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# Influences on the Role of the Stepfather in Stepfamilies

**James Brennan**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Previous research indicates that the stepparent-child relationship has an important influence on the adjustment of stepfamilies, and in particular on children's wellbeing. Stepfathers adopt a range of roles in regard to their stepchildren, and some roles appear to be more adaptive than others. This qualitative study aimed to understand stepfathers' perceptions about the stepfather role, and examine the influences that shape the kinds of roles that stepfathers develop in stepfamilies.

A sample of 86 stepfathers, living in New Zealand with their stepchildren (at least some of the time), completed an online questionnaire about their experiences and perceptions of the stepfather role, and the influences that shape their relationships with stepchildren. The questionnaire elicited participants' attitudes about the stepfather role, perceptions about social expectations for their behaviour towards stepchildren, and role models for being a stepfather. Stepfathers were prompted to write about the kinds of roles they had and the influences that shaped their roles. Participants were also asked about their experiences of seeking advice about being a stepfather, or their reasons for not doing so.

Thematic and categorical analyses were conducted on the qualitative data collected. The results indicate that there remains significant lack of clarity about what role a stepfather should play from a societal perspective, and variation in the kinds of roles stepfathers develop in stepfamilies. Three role types were identified in the data: a father-like role, a supportive adult role, and an uninvolved role. The roles taken by stepfathers were influenced by several salient factors: stepfathers' own attitudes and experiences, alignment or misalignment with their partners about their roles, the receptiveness of stepchildren, the involvement of biological fathers, and, to a lesser extent, perceived endorsement or opposition from extended family and society more broadly.

These findings are discussed in terms of existing knowledge about stepfather roles, and a preliminary model of the influences on stepfather roles is presented. This study contributes to the existing body of stepfamily research, and provides discussion on the implications for clinical practice and future research directions.

*This thesis is dedicated to my uncle, Craig Larkin sm*

*1946 – 2015*

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# CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

Many children grow up in stepfamilies in New Zealand and other western countries and many men experience being a stepfather. Previous research has demonstrated that stepfathers adopt a range of roles in regard to their stepchildren. Some of these roles appear to be more adaptive than other types of role. With the increased prevalence of stepfamilies in contemporary society, it is important to understand what influences stepfathers in the roles they develop, in order to better understand the challenges of their role and offer appropriate support to stepfamily members.

This thesis study aimed to understand stepfathers' perceptions about the stepfather role, and examine the influences that shape the kinds of roles that stepfathers develop in stepfamilies. The study uses a qualitative research approach. Eighty-six stepfathers completed an online questionnaire about aspects of their experiences and perceptions of the stepfather role and relationships with stepchildren, and the influences that shape this role.

The thesis contains seven chapters. Chapter One presents a review of the literature relevant to the study. Chapter Two presents the aims of the research, an overview of the qualitative approach that was used in the study, and the study methods. Chapters Three to Six present the results of the study. Chapter Seven reviews and discusses the main findings in light of previous research regarding stepfamily relationships and roles, and also presents a preliminary model of the influences on stepfather roles. Chapter Seven also considers the limitations of the study, and describes the implications the findings may have for clinical practice and future research.

The current chapter begins with an examination of the terms that are used in stepfamily research and in this study, as well as a brief overview of demographic trends. A review of relevant literature on the adjustment of children in stepfamilies is also provided, followed by a discussion of research specifically related to the stepfather role, its significance to stepfamily adjustment, and its influences.

## **Definition of Terms**

Stepfamily researchers and theorists have used a variety of terms to describe stepfamilies, including ‘blended’, ‘remarried’, ‘reconstituted’ and ‘combined’ families (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Labels have been adopted over time to avoid associated stigma and while the term ‘stepfamily’ may remain one such stigmatised term (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), it is commonly understood and allows for the naming of relationships within the family e.g., stepfather, stepsister. For the purposes of this study, ‘stepfamily’ will be used to describe a family containing an adult couple, either married or cohabiting, with at least one child from a previous relationship. This definition is inclusive of stepfamilies where the adult couple have children from the current union.

Variation in the makeup of stepfamilies has necessitated further refinement of stepfamily labels to include both *simple* and *complex* stepfamilies. Simple stepfamilies are those in which there is a union between a parent and a non-parent, while complex stepfamilies involve a union between parents who each bring children from previous relationships (Henderson & Taylor, 1999). Furthermore, a *stepfather family* will be used in this study to describe a family in which a parent resides with at least one biological child and a male partner, who may have children of his own or mutual children from the current union.

The terms *first-marriage* or *non-divorced* families will be used to define families with two biological parents living with their children. The term *parent* will denote the biological parent, and the *parent-child* relationship will describe the relationship between a biological parent and their child. The term *non-resident* parent will describe the second biological parent who does not reside with the stepfamily. *Stepfather* will denote the male partner of an adult who has a child or children from a previous relationship, and who may himself have children. Finally, the *stepparent-child* relationship will refer to the relationship between a stepfather and his partner’s biological child.

## **Demographic Trends**

Due to sample limitations, and variation in how demographers have defined stepfamilies, precise measures of stepfamily prevalence are difficult to establish

(Stewart, 2007). However, available evidence indicates that the proportion of individuals living as part of a stepfamily has risen considerably in the past thirty years compared to earlier decades. The trend during this period is likely due to an increase in the frequency of separation and divorce, non-marital child rearing, and re-partnering or cohabitation amongst adults, and the younger age at which these transitions take place, particularly in the case of Western societies (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008).

In the United States, it is estimated that one third of children will spend time living in a stepfamily household, and many more may be non-residential members of stepfamilies (Bumpass & Raley, 1995). In the United Kingdom, approximately 10% of all families are stepfamilies (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Data from the 2009-10 *Multi-Purpose Household Survey* (MPHS) in Australia indicated that blended families (stepfamilies who also have at least one biological child from the current union) and stepfamilies made up 3% and 4% respectively of the 2.8 million Australian families with resident children aged 0 to 17, and further, of the one million children who had a biological parent living elsewhere, 14% lived in stepfamilies and 15% lived in blended families (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

While stepfamily data is not collected in the New Zealand census, other surveys provide comparable estimates of stepfamily prevalence. Results from a 1995 study comprising 3,017 New Zealand women found that 20% of those interviewed had lived as part of a stepfamily at some stage before the age of seventeen, however this estimate did not include stepfamilies created as a result of a first union (Dharmalingam, Pool, Sceats, & Mackay, 2004). This estimate is supported by the *Christchurch Health and Development Study*, in which 18% of a cohort of 1,265 children followed from birth had lived in a stepfamily at some point before sixteen years of age (Nicholson, Fergusson, & Horwood, 1999).

These statistics demonstrate that living in a stepfamily for at least some part of one's life has become a common experience. Given that the majority of children remain with their mother following divorce or separation, stepfather families are the most common form of stepfamilies (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). As such, stepfather families are an important context for research into the well-being and functioning of individuals and families.

## **Adjustment of Children and Adolescents in Stepfamilies**

The impact of divorce on children has been the subject of research interest for several decades. Amato (2001) and Amato and Keith (1991) conducted meta-analyses of studies from the 1950s through the 1990s comparing measures of achievement, adjustment, and well-being for children whose parents had divorced with those whose parents were continuously married. The authors found that individuals with divorced parents had – on average – poorer outcomes with respect to measures of behavioural and emotional difficulties, self-esteem and life satisfaction, marital quality, rates of divorce, educational attainment, income, and physical health compared to those with continuously married parents. In his review of research into the effects of divorce from the preceding decade, Amato (2010) concluded that studies continued to yield these average differences between children in divorced and non-divorced families. With respect to explanations for these findings, Amato (2000) posits a divorce-stress adjustment perspective: spousal uncoupling sets in motion a series of events that may be experienced as stressful for parents and children, and these stressors (such as loss of support and contact, continuing discord between spouses, and economic decline) are then risk factors for various negative measures of adjustment and wellbeing.

Given that the formation of a stepfamily is often preceded by divorce and other challenging transitions for parents and children (such as separation, shared custody, and life in a single-parent family), it is difficult to determine any specific influence of stepfamily life on children's adjustment in stepfamilies from residual or flow-on effects from these other important transitions. However, researchers have attempted to examine the impact of stepfamily life on children and adolescents in longitudinal studies, comparing measures of their adjustment and wellbeing over time and making comparisons between groups who experience different family transitions and live in different family structures: some remaining with both biological parents in a non-divorced families, others living in divorced single-parent families, and yet others becoming part of a stepfamily.

Hetherington and associates conducted a series of in-depth longitudinal studies, most notably the *Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage* which has followed 900 children and adolescents living across non-divorced families, divorced single-parent families, and remarried stepfather families over a twenty year follow-up

(Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Hetherington's series of studies found that stepchildren show poorer outcomes across domains of externalising behaviour (aggression, non-compliance, conduct disorders), internalising behaviour (depression, anxiety, self-esteem), educational achievement, and interpersonal relationships than those whose parents were continuously married (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The authors noted that outcomes for children in divorced single-parent families and those in stepfamilies were similar – each, on average, experiencing more difficulties than their peers from non-divorced families. While it could be expected that the additional caregiving and financial contribution provided by a stepparent would enhance a family's wellbeing following divorce, the similarity in outcome measures between children in stepfamilies and divorced single-parent families suggests that the additional transition of remarriage, and the unique challenges of stepfamily living may offset any such gains (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Hetherington & Henderson, 1997).

Such findings have been supported by other longitudinal studies, research reviews, and meta-analyses. The *Development Issues in Stepfamilies Research Project* followed a sample of 100 remarried stepfamilies versus a comparative sample of 100 non-divorced families for a period of seven years. Examining the data from this study, Bray (1999) found more behaviour problems, more stress, and poorer social competence in stepchildren than in children of comparable age from non-divorced families. In their review of stepfamily literature in the 1980s and 1990s, Coleman, Ganong, and Fine (2000) concluded that, while study findings over those decades range widely, most research found stepchildren were at greater risk than children living with both biological parents for various problems, and that they fare similarly on outcome measures to children living with single mothers. A more recent meta-analysis by Jeynes (2006) examined 61 studies comparing measures of academic achievement and psychological well-being for children in non-divorced families, divorced or widowed single-parent families, and stepfamilies. The study concluded that children in stepfamilies and those from divorced or widowed single-parent families had statistically similar outcomes and both groups had poorer outcomes with respect to measures of psychological functioning and educational achievement than those from non-divorced families. In fact, Jeynes' meta-analysis found that children in

stepfamilies had somewhat poorer outcomes for educational achievement than children from single-parent family structures (Jeynes, 2006). Again, it appears that despite the social and financial contribution stepfathers potentially bring to a single-parent family following divorce, overall, these benefits are tempered by challenges associated with the additional transitions entailed in the formation and on-going functioning of stepfamily life.

Data from New Zealand indicate these trends are not isolated to American stepfamilies, which make up of the majority of research samples. Using data from the aforementioned longitudinal *Christchurch Health and Development Study*, Nicholson et al. (1999) compared measures of psychological outcomes at age eighteen from 106 children who had lived as part of a stepfamily for the first time between the ages of six and sixteen with a group of 801 children who had never lived as part of a stepfamily. The study found that young people in stepfamilies had elevated risk of juvenile offending, nicotine dependence, misuse of illicit substances, leaving school without qualifications, early onset of sexual activity, and multiple sexual partners compared to those who had never lived as part of a stepfamily (Nicholson et al., 1999). Importantly however, the authors noted that children who later spent time living as part of a stepfamily had experienced more disadvantageous socio-economic and familial circumstances in their early years than those children who never lived in a stepfamily. After applying a logistic regression to adjust group data for antecedent factors, group differences were either small or non-existent (Nicholson et al., 1999). That is to say, the poorer outcomes measured for young adults who had spent time living in a stepfamily may have been due to pre-existing vulnerability factors – such as greater socioeconomic adversities, a history of greater family conflict and disruption, maternal youth and depression, and a history of greater child attention – and not exclusively due to the effects of living in a stepfamily. As a result, the authors propose that family transitions such as stepfamily formation do not have a standard or consistent detrimental effect on child and adolescent adjustment. Instead, living in a stepfamily appears to be one risk factor amongst many known others that, in combination, increase child and adolescent vulnerability to negative outcomes.

As the study above highlights, children who live in stepfamilies are a non-random group and the differences in outcomes for stepchildren compared to those in non-divorced families may be partly explained by pre-existing factors surrounding the

dissolution of a previous family system rather than entirely or directly caused by the effects of divorce or remarriage themselves (Amato, 2010; Amato, 2014; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). However, there is robust evidence to suggest that multiple family transitions and issues involved in stepfamily formation and functioning are challenging and often stressful for children and adolescents and further, such transitions put them at greater risk for a range of negative outcomes compared to children whose parents are continuously married (Amato, 2001; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington, 1993; Jeynes, 2006; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). As Amato (2010) points out, whether or not divorce and remarriage have a causative or correlational effect on their wellbeing, it is self-evident family members' lives are changed by divorce and other family transitions: children usually experience the departure of one parent from their household, resident parents must alter their childrearing practices to adjust for this absence, families frequently move to new neighbourhoods and school zones, and parents may re-partner – introducing additional adults into their lives and routines.

While the general direction of group differences in adjustment between children in stepfamilies and non-divorced families is clear, it is important to note that the size of group differences is not large in absolute terms (Coleman et al., 2000). Hetherington, Bridges and Insabella (1998) estimate that 25% of children in stepfamilies experience significant difficulty compared to 10% of children in non-divorced families. Amato (1994) calculated average effect sizes across a range of outcomes within his meta-analysis, and overall, the adjustment of children in the divorced group (including many in stepfamilies) was 0.17 of a standard deviation lower than that of children from non-divorced families. While statistically significant, Amato's results highlight that a large proportion (43% in his review) of children in divorced and remarried families are better off with respect to various outcome measures than peers whose parents remain continuously married. In Bray's (1999) study, 20% of stepchildren had clinically significant levels of behavioural problems compared to 10% of children in non-divorced families. In Jeynes' (2006) meta-analysis, measures of psychological wellbeing for children in remarried families were around two-tenths of a standard deviation lower than those in non-divorced families, and this effect size was smaller for studies that used sophisticated experimental controls. These findings highlight the great variability of outcomes within and across family structure types. Many children

in stepfamilies adjust well, and poor outcomes for children are not an inevitable result of family transitions (Amato, 2010; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

### **The Importance of the Stepfather-Child Relationship**

Ganong and Coleman (2004) point out that an oversimplified conclusion often drawn from research summarised above is that the addition of a stepfather to the life of a child following divorce has little to no effect on their wellbeing. Such conclusions have been put into question by studies with methodologies that attempt to examine the effect of the kind and quality of stepfather-child relationships on outcomes for children in stepfamilies.

Bronstein and associates conducted an early study investigating the effect of relationships with stepfather and non-resident biological fathers on the adjustment of 136 preadolescents from divorced families (Bronstein, Stoll, Clauson, Abrams, & Briones, 1994). The authors found that stepchildren's perceptions of stepfather approval, support, and interest were positively associated with children's self-rated measures of self-concept, better classroom behaviour as rated by teachers, and negatively associated with psychological problems as rated by parents. While causation could not be inferred, the results suggested that when stepfather-child relationships are seen as supportive by stepchildren, they may provide a buffer against the adjustment difficulties associated with family transitions (Bronstein et al., 1994).

White and Gilbreth (2001) had 189 adolescents from stepfather families complete ratings of the quality of their relationship with mothers, stepfathers, and non-resident biological fathers (including ratings of perceived criticism, praise, admiration, how likely they would be to talk about problems or decisions, and an overall rating), and analysed associations with parents' ratings of their children's internalising and externalising problems. The authors found a significant negative association between adolescents' reports of stepparent-child relationship quality and parental reports of child internalising and externalising problems, independent of effects of stepchild age, years spent in stepfamily, or child's relationship with their non-resident father (White & Gilbreth, 2001). In other words, when adolescents reported a close, supportive relationship with stepfathers, reports of their internalising and externalising problems were significantly lower. Similarly, Berg (2004) noted a significant positive



association between perceived closeness in the stepfather-child relationship and self-esteem as rated by a sample of 930 adolescents, and in a New Zealand study, Pryor (2005) found that child reports of satisfaction with the stepparent-child relationship were positively associated with children's self-concepts and perceptions of their own strength.

In a larger and more recent study, data from the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health* in the United States were used to analyse the effect of relationships with stepfathers and non-resident fathers on 1,149 adolescents following divorce (King, 2006). Adolescents completed measures indicating how close they were to their mothers, non-resident fathers, and stepfathers as well as measures of adjustment. Results indicated that close stepfather-child relationships were associated with academic success, and fewer externalising and internalising difficulties for adolescents. Additional analyses provided evidence that stepfather-child relationships are somewhat more influential on adolescent outcomes than adolescents' relationships with non-resident fathers (King, 2006). Notably, there were no significant differences between outcomes for adolescents who were close to both their non-resident father and stepfather compared to those with close ties only to stepfathers. In other words, having a close tie to a stepfather is associated with greater academic success and psychological wellbeing in adolescents, and a close stepfather-child relationship may be as beneficial as having close ties to both a stepfather and non-resident biological father. Adolescents with close ties only to a non-resident father experienced significantly more externalising and externalising difficulties than those close to both men. As was expected, adolescents who lacked close ties to both stepfathers and non-resident fathers exhibited the poorest outcomes across all measures (King, 2006). It appears then that it is not simply living in a stepfamily, or the presence or absence of a stepfather in the life of an adolescent that influences the adjustment of children and adolescents following divorce and remarriage, but the kind and quality of relationship that exists.

In addition to the influence of the stepfather-child relationship may have on children's adjustment, additional studies show a significant, positive association between satisfaction in the stepparent-child relationship and other favourable outcomes for stepfamilies as a whole. Crosbie-Burnett's (1984) study of 87 stepfather families provided evidence that a strong stepfather-child relationship may have a greater effect

on overall family happiness than the quality of the marital relationship. In a longitudinal study of 98 stepfather families, Bray and Berger (1993) found evidence for a significant association between stepfather-child relationships and marital satisfaction, a link also supported by Skopin, Newman, and McKenry (1993). In White and Gilbreth's (2001) study, the proportion of adolescents who reported a good relationship with their non-resident biological father was higher in stepfather families than in divorced single-parent families. Pryor's (2005) study indicated that the stepparent-child relationship was also positively associated with the quality of the parent-child relationship. It appears then that there are important interrelationships between strong stepfather-child bonds and satisfaction in other stepfamily relationships.

In sum, a supportive stepfather-child relationship is generally associated with greater adjustment for stepchildren and overall stepfamily cohesion and satisfaction. Mutually satisfying stepfather-child relationships may then help to ameliorate, or buffer against the stressors accompanying family transitions. Cultivating a successful stepfather-child relationship is therefore seen as a crucial task for stepfamilies (Visher & Visher, 1996). However, this relationship is often the most challenging and stressful in stepfamily life (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). The important question arises as to how mutually satisfying and positive relationships are cultivated between stepfathers and their stepchildren. In order to begin to answer this question, it is useful to identify challenges that are common, if not intrinsic to the stepfather-child relationship.

### **Challenges in the Stepfather-Child Relationship**

While research outlined above suggests that stepfathers have the potential to make valuable contributions to the lives of their stepchildren, the process of establishing and maintaining this relationship is often fraught with difficulties, particularly in the early stages (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Couples who enter into stepfamilies often assume that the transition will be smooth (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Bray, 2005), and stepfamily therapists note they can be unduly optimistic that stepfamily members will quickly form loving bonds with each other (Papernow, 2013; Visher & Visher, 1996). However, transition into a stepfamily usually involves significant change and upheaval for each of its members. Stepfamily couples generally do not have a typical

'honeymoon' period to develop their relationship, as children are present (Pryor, 2014). In first-marriage families, expectations and beliefs about family life are generally negotiated between the spousal couple in the process of developing their relationship. In stepfamilies, the picture may be complicated by having more family members involved in the negotiations from the start (for example, resident and non-resident children of each spouse and non-resident biological parents) (Coleman & Ganong, 1997). As a result, it may take stepfamilies a long time to establish the basic family routines and standards that first-marriage families negotiate in the couple dyad alone (Coleman & Ganong, 1997).

While mothers are generally able to maintain or re-establish relationships with their children following transition into a stepfamily (Hetherington, 1993), stepfathers often struggle to adjust to new relationships and to negotiate places in the established lives of their partners and stepchildren, whose bond may appear somewhat impermeable (Papernow, 2014). Stepfathers are faced with the task of establishing and maintaining a strong spousal bond, as well as negotiating a co-parental alliance, and a relationship with their stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Marsiglio, 2004; Pryor, 2014). Marsiglio (2004) describes the dynamic of this situation as a 'family dance,' where stepfathers need to find rhythm and footing in the new family unit, in terms of adjusting to behavioural routines, managing individual personalities, and also in developing a new sense of collective familial identity. For stepfathers, establishing a relationship with a stepchild is one complex task among many others that need to be juggled in the initial stages of stepfamily formation (Robertson, 2008).

Girls may have particular difficulty accepting the presence of stepfathers, although longitudinal studies indicate that boys and girls of all ages may experience adjustment difficulties in the first two years of stepfamily life, and again during adolescence (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In the period before a stepparent comes into their lives, children may have become accustomed to both a certain level of availability of their parent, and also to a degree of personal autonomy (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Thus, when a stepparent is introduced to the family, stepchildren may often resent both the additional monitoring and the supervision they provide (Amato & Sobolewski, 2004; Coleman & Ganong, 1997).

A series of qualitative studies conducted in New Zealand found that, for some stepchildren, the arrival of a stepparent may lead to experiences of a loss of time and attention from the resident parent, or a sense of reduced importance in the family (Cartwright, 2005; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Some stepchildren describe a loss of security and comfort in the parent-child relationship as well as a loss of family traditions and ways of doing things (Cartwright, Farnsworth, & Mobley, 2009). Researchers and clinicians have also noted a tendency for children to experience loyalty conflicts when stepfathers become part of their lives, as closeness to a stepfather can be experienced as disloyalty to the biological father (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Papernow, 2014). Children may also experience a sense of loss if a stepfather's presence is seen as ending the chance of reconciliation between their biological parents (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

While relationships between mother and child and husband and wife can generally be seen as freely chosen, or involving a natural bond, the relationship between stepfather and child is not necessarily reciprocal or mutually sought (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999; Pryor, 2014). Stepfather-child relationships arise indirectly from the development of a spousal relationship, and as a result motivation from both stepfathers and stepchildren towards establishing a close bond may be lacking (Pryor, 2014). Moreover, from a societal perspective, a stepfather and his stepchild are generally considered legal strangers, with no specific status in relation to one another (Gold & Adeyemi, 2012; Hetherington & Henderson, 1997). With respect to social norms, exactly how stepfathers and children are to conduct themselves in relation to one another, and how they establish a dyadic identity is unclear (Pryor, 2014). The stepfather-child relationship therefore entails significant ambiguity.

