Identity, Inclusion, Love, and Conflict in American Film Portrayals of Stepfamilies

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ABSTRACT

This study utilized qualitative textual analysis to examine media portrayals of stepfamily communication. The researcher analyzed four popular American films. Patterns of identity, inclusion, conflict and love were found in each of the four films. These particular film portrayals reflected many stepfamily experiences and complexities, however, often presented simplistic resolution to problems faced by the stepfamilies, as frequent with popular films.

Introduction

What comes to mind when asked to think about a typical stepfamily in America? For many, it will be images or families from popular television or film portrayals. Well-known media stepfamilies include the Brady Bunch, Cinderella, Snow White, and more recently, Stepbrothers. Many of these stepfamilies face challenges, but are able to overcome and live happily ever after. Do these portrayals accurately reflect the diversity of American stepfamilies? Do these portrayals influence expectations that we, as a culture, have for stepfamilies? I explore these topics within the following study.

Stepfamilies are a common occurrence within American society. A significant number of children are, or will be, in a stepfamily at some point in their life. In fact, Bumpass, Raley and Sweet (1995) found that approximately 30% of children are likely to be part of a stepfamily in the United States. A National Opinion Research Center survey (1999), entitled “The Emerging 21st Century Family,” reported that only one in four households in America consist of a married couple and their children (as cited by Bryant & Bryant, 2001). The same survey also cited changes in marriage statistics, divorce rates, and birth rates for bringing about change to the American family (as cited by Bryant & Bryant, 2001). Families and stepfamilies are being recognized as incredibly diverse.

The definition of a stepfamily has expanded over time. Some researchers now include cohabitating couples and non-marital childbearing couples within the stepfamily definition (Bumpass et al., 1995). By including non-traditional families within the definition, Bumpass et al. (1995) enlarge the population included and encourage examination of this larger population as it is a more thorough illustration of stepfamilies in American culture. Thus, stepfamilies and the ways we understand them have become more dynamic and complex aspects of our lives, an intriguing communication phenomenon awaiting further exploration.

In this study, I examine communication within stepfamilies by exploring film portrayals of stepfamily communication in four themes: identity, inclusion, love, and conflict. I textually analyze four popular American films that involve stepfamilies to better understand how communication affects family relationships, both positively and negatively. I argue that stepfamily film portrayals often reflect the experiences of “real life” stepfamilies; however, serious problems in the stepfamily are usually completely resolved by the end of the film, thus, presenting unrealistic representations that are overly simplistic.

Communication and Identity

Carey defines interaction as offers “as ‘a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed’” (as cited by Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995, p. 7). Communication can be seen as creating, continuing, mending or changing reality for communicators. This definition displays the power that communication has to shape reality. For example, an apology can mend a previously broken relationship and create a better reality for the individuals involved in the relationship, just as much the absence of an apology can destroy a relationship and create a more negative reality. Viewing
communication as a continual process allows for greater understanding of the power of communication in our lives.

Jackson (2002) introduces identity as a negotiating process and asserts that this negotiation involves “attempts to maintain, retain or retrieve custody and authority over defining the self” (p. 245). As communicators negotiate ourselves, Jackson warns that “there is the possibility of gaining, losing and/or exchanging something” (p. 245). He further explains that identity is not fully gained, lost or exchanged in one experience, but that pieces of identity are bargained often in exchange for preserving the core of that identity. An illustration of identity negotiation can be shown in the case of an individual with mixed racial identities. Someone who identifies through both White and minority heritage often must negotiate their identities. They would have to choose whether to gain socially and primarily identify as a White individual, while losing their minority cultural identity. Any negotiation of their racial identity involves gaining, losing, or exchanging portions of their identity. Communication and identity are especially salient within family relationships. Communication is a part of and effects all aspects of family life.

**Literature Review**

Scholars have examined a number of dimensions in the stepfamily context. For the most part, stepfamilies have been viewed as separate institutions from the traditional nuclear family. Bumpass, et. al (1995) suggest the definition of a stepfamily be expanded to include cohabitating couples and other families. Stepchildren’s perceptions and stepparent’s experiences have been examined using a dialectical approach. The dialectical approach examines relationships by looking at opposing contradictions. Braithwaite, Baxter, Bryant and Wagner (2004) define contradiction as “simultaneous opposing demands or ‘pulls’ that constitute their relationship” (p. 448). The perspective of stepparents as “‘intimate outsiders’” (Beer, 1992, as cited by Coleman & Ganong, 1997, p. 108) and differences in parenting behaviors between stepparents and parents has been researched. Segrin and Nabi (2002) observed that media is a powerful influence on cultural and individual perceptions and expectations for marriage and family. Angst and Leon (2005) show that film portrayals are important in reflecting common cultural misconceptions and perceptions of stepfamilies.

