

## When Stepfathers Claim Stepchildren: A Conceptual Analysis

*Guided by social constructionist and symbolic interactionist perspectives and a grounded theory method, my conceptual analysis explores stepfathers' experiences with claiming stepchildren as their own. Using in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of 36 stepfathers, my analysis focuses on paternal claiming as a core category and generates 10 properties relevant to this social psychological phenomenon: timing, degree of deliberativeness, degree of identity conviction, paternal role range, solo-shared identity, mindfulness, propriety work, naming, seeking public recognition, and biological children as benchmarks. In addition, I consider how five conditions may influence stepfathers' perceptions of stepchildren. My analysis reveals a number of sensitizing concepts for studying stepfathers' efforts to develop a sense of group belonging and a fatherlike identity.*

Contemporary family formation and dissolution patterns increasingly foster alternative pathways to social fathering. Men who act in a fatherly way toward other men's children while maintaining a romantic relationship with the children's mother represent an important though understudied category of men critical to an expanded view of fatherhood (Dowd, 2000; Marsiglio, 1998; Marsiglio, Day, & Lamb, 2000). Whereas many men become formal step-

fathers by marrying a single mother, others develop an informal fatherly presence in a child's life, oftentimes but not necessarily while living with the child and the child's mother.

Just as a full accounting of contemporary fatherhood must incorporate formal and informal stepfathers, a thorough analysis of the social psychology of stepfatherhood must consider the emotional, psychological, and practical aspects of the stepfather-stepchild relationship. By definition, men's bonds with stepchildren are constructed outside the normative model of biological fatherhood and shared DNA. In most instances, the relationships also are formed, at least initially, without the benefit of legal standing. In practical terms, their persistence is usually contingent on men's continued relationship with the birth mother. Varied features of the stepfather-stepchild relationship poignantly highlight men's and children's feelings about and experiences with developing a sense of group belonging and interpersonal attachment.

These socially constructed aspects are intriguing due to the ambiguities often associated with the evolution of stepfamily life as an *incomplete institution* (Cherlin, 1978). Stepfamilies, as an abstract institutional arrangement, are often fraught with uncertainties about "family" norms and unstable alliances between various family members. Such realities can complicate everyday routines and decision making, contributing to stepfamily adjustment problems in many instances. Moreover, stepfathers generally must negotiate their places within a preexisting family dance that has been orchestrated by the birth mother and jointly performed with her child(ren)

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(Marsiglio, 2004). Birth mothers enter romantic relationships with a preexisting set of experiences, rituals, shared knowledge, interpersonal dynamics, and emotional memories that define their relationships with their child(ren) as part of a family unit. Stepfathers must therefore grapple with their desire and ability to join this evolving family production and to consider how they will be perceived. Consequently, much can be gained by shedding light on how men construct and manage their identities as stepfathers while taking their relationships with others into account.

Obviously, a man can approach the stepfathering experience and his relationship to a stepchild in numerous ways. I highlight situations where the stepfather's readiness to nurture, provide for, protect, and see a stepchild as though the child were his own reflects a state of mind and relationship orientation I label *paternal claiming*. Paternal claiming includes emotional, psychological, practical, and often symbolic aspects. In this study, it symbolizes the stepfather's investment as a social father and represents a meaningful way for him to orient himself toward stepfamily life. Though the claiming experience often implicates friendship-like bonding strategies previously referred to as affiliating (Stern, 1982), affinity-seeking, and affinity-maintaining (Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999), claiming encompasses a broader range of issues, including potentially negative outcomes for stepchildren, which I do not address.

My conceptual analysis generates theoretical and substantive insights directly relevant to interpersonal bonding, the meaning of family, an expanded view of fathering, and a deeper understanding of a stepfather's identity as a social father. Indirectly, my analysis informs the study of outcomes potentially associated with the stepfather claiming experience, such as the quality and stability of stepfather-stepchild relationships over time. Consistent with a grounded theory method, I rely on in-depth interviews to address two main questions: (a) what properties and subcategories distinguish the core category of paternal claiming whereby men orient toward stepchildren as their own, and (b) how might various conditions affect stepfathers' experiences with claiming stepchildren.

#### THEORETICAL SENSITIVITY

Social constructionists remind us that individuals' microlevel activities are shaped by larger

institutional arrangements that encapsulate them. For example, the status and interaction patterns of stepfamily members are influenced by normative standards couched within cultural, social, and legal systems. The prevailing cultural ideology about family ties discourages people in the United States and other industrialized countries from expecting certain types of familial bonds between stepfathers and children. So, too, persons in industrialized cultures (see Cretney & Masson, 1990 for discussion of British exception) have been reluctant to institutionalize fully a multiple-father scheme, although a number of nonindustrialized cultures of the South American lowland regions and elsewhere around the world show that sustaining a cultural climate supportive of some children having primary and secondary fathers is possible and beneficial to children (Beckerman & Valentine, 2002).

Though ill-defined at a cultural level, men's feelings, sensibilities, convictions, and actions that bear on their willingness to claim a stepchild as their own comprise both a state of mind and negotiated *strategy of action*, a kind of informal cultural product for forming familial-based social bonds between nonbiological parents and children (Swidler, 1986). Claiming a stepchild, especially when combined with the use of familial labels, also can be seen as part of an interaction ritual replete with socially constructed group membership symbols reinforced with emotional energy (Collins, 1988).

Stepfathers and family members sometimes consciously and unconsciously strive to construct some type of "we-ness" that resembles an experience often associated with biologically based families. In family terms, a sense of we-ness captures an individual's sense that he or she shares a familial reality with one or more persons. This in-group status translates into perceptions about interpersonal loyalty, a sense of belonging, obligations, rights, and sharing a home life. Unlike the typical biological father whose orientation toward his child is set in motion and reaffirmed by his presumed genetic tie and legal standing, a man who gets involved with a single mother's child confronts a more complex set of circumstances. In addition to his lack of involvement in the social aspects of pregnancy, birth, and some period of early childrearing, the typical prospective and active stepfather must come to terms with the reality that he is not, and never will be, the child's biological father. Thus, the meanings a man and others assign to

interpersonal ties not grounded in shared biology often are embedded in a loosely defined web of relationships and norms associated with family life and fathering (or adult supervision).

In some respects, paternal claiming and a quest for we-ness sometimes may be interpreted as part of a nomos-building process akin to Berger and Kellner's (1964) classic description of the social construction of marriage. In a marriage (or committed relationship), the process involves two adults experiencing their subjective lives and meanings about their relationship as part of an object—the marriage. Abstract feelings about the marriage/relationship become real and tangible; the couple jointly produces some sense of an ordered marital reality. Similarly, men's involvement with claiming stepchildren may allow them to make sense of their status and activities in a stepfamily system. Stepfathers' openness to claiming stepchildren while developing a sense of we-ness that incorporates them may relate to how salient men's identities as stepfathers or social fathers are to them. Although the paternal claiming process sometimes can be described as a unidirectional process whereby fathers do things to fashion their own identity construction, stepchildren (and birth mothers) often play a collaborative role in shaping a jointly held feeling of we-ness—that sense of the man and child as being part of a stepfamily or family. Stepchildren can make implicit or explicit claims of their own by embracing a stepfather's familial place in their lives. Consequently, the degree to which paternal claiming in individual stepfamilies is expressed unilaterally or as part of a joint nomos-building process varies greatly.

