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"NEW TO SITE AND NEEDING ADVICE!": A CONTENT ANALYSIS

EXAMINING ROLE STRAIN AND SOCIAL SUPPORT IN AN ONLINE

SUPPORT GROUP FOR CHILDLESS STEPMOTHERS

A DISSERTATION

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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

BY

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to identify types of role strain and social supportive behaviors utilized within on online social support group for childless stepmothers. A contents analysis of sixty-two message sets downloaded from an online support group for childless stepmothers identified multiple factors and relationships that affect the mental and emotional health of these women. Chi-square goodness of fit tests revealed prominent themes of role strain such as the living arrangements and visiting schedules of the stepchildren, as well as the uncertainty inherent in how to act toward the biological mother, and the actual interference of the biological mother in the functioning of the stepmother household. Although no significant differences were found between custodial and noncustodial stepmothers, correlations among all childless stepmothers revealed interesting relationships between role strain and offered social support with informational and emotional support being the most commonly coded social support categories. This study expands the current literature in three important ways 1) this study extends previous research on stepmother role clarity by pinpointing specific issues and relationships which impact the role strain stepmother's experience, 2) within a stress and coping framework, this report focuses on the reappraisal process and coping efforts by analyzing actual messages written and received online, and 3) this study extends the literature concerning online social support and the advantages of using weak tie networks not only for medical based issues, but relationship based issues, as well.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Stepfamilies are complex, ever-changing entities with multiple members who occupy multiple roles. When parents divorce the biological mother usually receives custody of the child, but it is unclear how many children change residence over the course of the child's life (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). In some cases, the biological father is the custodial parent thus making a stepmother/father household when the biological father remarries. The necessity of extending this research to include this understudied stepfamily unit is highly warranted (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Additionally, Ganong and Coleman (2004) address that fact that most of the research on stepmothers does not distinguish between residential (having physical custody) and nonresidential (not having physical custody) stepmothers. Although they may face similar issues with regards to role clarity, the current study may shed further light on what types of stressors are particularly difficult for stepmothers who live with their stepchildren as compared to stepmothers who do not. More importantly, most research does not distinguish between childless stepmothers and stepmothers who have biological children of their own. The stressors associated with being a childless stepmother could be much different than the stressors of stepmothers who have biological children of their own.

According to Whitsett and Land (1992b) stress may actually increase when a change in roles (i.e., the addition of stepmother role) is taken on out of expected nuclear family developmental sequence. For example, childless stepmothers are

becoming a wife and a mother at the same time, which is not the expected sequence of family development. Nuclear families are expected to be married first, and eventually become parents to newborn children. This may suggest that childless stepmothers are experiencing compounded stress due to the fact that they are simultaneously becoming a spouse, stepmother, in-law, and stepfamily member to an extended network. Johnson, Wright, Craig, Gilchrist, Lane and Haigh (2008) found that role clarity had the highest negative relationship on perceived stress in a sample of stepmothers. Therefore, issues related to defining the role of the stepmother are complex, and in need of further investigation. Some major goals of the current study are to extend the literature concerning stepfamily development, specifically with regards to the role of the stepmother by 1) focusing on stepmother/father households, 2) identifying differences in custodial (having both physical and legal custody) and non-custodial (not having both physical and legal custody) stepmother households, and 3) concentrating on role strain as a stressor.

Braithwaite, McBride, and Schrodt (2003) advocate a more comprehensive look at the ways stepfamilies manage their daily interactions. They claim that the larger social network has an influence over the functioning or dysfunctioning within the household. By using a systems perspective, these authors identified interactions among family subsystems by focusing on parent teams or individuals who are co-parenting within the family unit. Katz and Kahn (1966) place significance on understanding the communication of systems and subsystems within social organizations in order to identify the flow and influence of communication among and between these entities. The study currently under investigation expands the

systems perspective to examining how individuals outside the family subsystem influence stepfamilies by exploring how online communities may influence the interactions within the family through the informational and emotional support these stepmothers are receiving online. The ability to vent, get advice, and help other stepmothers could prove beneficial to stepmothers when interacting with their stepfamilies outside of the computer-mediated world of the support group.

In addition, the current study is concerned with the ways that online communities help stepmothers cope with role strain. Stepmothers may find themselves isolated from supportive friends and extended family relationships (Johnson et al., 2008), thus increasing their stress and decreasing their chances of finding help in dealing with stressors associated with the stepmother role. By focusing on stepmothers who are able to plug in to a network of similar others, the current literature on coping efforts, types of stressors encountered by stepmothers, and the effects of online support may be more clearly defined. More specifically, the current online social support literature can be extended in two ways: 1) by focusing on a social support group which addresses personal and/or relational issues instead of medical issues, and 2) by identifying practical applications as suggested by real stepmothers for how to deal with role strain.

The most commonly used types of social support include emotional support, which focuses on empathy, concern, and caring, and informational support which provides advice or new perspective. Informational support, especially in an online support group for stepmothers, could provide important components to enacting the stepmother role, advice on how to deal with boundary issues inherent in the

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stepmother/stepchild relationship, and possible techniques on how to cope with other issues not yet identified in the literature on stepmother role strain. With little attention being paid to these stepmothers due to their assumed infrequent custodial status (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Nielsen, 1999), understanding different types of social support could help this population of women cope with and clarify their roles as stepmothers. Even more importantly, by examining custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, any differences found between custodial status can help provide a better understanding of the types of support these women are giving and receiving. This prospectus advances our understanding of the multiple role strain issues that stepmothers are currently facing by focusing on the actual messages these women are constructing about the stressors they encounter. Braithwaite, Schrodt, and Baxter (2006) call for a "stronger focus on the specific messages and message behaviors that create, sustain, and alter stepfamily relationships" (p. 169). The current study attempts to extend the social support literature by concentrating on one major theoretical extension: identifying the reappraisal process enacted through actual conversations among a group of stepmothers. Reappraisal is a "changed appraisal on the basis of new information from the environment, which may resist or nourish pressures on the person, and/or information from the person's own reaction" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 38). Through the use of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress, stressful appraisals of situations that are perceived as threatening may be modified into challenging appraisals or opportunities for personal growth through the influence of other's reactions to the initial stressful appraisal.

This prospectus is concerned with providing a more comprehensive understanding of social support seeking by stepmothers with the hypothesis and research questions presented. The next chapters will first outline the literature relevant to the study and second will present the method to investigate the hypothesis and research questions in relation to a sample of stepmothers from an online social support community.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Relationship researchers have always been concerned with the health and successful functioning of the family. However, only within the last few decades has the development of the stepfamily come under more intense examination (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Braithwaite, et al., 2006; Papernow, 1993). Although stepfamilies consist of multiple interrelated relationships, the unsuccessful functioning of one member may easily upset the equilibrium of the entire family unit (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2007). The current literature review addresses issues associated with the development of the stepfamily, but will continue with a more comprehensive examination of how confusion concerning the role of the stepmother within the stepfamily may cause additional stress. The present study gives specific attention to an online social support community for stepmothers, and the unique difficulties they face. But first, I begin with an overview of the literature on stepfamilies, more specifically stepmother role strain.

Stepfamilies

Given that 52-62% of first marriages end in legal divorce, 75% of divorced individuals remarry, and 65% of remarriages include children from a previous relationship (Stepfamily Fact Sheet, 2007), it is surprising that this family form is often ignored or only slightly acknowledged among legal, medical, and educational communities (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Johnson, Craig, Haigh, Gilchrist, Lane, & Welch, in press). Ihinger-Tallman (1988) acknowledges the data on living

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arrangements for stepchildren and the current marital status of parents is unclear.

Children who are currently living with their biological mother, but have fathers who

have remarried are still considered a single-parent household, not a stepfamily. It is

sometimes difficult to determine legal relationships among stepfamily members

(Ganong & Coleman, 2004), and stepparents often have little rights when it comes

to making decisions for their own stepchildren (Johnson et al., in press).

Consequently, stepfamily life is complex and its daily functioning and life-long

development are easily misunderstood.

Cherlin (1978) proposes the family unit as a place to learn how to interact

with others based on social norms and mores. He views remarriage as an

"incomplete institution" riddled with ambiguousness with regards to labeling new

family members, disciplining stepchild(ren), and legal relationships, which in turn

affect the health and successful functioning of the family unit. Cherlin (1978)

claims, "Our society, oriented toward first marriages, provides little guidance on

problems peculiar to remarriages, especially remarriages after divorce" (p. 643).

Although Cherlin's (1978) perspective that remarriage as an "incomplete

institution" may be somewhat antiquated, he does identify the complex nature of the

relationships and expectations of new family members without the departure of old

family members (i.e., a new stepparent due to divorce and not the death of the

biological parent), and how this may complicate the interaction of those involved,

particularly when no regimented rules for appropriate behavior exist.

Papernow (1993) argues that stepfamilies develop through a predictable

cycle of seven stages: 1) the fantasy stage often filled with unrealistic expectations

about the new stepfamily, 2) the immersion stage where stepfamilies are immersed in miscommunication and misunderstanding, 3) the awareness stage when family members attempt to identify some familiarity with the new stepfamily, 4) the mobilization stage when stepfamily members begin to voice their own opinions and needs, thus beginning the restructuring of the new stepfamily, 5) the action stage where stepfamily members work more vigorously to reorganize its structure and focus more on joint decisions about family operation, 6) the contact stage where the remarried couple becomes distinct from the children, and the marriage becomes a place of intimacy, and 7) resolution where the stepfamily feels safe and secure with their new family form. Although Papernow's (1993) stages of stepfamily development have been beneficial to clinicians in helping stepfamilies adjust to their new family form, much of the recent research on stepfamilies has challenged this linear perspective of stepfamily development (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Nicholson, 1999; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990). Furthermore, many times stepfamilies are compared to first-marriage family standards for success (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988), which perpetuates the idea that remarriages are similar to first-marriage families in development and successful functioning, and may only set the stepfamily up for failure.

Even though stepfamilies as compared to first-marriage families may face increased stress when it comes to the challenges of defining roles for parents (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988), Golish (2003) argues that comparing strong stepfamilies to stepfamilies with difficulties rather than comparing stepfamilies with nuclear families could be more productive in understanding how all types of stepfamilies

function. She argues it is only through understanding the components of a strong stepfamily that one can understand how to make communication within other types of stepfamilies better. With little surprise, Golish (2003) found that strong stepfamilies engaged in open communication, quality time together, and used family meetings and open discussion to resolve conflict.

Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) took a more nonlinear approach to examining stepfamily development by using a turning point analysis. This analysis indicates that stepfamily relationships can be better understood through relational trajectories that describe the ups and downs of stepfamily development. Five trajectories emerged and consisted of multiple fluctuations in the family's perceptions based on if they currently felt like a family or not. Braithwaite and colleagues (2006) argue for an extension in understanding the developmental processes of stepfamilies by examining multiple stepfamily types, looking at communication at different points in the developmental process, and examining how stepfamily members communicate family identity.

In the search to understand the development of the stepfamily, the present study focuses on the role of the stepmother as an important aspect of successful development. The role of stepmother is highly impacted by the presence or absence of biological children. Some stepmothers bring biological children into the remarriage, whereas other stepmothers come into the marriage with no biological children of their own (childless stepmothers). Coleman and Ganong (1990) assert that little is known about stepmother households, consequently, the childless stepmother is of great importance due to their introduction to dealing with multiple

familial roles not previously encountered (i.e., spouse, stepmother, in-law), their

concerns about the stepchild's living arrangements (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), the

constant stigma surrounding the myth of the wicked stepmother (Dainton, 1993),

and the pressure to have feelings of warmth and love toward the stepchildren

(Dainton). Fine and Schwebel (1991) claim:

> In sum, stepmothers are likely to have more parenting stress than stepfathers
>
> because of the greater expectations they and others have of them as
>
> stepparents, because of the greater role ambiguity they face, and because of
>
> the greater difficulty they have in developing attachments with stepchildren.
>
> (p. 9)

Next, the literature focused on the stepmother role will be examined.

Stepmother Role Strain

Time Spent Together

The amount of time that stepmothers spend with their stepchildren has a

major impact upon the amount of clarity they report in their roles as stepmothers

(Fine, 1995). Residential stepmothers have more of a chance to set up specific

boundaries, rules, and expectations that help create safety and predictability for both

the stepmother and the stepchildren due to the simple fact that they spend more time

in the same home (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Orchard and Solberg (1999) found

that time spent with the stepchildren helps the stepmother in constructing a clearer

role with regards to expectations of inclusion, development of parental love,

household responsibilities, and expectations of mother replacement. Ambert (1986)

examined residential and non-residential stepmothers and found that if the

stepchildren lived with them (residential), the stepmothers reported getting along with their husband better and having higher marital satisfaction. These results indicate that stepmothers find life easier when both the stepchildren and the biological children live in the home, thus creating a more cohesive unit, with fewer disruptions from children coming in and out of the household. However, of Ambert's (1986) sample (26 men and 23 women) only 12 indicated that they were childless, and it is unclear what percentage of these were women (childless stepmothers). Fine and Schwebel (1991) claim during the earlier stages of stepfamily life, non-residential stepparents may find it difficult to adjust to the inconsistent living arrangements which could influence the successful negotiation of boundaries between the stepchild and the stepparent, especially with regards to discipline. This implies more stress for stepmothers especially if they are non-residential. Ganong and Coleman (2004) assert:

> Nonresidential stepmothers, given the combination of their part-time
> involvement and ambiguous roles, may have a more stressful time in
> deciding how to interact with stepchildren than residential stepmothers do.
> (p. 135)

Additionally, it is important to clarify the difference between residential status and custodial status among stepfamily households. When a child is residential, it refers to the parent/stepparent's physical custody of the child. Until recently, residential status has been dichotomized into residential or non-residential. Johnson et al. (2008) created a coding scheme based on self-report data from stepmothers based on where the child lived a majority of the time and how many nights in a typical month

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the stepchild spent in their household. Results identified five categories of residential status: fully residential, mostly residential, even split between households, mostly non-residential, and fully non-residential. This categorization benefits the literature by acknowledging the impact that residential status has on stepmother role ambiguity and stress levels among stepmothers. However, custodial status refers to not only the physical custody of the child, but legal custody, as well. Ultimately, custodial status focuses on which parent is able to make decisions regarding the child's welfare. If custodial status is given to the biological mother, this lack of control over the decisions being made about the children could highly impact the stepchild/stepmother relationship. The stepmother may have less power and control with regards to discipline and visitation schedules which ultimately interferes with the functioning of her household (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). If custodial status is given to the biological father, it could increase control within the stepmother/father household, but potentially increase conflict with the biological mother. Although an increase in power may decrease stress levels for the stepmother, external conflict with the biological mother could also disrupt stepfamily functioning.

Multiple Roles

Stepmothers encounter ambiguity when faced with the many expectations that come with the role of stepmother (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Many stepmothers feel caught between their spouse and their stepchildren, their stepchildren and the biological mother, and the stepfamily unit and the extended family. Ihinger-Tallman (1988) attests that role models for stepmothering are scarce,

and without role models for stepmothers, these women are likely to experience greater stress due to role ambiguity and conflicting expectations from spouses, stepchildren, and other family members (Fine & Schwebel, 1991). Even among stepfamily members Fine, Coleman, and Ganong (1998) found that there were inconsistencies with the way stepparents labeled themselves, "parents" in comparison to the way stepchildren labeled the stepparent "friend." Orchard and Solberg (1999) found that 33% of stepmothers view themselves as another parent or mother-like and 31% viewed themselves as a friend or supportive adult. With the pressure to identify what being a stepmother is, these inconsistent views concerning how stepmothers view themselves versus how their stepchildren view them could be an issue which causes strain.

Another issue that may affect childless stepmother stress is the transition from the previous role of single adult to the present role of spouse and stepmother. Simply, stepmothers may be facing the death of their old life, and the birth of their new life. Braithwaite, Baxter, and Harper (1998) claim that stepfamilies are facing the challenge of negotiating the rituals and norms associated with the "old" family while attempting to embrace "new" family practices that legitimize the new stepfamily form. This can often be difficult for both stepparents and stepchildren; however, for stepmothers who have never had children, this could be particularly stressful. Attempting to blend the way they used to be, or the things they used to do as a single woman with the way they are now as a new spouse and stepmother could be quite difficult. Braithwaite, Baxter, and Harper (1998) claim, "The old competes with, or opposes, the new in complex ways, presenting a variety of old habits and

sentiments that can challenge the new family's development" (p. 115). Although the above authors refer specifically to moving from an "old" family to "new" family, and that children would be most disrupted by this family arrangement, the argument remains valid when examining a stepmother's move from being a single member household to a multiple member household. Johnson et al. (2008) concluded that the addition of new childrearing tasks can highly impact the stress that stepmothers face. These additional responsibilities are time consuming, and can affect the functioning of the stepfamily, consequently increasing perceived stress for stepmothers and decreasing marital satisfaction.

Nielsen (1999) claims that too many stepmothers start the marriage by focusing on the stepchildren's needs instead of what the marriage needs to thrive. She states:

Ironically, the stepmother is less stressed and less disheartened when she eventually adopts the attitude: My *main* goal and my *main* focus is to build an intimate, fulfilling relationship with my husband and to take better care of my own needs, not to bond with or win the approval of my stepchildren. (p. 135)

Although this may be a way of clarifying the stepmother/spouse relationship, it remains unclear if stepmothers realize how best to reduce their role strain. One method of reducing role strain is to seek social support from entities outside the stepfamily. Kaufman (1993) suggests that adult education classes and reading materials can be helpful when stepparents have little in terms of a support system. Papernow (1993) outlines a number of strategies that clinicians may provide to

stepparents in order to build stronger relationships among the stepfamily unit including joining the Stepfamily Association of America, finding people who understand, spending one-on-one time with each family member, and supporting the biological parent's choice of discipline. Although all of these suggestions could be highly influential in clarifying the role of the stepmother, the current study argues that too much research has identified what stepmothers *could* do, and little research has identified what stepmothers *are* doing. By focusing on the lack of role clarity in relation to multiple stepfamily members, the current study hopes to identify how particular relationships may influence the ambiguousness of the stepmother role through the examination of actual conversations between stepmothers. Juggling multiple roles within the stepfamily, as well as negotiating time spent with the stepchildren, highly influences role clarity. Another issue that stepmothers face is boundary management.