It has been theorised that this ambiguity underlies many of the challenges associated with the stepparent-child relationship (Cherlin, 1978; Fine, 1995). Of particular significance to stepfathers is a lack of clarity surrounding their parental role with respect to stepchildren. Fine, Ganong, and Coleman (1997) had 39 stepfathers complete self-report measures of their perceptions of the stepfather role and their perceived adjustment in several domains of stepfamily life. The result suggested that stepfathers' clarity about their stepfather role is positively associated with their overall

adjustment in stepfamilies (Fine et al., 1997). However it is argued that even for biological fathers, there is very little societal prescription for how to parent their children, relative to society's expectations of mothers, and the situation is even less clear for stepfathers (Coleman & Ganong, 1997). As a result, the stepparent role is fluid and dependent on the expectations of the various individuals involved in stepfamilies (Browning & Artelt, 2012). Stepfathers are generally left to improvise their role with assistance from their partners and stepchildren and are often uncertain about their behaviour, particularly in relation to areas of discipline and affection (Marsiglio, 2004).

Research indicates that expectations of the stepfather role vary a great deal amongst and between parents, stepparents and stepchildren (Fine, Kurdek, & Hennigen, 1992; Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Marsiglio, 1992; Marsiglio, 2004). Fine, Coleman, and Ganong (1998) conducted a study with stepparents, parents, and children from 40 stepfamilies who completed self-report measures pertaining to their perceptions of the stepparent role, as well as various measures of their adjustment. The authors found that there was very little consensus amongst family members as to how stepparents should behave, and there appeared to be broad disagreement between the views of adults and children in stepfamilies (Fine et al., 1998). While around half of the parents and stepparents tended to agree that a stepfather ought to take an active parental role, similar to that of a biological parent, children were much more likely to perceive that a stepfather should assume the less active role of 'friend' (Fine et al., 1998).

In summary, the introduction of a stepfather may present various challenges to a stepchild's sense of individual and familial identity and to their relationships with other family members. The intrusion that a stepfather may represent to the child, or at least, the change and disruption to established routines that his presence entails may constitute a significant initial barrier to the development of the stepparent-child relationship. Difficulties in the formation of close stepparent-child relationships may also be linked to stepparent role ambiguity, a lack of societal prescription for how stepparents should behave, and frequent disagreement between stepfamily members about the role stepparents ought to play in stepfamilies. Research suggests that these challenges are not simply or inevitably resolved over time (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), as even in long-established

stepfamilies, stepparent-child relationships remain more troubled than parent-child relationships (Henderson & Taylor, 1999).

Given these challenges, and the importance of the stepparent-child relationship for stepchild and stepfamily adjustment previously discussed, recent studies have focused on understanding the ways in which stepparents do manage to develop positive relationships with their stepchildren. The following section will provide an outline of both quantitative and qualitative research into the different roles and parenting approaches stepparents (and in particular, stepfathers) form with their stepchildren as well as the adjustment and well-being outcomes that are associated with these different stepparent roles and stepparenting styles.

### **The Role of the Stepparent and Adjustment of Stepfamilies**

While there are unique challenges inherent in the stepparent-child relationship, stepparents can and do form close relationships with their stepchildren and, as previously discussed, these relationships may provide an important buffer against the potential negative impacts of family transitions on children's wellbeing. Perhaps due to the proposed ambiguity of their role, stepparents vary in the roles and relationships they develop with their stepchildren, and there is evidence, outlined below, to suggest that variation in the way that this role is developed and enacted has a mediating influence on the diverse outcomes that have been noted for the well-being of stepfamilies and the adjustment of children.

Stepfamily researchers using quantitative study designs to distinguish between different stepparenting styles have often focused on variation across two key parenting dimensions proposed by Baumrind (1971): warmth (including support, acceptance, and nurturance) and control (including supervision, rule setting, and discipline). In their study of families of early-adolescents in the first 26 months following remarriage, Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) identified three parenting styles applicable to parents and stepfathers: an 'authoritative' style was characterised by high levels of warmth/positivity, and high levels of monitoring and control; 'conflictual/authoritarian' parents exhibited high levels of control and monitoring, and moderate to low levels of warmth; 'disengaged' parents exhibited low levels of both warmth and control. The authors found that authoritative parenting by stepfathers (as opposed to disengaged or conflictual/authoritarian styles) was associated with greater

competence and less externalising problems in children. However, Hetherington (1993) found that in the early stages of remarriage, controlling behaviour (whether in warm authoritative styles, or in more punitive authoritarian approaches) led to resistance from preadolescent stepchildren. It was noted that a 'disengaged style' was most common style exhibited by stepfathers in Hetherington's (1993) study, and this trend remained even in long-established stepfamilies (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Crosbie-Burnett and Giles-Sims (1994) analysed measures of parenting styles and adjustment completed by 80 stepfamilies (86% of whom were stepfather families), collected between six and twelve months following remarriage. From measures completed by adolescents with regard to perceived warmth and control aspects of their stepparents, the authors identified four distinct parenting styles in their sample: 'authoritative,' authoritarian,' 'disengaged,' and 'supportive.' While three were essentially equivalent to those identified by Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992), a 'supportive' style was proposed to describe stepparents who demonstrated high levels of warmth/support and low levels of control/discipline. This combination of low control and high warmth has more commonly been labelled a 'permissive-indulgent' style when applied to parents, however the authors found this style to be an appropriate one for stepparents and changed the label to reflect this. Of the 69 stepfathers involved in study, 22% exhibited an 'authoritative' style, 22% were 'authoritarian,' 29% 'supportive,' and 28% were identified as 'disengaged' (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994). With respect to associations between stepparenting styles and adolescent adjustment, the 'supportive' style was associated with the highest levels of adjustment and a 'disengaged' style was associated with the lowest adjustment scores. There were no significant differences between adolescent adjustment scores between those with 'authoritative' and 'supportive' stepparents (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994). That is to say, stepparent support behaviours were associated with positive adjustment in stepchildren, whether or not control behaviours were also present. This result suggests that stepparent support behaviours may be more important for promoting adolescent adjustment than control behaviours, and further, that adolescents may more likely accept some control behaviours from stepparents if they also recognise support behaviours (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994).

Conclusions drawn from Bray's (1999) research tend to support the findings above. Bray noted that children were much more likely to accept stepparents who first attempted to form warm relationships, with no active discipline or control aspect. Children's reports of stepparent affection were associated with fewer adjustment problems, and 'disengagement' and 'authoritarian' styles from stepparents were related to stepchildren's poorer adjustment. After 2.5 years of stepfamily living, 'authoritative' stepparenting was associated with positive outcomes for stepchildren (Bray, 1999). Bray also found that stepfathers generally tended to reduce their warmth behaviours over time and this was associated with poorer adjustment outcomes for stepchildren (Bray, 1999).

Additional studies of stepfather roles have used qualitative designs to create descriptive thematic categories that help to distinguish variations in stepparenting approaches to developing the stepparent-child relationship. For example, Ganong et al. conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 54 individuals (adults, and children aged ten to nineteen) from 15 stepfather families, and two complex stepfamilies (Ganong et al., 1999). The authors focused on patterns in how stepparents went about developing affinity with their stepchildren. Three patterns were identified: 'non-seekers of affinity' did very little to get their stepchildren to like them, 'early affinity seekers' attempted to build warm relationships early on in the relationship, and 'continuous affinity seekers' carried on efforts to create affinity long after remarriage and cohabitation. While causality cannot be inferred, the authors noted that all but one of the 'early affinity seekers' had close, affectionate bonds with their stepchildren, while nearly all of the 'non-seekers of affinity' had distant relationships. 'Early affinity seekers' had a variety of levels of closeness in their relationships with stepchildren. Combined with Bray's (1999) findings above, these results suggest that stepparents' attempts to build affinity and warmth with their stepchildren ought to be continuous in order to maintain close, affectionate relationships.

In another qualitative study attempting to determine different stepparent approaches, Erera-Weatherley (1996) conducted interviews with a sample of 32 remarried couples about their attitudes, feelings, and behaviours concerning the stepparent-child relationship. The author's categorical analysis identified five general approaches taken by stepparents, four of which were relevant to stepfathers: a 'birth parent' style (relevant to stepfathers only), where stepfathers attempted to replicate the role of a



biological father; a 'detached' style, where stepparents had minimal involvement in the stepchild's life; an 'uncertain' style, typified by stepparents' lack of clarity and experience surrounding their role, and an acute sense of distress; and a 'friendship' style, where warmth and acceptance was emphasised by stepparents towards their stepchildren, with minimal control. While the sample size was small, based on accounts from stepparents and their spouses, the most effective stepparenting approach was the 'friendship' style. A 'birthparent' style appeared to generate conflict both in the stepparent-child relationship and in the spousal relationship. A 'detached' style was associated with animosity, alienation, and distrust in the stepparent-child relationship. The authors concluded that stepparents should avoid assuming total parental responsibility early on, especially when stepchildren are older and have close relationships with the non-resident parent.

The conclusions drawn from these studies about stepparent approaches most conducive to harmonious and supportive stepparent-child relationships tend to fit with what stepchildren expect and desire from their stepparents. As previously noted stepchildren may generally see the ideal stepparent role as being that of a friend, rather than a parent (Fine et al., 1998). Qualitative studies with New Zealand stepchildren suggest that stepchildren may experience anger and resentment towards stepparents who attempt to exert control and engage in unwanted disciplinary behaviour (Cartwright et al., 2009; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). Stepchildren often express a preference that their biological parent retains primary responsibility for discipline (Cartwright et al., 2009; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). Furthermore, parent-child relationships may be negatively impacted if stepchildren perceive their parent is supportive of their stepparent taking on a disciplinary role (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002), and parents may also experience torn loyalties between their partners and children if stepparents' attempts at discipline are rejected by children (Cartwright, 2005). From the perspective of many stepchildren, stepparent-child relationships were positive when they felt practically and emotionally supported by their stepparents, and when stepparents allowed resident biological parents to maintain responsibility for discipline (Cartwright et al., 2009; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010).

The general conclusions drawn from these studies indicate that stepparents ought to focus on developing warm, supportive relationships with their stepchildren in the

early stages of stepfamily life (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Erera-Weatherley, 1996) and initially avoid engaging in discipline and control behaviours towards their stepchildren (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). It is suggested that stepparents allow the biological parent to retain the primary disciplinary role, and that they ought to support the resident parent's authority (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). There is evidence to suggest that some stepparents do successfully develop authoritative, parent-like roles with their stepchildren (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), particularly when stepchildren are very young (Ganong et al., 1999). However, if stepparents do engage in control and disciplinary behaviours, it is recommended that they do so gradually (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992) while continuing to build and maintain warm relationships through friendly, supportive behaviour (Bray, 1999; Ganong et al., 1999). Recommendations from stepfamily research tends to support the advice given by family therapists that stepparents play a supportive role with their stepchildren, and initially try to build close, warm relationships, perhaps by developing friendships (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Papernow, 2006; Visher & Visher, 1996).

While there may be growing consensus amongst stepfamily researchers and clinicians about what the ideal approach to stepparenting might be, it is clear that great variation still exists in how stepparent-child relationships actually develop, and in the roles stepfathers enact in stepfamilies. Given that the role a stepfather takes has important implications for overall stepfamily functioning, and crucially, on the adjustment of children in stepfamilies, it is of interest to understand what may influence stepfathers towards one role or another.

### **Influences on the Stepfather Role**

Defining a role in stepfamilies is not done unilaterally by stepfathers (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). A stepfather's motivation, effort, and skills may be necessary to establish the kind of relationship he desires with his stepchildren, but they are not sufficient to guarantee it (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). Role and relationship development is an interactive and iterative process which takes place in a complex social context (Bray, 1999). Stepchildren, biological parents, and other family members are all likely to have an influence on the roles stepfathers develop. The

following section presents a summary of research findings concerning what may shape and influence the stepfather role.

### *Stepchildren*

Regardless of the effort stepfathers may expend towards affinity-seeking and role development in a stepfamily, stepchildren will ultimately decide how they receive and respond to such efforts, and they may not necessarily be compliant with stepfathers' relationship advances or overtures of parenting (Ganong et al., 1999). With respect to stepfathers who attempt to play a disciplinary role in the lives of their stepchildren, Bray (1999) observed that, even when men used effective authoritative parenting behaviours, stepchildren often rebuffed their attempts and responded with more behaviour problems. As previously noted, children and adolescents may tend to view that a parental role is inappropriate for a stepfather (Fine et al., 1998), they may often prefer that their biological parent remains in charge of discipline (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002), and stepchildren often express anger and resentment towards stepparents who exert authority (Cartwright et al., 2009; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010).

Even when stepfathers are motivated and diligent about seeking affinity with stepchildren they may be met with indifference. In a study of stepchildren's accounts of relationship development with stepfathers, Ganong et al. (2011) found that not all children will respond immediately to stepparents' attempts to build warm relationships; some may not respond at all, and others may not reciprocate such efforts until months or even years later. Stepchildren may choose to dislike, reject, or disregard stepfathers, and in these circumstances there may be very little that parents or stepfathers can do (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Some stepchildren may want their stepfathers to act as a parent, making it easier for stepfathers to develop warm relationships, while others may see the arrival of the stepfather as ending chances for their parents to reunite, and may reject their overtures of friendship (Ganong et al., 1999).

Inevitably, relationships are bi-directional, and studies of stepfather-child relationships highlight the strong influence a child or adolescent may have in shaping a stepfather's behaviour and role (Pryor, 2014). Studies have shown that when stepfathers' attempts to build close relationships are rebuffed by stepchildren,

stepfathers often withdraw and may become disengaged from the relationship (Ere-Weatherley, 1996; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) also found that when stepchildren exhibited more frequent anti-social behaviour, stepfathers were often unable to respond effectively to reduce this behaviour, and as a result, tended to exert less parental control, and demonstrate more negative behaviours towards stepchildren. In this respect, stepchildren's problem behaviour may be more effective in shaping stepfathers' behaviour than the reverse. In further evidence of this pattern, O'Connor, Hetherington, and Clingempeel (1997) reported that adolescents' responses to a stepfather were as strong a predictor of adolescent adjustment as was stepfathers' behaviour towards stepchildren.

Stepchildren's personalities appear to have a strong influence on the kinds of relationships and roles stepfathers develop in stepfamilies. Stepchildren vary in their openness to developing bonds with stepparents (Ganong et al., 1999). Also, individual stepchildren who have had multiple stepfathers will often vary in their responses to and evaluations of different stepfathers (Ganong et al., 2011). Personality combinations and, in particular, personality clashes may be difficult to resolve. Even if a stepchild has not necessarily prejudged the arrival of a stepparent, the individuals simply may not mesh (Browning & Artelt, 2012). Energetic and extroverted children may be more challenging for introverted stepfathers; independent and strong willed stepchildren may clash with and rebel against stepfathers who seek order and exert authority (Ganong et al., 1999). On the other hand, parents and stepchildren who share personality traits and interests may more likely develop close relationships (Ganong et al., 1999). Ganong et al. (2011) found that stepparents and children whose relationship trajectory was labelled 'liking from the start' tended to have mutual interests, common values, and shared pastimes. While stepchildren are more likely to respond with their own affinity-seeking behaviours when they recognise a stepfather's advances as catering to activities they themselves enjoy (Ganong et al., 1999), it is not enough for stepfathers to engage in stepchildren's favourite activities, help with homework, and provide financial support. Stepchildren must recognise these acts, ascribe positive intentions to them, and in some cases, navigate loyalty binds and potentially divergent evaluations of stepfathers made by parents and siblings before they make their own judgements and determine how they will respond (Ganong et al., 2011). While there is evidence to suggest that children can form close bonds to both

stepfathers and non-resident biological fathers (and this may be positively associated with measures of adjustment) (King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001), clinical experience and qualitative studies suggest that some stepchildren struggle with loyalty conflicts which may impede a stepfather's ability to form a close relationship (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Coleman et al., 2001; Papernow, 2014).

Factors such as stepchildren's age and gender may also influence stepfather-child dynamics. Generally speaking, the younger the child is at the time of the new family formation, the more accepting they are likely to be initially of a stepfather (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Visser & Visser, 1996), and boys may accept stepfathers more quickly than do girls (Bray, 1999; King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014). Adolescence appears to be a particularly difficult stage for stepfathers to initiate or maintain relationships and roles with respect to stepchildren, and this may be especially true for stepfather-daughter relationships (Bray & Berger, 1993; Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). In a quantitative study of 522 young adult stepchildren about the key dimensions of the stepparent-child relationship, Schrodtt (2006) found evidence that stepchildren who develop a relationship with their stepparent at an earlier age, and those who have been members of stepfamilies for longer periods of time may be more likely to grant stepparents some parental authority.

The way in which a stepchild responds to a stepfather clearly has an important influence on how their relationship and respective roles will develop. Ganong and Coleman (2004) summarise three reasons as to why stepchildren may not reciprocate relationship and role developing behaviours from stepfathers; 1) they may not recognise a stepfather's attempts as being directed towards building a warm relationships i.e., stepfathers may not have engaged in activities that were chosen by the stepchild; 2) they may have divergent or conflicting personalities, and have little in common with the stepfather; 3) stepchildren may feel pressure from others not to return gestures of bonding with stepfather.

### *Mothers*

Mothers may also have an influence on stepfathers' roles and their relationship development with stepchildren, either by encouraging or discouraging stepfather-child interaction. Recent qualitative studies, primarily based on in-depth interviews with

individual stepfamily members and stepfamily couples, provide insight into the varying ways and varying degrees to which mothers influence the stepfather role and the development of the stepfather-child relationship. In their qualitative interviews with 21 stepfamily couples, Svare Jay and Mason (2004) found that some couples attempted to replicate traditional roles from non-divorced families, and women in these families had often actively sought out a partner who would be an engaged father figure for their children. Some mothers may desire or expect support from stepfathers in a parental capacity, and encourage their partner to take on a disciplinary role (Cartwright, 2003; Marsiglio, 2004; Robertson, 2008; Svare et al., 2004). In such cases it may be difficult for stepfathers who might otherwise wish to adopt more of a friend-like role with their stepchildren. Mothers may foster closer stepparent-child relationships in several ways: by encouraging them to spend time and share activities together, by helping understanding between each other, and by mediating disputes (Ganong et al., 1999).

On the other hand, some mothers may intentionally maintain distance between their partners and children. This may occur early on in their romantic relationships, with some single parents perhaps being wary of attachment forming between their partners and children in case the relationship does not last (Ganong et al., 1999). Mothers may act as gatekeepers to their children, particularly in circumstances where they view their partners' disciplinary stance as being too harsh, and this may limit stepfathers who seek to enact a parenting role (Marsiglio, 2004). Gatekeeping behaviours were identified in Weaver and Coleman's (2010) qualitative study of interviews with 24 mothers in stepfamilies. The authors found that 20 out of the 24 women interviewed controlled aspects of the stepparent-child relationship up to and continuing into remarriage. Some women did not want stepfathers to act as a parent because they believed they adequately fulfilled that role, while others wanted to maintain relationships with their stepchildren as they were during the time they were a single parent (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Gatekeeping arose in the context of child discipline, particularly when mothers perceived that their children were misunderstood, and treated harshly or unfairly by their partners (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). The authors noted that gatekeeping tended to decrease over time once mothers sufficiently trusted their partners with their children, but mothers' controlling influence rarely disappeared altogether (Weaver & Coleman, 2010).

While some mothers actively facilitate or discourage relationships and roles between stepfathers and children, others may keep out of developing stepfather-child relationships. Ganong et al. (1999) conducted interviews with 17 stepfamilies, and two thirds of adult couples reported that the biological parent did little to encourage or facilitate the development of close stepparent-child relationships. Some may have perceived that the stepparents were doing fine without their support, some may wish to remain neutral in stepfather-child matters, particularly with respect to disputes, and others may simply not see facilitating the stepparent-child relationships as part of their role (Ganong et al., 1999).

Several studies indicate that many stepfamily couples do not openly discuss parenting issues at all, or they talk very little about the subject prior to re-partnering (Cartwright, 2010a; Robertson, 2008; Smith, 2008). In Robertson's (2008) study, only one quarter of couples discussed parenting issues prior to cohabitation, and when couples were living together, only half of the stepfather sample recalled discussing issues of discipline specifically with their spouse. Similarly, only two fifths of Cartwright's (2010a) sample of 99 adults in stepfamilies reported talking about parenting issues prior to re-partnering, despite many having concerns about possible impacts on children. These are important findings, given clinical observations that a lack of discussion around expectations for the stepparent role may result in later interpersonal problems (Browning & Artelt, 2012), and previous evidence that agreement between stepfathers and mothers in stepfamilies about how children are to be raised is associated with stepfathers' and stepchildren's perceptions of the quality of stepfamily life (Skopin et al., 1993).

#### *Non-resident Fathers*

Following divorce, non-resident fathers vary in their level of involvement with children. While some fathers remain active in their children's lives, others may be largely uninvolved. Before a stepparent is introduced, biological parents may already have agreements on parenting issues, and may retain equal responsibility for decisions regarding their children (Coleman et al., 2001). This may preclude a stepfather from adopting a parental role towards his stepchildren. Reflecting on their previous work, Coleman and Ganong (1997) noted that stepfathers in their research samples were much less likely to insist on adopting a parental role towards their stepchildren if biological fathers were still involved, and tended to serve a complimentary role,

except when non-resident fathers had little or no involvement – in this case most men assumed a primary parental role. Similarly, the majority of stepfathers in Marsiglio's (2004) study were in situations where biological fathers were uninvolved or largely removed from the family, and it was noted that some liked this opportunity to take on a fatherly role

It has been suggested that there may tend to be an inverse relationship between biological fathers' and stepfathers' involvement with children (Fine, 1995), and that a stepfather's role will often mould to fill whatever gap is left by a non-resident father (Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Svare et al., 2004). Erera-Weatherly (1996) proposed that a combination of factors relating to a non-resident father will influence the scope of the role that a stepfather may potentially fill: the extent of their involvement in the child's life, the strength or quality of the bond between the biological father and child, and the biological father's geographical proximity. In her sample of 32 remarried couples, Erera-Weatherly (1996) found that when a non-resident father lived nearby, had strong bonds with his children, and was actively involved, a stepfather was much less likely to develop a parental role. When a non-resident father had a warm bond with their child, but was not actively involved, the stepparent-child relationship was usually warm and close. When a non-resident father's relationship with his children was problematic, the stepfather-child relationship was described as a corrective experience for the child by mothers and stepfathers (Erera-Weatherley, 1996).