**Stepchildren**

Many researchers approach the topic of stepfamily communication by examining the experience of stepchildren (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant & Wagner, 2004). Others address the topic of stepchildren’s experience by exploring the dialectical tensions felt by stepchildren (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant & Wagner, 2004). Braithwaite, et. al (2008) examined the “contradictions . . . perceived by stepchildren to characterize the interaction when they feel caught in the middle between their parents” (p. 36) and looked at three dialectical tensions: freedom-constraint, openness-closedness, and control-restraint. They found instances of positive stepchildren-parent relationships—civil communication on the part of both parents created a healthier situation for the stepchildren—and negative stepchildren-parent relationships—stepchildren feeling forced to choose sides between parents. Baxter, et al. (2004) studied dialectical tensions felt by stepchildren, particularly, emotional distance-closeness, stepparent status (one parent or two parents in the stepfamily) and openness-closedness. Other studies research the less-pursued relationship of the stepchild and nonresident parent (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Afifi, 2003). Afifi1 (2003) explored the feeling of being caught and privacy boundaries within stepfamilies. She observed communication habits that contributed to the feeling of being caught, including: inappropriate disclosures, using a child as peer and co-parent, and using a family member as messenger or mediator, loyalty-disloyalty contradiction and revealment-concealment contradiction. Afifi (2003) also analyzed privacy boundary coordination and communication strategies used to manage privacy: boundary integration including openness and direct confrontation, communicating a unified front, minimizing strategies and creating a positive image of the other parent. Boundary separation included over-privileging avoidance and cycle of competitive
symmetry. Researchers have explored stepfamilies through the perceptions of stepchildren and the perceptions of stepparents.

Stepparents

Stepparents are often characterized by a common contradictory position as “intimate outsiders” (Coleman & Ganong, 1997), and are most commonly discussed in relation to stepchildren (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008; Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant & Wagner, 2004). For instance, Coleman and Ganong (1997) discuss the challenges stepparents face, including difficulties with role negotiation, getting stepchildren to accept their authority, unsupportive significant others, and competition with the parent. Some studies asked stepchildren to offer advice to their parents. This advice has included focusing on the children during and after transition times, as well as working together as co-parents (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008). Stewart (2005) examined involvement of stepparents and parents in their children’s lives by looking at two National Surveys of Families and Households. She found similar levels of involvement reduction as children grow in both stepfamilies and nuclear families. Involvement reduction refers to the decline of parent participation in children’s daily lives. The parenting techniques—particularly parental monitoring—of stepparents has been compared to that of biological parents. Fisher, Leve, O’Leary and Leve (2003) found similar parental monitoring levels when examining the monitoring levels of three types of families: stepmother/biological father, biological mother/stepfather, and two-parent biological families.

Stepfamilies and Media

Many researchers discuss the influences of culture and the media both in portrayals of stepfamilies and perceptions of stepfamily members about their family and family functions. For example, Coleman and Ganong (1997) write,

Individuals’ beliefs about family life are influenced by experiences in their family of origin, by media, by cultural standards, by observing other families…All of these present and reinforce, to varying degrees, a view of family life that is based on a nuclear family ideology (p. 107).

Families depicted in media impact the expectations of individuals for their own families. Idealistic expectations for marriage and family are strongly influenced by media images of marriage and family (Leon & Angst, 2005; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). In turn, the importance of film as a cultural medium that influences beliefs and values was discussed by Leon and Angst (2005), who noted “there is a lack of research on portrayals of stepfamilies in films” (p. 4).

Coleman and Ganong (1997) emphasize the importance of exploring the impact of media on stepfamily perceptions and identities. Media portrayals of stepfamilies often support negative stereotypes of, or promote unrealistic expectations for, stepfamilies (Coleman & Ganong, 1997).

Many researchers looking at media and its effects have often focused on television (Alexander, 2001; Austin, 2001; Brown & Hayes, 2001; Douglas, 2001; Morgan & Signorielli, 2001; Robinson & Skill, 2001). Some find that conventional views of families and family types are more often presented and promoted on television than non-traditional family types (Robinson & Skill, 2001; Douglas, 2001). Morgan and Signorielli (2001) explored almost fifty years of television families from the 1950s to 1990s and found traditional families were more common on television then was proportional to current American society. Traditional roles for the parent and child are also emphasized in family representation (Douglas, 2001).

Media is an influential player in communication. Some researchers find that media is especially influential in children’s perceptions and beliefs about the world (Austin, 2001). Brown and Hayes (2001) find that “People often see such television images as influencing notions about appropriate family life despite the overall feeling that such images are inaccurate or unrealistic” (p. 116). In turn, Douglas (2001) observes, “that popular presentations, especially those on television, affect the way in which
people think about the family” (p. 240). Thus, media’s influence on children’s perceptions affects children’s ideas on how a family should function.

Alexander’s (2001) advocacy for “scholars . . . [to] focus their attentions on the ways in which media affect the process of creating and sharing meanings within the family” (p. 281) recognizes and emphasizes the role that media plays in the communication process. She further explains that “media are implicated in the accomplishment of numerous family functions, including defining role expectations and articulating the nature of relationships” (Alexander, 2001, p. 281). Alexander’s work underscores the importance of studying media portrayals and their effects.