Symbolic interactionists, identity theorists in particular, would highlight the cognitive schemes that enable stepfathers to define their situations and make behavioral decisions (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Some would draw attention to men's commitment to their role relationships as stepfathers and the psychological centrality of these roles to them (Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). Others would consider how stepfathers manage their behavior and perceptions in order to match their *identity standard* or self-relevant meanings about stepfathering with their perceptions of a situation, the latter being influenced by stepfathers' perception of stepfamily members' and others' expectations of them (Burke, 1991). In either case, stepfathers' experiences are likely to be connected to the classic "looking-glass" self process (Cooley, 1902) whereby stepfathers

describe, judge, and emotionally respond to how they believe others see them. If stepfathers and stepchildren (and birth mothers) mutually verify identities they each hold, they may reinforce their commitments to one another and establish a new social structure (Burke & Stets, 1999), including a sense of we-ness.

Symbolic interactionists also would pay attention to how individuals' identities and relations within stepfamilies are tied to people's ritualistic use of and feelings about the labels that give meaning to their family positions and roles (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990). For men, words like *daddy* and *dad*, along with familial labels for stepchildren, remind us that language not only helps shape social experience but personal experiences also help bring life to language (Furstenberg, 1995). Words that convey family ties are intimately tied to the politics of the evolving family dance; they highlight people's emotionally laden efforts to negotiate their identities and sometimes claim others in their efforts to produce a we-ness.

To date, little qualitative research has focused on the subjective aspects of stepfathers' lives (see Rosin, 1987 for a useful journalistic analysis). An earlier grounded theory study focused on affiliating strategies (Stern, 1982), and a more recent qualitative study provides a valuable analysis of *affinity-seeking* and *affinity-maintaining* strategies that some stepparents use to encourage their stepchildren to accept and like them (Ganong et al., 1999). The primary strategies in this latter study (doing group activities, having fun together one-to-one, advocating for the stepchild, and making the stepchild feel like family) may both foster and be influenced by men's tendency to claim stepchildren as their own.

Some researchers have used survey data to explore aspects of stepfathers' identities and relationships with stepchildren (MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996, 2002; Marsiglio, 1995). Although not explicitly addressing the issue of paternal claiming, these data examine some of the personal, interpersonal, and family structural conditions that may affect men's tendency to claim stepchildren as their own. For example, the stepchild's gender, temperament, and age when the child is introduced to the prospective stepfather, among other conditions, may influence stepfather-stepchild adjustment processes (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Hetherington & Henderson, 1997). Many stepfathers face significant challenges performing

stepfathering roles with early adolescents, especially girls.

Because many stepfathers have their own biological children, research that explores men's potential loyalty conflicts between their commitments to their own offspring and to stepchildren also is relevant to understanding men's inclinations to claim other men's children (Clingempeel, Colyar, & Hetherington, 1994). Even though loyalty conflicts sometimes exist, Ganong & Coleman (1994) conclude that stepfathers who also have children of their own, compared to those who do not, "feel more companionship with their stepchildren, experience more intimate stepfather-stepchild interactions, are more involved with their stepchildren's friends, feel fewer negative feelings about stepchildren, and have fewer desires to escape" (p. 83). This may be particularly the case for those stepfathers whose biological children live with or spend a considerable amount of time in the same household. National survey data have shown that stepfathers who live with both stepchildren and biological children, compared to their counterparts who only live with stepchildren, are more likely to report perceptions consistent with having a fatherlike identity in relation to their stepchildren (Marsiglio, 1995).

## METHOD

### *Sample*

My analysis draws on audiotaped, in-depth interviews I conducted with a sample of 36 men residing in north central Florida in 2001 for a larger study on the social psychology of stepfathering that also included 13 birth mothers (see Marsiglio, 2004 for an extensive methodological description). Many of the men, though living in Florida at the time of the interview, had been raised in other states or spent significant amounts of time as adults living outside of Florida.

I recruited participants through announcements in a university hospital newsletter, a listserv directed at various university departments, and a local parenting magazine. Flyers were posted at a variety of sites throughout the community (e.g., community health center, firestation, homeless shelter, and churches), and a number of participants were recruited through word of mouth. To be included, a participant had to describe himself as being actively involved in the lives of his romantic partner's children, who were 19 years

of age or younger and living with the mother. Beyond these criteria, I did not employ any litmus test to identify the men as social fathers, nor did I systematically try to clarify for all men how their perceptions of the stepfather label resonated with them. All eligible men I contacted or who contacted me agreed to participate, although scheduling problems prevented a few from being interviewed.

My broad sample is consistent with the evolving social demography of men who date and then form varied types of committed unions with single mothers of minor children. It accounts for the possibility that some men can and do develop fatherlike feelings for stepchildren in settings other than the formal married stepfamily. Twenty-five participants were married and living with their partners, seven cohabited with their partners but were not married, and four lived in a residence separate from their partners. Five men had legally adopted the target stepchildren and a few were thinking about doing so. Given my sample's diversity in terms of the kinds of relationships and living arrangements the men reported, the label "romantic partner social father" (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002) may be a precise, though cumbersome, way of categorizing the men. For the sake of simplicity, I loosely refer to all of my participants as stepfathers.

The sample also is varied in terms of each stepfather's age, social class, race, duration and level of relationship commitment with partner, previous and current experience with own biological children, and the target child's gender and age. The youngest man I interviewed was aged 20, the oldest 54, and the average 36. I spoke with men from different social classes who worked at a range of occupations. Consistent with this occupational diversity, 16 of the men had completed college, 12 had completed high school and had some college experience, and 8 had either completed high school and not attended college or had not obtained a high school degree. Twenty-seven self-identified as being White, and nine were African American, with one White and one Black man claiming some Hispanic ancestry. Twenty-two had fathered their own biological children and 11 were actually living with at least one of their biological children at the time of the interview. Of those living with biological children, three men had children with their current partners. I spoke with stepfathers of sons and daughters who were infants, toddlers, young children, and adolescents of all

ages. Two men had partners who were currently pregnant with their first child together. Excluding these pregnancies, the average age of the oldest child living with the stepfather's partner was 10. These children were roughly 5 1/2 years old on average when stepfathers began their relationships with the children's mothers.

Unlike survey studies based on large, nationally representative samples, I make no specific claims about how comparable the experiences of the men in my sample are to the larger population of stepfathers in the United States or other Western societies. (For a national profile of stepfathers of children aged 0–12, see Hofferth & Anderson, 2003.) Because my sample tends to represent those men who are doing reasonably well as stepfathers, my analyses do not address the full range of stepfather experiences. My intent, though, is not to generalize in a rigorous way to a larger population of stepfathers; rather, my objective is to generate a conceptual analysis of selective social psychological concepts, experiences, and processes associated with stepfathers who primarily are involved with stepchildren in positive ways.

### Interviews

I interviewed personally 32 stepfathers; a male research assistant interviewed the remaining four. The interviews lasted 90 minutes on average with a range of 45 to 150 minutes. Participants were paid \$25. Most interviews were conducted in university offices; some were conducted in a church or the participant's office or home.