As well as differing in levels of involvement, non-resident fathers also vary in their responses to the introduction of stepfathers to the lives of their children, and their attitudes toward new stepfathers may effect stepfather-child relationship development. Ganong et al. (1999) noted that the most prevalent pattern of behaviour of non-resident fathers (as reported by other family members) was competitiveness towards stepfathers: criticising them in front of stepchildren, and arguing with mothers and stepfathers about child related issues. This stance contributed to loyalty conflicts within some children, which often impeded relationship development with stepfathers (Ganong et al., 1999), a pattern also noted by stepfamily therapists (Visher & Visher, 1996). Ultimately however, a child's continuing, close relationship with their non-resident father does not preclude having a positive relationship with a stepfather, and many non-resident fathers are co-operative with stepfathers (King, 2006; King et al., 2014).



### *Stepfathers*

As previously observed, “adjustment to stepfatherhood is clearly a complex and uneven process of accommodation to the constraints and challenges of stepfamily living” (Palisi, Orleans, Caddell, & Korn, 1991, p. 103). However, despite the important contextual influences that may shape a stepfather’s role, stepfathers themselves undoubtedly have a lot to do with the kinds of relationships they develop with stepchildren. Researchers have observed great variation in how men approach stepfatherhood. Ganong et al. (1999) noted that while all of the stepparents from their sample of 17 stepfamilies wanted to get along with their stepchildren, some took a very active approach to building warm relationships and others did very little. Some stepfathers quickly set rules and attempt to administer discipline, and others will take their time in this regard (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Ganong et al., 1999). Some stepfathers appear to develop roles with an intuitive, common-sense approach, and others may be much more deliberate and conscious decision makers (Erera-Weatherley, 1996). With respect to understanding these different approaches, Hetherington and Henderson (1997) point out that an individual stepfather’s role and adjustment may depend to a large extent on his own personal expectations, attitudes about family life, and goals with respect to relationships with new family members.

Clinicians have noted that most stepfathers attempt to fill the role of a father (Visher & Visher, 1988). While many stepfathers may continue to hold this as an ideal, research indicates that stepfathers have diverse notions and perceptions about what the stepfather role ought to be. This lack of consistency in perceptions may provide some explanation as to why stepfathers take such varied approaches to their roles.

Investigating stepfathers’ role perceptions, Marsiglio (1992) identified a sample of 195 stepfathers from the *National Survey of Families and Households*. Participants completed self-administered questionnaires assessing how they perceived the stepfather role as well as self-reports of the quality of their relationships with stepchildren. While 68% of participants disagreed at least somewhat with the notion that stepparents don’t have the full responsibility of a parent, 33% agreed at least somewhat that they were more like a friend than a parent to their stepchild (Marsiglio, 1992). Similarly, in their study of consistency in perceptions of the stepparent role, Fine et al. (1998) found that stepparents had varied ideas about what the stepparent role should be. From a range of potential labels, around half of the forty stepparents

who took part in the study believed that the ideal role of a stepparent was that of a parent, 18% thought that being a stepparent was the ideal role, another 18% thought the stepparent should ideally be a friend, and 12% selected an unidentified 'other' role category (Fine et al., 1998).

A range of personal attitudes and beliefs may influence the stepfather role. Some may expect to take on a disciplinary role with stepchildren because they view it as part of an adult male's responsibility in families, whether or not they are the biological parent (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Marsiglio, 2004). However, clinicians note that a stepfathers' belief that he ought to act as a disciplinarian may result in considerable distress for himself, his partner, and stepchild (Browning & Artelt, 2012). During stepfamily formation, some men may focus primarily or exclusively on developing a close relationship with their partners, making a living, and engaging in household chores and routines (Ganong et al., 1999). Some men may simply not see developing a stepfather-child relationship as a priority. As Ganong et al. (1999) observed, stepfathers in their study who did not make effort to build warm relationships with their stepchildren appeared unaware that it was at all important. Hetherington and Henderson (1997) propose that whether stepfathers believe stepfamilies should replicate nuclear, biological families or not has an important influence on the adjustment of stepfamilies. Particularly when children are young, some men may perceive it appropriate to replicate roles from non-divorced families (Marsiglio, 1992; Svare et al., 2004). However, trying to impose a nuclear family model on a stepfamily may result in considerable energy spent and discomfort (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Marsiglio, 2004).

Ganong et al. (1999) proposed that stepfathers' personality characteristics may also help to explain why men take such different approaches. The authors identified some stepfathers as laid-back (as described by their partners or children), and others as more take-charge in their personalities and in their approach. Laid-back stepfathers generally did not rush to become disciplinarians, tried more deliberately to form affectionate bonds with stepchildren, and appeared more successful in doing so (Ganong et al., 1999). The authors theorised that some men may be more controlling by their nature, and as such lack the patience that may aid the development of personal relationships and legitimate authority in the eyes of stepchildren (Ganong et

al., 1999). Additionally, some men who become stepfathers may simply like children more than others (Ganong et al., 1999).

Marsiglio's (1992) study suggests that whether or not a man has his own children from a previous union may influence his later adjustment and self-perceptions as a stepfather. Men who lived with their stepchildren and their own biological children simultaneously were more likely to report self-perceptions of a positive and father-like role identity than those men who cohabited with stepchildren only (Marsiglio, 1992). One interpretation of these findings is that fatherly responsibility towards one's own biological children in their household may have a spill over effect on the way men experience their role as a stepfather. From his later qualitative interviews with stepfathers, Marsiglio (2004) also found that men who had their own children more likely to feel confident about parenting abilities and then more likely to take a more assertive role in raising their stepchildren. Coleman and Ganong (1997) conclude that men's previous fathering experiences may 1) offer them greater knowledge about childrearing, and may contribute to more realistic expectations regarding relationships with, and the behaviour of stepchildren at various developmental stages; and 2) foster trust between partners regarding co-parenting. When stepfathers have custody of their own biological children, a stepfather may be forced to parent his stepchildren more actively in an effort to ensure fair treatment of all children in the household (Fine, 1995; Palisi et al., 1991).

Stepfathers' experiences of their own father figures may also be influential in the attitudes and approaches they take towards role development (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996; Marsiglio, 2004). Like biological fathers, stepfathers may try to actively replicate or avoid behaviours adopted by their own father figures (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). Marsiglio (2004) points out that stepfathers often judge and adjust their performance in relation to their own fathers, to the non-resident father of their stepchild, or to their own previous experiences as a parent. Furthermore, men with experiences of having stepfathers themselves may be able to empathise more directly with their stepchildren's dilemmas (Marsiglio, 2004). Thus the range of experiences a stepfather has with his own father figures may in turn inform and influence the role he adopts and the range of fathering behaviours he enacts with his stepchildren.

The flexibility of men's attitudes towards the stepfather role, and towards the operation of stepfamilies generally has been proposed as an important determinant of stepfathers' adjustment and role development (Marsiglio, 2004). Robertson (2008) argues that much will depend on whether a stepfather is willing to adjust and integrate with the established patterns of mother and child, or whether he attempts to negotiate or impose on issues of parenting involvement, standards of behaviours, discipline and routines. Marsiglio (2004) notes that understanding, patient stepfathers, and those who have more flexible attitudes and expectations about stepfamily life will tend to fare better in stepfamilies.

### *Social and cultural influences*

Ganong and Coleman (2004) point out that stepfamily relationships are influenced, at least in part, by the prevailing ideologies of the cultural contexts in which they are situated. The authors also argue that, at least in Western societies, the ideal family model is the middle-class first-marriage family, and as a result there may be subtle coercion for stepfamilies and stepfamily members to imitate the structure, processes, and behaviours common to nuclear families (Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). In his influential article, Cherlin (1978) presented an incomplete institutionalisation theory of stepfamilies, asserting that stepfamilies must solve day-to-day problems not faced by first-marriage families and arguing that there are no institutionalised or normalised solutions to their unique problems (such as kinship terms, stepparent authority, and legal responsibilities). The lack of clear norms concerning how stepfamilies should operate may also influence stepfamily members to resort to replicating non-divorced family processes and roles to address these problems, a tendency that has been noted by both researchers and clinicians (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Visher & Visher, 1988). As Fine et al. (1998) point out, while adults and children may have some ideas about how biological parents ought to act, they may have little common understanding of how a stepparent should behave, other than to act like a parent. In this way, we might expect that, in the absence of prescription for their roles, stepfathers may often seek to replicate the roles and relationships common to fathers in non-divorced families as a default (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Clinicians (Papernow, 2013) and researchers (Claxton-Oldfield, Goodyear, Parsons, & Claxton-Oldfield, 2002; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Planitz & Feeney, 2009) have

also highlighted the existence and impact of stereotypes and social stigma on stepfamilies and stepfamily members. While stepfamilies are now common phenomena, a recent study of stereotypes of stepfamily members carried out in Australia with a sample of 266 university students found that stepfathers were seen as less caring than biological fathers (Planitz & Feeney, 2009). Another study found that a group of 48 undergraduate students were more suspicious of a stepfather tickling his fifteen-year-old stepdaughter than of the same behaviour from the girl's biological father in an otherwise identical vignette (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2002). Over half of stepfathers in Robertson's (2008) study perceived predominately negative social views of stepfamilies, with a third perceiving mixed views, and a remaining 10% reporting only positive public perceptions. Awareness of social stigma and stereotypes may lead individuals to act in ways to disconfirm such views (Jussim & Fleming, 1996), and there is recent evidence to suggest that negative stereotypes may influence the behaviour of stepfathers. Robertson (2008) found that over 50% of their sample of stepfathers reported consciously limiting parenting behaviours in various ways (for example, showing affection, enforcing discipline, bathing), and 81% of those did so citing their non-biological status in relation to their stepchild. As Robertson (2008) points out, this finding is consistent with the awareness stepfathers reported about negative stereotypes and social stigma around their physical contact with stepchildren.

Given the body of research that exists on stepfamily functioning, it could be expected that the role development of stepfathers would be shaped by information or advice sought or received from available literature, or stepfamily support groups and the like. While little research has been conducted on this topic, none of the stepfathers in Erera-Weatherly's (1996) study sought out information or professional advice on their stepparenting approach, beyond their spouse. As such, the knowledge and resources available to stepfamilies and stepfathers may be underutilised. As pointed out by Cartwright (Cartwright, 2010b) it is unclear if research and clinical knowledge has filtered down to parents and stepparents.

### **Summary and Research Rationale**

The evidence presented above suggests that the stepparent-child relationship has an important influence on the adjustment of stepfamilies, and in particular on children's wellbeing. Developing a positive stepfather-child relationship is therefore a crucial

task for stepfamilies. Research and clinical advice from the past several decades tends to suggest that the best approach for stepfathers is to initially focus on developing a warm relationship with their stepchildren, perhaps adopting the role of a friend. It may be most appropriate for men to initially leave discipline to their partner, or simply to uphold their partners' rules and, if circumstances permit, to gradually adopt an authoritative role over time while maintaining warmth and supportive behaviours. Despite the growing body of stepfamily research and clinical advice, it appears that stepfathers continue to vary widely in the roles they take, and in how they approach the development of the stepfather-child relationship.

Existing research provides valuable insight into the range of roles and approaches to stepfather-child relationship development that occur within stepfamilies, and further, the variation in outcomes associated with them. However, our understanding of why and how stepfathers come to fulfil the kinds of roles they do and what specific mechanisms and processes might influence stepfather role development remains an area of interest (Robertson, 2008). As Ganong and Coleman (2004) point out, the kinds of stepfather-child relationships that exist appear to result from several processes, but more research is needed about these processes before they can be described and recommended. In their review of the diversity of father involvement, Marsiglio, Day, and Lamb (2000) highlight the need for research to consider not only how fathers and stepfathers are involved, but how family process, and dynamic features of family structures shape that involvement, and stress the need for greater understanding of men's efforts to figure out and negotiate what they should be doing for children. Coleman et al. (2000) have argued for the importance of qualitative studies with a focus on the more in-depth perspectives of all stepfamily members, and as Robertson (2008) asserts, while there is now considerable research on the adjustment of stepchildren, there is relatively little known about stepfathers' adjustment, experiences, and perceptions of stepfamily life. Finally, Ganong and Coleman (2004) argue for the importance of moving away from simple one-variable explanations for stepfamily phenomena, and instead towards development and testing of multi-variable models.

In light of the evidence above, it is relevant to explore stepfathers' perceptions about their role and to understand what influences men in the varying approaches they take to stepfatherhood. This study aims to gain insight into the influences that shape the

development of stepfather roles from the perspective of stepfathers themselves and to develop a preliminary model of how these influences contribute to the roles stepfathers develop. It is the concern of this research to understand what influences stepfathers in the roles they adopt, so as to better enable social agencies, clinicians, and others who support stepfamilies to guide stepfathers and stepfamilies towards adaptive roles that are most likely to lead to positive outcomes for stepfamilies.

Chapter Two provides the aims of the research, an overview of the qualitative approach that was used in the study, and the study methods.

## CHAPTER TWO – STUDY AIMS AND METHODS

This chapter presents the aims of the research, the qualitative approach of the study, and the Method section.

### **Aims of this Study**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the influences that shape the development of stepfathers' roles and relationships are an area of stepfamily research that warrants further study. The overarching aim of this study is to understand stepfathers' perceptions of the stepfather role, and examine the influences that shape the kinds of roles that stepfathers develop in stepfamilies. A secondary aim of this study is to develop a preliminary model of the influences on the stepfather role. This model may be of use to researchers and also to clinicians who work with stepfamilies.

The first aim of this study will be achieved through the use of qualitative research methods to facilitate a greater understanding of stepfathers' experiences of developing stepfather roles in relation to their stepchildren. For the scope of this study, I planned to give particular emphasis to men who are stepfathers; in particular focusing on how men interpret and give meaning to events and processes contributing to their roles as stepfathers. The second aim, to develop a preliminary model, will be achieved by connecting the results of this study to the existing literature and findings about stepfamily processes and relationships outlined in Chapter One. The preliminary model will be presented in Chapter Seven.

### **Qualitative research**

A qualitative research approach has been used in this study. Qualitative research has been called for in stepfamily research in order to further understand the dynamics of stepfamilies and shed light on the diversity of stepfamily experiences (Sweeney, 2010). Qualitative stepfamily research is also beneficial because it provides insight into the meaning of family interactions and relationships for individual stepfamily members and is therefore informative about relational processes – in this case, stepfathers' views and experiences of developing a stepfather role and the experiences that influence this (Ganong & Coleman, 2014).



Qualitative research is grounded in the assumption that reality and meaning are not static concepts, nor measurable phenomena, but that meaning and reality are constructed by individuals in their interaction with the world (Merriam, 2002). In contrast to traditional positivist research, there is no presumed underlying or inherent reality; rather reality is in flux, has multiple perspectives, and meaning is actively constructed by people as they engage with and interpret the world (Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 2002).

The focus of qualitative research is on understanding phenomena and provides researchers with the opportunity to generate hypotheses, develop theories, and build concepts to be tested in areas where theoretical knowledge may be limited (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research can also complement quantitative research by attempting to understand and explain results from qualitative studies (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The data produced by qualitative research is intended to be richly descriptive about the inner experience and perspectives of the people who have or are experiencing the phenomena of interest (Merriam, 2002). The goal of the researcher then is to interpret meanings, to synthesise and make sense of individuals' experiences of their own reality and to identify patterns, or themes across the data (Merriam, 2002). This particular study is based on an interpretive approach, which seeks to understand how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences at a particular time or in a particular context, and the meaning they derive or construct based on those experiences (Merriam, 2002).

The study makes use of an online data collection method using *Survey Monkey*. Online data collection essentially offers an electronic method of otherwise familiar research techniques and participant interaction (Merriam, 2002). In a comparative analysis of online questionnaires and traditional paper-and-pencil research methods in psychology, Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, and John (2004) provided evidence that internet samples are relatively diverse with respect to socioeconomic status, geographic region and age, and produced findings consistent with those from traditional methods. The authors also noted that internet studies were not adversely affected by non-serious or repeat responders. Furthermore, previous qualitative stepfamily studies in New Zealand have successfully employed online questionnaires to facilitate qualitative research into stepfamily experiences and processes (Cartwright, 2010a; Miller, 2015).

## Method

### *Recruitment*

Ethics approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee was given for the study. The study was advertised primarily through a New Zealand television news item on One Network News. The study was also advertised in a weekly e-newsletter, *Tots to Teens*, which is circulated to 21,000 parents in New Zealand (see Appendix A). The advertisements provided potential participants with a link to a website ([www.nzstepfathers.com](http://www.nzstepfathers.com)) where they could access information about the study (see Appendix B) and a link to the online questionnaire. Men who had been stepfathers for at least two years to at least one school-aged stepchild for at least some of the time were invited to participate.

### *Participants*

A total of 159 stepfathers began the online questionnaire, and 108 participants completed all questions. Of those who completed all questions, there were 86 stepfathers who met our selection criteria and provided sufficient responses to be analysed. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 74 years, with a mean age of 43 years. Of the 86 participants, 73 identified as NZ European/Pākehā (85%). Eleven participants identified as Māori (13%). Seven identified as European (8%), and four participants identified as other ethnicities (5%). Participants were able to select more than one ethnic identity.

The sample included 38 stepfathers who were married (45%), ten who were remarried (12%), and 37 were cohabiting (de facto; 44%). Stepfathers self-identified the length of time they had been a stepfather, with an average length of seven years. The majority of participants ( $n = 49$ ) had their own children from previous relationships (57%). Of those with their own biological children, five had their children living with them full time and eighteen had a part time arrangement. Most participants had between one and two stepchildren ( $n = 67$ ). Nineteen stepfathers in this study had between three and six stepchildren. Around one third ( $n = 27$ ) of participants had at least one new child with their current partner. When asked how much time they spent living with their stepchildren, 68 said that they lived with their stepchildren full time, and eighteen had a part time arrangement.

### *Development of the online questionnaire*

The development of the online questionnaire (see Appendix C) began with a brainstorm of the kind of information I would need to achieve the study aims. I then generated an initial list of questions. Upon review and editing with my supervisor, the questions were finalised and presented in an order that appeared logical for participants to follow. The questionnaire was comprised of two parts. The first part contained questions about basic demographic information, such as age and ethnicity, as well as questions about the composition of participants' stepfamilies. Participants were asked about how long they had been a stepfather, the ages of their stepchildren, about the number of children and stepchildren from current and any previous relationships, and related living arrangements.

The second part of the questionnaire contained questions intended to encourage participants to write about their perceptions and experiences relating to the development of their roles as stepfathers, and relationships with stepchildren. The questionnaire elicited participants' attitudes about the stepfather role, perceptions about social expectations for their behaviour towards stepchildren, and role models for being a stepfather. Stepfathers were prompted to write about the kinds of roles they had, things they might like to change about their relationships, and the influences that shaped their roles. Participants were also asked about their experiences of seeking advice about being a stepfather, or their reasons for not doing so. A final question allowed participants to add any further comments they wished to make.

Participants were thanked for completing the questionnaire. They were then invited to contact me via e-mail if they wished to express their interest in participating a potential follow-up to the study involving face-to-face or telephone interviews. Participants were assured that I would not be able to identify their responses from their e-mail message, and that their responses would remain anonymous. Twenty stepfathers responded to this invitation. However, upon review of the data with my supervisor it was determined that there was enough data to conduct the analysis. I sent a standardised e-mail reply to these participants thanking them for their expression of interest and informing them that, due to the response to the online questionnaire, the follow-up study was no longer necessary.

### *Data analysis*

Four sets of data were analysed. The main analysis related to the influences on the stepfather role, which is presented in Chapter Six. This set of data used the process of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The other three sets of data used a process of categorical analysis (Bowling, 2002).

Thematic analysis is a method of organising qualitative data – to identify, select, and report patterns or themes that are relevant to the research topic (Braun & Clark, 2006). It is a flexible method, which can be used within different theoretical frameworks, and for various purposes or aims (Braun & Clark, 2006). The primary results generated by thematic analysis are themes themselves, which are detailed, and rich descriptions about the phenomena of interest. Given the flexible nature of thematic analysis, the process of identifying themes requires considerable judgement on the part of researchers. The way in which themes are identified as themes may be freely chosen, but must be consistently applied by the researchers (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify six phases of thematic analysis that were carried out in this study: 1) familiarisation with the data, 2) generation of initial codes, 3) search for themes, 4) review of themes, 5) definition and naming of themes, 6) production of the final report. As suggested by the authors, the analysis moved recursively through the six phases, and the results developed over several months.

The first phase involved immersion in the data. This involved exporting individual participant responses to the questionnaire from *Survey Monkey* into individual word files. I then printed out the individual responses and began multiple readings of the full data set. From a thematic analysis approach, reading is an active process: a search for meaning and patterns across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Notes, descriptions of the data, and a list of initial ideas for coding were made alongside early reading of the data. The second phase involved the production of codes identifying individual features of the data of interest and of relevance to the research questions based on initial notes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes are a short descriptor for a basic element of an idea encapsulated in the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Identifying repeated codes across the data helps to form the basis for broader themes interpreted by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). My supervisor also provided regular checks and feedback throughout the data analysis process.

During phase three, I combined related or similar codes and sorted them into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic maps were created to stimulate thought and discussion around the relationships between codes, themes, and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In phase four, potential themes were reviewed and refined with the assistance of my supervisor. Final themes were combined, divided, or selected based on the strength of the supporting data. Firstly, extracts that were coded for each theme were read together to determine their consistency and overall coherence with respect to the theme. Secondly, themes were considered in terms of their validity, or fit with the complete data set. To facilitate this, my supervisor reviewed a sample of the data that had been analysed thematically; and also reviewed each theme. When it was agreed that revised themes and subthemes captured the majority of data without a large amount of overlap, they were agreed to be the final themes.

