, these participants appreciated stepfathers who adopted a role that was high on warmth and
authority, but also with the support of the mother. It is interesting to note that two of these participants described stepfathers who had ‘strict’ authority, whereas the others reported ‘flexible’ authority. One participant offered some advice to stepfathers based on her own experiences,

I would probably tell them about how he was always with my mum...Make it a together decision, always talk to the child together and don’t just, if for the stepdad to turn around and be like, “No you’re not going out, go to your room”, that would be the worst thing that you could do because one it wasn’t with the mother. The child would be like, “What? You can’t tell me”. And the fact that the child is just being told. Like whenever I got disciplined or whatever it was always in a discussion. Everything always happened in the dinner table, but that was because we were relaxed and we could just talk about things. So that would be my advice is to make decisions together and to openly discuss everything in a comfortable environment (Danielle).

The two male participants reported that the stepfather became the primary disciplinarian over time; this often coincided with the transition into adolescence. One of these participants experienced mental health problems during adolescence and he believed this was a contributing factor to his stepfather’s approach to discipline. The other participant reported a strained relationship with his mother during adolescence that required his stepfather to become the mediator and discipline as he would not accept authority from his mother,

Yeah Mum didn’t, she at that stage kind of used Dad [stepfather] to say stuff to me, I think she just didn’t really do that so much at that time. Often when she was angry at me, it wasn’t sitting me down, telling me what I’d done wrong, it was screaming her head off. It was generally Dad [stepfather] who did all the discipline for me at that stage and it would be stuff like taking my computer away for a week or whatever (Aaron).

Approximately half of the participants reported that the stepfather maintained a role of supporting the mother and backing up her discipline. Some even noted that they would have allowed the stepfather more authority but perceived that perhaps he did not feel comfortable taking a stronger disciplinarian role. As one participant noted,

It was still Mum that had the big say. But he could still set curfews and things like that. But Mum...was the head honcho. But I think it was more his reluctance. I would accept anything he said, I wouldn’t challenge it or anything. But I think he was reluctant to do things like that because he would be worried that I would challenge him (Sarah).

Two participants observed that their mother prevented the stepfather from adopting a stronger disciplinarian role. One participant's mother maintained financial responsibility for her
daughter and actively prevented the stepfather from having more authority, the participant believed that this was somewhat detrimental to her relationship with her stepfather and prevented a more father-daughter style relationship. When asked how she would have felt about her stepfather having more authority she said,

Probably not much different. Maybe a little bit closer, I don’t know. It might have seemed like more of a real father figure (Sarah).

Another participant said that her mother was not prepared to allow her stepfather to “wear the pants” and that she also acted in such a way as to prevent him from taking an authority role,

At that time Mum was definitely wearing the pants. I can’t remember anything that he had a say in, in anything I had to do. Because at that point I was still answering to Mum all the time. I guess the authority level was quite low. At that time we weren’t even listening to him that much. If we were in the lounge and I would be like, “Oh there’s a party, I want to go”, Mum would be like - after a couple of negotiations, Mum would be like, “Oh yeah that’s sweet”. But then Greg [stepfather] would be like, “No actually I don’t think she should, blah, blah, blah”. Then we would both just get pissed off with him because he said no. So sometimes it resulted in a fight, but in that initial point it was actually kind of low. It was kind of like caring and being like, “Yeah we’re going to do what you say”, and then just doing the complete opposite and just not telling him what happened. So I guess it’s a fault on our part but at that point it was low (Lisa).

Therefore there were a number of ways in which the stepfather disciplined in relation to the mother. For the majority of participants the mother maintained the primary disciplinarian role at the beginning of the relationship and the stepfather gradually took on more discipline usually through the process of enforcing the mother’s rules. For some participants the stepfather took on a disciplinary role earlier in the relationship and the mother supported this and sometimes regulated this if it was too harsh. Several stepfathers were able to transition into a role that was described as ‘authoritative’ (high on warmth and authority) with the two male participants having stepfathers who became the primary disciplinarian. For other participants the mother blocked the stepfather from taking on more authority. About half of participants had stepfathers who maintained a back-up or support role to the mother. All stepfathers eventually established some level of authority with the child over time.

**Navigating the Seas of Adolescence**

This next theme covers experiences of stepfather discipline directly related to the stage when participants were in adolescence. This is of interest as stepfamily research indicates that this tends to be a high risk time for difficulties within stepfamilies, typically due to challenges
associated with the stepparent-child relationship and discipline. It is of interest to note that the majority of participants in this study received some form of monitoring or discipline from the stepfather during adolescence. For approximately half, the stepfather maintained a ‘supportive role’ and backed up the mother’s discipline, for example by monitoring behaviour and enforcing her rules. However, several participants reported stepfathers disciplining in a team with the mother, for example adopting a disciplinary role with the support of the mother; most of these participants reported this as acceptable and a positive experience. Both male participants reported that the stepfather became the primary disciplinarian when they were in adolescence. This did not occur for any of the female participants. Participants reported liking when the stepfather made adjustments according to their developmental stage and decreased his expectations and discipline as they entered late adolescence.

The ‘middle stage’ identified in the interview corresponded with most participants’ entry into adolescence. From Table 5 it is apparent that most participants perceived an increase in stepfather discipline during this time. It is important to note that the participants Danielle and Lisa began living with the stepfather during adolescence. Danielle observed a shift in her stepfather’s behaviour upon his entry into her household. Lisa noticed a change in stepfather role after more time living with her stepfather; his disciplinary role changed slightly from having no control to low control. Of the other participants, many were reasonably accepting of stepfather discipline at this stage. All participants except the two mentioned above had lived with the stepfather for several years by this stage and this could have impacted on their acceptance of stepfather discipline. It is important to note that either before or during adolescence all stepfathers adopted one of two roles. One role entailed stepfathers demonstrating warmth and support towards the child and enforcing or maintaining the mother’s rules. The other role entailed the stepfather demonstrating high levels of warmth and authority towards the child. The type of authority was described as ‘strict’ by four participants and ‘flexible’ by the others, and involved both influence and discipline. One male participant reflected on how he accepted his stepfather’s authority during adolescence,

I think at this time he was starting to lay down the rules a little bit more. Yeah that later stage, he was starting to lay down the rules, not more 16, 17. Between 12 to 15 there wasn’t too much going on. I was just really obeying him and whatever he said kind of goes (Stefan).

This was not always a smooth transition however and several participants commented that they felt restricted by the stepfather’s discipline,
Yeah if I wanted to go to the movies on a Saturday night but I was going by myself with bussing with one of my friends for example, he wouldn’t allow that or he would have to ask this girl’s parents first, things like that whereas most of my other friends would be allowed to go, be independent already. Yeah small things like that he was more asking the parents and checking if everything is okay before doing it (Courtney).

Adolescence was typically the time when tension began to show in what had previously been a positive relationship between stepfather and child. These difficulties often related to typical adolescent problems and the negotiation between parent/stepparent and child. Some of these problems related to issues such as teenage relationships, school, chores, and driving lessons. For example, Aaron discussed the tension that arose from his stepfather’s expectation for him to take on more responsibility around the house when he turned 13,

Yeah which I didn’t take to very well at first. That was actually a bit of a barrier between me and Dad [stepfather]. He’s a real hard worker and doesn’t take any crap and I was a whiny 12/13 year old who didn’t want to do chores. He used to get a bit angry about that… I remember one time when I packed a sad over doing the laundry and he came and said, “I’ve done a 14 hour day and the last thing I want to bloody come home and do the laundry. You’ve sat on your arse playing games all day”, as I did. I remember him getting really angry about that but really quite upset about it for whatever reason. I did the whole I’m going to run away from home and then came back at dinner time kind of deal. But he came and found me and apologised for yelling and I apologised for being a twat (Aaron).

Another participant commented on the challenge that arose when she began a romantic relationship,

The aspect of boys came up and that tested the waters because they [mother and stepfather] didn’t want them wrecking my studies. But it didn’t end up to be such a difficulty because my long term boyfriend now, like he’s settled in as part of the family and my stepfather has included him in all our activities and they share like a bond through cars. So they involve each other through that. It’s moved from a difficulty to a positive thing because it’s brought us closer again but it tested the waters at the start. And he’s now accepted as part of the family but they were kind of suspicious and like they didn’t want someone interrupting my life and kind of messing up my chances of schooling. So they were kind of protecting me at the same time (Alana).