In sum, this focused review helps show how stepfamilies play a significant role in American society. It shows the scholarly emphasis on stepchildren’s and stepparent’s experience with dialectical tensions, stepparent’s position as simultaneously included and excluded, and the ways media portrayals influence our understanding of family and relationship expectations. Moreover, it shows the ways communication shapes our understanding(s) of this sort of family experience, and the ways family members complexly work to negotiate how we understand ourselves as well.

Rationale

The research question guiding the current paper is: How do popular American films symbolically represent the experience of stepchildren, stepparents and parents in communication? Studying this question is beneficial for at least three reasons. First, few studies have approached the topic of stepfamily conflict communication through the lens of film portrayals. Second, given the popularity of films in U.S. culture, and because so many persons often identify and learn from films, a valuable source of understanding communication is missing. This study attempts to contribute to that void. Third, I believe that the instances documented below can help us understand the complexities of some relationships and, in turn, can help us build healthy relationships.

Many of the above studies have engaged stepfamily communication by looking at the stepfamily as a whole, or by looking from the stepparent/parent perspective. This study will engage the topic by specifically looking at the stepparent/stepchild and parent/stepchild interactions and relationships. Because we know that communication helps create realities among and by communicators, we can expect to learn a lot from studying in this way. Also, as discussed above, media is a powerful influence within American culture. Because mass media texts often reflect and inform how we might live culturally, looking at stepfamily conflict communication using films from American popular culture can reveal cultural assumptions, values, expectations and norms that might often be taken for granted, along with potential consequences of these expectations.

Methods

This study uses textual analysis, an approach that can be used in a number of ways, including: rhetorical criticism, qualitative content analysis and quantitative analysis (Botan, Frey & Kreps; 2000). For this study, I chose qualitative content analysis. Botan, et. al (2000) describe content analysis:

Most content analyses are quantitative in nature; which involves counting the particular instances of certain types of messages in texts. There are, however, qualitative content analyses, where researchers are more interested in the meanings associated with the message than with the number of times message variables occur (p. 237).

Fursich (2009) supports this definition: “qualitative analysis that, beyond the manifest content of media, focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text” (p. 240). The importance of analyzing media texts—particularly television—is underscored by Fiske (1987), “not because it reproduces reality, which it clearly does not, but because it reproduces the dominant sense of reality” (p. 21). Thus, by textually analyzing the media texts of this study, I explore how this sense of reality might be coming through, or being constructed, by these media texts.
This textual analysis began by my process of film selection. I started with the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), searching key words such as “stepfamily” and “stepparent” in an attempt to locate films related to stepfamily communication. I sought recommendations from professors and colleagues, and also reviewed the film choices of a previous study (Leon & Angst, 2005). Through this process, I preliminarily selected four films and screened for relevance: *Stepmom* (1998), *The Kids are All Right* (2011), *Life as a House* (2001), and *Yours, Mine and Ours* (2005).

In the preliminary screening, I looked for substantial stepfamily portrayals. I was not concerned with traditional stepfamily definitions, but rather with having significant stepfamily relationships available for analysis. The first three films passed the preliminary screening, *Yours, Mine and Ours* (2005) did not pass the screening and was discarded, because it focused on the marriage of the parents more so than stepfamily dynamics. *Yours, Mine and Ours* (1968) was chosen for preliminary screening. After screening, I added it to the film selections. The final film selections represent unique perspectives and were as follows: *Stepmom* (1998), *The Kids are All Right* (2011), *Life as a House* (2001), and *Yours, Mine and Ours* (1968).

I screened these films and took extensive notes on communication and conflict episodes within the films. A conversation on disagreement, challenges, or tensions within the family constituted a conflict episode. Once notes were compiled, I coded these notes by looking specifically at the concepts identity, inclusion, love, and conflict. More specifically, I looked at identity as a negotiation process; inclusion as pertaining to involvement in the family, or non-involvement in the family; love as how characters talked about and showed understanding concerning love or affection. Conflict refers to the ways in which conflict was handled by family members and affected other family members.

**Results**

This analysis uncovers patterned ways that identity and inclusion and, in smaller ways, love and conflict are represented across these four films. Organized by concept, I examined how characters are shown to engage and work through these key dimensions in the stepfamily/stepparent relational setting. But first, I begin with a short summary of each film.

*Stepmom* (1998) is the story of Luke Harrison, his girlfriend Isabel, his ex-wife Jackie Harrison, and Luke and Jackie’s two children, Anna and Benjamin. Luke and Jackie have been working together to co-parent since they divorced three years ago, but Jackie is having serious issues with Luke’s girlfriend Isabel—especially since Isabel now lives with Luke. Isabel and Jackie clash. Isabel is a professional photographer and Jackie has been a stay at home mother for the past twelve years. After Jackie is diagnosed with terminal cancer, Isabel and Jackie have to put aside their differences and focus on what is best for the kids.