The fifth phase required the organisation of abstracts within themes and subthemes into a coherent and internally consistent account, with an accompanying, detailed narrative about what is of interest for each theme and why (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final phase comprised of the final written analysis presented in Chapter Six.

Three other data sets were analysed using a process of categorical analysis (Bowling, 2002). This process is similar to thematic analysis described above, but is useful when the data falls easily into some clear categories of response – often because there is less depth to the data. In this process, responses were coded and then the codes were placed into related sets or categories (Bowling, 2002). The process of categorical analysis was used to analyse data from the questionnaire related to stepfathers' perspectives on social expectations, stepfathers' role types and level of satisfaction, and their reports of advice-seeking. These are presented in Chapters Three, Four, and Five respectively.

## CHAPTER THREE – RESULTS

### STEPFATHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS FOR THE STEPFATHER ROLE

The chapter presents the results pertaining to stepfathers' perceptions of social expectations for their behaviour as stepfathers towards their stepchildren. The results come from the analysis of data from question eleven of the questionnaire:

Q 11. What have you noticed about social expectations in regard to how you should or shouldn't behave towards your stepchildren?

A process of categorical analysis, as discussed in the Method section of Chapter Two, was conducted on the data. Several categories were identified across participant responses: 1) There are no social expectations; 2) I took no notice of social expectations; 3) You should treat them as your own; 4) You should treat them differently, and; 5) Inconsistent expectations and stigma. Some participants had data under more than one theme. The results are presented below:

#### **There are no social expectations**

The most common response to the question of social expectations from participant stepfathers was that there were not any such expectations for their behaviour towards their stepchildren. Just over one quarter of participants expressed this point of view. When this was the case, responses tended to be brief and direct,

I don't believe there are any [social expectations]. (Participant 13)

Other participants reported being unaware of any expectations, or were unable to identify them,

No one has ever said anything to me and if they have I haven't noticed them.  
(Participant 15)

Nothing specific comes to mind. (Participant 16)

Some elaborated that the increasing prevalence of stepfamilies meant that being a stepfather had become a norm, and so did not entail significant social scrutiny or salient expectations,

[I] have noticed very little in regards to social expectations. Blended families are becoming increasingly common and it is just the norm these days.

(Participant 9)

Being a stepfather is very accepted. [I've] never had any strange looks.

(Participant 29)

A few participants claimed to be unaware of social expectations, and related this to the fact that when in public, their identity as stepfathers was not usually salient,

I've not really noticed any [social expectations] ... she calls me dad and most people don't realise she is my stepdaughter. (Participant 58)

### **I took no notice of social expectations**

Just over one fifth of participants appeared to dismiss, downplay, or actively ignore social expectations – whether there were any or not. Some expressed this view bluntly,

I don't care about any social expectations. (Participant 21)

For some men, it appeared that other considerations were deemed more important than social expectations for their behaviour, and these other considerations were often presented as a reason to ignore or dismiss any social expectations. For the following stepfather, negotiating role expectations with his partner was linked to the assertion he had not noticed anything about social expectations,

Nothing – as it was my goal and my new partner's goal to treat each child as a part of the family, in my case as my own child. (Participant 14)

Some appeared to disregard social expectations on the basis that their own views and expectations for behaviour were what mattered,

I do not let 'social expectations' affect my behaviour. I behave according to MY standards and morals. So I do not take much notice of them and therefore cannot really comment. (Participant 31)

Moreover, some participants appeared to diminish the suggestion of social expectations influencing their behaviour as stepfathers, instead giving priority to a sense of enduring values or moral standards to guide their behaviour and relationships,

Family values and moral are the most important, not expectations. (Participant 38)

All my children are treated as equals, so it matters not what other people think but more importantly what the child thinks of you – being equal will gain respect and there is your platform to father from. So I do not notice social expectations. (Participant 52)

Few participants with data in this theme articulated what specific social expectations they were ignoring, however many talked about not paying attention to social expectations because of an overriding philosophy of treating stepchildren as if they were their own children,

I haven't noticed any social expectations as I treat all our kids the same, so never had to think about it. (Participant 24)

Some participants implied that social expectations for stepfathers were irrelevant because they were considered to be in the role of a father with respect to their stepchildren,

As far as I, our family and friends are concerned, I am the boy's father. (Participant 3)

### **You should treat them as your own**

As reported above, several stepfathers appeared to disregard whatever social expectations might exist and instead sought to follow the guiding principle of treating their stepchildren as their own. Thirteen percent of participants thought that this principle was in fact what society expected of their behaviour as stepfathers. For those



men who already had children from previous relationships, they often reported an expectation that they should treat their stepchildren in the same way,

Society, I have noticed, expects me to treat my partner's kids in a similar manner to my own. (Participant 19)

Similarly, among those who did not already have children, many felt society expected them to treat their stepchildren as if they were their own biological children,

I think the expectations are that I would treat my stepchildren just as if they were my own. (Participant 45)

Men who felt society expected them to behave as fathers to their stepchildren were also included in this theme. One participant equated the expectations for stepfathers with expectations for fathers generally,

I believe there has always been an expectation that if you become a father, whether a biological father or stepfather, you have a responsibility to do a good job. (Participant 18)

The following participant reasoned that social expectations for him were to be like a father because of the age of the stepchild when he became a part of the family,

Because I have been there for my stepson from such a young age I guess most people would expect me to behave like any father would. (Participant 42)

Some perceived that society endorsed them in acting as fathers towards their stepchildren,

I am treated as the child's father. (Participant 36)

People are happy that I have taken on the role of father and accept it as it is becoming the norm. (Participant 76)

### **Treat them differently to your own**

In contrast to the theme above, a quarter of participants talked about society expecting stepfathers to have relationships different to those of fathers or parents. Some expressed this idea of differential treatment but were not explicit about what the differences in expectations were specifically,

People have expected me to treat my stepchild differently than my own children and were pleasantly surprised when I hadn't. (Participant 30)

The idea of taking a step back often came up within this theme. Participants had different ideas about what this entailed. However, when describing these different expectations, it was common for participants to relate them to those for fathers or parents. One participant seemed to agree that stepparents were expected to take a step back from parenting, and appeared frustrated at the lack of clarity about what that meant in practical terms,

You're expected to treat the stepchildren as you would your own while keeping undefined boundaries and distance that wouldn't be there with your own children. (Participant 75)

For some, the difference in social expectations between acting as a stepfather and as a father or parent related to the allowing the biological father to remain in the father/parent role,

My interpretation of what society expects is that I will be a loving, disciplined, patient parent for all the children in my care, with the ability to step back and encourage them [to] keep their real dad as their primary parent. (Participant 44)

Some participants were more specific about the areas of parenting they felt they were expected to step back from. One such aspect was around discipline of the stepchildren. Several stepfathers talked about the social expectation that they should not be as involved in discipline as biological parents might,

Professional expert advice tends to err on the side of you taking a step back in terms of discipline with my stepchildren and leaving that to the biological parent. (Participant 59)

Society seems to think that only his mother should provide discipline. (Participant 69)

Others perceived social expectations for stepfathers differed with respect to showing affection to their stepchildren,

Generally accepted as normal parenting, however expected to be less affectionate. (Participant 34)

Social expectations I've noticed are that many feel you shouldn't treat your stepchildren the same as your own. Also that it's not quite right to show loving or affectionate actions towards them. (Participant 64)

One participant felt that society expected stepfathers not to be parents, but to be friends to their stepchildren,

That you are supposed to be more their friend than their parent. (Participant 81)

Some appeared to articulate that stepfathers were not expected to be fathers, but to be a place holder for that role, involving parental responsibilities without holding the title,

Some think I should act as a father role model. But with all the responsibilities. (Participant 5)

Not to try and be their father, but be involved in their everyday life. (Participant 11)

One felt social expectations were for stepfathers to be minimally involved with their stepchildren,

People think that as the stepparent I should take backseat and not really be a big part of their lives. (Participant 27)

### **Inconsistent expectations and stigma**

Thirteen percent of respondents perceived that society had either inconsistent or stigmatising expectations with regard to stepfathers. With respect to experiences of variation in social expectations, some participants talked about noticing differences between families as to what was expected of their roles and behaviour,

I have noticed that my partner's family have different social expectations than my family. (Participant 40)

Another participant perceived differences in expectations between individuals, in this case, between teachers,

I think it varies from person to person. An example is when attending teacher meetings some teachers were shocked that I was attending while others were totally happy. (Participant 46)

The following participant perceived variation in expectations for stepfathers in a broad sense between men and women,

It's different depending upon who you talk to. Women tend to think that the relationship should be exactly the same as if it were your own child where men tend to understand that the relationship is a bit different. (Participant 48)

Finally, several participants commented on perceived prejudices around stepfamilies, or stigma related to being a stepfather. One felt this was based on the perception that stepfamilies are brought about by broken families,

A lot of people look down at you when you say they are your stepkids. I personally feel that if I don't say anything about the kids being my stepkids people are fine, but as soon as I say they are not mine, they act differently towards me, like I have broken up a family or something along those lines. (Participant 74)

One stepfather talked about social perceptions of stepfathers being overly and negatively impacted by news stories about stepfathers committing abuse of their stepchildren,

The media discourse around stepfathers is overwhelmingly negative. Articles written by so-called experts who say things like 'stepfathers are virtually guaranteed to abuse their stepchildren' as well as moral panic about stepfathers doing 'inappropriate' things like giving them a hug make me cautious about being seen to have too much involvement with the kids, so I keep my distance somewhat. (Participant 86)

Another participant perceived a binary in social expectations; that either one is seen as a perfect stepfather, or is at risk of being vilified,

Social expectations seem to stigmatise the stepfather. I am expected to be extra perfect or the evil devil, who the media loves to put down. The truth is we are just fathers trying to raise our kids with a few more hurdles in the way.

(Participant 82)

In summary, for this sample of stepfathers, social expectations were not uniformly clear or consistent. Over a quarter of stepfathers reported no knowledge of social expectations for their behaviour towards stepchildren. Many stepfathers appeared confident to ignore or dismiss social expectations – whether they were aware of any or not. Some men thought that society expected them to act like fathers, and to treat their stepchildren as their own. A quarter of participants talked about society expecting their roles to be different from the father role, but had varied views about how the roles were different. A final theme of participant responses was that social expectations for stepfathers were inconsistent, or stigmatising towards stepfathers.

## CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS

### STEPFATHER ROLE TYPES AND SATISFACTION

With respect to the research aims, it was of interest to know what kinds of roles participant stepfathers developed with their stepchildren, and also whether or not they felt satisfied with the kinds of roles and relationships they had. This chapter presents the analysis of the role types described by stepfathers, and their levels of satisfaction with these roles. This analysis was conducted using a process that was somewhat different from the other analyses. Rather than relating to one specific question, all of the data pertaining to stepfathers' roles and relationships with stepchildren, including statements about satisfaction with these relationships, were combined. The data from each participant was then carefully examined and given an initial code (for example, acts like/ perceives self to be like a father, or alternative role to father but still supportive/engaged). The codes were then examined for types. Three main types were defined. At this point, my research supervisor examined the coding to provide a process of review. Any areas of disagreement were discussed and the final types were defined. Each stepfather was then placed under the type that most closely matched his relationship and role descriptions. The analysis and results pertaining to satisfaction with the roles is described in the next section.

Three basic role types were proposed to represent how stepfathers talked about and perceived their roles. These included: 1) a father-like role; 2) a supportive adult role, and; 3) an uninvolved role. The number of participants in each role type and percentages of the total sample are presented in Table 1. Two participants were unable to be categorised due to insufficient data pertaining to their role. The results are presented below:

Table 1: Number and percentages of participant role types

<b>Role Type</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percentage of Sample (%)</b>
Father-like	46	54
Supportive adult	31	36
Uninvolved	7	8
Unclear	2	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>100</b>

## **Stepfather Role Types**

### *Father-like role*

When talking about the kinds of roles and activities participants engaged in with their stepchildren, the majority of stepfathers (54%) related their roles, in various ways, to being like fathers. Some participants explicitly referred to themselves as “dad” or “father” to their stepchild,

I am not a stepfather but a dad to my son ... I am his provider, protector and comfort. (Participant 50)

With my stepdaughter, I am her father, and she expects to get treated the same as my younger daughters. (Participant 51)

In other situations, participants talked about their fatherly status with regard to how they were perceived and addressed by their stepchildren. Some thought that the title of father or dad was bestowed upon them,

As time progressed, more and more I became known as Dad and since we have maintained that title. (Participant 57)

Several participants who indicated they had no children from previous relationships talked about approaching their roles as if their stepchildren were their biological children,

I have always treated them as if they were my own children and dealt with any issues that come up at that time. (Participant 8)

Some men who did report having children from previous relationships discussed approaching stepfatherhood in the same way that they approached being fathers to their biological children,

I have treated him the same as my own two [biological children]. (Participant 23)

Several emphasised their roles as being parents alongside their partners. In this way they were also identified as having father-like roles with their stepchildren,

I share the roles of a parent with her mother. (Participant 36)

Some stepfathers talked about being like fathers based on carrying out the kinds of activities they perceived that other (biological) fathers do,

I have taken on the role of father and therefore engage in all the responsibility of being a father. (Participant 30)

Others related to having father-like roles in that they emphasised replicating the roles of their own fathers,

I father as I would expect [my father] to. (Participant 2)

Several participants talked about their roles as being the main father figures or the male role models in the lives of their stepchildren. In the example below, the child had made this point,

When the eldest is with it he says I'm more of a father figure than [their biological father] ever has been and he considers me his father. (Participant 21)

Some related their roles in the family as fitting norms of being a parent: "My role was normal parenting" (Participant 37), "I am responsible for care as a normal parent would be" (Participant 6). Similarly others talked about their relationships being typical fathers and children: "It's a normal father-son relationship" (Participant 1).



One participant also talked about being a father to his stepchild by Whangai (Māori) adoption and the way he explained his commitment as a father to his stepson,

I am not a stepfather but a dad to my son ... Being Maori/Chinese we have something called Whangai which is Māori adoption. When as you call it my stepson (my son) was old enough to understand I said to him that when I met his mum I made the choice and I chose him to be my son and I am his provider, protector, and comfort and I offer myself to you as your Dad.  
(Participant 50)

Several participants talked about their roles being fatherly in ways that touch on several of the ideas discussed above. The following participant talked about having what he perceived as a typical father-son relationship with his stepchild, referred to himself as Dad, and talked about engaging in a range of behaviours he related to fatherhood,

I would say we have a typical father-son relationship. I do all the things I would expect most fathers do, from the simple enjoyable things like bike rides and kicking the ball around, to the not so fun things like discipline and teaching him respect, manners, and good morals. I enjoy being a full-on Dad and in my situation the biology doesn't matter. (Participant 42)

### *Supportive adult role*

While the majority of participants talked about being like fathers or like parents, there were others who reported being involved in the lives of their stepchildren in supportive ways without identifying themselves as being like parents or fathers. The term supportive adult has been chosen to identify such participant responses.

Participants who did not describe their roles as being like that of fathers used many and varied other titles, including *guardian*: "I tend to be more of a guardian and try to engage with his interests" (Participant 10); *teacher*: "My relationship with my two stepsons is still about a teaching role" (Participant 24); *caregiver*: "I find myself acting like a caregiver" (Participant 86); *mate*: "I am seen as much as a mate as I am a father figure" (Participant 62); *friend* or *uncle*: "Our relationship is probably more of a friend/uncle/father figure than a dad in the truest sense" (Participant 48).

When talking about and describing their roles, men often referred to the labels that their stepchildren used with them, and this also appeared to influence their perceptions of their roles. The following participant differentiated his role from his stepchildren's biological father,

They refer to me as their stepfather. We do a number of activities together ... I tend to leave discipline to their mother and I support her in the background ... From conversations we have they know that I am not there to replace their dad. (Participant 46)

When describing their roles and relationships with their stepchildren, some men talked about certain activities they did not engage in, or ways in which – for reasons to be discussed later – their roles were perhaps less than traditionally defined fatherly or parental roles. Some participants, while involved in the care of the stepchildren, described that their roles were limited with respect to disciplinary behaviours with their stepchildren,

[I] tend to stand back and watch/listen before I comment. I'm a bit softer with them than their mum – she disciplines them. I feed them, try and solve problems that I see stopping them from moving ahead in their lives. (Participant 43)

We play and talk. We have a common interest in computer gaming. I try to show him as much about the outdoors as I can ... I take less responsibility with discipline and comforting. (Participant 61)

Other participants talked about limiting their affectionate behaviours,

I am probably not as openly affectionate with them as their own father and mother... [We] hang out lots ... I think just hanging out playing games on our phones and watching TV is the best thing we do together. (Participant 45)

Some stepfathers said that their roles were still developing; they were involved, and perhaps they aspired to expand this involvement, however they did not report having father-like roles. The stepfather quoted below had been a stepfather for three years, and thought that the relationship was still developing,

I have a developing relationship with my stepson which has been quietly worked on with time. He has a quiet respect for me even though we don't do any activities together as such ... [I would like it if] he would come to me more. However, I know with time this will happen in due course. (Participant 35)

When talking about the way they related to stepchildren, some of the participant stepfathers who were in the supportive adult type primarily described engaging in activities as perhaps friends and mentors,

We get on quite well. We have a good experience of doing things together, such as making things, telling each other stories, and fishing. This is good for me as I can share and pass on skills. (Participant 40)

Several others talked about their roles in helping their partners to look after their children, or as being a back-ups to the primary parenting of their partners,

I help their mum get them organised in the morning for school. I collect the youngest from day care twice a week. I take an interest in how their day has been. I discipline them when I need to or back up my wife when she does. (Participant 25)

My role is limited but it is important to stand by my partner and be involved in some of the activities that they participate in. (Participant 52)

Some discussed being involved in the lives of their stepchildren but stopped short of claiming fatherly roles, or in fact expressed that they were not replacements for children's biological fathers,

[We have a] Loving supportive relationship, engage in just normal family activities, school life, and extended family life ... I have never tried to replace their Dad who died eight years ago. (Participant 28)

#### *Uninvolved role*

The final role type that was identified in the analysis of the data was an uninvolved role. These were men who, for reasons which will be considered in Chapter Six, talked about having little to no relationship with their stepchildren. This role type contains the fewest number of participants. However, there were common sentiments

expressed by these men which were interpreted to clearly distinguish them from the other role types.

Some participants reported spending little to no time with their stepchildren,

I very much struggle to have a relationship with my partner's children ... The only time I spend time with them is when we go on family trips once to twice a year. (Participant 19)

We share common interests, barely see each other now. He also spends a lot of time with just his mum. I always wanted/expected to have a father-like role but I don't. (Participant 26)

Similarly, others described simply having little to no interaction with their stepchildren,

My relationship is to be honest not a good one. The kids say good morning and goodnight. They don't want anything else. (Participant 54)

Another participant talked about not having any influence in the life of his stepchild,

I had no influencing role to play ... My wife has asked me to babysit when she is required to be out of the house. This is fine, other than that I have no say in what happened ... My influence being as it has been was next to not influencing at all. (Participant 73)

Some men talked about their roles having changed over time – eventually becoming disengaged and uninvolved,

Relationship has deteriorated over time. Was okay in the early stages. My role is not defined and I have no responsibilities associated with her ... You can never be prepared for such a situation. There is nothing you can pre-learn, you are definitely an outsider. When it does not work out you lose your self-esteem, your ability to judge yourself in a positive way. I would never advise anyone to go into such a situation. (Participant 39)

We occasionally did fun activities in the past but less now ... I would give anything to love them the same as my own two children and have a lot more fun with them ... I have now given up the thought that this will ever be a

reality – I think a relationship on a friendship level once they mature is all I can probably expect to achieve I hope. (Participant 59)

### **Stepfathers' Level of Satisfaction**

Participants were also categorised by an interpreted level of satisfaction with their roles. As with the analysis above, the data pertaining to stepfathers' roles and relationships with stepchildren, including statements about satisfaction with these relationships, were collated. Relevant data from each participant was then carefully examined and then given an initial code (for example, reports positive relationship, or reports poor relationship). The codes were then examined for types. Three main types were defined. At this point, my research supervisor examined the coding to provide a process of review. Any areas of disagreement were discussed and the final types were defined. Each stepfather was then ascribed a level of satisfaction that most closely matched his relevant responses.

Three basic descriptors were identified to represent participant stepfathers' satisfaction about their role: 1) positive; 2) mixed feelings, and; 3) mainly negative.

Participants who wrote only or overwhelmingly positive statements about their relationships throughout, or who indicated that they would not change anything about their roles were identified as being positive about their relationships: "I think my stepchild and I have a great relationship, there is nothing I would want to change" (Participant 30). Those who wrote mainly or all negative statements about their relationships or who stated that they wished their relationships to be other than it was were generally classed as mainly negative about their relationships: "I would like to be considered more of an authority figure in the house. I feel I am undervalued often" (Participant 53). Participants who wrote both positive and negative statements about their relationships were classed as having mixed feelings: "We have a slightly testy relationship as a lot of the time the main interaction seems to be the need to remind him to do his chores ... But we do have some fun times and generally agreed understanding that we should both respect each other as individuals" (Participant 44).

The number of participants classified into each rating of satisfaction and the percentages of the total sample are presented in Table 2.

*Table 2: Number and percentage of participants based on ratings of satisfaction*

<b>Rating of Satisfaction</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percentage of Sample (%)</b>
Positive	64	74
Mixed feelings	10	12
Mainly negative	12	14
<b>Totals</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>100</b>

### **Associations between Role Types and Level of Satisfaction**

As discussed in the previous two sections of this chapter, participants were ascribed role types (either father-like, supportive adult, or uninvolved) and ratings of satisfaction with relationships (either positive, mixed feelings, or mainly negative). Table 3 shows the relationships between participants' role types and levels of satisfaction. While the statistical power of these results is limited, there are several observable trends. Those who considered themselves to have father-like relationships were generally positive about their roles and relationships with their stepchild. Conversely, all seven men who had uninvolved roles reported dissatisfaction in those relationships. Roughly two thirds of those who had supportive adult roles were mainly positive about their relationships, and the remaining third had mainly negative or mixed feelings.