One participant in particular found the stepfather moving from a support role into a disciplinarian role difficult as it meant being accountable to another authority figure. In retrospect it appeared that she had accepted this change,
Well he’s been able to have more authority. So 16 year old me wasn’t happy with that. But I guess just that really. And having more than one person to be angry at and to argue with. But it hasn’t been all that bad (Jane).

Another difficulty encountered was when the stepfather tried to maintain a level of discipline that was inappropriate given the child’s developmental stage. One participant whose stepfather entered her life when she was in her mid-teens described her difficulties with both her stepfather and mother at this stage,

Yeah - he used to be so - I used to get so pissed off with it - he didn’t intend for it to come out that way, but if I go to a party or if I went to someone’s house, I’ve already pre-planned in my head what I’m going to do, and he would just be like, “Oh yeah I’ll drop you off and I’ll pick you up afterwards”. I would be, “Actually I really wanted to bus there and get my own way home”. He and Mum used to do it all the time - whereas this year I just had to say to both of them, “Look stop it. I know you guys are trying to be kind in looking after me and stuff, but can you guys stop telling me what I’m going to do and actually ask me what I’m going to do”. That was only this year. Ask me what I want to do. Instead of saying, “I will pick you up at this time and you will be waiting there”. Now it’s, “Do you need a ride home or are you going to bus?” So it’s kind of worked out that way. There’s definitely more independence but not so much that I feel I can’t call them for help. That’s what’s really important to them that if I do need it that they are the first ones to call. Especially with him (Lisa).

Those participants whose stepfathers made allowances for the stepchild’s growing independence and stepped back from a disciplinary role upon the child’s transition into late adolescence tended to reflect upon having more positive experiences with stepfather authority during adolescence. One participant could appreciate that her stepfather made allowances for her age and eased off his discipline,

I think now that I’m older he’s not as, like with any people, my mum and my dad they’re not so, I think I’m more independent. I don’t really need them. They don’t tell me when to go to bed, because I’m 20 I’m independent now so maybe you could say that, I don’t know how to put it, like authority has dropped a bit… (Courtney).

Therefore there was a range of experiences with stepfather discipline during adolescence and this area appears to have been a time of more tension then others. It is of note that the majority of participants perceived that this was still a largely positive stage in the relationship with the stepfather and several were able to use communication and other skills to negotiate difficulties associated with discipline with the stepfather. Many participants perceived and appreciated that the stepfather made adjustments for their developmental stage with discipline typically reducing during late adolescence with the transition into young adulthood.
He Brought Order to the Chaos

The final theme is relevant to a small number of participants who reflected upon the need for the stepfather to provide discipline for them, and thought it was necessary and beneficial to them. These participants appreciated that while accepting stepfather discipline may have been difficult in some regards, they perceived that he disciplined for necessary reasons and they ultimately gained from it. This way of framing stepfather discipline may have enabled these participants to be more receptive to his authority. One participant reflected upon her stepfather’s strong disciplinary style,

Well thinking about it now I think it’s been good. My sister might say a different thing because she’s had to have more, she’s had so much more discipline than me. I don’t really get in trouble or do anything silly. But yeah it’s more my sister and stepbrother because they clash and my sister kind of rebelled a bit so she had much more discipline than me so I think she would look at it kind of more negatively than me but I see it more positively because you learn from all of that and you learn not to do it again (Courtney).

Another participant experienced serious mental health problems during his teenage years and while his stepfather was very protective of him and placed strong limits on what he could do, he was able to reflect that this was for his own safety and his stepfather was trying to keep him safe,

He just, part of this has got to do because I’ve got a mental illness, he just wants to be really protective over that and he doesn’t want anything to kind of trigger me off I suppose. He doesn’t want anything bad that’s going to influence me to feel depressed or upset. At the end of the day he just wants me to be healthy and safe (Stefan).

Finally, one participant reflected that she and her siblings had behavioural problems due to the mother’s permissive parenting style. She perceived that it was necessary and beneficial for the stepfather to be disciplinarian to regulate their behaviour, although her older siblings struggled with this,

He was very authoritative I think. But only if he needed to be. For my brother it was like, “Oh I was the man of the house and now he’s taken over”. But for me he would step in when he had to and often because my mum is too kind for her own good, so that’s why we were so naughty. So he had quite a lot of authority, especially over me compared to the others. But it didn’t really come into play that often. He was just…he was trying to bring order to the chaos that was our family (Michelle).

Therefore a small number of participants reflected that the stepfather taking a disciplinarian role was necessary and beneficial to them.
Summary

This section covered the development of stepfather discipline. There were several ways in which discipline was established from the stepfather towards the stepchild. For the majority of participants this was a gradual process and typically discipline seemed to increase during the period of adolescence. This was associated with some difficulties for participants, however the majority were able to navigate this time successfully and maintain a positive relationship with the stepfather. For most participants the stepfather initially adopted a support role and disciplined as a back-up to the mother. A small number of participants experienced the stepfather in a disciplinary role early in the relationship, with the support of the mother. Several participants had stepfathers that adopted disciplinary roles later in the relationship and were often described as disciplining ‘in a team’ with the mother. The two male participants reported that the stepfather emerged as the primary disciplinarian during adolescence. Therefore there were a range of discipline styles and experiences by participants, but overall, all reflected that their experience had been positive.

Summary of Participants’ Experiences with the Stepfather

Table 5 below provides a brief summary of each participant’s experience with the stepfather relationship, stepfather influence and stepfather discipline across the three main stages of the relationship. Within each stage there is a brief analysis of: stepfather support, the quality of the stepfather-child relationship, stepfather discipline, stepfather influence, and a summary provided by participants describing the relationship with the stepfather.
### Table 5

**Overview of each participant’s experience with stepfather relationship, influence and discipline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age at stepfamily formation</th>
<th>Number of years in stepfamily</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Early stage</th>
<th>Middle stage</th>
<th>Later stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth (20)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Stepfather support</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Practical and emotional Close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quality of SF-C</td>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>Moderately close</td>
<td>Close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stepfather influence</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stepfather discipline</td>
<td>Low control, ‘Mum’s back-up’</td>
<td>Flexible control</td>
<td>Flexible control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participant summary</td>
<td>“Mum’s friend who lives with us”</td>
<td>“An authority figure”</td>
<td>“Like a father”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Age range (years)</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>6-14</td>
<td>15-current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle (19)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Stepfather support</td>
<td>Practical and emotional Close</td>
<td>Practical and emotional</td>
<td>Practical and emotional Close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quality of SF-C</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stepfather influence</td>
<td>Strict control</td>
<td>Strict control</td>
<td>Flexible control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stepfather discipline</td>
<td>“Like a father”</td>
<td>“Father figure”</td>
<td>“Father figure”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participant summary</td>
<td>3-11</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>16-current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Age range (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age range (years)</td>
<td>Stepfather support</td>
<td>Quality of SF-C</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Stepfather influence</td>
<td>Stepfather discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>4.5-6</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Distant</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>Low control, ’Mum’s back-up’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefan</td>
<td>5-11</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Some conflict</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>Low control, SF reluctant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtney</td>
<td>5-11</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>Moderate control, ’Mum has final say’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age 1</td>
<td>Age 2</td>
<td>Stepfather support</td>
<td>Quality of SF-C</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Stepfather influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Danielle  
(20)  
14.5  
5.5  
Stepfather support  
Practical  
Close  
Quality of SF-C  
Practical and emotional  
Close  
Relationship  
Stepfather influence  
Guidance  
Stepfather discipline  
Flexible control, ‘Mum’s back-up’  
Participant summary  
“Really fun uncle”  
Age range (years)  
9-13  
“Like a father”  
14-16  
“Mother and SF like a team”  
17-current  
Lisa  
(18)  
15  
3  
Stepfather support  
Practical  
Quality of SF-C  
Practical and emotional  
Close  
Relationship  
Stepfather influence  
Guidance  
Stepfather discipline  
Low control  
Participant summary  
“Mum’s partner”  
Age range (years)  
15-15  
“I trust him”  
15-16  
“Like a father”  
16-current