Boundaries

Generally speaking, families struggle with creating safe internal and external boundaries between its members (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006). Stepfamilies struggle with this issue even more than nuclear families. Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, and Pauk (2001) found four types of conflict with regards to boundary management in stepfamilies: 1) disagreements over resources, 2) loyalty conflicts, 3) individuals holding a "guard and protect" ideology, and 4) conflict with extended family members. More specifically, many stepmothers must face a difficult negotiation of creating safe boundaries between her household and the other parental household while allowing these boundaries to be permeable enough to allow the stepchild to

move between households. The stepmother may want to be involved in the stepchild's daily life, but are sometimes confronted with a highly involved biological mother who has a very established mother role. The stepmother may express a desire to be part of the stepchild's life, but must also make it very clear that she is not trying to replace the mother (Fine, 1995). Weaver and Coleman (2005) identified the desire of nonresidential stepmothers to engage in mothering behaviors, but not to be perceived as the mother for fear of infringing on the biological mother's role. It remains unclear if it is the stepmother, stepchildren, or a combination of both that have difficulty setting appropriate boundaries.

Some stepmothers may encounter boundary issues with a non-custodial parent, as well. Since non-custodial mothers remain more involved and have more contact with their children than non-custodial fathers (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988), stepmothers may have a much more difficult time maintaining a healthy relationship with the biological parent (mother). Neilsen (1999) claims that embedded cultural scripts discourage white middle and upper class women from viewing motherhood as being a community endeavor, and these women are more likely to disapprove of another adult's relationship with their children. Consequently, many stepmothers encounter hostile relationships with the biological mother, thus making the stepmother/spouse relationship and the stepmother/stepchild relationship much more challenging. Frequent contact between the biological mother and the remarried family unit could add to the stress of the situation especially if the biological mother is viewed as interfering with the remarriage.

Sometimes it is the biological mother that blurs boundary lines with their own children, thus by extension making it more difficult for the child to negotiate appropriate relationships with the stepmother. Afifi (2003) focused on the giving and withholding of information as a way to create bonds or create exclusion within the stepfamily. This study indicates that biological parents often created imbalanced environments through inappropriate disclosures. Parents may discuss the divorce with their biological children, and the children may experience a type of role reversal where they become the peer or co-parent. An informational bond between the child and parent is formed which makes it more difficult for the stepparent to penetrate that boundary. Even if the stepchild has affectionate feelings toward the stepmother, he or she often feels guilty about those feelings almost as if showing any affection toward the stepparent is a sign of disloyalty to the biological parent (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001). Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, and Wagner (2004) were interested in the perceptions of stepchildren regarding communication with their stepparents of primary residence using a dialectical framework. Results indicate that stepchildren struggle with showing emotional distance, yet wanting to be emotionally close with the stepparent at the same time. The same occurred with wanting the stepparent to establish authority over them, but also resisting this authority, and wanting to disclose and be open with the stepparent; however, keeping information private was highly valued, as well. Ultimately, boundary management is a reason for much of the stress experienced by the stepmother, especially if boundaries are not clearly articulated.

Golish and Caughlin (2002) discuss how stepchildren may use topic avoidance to help maintain boundaries with stepparents. Although no differences were found in the amounts and types of topics avoided with stepfathers and stepmothers, results suggest that stepchildren use the nondisclosure of information as a way to protect themselves from discussions concerning high risk topics like child support payments or their feelings about family members (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Golish & Caughlin 2002). One thing is certain, the psychological and physical presence of stepchildren and nonresidential biological parents affect the climate of the stepfamily household (Whitsett & Land, 1992a).

Myths Surrounding Stepfamily Life

Much of the literature which focuses on the role of stepmother is dedicated to identifying the negative stereotypes associated with being the 'wicked stepmother' which affects the stepmother's ability to clearly define their role (Campbell, 1995; Dainton, 1993). Through folk lore, fairy tales, and media portrayals of stepmothers, the stepmother faces negative stereotypes which are difficult to combat. Christian (2005) argues "relatively few have examined the difficulties faced by stepmothers as a direct result of the negative stigma they inherit by stepping into this role" (p. 28). Unfortunately, there are very few stepmother stories or role models that describe nurturing, loving stepmother/stepchild relationships, which often leads to stress among family members and role strain for stepmothers (Jones, 2004).

Claxton-Oldfield (2000) identifies three implications of the wicked stepparent myth. First, myths guide perceptions and expectations, so if stepmothers

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are deemed wicked, any attempt from the stepmother to act natural or even be nice is viewed as unloving or even manipulative. Second, this myth may influence how stepmothers view themselves. Since this myth carries such heavy stigma, many times stepmothers find themselves trying to hide their stepmother status to avoid the explanation that comes with being a stepmother. Third, the stepmother/stepchild relationship may be stressed due to the stepmother's attempts to discipline the stepchild, and the subsequent view from the stepchild that the stepmother must be wicked and evil. Stepmothers may engage in internal conflict surrounding these myths, and external conflict when confronted with expectations from society and family members concerning her role. Therefore, the need for support and encouragement to combat these myths is much needed.

Christian (2005) analyzed 69 narratives (only 4 were written by stepfathers) in an online support group for stepfamilies and found that the narratives posted allowed members to not only seek support, but to confront the myth of the wicked stepparent and counter the stigma surrounding this misconceived role. Her analysis indicates that stepmothers focus on two competing themes when dealing with the myth of the 'wicked stepmother' in their personal narratives: the biological mother as incompetent and the stepmother as martyr. This binary opposition puts the biological mother into the position that the stepmother is most often placed, the wicked parent, which reflects the stepmother's attempt to combat this negative stereotype. Although Christian (2005) provides a descriptive analysis that highlights a major issue confronted by these stepmothers, an extension of this study which includes multiple role strain issues and supportive messages in response to these

stressors could prove beneficial in understanding the communicative processes these women engage in online to cope with the confusion that accompanies their roles as stepmothers.

Another myth plaguing the stepfamily is the myth of instant love. Dainton (1993) claims:

> Specifically, the myth maintains that remarriage in and of itself creates an instant family, that stepmothers should (and will) automatically love their stepchildren, and that stepchildren will automatically love their stepmother. Further, because of this love, mothering is assumed to come naturally and easily. (p. 94)

If stepmothers do not "feel" close to their stepchildren when the expectation is that they will, great stress and confusion can manifest itself. Mothers are expected to love and nurture their children, as well as be responsible for child-rearing and household responsibilities (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). But, often there are inconsistencies with the way stepmothers think they should behave, and the way they actually behave (Whitsett & Land, 1992a). These inconsistencies may be particularly evident for childless stepmothers. Not having the opportunity to be mothers to their own children, childless stepmothers are confronted with the responsibilities associated with their new roles as stepmothers. They are faced with what it means to help raise children, and the possible guilt associated with their absent feelings of automatic love toward the stepchild(ren).

Dainton (1993) argues that the myth of the wicked stepmother and the myth of instant love actually contradict each other. One portrays the stepmother as evil

and wicked and the other claims the stepmother is overly loving and affectionate. Both are highly unrealistic, and can cause confusion as to how the stepmother should interact with her stepchildren. Especially in the early development of the stepfamily, some of these stepmothers do not want to be viewed as the wicked stepmother, so they may overcompensate with nurturing, warm behaviors that they are not quite comfortable with, yet, which could be misconstrued from the stepchild's perspective as insincere or manipulative.

Given the above discussion of the multiple factors influencing stress and role strain for stepmothers, the following research questions are posited:

H1: Non-custodial stepmothers report more role strain issues than custodial stepmothers.

RQ1: What role strain themes, if any, appear in stepmother's requests for social support?

RQ2: Are there differences among custodial and non-custodial stepmothers with regards to general role strain, stepchild(ren) role strain, spousal role strain, and biological mother/stepfather role strain?

<center>A Transactional Theory of Stress</center>

Stress

Although stress appears to be a common occurrence in the lives of many, pinpointing what stress really means is sometimes elusive and often times idiosyncratic. What is stressful for some may not be stressful for others. Early stress theories focused on the physiological responses to stress, with little attention being paid to psychological factors (Selye, 1979). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) outline a

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stress and coping framework which focuses on sociological, psychological, and physiological effects of stress on individuals, which extends the way researchers have been able to identify stressful events and coping efforts. "Psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). The transactional theory of stress concentrates on the importance of cognitive appraisals of the situation based on personal and environmental factors, as well as coping efforts that take on transactional properties. This view identifies the person and the environment as a dynamic, continually changing entity, and is reflective of a systems theory where the flux of relationships in relation to environment is constantly being redefined. First, I will discuss the appraisal process.

Cognitive Appraisal

Cognitive appraisal is "the process of categorizing an encounter, and its various facts, with respect to its significance for well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 31). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) claim that this process is less of an issue of information processing, but more like evaluative processing, "focused on meaning or significance, and takes place continuously during waking life" (p. 31). There are two types of appraisals, primary and secondary.

Primary appraisals can be irrelevant, benign, or stressful, and concentrate on the initial question, "Is this person or event stressful?" By focusing on an online social support group for stepmothers, it is assumed that these stepmothers have answered "yes" to this question. Further, the focus of this study is on stressful

appraisals which are categorized as being harmful, threatening, or challenging

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Harmful appraisals occur when damage to the person is

present, and could include lowered self-esteem or loss of a loved one. Threatening

appraisals occur when harm or loss has not taken place yet, but there is a perceived

threat of harm or loss. This type of appraisal allows individuals to anticipate stress,

thus plan for coping efforts to combat or work through it in advance. Finally,

appraisals can be challenging for the individual. Similar to threatening appraisals,

the individual is confronted with a perceived threat of harm or loss. Instead of

viewing it as a threat, the individual chooses to view it as a challenge, or

opportunity for personal growth. This "reappraisal" is usually influenced by other's

reactions to the initial appraisal, and reflects the individual's availability, or lack

thereof, to resources that affect the coping process. Secondary appraisals focus on

"What might or can be done in response to the stressful person or situation?" The

current study concentrates on this particular process. Individuals are concerned with

what coping options are available, the likelihood that a coping strategy will

accomplish what it is supposed to, and whether that strategy is effective. However,

this appraisal process is oftentimes influenced by the person's perception of

resources available to facilitate coping.

Both personal and situational factors may influence the appraisal process

(Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A personal factor that influences the appraisal process

is commitment. Commitment refers to how involved the person is to the situation or

relationship. "The greater the strength of a commitment, the more vulnerable the

person is to psychological stress in the area of that commitment" (Lazarus &

Folkman, 1984, p. 58). For stepmothers, increased psychological stress could be related to the commitment they feel towards their spouse and/or stepchild(ren), and consequently the threat they may perceive when one or both of these relationships contains uncertain or ambiguous elements.

A situational factor which may have an impact on the appraisal process is that of timing. The "out of order" sequence of events for stepmothers may increase the threat of the stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For childless stepmothers, this may be evident in the new role of wife and stepmother which occurs simultaneously. Additionally, having the event occur at the wrong time in life can be even more threatening. "Having an event occur too early can deprive a person of the chance to prepare for a new role" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 109). For example, if a stepmother of twenty-three has a stepchild of the same age, additional stress may accompany the negotiation of this relationship. Hence, the development of the stepmother role can be highly influenced by personal factors that affect the motivation to maintain stepfamily relationships, but can also be influenced by situational factors such as timing.

Finally, stress is apparent at differing levels of analysis which is evident in the appraisal process. The stepfamily may have difficulties as a familial unit; however, the degree of stress that each family member experiences depends on their personal appraisal of the encounter with the environment, "…this appraisal is shaped by person factors including commitments, vulnerabilities, beliefs, and resources and by situation factors including the nature of the threat, its imminence and so on" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 289). The current study concentrates on

the unique appraisal and coping processes that stepmothers face with regards to their stepfamily unit.

Coping

When it comes to secondary appraisals, or asking "What can I do about the stressful person or situation?" the ways that individuals cope, "depend heavily on the resources that are available to them and the constraints that inhibit the use of these resources in the context of the specific encounter" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 158). As the above quotation indicates, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) initially see the availability of resources as a major factor that influences coping, which eventually mediates stress. Such resources include 1) health and energy 2) positive beliefs 3) problem-solving skills 4) social skills 5) social support and 6) material resources.

Second, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identify constraints that may inhibit the use of such resources. DeLongis and Preece (2002) assert, "In the stepfamily, strained relationships may both constrain the choice of coping strategies and limit the efficacy of strategies employed" (p. 119). One particular issue that may influence the coping process is stepmother role conflict and role ambiguity. Stepmothers may become stressed when one role overextends her capacity to fulfill the requirements of another role, or when the expectations for a particular role are unclear or ambiguous (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Another constraint that stepmothers face is the stigma associated with being labeled the "wicked stepmother." With the continuation of such a negative stereotype, stepmothers may find it increasingly difficult to seek social support from friends and family because

of the lack of understanding and/or judgment that comes from individuals who are not in a similar situation. Jones (2004) claims, "the personal costs for stepmothers lacking a network of peers with whom they can confide and compare experiences can be high" (p. 130). It may also be that in addition to lack of support from friends and family, stepmothers may also fear acquiring social support from similar others because this would require them to acknowledge their stigmatized self which most stepmothers try to hide (Dainton, 1993). The perceived unavailability of this resource may increase stress, without providing the management of it.

Finally, the transactional theory of stress notes that coping must be defined independent of outcome. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argue that coping should include behaviors that are deemed failures and successes all contained within a process. "Definitions of coping must include *efforts* to manage stressful demands, regardless of outcome" (p. 134). With Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) emphasis on social support as a function of the coping process, the current study concentrates on a particular resource that stepmothers are choosing to use to cope with the stresses that accompany stepfamily life, the online support group. Additionally, by analyzing actual messages written by stepmothers to each other in search of support, the current study is focused on the *efforts* to manage stress regardless of the actual outcome of the support. Given the above argument that social support is a resource employed by stepmothers who encounter multiple demands and constraints, the following addresses the relevant social support literature.

Social Support

Traditional Social Support Perspectives

Social support from different relational partners within multiple contexts enhances both physical and psychological well-being (Albrecht, Burleson, & Sarason, 1992; Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003). Individuals continuously feel the need to connect with others and feel affection from those they value, especially during distressing times, and social support can provide guidance and validation for those in desperate need of it.

Burleson and MacGeorge (2002) review the history of social support and the two major perspectives that have developed. First, the sociological perspective focuses on social support as a function of social integration or networking. By looking at social support from a macro view, researchers linked involvement in social networks with well-being (Berkman, 2000; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Gottlieb, 1981; Wellman, 1999). Second, the psychological perspective focuses on the cognitive and affective processes within the individual. Much of this research focuses on individual traits or attachment styles and how these individual factors influence the ability to give and receive social support (Kleiboer, Kuijer, Hox, Schreurs, & Bensing, 2006).

One prominent perspective in the social support literature is the optimal matching model proposed by Cutrona and colleagues (Cutrona 1990; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). This perspective focuses on matching certain types of support with certain life stressors. Cutrona and Suhr (1992) argue that action-facilitating support (i.e., informational and tangible assistance) is most

beneficial for controllable life events that cause stress, whereas nurturant support (i.e., emotional, network, and esteem support) is most beneficial for uncontrollable events that cause stress. Intuitively, this perspective makes sense; however, research using this theoretical framework has produced mixed results in terms of matching support with stressor. This perspective appears to focus too much on the functionality of the support and less on its actual effectiveness. For example, if a stepmother expressed concern over a change in physical custody of a stepchild where the stepchild would start living in the stepmother/father household full time, one could assume that this stepmother would need emotional support in dealing with the new stresses that may come with this change since she probably has little control over where the child will live. However, maybe this particular stepmother is concerned with the additional money expenses this change would create (tangible support), or her rights with regards to consent for medical procedures for her stepchild (informational support). In this case, there could be multiple matches of support to this specific stressor or there could be a violation of the expectations that the stepmother had for the type of support she needed versus the type of support she actually received. The mismatch occurs when the perceptions of the type of support the receiver wants to receive are incongruent with the perceptions of the support the giver of the support thinks is best. Although the matching model may not identify the effectiveness of the support, it does eloquently identify the types of support being offered, and will be used as a category scheme for the current study.

Cohen and Wills (1985) have argued that social support can reduce the impact of stressful life events, thus providing the opportunity for effective coping

and enhanced physical and mental well-being. Their buffering model proposes that "support 'buffers' (protects) persons from the potentially pathogenic influence of stressful events" (Cohen & Wills, 1985, p. 310). Social support may prevent the initial appraisal of the event as stressful, help individuals explore what might or can be done to eliminate the stress, or it may help individuals to reappraise stressful events and provide reduced effects of the stressful event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Schwarzer and Leppin (1991) assert:

> If someone feels in control of a difficult situation owing to the availability of help by close network members, then the appraisal process is likely to result in a lower level of stress intensity. The perceived availability of a responsive social network also represents a coping option and therefore would make appraisals of harm/loss, threat or challenge less severe or even non-existent. (p. 110)

While these traditional social support perspectives have laid the foundation for social support research, communication scholars have found value in extending understanding of social support through the analysis of actual supportive communication.

Communication Perspective

Recent research has shifted to a more communicative perspective of social support termed supportive communication (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Goldsmith, 2004). Albrecht and Adelman (1987) propose:

> Social support refers to verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self,

the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of

personal control in one's life experience. (p. 19)

Burleson and MacGeorge (2002) define supportive communication, "as verbal and

nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others

perceived as needing that aid" (p. 374). Pecchioni, Wright, and Nussbaum (2005)

discuss the importance of social support throughout the life-span, noting that

although social support is enacted differently at various stages of life, it is

nonetheless a necessary aspect for enhancing health and well-being, but more

importantly happens through communication with others.

Although the sociological and psychological perspectives have contributed

to our knowledge about social support, the optimal matching model (Cutrona &

Suhr, 1992), buffering hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985), and communicative

perspective (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987) provide expansions to this massive body

of literature. Cutrona and Suhr (1992) provide a well established, validated coding

scheme for identifying types of social support during ongoing interactions, whereas

Cohen and Wills (1985) provide a validated framework for understanding how

social support actually protects or buffers individuals from stressful live events.

Additionally, the communicative perspective focuses on the actual content of

messages, which highlights the nuances of what is being said and how it is said in

supportive interactions. One way of examining these extensions is by focusing on

the use of an online social support community.

Online Support

Research indicates that online support is just as beneficial as face-to-face social support situations (Wright, 2002; Wright & Bell, 2003). Functionally, online support has specific advantages as compared to face-to-face support as it does not require transportation to and from meetings, members do not have to worry about finding a meeting place or working with different member schedules to find a time to meet, and online support groups provide continuous 24 hour availability (Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, & Wessel, 1995). Although the process of giving and receiving online support may appear to be different than traditional face-to-face interactions, the outcomes associated with online support are quite similar in that they can buffer the impact of negative live events.