*Table 3: Counts for each role type, and corresponding level of satisfaction*

	Positive	Mixed feelings	Mainly negative	<b>Total</b>
Father-like	41	5	0	<b>46</b>
Supportive adult	22	5	4	<b>31</b>
Uninvolved	0	0	7	<b>7</b>
Unclear	1	0	1	<b>2</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>86</b>

It would appear from the data that stepfathers' perceptions of a father-like role was frequently related to satisfaction with stepparent-child relationships. Uninvolved roles were only related to having mainly negative feelings in this sample. While most men who had supportive adult roles were positive about their relationships, one third of this group were identified as having mostly negative or mixed feelings. It is of note that these men tended to wish for 1) greater influence and authority: "I would like to be considered as more of an authority in the house" (Participant 53); 2) more acknowledgement and appreciation: "I would like to feel more acknowledged for the time and effort I put in" (Participant 27); 3) closer, more affectionate relationships: "I wish I had given more affection and built a closer communication with him from the start" (Participant 44); and 4) generally, a more father-like relationship: "[I] would have liked a more fatherly relationship" (Participant 11).

## **CHAPTER FIVE – RESULTS**

### **STEPFATHERS ON SEEKING ADVICE ABOUT BEING A STEPFATHER**

With respect to the research aims, it was of interest to understand whether stepfathers seek advice about being stepfathers, their sources of advice, the advice they receive, the perceived usefulness of that advice, and/or what barriers there might be to men seeking advice about being a stepfather.

The following section presents the results of the categorical analysis of the relevant data, specifically, the responses to questions sixteen and seventeen of the questionnaire:

Q 16. Have you ever sought out or received advice on how to develop a relationship with your stepchild, or how to be a stepfather? (YES/NO)

YES: Q 17 a. Please write about the advice you received, and whether you were able or unable to successfully implement that advice

NO: Q 17 b. Please describe any reasons as to why you have not sought advice or help on your role as a stepfather

The data from question sixteen was collated; and a process of categorical analysis, as discussed in the Method section in Chapter Two, was conducted on the data from the two versions of question seventeen (which, depending on their response to question sixteen, differentiated those who had and those who had not sought advice).

From the total sample of 86 participants, 21 (24%) stepfathers said they did seek out or receive advice about being stepfathers, while 65 (76%) stepfathers reported they did not seek out any such advice. With respect to the significance of this result, this is a small and non-randomised sample, and as such these percentages do not necessarily reflect a true rate of advice-seeking in stepfathers. However, it does suggest that many stepfathers do not seek any advice about developing a role and relationship with regard to their stepchildren.



## **Stepfathers Seeking Advice**

Participants who did report seeking advice consulted a range of sources, including parenting programmes, books (non-specified), the television series ‘The Politically Incorrect Parenting Show’ and related books, individual counsellors or psychologists, teachers, their partners, extended family members, and friends. Of the 21 participants who reported seeking advice, twelve participants also indicated that the advice was helpful, and six reported that the advice was not helpful.

### *Helpful advice*

The majority of advice stepfathers received appeared to be about general parenting concerns, not advice specific to stepfamilies. Some reported receiving advice from parenting programmes and parenting resources,

The Politically Incorrect Parenting TV programme and the books have been a huge help. Lots of little tricks and ways to communicate that really work.  
(Participant 31)

Occasionally see articles in the paper re: SKIP [a resource for parenting] and they generally make a lot of sense. (Participant 77)

Several received helpful advice from friends; however it was frequently unclear as to whether these friends had their own experience with stepfamilies and whether the advice sought related to the particular dynamics of the stepfather-child relationship,

I spoke with respected older friends. The advice was regarding the stepson who was extremely difficult for the first three years of the relationship. Time and perseverance resolved the problems. (Participant 75)

Some talked about seeking and receiving advice on relating to and parenting teenagers. Again, the advice did not appear specifically related to being a stepfather to stepchildren,

The advice has generally been about general topics, like how to cope with teenagers. (Participant 15)

I sought advice from a female friend who was a solo mother with a daughter now in her twenties ... I sought her advice on how she raised her daughter

through her teenage years. I used some of her advice and was able to successfully implement that during a very trying time for my teen [step] daughter, and the results were positive. (Participant 63)

Some said that just talking about issues and receiving emotional support was helpful,

I asked my mum. The advice helped, and so did talking about it. (Participant 40)

Several participants spoke about seeking and receiving advice from family members on how to be a father, rather than specifically on how to be a stepfather,

I have sought advice generally from my immediate family and this was in the early days of my relationship and how I should approach entering in the role of Dad. Obviously the advice was successful and I believe I have developed long term relationships with both my boys. (Participant 57)

I talked to my dad, not so much about how to be a stepdad, but more about how to be a dad. About taking time out of my day to spend with [him] and not getting everything done that needed doing as a result. Weighing which was more important, that kind of stuff. (Participant 83)

Again, non-specific to being a stepfather, this participant recalled seeking advice along with the child's mother about parenting in relation to a child with Autistic Spectrum Disorder,

Had advice on how to deal with his Asperger's behaviour ... Their mother and I were given some good advice from a clinical psychologist who specialises in Autism Spectrum. (Participant 86)

One participant reported receiving helpful advice on communicating family member roles and labels in stepfamilies. It is of note however that while this advice did relate specifically to a stepfamily issue, the advice was about defining oneself in a fatherly way,

When I first got her I didn't know what my role was or what I should be called. I was told that mum and dad are the carers and father and mother were the birth parents. This simple distinction was used with her from early on and

that made a huge difference in our relationship. Everything else is normal parenting. (Participant 41)

### *Unhelpful advice*

A small number of participants who sought advice talked about the advice not being helpful or effective. Several of these participants appeared to seek advice or support when difficulties had already emerged in the family, but again it was often unclear what these particular issues were, and what relationship they had to the participants as stepfathers specifically,

[I spoke to] a counsellor as the situation was having an adverse effect on myself. It was unsuccessful, the tips and suggestions given to me, as I had all but given up and it takes two. (Participant 39)

The following participant, along with his partner, sought out a parenting programme about stepfamilies which was unavailable due to lack of attendees,

We did attempt to go to a parenting class for joined families but they could never get enough numbers to run the programme in our area. (Participant 46)

Two participants reported encountering specific advice about developing a friendship with their stepchildren. One however disagreed with the suggestion to develop a friendship with the stepchild,

Most advice came from books. In the end [I] got sick of hearing the be-their-friend approach as [I] do not agree with that. (Participant 81)

A second participant thought it was not practical to implement advice to be a friend, given the perceived behavioural difficulties of his stepchildren and resulting need to intervene as a disciplinarian to support his partner,

[The advice was] to be a friend, not a disciplinarian – not realistic in my experience with challenging behaviours we experience. It has been unrealistic for me not to respond to such behaviour and leave it all to their mother. (Participant 59)

## Stepfathers Not Seeking Advice

The majority of participants (76%) said they did not seek or receive any advice about how to be stepfathers. The following section presents the analysis of participants talking about why they did not seek out any advice. Several categories were identified in the data to represent the reasons stepfathers had for not seeking advice: 1) There was no need for advice; 2) I had confidence in myself; 3) I went with the flow; 4) I had previous experience; 5) Advice was unavailable. These are outlined below:

### *There was no need for advice*

About a third of all participants said that did not seek advice due to a perception that there was never a need for it, or a need never arose. Such responses were often brief: “Didn’t feel it was necessary” (Participant 22), “Never felt the need to” (Participant 32), and “We don’t have any issues that we need help with” (Participant 69). Some thought they did not need advice because of their perceptions of the quality of their relationships with their stepchild,

I feel the relationship/friendship I have with my stepdaughter is a great one.  
(Participant 58)

It was generally unclear if these participants would have sought advice had any need arose. However, one participant specifically addressed this,

I don’t see any major problems. If there were I might seek some advice. As it stands things are good and we learn as we learn as we go along. (Participant 45)

### *I had confidence in myself*

An equally common reason given for not seeking advice was participants’ sense of confidence and self-belief about being stepparents,

I can work these things out for myself. Never let myself down. (Participant 7)

Some did not seek advice as they believed their natural ability to be fathers adequately equipped them for the stepfather role,

[I had] Confidence in my own ability as a father. (Participant 9)

For some this confidence was also supported by discussions with their partners,

[I did not seek advice] because I do what I think is the right thing, with discussion with my partner. (Participant 13)

I am confident in myself. I can read situations and people very well. I relate to children on their level. And with the support of my wife things have been pretty easy. (Participant 29)

*I went with the flow*

Nineteen participants discussed not seeking advice due to a perception that a 'go with the flow' approach would be the best way forward in a stepfamily situation,

I guess it's one of those go with the flow type things, you learn by doing. (Participant 42)

One participant talked about working things out as they came with his partner, as opposed to seeking advice,

Just did what seemed right to me and my wife. (Participant 1)

In a similar way, one participant talked about going on gut instinct,

[I] felt I was there to guide and support my stepchild – just went on gut instinct. (Participant 80)

*I had previous experience*

Another common explanation for not seeking advice about being stepfathers was participants' sense of having relevant and sufficient previous experience. This was especially common for men who had their own biological children from previous relationships. Participants who had been fathers to their biological children generally said they felt confident and thought it appropriate to transfer these skills and experiences to the stepfamily situation,

I was a parent before being a stepparent so felt that I had a good understanding of it. Being in a senior managerial work role I think also helps in some situations. (Participant 34)

Had my own views on the subject and my daughter's success after leaving home has shown I wasn't too far off the mark. (Participant 51)

Some participants had lived in stepfamilies themselves growing up, and had experience of these roles and relationships which they relied on over external advice,

Having come from a blended family and having step-grandparents as well, I am well versed in how well mixed families can get on so I have never had a problem with mine. (Participant 56)

One participant reported not seeking advice because he already had previous experience as a stepparent,

I had a stepdaughter with my second marriage and believe I did an admirable job of helping bring her up from the age of five to thirteen. (Participant 67)

#### *Advice was unavailable*

Twenty participants said they did not seek advice about being a stepfather due to issues related to advice being unavailable. Some participants appeared to doubt or were unaware that there were any resources or advice available with regard to being a stepfather,

I have never thought such a thing would be available. Personally I think parenting training (for biological and stepparents) is a fantastic idea and would have accessed this if it had been available. (Participant 18)

Other participants were unsure of where to look or how to go about finding any such advice or support: “Where would I find it?” (Participant 5). Another participant noted that part of not seeking advice related to not knowing any other men in a stepfamily situation: “Not sure from who or where, as I don’t know any other stepfathers” (Participant 60).

Some participants reasoned that they did not seek advice because stepfamily situations are unique and specific. Underpinning this idea appeared to be the notion that general family advice was not useful for stepfamilies and that a lack of understanding of their unique situation would mean that specific advice would not be available,

I haven’t found any useful information. There are no support groups or professionals who really have an understanding of what we go through. Any advice received is usually taken with a grain of salt as not many people I

associate with have had hands on experience in raising stepchildren.

(Participant 64)

Overall, the majority of the sample did not seek advice about their roles as stepfathers. Those who did often sought advice after problems had already emerged, rather than in preparation for their roles. Participants who did seek advice consulted a range of sources, but most advice appeared to be about general parenting, rather than any issues specific or more unique to stepfamilies or the stepfather-child relationship. Two participants received advice to form friendships with their stepchildren. One, however, disagreed with this advice, and another perceived it impractical to implement. Those who did not seek advice had some consistent reasons, ranging from not having had need for advice to advice being unavailable.

## **CHAPTER SIX – RESULTS**

### **INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE STEPFATHER ROLE**

This chapter presents the results of the thematic analysis of the data pertaining to stepfathers' views and experiences of the influences that shaped the development of their roles and relationships with stepchildren. Data from all questions asked of participants in the questionnaire were used for this portion of the analysis. The process of thematic analysis described in the Method section of Chapter Two was used. Five themes were defined that represent participants' experiences and views about their roles and how they developed: 1) How I thought it should be; 2) Involvement of the biological father; 3) Alignment with my partner; 4) Receptiveness of the stepchild, and; 5) the Wider social response. Most participants had data under several themes. Table 4 outlines these themes and subthemes which are discussed below.



Table 1: Themes and subthemes

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**How I thought it should be**

- *Treat them as your own*
- *Previous parenting experience*
- *Role models for being a stepfather*

**Alignment with my partner**

- *Agreements, having permission, and accepting guidance*
- *Being denied a disciplinary role*

**Involvement of the biological father**

- *When the biological father is involved*
- *When the biological father is uninvolved*

**Receptiveness of the stepchild**

- *Being accepted*
- *Being pushed away*

**Wider social response**

- *Endorsement and support*
  - *Discord and stigma*
- 

**How I thought it should be**

This theme concerns participants' experiences, attitudes, and expectations about how to be and what it means to be a stepfather. While there was variation in how participants thought they should behave towards their stepchildren and the kinds of relationships they sought, there were a number of common attitudes and experiences that appeared to form the basis for how many went about developing their roles.

### *Treat them as your own*

As illustrated in the previous two sections, a common attitude expressed by participants throughout the data was that a stepfather should treat his stepchildren as if they were his own children, or should treat them the same as he does his own biological children. As reported in Chapter Three, some men thought that this was what society expected of them, and others talked about ignoring social expectations and instead following their own expectation to treat their stepchildren as their own. Altogether, around one third of participants talked about their intention or the perceived expectation to treat their stepchildren as their own, including twenty who had their own children from previous relationships: “I aimed to treat her the same as my other daughters from the outset” (Participant 51), and eight who had no previous children,

I treat her like she is my own daughter ... I have slipped into the role quite naturally as a caring father who loves all of his children whether or not being the biological father. (Participant 79)

When discussing their intention to treat their stepchildren as if they were their own, stepfathers appeared to relate this to a principle of equality in which a stepchild should not be afforded lesser status or lesser treatment than a biological child; they should be treated the same,

I am seen as their dad and treat them as my own. While emotionally it is a different love that you have for your own children, I have always been conscious of treating the children all equally. (Participant 9)

### *Previous parenting experience*

With respect to other attitudes that appeared to underlie men’s approaches to stepfatherhood, twelve participants talked about their previous parenting experience with their own biological children and their intent to apply their existing parenting skills in their new roles as stepfathers. For some, the assumption appeared to be that if they had experience and ability as fathers, then they ought to extend that to their stepchildren,

Generally I consider myself a good father to my own two sons. I have always been there for them and have been involved in their interests and sports, as

well as schooling. I have simply extended this to include my two step daughters and they have accepted me into their lives. (Participant 47)

Having prior experience appeared to add to men's sense of confidence in their roles and relationships: "I was a parent before being a stepparent so felt I had a good understanding of it" (Participant 34). This is further exemplified by the following participant who had experience as a father to his biological children and also as a stepfather in an earlier stepfamily situation. He talked about carrying his previous father-like role into his current stepfamily situation,

I had a stepdaughter with my second marriage and believe I did an admirable job of helping bring her up from the age of five to thirteen. My then wife was happy with my fatherly role and how I behaved with her. This time around I've found it quite easy. (Participant 67)

#### *Role models for being a stepfather*

Around 40% of participants talked about role models that influenced their ideas about stepfatherhood and their subsequent roles as stepfathers. Participants referred to a range of role models which appear to have influenced them in a variety of ways. For some, role models provided templates on which to base their own behaviours and relationships with their stepchildren. Others talked about their desires to avoid or make up for negative experiences they had with role models.

Most commonly, participants named their own fathers as being influential to how they approached stepfatherhood. Several participants talked about wanting to mirror their own fathers' parenting in their relationships with stepchildren,

With no children of my own I have bought the father skills that [my father] showed to my current role as a stepfather ... I want to be a great father as he is. If not for my own children but for those bestowed on me through a loving relationship. (Participant 4)

Carrying forward their own fathers' parenting styles meant different things for different participants. The following participant, influenced by his father's parenting, appeared to take a more authoritarian approach to being a stepfather,

I have found dealing with the 11 year old rather easy, I just tell him how it is and treat him the same as my father taught me. The 'man up' kind of attitude. No kisses and cuddles, just doing stuff that is interesting, for example change a tyre, using the drill, hammering a nail in wall. (Participant 81)

Other participants, rather than attempting to fully recreate their fathers' roles, talked about specific values or behaviours that they wished to carry on as stepfathers. The following participant talked about wanting to be affectionate with his stepchildren as his own father was with him,

My own father, while not a great 'talker', is, and always has been, affectionate and supportive, and he and my mother have a good relationship. As a result of that loving family dynamic, I am very affectionate with my partner's children, and I believe strongly that it's important that we show them what a good relationship is. (Participant 70)

Whether they were trying to imitate or move away from the parenting style of their own fathers, it appears that many participants implicitly or intentionally based their roles on their existing notions of a father's role. The following participant was one of several who talked about wanting, as a stepfather, to correct for or to avoid recreating the negative experiences he had with his own father. Based on his own childhood, this participant believed it was important to emphasise security in his relationship with his stepson,

My own father is another huge reason why I think it is important to have a dad who is there for you always no matter what. I didn't have that growing up and I don't want to see my stepson go through what I did ... Because of this I want my boy to feel secure and know that I'm not going anywhere. (Participant 42)

A smaller proportion, around one fifth of participants, talked about role models besides their own fathers as being influential. Other role models included stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers, friends, and fathers-in-law. Some participants had their own experiences of living with stepfathers that influenced their approach to being stepfathers themselves. Again, some talked about examples to follow; others, examples to avoid. Several talked about wanting to avoid the authoritarian, overbearing, or abusive behaviours they saw their own stepfathers carry out. The

following participant felt that emphasising fairness and maintaining a friendship was of particular importance in contrast to his own experience with an abusive stepfather,

Having lived with a very abusive stepfather I have always been aware of not following his example concerning the way I treat my stepchildren ... I take this role seriously I do try to set an example ... I try to NOT do things that I experienced as a stepchild. I try to practice fairness, while maintaining rules, and especially try to keep a good friendship going. (Participant 22)

Similarly, the following participant, rather than emulating his own stepfather, decided to take a more easy going approach with his stepchildren and saw this as leading to a strong and satisfying relationship with them,

My own stepfather was a bit of a tool and I didn't want to be like that, so his influence has made my role as a stepfather less authoritative and I don't beat my stepchildren ... My easy going attitude has made him and his sister respect and love me. (Participant 12)

Other participants sought to recreate the positive experiences they had with their own stepfathers. The following participant saw his stepfather as a stabilising influence in his life from age two. Having seen him successfully carry out a father-like role, this participant had clarity and confidence about developing the same role with his own stepchildren who were similar ages when he became a part of their family,

From the age of two I had a stepfather who was a strong and positive force in my life... When I became a step-father to twins aged eighteen months I knew I was taking on a responsibility to them for the rest of their lives ... My biological father (who was violent towards my mother) left when I was two. From then I had a stepfather. He proved himself to be a hard-working, honest and stable influence in my life. He showed me that being a father is the way you think and act, not your genes. This gave me the confidence to be a stepfather myself ... From the beginning I wanted to be the best father I could be, taking part in all aspects of their lives. (Participant 18)

Another participant – who never met his own biological father – had both the experience of a stepfather adopting a distant, overbearing parenting style and also the experience of a grandfather and of uncles adopting more friend-like or supportive

adult roles. For his own role as a stepfather, it was his intention to replicate the more positive experience he had with his grandfather and uncles when he became a stepfather himself,

I had a really good hands-on grandfather and uncles that spent lots of time with me growing up as my father left my mother and ran away overseas. I never met him. My mother remarried and my stepfather was not a good role model as he was very overbearing and had no time for me but always had time for his son ... I do find that I sometimes become my stepfather and get loud and overbearing if the kids push my buttons a bit, but over time I have learned how to deal with that better. Also doing stuff with them like hanging out, talking to them more as a mate not a parent at first helped as that was how my uncles were with me and I gave them big respect for that. (Participant 27)

Finally, several participants had experiences of seeing their own fathers act as stepfathers to other children. The following participant saw his father acting in a father-like way with his stepsiblings. Having a favourable perception of that, he sought to carry this forward to his own role as a stepfather,

My father was a good father and a good stepfather as well (I come from a blended family) and he always treated my stepsisters as if they were his own children and I have always done the same with my step children. (Participant 56)

Another participant saw his father in a role as a friend and perceived this to be the wrong approach. As a result he felt compelled to develop a father-like role with his own stepchildren,

As a teenager my father remarried and had stepchildren. I saw how difficult it was for him. From this I wanted to do it slightly different and not be a friend, but a father figure. (Participant 6)

### **Alignment with my partner**

Just under half of all participants discussed how alignment or misalignment with their partners on the issue of their level of involvement as stepfathers had influenced the development of their roles in relation to their stepchildren. Regardless of what kinds

of roles they ended up with, when there was agreement between spouses, stepfathers tended to speak positively about their roles and their relationships with their stepchildren. Conversely, when stepfathers reported disagreement with their partners about their roles – particularly when they perceived they were denied any disciplinary involvement that they sought – they more frequently reported negative feelings, uninvolved roles, and often a sense resentment and loss.