Note: SF=Stepfather; C=Child

From Table 5 it is apparent that there were a number of similarities and differences for participants in Study Two. For the majority of participants the stepfather had no or minimal authority at the beginning of the relationship. These stepfathers were often described as engaging in a support or ‘back-up’ role, with many providing practical support during this stage. A number of these stepfathers were described as maintaining this role over time whereas the others went on to establish what appeared to be an ‘authoritative’ role with the stepchild, which usually involved influence and the stepfather disciplining in a team with the mother. The two male participants described stepfathers who became the primary disciplinarian over time. Two participants described stepfathers who had authority from the beginning of the relationship, while three participants described stepfathers who maintained a low level of authority throughout the relationship. Adolescence was typically the time when problems within the stepfather-child relationship were likely to occur.
What is interesting to note is that these ten participants had stepfathers who adopted different authority roles, yet for all of these participants the role the stepfather adopted was positive and acceptable to them. These results will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.
Chapter Five

Discussion

This chapter examines the results of both studies in relation to previous research findings regarding stepfather-child relationships, the stepfather role, and stepfather authority. This study aimed to investigate the range of young adult stepchildren’s experiences and perceptions of stepfather authority. It also aimed to investigate: i) Young adult stepchildren’s beliefs about stepfather authority; ii) Young adult stepchildren’s experiences and perceptions of stepfather’s approaches to authority; iii) The experiences of stepfather authority perceived or identified as either positive or problematic; and iv) The processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time. This chapter will address these aims and each of the research questions, which were: i) What contributes to the development of stepchildren’s acceptance of stepfather authority? ii) What influences the positive perceptions of stepchildren in regards to stepfather authority? and, iii) What influences stepchildren’s perceptions of problems in regards to stepfather authority? It will also address implications for stepfamily systems, clinical practice with stepfamilies, and consider future directions for research with stepfamilies.

Summary of the Main Findings

The Questionnaire

1. There were a range of experiences of stepfather authority. Thirty-two participants reported their experience of stepfather authority was mainly positive. Another 25 participants reported that their experience improved over time. These participants often described relationships that were initially distant or difficult, some experienced difficulties during adolescence. Twenty-three participants described their experience with stepfather authority as difficult, and for five it became worse over time.

2. The majority of participants identified positive experiences with stepfather authority. They often linked authority with care and support from the stepfather. A number perceived benefits of the stepfather having authority including knowledge or skills, a father figure, and an enhancement of themselves and the stepfamily system. For some having no stepfather authority but a supportive stepfather was positive.
3. A number of participants also reported difficulties with stepfather authority. These were sometimes related to the stepfather not being a biological parent, the stepfather attempting to adopt an authority role at an inappropriate time with the stepchild, adjustments to a new authority figure, authoritarian and harsh discipline, and negative impacts on the mother-child relationship.

4. There were a range of opinions regarding stepfather influence, with several participants stating the stepfather could have influence and discipline if certain conditions were met.

**The Interview**

5. All participants reported that the mother maintained the primary disciplinarian role at the beginning of stepfamily formation. All stepfathers were able to establish an authoritative role in some form over time, although the amount of influence and discipline, and the development of this differed.

6. Half of participants reported having a friendly relationship with the stepfather at the beginning, all described relationships that were eventually close or moderately close.

7. All participants perceived the stepfather to have influence over them in some way, often in the form of practical support, guidance and advice. Many appreciated this and could perceive benefits from this.

8. The area of discipline was a more challenging area for some participants. Five stepfathers adopted a ‘support’ role at the beginning of stepfamily formation (high in warmth/support, low in discipline/control and maintaining the mother’s rules). Two established a role that could be considered ‘authoritative’, that is, high on warmth/support and discipline/control, with the support of the mother, and three had no disciplinary role. This changed over time with six participants reporting the stepfather to have an ‘authoritative’ role by adolescence and four describing a ‘supportive’ stepfather. For the two male participants, but none of the female participants, the stepfather became the primary disciplinarian during adolescence.

This thesis study also aimed to contribute to an understanding of stepfamily systems, in particular the authority role of the stepfather within the stepfamily system. There is an essential difference between stepfamily and first-marriage family systems. The couple in a stepfamily system contains a parent and a non-parent, and this can be a unique challenge for stepfamilies. The stepparent role is often unclear and there can be different expectations from different stepfamily members in relation to this role. Therefore this thesis study aimed to gain further
insight into young adult stepchildren’s perspectives of stepfather authority, specifically those experiences perceived as positive by stepchildren. According to stepchildren in this study, stepfathers adopt a number of roles within the stepfamily system. In particular, as described by the participants, the type of authority role stepfathers tried to adopt differed across stepfamilies and was met with varying degrees of responses by children. Those participants who were positive about the stepfather and his role within the stepfamily tended to report that stepfathers adopted a supportive role initially and engaged in behaviour that was perceived to help establish a relationship with the child. The support dimension emerged as an important part of the stepfather role within the stepfamily system. Some stepfathers established a role that could be described as ‘authoritative’ over time. Participants who reported more difficult experiences with the stepfather role and authority tended to report that the stepfather adopted an authoritarian or ‘harsh’ disciplinary role. Problems were also reported with the stepfather adopting an authority role that was incongruent with the child’s developmental stage, for example, high levels of authority when the child was in adolescence. These experiences will be expanded on in further detail below.

**Positive Experiences and Acceptance of Stepfather Authority**

This section aims to address the following two research questions: What influences positive perceptions of stepchildren in regards to stepfather authority? What contributes to the development of stepchildren’s acceptance of stepfather authority? Overall the majority of participants in Study One reported some positive experiences of stepfather authority, with approximately one-third of the sample reporting an overall positive experience of stepfather authority. The participants in Study Two were selectively chosen to provide insight into positive experiences of stepfather authority and processes that are associated with an acceptance of stepfather authority, therefore all of these participants identified positive experiences, however these findings cannot be generalised to stepchildren in general. Positive experiences identified by participants in this thesis study included the positive quality of the stepfather-child relationship, the stepfather role, stepfathers and mothers talking to children, and the benefits of stepfather authority. For some participants in Study One, including all those who participated in Study Two, these experiences contributed to an acceptance of some level of stepfather authority and will be discussed further below. However, for some participants in Study One, the stepfather not attempting to have any authority was viewed as positive and appropriate.
Stepfather-Child Relationship

Many participants in this thesis study were able to reflect upon the positive experiences related to the stepfather's approach to authority and how this contributed to the development of a positive stepfather-child relationship and an acceptance of his authority. Thirty-four participants in Study One (ten of whom were interviewed in Study Two) identified that they perceived stepfather support and often a positive, caring attitude from the stepfather towards them, which many viewed as important in forming a relationship, as this often led to trust and respect from the stepchild towards the stepfather. In previous research, affection and admiration from stepchildren towards stepparents has been identified as crucial in determining the relationship strength (Schrodt, 2006). Additionally, affinity-seeking behaviour from stepparents that is perceived and accepted by stepchildren, and maintained throughout the relationship between stepparent and stepchild is associated with a warm and affectionate relationship (Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999). Schrodt (2006) identified the dimension of ‘positive regard’ as key in determining the stepparent-child relationship. He conceptualises this as, “the degree to which the stepparent and stepchild relate to each other in ways that are respectful” (Schrodt, 2006, p. 174). His findings indicate that respect and affection from the stepchild toward the stepparent is important in determining the strength of the relationship. Therefore it appears important that stepfathers interact with stepchildren in such a way as to engender respect from them, this in turn may allow a foundation from which authority can be established. The findings from this thesis study therefore indicate that perceived warmth and caring from the stepfather appear to be an important element in establishing a positive relationship between stepfather and stepchild, which may lead to an acceptance of stepfather authority. This further highlights the importance of the stepfather role within the stepfamily system, and emphasises the importance of the support dimension of this role. In addition perceived stepparental warmth from the perspective of residential parents, stepparents, and stepchildren has also been associated with increased child well-being (Fine et al., 1993; Nicholson et al., 2002).