*The Kids are All Right* (2010) is about Nic and Jules and their two children, Joni (eighteen years old) and Laser (fifteen years old). Joni’s and Laser’s mothers are Nic and Jules respectively. Joni and Laser are half siblings, because they have the same anonymous sperm donor father. Laser is interested in meeting his biological father and pushes Joni to make contact with him. The children begin to establish a relationship with their donor dad, Paul, while their mothers are unsure about the relationship. Nic keeps her distance from Paul at first, while Jules becomes friends with him. The five soon become close, until Nic finds that Jules and Paul have been having an affair. Joni and Laser soon find out and are devastated; both push Paul out of their life. Paul is left deprived of the family he was just getting to know. On the other hand, Nic and Jules reconcile and the kids realize the extent of their mothers love.

*Life as a House* (2001) tells the story of George Monroe who is estranged from his son, Seth, and ex-wife, Robin. Robin and her husband, Peter, are having difficulties with Seth who is abusing drugs and creating trouble. Robin begs George to take Sam for the summer to try to make him behave. George just lost his job and was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He decides to build a house after living in the small shack he inherited from his abusive father twenty-five years ago. Through the project, Sam, George, Robin and Peter all make positive changes in their lives. George passes away toward the end of the film, and Sam gives the house to the girl who was injured by George’s father in a drunken driving accident.


Yours, Mine, and Ours (1968) is about a widow, Helen North, her eight children, a widower, Frank Beardsley, and his ten children. Helen and Frank meet, fall in love, and get married despite the daunting prospect of having a family of eighteen children. They struggle to blend their two families and face many conflicts between their children. Frank and Helen face a new challenge when they find out Helen is expecting number nineteen. The new baby helps bring the family together and create a new stepfamily, especially when Frank legally adopts Helen’s children and Helen legally adopts Frank’s children.

Identity

Throughout all four films, identity appears as a constant negotiation process. Characters negotiated both personal and family identities within the stepfamily relationships.

In the beginning of The Kids Are All Right (2010), Jules and Nic are discussing Laser’s friend, Clay, and life choices. Nic says, “I think he’s wasting his potential.” Jules responds, “What’s that supposed to mean? . . . you know, like mother like son. Both of us wandering in the dark aimlessly, wasting our potential.” These statements are discussing identity; identity is being associated with purpose and development in this conversation. Jules takes Nic’s comment about Laser’s identity and future personally and relates Laser’s identity to her personal identity.

When Laser and Joni go to meet Paul, Joni hesitates and says, “He might be weird. I mean he donated sperm. That’s weird.” Both Joni and Laser have already placed Paul’s identity in question, because he donated sperm. The kids suggest Paul to be abnormal, because they do not believe donating sperm is a normal action.

Later in the film, Paul comments on Nic’s identity when Joni is sharing the conflict she is having with her mother. He answers, “That’s your mom. That’s her job.” After a conflict where Joni challenged Nic’s parental authority, Nic re-establishes her identity as a parent when she declares to Paul, “Listen, when you’ve been a parent for eighteen years, you come and talk to me . . . ok?” For Nic, her identity as a parent is based on time invested in her child’s life. In turn, for Nic, Paul’s identity as a parent fails because he has not invested years of time in her child’s life.

Joni exclaims her independence to her mom, Nic, as she asserts, “Yeah, I know how you feel about them [motorcycles], but I’m an adult now and you have to respect that. Ok? Good night.” Joni also articulates her position within the family when she yells at her mom, Nic, “What do you want from me? I did everything you wanted. I got all A’s. I got into every school I applied to. Now you can show everyone what a perfect lesbian family you have.” Here, Joni equates her identity as an excellent and successful student with being a good daughter. Jules communicates about her identity as a mother as a position that deserves respect, no matter the circumstances.

In Yours, Mine and Ours (1968), Mike (the oldest Beardsley child at seventeen) makes a comment at Helen and Frank’s wedding. He dramatically says, “We won’t be a family; we’ll be a freak show.” Mike explicitly talks about his family identity negatively—especially related to the number of siblings and step-siblings. He associates the large number of family members with negative perceptions of others and sees this as a reflection on him.

Contrasting Mike’s initial negative feelings, Helen’s son Phillip decides to change his identity by changing his name. He gets into an altercation with his teacher and classmates when this change is challenged.

Phillip tells his teacher the nun, “I’m Phillip Beardsley.”
Nun: No dear, your legal name is Phillip North.
Phillip: We all went to church and got married!! I’m Phillip Beardsley! (He gets into fight with classmates.)
Helen comes to pick Phillip up later.
Phillip (to Helen): She says I’m not legal and that Mike isn’t my brother!
Helen: Of course Mike’s your brother.
Helen (to nun): Please understand my situation. I’m trying to bring two families together. This is the first sign that I may be succeeding. Can he just use Beardsley?
Nun: But legally it’s North.
Helen: Yes, but emotionally it’s Beardsley.