Interviews followed a semistructured interview guide. Because social constructionist and symbolic interactionist perspectives guided my line of questioning, I sought to uncover how men construct, negotiate, and assign meaning to their evolving identities and life circumstances as stepfathers embedded within social settings structured by familial definitions and norms. The interviews covered a range of topics and were flexible enough to focus on related issues that participants raised during the course of the interview. I began the interviews by asking each participant to describe how he first met and got involved with his partner or wife. In general, the direction of the interviews provided men an opportunity to describe their experiences with their partners and stepchildren chronologically, but participants were free to move back and forth as they focused on particular issues and

told their stories. The direction of the interviews varied somewhat depending upon the participants' initial answers and the flow of the exchanges. After the first several interviews, I made an effort to ask the stepfathers questions, appropriate to their circumstances, dealing with key issues that had emerged from my ongoing analysis of the previous participants' interviews. I encouraged the men to discuss issues related to the way they navigated the terrain of stepfathering and managed their identities as men who present themselves in a fatherly way or as adult authority figures.

Although the interviews focused men's attention on the oldest target stepchild living with the mother, I asked participants numerous questions about all of their children (biological and step). The men often commented on children other than the oldest stepchild without being prompted.

### Analytic Approach

I used the constant comparative method that emphasizes an iterative process of data analysis by comparing incident with incident, category with incident, and category with category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This technique also calls for simultaneous data collection and analysis. My research assistant and I prepared extensive theoretical, methodological, and personal memos immediately after conducting interviews. Interviews were transcribed within a few days after completion, and I coded them upon receipt. By transcribing and coding interviews shortly after they were conducted, my preliminary analysis of the interviews informed subsequent interviews.

Following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) version of the grounded theory method, I conducted open coding and basic axial coding. Initially, I did a combination of line-by-line and paragraph coding of substantive themes (e.g., claiming, mindfulness, naming). For this article, I treated paternal claiming as a core category, while identifying various properties and subcategories associated with it. Interest in this general concept was grounded partially in previous survey research focusing on stepfathers' experiences with developing a *fatherlike* identity (Marsiglio, 1995). My interest was refined through my in-depth interviews with stepfathers in which they expressed a sense of ownership or claim toward their stepchildren. I then conducted a form of axial coding of claiming by focusing on the *action/interaction strategies/routines* by which claiming takes place, the *consequences* of claiming, and the

*conditions* that may affect whether and how stepfathers orient toward stepchildren as though they were their own. Although this later analytic strategy highlights some of the processual aspects related to claiming, my conceptual analysis focuses primarily on various elements associated with claiming as a cognitive and emotional relationship orientation involving stepchildren, with passing reference to it as a situated identity production.

One limitation of my coding procedure is that I was the only person who coded the interviews, which may reduce the dependability of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I did, however, have five participants review my written presentation and interpretation of their material. I asked them to suggest any changes that they felt were needed to best represent their views of what they experienced. Aside from a few minor changes, none of the participants asked me to change the text. In addition, prior to contacting the five participants, two student assistants read seven full transcripts and confirmed that my analysis was consistent with their readings of the data.

My aim in this conceptual analysis is more modest than what typically is associated with classic grounded theory: the generation of an explicit theory that is then compared and contrasted to existing theories. My principal objective is to use the grounded theory method to generate and sharpen a conceptual lens for exploring how some men experience stepchildren as their *own*.

## RESULTS

Among the men I interviewed, most expressed a reasonably strong connection to their stepchildren and felt as though they were responsible for them in numerous ways. The men's perceptions of responsibility were often accompanied by their tendency to see and treat the stepchildren as their own. They varied considerably, however, in their willingness to lay claim to children in this way. In addition, although a few of the men did not seem particularly assertive in their efforts to develop affinity, the vast majority seem to have made some effort, and only a few had stopped seeking affinity completely.

Paternal claiming emerged as a meaningful conceptual category directly or indirectly relevant to stepfathering because men often commented about the type and level of connection they had with their stepchildren. These men, on their own and in response to my questions, accentuated

the extent to which and how they fit into their stepchildren's lives, drawing on a paternal or quasipaternal frame of reference. They described their connections with stepchildren in general terms and in more practical ways involving money, discipline, protection, guidance, child care, and affection. Implicit references signaling their efforts to develop and sustain a familial sense of *we-ness* were embedded in some of their stories (e.g., creating a computerized family album). While referring to his wife, Vern, a father of three and stepfather to two, expresses a general sentiment about claiming illustrative of some stepfathers' perceptions: "We have since dropped that little fiction of I have three and she has two. We have five children and we just kind of treat it that way." Herman, speaking of his expectation that his stepchildren would be well behaved, reasons, "maybe they didn't come from my loins, but now they belong to me, so I expect the same behavior from them that I put forth." By examining expressions of paternal claiming such as these and related issues, I highlight a theoretically intriguing and practically significant orientation relevant to significant numbers of stepfathers.

### *Paternal Claiming: Properties*

I begin my conceptual analysis by delineating 10 interrelated properties that emerged from the data related to men's experiences with claiming stepchildren as their own: *timing, degree of deliberativeness, degree of identity conviction, paternal role range, solo-shared identity, mindfulness, propriety work, naming, seeking public recognition, and biological children as benchmarks*. This set of properties includes both action/interaction strategies/routines men use to manage their orientation toward stepchildren and potential consequences resulting from men perceiving stepchildren as their own. Although I discuss all 10 as separate properties of paternal claiming, I note that timing and degree of deliberativeness are closely intertwined, as are degree of identity conviction and paternal role range. In addition, the bidirectional nature of how some properties can relate to claiming in stepfathers' everyday lives means that they sometimes can be conceptualized as conditions that prompt men to claim stepchildren.

*Timing.* Arriving at that mental and emotional space of feeling comfortable with a fatherlike

identity, including a sense of claiming a stepchild, is part of a transitional process that unfolds in various ways for different men. Most of the men who established this type of orientation toward a stepchild did so as part of a natural process that unfolded casually over an extended period of time. A few, however, actually developed a father identity and claimed a stepchild as *theirs* relatively quickly. Though key events such as living together and marriage may influence the timing of claiming, they did not appear to be consequential for many stepfathers.

The timing aspect of claiming also is sometimes subject to ebbs and flows. Once a man claims a stepchild as his (or is moving in this direction), there are no guarantees that he will sustain this perception, either in form or degree. For example, Monty, a 33-year-old disgruntled stepfather who for the past 6 years has been involved with his wife's 11-year-old daughter, Beverly, was deeply hurt by how Beverly had treated him compared to her biological father, whom he felt had neglected and mistreated her:

I never really understood what I was to her; I still don't. I felt, I've always felt like I should have been her father, but I never was, and I never will be . . . I was always there for her in positive ways, and he never was; I mean, never. When she lived with him, he was mean to her; he would stay out all night and never call her and tell her that he wasn't coming home. She was 8 years old living with him, alone in the house all night because she didn't know where her own father was.

Once willing to assert himself as a committed father figure, Monty has resigned himself to having a marginalized position in Beverly's life because she has failed to acknowledge him as a *father*. He feels betrayed and resents Beverly's seemingly unconditional loyalty to her father. Thus, the psychological centrality of his identity as a stepfather and his willingness to see Beverly as his own has declined.