A number of stepfathers discussed by participants in Study One, including all those who participated in Study Two, were described by participants as putting in time and effort to build a relationship with the stepchild. While some studies have indicated that stepparents may not attempt to build a relationship with the stepchild (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), a number have indicated that many do attempt this (Fine et al., 1999; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). A number of participants in this thesis study appeared to appreciate the efforts of the stepfather in attempting a relationship with
the child. Therefore some children in stepfamilies perceived stepfathers making an effort to spend time with them and appreciated these efforts. Further to this finding, a number of participants in Study One, including all those followed-up for Study Two described a process whereby the stepfather became ‘actively committed’ to them, which they in turn reciprocated. Active commitment was defined in this study as a process where the stepfather became more involved and interested in the child’s life and demonstrated this by participating more actively in the child’s hobbies, activities, sporting and school. This is somewhat contradictory to findings from the Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) study, which found that stepchildren often displayed negativity and rejection towards stepparents’ attempts at building a relationship in the first 26 months post-remarriage. Hetherington and Clingempeel did not provide a longer follow-up so these relationships may have changed with time. The participants in Study Two were selectively chosen due to having positive experiences and participants in both studies were university students, therefore these stepchildren may have had particularly positive experiences or differed in some way from stepchildren in general. Additionally these experiences may have been some time ago and the participants may only remember more recent years. However, Fine et al. (1999) found that stepparents whose stepchild reciprocated warmth tended to establish close relationships, indicating that if stepchildren are open to stepparents’ efforts and warmth then this can be an important factor in establishing a stepparent-child relationship. Therefore this thesis study suggests that stepfathers may have an increased chance of establishing a relationship with the stepchild by demonstrating an active commitment towards them and supportive behaviour.

Yet not all participants were receptive to initial attempts from the stepfather to form a relationship. Two participants in Study Two were initially reluctant to form a relationship, however over time they accepted the stepfather and reported that he maintained openness towards them despite their rebuffs of his attention. This finding further highlights the importance of patience on behalf of the stepparent and not attempting to ‘force’ or ‘rush’ a relationship with the stepchild. Children in stepfamilies who feel pressure to have a relationship with the stepfather tend to feel more reluctant to establish a positive relationship (Anderson & White, 1986). Findings from Hetherington’s longitudinal studies also support this; children in stepfamilies tend to be cautious in response to initial attempts by stepfathers at forming a relationship. Those stepfathers who patiently persist and demonstrate warm and supportive behaviours are more successful at establishing a relationship (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In addition, when participants in Study One were asked for their opinion on stepfather influence
several perceived that it was important for the stepfather to take time to build a relationship with the child, treat them fairly and gain their respect before attempting an authority role. Therefore a finding from this study was that it was perceived as appropriate and important by some participants for the stepfather to establish an authority role slowly over time.

Stepfather support was also perceived as important in contributing to a positive stepfather-child relationship; therefore this study identified this as an important dimension of the stepfather role within the stepfamily system. There were several types of support identified in this thesis study including practical support such as helping with homework and sports/hobbies, financial support, and emotional support. For a number of participants in Study One, including all of those who participated in Study Two, this perceived support from the stepfather enhanced the development of a positive relationship and for some this enabled the stepfather to gain influence and sometimes an authority role. Stepparent support is often appreciated by stepchildren (Cartwright et al., 2009; Freisthler et al., 2003; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) and studies indicate that stepparents tend to be more successful at establishing a relationship when they adopt a supportive or friend-like role that is high on warmth but low on control (Bray, 1999). Therefore this study found that stepfather support is an important element of the stepfather role and forms an essential part of the stepfather-child relationship.

**Stepfather Role**

Most participants in this thesis study reported that stepfathers initially had no or minimal levels of authority at the beginning of the relationship. Any attempt at stepfather authority often came later in the relationship and most participants in Study Two described stepfathers who initially adopted a ‘supportive’ role that was high on warmth/support but low on discipline/control, some of whom then transitioned into a role that was high on warmth/support and discipline/control, a description that fits Baumrind’s (1971) definition of an ‘authoritative’ role. A previous New Zealand qualitative study of young adult stepchildren also found that a cautious approach to discipline is often appreciated by stepchildren (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). All participants in Study Two identified that the mother maintained the primary disciplinarian role in the beginning of stepfamily formation. As these participants all identified positive experiences of stepfather authority overall, it may be that the mother maintaining the primary disciplinarian role in the early stage of stepfamily formation is important in regards to stepfamily functioning. Another New Zealand qualitative study of young adult stepchildren found that these participants typically preferred the mother to maintain the primary disciplinarian

107
role (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). This finding highlights a key difference in the stepfamily system as opposed to the first-marriage system in that the parenting roles of the mother and stepfather can differ significantly, particularly during the early stages of stepfamily formation. This highlights that it is important for stepfamilies to be aware of this and in particular for mothers and stepfathers to be mindful that the stepfather may not necessarily have an authority role during this initial stage. Many participants in this thesis study reported that when stepfathers initially attempted to establish authority he did so by enforcing or maintaining the mother’s rules in a supportive manner. Half of the participants in Study Two reported this arrangement and perceived this as positive. This is in line with other research where children in stepfamilies reported wanting time to ‘get used’ to the stepparent (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Several of the stepfathers in Study Two who initially appeared to adopt ‘support’ roles were reported by participants as eventually transitioning into ‘authoritative’ roles. Bray (1999) and Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) found that children were more accepting of stepfathers who monitored behaviour and activities rather than attempting to have authority. Therefore it may be that stepfathers who initially adopt a support role that is low on control are more likely to be accepted by stepchildren if and when they attempt to adopt an authoritative role.

Two participants in Study Two reported stepfathers that were involved in discipline early in the relationship. These participants did indicate that the mother still had the final say in all matters related to discipline; again this may have made stepfather discipline more acceptable for these participants. It also potentially demonstrates that different children respond differently to stepfather discipline. This finding also indicates that there can be different approaches to co-parenting within stepfamilies that can result in positive experiences with stepfather authority. Findings from the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage indicated that stepfathers who backed-up the mother’s authority rather than attempting any independently were more likely to have a positive relationship with the pre-adolescent children in this study (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In general these findings from Study Two where the stepfather tended to move into a disciplinary role over time, support other studies that have found that stepchildren who do grant stepparents authority tend to do so slowly over time rather than during the early stages of stepfamily formation (e.g. Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). Schrodt (2006) found that to some extent stepchildren in his study, especially those who had developed a relationship with the stepparent at an earlier age, allowed more stepparent authority over time.
Participants in this thesis study who reported that the stepfather modified his approach to authority according to their age appreciated this. Several whose stepfather joined their family when the participant was in adolescence appreciated the stepfather not attempting to take an authority role at this stage. This is consistent with the literature that stepfather authority can be particularly challenging during adolescence, even in long-established stepfamilies (Bray, 1999; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). However, a number of participants in Study Two reported that the stepfather increased his level of authority upon their entry into adolescence. While this was sometimes perceived as difficult, many viewed this as appropriate. This is somewhat contradictory from findings in the literature, however supports a finding from the Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) longitudinal study, which found that when stepchildren are adolescent upon stepfamily formation, stepfathers establishing authority quickly was linked to greater acceptance of the stepfather (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). It is again important to remember that participants in Study Two were selectively chosen and as such had more positive experiences in general. Therefore this study, and in particular those participants chosen for Study Two, suggests that some stepchildren were prepared to accept authority from the stepfather during adolescence and this was overall a positive experience for them. This supports findings from Schrodt’s (2006) study, which found that positive regard, stepparent authority, and affective certainty were all associated with a close and positive stepparent-child relationship.

It is also important to note that some participants in this thesis study described stepfathers who did not take on a role of authority and this was viewed as positive and appreciated by these participants. Three of the participants in Study Two also described stepfathers who had minimal levels of authority throughout the relationship. These stepfathers appeared to have some influence (for example by providing guidance) but a minimal disciplinary role. Again, this was perceived to be positive and appropriate by these participants. These participants in Study Two were able to establish a positive relationship with the stepfather. Some additional participants in Study One whose stepfather did not attempt authority were also able to establish a relationship with the stepfather where he maintained a support role. This suggests that some stepfathers who are warm and supportive but do not take on a role of authority can do well with children as has been found in other studies (e.g. Bray, 1999). As previously mentioned, the support dimension emerged as a very important part of the stepparent role within the stepfamily system.
Talking to Children

Talking to children about the stepfamily and especially the stepfather was also mentioned as an important factor that contributed to the acceptance of stepfather authority. Good communication was helpful in a number of ways. Some participants in Study Two mentioned it as important in helping with the transition into stepfamily life and accepting the stepfather, for example the mother consulting the stepchild about this was viewed as helpful and appreciated by participants. This is an important point to note as studies indicate that parents sometimes do not discuss the transition into a stepfamily with their child (Cartwright, 2010b). For other participants it facilitated clarity of the stepfather’s role. Role clarity is an important factor that contributes to enhanced stepfamily functioning (Fine et al., 1997). Inconsistencies around perceptions of the stepparent role between stepparents and stepchildren have been associated with greater stepchild adjustment difficulties and strained stepparent-child relations (Fine et al., 1998). Therefore processes that help to clarify this role may result in less tension between stepparents and stepchildren and consequently a closer relationship. Clear communication between members of the stepfamily system was identified in this study as one of those processes.