This extended example suggests how Phillip has shifted his identity from being a North to being a Beardsley. When Helen and Frank married, Phillip felt as if he had lost his identity as Phillip North—one of eight children. He was now one of eighteen children and felt lost in the shuffle. Mike helped Phillip find his place in the new family, and Phillip associated the feeling of family with his last name.

In *Life as a House* (2001), Robin asks Peter, “I wish you’d talk to him [Sam]. He needs a man.” Peter—Sam’s stepfather—comments on George, Sam’s father. He says, “His father’s a man.” Robin clarifies and says, “A man he respects.” Peters responds, “He respects nothing.” In this scene, Robin and Peter are establishing Sam’s personal identity as well as George’s identity as a father. Sam gets characterized as a troublemaking teenager, and George as the un-involved father who has not earned the respect of his son.

In the beginning of the story, Robin discusses her own identity as a mother, asking George, “What kind of mother can’t stand her own son?” George reassures her later on in the story by praising her: “You’re a good mother, Robin.” Robin’s identity as a mother, like all identity negotiation, is not negotiated alone; she relies on others for feedback as she negotiates. Robin, along with her children, firmly bases her success as a mother as the foundation of her identity.

In *Stepmother* (1998), the identities most often being negotiated are stepmother and stepchild. For instance, while in a conflict, Anna yells at Isabel, “I don’t have to listen to you!” Isabel responds, “Yes you do.” Anna shouts, “No I don’t! You’re not my mother!” Here Anna is negotiating the difference between her mother and her stepmother. To Anna, her mother is someone to be listened to and respected, while her stepmother is someone who is unfortunately in her life and not at all in a similar role to her mother.

In another scene, Isabel discusses her own identity in a conflict with Jackie, when asserting, “I am so unbelievably sick of your imperious bullshit! I never said I was June fucking Cleaver!” Here, Isabel is carefully balancing her identity as a stepmother; she wants to be involved, but not to the extent that Jackie is. Jackie actively participates in all of the children’s school programs and activities; she efficiently prepares healthy meals and knows the minute details of their daily schedules. Jackie reinforces the differences between their identities when she exclaims, “And I don’t [have a life]? Because I have children? You know what your problem is? You are so self-involved. You couldn’t be a mother!” Jackie wields her motherly success as a weapon against Isabel, placing motherhood in contrast to being “self-involved.”

Later in the story, Isabel becomes incredulous when the kids school calls her telling her that Anna and Ben weren’t picked up by Jackie. She asks, “Are you sure you have the right kids?” The school official says, “Yeah, Anna and Ben Harrison. Why?” Isabel replies, “Because Jackie Harrison would never forget to pick up her kids.” For me, this moment shows that Isabel is negotiating Jackie’s identity as the ideal mother. When negotiating their identity as parents who are no longer together, Luke tells Jackie, “We are still their parents for the next 100 years.”

As the film unfolds, Anna’s negotiation of Isabel’s role is evident in the conversation with her mother:

Anna: I was thinking about what you said about Isabel. You know, about seeing the good side of her. You know; you’re right. . . She knows all about clothes and stuff. She knows every rock n roll song ever written. She’s kinda like a kid herself.
Jackie: Like a big sister?
Anna: Yeah, and she knows all the cool junk food places to eat at. Once you get to know her, she’s not bad. But don’t tell her. . .
Anna’s negotiation of Isabel’s role continues through the film. When Jackie tells the kids that she has cancer, Anna lashes out and asks, “Where’s Isabel?” Jackie asks, “What?” Anna says, “It’s Thursday, we’re supposed to be with Isabel. She should have picked us up by now.” Ben says, “I’d rather be with Mommy.” Anna retorts, “Well, she’s dying. Isabel’s your mother now.” Faced with the fact that her mother has cancer and might die from the cancer, Anna re-negotiates Isabel’s role as stepmom. Anna temporarily shifts identity of primary caretaker away from her mother to her stepmother. Perhaps the best example of identity negotiation from *Stepmom* (1998) is the conversation that Jackie and Isabel have when Jackie realizes she is dying and Isabel will be her children’s stepmother. Isabel shares,

> I never wanted to be a mom. Well, sharing it with you is one thing. Carrying it alone the rest of my life. . . always being compared to you. You’re perfect. They worship you. I just don’t want to be looking over my shoulder everyday for twenty years knowing that someone else would have done it right. Done it better; the way that I can’t.

Jackie asks, What do I have that you don’t?

Isabel answers, You’re mother earth incarnate.

Jackie replies, You’re hip and fresh.

Isabel says, You ride [horses] with Anna.

Jackie reassures, You’ll learn.

Isabel recognizes their co-parenting as an easier identity than sole mother figure and fears the responsibility that comes with motherhood. Jackie does not tell Isabel that she’s finished learning as a mother; Jackie encourages Isabel to see being a stepmom as a process—a negotiation process.