Advantages of online support groups include: 1) it utilizes a lack of face-to-face contact, which allows individuals using the online support group to focus solely on the messages written and received, 2) it allows individuals to see the person and not the stigma surrounding the illness or issue they may be experiencing, and 3) it allows the ability to give and receive feedback, to influence and be influenced, and thus provides a sense of control for those involved. With an online community of individuals and family members facing cancer, Wright (2002) argues that informational support could provide control over their situation through the power of knowledge about their disease which in turn allows for better decision-making processes. The current project attempts to address a gap in the literature concerning online support groups. Thus far, most research has focused on online support groups for cancer (Sullivan, 2003; Wright, 2002), heart disease (Lee, Colditz, Berkman, &

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Kawachi, 2003), HIV/AIDS (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004), or other

medical related issues like physical disabilities (Finn, 1999). However, it is

important to extend analyses to include personal issues that cause stress and strain

socially, physically, mentally, and emotionally. After surveying 1,697 adults age 18

or older, Horrigan (2001) found that 43% of Internet users fall into the "getting by"

group of Internet users. The "getting by" group usually consists of more women

than men, and 71% of members go to the group to communicate about important

issues. These groups are becoming more readily available on the Internet, and can

provide information for many in need of it. Horrigan (2001) argues that a majority

of individuals in these groups are using this online source to address day-to-day

responsibilities, and that conversation is a little more important in the "getting by"

group as it helps individuals receive valuable information on how to deal with

personal issues, like parenting.

Another advantage of using online support groups lies in the actual

explanation and writing process associated with sharing ideas and creating

narratives. Albrecht and Adelman (1987) claim "The 'sounding board' function

enables receivers to articulate their uncertainties and problems in ways that help

them to be more objective and perhaps even resolve the troubling issues that they

face" (p. 33). Weinberg et al. (1995) propose that one important function of online

support is the writing process itself. The ability to carefully craft messages and

responses provides distance from the stressor individuals may be facing and allows

reflection on how they think and feel about that stressor. Braithwaite, Waldron, and

Finn (1999) found that online support was highly beneficial for individuals with

disabilities who were not able to communicate orally, or were only able to do so partially. Members were able to express their thoughts, using as much or as little time needed, and craft coherent messages that would have been difficult to do in a face-to-face support group. The ability to discuss daily or weekly stressors could help enhance self-efficacy and self-esteem when confronted with that same distressing situation in the future by providing a repertoire of coping strategies, as well as a safe place to vent about the people involved or the issues being faced (Wright, 2002). Wright and Bell (2003) also identify the use of computer-mediated support as a place where writing becomes therapy, and whose use may spur members to increase requests for support as well as enhance health outcomes for the user. Additionally, busy stepmothers have the option of sitting in front of their computer and writing messages on their own time as opposed to a scheduled group meeting time.

Strong vs. Weak Ties

One reason online support groups offer such unique benefits is directly associated with its ability to offer support from weak ties. Strong ties refer to close family or friends, while Adelman, Parks, and Albrecht (1987) conclude that, "the term w*eak ties* refer to an umbrella concept that covers a wide range of potential supporters who lie beyond the primary network of family and friends" (p. 126). Weak tie networks allow individuals to obtain support from those not within their intimate circle (Granovetter, 1973), and consist of relationships with the neighbor, hairdresser, bartender, and more recently, online communities. Wright (2002) suggests that the purpose of individuals with cancer using an online support

community is to gather information about their disease, gain emotional support from similar others, and maintain interpersonal relationships without having to deal with the stigma of the illness. Sullivan (2003) examined support within two online cancer communities, men with prostate cancer and women with ovarian cancer. Gender differences were found in the ways men and women used online support communities, with men empowering each other through information giving and receiving, while women focused on sharing feelings and providing emotional support. Although much of the weak tie online support group research has focused on health issues, weak ties may be a particularly important resource for stepmothers concerned with how to maintain stepfamily relationships.

Benefits of Online Support as a Weak Tie

One major benefit of utilizing weak ties to obtain support is protection from the stigma surrounding negative feelings associated with the issue being addressed online. By using online support as a form of a weak tie, individuals are often able to move beyond their immediate social network, form valuable relationships that may increase self-esteem, and gather a repertoire of coping strategies (Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht, 1987). Wright and Bell (2003) expanded the idea of weak ties to include computer-mediated communication (CMC). By using online support groups, individuals are able to avoid stigma which may otherwise prevent them from seeking help. According to Wright and Bell (2003), "Stigma refers to the sense of shame, disgrace or taboo associated with a particular illness/condition, usually stemming from fears and prejudices surrounding cultural conceptions of a health issue" (p. 42). Brashers, Neidig, and Goldsmith (2004) discuss some of the

processes that HIV and AIDS patients go through when deciding who they turn to for support. Many of these individuals will selectively elicit support from certain individuals they know can deal with the stigma of the illness, namely other individuals with HIV/AIDS. Stepmothers also have to deal with stigma associated with their role. Dainton (1993) claims:

> The fact that stepmothers' stigma is not visually apparent would lead one to believe that they have a discreditable stigma. That is, despite fairy tales' depiction of stepmothers as evil hags, real stepmothers look just like real mothers. Their stigma is not immediately apparent. (p. 95)

Although stepmothers may not be dealing with a physical disability that stigmatizes them, they certainly are facing issues like feeling caught between their roles as mothers and their roles as spouses, the myth of instant love associated with motherhood, and the negative stereotypes of the wicked stepmother that are linked with the stepmother role (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Therefore, this stigma may increase the need to seek social support from weak ties such as online support groups.

The second major benefit of using online support is anonymity. Online support groups give stepmothers the ability to keep themselves anonymous and may provide them with a safe place to express their feelings and receive help. Adelman and colleagues (1987) claim that weak tie networks give individuals opportunities to have important, low risk discussions of high risk topics. These stepmothers may feel free to discuss the hurts and pains that accompany their roles as stepmothers, but feel safe and secure in doing so. If stepmothers were to raise these issues in strong

tie networks, spouses and extended family members may not understand their negative feelings about being a stepmother which could induce even more negative consequences like feeling threatened, stigmatized, or condemned.

The third major benefit of using online support is the extension of access to information and the ability to compare oneself to others (Adelman et al., 1987). In online communities, extending weak ties and discussing issues with multiple individuals is easier. Adelman, Parks, and Albrecht (1987) state, "Self-evaluation is facilitated by comparison to weak ties because they provide a greater variety of information and thus a better ability to judge how typical or normal our own behavior is" (p. 135). This could be highly beneficial for stepmothers due to the constraints they face when seeking social support. Cherlin's (1978) argument that the stepfamily is an "incomplete institution" highly stigmatizes members of the stepfamily, thus encouraging the stepfamily to hide their familial status. Ganong and Coleman (2004) claim, "The nuclear family ideology thus serves as a deterrent for stepfamilies to be open with outsiders and with themselves" (p. 30). Coleman and Ganong (1997) argue that the nuclear family ideal contributes to the invisibility of stepparents, and hinders the stepfamily from seeking or obtaining social support. Obtaining social support from weak tie networks may combat the need to hide membership in a stepfamily unit. Additionally, Wright (2002) claims that online members reported similarity to others online and similar experiences with cancer as the most advantageous aspects of using online support. In and experiment testing credibility and homophily, Wang, Walther, Pingree, and Hawkins (2008) found that within online discussion groups, similarity was the major factor in evaluating

information, and the likelihood to act on the advice given. Ultimately, the more individuals perceived online discussion groups to be homophilous, the more they would give credence to the information provided and adopt the advice offered. With the ability to contact many different individuals, all dealing with a similar issue, individuals may gain multiple perspectives in how to understand their roles as stepmothers, and more importantly how to cope with stressors associated with the ambiguousness of their roles.

In conclusion, the current study attempts to expand the social support literature by examining the use of weak tie social support resources with regards to personal issues rather than medical issues, and ultimately offer practical applications for how to deal with stepmother role strain based on the role strain issues presented by the stepmothers themselves. However, due to the many questions that remain with regards to what types of support that are enacted in these online support groups, the following research questions are posited:

RQ3: What types of social support are offered in response to stepmother role strain?

RQ4: Do the types of support offered differ for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers?

RQ5: Are there patterns between types of social support enacted in response to certain role strain issues presented by stepmothers for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers?

CHAPTER 3

Method

Content Analysis

According to Holsti (1969), "Content analysis is any technique for making

inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of

messages" (p. 14). Content analysis can be a valuable quantitative tool for

comparing specified variables within communicative messages. Hosti (1969)

proposes that each step in the analysis process is based on explicit rules and

procedures for identifying message characteristics dictated by theory. Additionally,

other investigators who follow these same procedures should arrive at similar

conclusions. Krippendorff (1980) outlines multiple ways of unitizing

communicative messages; physical units, syntactical units, referential units,

propositional units, and thematic units. The current analysis relies on explicit rules

for unitization and categorization of messages based on the above suggestions for

implementing this quantitative tool.

Online Support Group

Data for this study is based on messages posted on an online social support

group for childless stepmothers (childlessstepmoms.org). Permission was obtained

from the webmaster/president of the Childless Stepmom NFP organization to

monitor and analyze message board postings for up to one year. Although this

website caters to stepmothers who do not have biological children of their own,

demographic information concerning mothering and marital status was limited. To

be included in discussion board postings, members must have registered with the

website confirming they were indeed a childless stepmother. This study was approved by the authors' university IRB. The current sample contains unique usernames with all usernames being changed in the results section to protect the identity of the users.

Unit of Analysis

On this particular site, there are multiple forums for discussion including topics focused on the biological mother, financial issues, legal issues, and lighter topics for discussion like health, fitness, and hobbies. For the purposes of this study, discussion board messages for custodial stepmother issues and non-custodial stepmother issues were analyzed beginning September 20, 2005 and extending for the duration of one year. As there were more custodial message sets ($N = 64$) than non-custodial message sets ($N = 46$), a random sample of the custodial messages was taken to equal the non-custodial messages. A total of 92 sets of messages were examined, and sorted by username. To ensure independence of observations, if more than one message set for a username was present, only one was used for the final analyses. After eliminating these message sets, a total of 62 message sets were used for the final analyses (custodial $N = 31$ and non-custodial $N = 31$). Each message set was broken down into sentences for a total of 2,073 sentence units for the initial poster and 6,068 sentence units for response postings. Individual stepmothers ($N = 62$) and total coded units ($N = 8,141$) were used in the analyses.

Coding Procedures

Two research assistants were trained by the author to code message sets consisting of an initial posting (role strain issues) and several responses (social

support responses) to that initial posting. One coder paired with the first author to code for role strain issues, and the second coder paired with the first author to code for social support behaviors. Each posting which was posted by an individual user was broken down into sentence units (Krippendorff, 1980). According to Krippendorff (1980):

> Regarding unitization, the general recommendation is to aim for the empirically most meaningful and productive units that are efficiently and reliably identifiable and that satisfy the requirements of available techniques. (p. 64)

Since the Role Strain Index for Stepparents was originally based on survey data, the categories were modified by the author to better represent a coding scheme for communicative messages. Whitsett and Land (1992a) conducted a factor analysis which identified eight role strain categories based on a 0-4 scale where 0 = strongly agree and 4 = strongly disagree (role captivity, role ambiguity, role conflict, self-role incongruence, emotional spouse support, boundary ambiguity, inclusion/exclusion, and resources). The author used role strain categories guided by these eight categories, but modified each based on an examination of 15% of the data which ultimately included nine overall role strain categories (49 total sub-categories for role strain). For example, for role captivity, the first item on the Role Strain Index for Stepparents states, "Sometimes I wish I could escape from all the demands I am asked to meet." In this case, the author labeled this as sub-category "escape" and a unit was coded as such if the coder matched a statement in the message board postings which reflected the stepmother's wish to escape from

demands she must meet, or expressed feeling of lack of control over the situation. Each category and sub-category is clearly outlined in Appendix A.

The first coder was trained by the author to use a modified version of Whitsett and Land's (1992a) Role Strain Index for Stepparents (see Appendix A). Each posting included a topic of the day initiated by the individual seeking social support. After the initial postings were unitized, each unit authored by the initial poster was placed into one of nine role strain categories; role captivity, role conflict, stepchild(ren)/stepmother relationship, role ambiguity, resources, spousal support, boundary ambiguity, miscellaneous, or emoticons. The first coder and the first author unitized and coded approximately 10% of the data and found 81% agreement with a Cohen's Kappa (1960) of .78. This was based on unitizing a total of 247 units and agreement on 200 of those units. After acceptable reliabilities were achieved, disagreements were resolved, and the rest of the data was divided and coded. These coded units were summed, and account for the total units requesting support.

Before training the second coder regarding the social support coding scheme, the author examined approximately 15% of the data and added two categories to Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) coding scheme. One category, labeled miscellaneous, was added which allowed the coders to identify when a response posting copied and pasted a previous posting, posed questions about the situation to provide clarification, or used fragment sentences unrelated to the overall posting (i.e., sign-ons, sign-offs). Another category, labeled emoticons, identified different types of emoticons used to emphasize support. All other categories fit the postings well (see Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999 for fit of categories with an online

disability group). The second coder was trained by the author to place units into one of the five general support types; informational, tangible assistance, esteem, network, and emotional support by using Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) Social Support Behavior Code (SSBC) (see Appendix B), and the two additional categories added by the author, miscellaneous and emoticons (47 total sub-categories for social supportive behaviors). All responses following the initial posting and those not authored by the initial poster were unitized and coded into the social support categories. The second coder and the first author unitized and coded approximately 10% of the data and found 74% agreement with a Cohen's Kappa (1960) of .64. This was based on unitizing a total of 609 units and agreement on 450 of those units. Although this was a lower agreement than expected, other researchers (Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999) produced similar results, and had similar issues with the coding scheme. It was difficult to differentiate between personal narratives that provided understanding about a personal situation (emotional support) and personal narratives that provided information to help better the stepmother's current situation (informational support). After acceptable reliabilities were achieved, and disagreements were resolved, the rest of the data was divided and coded. These coded units were summed, and account for the total units of givers of social support or social support providers responses.

Analyses

For Research Question 1, what role strain themes, if any, appear in the stepmother's requests for social support, the analysis includes frequencies of role strain issues for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers. A frequency table was

constructed to indicate the types of role strain issues encountered by custodial and non-custodial stepmothers.

To test Hypothesis 1, non-custodial stepmothers report more role strain issues than custodial stepmothers, an independent sample t-test was utilized. For this hypothesis all units from the poster expressing role strain issues were combined so that the unit of analysis became a composite of all stepmother's text. An independent sample t-test was conducted to see whether custodial and non-custodial stepmothers differ in terms of number of role strain categories mentioned.

To examine Research Question 2, whether there are differences in the types of role strain themes discussed with regards to general role strain, stepchild(ren) role strain, spousal role strain or biological mother/stepfather role strain, among custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, a number of tests were conducted to identify differences among these groups. First, a chi-square goodness of fit test (one for custodial and one for non-custodial) was conducted to test for an equal number of coded units for general, stepchild, spouse, and biological mother role strain for custodial stepmothers, and again for non-custodial stepmothers. This test was conducted to determine if the types of role strain vary from what might be expected by chance for both custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, and to help identify what role strain category was most prominent among each group of stepmothers by examining the units of role strain for the categories. Additionally, among the four overall role strain categories, 17 sub-categories were tested using a chi-square goodness of fit test to determine any differences from expected frequencies among the more specific role strain issues. Finally, to examine differences *between* groups

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(between custodial and non-custodial) an independent sample t-test was conducted based on the average percentages of role strain each stepmother had for each category and sub-category.

To identify types of social support offered in response to stepmother role strain for Research Question 3, the analysis focused on frequencies of social support for both custodial and non-custodial stepmothers. A table was constructed which indicates the frequencies of social support categories as identified for custodial stepmothers and non-custodial stepmothers.

For Research Question 4, do the types of social support offered differ for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, a chi-square goodness of fit test was conducted to determine if the types of social support vary from what might be expected by chance for both custodial and non-custodial stepmothers (similar to Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999). This test focused on whether the social support categories (i.e., informational, tangible, esteem, network, and emotional) were equal in terms of units coded for custodial stepmothers, and again for non-custodial stepmothers. Additionally, to test differences between stepmother groups (custodial and non-custodial) an independent sample t-test was conducted based on the average percentages of social support each stepmother had for each category and sub-category.

Finally, for Research Question 5, are there patterns between types of social support enacted in response to role strain issues for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, a correlation was conducted to determine if there were any relationships between role strain and types of social support.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Overview of Analytic Methods

A content analysis was utilized to examine conversational messages given and received within an online social support group for childless stepmothers. The data was coded into categories of role strain and social supportive behaviors. Following an examination of the method, the researcher decided to compute frequencies for Research Questions 1 and 3, and include examples of statements that reflect the categories of the coding scheme. Direct quotations from the message board postings are used to provide clarification for these categories. For Hypothesis 1 an independent sample t-test was conducted to test for a greater amount of coded role strain for non-custodial stepmothers. Additionally, for Research Questions 2 and 4 a chi-square goodness of fit test was conducted separately for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers utilizing the coded unit as the unit of analysis to identify differences *among* categories, and an independent sample t-test was conducted to identify any differences *between* custodial and non-custodial stepmothers in terms of role strain categories (i.e., general, stepchild, spousal, or biological mother role strain) and social support categories (i.e., informational, tangible, esteem, network, and emotional) by utilizing the average percentage of each overall category and using the individual stepmother as the unit of analysis. As a secondary analysis, an independent sample t-test was conducted to identify any differences between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers on specific sub-categories of role strain (i.e., escape, negative, investment, discipline, living arrangements, money, visiting

schedule, depend on spouse, act toward biological mother, and interference of biological mother) and social support categories (i.e., suggestions, appraisal, teaching, compliment, validation, companions, sympathy, empathy, encouragement, and questions), once again utilizing the average percentage of each sub-category and using the individual stepmother as the unit of analysis. Finally, for Research Question 5, a correlation was conducted to identify relationships between role strain sub-categories and social support sub-categories.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked what role strain themes, if any, appear in stepmother's requests for social support. To identify roles strain themes, the analysis focused on placing the data into one of 49 sub-categories or 9 overarching categories of an inductively derived coding scheme. Table 1 includes the frequencies of all coded units from the initial poster which were placed into role strain sub-categories, and the total percentage of each overall theme. The following description of the data is a report of the most prominent to the least prominent themes identified in terms of total coded units.