Communication was useful to some participants in that it could alleviate any potential loyalty conflicts they might have felt between the stepfather and father. Participants in this thesis study who identified the stepfather as having a disciplinary role early in the relationship indicated that his authority was more acceptable if this was accompanied by good communication and a clear explanation of rules and expectations. Communication has been identified in other studies as important for stepfamily functioning. In one study stepfamilies who demonstrated good communication skills were able to use these to resolve conflicts and were identified as more likely to stay together (Saint-Jacques et al., 2011). Therefore it appears that communication from the stepfather in regards to his role within the stepfamily and in relation to the child may have helped the child to accept his authority role.

Benefits of Stepfather Authority

A number of participants in this thesis study identified that there were several benefits of stepfather authority. This was also identified as a key condition by participants in Study One when they were asked for their opinion regarding stepfather influence. Several participants appeared to perceive that the more benefits to the stepchild then the more appropriate stepfather authority would be. One benefit of stepfather authority was an enhancement of the stepfamily system, particularly gaining a father figure and an additional authority figure. This was
particularly commented on by participants who had an absent biological father. A qualitative study indicated that stepfathers are more likely to adopt a parenting role when the non-residential father is disengaged (Svare et al., 2004). The absence of the non-residential father may reduce the possibility of loyalty conflicts for the child and enable them to be more accepting of the stepfather. Some participants perceived that there was a need for stepfather authority. For instance, the mother may have had a permissive parenting style and the stepfather was able to help with setting limits. When the residential parent adopts a non-authoritative role then stepparental authority can be beneficial to child well-being (Nicholson et al., 2002). Other participants appreciated that they learnt values, skills or knowledge from the stepfather and some perceived that it helped with their self-esteem; this also has been found elsewhere (Pryor, 2005). Many of these benefits were benefits to the wider stepfamily system, for example, the stepfather adopting a father role, forming a co-parenting system with the residential parent, and contributing knowledge, values and skills to the family.

Difficult Experiences of Stepfather Authority

This section aims to address the following research question: What influences stepchildren’s perceptions of problems in regards to stepfather authority? The majority of participants in Study One also commented upon difficult experiences related to stepfather authority; that is to say most participants had both positive and difficult experiences. Twenty-three identified that overall their experience was difficult and for five participants the experience with stepfather authority became worse over time. Although participants in Study Two were selectively chosen for identifying largely positive experiences of stepfather authority, a number reflected upon some of the difficulties they encountered in relation to stepfather authority. Many difficulties identified by participants in this thesis study were related to adolescence, the stepfather’s approach to authority, issues around the stepfather not being their ‘real’ father, and negative impacts on the participants’ relationship with the biological mother.

Challenges during Adolescence

A number of participants in Study One, some of whom were followed up for Study Two, identified that there were more difficulties in the relationship with the stepfather during adolescence than at other times. This is a common finding in the literature with difficulties emerging even in established stepfamilies (Bray, 1999; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). It is important to note that most participants followed up for Study Two had a stepfather established in either an ‘authoritative’ or ‘supportive’ role either before or during
adolescence, where the stepfather had some level of authority (at a minimum this involved enforcing the mother’s rules). The transition of the stepfather from being a ‘friend’ or ‘support’ to having an authority role was not always easy, as reported by some of the participants in this thesis study. Stepfather authority during adolescence was associated with difficulties for some of these participants, for instance some struggled to adjust to having an additional authority figure in their lives. Others struggled with feeling restricted. This supports findings that stepparent authority can be a source of tension and ambivalence for stepchildren. In one study stepchildren reported that they wanted the stepparent to have authority but struggled with granting this (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004). However a number of participants in Study One, including all of those who participated in Study Two, were able to resolve this tension and accept some authority from the stepfather eventually. These participants’ relationships with the stepfather were able to ‘recover’ from the tensions experienced in adolescence.

Mother-Child Relationship

Around one tenth of participants in Study One identified that stepfather authority had a detrimental effect on the relationship with the biological mother. In a New Zealand qualitative study, one in four young adult stepchildren perceived that stepfamily life had negatively affected their relationship with the residential parent (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Some also reported a sense of betrayal when the mother allowed or supported the stepfather taking a disciplinary role, or if the mother was perceived as taking the stepfather’s side during conflict between the stepfather and stepchild (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Some participants in Study One perceived the stepfather as controlling or undermining the mother and this was difficult for them. Tension within the stepfamily system regarding the stepfather role can negatively impact on the mother-child relationship (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). This relationship is often described as more distant within the early years of stepfamily formation (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Therefore this thesis study found that for at least one tenth of participants, the relationship with the mother was perceived as negatively impacted by the stepfather in some way.

Stepfather’s Approach to Authority

Participants in this thesis study perceived some difficulty with aspects of the stepfather’s approach to authority. Of note, none of the participants followed up for Study Two identified stepfathers who demonstrated an ‘authoritarian’ or ‘disengaged’ stepparenting style, although several had stepfathers who demonstrated ‘strict’ control, yet they were also warm and supportive. However a number of participants in Study One, which is more representative of
children in stepfamilies than Study Two (as Study Two was a selectively chosen sample of stepchildren who identified more positive experiences of stepfather authority), identified that stepfathers appeared to adopt a role that was high on discipline/control and low on warmth and support, for example, ‘authoritarian’. Several also had stepfathers who adopted a ‘disengaged’ stepparenting style. A disengaged stepparenting style was characterised by low warmth/support and low discipline/control. This type of stepparenting style was often associated with difficult experiences of authority. A disengaged stepparenting style is generally associated with poorer outcomes for children in stepfamilies than other stepparenting styles (Nicholson et al., 2002). In an interview study with 115 young adults and adolescents in stepfamilies, Golish (2000) investigated the relationship between stepparenting style and stepchildren’s topic avoidance and satisfaction with the stepparent. She found that an authoritarian stepparent was associated with decreased satisfaction with the stepparent and more topic avoidance; while stepchildren with authoritative stepparents and those rated as more permissive had the least topic avoidance. Findings from the VLSDR also indicate that stepparents who adopted a disengaged stepparenting style tended to have conflicted and strained relationships with stepchildren (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Therefore it is not surprising that more difficult experiences were reported from participants with stepfathers who adopted either an authoritarian or disengaged stepparenting style.

Timing of Authority

Some participants in this thesis study identified difficulties with the stepparent attempting to adopt a parental role or establish influence or discipline too early in the relationship. Perceived stepparent control by parents and stepparents has been associated with decreased child well-being in stepfamilies (Fine et al., 1993). Most stepfamily researchers and clinicians agree that children whose stepparents adopt a disciplinary role early experience more difficulties than those whose stepparents adopt a support role (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Papernow, 2006). Additionally children often resist discipline from the stepfather early in the relationship (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Clinical and empirical studies suggest that this is particularly so if the stepparent has not built a positive relationship with the stepchild first (Bray, 1999; Mills, 1984). Therefore it appears best for stepfathers to adopt a cautious approach to discipline, ensuring they take the time to establish a relationship with the child first, although this is not a guarantee of an acceptance of authority.
Participants were more likely to perceive difficulties with authority when the stepfather did not adapt his approach to authority or level of control according to the stepchild’s developmental stage. A common difficulty perceived by participants in this thesis study was stepfathers attempting to maintain a high level of authority when the participant had transitioned into late adolescence or young adulthood. Other stepfamily studies have also found that it can be problematic if stepparents and parents are ‘out of sync’ with the developmental stage of the children (e.g., Bray, 1999). This has an important implication for the stepfamily system; the stepparent needs to adjust their expectations of their role within the stepfamily and level of authority according to the child’s developmental stage.