*Degree of deliberativeness.* Men vary considerably in how much thought they give to their relationships with their stepchildren. Consistent with a form of timing where men gradually begin to perceive stepchildren as their own, some men do not make a conscious, deliberate decision to orient themselves to their stepchildren as though they were theirs. In a sense, events and processes unfold and men eventually realize that they perceive their stepchildren in this way.

I anticipated that more of the stepfathers would recall unexpected turning point experiences that led them to see themselves in a fundamentally different way with respect to their fathering roles (Strauss, 1969). Those who claimed their stepchildren without a turning point experience gradually and with little fanfare came to appreciate and grow closer to their stepchildren by spending time together and learning about each other.

A few stepfathers did note specific events that led them, without forethought, to recognize that their connections with their stepchildren had changed. For Randy, age 50, the turning point occurred one afternoon shortly after he picked up his partner's preschool child from daycare. As Randy was driving, he came upon a car accident and pulled his car across traffic to protect the persons lying in the street. Within minutes, fire trucks and police cars were all around. He describes the situation as "exciting" for his stepson at first, "but then it gets scary. And up to that point, it'd been more like, that [I] was okay to play with, but I wasn't okay for, if he wanted comforting or he wanted to feel secure—it was, that was still mama's ballpark. . . but he, that day, decided it was okay to crawl in my arms and be okay. And that was, in a way, was a big, big point." Randy believes that the small boy he had grown to see in a fatherly way had suddenly taken a huge step toward being able to seek and accept his fatherly love. This type of recognition is part of the looking-glass self process that solidified Randy's emerging sense of being a father.

Turning points are sometimes rooted in far less dramatic events. For instance, the first time Eddie picked up his stepdaughter from school because her mother was working late gave his stepdaughter the chance to say "Oh goody!" upon learning that he was there to retrieve her. Eddie recalls seeing his stepdaughter and his relationship to her in a new light after spending quality one-on-one time with her when they went home. This was the first time he had, by himself, taken care of her for an extended period. Although Randy and Eddie's turning point experiences prompted them to shift their consciousness about their stepfather identities, neither of these men deliberately set out to make this happen.

Some men do take a more deliberate approach and explicitly specify their expectations for how they want to relate to their partners' children. In these instances, they clarify how they want a situation to be defined, occasionally fairly early during the relationship, and act to have the

definition honored. When 41-year-old Terry was asked if he had negotiated with Angela prior to their marriage the type of rights and responsibilities he would have with Zack, Terry forcefully replies:

It was going to be all or nothing, and that was my negotiation. It was like, if I'm coming into this relationship, then I'm coming in a hundred percent. I'm either going to be an all husband and an all father or nothing at all. I can't have like half a relationship. I can't be half a father. Where do you draw the line? At what point do you stop and say, 'oh well, I'm being a little bit too harsh here.' Or, 'I can't tell you you can't go to baseball tonight. Only your mother can do that.' If I'm going to love you, I'm going to be your father. I'm going to be there all the way.

*Degree of identity conviction.* Although one might conceive of claiming as a distinct relationship orientation or type of perception, it is useful to recognize that men vary in how fully they claim or embrace a stepchild as theirs. Men can wrestle with a partial identity or an intermediate level of conviction as a father to a nonbiological child. Their convictions can hinge on matters such as how they feel about specific roles (e.g., disciplinarian, provider, legal guardian) or a stepchild's physical proximity to them at a given point in time. Terry's earlier comment, for example, underscores his perception that crafting his identity as a father to a nonbiological child meant that he needed the freedom to immerse himself fully. There could be nothing incomplete about his identity as a father, and he was willing to assume all typical fatherly roles. A number of other stepfathers shared Terry's sentiment, expressing their deep, unconditional commitments to their stepchildren. Others had weaker convictions about the extent to which they saw a stepchild as theirs.

A man's degree of conviction may vacillate by whether his stepchild is presently residing with him. A stepfather involved with stepchildren who split much of their time between the biological father's and birth mother's homes may have a much more heightened sense of *owning* a stepchild when the child is currently under his roof, and subject to his rules and financial circumstances. Robby, referring to his stepchildren, says "To me, they are mine, when they're with me they are mine. So I, I treat them just like I would my own daughter, buying them things and whatever." Though I did not pursue this line of

questioning in detail, a few men made remarks consistent with a fluctuating display of conviction for their identities.

*Paternal role range.* Because the conviction for a claiming orientation may vary relative to which stepfather or father roles are in question, it is useful to capture the range of opportunities men have to realize it. Men may feel like a father because they change diapers, pack lunches, or get involved in carpooling kids to and from soccer practice, but they may feel awkward about disciplining children or balk at taking on formal or informal financial obligations for children who are not their own. Perceptions of fathering may be segmented in other ways as well. Tim, for example, is a 31-year-old father of two preschool boys whose mother has physical custody of them while Tim lives with his fiancée and her two youngest daughters, 2 and 3 years of age. In his mind, Tim feels like and acts like a dad to these two girls; they call him "daddy." He changes diapers, dresses them, feeds them, and disciplines them as though they were his own children. But he is reluctant to act on the biological father's suggestion that he legally adopt them, a suggestion that the children's mother has reservations about also. Tim has concerns about assuming official financial responsibility for the girls at this point because it would terminate the biological father's child support obligations. He also is worried because he is not yet married to their mother. In many respects, Tim has come to see himself as a father, in part because the out-of-state biological father, who just recently started to pay child support, is largely out of the picture. His conviction is only partial, though, because he is still contemplating whether it makes sense to take on the financial role completely. That Tim's fiancée is reluctant to cast him fully into the father position helps to limit his commitment to the full range of experiences typically associated with a father identity. Tim's future marriage, coupled with additional time in which the biological father remains uninvolved, may prove decisive in helping Tim deepen and expand his identity as a father and his sense of paternal claiming.

*Solo/shared father identity.* Whether a man feels he is solely responsible for a stepchild or shares a paternal status with the biological father represents an intriguing property of men's experiences with claiming stepchildren. Obviously, a

stepfather will tend to have more leeway asserting a strong paternal claim if the biological father has had little or no contact with a child. A stepfather can still feel as though he has claimed a child if the child's father is actively involved, however. Thirty-five-year-old Eddie found himself in this situation with his 8-year-old stepdaughter.

Sometimes I feel like I'm on the outside looking in because—sometimes I wish she was mine. I guess because we're just that close...in my heart, I feel like I'm her father.... I know in reality, I'm not but, I'm going to give her all the benefit that a father should. I'm going to make sure she gets those benefits. Even though her dad is giving them to her, she is given a little extra and I figure that extra go a long way.

Though Eddie recognizes that his stepdaughter is not really *his* per se, he still has a deep emotional connection to her; he feels like a father. He acknowledges that her dad is there for her and providing her with benefits, but Eddie also feels he can supplement the father's contributions. In this kind of shared father identity scenario, the child is likely to accrue significant benefits because the biological father is active and the stepfather respects the father's place in the child's life while simultaneously making an effort to help the child in a fatherly way (White & Gilbreth, 2001).

Some of the stepfathers have even made it easier for biological fathers to maintain contact and a positive relationship with their children. Through a variety of overt and subtle means, the stepfathers have served the purpose of being an ally to the father (a concept developed elsewhere [Marsiglio, 2004]). How and why men construct this role is likely to influence and be affected in complex ways by men's orientation toward claiming stepchildren as their own. Notably, for a man to assume a father ally role, he must at least acknowledge that the biological father has a legitimate right and vested interest to be involved with his child.