Boundary ambiguity. The most commonly coded category identified issues related to boundary ambiguity, which accounted for 22% of the coded units ($n = 438$ units) using the role strain coding scheme. This category included five sub-categories that addressed more specific issues related to unclear boundaries between stepfamily members, but mainly focused on unclear boundaries between the stepmother and the biological family (i.e., biological mother and stepfather/boyfriend). Sub-category 7a, act, focused on issues between the

stepmother and the biological mother and/or stepfather. Often, the stepmother would express general confusion concerning how to act toward the biological mother or stepfather. One non-custodial stepmother (#012) wrote:

> SS [stepson] is playing soccer so I get to see BM [biological mom] 2 times a week!!! The team just had their pictures made and they were ready Saturday. They gave them to me because I'm the coaches wife. I was passing them out and it came to the one for BM [biological mom]. I walked over to her and said "here are your pictures" she just stood there and ignored me. So I just stood there until she took them. Her sister was there and finally took them from me. GROW UP!!! I'm just sick of all of it!!

Another non-custodial stepmother (#020) expressed confusion over her general interactions with the biological mother. She stated, "It's so strange – they [biological mom] feel threatened if you try to parent their children, but you're completely evil if you DON'T try to parent them. These women [biological mothers] just seem so bitter, no one can do anything right by them." In addition, custodial stepmothers wrote freely about the instability of the biological mother due to drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and mental health issues. Possibly due to the fact that this instability could be a reason why these women had custody of their stepchild(ren) to begin with. One custodial stepmother (#120) explained her frustration with her stepdaughter's biological mother:

> Mind you BM [biological mom] has taken SD6 [stepdaughter, age 6] to a meth house on Christmas day, allowed her to miss 18 days of school in kindergarten, that's an average of 1 day per week that she had her, not taken

her to extra curricular activities that DF [biological dad] and I asked her about and paid for, hasn't taken her to the doctors or dentist in over 3 years, doesn't make her take care of her hygiene at all.

Sub-category 7b, interference, was similar to 7a, in that it focused on the relationship between the stepmother and the biological mother and/or stepfather, but emphasized the actual interference of the biological family in her relationship with her husband and/or stepchild(ren). One stepmother (#133) conveyed this interference with comments concerning the biological mother's boyfriend. She wrote, "BM's BF [biological mom's boyfriend] is a macho jerk, he sends us emails telling us he hates BD [biological daughter] and demanded BM [biological mom] get more access time." This went further than just frustration with the biological mother's boyfriend. By sending hateful emails, he was impacting the stepmother household in a negative way, which caused strain for this particular stepmother.

Additionally, stepmothers also faced issues of loyalty. Conflicts emerged between the stepmother household and the biological mother household that created confusion and frustration (sub-category 7c, loyalty). It manifested itself in a few ways, sometimes as a comparison between the stepmother and the biological mother, as outlined by this stepmother (#012), "Then there's the sd [stepdaughter] who always compares me to BM [biological mom]. I know she is only 3 but it drives me crazy. Mommy has this and mommy has that. You look like this and mommy looks like that." Secondly, some stepmothers acknowledged guilt that the stepchild may be experiencing with regards to the child's relationship with their biological mother. This custodial stepmother (#145) expressed:

> If she [stepdaughter] were given the opportunity, she would move back in
> with BM [biological mom]. I think SD [stepdaughter] also believes that if
> she accepts or wants anything different than BM [biological mom], she is
> betraying BM [biological mom]. I think this one [family psychologist] is
> picking up on SD's loyalty to her mom and how that can keep her from
> adjusting to our house.

Here it is evident that the stepchild is having difficulties adjusting to the stepmother household due to loyalty she feels toward her biological mother. This, in turn, is having an impact on this particular stepmother's home, as well.

Although not as apparent in the data, sub-category 7d (one total unit) outlined how the stepmother is called upon to mediate the relationships between stepfamily members (e.g., biological father/stepchild relationship, biological mother/biological father relationship), and sub-category 7e (one total unit) summarized the stepmother's resentment about having to share her spouse with his child(ren).

Miscellaneous. This miscellaneous category (19%, $n = 388$ units) allowed for parts of the data that did not seem to fit into any of the categories directly related to role strain the stepmother was experiencing. This particular category was specifically developed by the first author to ensure that all units could be coded; however, this was not part of the original scale developed by Whitsett and Land (1992a). Many times the stepmother would copy comments from another post and paste it into her post which allowed her to put her comments into the proper context (sub-category 8a). Sub-category 8b were requests for help and advice ($n = 159$

units), which usually came toward the end of the stepmother's post with general requests like this, "What do you think ladies?" (#005), while sub-category 8c were expressions of gratitude toward the group for their support and assistance ($n = 73$ units), with statements like, "Thanks again!" (#046), and sub-category 8d were expressions of support from the stepmother's family which included this statement from a non-custodial stepmother (#003), "I have a great support system – my family drives in from all over to spend time with them [stepchildren], so that's a plus."

Although the label "miscellaneous" does not imply importance, this category was valuable in identifying how and how often these stepmothers were requesting advice and/or help, as well as how and how often they expressed gratitude for advice given on the online support group.

Resources. Issues related to living arrangements, money, and visiting schedules were the third most commonly identified category accounting for 17% ($n = 355$ units) of the role strain data. Living arrangements (sub-category 5a; $n = 130$ units), addressed issues directly related to the stepchild(ren) moving in or out of the stepmother home. This was often an underlying theme to most of the message postings, but the data was placed into this category if living arrangements was the primary theme. There were mixed statements regarding living arrangements as some stepmothers desired the stepchild(ren) to live with them. This non-custodial stepmother (#002) wrote:

> BM [biological mom] rang up and said that she can't take the kids anymore you can have them full time. This is something that DH [husband] and I

actually hope (and pray in my case) for. It would just put our own minds at rest.

Other stepmothers did not want their stepchild(ren) in the stepmother home, as expressed by this non-custodial stepmother who was faced with becoming a custodial stepmother. She (#128) states:

My DH [husband] has wanted nothing more than for SD [stepdaughter] to move in with us full time. I doubt that I could handle it if things were the way that they are now. I can handle 9/10 weekends, I am used to that and can deal with it no problem most of the time. But when we have her for longer periods of time the whole situation becomes so much harder to deal with.

Another issue for these stepmothers was money (sub-category 5b). Many of them commented on how upset they were to be paying child support to the biological mother, while others expressed negative feelings related to extra expenses that came with having stepchild(ren). One custodial stepmother expressed frustration with the biological mother for distancing herself from the children, and failing to help with financial responsibilities associated with the children. She (#116) wrote:

She [biological mom] already owes about $1500 and it is rising every month. She doesn't work (gets money from her mom who lives in a different country), so we can't do payroll deductions, but the state will start taking more and more measures against her the longer she doesn't pay (although who knows if that will get her to start paying). So far, not one dime.

Finally, sub-category 5c, visiting schedule, summarized issues related to the current visiting schedule of the stepchild(ren). This category was differentiated from 5a in that this category dealt with statements related to the stepchild's visits, while 5a addressed physical and/or legal custodial matters. There was a mixture of issues associated with this category. One custodial stepmother discusses the lack of alone time she gets with her husband because her stepson has been banned from the biological mother's home for inappropriate behavior. She (#143) claims, "SS [stepson] and SD [stepdaughter] are supposed to be going to their mom and sf's [stepfather's] EOW [every other weekend]. In January SS [stepson] did something he shouldn't have while at BM's [biological mom's] house. He has not been allowed back since." Because the stepchildren are not allowed to have regularly scheduled visits with their biological mother, the stepmother household has been impacted in a negative way, by limiting the alone time this stepmother is able to spend with her spouse.

Stepmother/stepchild relationship. The nature of the stepmother/stepchild relationship was also a regularly occurring theme (12%, *n* = 254 units). Sub-category 3a, positive, addressed positive feelings that the stepmother had toward her stepchild(ren). They often expressed love, liking, or an overall sense of contentment with their relationship with the stepchild(ren). Sub-category 3b, negative, addressed just the opposite. Many times the stepmothers expressed negative feelings about their stepchild(ren), dislike, frustration, and even hatred. One non-custodial stepmother (#046) conveyed both of these sentiments within the same post with three units being coded as 3a and one unit coded as 3b:

One thing that is interesting is that it seems the age of the SK [stepkid]

makes a big difference in how we seem to feel about them. I had no

problems with SS [stepson] when he was younger. He was a total sweetheart

and we got along great [sub-category 3a]. As he got older, that is when the

problems started….he changed for the worse [sub-category 3b].

As this quote suggests, the stepmother is not focused on any specific behavior that

influenced how she felt about her stepson, but just overall positive and negative

feelings she has experienced with regards to her relationship with him.

The last sub-category (3c, investment) accounted for investments that the

stepmother made in the stepchild(ren). They often wrote about spending family time

together, giving of themselves emotionally, or expressing a sense of protection

toward the stepchild(ren) by offering guidance or support. One custodial stepmother

(#145) expressed, "I may not make a significant difference in her [stepdaughter]

life, but at least I'm helping her to see what a sane, loving, caring husband-wife

relationship is. I try to encourage her to do her best, but she doesn't want to put

forth any effort."

Spousal Support. Spousal support (12%, *n* = 249 units), included discussions

of the stepmother/spouse relationship. Sub-category 6a, spouse support, focused on

how the entire stepfamily influenced the relationship between the marital dyad.

Often times, the stepmother would express a lack of support from the spouse with

regards to disciplining the stepchild(ren), decisions regarding their behavior, or

general help with stepparenting. However, other times, the stepmother would

convey a supportive relationship with her husband. Here, one custodial stepmother

(#164) explained how supportive her husband was with regards to her contribution toward raising his children:

> Thankfully, my DH [husband] is more supportive than he used to be. We have been together five years, only married for four, and in the last three years he has been really good at backing me no matter what. Even if he doesn't agree all the time.

Sub-category 6b, depend on spouse, also identified comments from the stepmother concerning their ability to depend on their spouse or issues they may have been experiencing with their spouse directly, but was differentiated from 6a by focusing solely on the marriage dyad. Some stepmothers wrote about their desire to spend more "alone time" with their spouses. For example, this non-custodial stepmother was transitioning to a custodial stepmother, and was concerned about how this new change would affect their relationship. She (#150) explained:

> But I am glad that we have at least started talking and that he recognizes the wisdom in what you all [support group] have said, and the importance of setting up a routine makes a lot of sense to both of us.

Sub-category 6c ($n = 13$ units) categorized comments concerning the stepmother's perceptions of feeling left out of the relationship between her spouse and his child(ren), and sub-category 6d ($n = 2$ units) was used to identify the stepmother's desire for her husband to talk more about his feelings about his former spouse and/or child(ren). These two categories were used the least within the theme of spousal support.

Role captivity. Role captivity (8%, *n* = 170 units) concentrated on statements made by stepmothers who felt trapped in their role as stepmother. For role captivity, 4% (*n* = 76 units) of the data reflected how these stepmothers often expressed wanting to escape from their current role as a stepmother (sub-category 1a, escape), and 4% (*n* = 94 units) expressed feeling like they were sacrificing themselves for the needs of other family members, usually the stepchild(ren) (sub-category 1b, self-sacrifice). One non-custodial stepmother (#006) wrote:

> The reality is though that I don't think of sd [stepdaughter] as our child because she is not [sub-category 1a]. I have to fight for even a modicum of private time on weekends or weekends without her [sub-category 1b]. The fighting I do with df [husband] does not endear sd [stepdaughter] to me and so no, I don't think of her as our child and never will [sub-category 1a].

Role ambiguity. Statements related to unclear expectations concerning the stepmother role, or role ambiguity, accounted for 7% (*n* = 135 units) of the role strain data. This theme was summarized eloquently by one custodial stepmother (#106) with these comments:

> If I had to pinpoint the rage/sadness, it's that we are this totally normal, happy, somewhat together bunch until someone asks something about my sd [stepdaughter] and suddenly it comes out that we're a modern American family and there seems to be this taint that washes over us. Then they figure it out and say something lame to me like, "well, you're really her mother." Well, I am and I'm not. Did I birth her? No. Have I been to every single first day of school since kindergarten? Parent teacher conference? Performance?

Last day of school? You bet. And wow do I hate it when BM [biological mom] calls to talk to her and she runs into her room with the phone and shuts the door. It's like she's [stepdaughter] cheating on me.

Clearly this stepmother struggles with the legitimacy of her role as mother. She feels she performs it successfully until the role of stepmother is made public. At this point the role she performs is dissonant with other's perceptions of her role.

Some stepmothers expressed frustration and/or concern about disciplining the stepchild(ren), disapproval of the stepchild's behavior, or enforcing rules of the stepmother household (sub-category 4a, discipline). One custodial stepmother (#134) wrote:

[Stepson] is 13 and is used to a life of few rules and has done what he wanted. [Stepson] had control of the remote, had NO chores played video games incessantly and had failing grades. We have changed a lot of that through my nagging and the help of a counselor, but I am sick of the position that I am the "heavy" when my fiancé is quite content to look the other way.

Although not as prominent, some stepmothers wrote about unclear expectations with regards to the stepchild's homework and school related issues (sub-category 4b, $n = 26$ units) and narratives expressing confusion over what to "call" the stepmother (sub-category 4c, $n = 3$ units).

Emoticons. Emoticons accounted for 4% ($n = 83$ units) of the role strain data. Stepmothers often used emoticons to emphasize how they were feeling about their current situation. For example, one stepmother (#010) expressed anger with the emoticon at the end of this thought, "Its been a long stressful summer dealing with

this, the lawyers and everything else that comes with it. 😠 ” Another stepmother (#018) used an emoticon which conveyed sadness over her lack of visitation with her stepchildren by stating, "And I don't know how to let all this go. I'm really trying but I guess I haven't disengaged as much as I thought I had. 🙁 ” These emoticons were useful in placing the data into context, and providing some nonverbal cues to help interpret the meaning of the data.

Role conflict. Finally, role conflict (< 1%, *n* = one unit) identified issues related to feelings of conflict that the stepmother may have experienced with the multiple roles she was juggling as wife, employee, and parent. Only one unit out of 2,073 units fell into this category.

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 stated that non-custodial stepmothers report more role strain issues than custodial stepmothers. An independent sample t-test found no support for this hypothesis which examined a composite role strain score (total number of units) for each custodial and non-custodial stepmother. Results indicate that there are no significant differences in the amount of overall role strain issues reported by custodial (*M* = 35.35; *SD* = 24.58) and non-custodial stepmothers (*M* = 31.42; *SD* = 26.51) $t(60) = .621$, $p = .54$, $\eta^2 = .0063$. Additionally, it was surprising that the initial sample of messages indicated that within one year custodial stepmothers had posted 64 messages, while non-custodial stepmothers had only posted 46. This potentially argues against current literature which indicates that stepmothers who have their stepchild(ren) living with them report less role ambiguity as it allows for

the negotiation of regular rules for interaction and less ambiguity (Ganong &
Coleman, 2004).

Research Question 2

Chi-square goodness of fit. Research Question 2 asked if there were
differences in the frequency of categories of role strain. The unit of analysis was the
total number of role strain units, and differences were identified separately for
custodial stepmothers and non-custodial stepmothers. Results indicated that role
strain categories were not evenly distributed for custodial χ^2 (3, *N* = 884) = 322.95,
p = .000, and non-custodial stepmothers χ^2 (3, *N* = 717) = 171.13, *p* = .000 (refer to
Table 2). For both custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, role strain due to the
stepchild(ren) was the most prominent theme discussed (49% of total role strain
units for custodial and 44% of total role strain units for non-custodial). Additionally,
role strain due to boundary ambiguity with the biological mother/stepfather was
highly evident as an issue proposed by these stepmothers. This indicates that issues
between the stepmother and the stepchild(ren) account for almost one half of role
strain, while issues between the stepmother and the biological mother account for
over one fourth of role strain (27% of total role strain units for custodial and 27% of
total role strain units for non-custodial) for both types of stepmothers.

To determine which specific sub-categories were the most commonly
discussed issues of role strain, a chi-square goodness of fit test was conducted for
each sub-category based on the above main themes (i.e., general, stepchild(ren),
spouse, and biological mother role strain). Results indicate that the units coded for
these particular role strain sub-categories were not equally distributed for either

custodial stepmothers $\chi^2(16, N = 884) = 520.77$, $p = .000$, or non-custodial

stepmothers $\chi^2(18, N = 717) = 637.83$, $p = .000$ (refer to Table 3). With regards to

issues related to the biological mother, both custodial (20% of total role strain units)

and non-custodial stepmothers (17% of total role strain units) discussed the lack of

certainty surrounding how to interact with the biological mother, especially how

unstable she perceived the biological mother to be. Additionally, custodial

stepmothers (6% of total role strain units) and non-custodial stepmothers (9% of

total role strain units) expressed the actual interference of the biological mother in

the functioning of her household.

In terms of role strain associated with the stepmother's relationship with her

stepchild(ren), both custodial and non-custodial stepmothers were facing issues

related to the living arrangements of the stepchild(ren) and the visiting schedule of

the stepchild(ren). For custodial stepmothers, living arrangements accounted for

10% and visiting schedule accounted for 8% of the units coded into the role strain

category scheme, while living arrangements for non-custodial stepmothers

accounted for 5% and the visiting schedule accounted for 12% of role strain. Among

custodial stepmothers, 8% of the units were associated with comments concerning

the investment that these women were putting into the stepmother/stepchild

relationship, which usually focused on spending family time together or supporting

the stepchild in some way. Additionally, custodial stepmothers shared issues related

to the discipline of the stepchild or the enforcement of rules of the stepmother's

household (9% of total role strain units). However, among non-custodial

stepmothers, negative feelings (i.e., hate, dislike, frustration) toward the

stepchild(ren) were expressed fairly often (13% of total role strain units). The next section addresses how the researcher tested potential differences between these categories and sub-categories with regards to custodial status.

Independent sample t-test. To test for differences in role strain categories between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, the unit of analysis became each individual stepmother, and her most prominent role strain category coded. Percentages of the categories of role strain (i.e., general, stepchild(ren), spouse, and biological mother) were calculated for each stepmother. For each stepmother, the units coded into sub-categories that composed each overall category were added together and divided by the total role strain units. For example, if a stepmother had 20 units coded into spousal role strain, and had 100 units total in her posting, 20% of her posting was in the spousal role strain category. To get more accurate proportions of just role strain issues, categories 8 (units coded as miscellaneous) and 9 (units coded emoticons) were excluded from the role strain total.

These average percentages of the overall categories (i.e., general, stepchild(ren), spouse, and biological mother) were compared *between* custodial and non-custodial stepmothers using an independent sample t-test. Three individuals were eliminated from this analysis due to the fact that all units within these individuals' posts fell into the category miscellaneous (two custodial and one non-custodial). No significant differences were found for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers for general, stepchild(ren), spouse, or biological mother role strain (refer to Table 4).