**Stepfather Not a ‘Real’ Father**

Around one third of participants from Study One identified difficulties related to the stepfather being perceived as not a ‘real’ father. These were difficulties related to the stepfather not being a biological parent or family member. For some participants this tension made it difficult for them to accept his authority. A study of young adult stepchildren supports this finding, some of the participants in this study appeared to struggle with legitimising stepparental authority due to the stepparent not being a ‘real’ parent (Baxter et al., 2004). Sometimes the difficulties participants in this thesis study discussed with the stepfather not being a ‘real’ father were related to a lack of role clarity, which has been discussed in more detail above. Other participants reported difficulties related to their feelings of divided loyalty between the biological father and stepfather. Some studies report that this can be common (Freisthler et al., 2003) particularly as more non-residential fathers are remaining increasingly involved in their children’s lives post-separation (Pryor, 2006). However, a number of participants in this thesis study were able to resolve this tension and eventually accept the stepfather’s authority. Studies have found that it is possible for children to accommodate a close relationship with the non-residential father and stepfather (Funder, 1996; Pryor, 2004a; White & Gilbreth, 2001) and those that have relationships with both tend to have better outcomes and increased well-being (King, 2006).

**Clinical Implications**

There are a number of implications that can be drawn from this study when working clinically with stepfamilies. First it is important to acknowledge that there were a range of experiences with stepfather authority identified by participants in this study. Subsequently there
will not be a sole recommended approach to stepfather authority; however there were a number of findings that lend to some general recommendations for clinicians working with stepfamilies.

In light of previous findings this study emphasises the importance of warmth, support and openness from the stepfather toward the child, which can lead in time to an acceptance of authority. Many participants perceived that the stepfather was kind, open and took the time to get to know them and establish a relationship with them. Yet other studies suggest that some stepfathers do not take the time to establish a relationship with the child, instead focusing on building a relationship with the new spouse (Fine et al., 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Therefore a clinical implication is that it is important for clinicians to emphasise the importance of establishing a relationship between the stepfather and stepchild. Potential ways to do this may be through family therapy or educational programmes for new stepfamilies. These programmes or therapy could emphasise that stepfathers practice patience and perseverance and make an effort to know the child. In a review of the stepfamily literature Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) provide some recommendations for educational programmes that target the stepparent-child relationship. These include: providing information regarding child development and behaviour management, advice for stepparents to ease into a parenting role slowly, and for stepparents to not expect a close bond if stepchildren are older (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

A finding that emerged from this study was the need to establish a positive relationship between stepfather and stepchild first before attempting to establish authority. This supports previous research that also found this (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Mills, 1984). It may therefore be important for clinicians to emphasise the importance of this to stepfamilies and to focus on interventions that facilitate an enhanced stepfather-stepchild relationship first before the stepfather attempts an authority role.

Another clinical implication is the importance for stepparents to adjust their role and authority according to the developmental stage of the child. Many participants viewed it as inappropriate for the stepfather to maintain high levels of authority during late adolescence and early adulthood. Many were still prepared to accept influence from him at this stage though, but not discipline. Therefore it is important for stepparents to ease off the level and type of authority they have as children transition into adulthood. For those who join the stepfamily while the child is in late adolescence it may be appropriate for them to maintain a support role rather than
attempt authority independently of the mother as has been recommended by other researchers (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

This thesis study supports findings that authoritarian and disengaged stepparenting styles are the most difficult for children to accept (Nicholson et al., 2002). It may therefore be appropriate for stepfamily clinicians and stepfamily education programmes to educate stepparents about approaches to parenting and the outcomes for children for each of these. Stepfathers should be reminded that stepchildren are often cautious during the initial phase of stepfamily formation and that they should not necessarily interpret this as rejection from the stepchild and to continue persevering in their efforts to establish a relationship.

Another important recommendation for clinicians would be to highlight effective communication within the stepfamily. This is not limited to the stepparent and stepchild but all stepfamily members. Participants in this study appreciated when the mother consulted with them and made an effort to prepare them for stepfamily life. It may therefore be appropriate for clinicians working with stepfamilies, or educational programmes for stepfamilies, to recommend that mothers discuss the possibility of stepfamily formation with children. It may also be appropriate for mothers to discuss the potential role of the stepfather in the family. A New Zealand study and other international studies have highlighted that stepparents, parents and children tend to have differing expectations regarding the stepparent role (Fine et al., 1998; Mobley & Cartwright, 2013), therefore it may be important for clinicians to discuss this with new stepfamilies and to help them negotiate roles and adjust their expectations regarding the stepparent role.

Communication from the stepfather to the child in regards to his role was also identified by participants as useful. Those stepfathers who took the time to discuss his potential role with the child and indicate that he did not have the intention of replacing the biological father were perceived as positive. Pryor (2004b) in her New Zealand study, also found that children in stepfamilies were able to accommodate multiple parenting figures in their lives, perhaps suggesting that children are able to resolve loyalty conflicts and establish a relationship with both the non-residential father and the stepfather. It may therefore be appropriate for stepfathers to attempt this conversation with children. Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) also recommend that stepfamily education programmes emphasise empathy and negotiating skills, which are helpful for stepfamily members to negotiate roles and household rules.
All participants who were followed-up for Study Two reported that the mother maintained the primary disciplinarian role upon stepfamily formation. This study supports previous research that also found that children are more likely to accept stepfathers who ‘back-up’ the mother’s rules and discipline but do not attempt any independently (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Several stepfathers were able to establish a support or back-up role in which they enforced or maintained the mother’s rules and this was acceptable to participants. It was the exception for the stepfather to attempt authority independently of the mother. Therefore a recommendation to clinicians is to emphasise the importance of the mother maintaining the primary disciplinarian role and if the relationship between stepfather and stepchild is positive then it may be acceptable for the stepfather to slowly transition into an authority role by maintaining and enforcing the mother’s rules for a time. This recommendation is also supported by other studies (e.g. Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994).

**Study Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this thesis study. Firstly the participants were all self-selected and university students. Also, the majority were New Zealand European and female. Therefore the participants were not a representative sample of the general population. Efforts were made to recruit more male participants however this was not possible. It is also possible that participants who volunteered may have had more positive experiences with stepfather authority and therefore may have been more likely to participate in the study, although it is important to note that most participants also discussed problems with stepfather authority. Therefore the findings from this thesis study are limited in their generalisability to the general population.

The data in this thesis study were retrospective accounts of young adult stepchildren. Therefore these experiences are not representative of all stepfamily members’ experiences and viewpoints. Interviews of all family members would have led to a richer understanding of stepfather authority. Other stepfamily members may have been able to provide information or insight into the earlier experiences the child had with the stepfather. Several participants reflected that their siblings had a contrasting experience with the stepfather; therefore their perspective could reveal some of the processes associated with either an acceptance or non-acceptance of stepfather authority. Obtaining the perspectives from stepfathers may allow for an exploration of their experiences of stepchildren and how this impacted on their role. It may also have provided some insight into the motivation of the stepfather in regards to some of his
behaviours. Multiple perspectives would have allowed for a fuller, richer understanding of stepfather authority and his role, and also the impact of this on the wider stepfamily system. There is also the possibility that important experiences were not recalled by participants. For example, some participants had little or no memories of the early years in the stepfamily.

The first study included 88 participants and provided a good range of experiences. However, due to the method of data collection, the data was at times superficial, and the depth of data provided was inconsistent across participants, with some writing in depth and others writing briefly. This may have been prevented if prompts had been used in the questions.

The second study aimed to investigate positive experiences of stepfather authority. However, some of the participants had experienced considerable difficulty with stepfather authority at some time in their relationship. This could be a limitation of the study. Alternatively, it could indicate that most stepchildren, even those with positive relationships, experience some problems with stepfather authority. It is also important to note that young adults from first-marriage families would also have reported difficulties with parental authority.

It is also important to acknowledge that in qualitative research the researcher is the primary tool for data collection and analysis. There is therefore the potential for bias when interviewing participants and when analysing the data. However, as described earlier, steps were taken to try to reduce this possibility and to attempt to ensure that the results accurately and validly represented the data.

Finally, the study aimed to investigate stepfather authority. However, as the results indicated, stepfather authority is integral to the relationship between stepfather and stepchild within the stepfamily context. If the focus had been on the stepfather-child relationship generally, different experiences and therefore results may have emerged.