Thus, some of the stepfathers like Eddie construct their own understanding of family reality by assuming that it is fine for children to have two fathers. Terry, for example, was open to helping his now 9-year-old stepson Zack recognize a few years ago that it was okay to have two dads—even though he despised the biological father's lifestyle and approach to fathering. This topic surfaced when emotions grew particularly

heated one summer when Zack used the phrase "my dad in Gainesville" in a conversation he was having while visiting his father out of state. The father, according to Terry, "lost it" and "called up threatening me" because the father didn't want Zack to call Terry "dad." Later that summer with his wife by his side, Terry recalls telling Zack something like,

"Look, it's okay to have two dads. You have a couple sets of grandparents and whatever. It's okay to have two different fathers. I'm the one that's here with you all the time and he's the one up there. If he gets more involved in your life, then great! If he doesn't, nothing changes. I'm still here. I'm the one that's going to be here every day." So I said "don't be afraid to call me whatever you want to call me."

For Terry and his wife, the notion of Zack—or anyone for that matter—having two dads was rather mundane because it reflected many people's everyday realities. Not all stepfathers shared this sentiment, though. Some wanted a much clearer demarcation between the biological father and stepfather statuses.

*Mindfulness.* One possible corollary of how men express paternal claiming involves their level of awareness of their stepchildren's existence and well-being. This state of consciousness takes many forms, including quick mental flashes of a face, a specific event, or a comment; more extended forms of daydreaming about certain aspects of a child; and occasions when a stepfather reflects on how he might solve a problem the child is having at school, with friends, family members, or a personal problem. The later form incorporates elements of paternal responsibility (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1985; Pleck & Stueve, 2001). Mindfulness captures a stepfather's attentiveness to a child's likes, dislikes, moods, needs, and the times they've shared together. In addition to how frequently a stepfather thinks about his child, other aspects of this mental imaging include the types of things a stepfather thinks about his stepchild, the impetus and circumstances associated with those thoughts, and the depth and accuracy of men's reflections. This kind of mindfulness may offer clues about the saliency of a stepfather's identity as a father figure and the intensity of his conviction to claim the child as his own.

Though some men seldom think about their stepchildren outside of the children's company,

others indicate that they spend a lot of time engaged in this type of daydreaming. The kinds of visions stepfathers have include many of the same sorts of things biological fathers think about their children: what they're doing or feeling at the moment, what types of toys they might like, what can be done to improve a behavior or school problem, memories of playful activities, and visions of future experiences (Marsiglio, 2004).

*Propriety work.* Stepfathers sometimes find themselves in situations where they consider and negotiate the appropriateness of their fatherly behavior, in part because they become keenly aware that they are not biologically related to their stepchildren, and may be judged accordingly. These situations induce a man to manage his thoughts and actions with regard to the suitability of such matters as showing physical affection toward his stepchild, how to interact with a stepchild in public and in domestic spaces where the biological father is present, and how to deal with being excluded from decision making related to the stepchild.

Propriety work is vividly brought into focus when stepfathers grapple with concerns related to sexuality issues and teenage stepdaughters. Forty-two-year-old Herman's comments in reference to his 14-year-old stepdaughter, Annette, speak volumes about the difficulties stepfathers often face, as men, when they try to bond with teenage stepdaughters, especially those whom they did not know as young children. Prefacing his comments about sexuality with a sample of conversations he has with himself, Herman attempts to figure out the borders of how he should interact with Annette.

Don't forget, she's not really your daughter. But she is your daughter. So I have to catch myself. How do I handle this? . . . She's a young girl and I'm not her father. . . . So I do have a fear. . . . I feel uneasy hugging her in public. When it comes down on me, man, it's like—look over there, aren't you proud of her? And I'm like yeah—I want to show love but it's like—nahhh—don't do that. And I'm sure we'll both benefit from it because I'll get the pleasure of holding her, and she'll get the pleasure of being held. I'm like, nahhhh—don't do that. . . . Because I look around and I see people and it's like—ooh, look at him over there hugging that young girl, like—I mean, we're a sick society of people.

Though I only spoke with a few men who entered the lives of stepdaughters when the girls were teenagers, Herman is not alone in his struggle

to navigate the awkwardness of expressing physical intimacy with a stepdaughter (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). It is here, in the relationship a stepfather has with his teenage stepdaughter, that the gendered nature of stepparenting is most visible for a man. Prevailing social expectations and suspicions about male sexuality mean that stepfathers are likely to face unique challenges as they manage their social selves and looking-glass selves. Sometimes these challenges are faced in silence, other times not. Whether a man explicitly raises these issues with the birth mother or the stepchild, various circumstances may prompt stepfathers to realize that they are not biologically related to their stepchildren. At the same time, though, by drawing attention to his perceived status as a father figure, the incest taboo may actually heighten a stepfather's awareness of the fatherly presence he has in his stepdaughter's life.

*Naming.* The use of familial labels often is woven into how the men orient themselves toward stepchildren. Although not necessary, claiming and familial labels often go hand-in-hand, coming into play in various types of everyday life situations. Encouraging or allowing a child to use the *daddy* or *dad* label can intensify the child's feelings for and attachment to a stepfather and, in turn, provide the stepfather with added incentive to claim the stepchild. Similarly, men's use of terms such as *daughter*, *son*, *my children*, or even *my boys* and *my girls* can reflect and reinforce men's sentiments toward their stepchildren.

Many of the participants who heard stepchildren refer to them as father figures of some sort recalled having a number of positive emotions. Carl's reply is illustrative: "I was just ecstatic. . . . It was like seeing her walk, which I never got to see. But it was kind of that same type of experience. . . . It was just neat." Similarly, Emmit says, "every time he calls me dad I feel like I'm somebody important to him. Even to this day, if I have to go out to the school and talk to his teacher or something like that, he'll, when I come through the door, he'll start smiling and he'll come grab me." These experiences postdate Emmit's transition to seeing his stepson Jack as his son. Emmit recalls an earlier instance when Jake put him on the spot while Emmit was chatting with some of his parents' friends. With Jake by his side, Emmit replied to a question about whether Jake was his son. "This is my stepson, this is my wife's son." Upon hearing that, Jake

looked up and said, “No, I’m your son.” Ever since that day Emmit has always called Jake his son. Speaking of his adolescent stepdaughter, Herman illustrates the significance of language for conveying his fatherly commitment to her.

I’ve got to admit, I love her... She’s my daughter... I don’t introduce her as my stepdaughter, because I didn’t step on her... I introduce her ‘This is my daughter.’... So it’s not like she’s not a part of me, just because she’s not a part of me. She’s a part of me. I’d go crazy if something happened to her... I’m proud of the little girl.

Jackson, a man without children, offered a thought-provoking example of how hearing “daddy” produced a set of mixed emotions relevant to the experience of claiming stepchildren.

[I felt] very glad and warm to hear it, but there was a surprising bit of fright to it because I was realizing the responsibility that was coming with that. If he was going to place that name into my world, then I needed to meet up to that. Which actually did help, because it helped me to realize a little bit more what I was accepting in my life, that I was moving into the world of parenting and away from the world of the visiting uncle or whatever, which is about as close to any type of child contact as I’d had.