While the four films are distinct in nature, they share a common thread in terms of how they represent identity. First, parent-child and stepparent-child identity is often negotiated through episodes of conflict. Children, parents and stepparents often solidly shift identities during or after conflict. Second, parent and stepparent identity are often negotiated through comparison to their counterpart. Stepparents positively and negatively compare their identity to that of the parent and vice versa. Third, children’s adjustments in negotiating stepparent or parent identity are influenced by the responses of both the stepparent and parent. A parent’s negative opinion of the stepparent often shaped and altered the positive opinion the child had of the stepparent.

**Inclusion**

In *Yours, Mine and Ours* (1968), the representation of inclusion varies in the stepfamily context for different family members. On their first night as a stepfamily, Frank declares, “Let’s get one thing straight. There’s no more mine and there’s no more yours. From now on, everyone and everything is ours.” Frank was responding to comments about my sister from his children. To Frank, eliminating personal family (Beardsley and North) claims was the first step in including all members in the new stepfamily. Frank embodies the primary position of power within the family; he attempts to utilize this power by creating neutral identities for the children.

Phillip North feels lost at the beginning of the stepfamily, especially in the everyday chaos, until Mike Beardsley comes along and helps him with the things he needs to do to get ready for school each morning. After getting Mike’s help, Phillip proudly tells the bus driver, “That’s my brother [Mike].” For Phillip, Mike is included as a sibling, despite differences in last names.

Helen includes Mike into the anticipation of the new child when Mike asks, “Do you want this baby?” She replies, “Very much. You see, he won’t have to worry about whether he’s a Beardsley or a North.” Here we see, to Helen, the differences within their stepfamily of name identities possibly create an exclusion for the children. Once the baby is born, Phillip asks Mike “Is he my brother or your brother?” Mike answers, “He’s both our brothers.” Mike firmly positions or establishes the new child as included in their new sibling relationship, and to all the North and Beardsley children.
Perhaps the most powerful moment of inclusion is found in Mike’s closing comments at the adoption ceremony. Mike tells the judge, “Besides it doesn’t matter much what this court does. You see, we held our own meeting yesterday and if you’re interested in democracy: Helen North Beardsley was unanimously elected our mother for life.” The Beardsley children choose to include Helen as their mother rather than place her as an outsider to their family. The children deliberately included Helen as their mother rather than excluding her as in past instances. Their deliberate inclusion speaks to the shift in family inclusivity overall.

In *Life as a House* (2001), George forces his son, Sam, to include him in his life. In a discussion with Robin over Sam’s summer living arrangements, George yells,

He’s not spending the entire summer with some kid in Tahoe. He can hate me. You can hate me. He can try to kill me in my sleep. I don’t care. Sam is spending the summer with me! He’s my son; he’s sixteen. That’s it! . . . You have worn out your welcome at this house, Sam. This may be the worst summer of your life, but you’ve earned it.

George views inclusivity into his son’s life a rigid right he has as a father. By forcing Sam to include him, George does not allow exclusion.

In this sense, Sam excludes George from the position of father when he refers to Peter as his father; he exclaims, “Why don’t you just go beg some money off my Dad so you can move into some place with a real bathroom and a real kitchen?” Sam’s deliberate labeling of Peter as “Dad” does not leave a relational space for George to fully participate as his father.

In *Stepmom* (1998), Isabel tries to improve her relationship with Anna by asking Jackie if she can take Anna to a concert. When Jackie laughs at Anna going somewhere on a school night, Isabel simply says, “I just thought it would be something nice that she and I could do together.” Isabel was seeking to involve Jackie into her decision, while Jackie refused any inclusion.

When Ben and Anna are upset because Jackie forgot to pick the kids up from school, Isabel embraces Jackie by lying to the kids, “To tell you the truth, I did. You’re mother had to help a friend with this emergency and called to switch days. I got caught up at work and just forgot all about you.” Isabel tries to persuade the kids to exclude her, rather than their mother, Jackie. Isabel seeks to protect the children’s image of their mother as perfect by exploiting her image as the forgetful individual. While her initial motive is not to incorporate Jackie, she does so to benefit the children.

In a later scene, Jackie and Luke tell the kids that Luke and Isabel are going to get married and Anna reacts,

I’m not upset! Why would I be upset? I mean, no one asked me when you got a divorce. No one asked me if I wanted a new mother. No one even asked me if I liked her. If you guys don’t care about keeping our family together, than why should I?

Jackie clarifies, “Baby, Isabel isn’t going to try to take my place as your mom.” In this moment, Jackie attempts to include Isabel as a stepmom but not exclude herself as their mother, while Anna’s communication suggests her feeling excluded from decisions that are changing her family.