**Future Research Directions**

This thesis investigated the experiences of stepfather authority perceived or identified as positive or problematic and the processes within the stepfather-child relationship that facilitate positive experiences of stepfather authority over time from the perspective of young adult stepchildren. Future research could explore this same area but with stepmother families. It could also use a broader sample from the general population. Given that this study was conducted in a New Zealand context, it is important for researchers to understand different cultural groups. Many studies conducted with stepfamilies tend to focus on European families. It is therefore
important for future studies to explore experiences within other ethnicities, and particularly with Māori stepfamilies in New Zealand.

Future studies could also explore the development of stepfather authority from the perspective of other stepfamily members. It could be of particular interest to gain stepfathers’ experiences of authority. Researching the experiences of other stepfamily members, for example siblings, may help shed further light on those factors that may contribute to an acceptance of stepfather authority. It is also important to further examine the role of other stepfamily members in determining stepfather authority. Stepfamily studies tend to focus on the stepfamily alone and often do not include members of the wider stepfamily system, for example non-residential parents and grandparents. It is therefore recommended that future research consider the role these family members have on the stepfather-child relationship.

It could also be important to explore the perspective of siblings in stepfamilies. As was clear in this study, different children in the same stepfamily may have different experiences with the same stepfather and stepfather authority that could highlight important processes within this relationship and authority. It may also be of interest to investigate the impact of sibling relationships with the stepfather on other stepchildren and their relationship with the stepfather.

Another area of research to be considered is long-term studies that follow stepfamilies over time and examine the development of the stepfather-child relationship and stepfather authority. This research could be conducted from a qualitative and quantitative perspective in order to provide insights from various family members into the development of the stepfather-child relationship and stepfather authority over time. This research could also have an emphasis on positive experiences or those in which a satisfactory or functional relationship develops. At present this is a lack of clear findings in the literature regarding the most adaptive role a stepparent should take and a longitudinal study that looked at this from a qualitative and quantitative perspective may be able to provide more robust recommendations in regards to this role.

**Summary**

In conclusion, this thesis research indicates that there were a wide range of views and experiences that children in stepfamilies identified in relation to stepfather authority. While some of these were difficult, there were a number of positive experiences identified and it was possible for some stepfathers to gradually adopt a father-like role with stepchildren with whom they had
developed a high level of warmth and authority and this was a positive experience for some stepchildren.

Approximately one third of participants reported mostly positive experiences with stepfather authority. Positive experiences tended to be associated with a warm and friendly stepfather, perceived support and friendly behaviour towards the child, which appeared to help facilitate a positive stepfather-child relationship. Clear communication and perceived respect from the stepfather towards the child also helped. For some participants a positive relationship between stepfather and child allowed for the acceptance of stepfather authority in time. Finally, in general it appeared that it was more acceptable for the stepfather to take time before attempting an authority role.

Experiences identified as difficult tended to be associated with divided loyalty between the stepfather and biological father, or issues related to the stepfather not being a biological parent. There were also issues at times if the stepfather role was incongruent with the child’s developmental stage. An authoritarian or harsh disciplinary role was also perceived as more difficult by children. Lastly, some difficulties were identified in relation to the stepfather role negatively impacting on the mother-child relationship.

This study has contributed to an understanding of roles adopted by stepfathers in stepfamilies and the processes that can facilitate or hinder an acceptance of stepfather authority. The findings also contribute to family systems theory and highlight processes that can enhance the positive functioning of stepfamilies. More children are likely to spend time in a stepfamily in the future and are therefore at risk for a range of potential negative outcomes. This study indicates that successfully establishing a stepfather-child relationship and stepfather influence and discipline can be associated with a range of benefits to children in stepfamilies and therefore focusing on enhancing the processes that contribute to this can be beneficial for all members of a stepfamily.
Appendices
Appendix A: Participant Information Sheets
Participant Information Sheet – Study One

Project title: A Qualitative Investigation into Young Adult Stepchildren’s Experiences of Stepfather Authority

Investigators: Ms. Jessica Mitchell and Dr. Claire Cartwright

You are invited to participate in a project investigating young adult stepchildren's experiences of stepfather authority. The research is being conducted by Jessica Mitchell, a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology in the Department of Psychology, and Claire Cartwright, a senior lecturer in the Department of Psychology.

Stepchildren's experiences and perspectives on their relationships with stepfamily members is an important area to investigate and your participation in this project will help expand our knowledge of what helps stepfamilies to function successfully. This study aims to explore young adult stepchildren's experiences of stepfather authority and if these change over time. It also aims to investigate what factors can impact on these experiences. You have been chosen for participating in this study by expressing interest and responding to the advertisement.

If you are interested in participating then you are invited to complete the online questionnaire. This can be accessed through any computer with an internet connection. The questionnaire is likely to take 20-25 minutes to complete. Your participation is completely voluntary. The information you provide is kept secure and is encrypted by the Survey Monkey internet database and only I will have access to this information and will not be able to identify any information about you. Any information accessed from Survey Monkey will be viewed only by myself and my supervisor and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for a period of six years. All data will be deleted or shredded after six years.

If you agree to take part you do not have to answer all of the questions if you do not want to and you do not need to tell us why. The responses for the online questionnaires will be anonymous; therefore you will not be able to withdraw this data once completed. However you may stop answering the questionnaire and your responses will be deleted if you choose to cancel while answering the questionnaire. If the information you provide is reported/published, this will be done in a way that does not identify you as its source.

A second part of this study will involve individual interviews designed to get a more in-depth understanding of experiences of stepfather authority. I am interested in interviewing 12 people who have had some positive to mainly positive experiences with their stepfather. At the end of the online questionnaire you will be given the option to participate in an individual interview. Your
participation in the interview is completely voluntary and you will be given a $20 voucher for your time. By expressing interest in completing the interview then your name and/or contact details will no longer be anonymous to me only. I will receive an email to a secure email address with your name and/or contact details and will contact you about participating in the interview.

As a result of participating in this study you may experience psychological discomfort. If this occurs you are encouraged to request assistance from Claire Cartwright.

If you have any concerns you may contact Jessica Mitchell via email at jmit050@aucklanduni.ac.nz, by phone at (09) 3737599 ext 86755, Dr. Claire Cartwright via email at c.cartwright@auckland.ac.nz, by phone at (09) 373 7599 ext 86269. The Head of the Department of Psychology can be contacted via email at f.seymour@auckland.ac.nz, by phone at (09) 373 7599 ext 88414, all the above people can contacted by mail at the address on the letterhead.

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone (09) 3737599 ext 83711.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/07/10 for 3 years, Reference Number 2010/237
Participant Information Sheet – Study Two

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
Faculty of Science

Human Sciences Building
Floor 6, 10 Symonds Street,
Telephone 64 9 373 7599
Facsimile 64 9 373 7450

Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

Participant Information Sheet

Project title: A Qualitative Investigation into Young Adult Stepchildren’s Experiences of Stepfather Authority

Investigators: Ms. Jessica Mitchell and Dr. Claire Cartwright

You are invited to participate in a project investigating young adult stepchildren’s experiences of stepfather authority. The research is being conducted by Jessica Mitchell, a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology in the Department of Psychology, and Claire Cartwright, a senior lecturer in the Department of Psychology.

Stepchildren’s experiences and perspectives on their relationships with stepfamily members is an important area to investigate and your participation in this project will help expand our knowledge of what helps stepfamilies to function successfully. This study aims to explore young adult stepchildren’s experiences of stepfather authority and if these change over time. It also aims to investigate what factors can impact on these experiences. You have been chosen for participation in this study by expressing interest and responding to the advertisement.

If you are interested in participating then you are invited to complete the online questionnaire. This can be accessed through any computer with an internet connection. The questionnaire is likely to take 30 minutes to complete. Your participation is completely voluntary. The information you provide is kept secure and is encrypted by the Survey Monkey internet database and only I will have access to this information and will not be able to identify any information about you. Any information accessed from Survey Monkey will be viewed only by myself and my supervisor and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for a period of six years. All data will be deleted or shredded after six years.

If you agree to take part you do not have to answer all of the questions if you don’t want to and you do not need to tell us why. The responses for the online questionnaires will be anonymous; therefore you will not be able to withdraw this data once completed. However you may stop answering the questionnaire and your responses will be deleted if you choose to cancel while answering the questionnaire. If the information you provide is reported/published, this will be done in a way that does not identify you as its source.