Here we see how language can shape people’s experiences. Jackson heard a lot more than a word when Mason initially called him “daddy.” With that word came a host of images about parental roles and responsibilities that had not been a part of Jackson’s everyday life. Although Jackson was only able to hope and dream about becoming a family man while he was with his previous wife, Mason and his mother acquainted Jackson with the everyday realities of family life, prompting him to experience his looking-glass self as a father. These stepfathers, as well as others, were moved by the symbolism of familial labels, and saw that they represented a deep interpersonal bond, one that reinforced their perceptions about claiming the stepchildren as their own.

The symbolic complexity of familial labels is related to some men’s perceptions, feelings, and the claiming experience in subtle ways. For example, stepfathers who had biological children living elsewhere were in a position to develop a unique perspective on the *naming* process. Not wanting to imagine their own children calling someone else dad, some men, though not all, were reluctant to have their stepchildren call them dad, especially if

the biological father was at least moderately involved in the child’s life. Robby describes his opposition while recalling the remark he made to his stepdaughter Tracy when she called him daddy one day. “‘Tracy I’m not your daddy. Your daddy is Brad.’ I don’t want my daughter calling anybody else daddy and I know Brad must feel the same way; he doesn’t want his kids calling anybody else daddy and I don’t blame him.” Although Robby had never directly talked to Brad about this issue, buried in Robby’s reaction appears to be a sense that a father’s sacred claim to his children will be violated if the words used to identify this position are used too broadly. Ironically, Robby’s glowing descriptions of his stepchildren revealed that he was totally committed to being involved in their lives; he was just not prepared to have them call him dad. He says, “I like the bond that I have with me and Tony [stepson]. I went out and bought Tony his own little lawnmower. And he can get out there, and it’s kinda fun having a son around. Now I know how my dad feels.” Apparently the emotional connection Robby has with Tony is enough; he is capable of perceiving his stepson as his own without needing the label to confirm his cofather status.

Stepfathers and children’s varied use of familial labels highlights how the claiming sentiment may be fostered in situated contexts. Several obvious distinctions may occur when a man is with his own family members, versus being in the company of others outside his family, and then those situations where these two camps overlap. This distinction can be seen in the way Randy’s 9-year-old stepson relates to him. “Very rarely does he outright call me dad. But, he uses dad as, you know, ‘I have to ask my dad. I have to do this.’ ‘This is my dad.’ So I’m still Randy, but now I’m Randy his dad.” This scenario shows how stepfathers can have their identities as father figures reinforced, even though it is done indirectly. A man who hears a stepson or stepdaughter refer to him as dad in front of other children, family, or strangers may have an easier time internalizing his sense of being involved with children in a fatherly way. It does not, however, provide a stepfather with what is likely to be the ultimate occasion to see himself as a father through his stepchildren’s use of familial labels. That privilege is reserved for the man whose stepchild freely refers to him as dad directly.

*Seeking public recognition.* Being acknowledged as a father figure to a stepchild via the law, school

teachers, children's coaches, relatives, neighbors, and others can shape stepfathers' perceptions about claiming (Marsiglio, 2004). This recognition can be offered without being solicited, but stepfathers also may use impression management strategies to create public recognition. I limit my brief comments here to issues related to adoption. A relatively small percentage of stepfathers are able to solidify their sense of commitment by institutionalizing it through the legal system and adoption (Fine, 1994; Hans, 2002; Katz, 1999; Mason & Mauldon, 1996; Mason, Harrison-Jay, Svare, & Wolfinger, 2002). Men who adopt their stepchildren have a practical and symbolic resource to clarify their feelings for their stepchildren, and perhaps express how they want to be perceived within their families. In some cases, men may not view their adopted children as stepchildren at all. This held true for Doug, a 44-year-old man who adopted his wife's son, now 18, when the boy was about 3. As was the case for a few of my participants, Doug placed a stipulation on his marriage. In his words:

I told her, I'll marry you, but that's my son legally. No step involved, nothing like that. That's my son. She said 'fine; I don't see anything wrong with that.' So that's when she went back to him [biological father] and said she don't want any alimony, child support, nothing. Just want you out of the picture. He signed the papers; he said no problem. I won't cause any trouble. So when the papers came back, they just simply read my name, didn't say stepfather or nothing else.

Another man who initially became a stepfather through marriage, 32-year-old Kevin, officially adopted his 7-year-old stepson just a couple of months prior to the interview. Thus, the powerful images of how this process affected him were fresh in his mind.

I don't know why, but I did notice a change when the adoption went through. But just a genuine affection I felt for him really for the first time, it seems like. Not for the first time, not affection—but just a real natural love feeling for him, like he was mine, my own. . . . I don't know what it was. Just something changed.

As Kevin describes it, the adoption experience helped Kevin see Trevor more like he did his own son.

*Biological children as benchmarks.* Being in a position to claim and feel connected to a stepchild

may be related to how a man feels about his own child and his fathering experience. Derek compares his relationship with his resident stepson to those with his biological children living elsewhere with two different mothers. He asserts that he has a closer bond with his stepson Elkin than with his own children because he has been able to be with Elkin on an everyday basis. Being with Elkin daily provides Derek with many opportunities to experience the feelings of being a proud father. Even though he goes to great lengths to clarify that he loves all of his children, he is willing to acknowledge that his bond is stronger with Elkin because of his daily contact and sense of being held accountable for his role in shaping Elkin's behavior.

Brandon, age 30, provides further evidence that refines our understanding of how having their own children offers men a practical way to measure the quality and intensity of their feelings as stepfathers. Asked if he feels differently toward his two stepchildren than his own child, Brandon replies,

I really don't. I mean, I thought initially when we first, we all moved in together that maybe—I was a little worried, how am I going to feel towards them? But now. . . I consider them my kids even though I'm not the biological father. I don't really try to step in to take—for them to call me dad or anything like that—but I don't really see them as any different. I mean. . . I'll do my best to protect them and treat them fairly.

Brandon adds that he feels he can "love" his stepchildren as well as his son in all aspects.

Whereas some stepfathers can use their own children as a benchmark for their feelings toward stepchildren, many stepfathers do not have this option. At least for some, it does not seem to matter. Despite not having biological children of his own, Carl is quick to assert how powerful he believes his feelings are for his stepchild, Vicky. "I wanted a child biologically, but now it just seems that there's no need for it because I have everything I want and could ever possibly imagine having in a nonbiological child. I don't see Vicky as anything but my child." Similarly, Randy, another stepfather who is not a biological father, explains, "I don't think I can love Jamie any more if I really was his father, than I do right now. And maybe in some ways, maybe even more because ours is simply based on trust. I don't have any stickers all over him—you're my son." From Randy's point of view as a

stepfather, nothing is given, as is often thought to be the case with birth parents. He has to “earn” his place in his stepson’s heart “every day.”

### *Conditions for Paternal Claiming*

Having clarified some of the conceptual aspects to stepfathers’ claiming experience, I briefly explore several conditions that may encourage men to perceive stepchildren as their own. These conditions are not meant to be exhaustive; rather, they exemplify the various issues that emerged from my interviews and analysis.

*Stepfather’s identification with stepchild.* Although stepfathers cannot point to having shared DNA with stepchildren, they sometimes can see other behavioral and personality similarities that foster a sense of affinity. A hint of this pattern is apparent in the way Thomas describes how he came to perceive his stepsons as his own.