*Agreements, having permission, and accepting guidance*

A quarter of participants talked about explicit negotiation or tacit agreement with their partners on what the stepfather role would involve. For some these discussions took place early on in the relationship,

I sat down with my now wife and we nussed out what the kids really need from both of us grown-ups to look after them and when to be there for them etc.  
(Participant 27)

Other stepfathers continued to talk about their roles over time with open communication,

We've discussed at length the expectations regarding my role, and that it is as an equal parent ... we have very open lines of communication around parenting (Participant 2)

Several participants emphasised the importance of establishing and working together as a team in establishing their roles. Some referred to the importance of a “united front” (Participant 28) with respect to parenting, or as another stepfather said: “singing off the same hymn sheet” (Participant 29). The following participant talked about having his partner’s agreement and support in shaping his father-like role, including being a disciplinarian in relation to his stepchildren,

My wife's relationship with both me and the children has had a significant effect. We have always worked as a team and backed each other in parenting. In the beginning this involved me finding my way to ensure I had the authority to pull the children up when they broke rules etc. We quickly became a team through positively supporting each other – for example if a child had asked one of us for an answer to something they were not allowed to ask the other to see if they could get a different answer. (Participant 18)

Several stepfathers who appeared to seek out father-like roles with their stepchildren talked about the importance of their partners offering their blessing, or giving their permission to enact this kind of role,

Obviously my wife has a lot of impact on how things have gone over time but she is open and willing to let me be a dad to her child. (Participant 42)

The following participant appeared to be sensitive to how his arrival into the family entailed an important change to the established functioning of the family, and was appreciative of his partner in allowing him some care and responsibility as a parent to her child,

Her mother is obviously the major influence on my parenting/relationship. We communicate well with regard to parenting decisions and are generally on the same page. My wife has been 100% supportive of me moving into a parenting role despite it being a difficult transition for her, as she was a sole parent for four years. (Participant 77)

Several participants talked about being invited or guided into a particular role by their partners. In these situations, men may have had less pre-established ideas of what kinds of roles they wanted and were happy to extend their involvement and roles to a level their partners felt was most appropriate. The following participant talked about being invited into a father-like role from the outset of their relationship,

My wife wants me to act as a father so I do ... My wife wanted to be sure that I would accept her son before we married. She wanted to me act as a father. (Participant 7)

Another participant talked about following his partner's lead in terms of forming a friendship with his stepchild first. This participant later came to identify as having a father-like role,

My wife, her mum, encouraged me to be a friend first, build a relationship and let her (mum) discipline her. Very sound advice that now three years later is working really well, as I know I can back up what mum has asked her to do. (Participant 16)



While most men who talked about being invited into roles by their partners were willing to comply, two stepfathers were an exception in that they sought a lesser degree of involvement than their partners desired. In one case the stepfather talked about tempering his involvement in response to the perceived needs and desires of the stepchild,

My partner pushes me to be a father figure, but I have let the child decide on the pace of the relationship ... I am happy with where I am at, but my partner wants it to be more. (Participant 5)

In the second instance, the participant restricted his role based on his perception that stepfathers ought not to be involved in discipline,

Although my wife encourages me to use some authority, I don't feel that is my place, as their stepfather. (Participant 68)

#### *Being denied a disciplinary role*

For many participants, communicating with their partners about role expectations was crucial for the development of their roles; however, communication did not guarantee alignment between all couples. If agreement was not reached, or there was conflict between men and their partners' expectations, participants more frequently reported mainly negative or mixed feelings about their roles. Despite the two exceptions above, misalignment between partners otherwise took the form that the stepfather expected or desired to take on a greater role but they perceived their partner as blocking or restricting their involvement. The following participant had a supportive adult role and felt frustrated by perceived limitations placed on that role by his partner,

His mother prefers me to only be involved in positive things and leave the discipline to her. I find that hard because I want to get involved in all aspects because I have to live with the consequences of all aspects ... My wife (stepson's mother) has called the shots along the way with regards to how much involvement I have. Sometimes we disagree and it has been the source of much conflict, we parent differently. (Participant 53)

Having permission to discipline their stepchildren was an issue some participants appeared to feel strongly about, and this was an area of disagreement between several participants and their partners. The following participants were amongst several who

appeared to withdraw from relationships with their stepchildren in relation to feeling denied a disciplinary role, or a say in the rules of the household,

I very much struggle to have a relationship with my partner's children. They are great kids but because I have no say in how they behave e.g. chores in the house, then I tend to remove myself from interacting with them ... The protective instinct of my partner towards her children, and her complete inability to discuss my ideas of how chores, discipline, etc. should be happening has tended to make me resentful/unable to want to spend time with them. (Participant 19)

The following example highlights that while some men may be highly motivated to seek out authority and influence in parenting, when they perceive this aspect of their role is not welcomed or supported by their partners, there may be very little they can do, and some may disengage from the relationship as a result,

Unfortunately, as my new wife decided that I had no influencing role to play, other than [stay] silent, things have not proceeded as I would have liked. I am not the silent type when it comes to wanting to be an influence on how children ought to be raised ... My wife has often asked me to 'babysit' when she is required to be out of the house. This is fine, other than that I have no say in what happens, other than maintaining a safe and warm environment. No discipline aspect at all. (Participant 73)

As in the example above, in several cases, stepfathers reported that when they felt blocked by their partners with respect to establishing the kind of roles they desired, they often felt very dissatisfied and began to actively withdraw from stepparent-child relationships,

My role is not defined and I have no responsibilities associated with her. I am not allowed my opinion by both her mother and stepchild. Parenting skills, attitudes, principles differ from step child's mother. All contributed to now being in a position of not knowing what to do, so you withdraw, compromise your principles and question if the relationship is worth it. (Participant 39)

While the majority of men were resentful of perceived gatekeeping behaviour by their partners and some become largely uninvolved with their stepchildren, there were two

exceptions. For the following stepfather, despite perceiving restrictions placed on his parental involvement, he deferred to his partners' prerogative,

I take less responsibility with discipline and comforting as my partner is protective of that space and I respect that. (Participant 61)

The following participant appeared to take a patient approach, particularly regarding his partner's desire for him not to take on a father-like role. Over time his partner began to encourage and expect greater involvement,

[The stepfather role] is very much something that takes time. When I first met my partner's children, she did not want me at all to take on any kind of role similar to that of a father. She was very protective of that relationship with their birth father. Over time that has changed ... almost overnight I was taken from not having that sort of involvement to being asked why I wasn't stepping up and dealing with the children. Over time that has settled, and I am now very much a part of the children's lives on a daily basis. (Participant 70)

### **Involvement of the biological father**

Forty percent of participant stepfathers indicated that the involvement of biological fathers influenced the roles they had with respect to their stepchildren. In general, when it was perceived by stepfathers that biological fathers were absent or uninvolved they felt more able or sometimes more responsible to take on father-like roles with their stepchildren. When stepfathers perceived that biological fathers were still involved as primary male role models or remained active participants in the lives of their stepchildren, they more frequently reported supportive adult roles or uninvolved roles, rather than father-like roles.

#### *When the biological father is uninvolved*

For some stepfathers, the absence or lack of involvement of biological fathers in the lives of their stepchildren appeared to be the most important influence in determining the level of involvement they had in a parenting role. The following examples illustrate a common experience amongst participants: when a stepfather perceives that a father is missing in the life of his stepchild, he may feel responsible or think it most appropriate to take on and fulfil this position. Two participants explained,

My stepson's biological father is the person who has probably had the biggest influence. He has decided from a very young age that he doesn't have the time or effort to put into being a dad so I have taken on the father role entirely.

(Participant 42)

The second example below illustrates that the absence of a biological father may influence a stepfather to adopt a father-like role, even if this was not his initial intention or expectation,

The main factor that has influenced my relationship with my stepdaughter is the fact that she has almost no contact or relationship with her biological father. As a result, I have taken on more of a father's role than I may have otherwise. (Participant 36)

The absence or lack of involvement of biological fathers in the lives of their stepchildren often came as a relief to stepfathers who perceived their roles were therefore clearer,

The two boys don't see their biological father and never have. So I am seen as their dad and treat them as my own and do all the normal father-son type of activities ... Being the only dad that the stepsons know has made it very easy.

(Participant 9)

Furthermore, stepfathers who did not hold their stepchildren's fathers in high regard sometimes felt clearer about their roles and less conflicted about being actively involved in the lives of their stepchildren,

Oddly enough [my] stepchild's biological father, through drunken bullying behaviour via text and phone, has made things better for us as the basic 'dad' duties are carried out with a smile along with good positive reinforcement and encouragement in relation to school and life in general. (Participant 65)

Most stepfathers who reported an influence from biological fathers on their roles were in situations where fathers were uninvolved from the beginning of their relationships with their stepchildren. However, others reported changes in their roles later in their relationships when circumstances with fathers changed. The following participant,

who had a father-like role, talked about having greater clarity about what his role ought to be when contact with the biological father reduced,

Initially there were difficulties in establishing my role as I did not want to damage their relationship with their biological father who continued to see them on a regular basis ... My role changed a little when we moved from the UK to NZ as their biological father was not able to see them on a regular basis. From that point my role was much more clear. (Participant 18)

*When the biological father is involved*

The quote above also highlights that a stepfather may experience a lack of clarity about his role when the biological father remains active in the life of the stepchild. When stepfathers perceived that biological fathers were still involved, many felt that they should not or could not take on father-like roles with their stepchildren, and instead tended to report limiting their parental involvement in various ways. Implicit in the views of several participants was the notion that there is only room for one such father figure, and they were reluctant to pursue that role if they perceived the role was already occupied,

I would have liked a more fatherly relationship, but felt that it was important that their biological father held that role, even though he didn't do it well. (Participant 11)

The importance of the biological father's involvement from the points of view of many stepfathers is further illustrated by the following participant whose two stepchildren had different biological fathers. This stepfather reported different roles with his two stepchildren based on the differing level of involvement of their respective biological fathers,

[The] oldest stepchild has a dad actively involved in his life and I am more of a friend to him. Youngest stepson's biological father is not involved in his life at all so I play a father role. (Participant 53)

Some retrospectively regretted limiting their involvement based on initial perceptions that certain aspects of the father role should only be held by one person, or were not appropriate for stepfathers if their stepchildren still had biological fathers involved in their lives,

I wish I had given more affection and built a closer communication with him from the start. I feel that it is a bit late now but I am making more of an effort to give hugs or appropriate touch to show my love. When he was little I thought I should leave all that for his real dad to give him. (Participant 44)

### **Receptiveness of the stepchild**

Approximately sixty percent of stepfathers indicated that their stepchildren's response to them – whether they felt accepted or held at a distance – influenced their roles and relationships. Generally speaking, where stepfathers perceived their stepchildren were open to developing warm relationships and/or to discipline, men tended to increase their involvement and expand their roles and this was frequently accompanied by stepfathers' reports of satisfaction. When attempts to build warm relationships were rebuffed, or if men perceived a lack of respect with regard to their disciplinary behaviours, stepfathers were more likely to report difficulty in establishing roles and dissatisfaction with their roles and relationships.

#### *Being accepted*

Participant stepfathers talked about different kinds of experiences, and different behaviours that they observed in stepchildren that related to feeling accepted or desired in father-like roles. Fourteen participants recalled with particular significance when their stepchildren began calling them 'dad.' Many were quick to point out that this was spontaneous on the part of stepchildren, rather than imposed. Participant responses gave the impression that stepfathers felt accepted or wanted in a fatherly capacity, and often felt privileged to be given the title,

I am lucky, she calls me Daddy. I do everything a dad would do. I carry her to bed at night, tuck her into bed. I'm able to talk about her day, cheer from sports side-lines and embarrass her and discipline if needed. (Participant 16)

My stepdaughter tells her friends that I am her 'other' Dad and that makes me feel really good about our relationship. (Participant 56)

Some stepfathers noted a turning point in their relationships with their stepchildren when new children were born into the stepfamily. The following participants observed a solidification of their status as parents or father figures partly driven by their perception of greater acceptance by their stepchildren from that point on,

I act as a father. After my first child was born and started calling me Dad she also wanted me in that role. (Participant 5)

I was called by my first name until my wife and I had a child. Although I never asked my older girls to call me Dad (as I did not feel I had the right), they began copying my biological child and since then they have called two men Dad. (Participant 18)

Many stepfathers talked about being more readily accepted and having closer relationships with stepchildren who were of a younger age when they first became a part of the family,

My relationship with the youngest is closest, as she has known me as a father figure for more than half her life in total. (Participant 84)

From the point of view of several stepfathers, the age of their stepchildren and their openness to them was related to the strength of the bond between stepchildren and their biological fathers. This may represent an interrelationship between the themes of stepchildren's receptiveness and the involvement of the biological father,

The youngest girl (now eleven) was very open to me quite quickly as she did not really get to form a bond with her own father (who left when she was three) and I was the next male figure to come into her life apart from family members. She was seeing her father every second weekend but she struggled with him and was only going in the end because her older sister went. These visits have now stopped completely and I have assumed the 'Dad' role on their wishes. I did not force this, but earned their trust and cemented their belief that I along with their mother had their best interests at heart. (Participant 47)

Some men talked about sensing not just acceptance but desire on the part of their young stepchildren for a father figure from early on in relationships,

It does feel good to be there for him and help mould him into a young man as his dad had hardly been around since he was born and he was very accepting of me and craving a role model. (Participant 76)

I think my step-daughter – having missed out on having a father – liked getting a new father. (Participant 51)

Several participants talked about their stepchildren making an independent decision to stop shared custody living arrangements with their biological fathers. This appeared to signal that they were desired or presumed as father figures by their stepchildren. One participant talked about becoming a 'de facto dad,'

Initially, joint custody meant the children were sharing half time at each house. Their father had remarried too and they had a very hard time, particularly the younger [child], from the stepmother. That still continues but both boys have elected not to visit their father's household, not from any wish of ours, but to the contrary. Our household has become home and I am a de facto dad. (Participant 20)

Moreover, the following participant talked about consciously and actively developing a fatherly role when his stepchild chose to live with him and his partner.

As much as we had problems, the truth was she would rather live with me and her mum instead [of her father]. Knowing she would rather be with me was an influence on making me look at myself and think 'what would I like to have had better than my parents could have done better?' From there I just kind of accepted and moved on with fatherhood progression. So if I was to say what was the main influence was it would be her accepting me and wanting to stay in mine and her mother's life. (Participant 85)

Some men talked about being explicitly or implicitly preferred to their stepchildren's biological fathers. The following participant felt preferred as a father in general,

When the eldest is with it he says I'm more of a father than Steve ever has been and he considers me his father. (Participant 21)

Others perceived their stepchildren related, or got a long better with them than their biological fathers,

One of the things that has influenced my relationship with my stepdaughter is the fact that her father does not relate well with her and she feels that I do so better. (Participant 56)

Another participant talked about being the preferred person to do certain activities with,



They don't have a positive relationship with their father. The younger of the two always says he wants to do 'boy' things with me. When I say, 'how about your father?' He always says no. So I think this is a huge influence, I want to give them every opportunity they deserve. (Participant 74)

Several participants talked about their stepchildren confiding in them about personal matters, and being preferred as a go-to person for support,

We have a great relationship. He treats me like his real dad and would probably talk to me about things before he talked to his real dad. (Participant 12)

In many cases stepfathers discussed that shared involvement with interests and activities of stepchildren was influential in expanding their roles in the stepfamily. Responses indicated that men were generally sensitive to and conscious of whether their stepchildren reciprocated affection, and whether there was mutual interest in sharing activities and spending time together,

We did a lot of surfing together. That bond grew stronger as he got older. (Participant 50)

We play and talk. We have common interest in computer gaming which is a good place for us. (Participant 61)

Moreover, several stepfathers made particular mention of the importance and satisfaction of being able to pass on skills and knowledge,

We get on quite well. We have good experiences of doing things together, such as making things, telling each other stories, and fishing. This is good for me as I can share and pass on skills. (Participant 40)

Perceived acceptance from stepchildren also related to responses to stepfather authority. Participants often talked about feeling respected by their stepchildren when they viewed them as receptive to their authority and to their disciplinary behaviours,

We get on really well and have a great relationship. I enjoy coaching his sporting teams and he really respects what I coach him. I help in school work and he is accepting if I have to discipline him. (Participant 62)

My stepson shows me respect as I give him the same in return, which is all I can ask. (Participant 52)

*Being pushed away*

It also appeared that when men perceived they were not received positively by their stepchildren, their satisfaction and involvement sometimes decreased. Around one third of participants talked about experiences of feeling pushed away, or not being accepted by their stepchildren. In some instances this push and pull from stepchildren was fluid and changing over the course of relationships,

The youngest child themselves has influenced the role I play ... sometimes drawing me in, other times rejecting me (depending on whether or not they liked what I was saying/doing). (Participant 53)

Some participants attributed this to developmental changes in the teenage years of their stepchildren. The following stepfather expressed a sense of frustration and loss at being pushed away by his thirteen-year-old stepdaughter,

[My stepdaughter] and I spent a lot of shared time throughout her growing years – in the house and on some camping holidays – times I have thoroughly enjoyed being part of the family. However latterly there appears to have been a change that has come over her as she now tends to ignore me even when in the same room ... Because she is now a 13 year old ‘teen,’ there appears to have been a change in her attitude to how she behaves around me ... as there appears to be no way of my having any influence on how she ‘works,’ I’m left to wonder what might be, one day. (Participant 73)

As in the case above, some stepfathers who felt pushed away by their stepchildren lost confidence and esteem and found it difficult to subsequently change their roles and relationships, and often uninvolved roles eventuated,

[The] relationship has deteriorated over time. Was okay in the early stages. I tried to support and went to all her activities but was always kept at arms distance ... [I would like to] be able to talk to her without feeling like she is not telling me everything, manipulating and feeling like she is pushing me away if I get too close. I feel I am unable to change this due to other influences

and the personality of the child. When it does not work out you lose your self-esteem, your ability to judge yourself in a positive way. (Participant 39)

Some stepfathers believed that differences in personalities and interests could not be overcome, and appeared to reduce their involvement with their stepchildren,

I'm a practical outdoors person and the teenagers seem to prefer to spend time sitting in front of the television. This doesn't interest me, so I avoid it, and the children see less of me as a result than I would like. (Participant 84)

Other participants perceived difficulties arising in their relationships due to resistance to their attempts to enforce rules and authority, particularly when this involved changes to how households had operated previously,

They didn't like me at all. In fact my step daughter told me a few years later that at the time she hated me. One of the reasons for this friction was that my partner had been doing everything for her children ... Once I started living with them, my partner and I agreed that they needed start taking responsibility for themselves, make beds and lunches for school, do the dishes that didn't go in the dishwasher and later their own washing. This was hugely resisted ... My relationship with her brother was more difficult because he resented being more self-sufficient. (Participant 37)

Just as men talked favourably about being respected by their stepchildren, several noted dissatisfaction and difficulty in their relationships when there was perceived lack of respect,

Respect is a big issue. They have never had a male figure in their lives and don't know how to relate. They don't know how to act and therefore it has been difficult to change. (Participant 6)

While some noted increased acceptance from their stepchildren when new children were born to the relationship, others perceived this lead to rejection,

When my partner fell pregnant with my eldest child, the eldest stepdaughter was worried that the baby would get all the attention and made it very clear she wanted to break the family apart. (Participant 33)

Just as some stepfathers perceived that a distant father-child relationships lead to greater acceptance from their stepchildren, for others, close father-child bonds were related by some to being pushed away. Five stepfathers felt that loyalty to biological fathers led to an unwelcoming reception from their stepchildren. Several did also express a sense of rejection that despite their efforts, their stepchildren might continue to hold their biological fathers in higher regard,

As a stepfather it's hard to bond with a child when they have a father of their own. In my case they hardly see their father due to his decisions but the love for their father will be always stronger for him then it would for me. It's hard to accept that their love for him will be stronger even though they have been raised with me as my own and have spent little time with their father.

(Participant 66)

Another participant talked about loyalty bonds being difficult to shift, and his role being difficult to establish despite his assurance to his stepchildren that he was not necessarily a replacement for their biological father,

All of the things we do together we do as a family. I don't really spend time with the kids on their own. It's difficult to know what role the kids expect from me as there is still a lot of loyalty to their real dad. It's been very difficult for one of the kids in particular to understand that I am not necessarily a replacement of their real dad, and that it's ok to have both. (Participant 86)

In another example of the interrelationship between themes, several participants talked about biological fathers having influenced their stepchildren to reject them as stepfathers. For the following participant, feeling rejected by his stepchildren also added pressure to the spousal relationship,

My relationship is, to be honest, not a good one. The kids say good morning and good night. They don't want anything else. This is not good for me or my relationship with their mother. It puts pressure on us ... The boy's father is negative toward the boy's mum and her relationship with me. This has a spin off effect with how they think about us ... Would have been better to meet their mother when they were younger. Maybe they would be more positive toward the idea. (Participant 54)

While several participants felt powerless to overcome experiences and perceptions of rejection or distance from their stepchildren, some appeared able to maintain relationships without withdrawing altogether. The following stepfather noted that his stepdaughter continued to seek her mother's support and comfort for certain issues, rather than his own. However, he appeared able to contextualise this, and reported keeping up other behaviours related to care and fun in his role,

It probably isn't as natural with her as it is with her little brother and that's probably a reflection of their relative age when I appeared on the scene. Bella and I get on very well though. She doesn't open up to me though and when she has a bad day at school or a health issue she will only ever share it with her mum. This is understandable and it doesn't worry me. At least she's talking to one of us. I take her to drama practice every weekend and generally run her around the place, although she is becoming more independent. I think just hanging out playing games on our phones and watching TV is the best thing we do together. (Participant 45)

Several participants emphasised the importance of patience, trust, and love as the means to successfully manage and maintain relationships with stepchildren who were perhaps not immediately open to them,

It can take a while for them to trust you, I suppose they wonder how long you will be there. For me now, even if my partner and I parted, I would still feel I had to look after those kids. I think part of being a stepdad is unconditional love just like with my own kids – they get it with no strings, no games. (Participant 43)

Some stepfathers commented specifically on their stepchildren having been negatively impacted by the actions or absence of their biological fathers. Again, stepfathers talked about the importance of building trust, showing love, and having patience in maintaining and improving relationships,

The younger has been damaged from his experience at his father's place and that has made him more wary of me ... [It is] taking love and patience but we are winning. I am fully expectant that another year will see great progress. (Participant 20)

The eldest is suffering from being abandoned and has resorted to drugs, has overdosed, and is fighting addiction. I have been there throughout and encouraging him, although a lot of the time he is not there and unresponsive. It is very hard but I will not abandon him. (Participant 21)

### **Wider social response**

Around forty percent of participant stepfathers talked about the response of extended family members or of broader societal views about stepfamily relationships as being influential to their roles and related satisfaction. While the wider social response did not appear to be as instrumental in determining stepfather roles as other influences, approval and support from extended family members and perceived societal acceptance of stepfathers appeared to relate to participants' satisfaction, confidence and sense of legitimacy in their roles. Conflict and disapproval from extended family members or perceived stigma from society, on the other hand, were generally linked with experiences of role confusion, dissatisfaction, and, in some instances, may have influenced stepfathers to limit certain behaviours towards their stepchildren.

#### *Endorsement and support*

Ten stepfathers talked about the positive influence of endorsement and support from wider family members. From the point of view of several participants, acceptance by their partners' wider families increased their legitimacy in the eyes of their stepchildren,

I have been accepted by my partner's family and the girls can see that I have the family's respect. (Participant 47)

Other stepfathers commented on the importance of endorsement from their own families for the cohesion and unity of the new stepfamily within the wider family system, and for the wellbeing of their stepchildren,

Family embracing the family dynamics and treating the kids as part of the family [influenced the relationship]. Grandparents have treated the child as part of the family, which is what the child is. Good family bonds, good family values, and good children. (Participant 82)

Moreover, for some participants extended family members were influential in giving their support and advice with regards to parenting,

My partner's parents are very involved in the parenting decisions, not because they are overbearing, but because we always seek their counsel. As a result of this, their opinions are heavily weighed into parenting decisions we make.