A second part of this study will involve individual interviews designed to get a more in-depth understanding of experiences of stepfather authority. I am interested in interviewing 12 people who have had some positive to mainly positive experiences with their stepfather. At the end of the online questionnaire you will be given the option to participate in an individual interview. Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary and you will be given a $20 voucher for your time. By expressing interest in completing the interview then your name and/or contact details will no longer be anonymous to me only. I will receive an email to a secure email address with your name and/or contact details and will contact you about participating in the interview. If you are
interested in participating in the interview, I will arrange a time to interview you. These will be conducted at the University of Auckland at a time that is convenient to you. You will be reimbursed for any travel expenses involved in getting to and from the interview. The interview is likely to take 1-2 hours. Your participation is completely voluntary. Interviews will be audio-taped and downloaded onto the computer of Jessica. The audio files will be deleted once a transcript is made. Your real name will not be used when the interview is transcribed and will not appear in any summaries of the results. The interviews will be transcribed by Jessica and a professional transcriber who has signed a confidentiality agreement to keep all information confidential. The professional transcriber will not be made aware of any identifying details. The transcripts will be stored in a secure location for a period of six years. After this time they will be shredded. If you agree to take part you do not have to answer all of the questions if you don’t want to and you do not need to tell us why. You may withdraw at any time without explanation and any information about you and your interview transcript may also be withdrawn at your request, for a period of up to 3 months after testing has taken place.

As a result of participating in this study you may experience psychological discomfort. If this occurs you are encouraged to request assistance from Claire Cartwright who will refer you to the appropriate services.

If you have any concerns you may contact Jessica Mitchell via email at jmit050@aucklanduni.ac.nz, by phone at (09) 3737599 ext 86755, Dr. Claire Cartwright via email at c.cartwright@auckland.ac.nz, by phone at (09) 373 7599 ext 86269. The Head of the Department of Psychology can be contacted via email at f.seymour@auckland.ac.nz, by phone at (09) 373 7599 ext 88414, all the above people can contacted by mail at the address on the letterhead.

For any queries regarding ethical concerns you may contact the Chair, The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone (09) 3737599 ext 83711.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/07/10 for 3 years, Reference Number 2010/237
Appendix B: Consent Forms
Consent Form – Study One

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
Faculty of Science
Human Sciences Building
Floor 6, 10 Symonds Street,
Telephone 64 9 373 7599
Facsimile 64 9 373 7450
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

CONSENT FORM

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that my participation in this research is completely voluntary.
- I understand that data will be kept for 6 years, after which they will be destroyed.
- I understand that the findings of this study will be reported and published.
- I understand that if I choose to participate in the individual interview my responses will no longer be anonymous.

1. I agree to take part in this study:
   o Yes
   o No

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/07/10 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2010/237
CONSENT FORM

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Project title: A Qualitative Investigation into Young Adult Stepchildren’s Experiences of Stepfather Authority

Names of Researchers: Ms. Jessica Mitchell and Dr. Claire Cartwright

I have read the Participant Information Sheet, have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that my participation in this research is completely voluntary.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw participation at any time, and to withdraw any data traceable to me up to a specified date (__/__/__).
- I agree / do not agree to be audiotaped.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings.
- I understand that a third party who has signed a confidentiality agreement will transcribe the tapes.
- I understand that data will be kept for 6 years, after which they will be destroyed.
- I understand that the findings of this study will be reported and published.
- I understand that if I choose to participate in the individual interview my responses will no longer be anonymous.
- I understand that the individual interview will take between 60 and 90 minutes to complete.
- I understand that I will be reimbursed for my travel expenses.

Name ______________________

Signature ___________________ Date________________

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/07/10 FOR (3) YEARS. REFERENCE NUMBER 2010/237
DO YOU HAVE A STEPFATHER?

PARTICIPANTS REQUIRED

Did you live with your mother and stepfather for at least two years while you were growing up?

Are you aged between 18 and 30?

If so, you are invited to consider taking part in my research.

My research is focused on investigating stepchildren’s experiences of and perspectives on stepfather authority.

This study will involve completing an online questionnaire which will take 30 minutes to complete.

My name is Jessica Mitchell and this study is part of my Doctorate of Clinical Psychology at the University of Auckland.

If you are interested in participating please go to the following link:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/HZ7G2YZ

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 14/07/2010 FOR 3 YEARS, REFERENCE NUMBER 2010/237.
Online Questionnaire

Below you are asked for some information about yourself and there are five questions for you to complete.

1. What is your age in years?
2. What is your gender?
   o Female
   o Male
3. Which ethnic group do you identify with? (You may choose more than one option).
   o NZ European/Pakeha
   o Maori
   o Pacific Island
   o Asian
   o Other
4. What year are you at university? (Stage one, stage two, masters etc.)
5. What do you intend to major in?
6. What was your age when your stepfamily formed? (This is the stepfamily with your mother and stepfather).
7. How many years did you live with your stepfather?
8. Are you mother and stepfather still together?
   o Yes
   o No

The next part of this questionnaire will be five questions for you to answer in as much detail as possible. The boxes may look small but they will expand as you write so you may write answer of up to 2000 characters for each question.

Stepfather authority has been defined as: the degree to which a stepfather can influence and/or judge the behaviours and actions that are appropriate or inappropriate for a stepchild.

9. With the previous definition in mind please describe the positive aspects of your experience of stepfather authority?
10. What were the most difficult aspects of stepfather authority for you?
11. Were the issues surrounding stepfather authority ever discussed with you, and how did you feel about that?
12. How did your experiences with stepfather authority change as you became older and you knew your stepfather longer?
13. Keeping in mind your own experiences, what is your opinion about the amount of influence a stepfather should have? Please explain and use personal examples so that I will better understand your ideas.
Appendix E: Interview Schedule
Interview Schedule

Thanks for agreeing to participate in this interview about your experiences with stepfather authority. The interview will take around an hour today, is it ok if I record it using this digital recorder? It’s just to make sure I get all of the important information, it will be wiped at the end of the study, is that ok? I’ve just got a few basic demographic questions to ask you first before asking you some more questions about your relationship with your stepfather. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or you don’t want to answer a question, that’s fine, just say to me can we stop or I’d rather not answer that. It’s up to you.

Administrer questions to obtain demographic details:

**Demographic details**

1. Current age
2. Ethnicity
3. Age at parental separation
4. Custodial arrangements when growing up
5. Amount of contact with biological father
6. Age when they first started living in a stepfather stepfamily situation
7. If mother and stepfather married or cohabited
8. If mother and stepfather are still together
9. If there are other siblings/step-siblings and whether these were resident/non-resident
10. Participant’s current living situation
11. How much contact participants currently have with their stepfather and mother

Administer open-ended semi-structured questions below;

For this next set of questions I would like you to please provide as much detail as possible and include examples if you can remember to help with the points you make

**Open-ended semi-structured questions**

1. Could you tell me about your memory of meeting your stepfather for the first time?
2. When you think back to the period of getting to know your stepfather before you lived together, when he was ‘dating’ your mother, what do you remember from that time?

Now what I would like to do is divide your relationship with your stepfather into three main time sections: the beginning, middle and later stages. Does that make sense to you? Can you
think of three stages in your relationship? Can you think of the approximate age you were for each stage? Now what I would like to do is ask you a set of questions for each of these stages. So thinking about the beginning stage of your relationship

3. What was your relationship with your stepfather like during this period?
4. What were the difficult aspects of your relationship?
5. What were the positive aspects of your relationship?
6. Did your relationship change during this period? If so, how?
7. What was your experience of authority like during this period?

*Repeat questions three through seven for both the middle and later stage of the relationship.*

And now thinking overall about your stepfather

8. Overall how do you feel about your stepfather?
9. Did you and your stepfather ever talk to each other about your feelings towards one another or how you felt towards one another?

And now thinking about your mother and her impact

10. When you look back, were there things that your mother did that helped or got in the way of you developing a relationship with your stepfather?

And lastly, one final question for you

11. Looking back at your time in your stepfamily and your relationship with your stepfather, what advice would you give to stepfathers and mothers about the stepfather and his having authority in the family with stepchildren?

Is there anything else that you would like to add? Thank you very much for your time today.
References


Freisthler, B., Svare, G. M., & Jay-Harrison, S. (2003). It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 38*(3), 83-102.