To test for differences in specific sub-categories of role strain *between* custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, certain sub-categories of interest were chosen by the researcher based on the sub-categories of most theoretical importance within general, stepchild(ren), spouse, and biological mother role strain categories (i.e., escape, negative, investment, discipline, living arrangements, money, visiting schedule, depend on spouse, act, and interference) and percentages of total units in these sub-categories were calculated for each stepmother. These average percentages were compared using an independent sample t-test with a lowered alpha level or a Bonferonni correction, $p = .01$, to account for multiple tests (Abdi, 2007). No significant differences were found between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers among these chosen sub-categories of role strain (refer to Table 5).

The analyses indicate no significant differences between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers; however, what is of interest is the focus of a majority of the role strain for both types of stepmothers, and the lack of differences between them. The relationship between the stepmother and the stepchild(ren) as well as the stepmother and the biological mother account for almost three quarters of the coded role strain. For both types of stepmothers, living arrangements and the visiting schedule of the stepchild play a major role in their lives. Interestingly, among non-custodial stepmothers, a moderate amount of the coded data included comments made concerning the negative feelings the stepmother had toward her stepchild(ren).

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked what types of social support are offered in response to stepmother role strain. To identify social support themes, the analysis

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focused on placing response units into one of 47 sub-categories or 7 overarching

categories (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992) based on a modified coding scheme which

included two additional categories created by the author, miscellaneous and

emoticons (refer to Table 6 for frequencies and percentages). The following

description of the data is a report of the most prominent to the least prominent

themes identified with direct quotations from stepmothers to reflect each social

support category.

Emotional support. Emotional support accounted for 47% ($n = 2,879$ units)

of all coded response units, with sub-category 5e, empathy, having a total of 2,605

units. This sub-category allowed responses which focused on expressing

understanding or empathy, and usually manifested itself in the form of personal

narratives about their own stepmother situations. It appeared that these responses

were a way to vent about their own personal stresses, but also provide the recipient

with a deep sense of understanding and empathy. One custodial stepmother asked

how other couples (stepmother/father) had gotten custody of stepchildren from an

unstable biological mother. She goes on to explain how her husband had tape

recorded the biological mother locking the children in a closet. One responder

(#130-3) provided this narrative in response which expressed her story:

>Oh, and originally, they were going to do a stipulated divorce, DH
>
>[biological dad] was going to give her money every month to make the
>
>house payment, and he had agreed to 50/50 [custody]. She thought she could
>
>get a better deal and got her own attorney, and ended up with not only no
>
>money from DH [biological dad], but she pays us (reimbursements for

daycare, medical, school fees, etc.) and only has the kids 3 weekends a month.

Sub-category 5d, sympathy, categorized data which expressed sorrow or regret for the current situation of distress that the stepmother was experiencing. This category resulted in a total of 57 units with sympathetic responses like these, "I'm sorry that she's [stepdaughter] been so alienated from DH [biological dad]" (#028-20). Sub-category 5f, encouragement, ($n = 217$ units) was a way for these stepmothers to provide encouragement for the initial poster dealing with stress related to their roles. Many times it included statements of good luck, hope, or requests for updates on a current situation, for example, "Hang in there. You'll get through it." (#005-2). Other times it was a simple statement that welcomed new members to the group to give them hope that they were not alone in their struggles, "First and foremost – welcome!" (#022-4).

Not all of the sub-categories for emotional support were identified within this data set. Sub-categories 5a, relationship, which stressed the importance of closeness and love between the initial poster and the responder, 5b, physical affection, which offered physical contact, hugs, and kisses between the initial poster and the responder, 5c, confidentiality, which gave responders a chance to express keeping the information from the initial poster confidential, and 5g, prayer, which allowed responders to pray with the recipient did not appear in this data set. A logical argument for this absence would be the online nature of the relationship between giver and receiver of support. Not being face-to-face, or having little relational history may have impeded the exchange of these types of support.

Informational support. Informational support accounted for 30% (*n* = 1,821 units) of the total coded response units. Sub-category 1a, suggestions, focused on the support giver's comments which offered ideas, suggestions, advice, and opinions concerning the situation. This advice accounted for 1,274 units, and can be seen in this example from one stepmother who was attempting to present ideas on what to do while spending time with the stepchild(ren), which was a great concern for non-custodial stepmothers who were unfamiliar with interacting with their stepchildren. She (#014-3)) states:

> We do lots of projects that involve coloring and painting. Last week I had a
> big box and we colored and made it a big house with a yard. There are lots
> of projects at Michael's (don't know if you have those craft stores). This is
> both of my SK [stepkids] not just SD [stepdaughter]. We also go to the park
> and library.

This sub-category was useful in cataloguing simple ideas and suggestions like these, as well as more complex issues concerning how to handle marital conflict, discipline issues with stepchildren, or how to handle the biological mother relationship. One custodial stepmother was asked if she would still marry her husband knowing what she knows now about being a custodial stepmother. She reflects on her experience, and provides valuable information in the form of advice almost as a warning for other stepmothers not to make the same mistakes she did. She (#121-27) reflects:

> I wouldn't have been so intimidated by BM [biological mother]. I would
> have opened up to my in-laws sooner. I would have welcomed BM

[biological mother] into my life immediately, instead of considering her an adversary for the first 3 years. I would have not wasted so much time being jealous that she had kids with him [husband] instead of me, and instead, been grateful that she is sharing her children with me.

Sub-category 1b, referral (*n* = 37 units), categorized comments which directed the recipient to some other source of help or information. This included other support websites, websites pertaining to stepfamily life, and therapists or counselors to help with stepfamily issues. A custodial stepmother (#123-12) had this to say with regards to switching from non-custodial to custodial status, "Get counseling. SD [stepdaughter] has a counselor and we go sometimes for family counseling." To ensure mutually exclusive categories, this particular category grouped referrals pertaining to help outside of the online support group (category 4, network support, offered help from other stepmothers inside the online support group). For an example of 4c (companions), one response pointed a distraught stepmother to another support group user's post because she had made specific comments related to an issue this stepmother was currently facing with the biological mother's aggressive boyfriend. She (#133-7) writes, "[User] entered a post about internet stalking on 1/13, in Legal Issues [another forum], Internet stalking/annoyance is now a federal crime. You might want to give it a look."

Situational appraisal (sub-category 1c, *n* = 296 units) was useful in cataloguing data that reassessed or redefined the situation. Many times, these stepmothers would provide a different perspective which allowed the recipient to look at the situation in a different light. For example, a distraught stepmother was

dealing with her feelings of obligation to watch her husband's daughter for a

majority of the child's summer break, as requested by her husband. One responder

attempts to redefine the situation which may influence this mother's perspective.

She (#006-6) writes:

> However, I think the thing that has helped us sooo much is that when I
>
> married my husband I knew he had 3 girls and I try to not think of them as
>
> his kids but our kids. That helps a great deal, because as a SM [stepmother]
>
> or a mom in general the care and raising of kids does fall on a mom more.
>
> But I'm just saying that the way I view the girls and what role I play in their
>
> lives has helped keep down resentment.

Ultimately, she is encouraging this stepmother to think of the stepchildren as *her*

children, as well, which may in turn affect the relationship that they share.

Finally, teaching (sub-category 1d, $n = 214$ units), provided detailed

information, facts, or news about the situation which helped teach the recipient

something that could help them deal with the situation. One particular custodial

stepmother was seeking advice on how to handle a meeting between the biological

father and herself, the biological mother, and child services to arrange limited

visitation with biological mother after her stepchild had been in the care of child

services for the last four years. One support provider offered a bit of information

that remained more fact based, and provided valuable insight. She (#135-2) states:

> As has been well documented in the press in recent years, child protective
>
> service agencies in MANY states have been found to be highly negligent at
>
> protecting vulnerable children from harm AND have also been known to

recommend that children go back with formerly abusive and neglectful

parents only to have the children die or be harmed again.

As seen here, this fact based information was similar to a warning for this particular

stepmother to be wary of all parties involved when dealing with the visitation rights

regarding her stepchild.

Esteem support. Boosting morale, through compliments and validation of

each other was also apparent in the data, and accounted for 9% ($n = 559$ units) of the

total response units. Compliments (sub-category 3a, $n = 98$ units) were used by

providers to say positive things about other stepmothers and emphasize their ability

to deal with the situation. One responder (#103-8) provided a few compliments to a

custodial stepmother frustrated with her teenage stepdaughter by writing, "I think

that you are doing such a wonderful job. You are doing what every mother

would/should do. You are worried and concerned. You have given up a lot, and

have stepped in when there was a void to fill."

Validation (sub-category 3b, $n = 438$ units) was used to express agreement

with the stepmother's perspective, and was reflected in the data with simple

statements like, "I agree." Additionally, some of the stepmothers would respond

with agreement as to how the stepmother felt about a situation or handled a

situation. For example, one non-custodial stepmother was upset that she and her

husband had no contact with the children for four days, and was becoming

concerned. One stepmother (#018-6) replies, "I'd have been worried too if there was

no call from the s[tep]kids for four days. And I'd be angry that BM [biological

mom] didn't clue you guys in as to what was happening, so you wouldn't worry."

Here, this stepmother is clearly agreeing with the worry and concern expressed by the initial poster. She is not only validating her feelings about the situation, but supporting this stepmother's concern for her stepchildren.

Finally, sub-category 3c, relief of blame, ($n = 23$ units) were comments made by support providers which attempted to alleviate blame or guilt the recipient may have felt about a certain situation. One stepmother initially expressed embarrassment about taking her poorly behaved stepchildren into public places. Another (#115-2) stepmother responded with the following, "However, this is not your fault, your DH [husband] and the BM [biological mom] allowed this behavior to develop." It appeared that when some stepmother's expressed helplessness concerning a stepchild's behavior, support providers would provide statements like these as a way to encourage the stepmother to attribute the stepchild's poor behavior to someone else, usually the biological father, or more often the biological mother.

Miscellaneous. Once again, the miscellaneous category (7%, $n = 412$ units) provided a category for comments that did not fit so well into the existing social supportive behaviors scheme (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Sub-category 6a allowed the stepmother to copy comments from another post and paste it into her post which allowed her to put her comments into the proper context. Sub-category 6b, questions ($n = 226$ units), classified general questions about the situation or questions that asked for clarification from the recipient (e.g., "What did you tell your husband?"). And, sub-category 6c grouped fragment statements like sign-offs (e.g., "Talk soon, Sally").

Emoticons. Within posts, stepmothers used emoticons that accompanied much of the text. The researcher felt it important to code for these emoticons as they provided context and emphasis to much of the verbal text, and was not accounted for with the current coding scheme (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Emoticons (5%, *n* = 316 units), including positive and negative emoticons were used to emphasize verbal text. Additionally, they were often used as a substitute for actual text, and physical contact. For example, since physical contact was impeded, the social support givers used the following, *hugs* or an actual icon of a person holding out their arms to emphasize giving these stepmothers a hug. Emoticons included were positive (e.g., smiley, wink, cheesy, grin), negative (e.g., sad, angry, cry) physical affection (e.g., hugs, kisses), and other (e.g., cool, rolling eyes, sticking tongue out).

Network support. These responses (1%, *n* = 74 units) compartmentalized comments made by providers who offered support from companions within the online support group (sub-category 4c). They often reminded the recipient of the availability of other stepmothers within the online support group who had similar experiences, and who could provide perspective. For example (#106-15), "Make yourself at home because that is where you are now! This place [support group] is a wealth of inspiration, ideas and sympathy! It is a great place to vent and get some validation." Another stepmother (#106-14) wrote, "And you are really going to like the interaction that goes on here. It is unbelievably supportive and constructive. Best of all everyone is on your side."

Sub-categories 4a and 4b were not apparent in this particular data set, as these focused on offering to spend time with the recipient (4a) and offering access to

new companions (4b). Once again, the argument stands that these two sub-

categories might be more relevant for face-to-face support.

Tangible support. Tangible support was not a common theme identified in

the data due to the often face-to-face nature of this type of support. However, sub-

category 2e which classified comments concerning a stepmother's willingness to

help the recipient did appear (< 1%, $n = 7$ units).

Research Question 4

Chi-square goodness of fit. Research Question 4 asked if types of support

offered differ for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers. First, a chi-square

goodness of fit test was run for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers separately

to determine if the categories differ within each group of stepmothers. Results

indicate that social support categories are not equally distributed for custodial

stepmothers, $\chi^2(16, N = 2,643) = 7546.99, p = .000$, and for non-custodial

stepmothers, $\chi^2(16, N = 3,239) = 12,432, p = .000$ (refer to Table 7). In terms of

sub-categories identified in the data, for both types of stepmothers, empathy

(emotional support) was the most prominent theme discussed (40% for custodial

and 48% for non-custodial), and informational support in the form of suggestions

and advice was the second most prominent theme (22% for custodial and 21% for

non-custodial). Additionally, validating each other (esteem support) was an

important way of expressing support (7% for custodial and 8% for non-custodial).

Independent sample t-test. To test for differences in the overall social

support categories *between* custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, the unit of

analysis became the responses to the initial post, and the most prominent social

support category coded. Percentages of the overall categories of social support (i.e., informational, tangible, esteem, network, and emotional) were calculated for each stepmother. For responses to the initial post, the units coded into sub-categories that composed each overall category were added together and divided by the total number of social support units. For example, if 20 units were coded into informational support, and there were 100 units total in the response postings, 20% of the postings were in the informational support category. To get more accurate proportions of just social supportive behaviors, sub-categories 6a (units coded as copying and pasting other posts) and 6c (units coded as fragment sentences and sign-offs) were excluded from the social support total due to the fact that these categories provided little in terms of actual social support..

These average percentages of the overall categories (i.e., informational, tangible, esteem, network, and emotional) were compared *between* custodial and non-custodial stepmothers using an independent sample t-test. One case was deleted from analysis due to a much higher number of coded units ($n = 538$) than the other cases. No significant differences were found for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers for percentage of units falling into the social support categories (refer to Table 8).

Additionally, to determine differences in the sub-categories of social support categories *between* custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, percentages of the sub-categories which were of theoretical importance (i.e., suggestions, situational appraisal, teaching, compliment, validation, companions, sympathy, empathy, encouragement, and questions) were calculated for the response postings. These

percentages were compared using an independent sample t-test with a lowered alpha level or a Bonferroni correction, $p = .01$, to account for conducting multiple t-tests (Abdi, 2007). No significant differences were found for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers for sub-categories of social support categories (refer to Table 9).

Research Question 5

Research Question 5 asked if there were patterns between types of social support enacted in response to certain role strain issues presented for stepmothers. Once again, percentages for each role strain sub-category and social support sub-category were calculated from the total for each stepmother. A correlation was utilized to determine patterns between the percentages of sub-categories for role strain and percentages of social support from the sub-categories selected by the researcher of which were also used in the independent sample t-tests. Table 10 indicates some significant relationships between particular role strain sub-categories and social support sub-categories.

Role strain sub-category correlations. The role strain sub-categories that had a significant positive correlation were interference from the biological mother and investment in the stepmother's stepchildren ($r = .307$, $p < .05$). It appeared that there was a significant association with the actual interference the stepmother was experiencing with the biological mother, and the stepmother's ability to support, protect, and invest in her stepchildren's lives. The more the biological mother was coded as interfering with the stepmother household, the more the stepmother was coded as discussing spending family time with her stepfamily, and wanting to invest in her stepchildren.

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Social support sub-category correlations. Significant positive correlations appeared in a few of the social support sub-categories. Reminding stepmothers of other companions, namely other stepmothers within the online support group, was associated with saying positive things about the stepmother or complementing her on her abilities as a stepmother (esteem support) ($r = .456$, $p < .01$). Additionally, providing the stepmothers with encouragement (emotional support) was associated with saying positive things about the stepmother or expressing compliments (esteem support) ($r = .526$, $p < .01$). These relationships seem likely, as telling the stepmother she is a good stepmother could be considered a form of encouragement, and as it comes from other stepmothers who are in similar situations reminds them of the importance of these companions, or similar network members.

Empathy appeared to be negatively correlated with multiple other social support sub-categories. Empathy was negatively associated with informational types of support like suggestions and ideas ($r = -.351$, $p < .01$), and providing fact based information through teaching ($r = -.274$, $p < .05$). The analysis also showed negative associations between providing understanding through narratives including personal situations and complimenting the stepmothers requesting support ($r = -.353$, $p < .01$). Finally, empathy was negatively correlated with emotional types of support like sympathy ($r = -.273$, $p < .05$), encouragement ($r = -.311$, $p < .05$), and asking questions for clarification and support ($r = -.311$, $p < .05$). One could argue that empathy is more "self" focused, and sympathy, encouragement, and asking questions are more "other" focused which is why the matrix indicates a negative relationships between these variables.

Role strain and social support sub-category correlations. Offering

suggestions and advice (informational support) for how the stepmother could spend

time with her stepchildren (investment) was significantly positively correlated ($r =$

.478, $p < .01$). As some of the descriptive text shows, many times these stepmothers

wanted to know *how* to spend time with their stepchildren, or *what* to do with their

stepchildren when they were in the stepmother home. Providing practical ideas like

going to the park, making crafts, or doing chores together was a popular response

for many of these women. Another significant positive relationship was between

teaching (informational support) and the children's visiting schedule ($r = .368, p <$

.01). When issues with the visiting schedule of the stepchildren arose, some

responses contained more fact based information like perspectives related to what

the law says, parental rights, and instances related to what had happened to them in

the past in terms of visiting rights. These two correlations above are important in

that these stepmothers offered practical information concerning more controllable

events like how to interact with their stepchildren, and how to address issues they

may not have as much control over, like when the stepchildren are present in the

stepmother home.

Some stepmothers expressed having negative feelings about their

stepchildren, and manifested itself as frustration, dislike, and also hate toward the

children as individuals. The correlation matrix revealed a significant positive

relationship between these negative feelings toward the stepchildren and validation

(esteem support) from other stepmothers as a social supportive response ($r = .385, p$

$< .01$). Social support providers responded with agreement concerning the

stepmother's negative views of her stepchildren. It was as simple as "I agree" or as complex as outlining the particular points of agreement, usually related to specific behaviors the stepmother's were upset with. In the end, these stepmothers were receiving an endorsement from each other which validated the frustration and dislike they were experiencing toward their stepchildren.