They’re my kids. I look at them like they’re my boys. I tell everybody, they’re my boys. And I don’t want to take nothing away from his [Danny’s] dad, but I’ve raised them for so long now, I mean...you have a child in your home for the amount of time that I have, you feed them and long enough, they’ll start acting and looking just like you, you know what I’m saying? They just do. They just call me, call me ‘dad.’

Thomas’s description brings to light the idea that his stepsons have started taking on some of his personal characteristics because they have been together so long, whereas the biological father has had little to do with the boys. His description seems to imply too that his openness to accepting the boys as his own evolved in a rather ordinary fashion, a consequence of the accumulated daily flow of activities and shared physical space.

A few men mentioned similarities in their personalities and leisure interests. Kevin offers this assessment of his stepson. “[A]s I’ve gotten to know Trevor it’s amazing how much he’s like me, for not being my own child. We’re of a kindred spirit. We’re both talkative. We both have rich imaginations.” Because Kevin has gotten to know Trevor better over time, he is now able to understand him more clearly and to identify with him. This makes it much easier for Kevin to empathize with Trevor and to treat him as his own child. Kevin’s observation further reveals the mounting influence that mundane

interpersonal sharing can have on strengthening the basis for paternal claiming.

Other men found that they related to stepchildren, primarily boys, because of their mutual love of sports. Terry, an avid multisport athlete since he was a child, describes how he and his stepson Zack “immediately hit it off” because Zack is “a little jock, very very sports-athletic.” Reflecting on his early experiences with Zack, Terry surmises that “[Zack] just wanted a father figure and I guess he saw me as one, as a potential one for him, because I worked for him. I fit.” Their fit as sports enthusiasts has provided them with a continual source of bonding that has enabled Terry to see Zack as his own son more easily, and for Zack to see Terry as one of his dads.

*Stepfather’s personality.* Although I did not systematically study this issue, it appears that men’s personalities can affect the way they orient themselves toward stepchildren. Feeling secure about himself and his relationship with his partner may lead a man to feel less threatened by the biological father’s paternal involvement and coparenting with the birth mother. Stepfathers with these traits may be more willing to incorporate another man’s child into their lives, accommodate a shared orientation toward fathering, and make an effort to be a father ally if they feel the biological father is a good father.

A stepfather with an assertive personality and an appreciation for children may seek a prominent place in his stepchild’s life, developing a strong conviction about his fatherly role. Herman, for example, is a self-proclaimed “take charge” kind of person who has somewhat traditional views about a man’s place in a household and years of experience as a juvenile counselor. When it comes to his 14-year-old stepdaughter’s life, he makes it clear that he wants to take, and has taken, an active role in parenting her. Herman reenacts what he told his stepdaughter on one occasion:

I expect something from you now. I’m not saying everybody else didn’t expect something from you before, but I have expectations and I expect good grades, good behavior, and I expect a future out of you, because you belong to me now. So at this point, we’re going to start doing everything that we should in order to get you to where you need to be.

Obviously, Herman’s choice of words, “you belong to me now,” signals a strong sense of

paternalism with Herman seeing himself as being in charge of his new family.

In stark contrast, Mark, a 42-year-old stepfather of two preadolescent girls, and biological father of twins with his first wife, characterizes himself as “not a real kid person.” He stresses his interest in pursuing time-consuming business interests and hobbies that do not involve his current wife or stepchildren, a practice that he feels contributed significantly to the demise of his first marriage. It appears that Mark’s reluctance to perceive his stepdaughters as his own is consistent with his self-appraisal of his “personality.” “I wouldn’t say ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder], but probably very close, I like to have things going on. I like to be pretty active . . . it’s pretty darn boring to watch these two girls [stepdaughters] do their homework, and get their bath and get their clothes ready. It’s not real exciting.” Throughout, Mark portrays himself as being somewhat separate from the family subsystem composed of his wife and her daughters. Compared to Herman, Mark is far less mindful of and attached to his stepchildren.

*Birth mother’s involvement.* A number of birth mothers exert tremendous direct and indirect power as gatekeepers and facilitators, especially early in a stepfather-stepchild relationship. These initial experiences set the tone for men as they become familiar with their partner’s children and begin to develop an orientation toward them. In some instances, mothers who encourage men to help discipline their child(ren) or deal with a school or behavior problem provide them with a chance to take on a fatherly role. Several stepfathers applauded their partners for making it easy for them to develop strong feelings for the children. The birth mother also can play a role in the stepfather’s identity construction by encouraging or discouraging his formal adoption of her child. In various ways, then, birth mothers help structure conditions that influence the likelihood that men and children will develop a sense of we-ness.

In addition, when a stepfather sees his partner acting lovingly toward his child, he sometimes consciously or unconsciously reciprocates and opens himself up to her child. As was the case with some of my participants, when partners each have one or more biological children, they can commit themselves to treat them all the same. This works fine in many instances, but practical difficulties arise when a stepfather’s child spends

only limited amounts of time with him and the man’s stepfamily.

*Stepchildren’s perceptions and reactions.* Consistent with the interactionist perspective, some of the stepfathers’ orientations are significantly influenced by their interpretations of their stepchildren’s perceptions of and reactions to them. Other research has found that, compared to step-parents and biological parents, stepchildren are more likely to perceive the stepparent as a friend rather than a father (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998). Some of the stepfathers in my study say that despite their desire to act in a fatherly way, they are keenly aware of a child’s effort to sustain borders. These reactions have the effect of accentuating for stepfathers their ambiguous and sometimes precarious place in a child’s life. For instance, Harry, age 44, is fully aware that he has struggled with his stepdaughter Kelly, who he feels “never really opened up” despite his efforts to make her feel comfortable. In his words, “Kelly has never been very close with me and it’s not at all like my two other children [more recent biological children to Kelly’s mother]. She likes the idea of having a dad, but she doesn’t really want the personal relationship that comes with it. It’s a matter of appearance I think more than anything else for her.” For Kelly, then, it has been important to fit in with her friends and having a dad has allowed her to do this more easily. But by not investing fully in her role as Harry’s daughter, Kelly has reinforced Harry’s awareness of the borders that restrict his ability to feel a deeper, fatherly bond to Kelly.

Children have various options at their disposal to let a man know that they see him as a father figure. Related to the earlier discussion about naming, the power of language to embrace or marginalize stepfathers can be seen in how some children feel about their last names (Furstenberg & Talvitie, 1979). In several instances, children made clear requests that they wanted to have the same last name as their stepfather, a gesture tied to the claiming process and acknowledged by men as significant.

*Biological father’s presence and involvement.* In most cases where the stepfather felt as though the stepchild were his own, the biological father was only marginally involved in the child’s life, if at all. Clearly, a biological father can directly or indirectly play a prominent role in shaping a stepfather’s inclination and opportunity to see a

stepchild as his own. After describing how he initially got involved with his stepdaughter, Vicky, when she was almost 3 years old, 30-year-old Carl adds:

She didn't know her dad before, so it was—I don't want to say it was an easier situation, but not knowing her dad and not knowing that she had someone there at the stage when I met Lani [Vicky's mother] was—it was a little bit more easy to have Vicky come around, I guess, in our relationship together, because I think it might have been more difficult having a father there.