Later in the film, Isabel confronts Jackie about what appears to be Jackie’s plan to move to Los Angeles with the children—far away from their current home in New York. Jackie responds to Isabel’s accusation by stating, “I would have thought this was the answer to your prayers. You lose the witch and her two little brats in one swoop. Simplifies everything. You get your life back.” Isabel replies, “Oh, but you can make plans to rearrange everyone else’s life without consulting us.” Jackie explains, “Bi-custodial parenting. People do it all the time. Luke gets the kids for one month during the summer and every other holiday. It’s not ideal, but people make it work.”

This moment suggests that Isabel feels Jackie does not have the right to exclude her and Luke from major decisions. Isabel expects to be included. Luke’s position as an involved father is threatened by Jackie’s
potential move; Isabel’s position as incorporated family member is jeopardized by Jackie’s seeming unilateral decision.

Anna does not feel included in the family process when Jackie tells them that she has cancer. Anna becomes very upset when Jackie says she’s been sick for a long time and is only now sharing it with Anna and Ben. She asks, “So you lied? You lied when you never told me. If you lied then, maybe you’re lying now. How can I ever believe you again?” Anna feels that parents need to include their children in major family crises. When excluded, she feels betrayed.

In another scene, Anna is upset about a situation at school and first chooses to exclude Isabel from the situation by saying, “No thanks. I don’t need advice from a stepmother.” After Isabel says they can do something together about the situation, Anna warms up and accepts Isabel’s advice. She even says, “I’ve had the worst day, until now.” Isabel earns entry into Anna’s life after showing that she cares for Anna.

After Jackie comes home from her cancer treatment in Los Angeles, Isabel brings the kids to surprise her at the airport. Ben is hesitant and asks Isabel, “Why is she in a wheelchair?” Isabel answers, “Sweetie, she’s traveled a long way and she’s tired. Now go up and give her a hug and be really gentle.” In this moment, Isabel encourages the children to continue to include their mother in their daily lives. Ben also engages Isabel as a mother figure by looking to her for answers.

After a conflict with Jackie, Isabel shares, “. . .this isn’t about me or you. It’s about them. And believe it or not, I am trying and I do have their very best interests at heart.” Jackie offers Isabel a more complete picture of inclusion when discussing Anna, and says, She [Anna] doesn’t have to choose. She can have us both, love us both. And she will be a better person because of me and because of you. I have their past and you can have their future.” To Jackie, inclusion of one individual does not automatically result in exclusion in the other; both her and Isabel can be simultaneously involved in the children’s lives.

Perhaps the greatest moment of inclusion occurs at the close of the film when Isabel has Luke, Jackie, Ben and Anna sit down for a family photo on Christmas day. Isabel says, “Let’s get a family picture” and snaps a picture of the four of them. After the first photo, Jackie declares, “Ok, now let’s get one with the whole family. Isabel?” Isabel joins the four and poses for a family photo. Jackie’s inclusion of Isabel into the family photo marks a point of acceptance and warmth that the two women have reached. This moment marks a shift in their relationship in the ways each welcomes the other.

In The Kids are All Right (2010), when Jules and Nic find out that Laser and Joni went to meet their donor dad, Paul, a conversation ensues:

Jules: Honey, we understand that you would be curious about your biological father. It’s completely natural.
Nic: But why didn’t you tell us?
Joni: Because we knew you’d be upset.
Jules: No, no, no. We’re not upset. We wish you would’ve included us in the conversation, that’s all. But you met him and that’s cool and we can move on.
Joni: Actually, I want to see him again.
Jules, Nick, Laser: You do?
Nic: No way. No one’s seeing anyone until we meet him.

To Nic and Jules, inclusion into their kid’s lives is a balancing act that involves understanding their need for autonomy as well as their need for guidance. Their skillful negotiation of involvement benefits their relationships with their children.

Laser mediates the level of inclusion that Paul has within his life by hanging out with Paul and bringing his friend Clay. When Paul suggests, “Maybe we could hang out together, just you and me next time. . . I didn’t like the way he was talking to you at all,” Laser becomes defensive and protective of his friend. Joni draws Paul into her life by discussing the problems that she’s having with her mom. Joni shares, “My mom, Nic, she’s driving me crazy!” Paul asks, “Yeah, what’s she doing?” Joni responds, “She’s treating me like I’m twelve. Like she doesn’t want to admit that I’m an adult.” Paul says, “She’s
your mom. That’s her job.” Joni scoffs, “What to smother me to death? That’s not her job.” Paul suggests, “Well if you want things to be different, you gotta make that happen yourself. That’s your job.” Here we see, Joni and Laser begin engaging Paul in greater ways as the film progresses.

There are also smaller instances of inclusion in the film. For instance, Paul attempts to assert himself in parenting decisions by making a recommendation to Nic: “You know if you backed off a little bit on the restrictions, you probably wouldn’t have so much conflict.” However, Nic struggles with including Paul into their family, and says, “It’s this whole Paul thing. It’s driving me crazy. I feel like he’s taking over my family.” To Nic, inclusion involves relinquishing some form of control and this makes inclusion difficult. Paul establishes inclusion when he proposes a toast at dinner; he says, “Cheers to an unconventional family.” This gesture, for me, suggests how Paul feels secure in his growing involvement in the family’s daily life; that is, he feels included.