Finally, expressing the need to escape from the demands of her role as stepmother was positively associated with responses reminding these stepmothers of the availability of other stepmothers or companions (network support) who were experiencing some of the same issues ($r = .300$, $p < .05$). So, as stepmothers felt a lack of control, and a desire to abandon their role as stepmother, they were reminded of the importance of their online community, and other stepmothers who could help with their current situation. These uncontrollable aspects of stepmotherhood were addressed by providing comfort through relationships with others within the online network. Additionally, as issues concerning disciplining the stepchildren arose, these stepmothers were again reminded of the availability of other companions online who were experiencing similar situations (network support) ($r = .266$, $p <$ .05). This custodial stepmother welcomes a newcomer to the group by emphasizing a sense of belonging to the group. She (#136-3) writes, "You aren't alone anymore. We're all here to offer comfort, support, wisdom, laughter." The reiteration of similar situational factors reminded these stepmothers that they were not alone, and that there is an availability of support that may not be as accessible with their family and face-to-face friends due to the social stigma surrounding their stepmother status.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to identify types of role strain and social supportive behaviors utilized within on online social support group for childless stepmothers. By employing a stress and coping framework, multiple factors that affect the mental and emotional health of these women emanated from the conversations these stepmothers had with each other within this online group. Chi-square goodness of fit tests revealed prominent themes of role strain such as the living arrangements and visiting schedules of the stepchildren, as well as the uncertainty inherent in how to act toward the biological mother, and the actual interference of the biological mother in the functioning of the stepmother household. Although no significant differences were found between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, correlations among all childless stepmothers revealed interesting relationships between role strain and offered social support with informational and emotional support being the most commonly coded social support categories. This study expands the current literature in three important ways 1) this study extends previous research on stepmother role clarity by pinpointing specific issues and relationships which impact the role strain stepmother's experience, 2) within a stress and coping framework, this report focuses on the reappraisal process and coping efforts by analyzing actual messages written and received online, and 3) this study extends the literature concerning online social support and the advantages of using weak tie networks not only for medical based issues, but relationship based issues, as well.

Research Question 1, Hypothesis 1, and Research Question 2 all addressed types of role strain evident in the data and tested whether there were any differences between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, while Research Question 3, Research Question 4 and Research Question 5 focused on the types of social support offered, and the correlations that emerged between role strain and social support. The following interpretation examines what this study's findings mean, and how these findings might spur continued research on stepmother/father households.

Extending the Focus of Stepmother Role Clarity

Overall, the current study encouraged an examination of role clarity in a more comprehensive way, by focusing on role strain (i.e., multiple stressors with multiple individuals within the stepfamily unit). As Johnson et al. (2008) found, role ambiguity influenced perceived stress among childless stepmothers, and consequently lowered marital satisfaction. Additionally, Fine, Coleman, and Ganong (1998) examined how clearly defining the stepparent role remained elusive due to inconsistent perceptions from parents, stepchildren, and stepparents. Based on this evidence, it is clear that childless stepmothers are confronted with confusion and frustration regarding their role as stepmother; however, more explicitly, the present inquiry indicates stress is compounded when other relationships such as the spousal relationship and interactions with the biological mother are considered, as well.

This analysis challenges the common assumption that role clarity is primarily defined by the relationship the stepmother has with the stepchildren (Fine, 1995), and identifies the importance of the relationship these stepmothers maintain

with the biological mother, and the relationship these stepmothers have with their spouses, as well. For example, Research Question 1 asked what types of role strain were evident in the conversations among these women. The data suggest that issues related to the stepchildren, such as how the stepmother feels about her stepchildren, how to discipline them, and their living arrangements and visiting schedules, are at the forefront in creating role strain. However, these women also convey issues surrounding the support, or lack thereof, from their spouses regarding stepchildcare, disciplining the stepchildren, and major decisions regarding the stepchild's welfare. Additionally, the uncertainty regarding how to act toward the biological mother and the actual interference of the biological mother in the stepmother home also creates a sense of confusion and ambiguity, thus promoting role strain.

Hypothesis 1 and Research Question 2 attempted to extend this comparison by looking at differences between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, but found no significant differences between these two groups. But, within the correlation analysis for Research Question 5, interesting relationships between role strain and social support emerged. The following sections outline a more detailed explanation of the role strain findings for particular stepmother relationships, and the social support offered in response to these stressors.

Stepchild(ren). Issues with the stepchildren accounted for over one half of the role strain data. In response to Research Question 1, results indicate that the living arrangements ($n = 130$) and the visiting schedule ($n = 155$) of the stepchild were prominent themes discussed by these stepmothers. There were mixed emotions in their discussions of current living arrangements and visiting schedules, as some

stepmothers expressed wanting to be with their stepchildren more often, and others

wanting to be with their stepchildren less often, but all resulting in a disruption of

the stepmother home due to these issues. Additionally, the subject matter of some

discussion boards was related to disciplining the stepchildren ($n = 106$), extra

expenses related to the stepchild (i.e., paying biological mother child support, $n =$

70), and concerns of spending family time together, and/or giving guidance and

support to the stepchildren ($n = 100$). Finally, a small portion of stepmothers

expressed a loving, positive relationship with their stepchild ($n = 10$), but most

expressed feelings of frustration, dislike, and confusion regarding this relationship

($n = 144$). These categories of role strain show a range of issues stepmothers have

with their stepchildren; however, in an attempt to understand more about the

conversations between these women, the current analysis also identified significant

correlations between types of role strain and types of social support paying special

attention to the stepmother/stepchild relationship.

For example, Cutrona and Suhr (1992) argue that informational types of

support are often common when confronted with controllable life events. For

Research Question 5, the correlation analysis provided clarification for how

stepmothers responded to each other with informational types of support when

presented with particular role strain issues regarding the stepchildren. When

stepmothers wrote about spending family time together, the responses were in the

form of suggestions ($r = .478$, $p < .01$). Playing games, making greeting cards for

family members, cleaning house, and going to the park were all very practical things

that these women could take away with them and implement in their daily lives.

The correlation analysis for Research Question 5 also indicated that information regarding the stepchild's visiting schedule was of importance to these stepmothers. Johnson et al. (in press) argue that major decisions regarding the stepchild's custodial status, visitation schedule, and child support are often made by legal personnel with little concern for how these decisions will affect the stepparent's life. Here, the data suggest that providing detailed facts or news were given as a response to stepmothers expressing difficulty with their stepchild's visiting schedule ($r = .368$, $p < .01$). In order to demonstrate this point, in response to visiting schedule issues, some stepmothers provided detailed information concerning how the court system worked, which in turn allowed them to communicate boundaries and provide practical help with how to address delicate legal issues.

Practically, requesting ideas for how to invest in or disengage from their stepchildren, and how to confront issues directly related to the stepchild's visiting schedule and its affect on the stepmother's home spurred more responses focused on what these stepmothers could do to change their situation in the form of informational support. Research has identified resources that are available for childless stepmothers, like education classes, reading materials, or specific strategies stepparents can use to maintain stronger relationships within their stepfamilies (Kaufman, 1993; Papernow, 1993); however, the current study has outlined what stepmothers *are* doing, not what they *could* do to address role strain. Consequently, this online forum not only provided a place to give suggestions for action to those who desperately needed it, but provided a unique look at what these women *are*

doing in their own situations. More importantly, these examples are not only relevant for those involved in this online forum, but for others such as practitioners and family counselors who could modify and implement these suggestions into their own interactions with stepmothers. Clinicians and therapists should begin to weigh the use of online support as a viable option for their patients and communities. The author does not advocate the elimination of highly trained professionals who provide much needed services to stepfamily members, but challenges these professionals to consider becoming the link which connects stepmothers with additional resources such as online social support, given its many benefits. In addition to the stress that comes along with being a stepmother, another influential relationship which highly impacts the clarity of the stepmother role is the relationship the stepmother shares with her spouse.

Spousal support. Results of the chi-square goodness of fit tests for Research Question 2 revealed that issues related to the lack of support from the spouse with regards to disciplining the stepchildren, stepparenting, and being involved in decisions concerning the stepchildren was greater than the expected frequency (custodial observed $n = 77$ and expected $n = 52$, non-custodial observed $n = 76$ and expected $n = 37.7$, $p = .000$). Some stepmothers wrote about their spouse's ability to provide support with these issues, but some stepmothers wrote about a lack of support from their husbands. Steil (2000) summarizes current research on the unequal partnership of marriage claiming that wives provide more emotional support for their husbands than husbands provide for their wives, which may also be the case for these stepmothers. At times, these women discuss the lack of support

they receive from their husbands, but appear to be finding this support within the online group.

Stepmothers feel undermined, invisible, and unable to adequately deal with disciplining the stepchildren when there is a lack of support from the spouse because of the impact of the myth of the wicked stepmother (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000). Current findings indicate a positive correlation between discipline issues with the stepchildren and receiving social support in the form of network support. Stepmothers who respond with social support are reminding stepmothers dealing with discipline issues related to their stepchild of the availability of other stepmothers in the group who have had similar experiences ($r = .266, p < .05$). Hochschild (1989) found that when women compared their marital relationships and responsibilities to that of other women, as opposed to comparing themselves to their husbands, they were more satisfied with their current situations. As stepmothers battle negative stereotypes, lack of support from their husbands, and stepchild discipline, they may find comfort in comparing themselves to other stepmothers instead of the spouse to gauge their success or failure. The availability of possible stepmother-to-stepmother comparisons makes this heterogeneous group of women that much more important, as many of these stepmothers have found an alternative way of measuring their success as stepmothers. Besides the significant relationship these stepmothers maintain with their stepchildren and their spouse, one final relationship was identified as a prominent source of stress, the relationship with the biological mother.

Biological mother. Interaction with the biological mother, which accounted for one fourth of the role strain themes identified from the stepmothers' postings, was of much concern for these women. Since non-custodial biological *mothers* are more involved in their children's lives as compared to non-custodial biological *fathers* (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988), the stepmother/biological mother relationship is strained as potential power issues emerge. Stepmothers who had no children of their own prior to a remarriage were found to expect to be more involved in disciplining their stepchild, making stepfamily decisions, and partnering with their husband in the daily functioning of the stepfamily (Orchard & Solberg, 1999). However, Nielsen (1999) argues that white middle and upper class women discourage other adult relationships with their children, which may lead to heightened conflict between these stepmothers and the biological mothers. More importantly, society's negative portrayals of stepmothers, the mother's and stepmother's personality, the stepchildren's gender and mental health, and the father's relationship with the biological mother all affect stepmother stress (Neilsen, 1999). The present analyses indicate that for these stepmothers, the more they discussed issues regarding spending family time together, or expressing a desire to protect or support their stepchildren, the more they discussed the interference of the biological mother in their relationships with their stepchildren and their spouse ($r = .307$, $p < .05$). For childless stepmothers, the desire to somehow become a part of the family may be interfering with the biological mother's desire to maintain her "mother" role in the family.

However, Orchard and Solberg (1999) also found that when self-reporting, "stepmothers strongly and consistently agreed that they did not expect to replace the children's mother nor compete with her" (p. 116). Whether these women were able to enact this ideal is illustrated by the data from this study. The present inquiry identified how these stepmothers wrote about experiencing conflicting loyalties, where the stepchildren compared the stepmother to the biological mother, or sometimes discussed how the stepchildren wanted to spend more time with the stepmother but felt guilty about expressing this to their biological mother for fear of hurting her. With the biological mother's possible perception of encroachment upon her role as mother, and the stepmother's desire to become an important member of the stepfamily unit, conflict, hurt feelings, and miscommunication seem inevitable. This conflict may continue to be spurred by the stepmother's accurate and/or inaccurate perceptions of the interference of the biological mother, and also the biological mother's accurate and/or inaccurate perceptions of the interference of the stepmother. It seems important that the biological mother and the stepmother work together to begin the process of helping to define the stepmother role, as it could reduce stress for both the biological mother and her interactions with the stepmother household. If clear boundaries and communicative rules are established between these women, the stress associated with such a relationship could be decreased. Additionally, by pursuing questions related to these perceptions and the actual communicative practices employed by these women, models for positive, functional, and effective communication may be established between these women.

These numerous factors are crucial in understanding the delicate relationship between the stepmother and the biological mother. The current study agrees with Nielsen (1999) that more research is needed which focuses solely on the stepmother/biological mother relationship, and the unique impact this relationship has on the functioning of the stepfamily. In addition to the biological mother's influence on stepmother role clarity, the current study focused on the custodial status of the stepchildren as it relates to role clarity. The following addresses the lack of differences found between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers in the current analysis, and possible explanations for these non-significant findings.

Custodial vs. non-custodial. An important aspect of the current study was to test for expected differences in the amount and type of role strain discussed by custodial and non-custodial childless stepmothers. For Hypothesis 1 and the independent sample t-tests for Research Question 2, no differences were found between the amount of overall role strain and the sub-categories of role strain experienced by custodial and non-custodial stepmothers based on the number of units coded for each role strain category or the average percentages of role strain calculated for each stepmother. These findings do not support the current stepfamily literature's suggestion that custodial stepmothers experience more role clarity with regards to the relationship they share with their stepchild(ren) (Orchard & Solberg, 1999). As Hypothesis 1 states, the researcher expected non-custodial stepmothers to experience more role strain due to the many factors that impact the stepmother's relationship with her stepchild(ren), including lack of time to create safe boundaries and regular rules for interaction. One statistical reason for these non-significant

differences could be the small sample size. The initial sample was small to begin with, but as duplicate usernames were eliminated from analyses to ensure independence of observations, the sample grew even smaller, making it difficult to identify any differences between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers.

On the other hand, past research has failed to examine childless stepmothers, and the impact, or lack thereof, that custodial status may have on role strain. Johnson et al. (2008) found a positive, but non-significant relationship between stepchild residency and role clarity. A post-hoc contrast just shy of reaching significance indicated that role clarity was highest for fully residential stepmothers, and lowest for mostly nonresidential stepmothers (i.e., lives most of the time with biological mother). Although this relationship was in the predicted direction, the stepchild's residency and stepmother role clarity remains convoluted as differing degrees of residential status are considered.

In the present report, the fact that no differences were found between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers could also be attributed to the fact that custodial and non-custodial *childless* stepmothers have similar difficulty in relating to and creating safe boundaries with their stepchildren because they are facing the role of "mother" without any previous experience (no biological children of their own). Results from the chi-square goodness of fit tests indicate that both custodial and non-custodial stepmothers had higher frequencies of role strain than expected on reporting issues related to their relationship with the stepchildren (custodial observed $n = 430$ and expected $n = 221$, non-custodial observed $n = 314$ and expected $n = 179.3$, $p = .000$) and issues related to their relationship with the

biological mother (custodial observed $n = 242$ and expected $n = 221$, non-custodial observed $n = 196$ and expected $n = 179.3$, $p = .000$). Although the independent sample t-tests found no significant differences between the proportions of role strain for custodial and non-custodial stepmothers, these high proportions indicate that *all* childless stepmothers, regardless of custodial status are confronted with significant stress related to their role as stepmother.

Whitsett and Land (1992b) argued that stress increases when an individual takes on roles out of expected sequence (i.e., becoming a wife and a mother simultaneously). A lack of clarity about their roles and the strain associated with this ambiguousness and uncertainty may be similar for custodial and non-custodial childless stepmothers because their custodial status temporarily takes a back seat as they deal with other relationship focused and problem focused issues with stepchildren and the biological mother. Further research which examines childless stepmothers is needed to fully understand if these findings can be generalized to other childless stepmothers, or if the lack of differences found here are unique to this sample.

Ganong and Coleman (2004) highlight the importance of studying the stepmother/father household, as a majority of the research to date has examined mother/stepfather families. The acknowledgement of multiple relationships and confusing issues which highly impact the functioning and health of the stepmother/father household is a step in the right direction for stepfamily research. The current report also considered what relational and topical issues *childless* stepmothers commonly face. Stepmothers with no biological children of their own

often express feeling hurt, confused, and uncertain they would make the same decision to marry their spouses knowing what they currently know about being a childless stepmother. The current study pinpointed specific factors that influence the lack of role clarity stepmothers feel in order to spur continued research on this key population. Next, this paper discusses a second major implication of the present study, the reappraisal and coping process.

Stress and Coping

   Reappraisal. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identify stress as a transactional process where individuals interact with their environment to continuously redefine the situation. Primary appraisals which ask the question, "Is this person or event stressful?" can be categorized as harmful, threatening, or challenging, while secondary appraisals ask, "What might or can be done in response to the stressful person or situation?" By examining an online support group for childless stepmothers, these women have answered "yes" to the primary appraisal, "Is this person or event stressful?" because they have actively sought out a community of other women who share similar stressors associated with being a stepmother. They have also provided thoughtful and interesting answers in an attempt to provide support regarding what could be done in response to stressful life events that stepmothers face (secondary appraisals). Results of the chi-square goodness of fit tests for Research Question 4 indicate that most responses emerged in the form of emotional support ($n = 2,879$) and informational support ($n = 1,821$), which coincides with previous research on online support groups (Wright, 2002).

This study focused on social support responses as a way to address secondary appraisals through a "reappraisal" process, or by reframing the situation. By examining the units coded as informational support (i.e., suggestions, referral, situational appraisal, and teaching) and emotional support (i.e., sympathy, empathy, and encouragement) the data reveal an attempt by these stepmothers to redefine the conflict surrounding their role strain, and encourage each other to "reappraise" their harmful or threatening situations into a challenge or opportunity for personal growth.

Through conveying understanding, these women also provided ways for stepmothers to reappraise or reframe their stepfamily situation. For example, by offering informational support in more explicit terms like practical solutions and attempts to provide alternate perspectives to stressful situations, these women provided a sense of control over their situation, which helped them reappraise the current situation. One non-custodial stepmother was struggling with the immature and reckless behavior of the biological mother, and the children's desire to continue to reside with the biological mother. She (# 024) writes, "They [stepchildren] are so upset, but still they want to go home to her [biological mother], which I can't understand why they would rather live with her verse[u]s their Dad who never lets them down." One responder focused on the current situation by attempting to provide multiple reasons why the stepchildren desire to remain with their mother. She (#024-2) concludes:

> I think it's because she's mom, they love her, they miss her, they want the
> unattainable. They are only children, and don't understand the big picture. I

think the promise of things returning to "normal" after 6 months was an

unfortunate because they'll never really settle in if they know things will

change. Why get comfortable if you're not going to stay? Or maybe they feel

like if they don't live there, BM [biological mother] will forget about them,

whereas they know that Dad will always be there? Or maybe they just miss

their school and friends and neighborhood.

Here, the responder implied that the stepchildren wanting to be with their mother

had little to do with the stepmother's abilities to provide a good home for the

stepchildren. The initial poster saw this situation as a personal attack against her as

the stepmother, but the responder was able to reframe the stepchildren's choice to

implicate other factors not directly associated with her role as a stepmother. The

stepmother's realization of additional influences that guide the stepchildren's living

arrangements provided an alternative perspective and alleviated the challenge to her

stepmother role which she perceived as being present. In addition to identifying the

reappraisal process, the current study focused on coping efforts present within this

online group. Next, how this study examined coping efforts using weak tie networks

will be discussed.