Taking care not to upset Vicky by having her think that he was taking her mother away from her, Carl was able to move into Vicky's life without competing with another man for her time or loyalty.

### CONCLUSION

Grounded in the social constructionist and symbolic interactionist traditions, my conceptual analysis explores one of several ways stepfathers can perceive and relate to stepchildren, claiming them as their own. When others are supportive, some men in my sample bond with and claim stepchildren as their own while expressing a desire for a type of familial *we-ness*. This support underscores the reality that paternal claiming is embedded in a multilayered, socially constructed context.

On a conceptual level, claiming a stepchild distinguishes forms of fathering from seemingly similar expressions of friendship and mentorship between one man and another man's offspring. Paternal claiming also tends to differentiate those who are committed to embracing a fatherlike identity from those who experience a more detached, peripheral status as an adult male authority figure. The 10 properties my analyses generated (timing, degree of deliberativeness, degree of identity conviction, paternal role range, solo/shared father identity, mindfulness, propriety work, naming, seeking public recognition, and biological children as benchmarks) can serve as sensitizing concepts (van den Hoonaard, 1997) to guide and deepen analyses of stepfathers' inner worlds and the transitional paths they take in perceiving stepchildren as their own.

An important aspect of stepfathers' subjectivity involves how they manage their identities as they merge their lives with their partners' preexisting family dances and then continue to negotiate the borders of stepfamily life. Not surprisingly, a

number of the properties and conditions that emerged as important in men's identity construction and expression of paternal claiming implicate others' potential influence. Consistent with earlier research (Ganong & Coleman, 1994), my analysis suggests that experiences with one's own biological children can provide men with benchmarks to construct images of stepchildren as their own, although having biological children may sometimes dissuade men from developing this perspective (Rosin, 1987). Not surprisingly, my data also show that successful interpersonal bonding with stepchildren (Stern, 1982; Ganong et al., 1999) seems to enhance stepfathers' willingness to lay claim to them. The negotiation and use of familial labels, especially when the stepfather is immediately involved in the interaction, helps perpetuate the *nomos*-building process and facilitate paternal claiming.

Identity theorists may find that some of the more intriguing theoretical questions address stepfathers' direct or indirect dealings with the biological father. The mere presence or absence of a biological father can shape how men develop their standards for judging their stepfather identity and their commitment to particular role relationships with a romantic partner and her child. These standards are likely to be influenced by culturally constructed images of how stepfathers should relate to biological fathers, stepchildren, birth mothers, and other interested parties.

My study, particularly a broader set of analyses presented elsewhere (Marsiglio, 2004), shows that stepfathers can form and express their identities by using either competitive or cooperative approaches in response to biological fathers' involvement. Thus, by studying stepfathers, identity theorists have an opportunity to consider unique processes involving either the construction of a shared or solo father identity. Recall that some stepfathers tend to claim their stepchildren while acknowledging that the biological father can make similar (though perhaps slightly different) claims, whereas others perceive that the father is irrelevant to their claiming orientation. Stepfathers' perceptions of stepchildren are thus influenced by their views of the biological father—both in terms of his social status as father and his qualities as a person. These interrelated perceptions may be tied to how mothers introduce and sustain images of the biological father to the stepfather, the direct interactions the stepfather has with the biological father, and the biological father's type and level of involvement

with his child. Even though vaguely defined normative forces originating beyond the participants influence these phenomena, stepfathers can forge their own creative options for orienting themselves toward stepchildren.

Although the stepfathers provided various insights about how and why their orientation toward stepchildren changed, my data are not ideal for exploring some of the subtleties of paternal claiming as an unfolding process. Longitudinal designs that target stepfathers closer to the time when they are initially developing their stepfather identity would be better suited for assessing the slight shifts in stepfathers' thoughts and feelings. Stepfathers would be in a better position to describe their emerging thoughts about and feelings toward a stepchild, the child's mother, and the biological father, as well as how these subjective elements might be connected. My findings suggest, however, that in addition to the five basic conditions I presented as influencing paternal claiming, stepfathers often will indicate that their claiming orientation arose slowly with little warning. It was their shared daily contact and practical involvement in their stepchildren's lives that altered their views in almost imperceptible ways.

Taken together, the properties involving the degree of identity conviction and paternal role range can inform how identity theorists might apply the psychological centrality concept (Stryker & Serpe, 1994) to stepfathers. I emphasized how men can express paternal claiming at various intensity levels and realize it more or less fully with respect to certain paternal roles. This finding underscores the importance of differentiating men's commitments to their general stepfather identity versus particular aspects of it. Moreover, it suggests that researchers should study the process by which different forms of commitment are inspired, related, and change. Research along these lines can explore the linkages between stepfathers' sentiments and how they enact a range of fatherly roles including discipline, affection, financial support, and protection. How the performance of these roles affects stepfather-stepchild adjustment and child outcomes will expand previous research (Hetherington & Henderson, 1997; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; White & Gilbreth, 2001). In addition, attention might be given to how others influence the process—for example, by focusing on the consequences of a birth mother making it known in tacit or candid ways that she expects the stepfather to assume

financial or disciplinary responsibility for her children.

Opportunities exist to explore paternal claiming more fully as either a social psychological orientation that is experienced as part of a larger stepfamily process or as a situated form of identity production. Although my study underscores how the fluid and negotiated nature of stepfathers' approaches to stepfamily life can be framed from social constructionist and symbolic interactionist perspectives, other frameworks have much to offer as well. For example, future research applying Collins's (1988) model of interaction rituals might generate fresh insights because this model emphasizes group membership symbols, forms of cultural capital based on shared experience, and emotional ties. Similarly, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach could prove useful in addressing the potentially intriguing impression management strategies that stepfathers may use to create public recognition for their fatherly presence in their stepchildren's lives.

Irrespective of the conceptual frameworks used, researchers need to deepen, expand, and ground in empirical data insights for apprehending stepfathers' subjectivity in diverse contexts. Moreover, future research should consider how other conditions, some closely related to the ones I discussed, affect men's tendencies to claim stepchildren as their own. The duration of the stepfather's involvement with the stepchild's mother, stepchildren's fears about whether a stepfather will stick around, stepchildren's ages, the level and type of extended family support, and the biological father's personality are likely to make a difference. Further, researchers should consider whether social class, race, and cultural conditions intersect in significant ways to fashion how men form and manage their bonds with and orientation toward stepchildren during various developmental stages and in different stepfamily arrangements. Much also can be learned about how a man's personality and larger sense of self are related to his experience with claiming stepchildren as his own and his developing self-perception as a father.

Given prevailing family formation patterns and the paucity of social psychological research on stepfathers, efforts to study formal and informal stepfathers are timely. Viewed from a practical or public policy standpoint, the claiming experience is noteworthy because it can influence stepfamily dynamics and stepchildren's well-being.

Although employing this style of stepfathering does not automatically lead to positive consequences for stepchildren or stepfathers—or shelter them from negative ones—many stepfathers who develop this perspective love, nurture, provide for, and serve as advocates for their stepchildren in healthy ways. Of course, stepfathers may make significant contributions to stepchildren without claiming them in the way I describe here. Clearly, depending upon the circumstances, positive outcomes can result from varied psychological orientations and behavioral styles of stepfathering.

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