(Participant 2)

With respect to wider societal responses, five participants spoke favourably about stepfamilies or the stepfather-child relationship being more common and more accepted,

Blended families are becoming increasingly common and it is just the norm these days. (Participant 9)

I feel now that the stepfather relationship is fully accepted in society.

(Participant 69)

### *Discord and stigma*

In other situations, participants talked about the influence of disagreement or disapproval from extended family members about the stepfather role. Such clashes did not necessarily change the roles stepfathers ultimately took. However, when discord was reported, men appeared to relate this to feelings of dissatisfaction, and confusion about role-appropriate behaviours. Seven stepfathers talked about having such experiences,

My wife's parents have sometimes made it difficult where they will come in and interfere with household rules. [It's] easy to enforce with my own children but the lines become a bit blurred with a stepchild. Also my own parents not being so accepting of the extended family made things extremely difficult.

(Participant 48)

The following participant talked about feeling dissatisfied and isolated as a result of conflicting familial expectations around discipline in particular, and this was a common source of contention,

Family members appear to have expected that I should not speak firmly to or verbally discipline my stepchildren. This has caused issues, but I do what I

need to do, and I think that the younger children respect me for giving clear expectations and being consistent. However, it also results in me not asking the children to do things or to get involved in activities with me in the same way that I have done in the past with my children. This also leads to an unsatisfactory situation from my own perspective, and I feel isolated as a result. (Participant 84)

Some men expressed a sense of loss and disappointment when they perceived their own families did not embrace stepchildren as their own kin,

It is a shame that my mother has not really accepted the children as her grandchildren, choosing to be called by her first name and never really taking an interest in their lives. (Participant 18)

While some participants saw the stepfather role as being increasingly normative and accepted in society, others talked about the effects of negative societal attitudes towards stepfathers. Of the twelve participants who talked about the detrimental effect of wider societal views, the majority were conscious of perceptions of stepfathers as being abusive towards their stepchildren. Several participants talked about this influencing, and at times restricting their disciplinary behaviour towards stepchildren,

[I'm] aware of sexual allegations towards stepparents. Have to be more aware of alternative ways to discipline. (Participant 25)

For others, concern about the potential negative view of stepfathers lead them to feel self-conscious about showing affection to their stepchildren, or to limit such behaviours, particularly in a public context,

The way I display affection with my own children is to give hugs and kisses and would love to be able to do the same with my stepchildren. One of them gives me an occasional hug when they go to stay with their dad for a weekend or when I go away for work ... Items you see in the media about how some stepparents treat their stepchildren make you a little wary. (Participant 46)

Some participants talked with relief about the fact that their status as stepfathers was generally not obvious to others in public. However, the following participant talked



about the additional difficulty he perceived in being of a different ethnicity to his stepchildren, in that his lack of a biological relationship was more salient,

I have stepdaughters whom are of Asian descent, and therefore it is obvious to others that they are not my biological children. It can be hard in social circumstances to show affection as I would normally, knowing how men can sometimes be perceived in public by others ... I feel it does play on my mind and I am always cautious about how I can act around other people, and how they view me ... I think my stepdaughters sometimes feel a little left out, or might feel second best when really this is not the case. I love them just as I do my own, but society prevents me from showing this in an embracing way.

(Participant 63)

One participant perceived two different stereotypes of stepfathers, and felt stigmatised as neither appeared to fit his experience,

Social expectations seem to stigmatise the stepfather. We are expected to be extra perfect or the evil devil who the media loves to put down. The truth is we are just fathers trying to raise our kids with a few more hurdles in the way.

(Participant 82)

Overall, the roles taken by stepfathers were influenced by several salient factors: stepfathers' own attitudes and experiences, alignment or misalignment with their partners about their roles, the receptiveness of stepchildren, the involvement of biological fathers, and, to a lesser extent, perceived endorsement or opposition from extended family and society more broadly. These results, as well as the results from Chapters Three to Five will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Seven.

## CHAPTER SEVEN - DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine stepfathers' perceptions about the stepfather role, and understand the influences that shape the kinds of roles that stepfathers develop in stepfamilies. This chapter examines the results of the study in light of previous research regarding stepfamily relationships and roles, and also briefly considers the implications of these results for public agencies and clinicians who work with stepfamilies, as well as future research directions. A brief summary of the main findings is presented below. These results are then discussed in greater depth in the following section, and a preliminary model is proposed to conceptualise the influences on the stepfather role identified in the study.

### **Summary of the Main Findings**

Stepfathers' perceptions of social expectations for the stepfather role

- 1) Social expectations for their roles, as reported by stepfathers, were neither clear nor consistent and did not appear to concern or influence most stepfathers. The majority of men reported either being unaware of social expectations, ignoring them, or they perceived that there were none.
- 2) Some men thought that society expected them to act like fathers to their stepchildren; others thought they were expected to behave differently to fathers but had unclear or divergent views on how their roles were to be distinguished from fathers.

Stepfather role types and satisfaction

- 3) Over half of stepfathers perceived and described their role as being a father, or like a father to their stepchildren. Men who reported father-like roles generally felt positive about their roles and relationships.
- 4) Just over a third of participants were identified as having a supportive-adult role. While the majority of these stepfathers reported satisfaction about their relationships, some talked about wanting more authority, greater appreciation, closer, or more father-like relationships with stepchildren.

- 5) A small but distinct group of stepfathers talked about being uninvolved with their stepchildren, and each of these participants spoke about their lack of relationships with marked dissatisfaction.

#### Stepfathers on seeking advice about being a stepfather

- 6) Three quarters of participants said that they did not seek advice about how to be a stepfather. The majority of these stepfathers reported they did not need advice, felt confident without it, preferred to 'go with the flow,' or reported relying on previous parenting experience. Others said that they did not know where to look for advice, or did not think relevant advice would be available.
- 7) Of those who did report seeking advice, most talked about seeking and receiving general advice about being parents or fathers, rather than advice specific to stepfamilies or to being stepfathers. Furthermore, most appeared to seek advice after problems had arisen, rather than in preparation for their roles.

#### Influences on the development of the stepfather role

- 8) The roles taken by stepfathers were influenced by several salient factors: stepfathers' own attitudes and experiences, alignment or misalignment with their partners about their roles, the receptiveness of stepchildren, the involvement of biological fathers, and, to a lesser extent, perceived endorsement or opposition from extended family and society more broadly.

### **The Ambiguity and Heterogeneity of the Stepfather role**

Despite accumulating evidence and emerging consensus between research and clinical literature about how stepfathers might most successfully and harmoniously navigate their roles and relationships with stepchildren, the results of this study suggest that there remains significant lack of clarity about what role a stepfather should play from a societal perspective, and considerable variation in the kinds of roles stepfathers enact in stepfamilies.

With regard to social expectations for being a stepfather, participants in this study had mixed views. The majority of participants reported that either there were no social expectations for being a stepfather (or were unaware of any such expectations), or that – even if there were – they were inclined to dismiss or ignore them. Other responses

reflected a lack of consistency between stepfathers about what society expected of them. Some felt society expected them to act like fathers. Others believed society expected their behaviour to differ from fathers, but had varied views about how the role ought to be different. Yet others commented explicitly that social expectations vary from person to person. As such, the results of this study suggest that the ambiguity of the stepfather role from a societal perspective, as proposed by Cherlin (1978), persists. The results are also consistent with other studies that have shown inconsistency between individuals' expectations for the stepfather role (Fine et al., 1992; Fine et al., 1998; Marsiglio, 1992; Marsiglio, 2004).

With respect to the kinds of roles participants reported having, overall, the results reflect the heterogeneity of what comprises the lived role of being a stepfather. Participant stepfathers were generally motivated to make a positive contribution to the lives of their stepchildren. However, consistent with other studies, there was considerable variation in the kinds of roles participants developed (Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Robertson, 2008; Svare et al., 2004). Three role types were identified in the data. As in Robertson's (2008) study, the majority of stepfathers saw themselves, or related their roles to being like fathers to their stepchildren. Similar to stepfathers in studies by Erera-Weatherly (1996), and Svare et al. (2004), many used fatherly labels and talked about replicating the role and behaviours they thought a father should. Just over one third of participants were clearly involved with their stepchildren, and reported engagement in various kinds of supportive behaviours, but did not claim fatherly or parental status. Men in this category often reported there were aspects of a full parental role that, for reasons to be discussed, they did not engage in with their stepchild. This group of participants did not have a uniform or single way of describing or labelling their role or relationship, however various terms were used, such as friend, teacher, guardian, or caregiver. These stepfathers may correspond to the 'assistant parent' role type proposed by Svare et al. (2004). A final group of stepfathers, comprised of 8% of participants, talked about having little to no relationship or involvement with their stepchildren. This group may resemble the 'disengaged' style identified by Hetherington and associates (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

## What Influences the Role of the Stepfather?

This study aimed to understand what influences the kinds of roles and relationships stepfathers have with their stepchildren. As discussed above, the current study and previous research indicate that the stepfather role lacks clarity from a societal perspective, and there remains significant ambiguity about what stepfathers perceive is expected of them. In the absence of societal prescription for how to be a stepfather, a range of stepfather roles emerged in the sample through interactions between several important influences. Based on the main thematic analysis of this study, a preliminary model is proposed to illustrate these influences (see Figure 1 below).

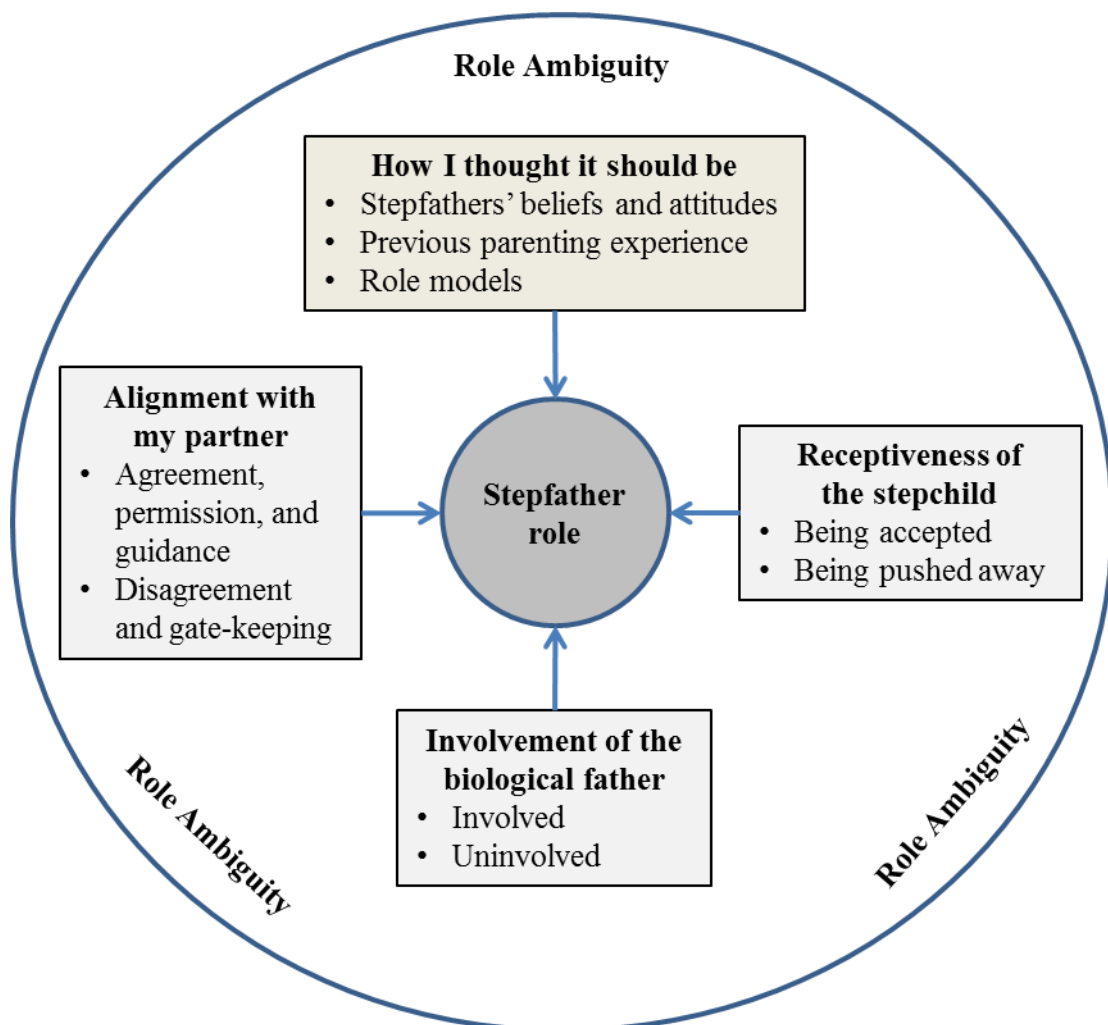


Figure 1: A preliminary model of influences on the stepfather role

### *How I thought it should be*

Participants' own attitudes, experiences, and role models for being a stepfather were identified as salient influences on stepfathers' role development. With respect to common attitudes, altogether, around one third of participants talked about their intention or the perceived expectation to treat their stepchildren as if they were their own child. It is unclear exactly why this sentiment was so common amongst stepfathers in this study. Some appeared to relate this intention to a principle of equality in which a stepchild should not be afforded lesser status or lesser treatment than a biological child.

A second common intention expressed by stepfathers, when relevant, was to apply their previous parenting experiences as fathers to their stepchildren. For some, the assumption appeared to be that if they had experience and ability as fathers, then they ought to extend that to their stepchildren. This finding is consistent with Marsiglio's (2004) study which found that men with their own children were more likely to take an assertive role in raising their children, and furthermore, as in this study, having such previous experience appeared to add to men's sense of confidence in their roles and relationships. Marsiglio's (1992) study also found that men who lived with their stepchildren and their own biological children simultaneously were more likely to report self-perceptions of a positive and father-like role identity than those men who cohabited with stepchildren only, and the results of this study add support to the hypothesis that fatherly responsibility towards one's own biological children in their household may have a spill over effect on the way men experience and carry out their role as a stepfather.

Men often set their goals for fatherhood depending on recollections of their own childhood, choosing either to compensate for their father's deficiencies or to emulate their positive qualities (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004), and results from this study suggest that that men often approach stepfatherhood in the same way. Around 40% of participants identified role models that influenced their ideas about stepfatherhood and their subsequent roles. For some, role models provided templates on which to base their own behaviours and relationships with their stepchildren. Others talked about their desires to avoid or make up for negative characteristics or experiences they had with role models. Most commonly, participants named their own fathers as being influential to how they approached stepfatherhood.

As also found by Marsiglio (2004), carrying forward their own fathers' parenting styles meant different things for different stepfathers. For example, some expected to enforce rules, and teach skills as their fathers had; others wanted to display more warmth and affection than their own fathers had shown. Importantly, whether they were trying to imitate or move away from the parenting style of their own fathers, it appears that many participants implicitly or intentionally based their roles on their existing understanding of a father's role. Only a small proportion of participants, around one fifth, talked about role models besides their own fathers as being influential, such as stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers, friends, and fathers-in-law. Interestingly, participants who had their own experience of living with stepfathers often talked about wanting to take a less authoritarian approach, and to build trust and security in their relationships with stepchildren. However, data on this issue was limited.

In summary, many participant stepfathers expressed intentions to treat their stepchildren as their own, to extend pre-existing parental roles to stepchildren, or to replicate or make up for experiences with their own biological fathers. While not all participants voiced the attitudes above, it seems to follow that holding any or all of these attitudes will influence stepfathers to attempt, or deem it most appropriate to take on a father-like role with their stepchildren. These findings are consistent with other studies and clinical literature that find most men attempt to fill the role of a father in stepfamilies, and that without clear advice and direction for how stepfathers and stepfamilies should arrange themselves, many tend to resort to nuclear family models (Bray, 1999; Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Visher & Visher, 1988). Furthermore, while the statistical significance may be limited, stepfathers who reported father-like roles had generally positive feelings about their relationships, which again reflects previous findings that father-like role perceptions are associated with stepfathers' reports of satisfaction (Marsiglio, 1992). As Marsiglio (2004) explains, some stepfamilies may manage very well modelling themselves after non-divorced families, however it is not appropriate or suitable for all situations. It may depend to a large extent on what kinds of fatherly behaviours or principles a stepfather desires to bring to his role, and, perhaps more importantly, how his expectation to behave like a father gels with other influences in the stepfamily situation, outlined below.

### *Alignment with my partner*

A second influence on the stepfather role identified in the data was alignment or misalignment on role expectations between men and their partners. Just under half of participants talked about this being important to their role development. Some men reported explicit negotiation and agreement with their partner about what their role would be. For many couples, this agreement was about presenting a united parenting front, and ensuring stepfathers had the ability to enforce rules and discipline. Some men spoke about having permission from their partners to act as a parent, and others talked about being guided by their partners into a role she deemed most appropriate. As in other studies, some mothers may desire or expect support from stepfathers in a parental capacity, and encourage their partner to take on a disciplinary role (Cartwright, 2003; Marsiglio, 2004; Robertson, 2008; Svare et al., 2004). Again, it appears that the assumption for many couples was that a father-like role, or an equal parenting role was ideal for stepfathers. However, one participant talked about being guided towards a friendship role, and reported a positive experience with this.

With just two exceptions, misalignment between partners occurred when stepfathers expected or desired to take on greater roles but they perceived their partners as blocking or restricting their involvement. In particular, misalignment between stepfathers and their partners centred on the issue of stepfathers' authority and discipline, which is in keeping with stepfamily literature highlighting that problems around discipline are often at the centre of stepfamily dysfunction, and may result in conflict between parents and children, stepparents and stepchildren, and couples (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Papernow, 2006). As identified in the previous section, men were often motivated to act as fathers to their stepchildren, including seeking out authority and influence. However, when they perceived this was not welcomed or supported by their partners, many said they disengaged from stepfather-child relationships towards uninvolved roles.

Regardless of what kinds of roles they ended up with, when there was agreement between couples, stepfathers tended to speak favourably and positively about their relationships with stepchildren. Conversely, when stepfathers reported disagreement with their partners about their roles – particularly when they perceived they were denied any disciplinary involvement that they sought – they more frequently reported unsatisfying, uninvolved relationships, and often a sense resentment and loss. This



trend is consistent with Skopin and associates' (1993) finding that agreement between stepfathers and their partners about the raising of adolescents was a significant predictor of relationship quality from the perspectives of both stepfathers and their stepchildren.

#### *Involvement of the biological father*

A third prominent influence on stepfathers' roles, discussed by 40% of participants, was the involvement of stepchildren's biological fathers. Supporting previous research, when it was perceived by stepfathers that biological fathers were absent or uninvolved, they often felt more able or sometimes more responsible to take on father-like roles with their stepchildren (Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Svare et al., 2004). The absence or lack of involvement of biological fathers in the lives of stepchildren often came as a relief to stepfathers who perceived their roles were therefore clearer. In other words, when a child has little to no contact with their biological father, stepfathers may experience less ambiguity about their relationships with stepchildren, and feel more confident to develop father-like roles.

When stepfathers perceived that biological fathers were still involved as primary male role models or as active participants in the lives of their stepchildren, many felt that they should not or could not take on father-like roles, and instead tended to report limiting their parental involvement in various ways, even if they thought biological fathers were not behaving well in the role. While there were exceptions, the results of this study support findings that, in many cases, stepfathers perceive an inverse relationship between biological fathers' and their own involvement with children (Fine & Kurdek, 1995), and as found previously (Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Svare et al., 2004), stepfathers will often mould to fill whatever gap is left by a non-resident father. Implicit in the views of these stepfathers was the notion that there is only room for one such father figure, and they were reluctant to pursue that role if they perceived it was occupied. However, as previously highlighted there is evidence to suggest that a child's continuing, close relationship with their non-resident father does not preclude having a positive relationship with a stepfather (King, 2006; King et al., 2014).

### *Receptiveness of the stepchild*

A third key influence on the stepfather role identified in this study was the perceived receptiveness of stepchildren to stepfather-child relationships. Studies by Ganong and associates found that stepchildren vary in their openness to developing bonds with stepfathers (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011). Participants in this study were often sensitive to signs of acceptance or rejection from stepchildren, as approximately 60% of participants talked about their stepchildren having contributed in various ways to the roles they developed. Many stepfathers talked about feeling desired in fatherly roles by their stepchildren, and previous studies considering the perspectives of stepchildren have found that some want their stepfathers to act as parents, which may make it easier for stepfathers to establish warm relationships, and to develop father-like roles (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). Participants often spoke with great affection about their stepchildren spontaneously calling them 'dad,' and when they perceived they were a preferred person to seek advice or comfort from. These experiences appeared to contribute to men's father-like perceptions, and participants were generally open and enthusiastic about taking on father-like roles when they saw this as desired by their stepchildren. As in other studies, when stepchildren were young at the formation of the stepfamily, men often presumed to take on father-like roles, and perceived that younger stepchildren were receptive to this (Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Marsiglio, 1992; Schrodtt, 2006; Svare et al., 2004). Participants spoke fondly about sharing interests and activities with stepchildren, and passing on knowledge and skills, and, as in other studies, these experiences often formed the basis of their on-going relationships (Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Ganong et al., 1999).

Consistent with previous research, when attempts to build relationships were rebuffed, stepfathers often reported dissatisfaction with their roles and relationships, and some ended up with uninvolved roles (Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Some stepfathers thought that differences in personalities and interests could not be overcome. Others commented on stepchildren becoming less receptive to relationships during teenage years. For some, difficulties arose in their relationships due to resistance to their attempts to enforce rules and authority. These findings mirror previous studies highlighting that stepchildren may think it inappropriate for stepfathers to act as fathers, and may feel resentment towards

stepfathers who seek to set rules and provide discipline (Bray, 1999; Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; Fine et al., 1998; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). As also found by Erera-Weatherly (1996), from the point of view of several stepfathers in this study, their stepchildren's openness towards them was related to the children's ages, and the perceived strength of the bond between stepchildren and their biological fathers. This may represent an interrelationship between the themes of stepchildren's receptiveness and the involvement of the biological father. Whatever the underlying reasons, when they felt pushed away by stepchildren, participants often became frustrated, or lost confidence and found it difficult to subsequently change their relationships. As a result, despite men's efforts and intention, it often eventuated that they became largely uninvolved.