Coping efforts using weak tie networks. In past research, the availability

of social support has depended heavily on close family, friends, and/or face-to-face

network members, also known as strong tie networks (Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht,

1987). The current study joins other research in challenging the idea that face-to-

face social support is beneficial for everyone, and argues that the involvement in a

weak tie network which provides support can be highly advantageous (Weinberg et

al., 1995; Wright, 2002; Wright & Bell, 2003). Adelman, Parks, and Albrecht (1987) claim that one of the most beneficial features of weak tie networks is its access to information and the ability to compare oneself to others. Additionally, Cutrona and Suhr (1992) argue that matching the type of support with a specific stressor is highly beneficial to emotional and mental health. As the current study did not use survey data which would have asked about the effectiveness of the support given, "matching" certain types of social support to certain types of role strain was not as relevant here. However, the results of the correlation matrix for Research Question 5 did reveal how role strain issues were associated with social supportive behaviors. This was not done in an attempt to "match" role strain with social support, but was an attempt to identify responses which could be labeled as coping efforts (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Certainly, one of the important characteristics of the present analyses was the examination of multiple social supportive responses to an initial poster, which is contrary to the "matching" hypothesis which proposes matching one particular social supportive response to one particular life stressor (Curtrona & Suhr, 1992). Results revealed an average of 11.08 posts in response to the initial poster's role strain issue. These numerous responses to role strain represent many perspectives from which the stepmother seeking support can select the most useful advice from her perspective. If stepmothers are able to freely select from these multiple offers of social support, there appears to be no need to "match" support to role strain, because the recipient can choose which types of support are most beneficial to her at the time. These multiple perspectives also allow stepmothers to choose a combination

of social supportive responses that may meet different needs. For example, a stepmother may need information to make a tough decision regarding the discipline of her stepchild, but gaining encouragement from other stepmothers to actually implement what she's learned may be just as important.

Through examining the provision of multiple social support attempts to one individual's situation, the social supportive process now becomes a personal endeavor where stepmothers identify support that helps their coping process, and can choose to ignore supportive responses that may hinder their coping process. Wright (2002) argues that online support groups can provide a place for individuals confronted with similar health related issues. More specifically, within an online cancer community, Wright (2003) found that people, "enjoyed the opportunity of finding specialized information and emotional support exchanges about specific types of cancer by participating in tailored discussions within the community" (p. 45). As stepmothers experience a sense of similarity with other stepmothers within this online community, they are simultaneously exposed to multiple perspectives. Access to this information could increase the chances that these stepmothers are able to compare themselves to very similar others while gaining multiple points of view, thus enhancing the chances that the stepmother finds support she deems as effective and increasing coping efforts. Next, this paper addresses the third major implication of the current study, expanding the research delineating the usefulness of online social support.

Implications for Online Social Support

  Relationship based online support groups. One unique aspect of this online support group lies in its focus on relationship based issues, not medically related issues (for exception see Dunn, Hurshman, Litwin, Gusella, Ellsworth, & Dodd, 1998). The work of past researchers in identifying the usefulness of weak tie networks to battle mental and physical disease is important in its on right, and has provided a template with which to study the mental, physical, and emotional benefits of online social support (Finn, 1999; Sullivan, 2003; Weinberg et al., 1995; Wright, 2002; Wright & Bell, 2003). However, stepmothers are faced with difficult issues surrounding their roles as stepmothers, spouses, and in-laws, and identifying the benefits of this online forum could encourage a more comprehensive lens with which to examine online support and, more importantly, its ability to help individuals in the maintenance of their offline relationships. With the emergence of more support groups focused on relationally based issues, a better understanding of interpersonal processes developed online and transported offline could be discovered. The present analyses argue that stepfamily relationships oftentimes bring with them compounded stress, with limited resources for coping. By engaging in weak tie networks to handle relationship based issues like the ones mentioned here, more avenues to effectively maintain sensitive offline relationships (i.e., the relationship with the biological mother, the spouse, the stepchildren, and other extended familial ties) emerge. As some offline relationships are tricky, sticky, and wrought with conflict, online support groups may provide many ideas on how to interact with important offline personal relationships, and a place to test possible

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communication strategies where valuable feedback is offered. Online support groups in comparison with face-to-face social support offer a somewhat anonymous forum with many benefits which will be outlined next.

Online versus face-to-face support. Adelman, Parks, and Albrecht (1987) emphasize the importance of weak tie networks to provide low risk discussions of high risk topics. Practically, online support has offered stigmatized groups, like stepmothers, a refuge to vent, get advice, and maintain valued relationships with similar others. The stigma surrounding stepmothers is difficult to see, as it is not a physically recognizable one (Dainton, 1993), but when their status as stepmother is discovered outside of the online group, the negative stereotypes associated with being a stepmother come to the surface, and anonymity and safety is lost. Data indicated this group of childless stepmothers often expressed negative feelings like frustration, hate, and dislike toward their stepchildren ($n = 144$). Within relationships outside of this network, or face-to-face relationships, expressing these negative feelings could stigmatize the stepmother even more, consequently enforcing the stereotype of the wicked stepmother these women so desperately try to avoid. More importantly, the correlation analysis for Research Question 5 revealed that expressing these negative feelings about their stepchildren was positively associated with validation from other stepmothers ($r = .385, p < .01$). In essence, these stepmothers found a forum to express their frustration with their stepchildren where other stepmothers agreed with their assessment of the situation, and provided validation for those negative assessments without judgment. This is important, as it becomes a safe place to express these negative feelings to similar others instead of

expressing these negative feelings to their spouse or stepchildren which could have a significant negative impact.

One important note to make is that although these stepmothers may view the validation of these negative feelings they have toward their stepchildren as supportive and helpful, another examination of this type of supportive response could be interpreted differently. Stepmothers should be careful that the validation of these negative feelings is not creating a self-fulfilling prophecy where they are encouraging bad attitudes toward their stepchildren, and perpetuating cycles of unhealthy stepmother/stepchild relationships.

Another unique aspect of online social support as compared to face-to-face support lies in its twenty-four hour a day availability. As life becomes busy negotiating living arrangements, visiting schedules, school activities, and spending time alone with their spouses, the availability of support at any time of the day is a valuable resource for these stepmothers which face-to-face support does not provide. With online support being available twenty-four hours a day, the stress of finding a time to "meet" is eliminated, and makes way for the opportunity for coping to occur. Obviously, face-to-face support does not allow for this type of convenience, and could hinder stepmothers in need of support from actually receiving it. Dunham et al. (1998) studied a sample of young single mothers who were given access to a computer-mediated social support network. They found that these women were able to get information concerning parenting issues, discuss parenting stresses, and receive emotional and informational support. They also found that those mothers who actively participated in the computer-mediated

support group reported lowered levels of parenting stress. For this particular community, the opportunity to connect with other single young mothers was essential in addressing the stresses of parenthood.

Similar to the sample of young single mothers examined by Dunham et al. (1998), the current sample of childless stepmothers expressed a deep sense of community which significantly lowered stress levels associated with parenting. The current correlation results suggest that as stepmothers express a desire to escape from their roles as stepmothers they are reminded of others within the community who care about them and their situations ($r = .300$, $p < .05$). Additionally, the more these stepmothers were coded as validating each other, the more they were also coded as providing encouraging comments to one another ($r = .526$, $p < .01$). For some of these mothers, the validation, encouragement, and sense of community they receive within this online community may not be matched by outside friends or family members attempting to provide social support.

Unfortunately, one of the major drawbacks of using online support groups is the need for computer access, which may not be available to all stepmothers. Although libraries, schools, and internet cafes are increasing the availability of such technologies, the time, energy, and knowledge it takes to make online support groups a part of everyday life can be difficult, thus hindering access to such valuable networks. Consequently, limited access to this type of support could possibly increase stepmother stress and decrease coping efforts. In addition to the findings discussed above, other elements of importance emerged from this study which deserves attention.

Coding Scheme Issues

The use of the Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) coding scheme was useful in outlining the types of support given in the response postings, but consequently, using an established coding scheme tailored for face-to-face support encounters was complicated at times. The lack of face-to-face interaction made some of the categories not as relevant.

First, offering tangible assistance appeared only once in the data. Offering loans, offering to perform tasks directly related to stress, offering to take over some of the stepmothers responsibilities while she was under stress, and offering to join the stepmother in some form of action to reduce the stress were absent in the current data set. Expressing a willingness to help was the only type of tangible assistance offered, and was rarely present.

Second, some forms of network support (i.e., access and presence) were not useful in the current analysis. Offering to provide the stepmother with access to new companions and offering to spend time with the stepmother were once again more focused on a face-to-face type relationship. Third, certain types of emotional support were not as prevalent as others. As this study argues, online support groups viewed as a weak tie network might not provide certain types of emotional support due to the partial anonymity or lack of relational history inherent in the group. For example, stressing the importance of the closeness and love between stepmothers within the group, offering physical affection like hugs and kisses, promising confidentiality, and offering to pray with the stepmother are all possible appropriate forms of support for stressful situations; however, a lack of relational history and a

certain amount of anonymity may inhibit these stepmothers from exhibiting these types of support. Wright (2000) discusses the difficulty of contacting the same person to form long-term relationships with individuals in online support groups, thus making it challenging and sometimes problematic to determine how weak ties become stronger ties, or if they even do.

Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) coding scheme also needed slight modifications to account for conversational parts of the data that could not be categorized under the current coding scheme. The author added two important categories, miscellaneous and emoticons, which provided additional options for coding the types of support given. Stepmothers would often cut and paste a section of a previous post, then type their message below in direct response to a certain portion of a message they were responding to. This provided some context for the coders which helped with the coding process. Stepmothers also asked questions for clarification and questions which probed deeper into the situations these childless stepmothers were facing. It appeared they used these questions as a way to show interest for those stepmothers struggling with role strain, and gather valuable information which may have guided additional social supportive responses ($n =$ 226). The emoticons coded were extremely valuable in helping to categorize units before and after their placement in the text. These emoticons also helped provide some nonverbal cues which would otherwise be absent within an online forum such as this one. Once again, these types of categories are not included in coding schemes tailored for face-to-face interactions and deserve more attention from researchers.

One limitation was the lack of demographic information available to the researcher to conduct additional analyses which may have included number of stepchild(ren) in the household, the sex of the stepchild(ren), or even a more detailed understanding of the residency of the stepchild(ren). Associations between these types of variables and role strain issues reported by childless stepmothers are of great value, and should be considered in future research on stepfamilies. The researcher attempted to gather this information from the president of the website, but was unsuccessful in doing so.

Another limitation that had a significant impact on the reporting of results was the small sample size. Significant differences between custodial and non-custodial stepmothers may have been identified if a larger sample was available for analyses. Additionally, the lack of differences found between groups could be attributed to the large standard deviations inherent in the comparison of the average percentages of the categories for each stepmother, as for some stepmothers, a category would contain 0% of the data while other stepmothers would contain 75% of that same category.

Also, there was some difficulty in maintaining clear boundaries between some of the social support sub-categories. The coders were challenged by the many personal narratives written by these childless stepmothers, and how to differentiate narratives that provided information versus narratives that provided empathy (emotional support). It appeared that the personal narratives gave examples of how to deal with a certain situation (information), by expressing their understanding or

explaining they had been confronted with a similar situation (empathy). Although the actual percent agreement for all social support categories (including sub-categories) was 74%, the Cohen's Kappa (1960) for all of these categories was .64, which was lower than desired.

Braithwaite and colleagues (1999) experienced similar issues when using the same coding scheme for an online support group for people with disabilities. As this appears to be problematic for a number of researchers, others who use Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) coding scheme should outline specific coding rules to help regulate the overlap between these sub-categories, and should consider using other social support coding schemes which may fit the data more parsimoniously such as Barbee and Cunningham (1995), Bradbury and Pasch (1994), or Burleson (1985).

Finally, the researcher acknowledges the use of a positivist approach to the current study. This same data set could benefit from a more interpretive approach, which could enhance the statistical results found here with richer descriptive explanations of the conversations of childless stepmothers. For example, researchers could focus on the dialectical tensions between the stepmother and the stepchild(ren), the stepmother and the spouse, and the stepmother and the biological mother. Understanding how these boundaries are defined and maintained would be highly beneficial.

Conclusion

The current study has theoretical and practical applications which build on previous research on family communication, including much needed attention to the stepmother/father household (Campbell, 1995; Christian, 2005; Johnson et al., 2008;

Jones, 2004; Neilsen, 1999; Weaver & Coleman, 2005), and some of the unique issues confronting this stepfamily unit. Additionally, the current study focused on the continued importance of identifying stressors experienced by custodial and non-custodial stepmothers. Finally, results are intriguing in relation to how *childless* stepmothers face role strain. Further research is needed in all of these areas. More questions remain as to how stepmother/father households function differently from and similarly to mother/stepfather households. Although no significant differences emerged with regards to custodial status, the residency and custodial status of the stepchild should be continuously considered, as previous research indicates this as an important variable in determining role clarity (Fine, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). More importantly, additional focus needs to be placed on the differences and similarities of childless stepmothers and stepmothers with biological children of their own. This study establishes an understanding of overall role strain by including multiple stressors and multiple relational factors. Further analyses which include triangulation would be helpful in parsing out such complex variables and relationships.

By utilizing a content analysis and examining actual messages created and exchanged by these women, this study offered an analysis of intimate thoughts and feelings expressed within this online group of childless stepmothers. These written messages included valuable text, but this study could not provide self-report data concerning how the writing process itself was possibly therapeutic. Weinberg et al. (1995) and Wright and Bell (2003) express that writing down problems in an online forum can provide individuals with distance from their problems in order to reflect

and gain insight. Future research should consider this aspect of online support groups and its advantages and disadvantages.

Finally, previous research has mainly focused on the use of face-to-face social support or medical, or disease related online support groups. This study argued that online support groups focused on relational issues can be extremely useful for individuals being stigmatized due to a personal role they fulfill and the relational conflict that accompanies those roles. As Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest, coping can be as simple as the effort put forth in dealing with stress, and can be independent of the actual success or failure of the supportive interaction. Practically, this study showed how informational and emotional support can be used to reframe stressful appraisals of stepmother role strain into ways of exploring how stepmothers can maintain their roles more effectively and with less stress. Through social supportive responses, these women empathized with each other, offered solutions that have worked for them, and created a community of similar others willing to provide much needed support to a population that may not have found support resources except through this online connection.

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Appendix A

Modified coding scheme based on Whitsett & Land's (1992a) Role Strain Index for

Stepparents

GENERAL ROLE STRAIN

1. **Role Captivity- feeling trapped in unwanted roles**
   A.   Escape- wishing to escape from demands she must meet

   B.   Self-sacrifice- her own needs get lost trying to meet everyone else's

2. **Role conflict- feeling conflict with regards to multiple roles**
   A.   Career/wife conflict- her career demands sometimes interfere with her role as a wife

   B.   Career/family conflict- sometimes her time away at work conflicts with family time

   C.   Multiple role conflict-she feels that she is constantly juggling her different roles (e.g., spouse, job, parent) to meet all the different demands of those roles

STEPCHILD(REN) ROLE STRAIN

3. **Stepchild(ren)/Stepmother Relationship- tone of relationship between stepmother and stepchild**
   A.   Positive feelings- loving relationship; feeling positive about the relationship (could be stepmother to stepchild or stepchild to stepmother)

   B.   Negative feelings- hate/dislike/frustration or confusion (I like them and hate them) within the relationship (could be stepmother to stepchild or stepchild to stepmother)

   C.   General investment in stepchild(ren)- comments concerning spending family time together, sharing things, or giving of herself emotionally (guidance and/or support)

4. **Role ambiguity- unclear expectations concerning stepchild**
   A.   Discipline- comments concerning expectations of discipline/rules at SM house, sometimes expresses disapproval of stepchild's behavior

   B.   School/Chores- comments about expectations of school/homework/chores

C. Name- comments concerning expectations/confusion about what to "call" stepmom

5. **Resources- issues with living arrangements, money, and/or visiting schedules**
   A. Living arrangements- issues related to living arrangements; stepchild(ren) moving in or out of ALL stepfamily households

   B. Money- never seems to be enough money to meet all family expenses; negative feelings about having to pay biological mother child support; extra expenses related to child

   C. Visiting schedule- issues related to the visiting schedule; frustration and/or contentment with current visiting schedule

SPOUSE ROLE STRAIN

6. **Spouse Support- issues with spouse providing support for SM**
   A. Spousal support of discipline/decisions- comments concerning support from spouse with regards to disciplining his child(ren) or decisions regarding stepchild(ren) including dealing with stepchild's behavior or help with stepparenting (mainly focused on spousal support with regards to the stepfamily unit

   B. Depend on spouse- comments concerning her ability to depend on spouse/spend time alone with spouse (mainly focused on the marriage dyad, unlike 6a)

   C. Exclusion/Inclusion- comments concerning her perceptions of feeling left out/included in the relationship between her spouse and his child(ren)

   D. Shared feelings- spouse to talk to her more about his feelings about his former spouse and/or child(ren)

BIOLOGICAL MOTHER/STEPFATHER ROLE STRAIN

7. **Boundary ambiguity- unclear boundaries between stepmother and outside family**
   A. Act toward- she is not sure how to act with regards to biological mother/stepfather; can express both positive or negative feelings toward them; expresses instability of biological mother or frustration with biological mother (drugs, alcohol, mental health, resources)

B.	Interference- she feels that her spouse's former wife interferes with her relationship with her husband and/or stepchild(ren); these would be different from 7a because they deal with not just frustration with the biological mom, but the actual interference of the biological mom in the stepmother house

C.	Loyalty- she believes her stepchild(ren) feel a conflict of loyalties between stepmother and his or her biological family; comment on how stepchild(ren) may or may not want to be with biological mom (compare biological mother to stepmother)

D.	Mediator- stepmother mediates relationship/communication between members of stepfamily; biological father/children, biological father/biological mother, etc.

E.	Sharing time- she resents having to share her spouse's time with his child(ren)

MISCELLANEOUS

**8.	Miscellaneous**
A.	Copies section of previous post/general statement off by itself

B.	Requests for help/advice (all question marks requesting help/advice)

C.	Expressions of gratitude to group

D.	Expresses support from family

**9.	Emoticons**
A.	Emotionally positive emoticons

1. Smiley   :)
2. Wink   ;)
3. Cheesy   :D
4. Grin   ;D
5. Thumbs Up

B.	Emotionally negative emoticons

1. Angry   >:(
2. Sad   :(

3. Cry 　　　　 :'(

4. Embarrassed 　 :-[

5. Undecided 　　 :-\

       C.   Physical affection emoticons

1. Kiss 　　 :-*

2. Hugs

       D.   Other

1. Shocked 　　 :o

2. Cool 　　　 8)

3. Huh 　　　 ???

4. Roll Eyes 　　 ::)

5. Tongue 　　 :P

6. Lips Sealed 　 :-X

Appendix B

Definitions of Social Support Behavior Codes (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992)

1. **Informational support**
    A. Suggestion/advice- offers ideas and suggests actions

    B. Referral- refers the recipient to some other source of help (usually help outside of the group, sometimes experts)

    C. Situation appraisal- reassesses or redefines the situation

    D. Teaching- provides detailed information, facts, or news about the situation or about skills needed to deal with the situation

2. **Tangible assistance**
    A. Loan- offers to lend the recipient something (including money)

    B. Direct task- offers to perform a task directly related to the stress

    C. Indirect task- offers to take over one or more of the recipient's other responsibilities while the recipient is under stress

    D. Active participation- offers to join the recipient in action that reduces the stress

    E. Willingness- expresses willingness to help

3. **Esteem support**
    A. Compliment- says positive things about the recipient or emphasizes the recipient's abilities

    B. Validation- expresses agreement with the recipient's perspective on the situation

    C. Relief of blame- tries to alleviate the recipient's feelings of guilt about the situation

4. **Network support**
    A. Access- offers to provide the recipient with access to new companions

    B. Presence- offers to spend time with the person, to be there

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C. Companions- reminds the person of availability of companions, of others who are similar in interests or experience (usually refers stepmom to other stepmoms inside the group with similar issues)

5. **Emotional support**
   A. Relationship- stresses the importance of closeness and love in relationship with the recipient

   B. Physical affection- offers physical contact, including hugs, kisses, hand-holding, shoulder patting (only if they express wanting to do this in person)

   C. Confidentiality- promises to keep the recipient's problem in confidence

   D. Sympathy- expresses sorrow or regret for the recipient's situation of distress

   E. Understanding/empathy- expresses understanding of the situation or discloses a personal situation that communicates understanding

   F. Encouragement- provides the recipient with hope and confidence (keep up the good work) or requests for updates on what's happening

   G. Prayer- prays with the recipient

6. **Miscellaneous**
   A. Copies and pastes a section of someone's posting

   B. Questions about situation/questions for clarification

   C. Fragment statements; sign-ons, sign-offs

7. **Emoticons**
   A. Emotionally positive emoticons

1. Smiley   😊   :)
2. Wink   😉   ;)
3. Cheesy   😊   :D
4. Grin   😁   ;D
5. Thumbs Up

   B. Emotionally negative emoticons

1. Angry   😠   >:(

2. Sad   🙁   :(

3. Cry   😢   :'(

4. Embarrassed 😳   :-[

5. Undecided   😕   :-\

        C.   Physical affection emoticons

1. Kiss   💋   :-*

2. Hugs

        D.   Other

1. Shocked   😮   :o

2. Cool   😎   8)

3. Huh   😕   ???

4. Roll Eyes   🙄   ::)

5. Tongue   😛   :P

6. Lips Sealed 😶   :-X

Table 1

Frequencies of All Coded Units from Initial Poster for Custodial and Non-custodial

*Stepmothers*_____

Role Strain	Custodial Units	%	Non-Custodial Units	%	Total Units	Total %
1. Role Captivity	**86**	**4**	**84**	**4**	**170**	**8**
Escape	40		36		76	
Self-Sacrifice	46		48		94	
2. Role Conflict	**1**	**< 1**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**< 1**
3. Relationship w/ Stepchild	**121**	**6**	**133**	**6**	**254**	**12**
Positive	6		4		10	
Negative	49		95		144	
Investment	66		34		100	
4. Role Ambiguity	**105**	**5**	**30**	**1**	**135**	**6**
Discipline	77		29		106	
School	25		1		26	
Name	3		0		3	
5. Resources	**204**	**10**	**151**	**7**	**355**	**17**
Living Arrangement	91		39		130	
Money	47		23		70	
Visiting Schedule	66		89		155	

Table 1 (continued)

Frequencies of All Coded Units from Initial Poster for Custodial and Non-custodial Stepmothers

6. Spousal Support	**126**	**6**	**123**	**6**	**249**	**12**
Spouse Support	77		76		153	
Depend Spouse	42		39		81	
Exclude/Include	7		6		13	
Shared Feelings	0		2		2	
7. Boundary Ambiguity	**242**	**12**	**196**	**10**	**438**	**22**
Act	174		124		298	
Interference	54		61		115	
Loyalty	14		9		23	
Mediator	0		1		1	
Sharing Time	0		1		1	
8. Miscellaneous	**190**	**9**	**198**	**10**	**388**	**19**
Copy Post	60		92		152	
Request Advice	86		73		159	
Gratitude Group	42		31		73	
Gratitude Family	2		2		4	
9. Emoticons	**24**	**1**	**59**	**3**	**83**	**4**
Positive	8		18		26	
Negative	10		23		33	
Physical Affect.	1		1		2	
Other	5			17	22	

Table 1 (continued)

Total	1099	53	974	47	2073	100

Table 2

*Chi-square Goodness of fit test for Overall Role Strain Categories*_____

Role Strain	Custodial			Non-Custodial		
	O	*E*	Residual	*O*	*E*	Residual
General	86	221	-135	84	179.3	-95.3
Stepchild(ren)	430	221	209	314	179.3	134.8
Spouse	126	221	-95	123	179.3	-56.3
Biological Mother	242	221	21	196	179.3	16.8

Note. All tests were significant, *p* = .000; df = 3. General includes Role Captivity and Role Conflict, which focused on feeling trapped or in conflict with her role as stepmother. Stepchild(ren) includes Stepchild(ren)/Stepmother relationship, Role Ambiguity, and Resources, which focused on the overall tone of the stepchild/stepmother relationship, the expectations of the stepmother role, and resources related to the stepchild. Spouse includes issues with the spouse such as the availability of support, spending time alone with the spouse, and decisions regarding the stepchild(ren). Biological Mother includes issues surrounding the interference of the biological mother in the stepmother home as well as general unclear expectations as to how to act toward the biological mother.

Table 3

*Chi-square Goodness of fit test for Role Strain Sub-Categories*_____

Role Strain	Custodial			Non-Custodial		
	O	*E*	Residual	*O*	*E*	Residual
Escape	40	52	-12	36	37.7	-1.7
Self-Sacrifice	46	52	-6	48	37.7	10.3
Positive	6	52	-46	4	37.7	-33.7
Negative	49	52	-3	95	37.7	57.3
Investment	66	52	14	34	37.7	-3.7
Discipline	77	52	25	29	37.7	-8.7
School	25	52	-27	1	37.7	-36.7
Name	3	52	-49	0	37.7	-37.7
Living Arrangement	91	52	39	39	37.7	1.3
Money	47	52	-5	23	37.7	-14.7
Visiting Schedule	66	52	14	89	37.7	51.3
Spousal Support	77	52	25	76	37.7	38.3
Depend on Spouse	42	52	-10	39	37.7	1.3
Exclusion/Inclusion	7	52	-45	6	37.7	-31.7
Shared Feelings	0	52	-52	2	37.7	-35.7
Act	174	52	122	124	37.7	86.3
Interference	54	52	2	61	37.7	23.3
Loyalty	14	52	-38	9	37.7	-28.7
Mediator	0	52	-52	1	37.7	-36.7

Table 3 (continued)

Sharing Time	0	52	-52	1	37.7	-36.7

Note. All tests were significant, *p* = .000; for custodial df = 16 and for non-custodial df = 18.

Table 4

Independent sample t-test for Overall Role Strain Categories _____

Role Strain	Custodial		Non-Custodial			
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	η^2
General Role	11.41%	21.04	10.43%	13.26	.22	.0008
Stepchild(ren)	46.90%	28.17	46.93%	32.68	-.005	.0000004
Spouse	12.31%	12.87	20.17%	28.64	-1.35	.03
Biological Mother	29.14%	29.49	22.27%	24.43	.95	.02

Note. All tests were non-significant, *p* > .05; df = 57. General includes Role Captivity and Role Conflict, which focused on feeling trapped or in conflict with her role as stepmother. Stepchild(ren) includes Stepchild(ren)/Stepmother relationship, Role Ambiguity, and Resources, which focused on the overall tone of the stepchild/stepmother relationship, the expectations of the stepmother role, and resources related to the stepchild. Spouse includes issues with the spouse such as the availability of support, spending time alone with the spouse, and decisions regarding the stepchild(ren). Biological Mother includes issues surrounding the interference of the biological mother in the stepmother home as well as general unclear expectations as to how to act toward the biological mother.

Table 5

*Independent sample t-test for Role Strain Sub-Categories*_____

Role Strain	Custodial		Non-Custodial			
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	η^2
Escape	6.55%	15.96	3.30%	6.25	1.04	.02
Negative	4.93%	9.27	7.57%	12.55	-.92	.01
Investment	7.72%	12.44	7.47%	17.86	.06	.00007
Discipline	8.34%	20.85	3.07%	8.73	1.28	.03
Living Arrangements	12.45%	20.46	6.27%	14.69	1.34	.03
Money	4.24%	11.76	2.60%	6.26	.67	.008
Visiting Schedule	6.52%	14.37	16.43%	28.28	-1.69	.05
Depend on Spouse	4.45%	7.64	9.63%	24.01	-1.11	.02
Act toward BM	22.21%	25.33	14.27%	20.87	1.32	.03
Interference of BM	5.52%	7.92	5.60%	10.99	-.03	.00002

Note. All tests were non-significant, *p* > .05; df = 57

Table 6

Frequencies of All Coded Units from Responders for Custodial and Non-custodial

*Stepmothers*_____

Social Support	Custodial		Non-Custodial		Total	Total
	Units	%	Units	%	Units	%
1. **Informational**	**845**	**14**	**976**	**16**	**1821**	**30**
Suggestions	589		685		1274	
Referral	12		25		37	
Situation Appraisal	122		174		296	
Teaching	122		92		214	
2. **Tangible Assistance**	**6**	**< 1**	**1**	**< 1**	**7**	**< 1**
3. **Esteem**	**266**	**4**	**293**	**5**	**559**	**9**
Compliment	67		31		98	
Validation	182		256		438	
Relief of Blame	17		6		23	
4. **Network**	**65**	**1**	**9**	**< 1**	**74**	**1**
5. **Emotional**	**1232**	**20**	**1647**	**27**	**2879**	**47**
Sympathy	28		29		57	
Empathy	1062		1543		2605	
Encouragement	142		75		217	
6. **Miscellaneous**	**202**	**3**	**210**	**4**	**412**	**7**
Questions	114		112		226	

Table 6 (continued)

7.	**Emoticons**	**115**	**2**	**201**	**3**	**316**	**5**
	Positive	32		68		100	
	Negative	18		39		57	
	Physical Affect.	33		36		69	
	Other	32		58		90	
	Total	**2731**	**45**	**3337**	**55**	**6068**	**100**

Note. Informational support includes suggestions and advice. Tangible includes assistance such as money, helping with tasks, and expressions of willingness to help. Esteem includes compliments and validation. Network includes access to companions and availability of similar others. Emotional includes sympathy, empathy, and encouragement. Miscellaneous includes general questions about the situation and questions which ask for clarification. Emoticons includes types of emoticons used within text, such as smiley faces or crying faces.

Table 7

*Chi-square Goodness of fit test for Social Support Sub-Categories*_____

Social Support	Custodial			Non-Custodial		
	O	*E*	Residual	*O*	*E*	Residual
Suggestions	589	155.5	433.5	685	190.5	494.5
Referral	12	155.5	-143.5	25	190.5	-165.5
Situational Appraisal	122	155.5	-33.5	174	190.5	-16.5
Teaching	122	155.5	-33.5	92	190.5	-98.5
Willingness	6	155.5	-149.5	1	190.5	-189.5
Compliment	67	155.5	-88.5	31	190.5	-159.5
Validation	182	155.5	26.5	256	190.5	65.5
Relief of Blame	17	155.5	-138.5	6	190.5	-184.5
Companions	65	155.5	-90.5	9	190.5	-181.5
Sympathy	28	155.5	-127.5	29	190.5	-161.5
Empathy	1062	155.5	906.5	1543	190.5	1352.5
Encouragement	142	155.5	-13.5	75	190.5	-155.5
Questions	114	155.5	-41.5	112	190.5	-78.5
Positive Emoticons	32	155.5	-123.5	68	190.5	-122.5
Negative Emoticons	18	155.5	-137.5	39	190.5	-151.5
Affection Emoticons	33	155.5	-122.5	36	190.5	-154.5
Other Emoticons	32	155.5	-123.5	58	190.5	-132.5

Note. All tests were significant, $p = .000$; df = 16

Table 8

Independent sample t-test for Overall Social Support Categories_____

Social Support	Custodial		Non-Custodial			
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	η^2
Informational	37.35%	19.09	30.27%	24.27	1.27	.03
Tangible	.13%	.56	.03%	.18	.89	.01
Esteem	10.81%	7.05	10.87%	9.82	-.03	.00002
Network	1.87%	5.09	.17%	.46	1.82	.05
Emotional	40.77%	20.47	42.13%	26.22	-.23	.0009
Questions	4.61%	3.98	10.40%	24.64	-1.29	.03
Emoticons	4.39%	4.29	6.53%	5.85	-1.64	.04

Note. All tests were non-significant, *p* > .05; df = 59. Informational support includes suggestions and advice. Tangible includes assistance such as money, helping with tasks, and expressions of willingness to help. Esteem includes compliments and validation. Network includes access to companions and availability of similar others. Emotional includes sympathy, empathy, and encouragement. Questions includes general questions about the situation and questions which ask for clarification. Emoticons includes positive and negative emoticons used within text.

Table 9
Independent sample t-test for Social Support Sub-Categories _____

Social Support	Custodial		Non-Custodial			
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	η^2
Suggestions	25.39%	16.89	17.03%	18.25	1.86	.06
Situation Appraisal	6.00%	8.53	5.47%	7.08	.27	.001
Teaching	5.68%	8.20	5.13%	12.24	.21	.0007
Compliment	2.42%	4.09	1.10%	2.16	1.57	.04
Validation	7.19%	5.09	9.40%	9.04	-1.18	.02
Companions	1.87%	5.10	.17%	.46	1.82	.05
Sympathy	1.42%	2.81	1.23%	2.27	.28	.001
Empathy	32.45%	22.72	38.13%	27.01	-.89	.01
Encouragement	6.97%	13.89	2.73%	3.77	1.61	.04
Questions	4.58%	4.02	10.40%	24.64	-1.30	.03

Note. All tests were non-significant, *p* > .05; df = 59

Table 10

Intercorrelations between Sub-Categories of Role Strain and Social Support

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Escape	1				
2. Negative	.001	1			
3. Investment	-.098	.155	1		
4. Discipline	-.058	-.119	-.085	1	
5. Living Arrange	-.100	-.103	-.164	-.078	1
6. Money	-.047	-.087	-.137	-.018	.099
7. Visiting Schedule	-.167	-.156	-.083	-.137	-.064
8. Depend Spouse	-.101	-.140	-.120	-.122	-.117
9. Act toward BM	-.161	-.057	-.108	-.141	-.145
10. Interference BM	-.182	-.218	.307*	.021	-.159
11. Suggestions	-.230	.054	.478**	-.137	.095
12. Appraisal	.088	-.109	-.085	-.102	-.148
13. Teaching	.097	-.085	-.006	-.060	-.029
14. Compliment	.159	-.196	-.048	.186	-.002
15. Validation	-.163	.385**	-.134	-.125	-.030
16. Companions	.300*	-.139	-.090	.266*	-.055
17. Sympathy	.054	.074	-.126	-.058	.024
18. Empathy	.047	-.113	-.226	.057	.134
19. Encouragement	.104	-.022	-.117	.040	-.063
20. Questions	-.095	.002	.009	.147	-.083

Table 10 (continued)

*Intercorrelations between Sub-Categories of Role Strain and Social Support*_____

	6	7	8	9	10
1. Escape					
2. Negative					
3. Investment					
4. Discipline					
5. Living Arrange					
6. Money	1				
7. Visiting Schedule	-.166	1			
8. Depend Spouse	-.069	-.109	1		
9. Act toward BM	-.098	-.174	-.173	1	
10. Interference BM	.146	.021	.007	.046	1
11. Suggestions	.076	-.177	-.042	-.061	.235
12. Appraisal	.134	-.125	.039	.095	.199
13. Teaching	-.119	.368**	-.118	.070	-.131
14. Compliment	-.154	-.112	-.115	.141	-.015
15. Validation	-.027	-.029	.180	.007	.031
16. Companions	-.078	-.139	-.112	.033	.000
17. Sympathy	-.134	-.197	.052	.207	.072
18. Empathy	.002	.039	.038	-.071	-.216
19. Encouragement	.193	-.209	-.063	.064	-.146
20. Questions	-.014	.044	.112	-.085	.202

Table 10 (continued)

*Intercorrelations between Sub-Categories of Role Strain and Social Support*_____

	11	12	13	14	15
1. Escape					
2. Negative					
3. Investment					
4. Discipline					
5. Living Arrange					
6. Money					
7. Visiting Schedule					
8. Depend Spouse					
9. Act toward BM					
10. Interference BM					
11. Suggestions	1				
12. Appraisal	-.096	1			
13. Teaching	-.151	-.074	1		
14. Compliment	-.037	-.045	-.047	1	
15. Validation	.049	.048	-.189	-.027	1
16. Companions	-.187	.011	-.080	.456**	-.109
17. Sympathy	.028	.180	.134	.011	.136
18. Empathy	-.351**	-.084	-.274*	-.353**	-.205
19. Encouragement	-.102	-.099	-.093	.526**	-.043
20. Questions	-.188	-.122	-.112	-.091	-.110

Table 10 (continued)

*Intercorrelations between Sub-Categories of Role Strain and Social Support*_____

	16	17	18	19	20
1. Escape					
2. Negative					
3. Investment					
4. Discipline					
5. Living Arrange					
6. Money					
7. Visiting Schedule					
8. Depend Spouse					
9. Act toward BM					
10. Interference BM					
11. Suggestions					
12. Appraisal					
13. Teaching					
14. Compliment					
15. Validation					
16. Companions	1				
17. Sympathy	.062	1			
18. Empathy	-.067	-.273*	1		
19. Encouragement	.144	-.032	-.311*	1	
20. Questions	-.074	-.073	-.311*	-.110	1

*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level, two-tailed.
**. Correlation is significant at the .01 level, two-tailed.