#### *Wider social response*

Around 40% of participants talked about the response of extended family members and society more broadly as being influential in the roles they developed. However, for reasons outlined below it was not represented in the model above in same manner as other the influences identified in the study. While important, perceived endorsement or a lack of acceptance from stepfathers' wider social context did not appear to be as instrumental in influencing the kinds of roles men developed as other influences outlined above. Rather, it appeared to relate to their satisfaction, confidence, and sense of legitimacy about the roles they had. Some men felt that other family members, and society as a whole were accepting and approving of stepfathers. As found by Marsiglio (2004), some men found it rewarding to be seen and treated by others as a father to their stepchildren. Others expressed that different expectations of other family members about their role created confusion or tension, and some thought that society was stigmatising of stepfathers. In a few instances, stepfathers reported limiting their affectionate or disciplinary behaviour, particularly in public, in relation to concern about stereotypes of abusive stepfathers – a finding consistent with Robertson's (2008) study, and other research into stepfather stereotypes (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2002; Planitz & Feeney, 2009).

However, as outlined previously, from the point of view of stepfathers in this study, social expectations were generally unclear, inconsistent, or deemed unimportant. Furthermore, with respect to other possible societal influences, it appears that advice from stepfamily research had generally not filtered through to the stepfathers in this

study. Only one quarter of the sample reported ever seeking or receiving advice about their roles. While this advice was often seen as helpful, participants generally talked about receiving non-specific parenting advice, or emotional support. Very few appeared to seek advice specific to the challenges of stepparenting, and most who sought advice appeared to do so after challenges had emerged, rather than in preparation for stepfamily life. Similarly, none of the parents or stepparents in Erera-Weatherly's (1996) study had sought out information or professional advice on their stepparenting approach, and while both studies are comprised of small samples, they provide evidence that there may be a general disconnect between stepfamily research and stepfamily members, or the public more broadly. Interestingly, two participants did report receiving advice to develop a friendship with their stepchildren but did not implement it. One simply disagreed with the advice, while the other felt that it was unrealistic not to support his partner by acting as a disciplinarian in response to his stepchildren's challenging behaviour, so it remains unclear whether recommendations based on stepfamily research could or would be implemented by stepfathers if they were communicated to stepfamilies, at least in New Zealand where the study took place.

For participants who did not seek advice, there were a small and consistent set of reasons. Most commonly, participants felt they simply never had need of advice, so never sought it out. Others talked about feeling confident in themselves, thinking it best to go with the flow, or reasoning that they had previous parenting experience which meant advice was unnecessary. We do not have the data to know whether other stepfamily members would agree that they never had need for advice. However, such responses suggest that individuals generally may not consider the stepfather role to be different from 'normal parenting' and, as raised by Cartwright (2010a), adults in stepfamilies may generally not have an appreciation for the unique challenges entailed. A final group of participants who did not seek advice doubted that advice existed, reported not knowing where to look, or perceived that because each stepfamily is unique, relevant advice would not be available. As such, the knowledge and resources produced by stepfamily researchers and clinicians may be underutilised. In light of the above, the most salient influence on the stepfather role from a societal point of view is proposed to be the persisting ambiguity and lack of clarity about how

to be a stepparent. Hence its depiction as the surrounding context in the model presented above. The clinical implications of these findings will be discussed below.

*A summary of the preliminary model*

As a result of the ambiguity of the stepfather role from a societal perspective, and the apparent disconnect between stepfamily research and stepfamilies themselves, stepfathers are left, along with other family members, to develop their roles relatively unguided. In the absence of clear norms for the stepfather role, men may often resort to modelling their roles on fathers from non-divorced, nuclear families. This may arise from a desire not to be seen as affording stepchildren lesser status than one would their own biological children, or perhaps due to a lack of alternate role models for how to be a stepfather besides acting as a father might. Men who have previous parenting experience with their own biological children may generally think it appropriate to carry out their roles with stepchildren in the same fashion. Further, a stepfather may seek out a father-like relationship because it is seen as a desirable and rewarding role.

While the intention to act as a father toward one's stepchildren may be well-meaning, it may often be at odds with what children deem appropriate, with prevailing clinical advice to build friendships with stepchildren, and ultimately, the surrounding family context may not support it. Even when men believe they have skills or experience, and are motivated to fulfil a fatherly role, they may not be able to enact this role due to other influences. As Ganong and Coleman (2004) point out, the reaction of partners and children to stepfathers who try to adopt a parental role, including dimensions of authority, may range from approval and support, to passive acceptance and resentment, through to active rebellion. Consider two stepfathers who seek, or assume to fulfil a fatherly role. One may find himself in a situation with a partner who is encouraging of him to act as a father, with a stepchild who is relatively young and receptive to a new parent, and a biological father who is uninvolved. Another stepfather who seeks a fatherly role may be in a situation where his wife wants to maintain disciplinary responsibilities, where the biological father remains actively involved, and with an adolescent who is generally disinterested in having a new parental figure. Certain conditions may mean that a stepfather comes to play a father-like role with his stepchild in mutually satisfying ways, and in other conditions conflict, resentment, and disengagement may result.

As suggested by Marsiglio (2004) and Robertson (2008), the flexibility of men's attitudes towards the stepfather role, and towards the operation of stepfamilies generally may be an important determinant of stepfathers' adjustment and role development. The model (presented in Figure 1 above) may serve to illustrate why this is so, as men who are willing to adjust and integrate, to negotiate, and be patient amongst the diverse range of contextual influences may, understandably, be more successful at developing close and salutary relationships with stepchildren. As was described by many stepfathers – as the various influences change over time, so too may the scope of the stepfather role, and stepfathers who are willing and able to be flexible in response to such changes may navigate these changes more favourably. For example, several participants emphasised the importance of patience, trust, and love as the means to successfully manage and maintain relationships with stepchildren who were perhaps not immediately open to them. Furthermore, while some men talked about withdrawing from relationships when they perceived their partners did not allow them a disciplinary role, one participant responded with flexible deference to his partners' wishes, and another acknowledged that the stepfather role takes time to develop, and appeared to take a patient approach. Both participants were able to establish and maintain supportive-adult roles and were identified as being positive about their relationships. Stepfathers who have more fixed ideas about fatherhood based on their experiences, and who have firm notions around the rules that children should live by or the roles that a man should take in families may find it challenging to adapt to the myriad of dynamic influences operating in the stepfamily system.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this thesis study. With respect to the research sample, participants predominately identified as New Zealand European/Pākehā. As a result, the findings from this study are limited in their generalisability to the general population, and the results may not be relevant to stepfathers from other cultural groups. Additionally, all stepfathers who participated in this study were in heterosexual relationships, and as such, findings may not necessarily relate to stepfathers in homosexual relationships. Furthermore, the sample was self-selected, and in order to study influences on the stepfather role over time, data was collected from men who had been stepfathers for at least two years. It is possible that stepfathers who had difficult relationships with stepchildren were less likely to

participate, and a focus on more established stepfather-child relationships may bias the sample towards well-functioning stepfamilies as more dysfunctional stepfamilies tend to select out of such samples.

This a qualitative study of the stepfather role based on the views and experiences of stepfathers only. Other stepfamily members may have different views about the stepfather role and may have provided other information or insights into stepfathers' relationships with stepchildren. We cannot assume that stepchildren and mothers are also content when stepfathers report positive feelings and satisfaction with their roles. As previously discussed, stepfather role types were ascribed based on how participants saw themselves. It is possible that other stepfamily members would view their roles differently.

The study was based on data collected from an online questionnaire. The format of this study may have discouraged or been inaccessible to some potential participants. Moreover, the depth of data provided was inconsistent across participants. Some wrote in depth and others tended to be briefer. Responses lacked the depth of information that may have been gained through interviews, where prompts could have been provided. On the other hand, the study allowed access to a wider group of stepfathers.

It is also acknowledged that the researcher is the primary tool in qualitative analysis. As with all qualitative research there is a degree of subjectivity (Merriam, 2002). While reviews were conducted to ensure a valid representation of the data, it is possible that another researcher may have identified somewhat different themes or emphases using the same data set.

## **Clinical Implications**

### *More information and support for stepfamilies in New Zealand*

This study supports clinical literature (e.g., Browning & Artelt, 2012; Bray, 2005) that psycho-education is desirable in helping adults and children to understand the context of stepfamilies following divorce and partnering, and to normalise the challenges that often accompany such transitions. In addition, this research provides an argument for more focus on stepparenting in stepfamilies, at least in New Zealand. Unlike the USA and Australia, New Zealand does not have a Stepfamily Association or other

organisation that disseminates information and provides education and support to stepfamily members. Given that the first two years of stepfamily life are a particularly crucial time for their adjustment (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), it would be most beneficial for parents considering re-partnering to have this information in their minds before starting new relationships, rather than in interactions with social services after problems have emerged.

However, the findings of this study in relation to stepfathers on seeking advice also suggest that there may be several challenges entailed in engaging stepfathers to seek out any such organisations or information. Many stepfathers said they were not aware of any relevant support or advice outlets, and to an extent, this may reflect the lack of a dedicated stepfamily association. Generating awareness of the availability of such a service may address this barrier. However, stepfathers in this study often reported they did not need advice and many had a tendency to view (or want to view) themselves as fathers, rather than stepfathers. As a result, even if aware of such stepfamily services, some may prefer not to engage with them because they may consider themselves 'normal families.' It seems important then that attempts to access and provide information to stepfathers are accompanied by messages validating the increased prevalence of this family arrangement, normalising the challenges commonly faced, and emphasising stepfamily strengths.

#### *Specific recommendations for stepfamily programmes and clinicians*

It is important that clinicians understand that different stepfathers hold different views and expectations about their roles. However, many may be implicitly or actively working towards developing father-like roles. In certain situations this may work well within stepfamilies, and at other times this may result in tension and conflict. As stepfamily therapists point out, adults may need assistance relinquishing unrealistic expectations for immediate stepparent-stepchild bonding (Papernow, 2006), and helping a stepfather step away from the role of primary disciplinarian can yield positive results for stepfamilies (Browning & Artelt, 2012). However, as highlighted in this study, some men may have difficulty letting go of this more active parenting role. As Papernow (2008) points out, while some men may be relieved at the prospect of taking a less active role in discipline, others may be disappointed.



As previously discussed, flexibility and patience appear to be important values to foster in stepfathers (Marsiglio, 2004; Robertson, 2008), and it may be problematic for stepfathers and their relationships if men hold firm beliefs that they ought to be in a disciplinary role. In light of the above, stepfamily programmes or clinicians may consider working with stepfathers on their role expectations. As the results of the current study suggest, men's approaches to stepfatherhood are often influenced by their own fathers. Role expectations could be explored by discussing the constructs men hold in relation to stepfatherhood, and different kinds of roles that might exist. In conjunction, it may be useful to help stepfathers to understand and empathise with the perspectives of children and their partners in stepfamilies (Browning & Artelt, 2012), to discuss their needs and desires, and also to consider the difficulties that might emerge in applying various potential roles in relation to the at times vulnerable and fluid stepfamily environment. It may be useful for clinicians to work with stepfathers to think about their roles more broadly, and to foster willingness to be creative about how to include or involve themselves with their stepchildren. If men feel frustrated by the prospect of relinquishing or being denied a disciplinary role, clinicians could work with stepfathers to think about other behaviours or values that were important from their own father figures that they may more harmoniously integrate into stepfather-child relationships.

It is also important to validate the difficulties men may face in navigating the dynamic and diverse influences in the stepfamily system. With respect to the receptiveness of stepchildren, this study supports Papernow's (2008) recommendation to normalise the resistance that may come up in the stepfather-child relationship, and rather than responding with alarm and blame, to respond with patience and compassion. Stepfathers should be guided to allow changes in how stepchildren respond to them over time so that disappointments can be managed and withdrawal from relationships can be minimised.

With respect to creating alignment between stepfathers and their partners, the findings of this study are consistent with recommendations to encourage open communication among stepfamily members (Browning & Artelt, 2012) so that the parties can talk freely about family roles and related concerns. This might curtail any dilemmas faced by mothers and stepfathers as they traverse this new arena. However, as identified in the current study, communication does not guarantee alignment between stepfamily

couples. Effective communication skills may need to be taught and developed simultaneously. Regardless of the kinds of roles stepfathers reported in this study, when there was agreement between couples, men were more often positive about their relationships, and as a result, an essential aim in discussions between stepfamily couples could be emphasised – that they arrive at agreement and support each other in their respective roles.

Stepfathers may experience more ambiguity about their roles when stepchildren have close ties to non-resident biological fathers. However, research suggests that a child's continuing, close relationship with their non-resident father does not preclude having a positive relationship with a stepfather (King, 2006; King et al., 2014). As such, stepfathers might be encouraged to know that their support for their stepchildren is not mutually exclusive with the involvement of biological fathers, and that stepchildren benefit from close ties to both stepfathers and biological fathers (King, 2006).

### **Future Research Directions**

This study examined stepfathers' perceptions about the stepfather role, and the influences that shape the kinds of roles that stepfathers develop in stepfamilies. Similarly, future research could examine influences on the roles of stepmothers. In particular, to explore similarities and differences in how stepmothers perceive social expectations about their behaviour towards stepchildren compared to stepfathers, and to understand the attitudes, expectations, and role models that influence stepmothers' role development. Furthermore, this study was primarily comprised of a New Zealand European/Pākehā sample. It is therefore important for future studies to explore attitudes and experiences related to stepfathers' role development within other cultures, and particularly with Māori stepfamilies in New Zealand.

Interestingly, participants in this study who had their own experiences of living with stepfathers often talked about wanting to take a less authoritarian approach, and instead, wanting to build trust and security in their relationships with stepchildren. Data on this issue was limited. However, combined with Marsiglio's (2004) observation that such men may be better equipped to empathise with stepchildren's dilemmas about having a new adult male in their lives, explicitly examining differences in the attitudes and roles of men who have lived as part of stepfamilies themselves and those who have not may be a useful focus for future research.

## **Conclusion**

There appears to remain a lack of clarity and consistency in expectations for the stepfather role, at least in New Zealand, and considerable variation in the kinds of roles that men develop in stepfamilies. However, a majority of participants in this study related their roles to being like fathers to their stepchildren. With a lack of clear social norms to guide stepfathers in the development of their roles and relationships with stepchildren, many participants implicitly or intentionally based their relationships on their understanding of a father's role, desired to carry forward previous experience as a parent, or expected to treat stepchildren as if they were their own biological children.

Knowledge and resources provided by stepfamily researchers and clinicians appeared not to have filtered down to participants in this study. Three quarters of participants said they did not seek advice about how to be a stepfather, and those that did tended to seek general parenting support, as opposed to specific advice relating to stepfatherhood. Furthermore, most appeared to seek advice after problems had arisen, rather than in preparation for their roles.

The roles developed by participants in this study appeared to be influenced by several salient factors: stepfathers' own attitudes and experiences, alignment or misalignment with their partners about their roles, the receptiveness of stepchildren, the involvement of biological fathers, and, to a lesser extent, perceived endorsement or opposition from extended family and society more broadly.

Participants in this study were generally motivated to make positive contributions to the lives of their stepchildren. Many who had father-like roles and supportive adult roles spoke positively about their relationships. However, some men appeared to be highly motivated to seek out authority and influence in parenting. When they perceived this aspect of their role was not welcomed or supported by other influences in the family system, they often expressed a sense resentment and loss, and some talked about disengaging from relationships with stepchildren as a result.

Stepfamily programmes and clinicians who work with stepfamilies may assist the development of positive stepfather-child relationships by helping stepfathers to think broadly about their roles, to empathise with the perspectives of their stepchildren and

partners, and to encourage creativity, flexibility, and patience in how they involve themselves with their stepchildren.

## **APPENDIX A – RECRUITMENT EXAMPLE**

Advertisement featured in *Tots to Teens* e-newsletter Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2013

### **Stepfathers sought for study of their role in the family**

A University of Auckland study aims to learn more about the roles New Zealand stepfathers take on, and their reasons for doing so. The new study, by Clinical Psychology student James Brennan, will focus on understanding men's experiences of developing their role in stepfamilies and, in particular, what influences the kind of relationships stepfathers have with their stepchildren.

James would like to hear from men currently living in stepfamily situations (whether married or co-habiting) and whether they have children from a previous relationship or not. Participants in the research will complete an online questionnaire about their experiences of developing a role in their families, and about the influences that shape their relationships with stepchildren. The survey is anonymous and will take about 20 minutes to complete.

To take part in the study or for more information, please visit the website below.

**[www.nzstepfathers.com](http://www.nzstepfathers.com)**

**APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS  
ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 20/12/2012 for 3 years, Reference Number 8813**

## **APPENDIX B – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

Please read and consider the information below before taking part in this study. You may access a link to the online questionnaire at the end of this page.

### **Eligibility**

If you have been a stepfather for two years or more to at least one school-aged stepchild who currently lives in your household for at least some of the time, then you are invited to participate in this study.

### **Purpose of this research**

Stepfamilies are an increasingly common family arrangement in New Zealand; however, research suggests that stepfamily members can struggle to adapt to a new family situation, and stepfathers often report uncertainty about what their new role ought to be, and how stepparent-child relationships should work. On the other hand, some stepfathers have positive experiences of forming relationships with their stepchildren.

This research focuses on how stepfathers establish their role in relation to their stepchildren, and what influences the relationships they develop. If you take part in this research we will be interested in your experiences of developing and managing your role as a stepfather.

This research will assist in understanding the challenges associated with establishing a role as a stepfather, as well as how successful stepfather-child relationships are formed. Through this research we hope to add to the body of knowledge that is available to guide stepfathers in stepfamilies.

### **Your involvement**

If you do take part you will complete an online questionnaire about your experiences of developing a role as a stepfather. This will take about 30 minutes to complete at most. The questionnaire is password-protected and is a site that belongs to the School of Psychology at the University of Auckland.

Our experience suggests that completing these questionnaires can be a positive experience, however in the unlikely event that you are troubled or upset during or after completing it, my supervisor Doctor Claire Cartwright, who is a Clinical Psychologist would be able to refer you to appropriate counselling or family support agencies, if you request it.

We expect to gather all the information needed for our study from our online questionnaire. However, if more data is required to complete our research, there is the possibility that a second part to this study may be added. This would involve conducting a brief face-to-face or telephone interview with about 10 stepfathers to

understand their experiences of developing a relationship with their stepchildren in more detail. If you would like to register your interest to take part in this additional portion of the study, you will be given an email address at the end of this questionnaire. Once you have completed the questionnaire you can contact us and your name will be put on a list of possible participants. Please be assured that from your email, we will not be able to tell which questionnaire was yours, and so your responses on the questionnaire will remain anonymous.

### **Right to withdraw from participation**

We would like you to take part in this research but you are under no obligation to do so. It is completely voluntary. Your consent to take part in the study will be indicated if you complete the questionnaire. Please note that once questionnaire answers have been submitted, we will not be able to fulfil any requests to remove them from the study, as the answers will not be identifiable to any individual person who takes part.

### **Confidentiality and anonymity**

You will not be asked for any personally identifying information in the questionnaire (such as name, address, telephone number, email address). As a result, all your responses will be anonymous, and will not be identifiable to you. It is our intention that results from this study will be published in my Doctoral thesis, and in New Zealand or international research publications. Some participant quotations will appear in the analysis and results sections of my thesis. Quotes will be presented respectfully, and, as they are anonymous, they will not be identifiable to any person.

### **Queries**

If you have any queries or wish to know more please email me: James Brennan at [jbre027@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:jbre027@auckland.ac.nz)

Alternatively, my supervisor is Dr Claire Cartwright who may be contacted by phone on (09) 373 7599 Extn. 86269 or by email at [c.cartwright@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:c.cartwright@auckland.ac.nz)

The Head of the School of Psychology is Associate Professor Doug Elliffe who may be contacted by phone on (09) 373 7599 Extn. 85262 or by email at [d.elliffe@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:d.elliffe@auckland.ac.nz)

For any queries regarding ethical concerns please contact:

The Chair, the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Room 005, Alfred Nathan House, Private Bag 92019, Auckland. Phone (09) 373 7999 Extn. 87830

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 20/12/2012 for 3 years, Reference Number 8813

## APPENDIX C – ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

### Influences on the role of the stepfather in New Zealand stepfamilies

#### **General information**

1. What is your age in years?
2. Which ethnic group do you identify with? (You may choose more than one option).
3. What is your current relationship status?
4. How many children from previous relationships do you have?
5. If you have children from a previous relationship, do they live with you and your current partner?
6. How long have you been a stepfather?
7. How many stepchildren do you have?
8. What were the ages of your stepchildren when you first spent time living with them?
9. How much time do you spend living in the same house as your stepchild or stepchildren?
10. How many children have you had with your current partner?

#### **Influences on the role of the stepfather**

The following questions will help us to understand what has influenced the role you have as a stepfather in your family. Please write about what is important or meaningful for you and give as much information as you would like and feel you have time for. The boxes will expand as you write.

11. What have you noticed about social expectations in regard to how you should or shouldn't behave towards your stepchildren?
12. As part of your growing up, what experiences of father figures or male role models have you had that influenced you as a stepfather?

PLEASE NOTE – if you have two or more stepchildren, please write about the one closest to age 12.



13. Please describe the kind of relationship you have with your stepchild, and the sorts of role, activities or responsibilities you engage in with them. Please also comment on how this is for you.
14. Aside from your own decisions and actions, what else (for example, what other people or circumstances) has influenced the relationship you've had with your stepchild over time? Please describe any such influences and their impact in some detail.
15. Is there anything you would like to change about the relationship you have with your stepchild, but have felt unable to do so? Please discuss the change you would like and comment on why you feel unable to do so.
16. Have you ever sought out or received advice on how to develop a relationship with your stepchild, or how to be a stepfather?

Yes/No

17.
  - a. (If Yes) Please write about the advice you received, and whether you were able or unable to successfully implement that advice.
  - b. (If No) Please describe any reasons as to why you have not sought advice or help on your role as a stepfather
18. Please write about anything else you might like to discuss (optional).

### **Questionnaire completed**

Thank you for your time and responses to this questionnaire.

If you would like to register your interest for the small follow-up interview study, please email [jbre027@aucklanduni.ac.nz](mailto:jbre027@aucklanduni.ac.nz)

Please be assured that from your email, we will not be able to tell which questionnaire in this current study was yours, and so your responses will remain anonymous.

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