After the Paul and Jules affair is revealed, Nic, Jules, and the kids exclude Paul from the family. Nic vocalizes their exclusion. She says, “You hold on. You know what you did to my kids?! Let me tell you something man. This is not your family! This is my family!” Paul replies, “I know that Nic.” Nic answers, “No, you don’t know. You don’t know. You know why? Cuz you’re a fucking interloper. If you want a family so much, you go out and make your own.” In this instance, exclusion works as a form of protection Nic enacts for her family.

Although diverse in nature, I see two common themes cutting across the four films. First, inclusion and exclusion are not final positions; family members may include an individual in one moment and exclude them the next. Second, inclusion must be earned and it can be lost. An individual can earn involvement into a family members’ life through positive steps; the same individual can lose involvement by creating a destructive relationship.

Love

The characters in each of these four films discuss and display love in different ways. Love is not established as having one set meaning, but rather varies from person to person in each film. In Life as a House, Robin is beginning to question her husband Peter’s love for his children. She asks, “Do you think it’s odd your kids don’t hug you?” Peter quickly answers, “Should I?” Robin declares, “It would worry me. [pause] What would you be if you asked Ryan and Adam to run in here right now and hug you?” He simply says, “I’d be you.” Here, Peter and Robin have different ideas and displays of love. Robin’s communication suggests love as being physically affectionate to your children. On the other hand, Peter does not see love that way and questions why that would even matter.

Elsewhere in the film, Sam challenges his father, George, screaming, “You got no right going through my things! That’s an invasion of privacy.” George asserts, “Everything about you is my business. What you smoke, what you sniff, what you swallow. It’s all my business.” Sam retorts, “I’ve been using since I was twelve. You’re all so unbelievably stupid, you know that? You didn’t give a shit about anything I did up until now.” George says, “I apologize for everyday but today. Today I give a shit.” To George, love means caring about Sam’s actions and their effects; Sam feels his father’s love is uncertain because he has not felt been aware of this love before.

In Stepmom, Anna and Ben question their father about love. In one scene, Isabel had recently moved in with Luke and the kids are still adjusting to this change.

Anna: So why did she move in with you anyways?
Luke: Because we love each other and because we want to share our lives together.
Anna: Well, you already had a life with mommy.
Luke: But mommy and I weren’t getting along very well and it wasn’t fair to you guys us fighting all the time.
Ben: I fight with Anna all the time. Can I move out?
Luke: No. But you guys are brother and sister.
Anna: Well you were husband and wife. Doesn’t that mean something?
Luke: Yes, it does. But well, when you get older, your relationships get a lot more complicated and there are all kinds of feelings flying around. And sometimes, some of those feelings change.

Anna: But did you fall out of love with mommy?

Luke: Well, yeah, I guess I did. I still love your mom; it just became a different kind of love, that’s all. We’re still really good friends and we always will be.

Ben: Can you ever fall out of love with your kids?


When Luke explains that love between him and Jackie disappeared, Anna and Ben question if their father’s love for them can also disappear. Luke reassures them that a parent’s love for their children is different than love in a marriage or relationship; he establishes love between adults as complicated and dependent on feelings, but love between parent and child as simple and inherent.

In *Yours, Mine, and Ours*, the children struggle to reconcile the love their biological parents had with the fact that the Beardsley’s father and the North’s mother married and have said they love each other. Colleen questions her mother’s idea that Frank should adopt the North children: “Mother, that’s the most awful thing I’ve ever heard of. He’s [Mr. North] hardly been gone a year and you’re trying to wipe him out of your life like he never existed. And, I thought you loved him!” Rosemary Beardsley echoes a similar statement: “We loved our mother just as much as they loved their father. And now you’re asking us to bury her again?” Here the children show love as something that should not disappear easily. They become upset when it seems each of their parents is easily dismissing their love for their previous spouses.

In *The Kids are All Right*, Jules and Nic explicitly communicate love to their children. In a conversation with Laser, Jules says, “Laser, your Mom and I accept and love you unconditionally. You know that, right?” Jules is seeking to remind Laser of that love, even in the difficult conversation they are having. Adversity reinforces rather than diminishes the love parents have for children.

In one of the final scenes of the film, Jules talks to Nic, Joni and Laser about her affair with Paul. She simply says,

> ... I feel sick about it [the affair], because I love you guys and I love your Mom and that’s the truth. Sometimes you hurt the ones you love the most, and I don’t know why. Anyway, I just wanted to say I’m very sorry for what I did, and I hope you’ll forgive me eventually.

To Jules, love takes work and involves forgiveness. Even though she knows that her kids and her partner love her, she realizes that forgiveness is not automatic after what happened. Nic breaks down and cries after this confession; Laser and Joni listened carefully with little reaction except concern for Nic.

While these four films have marked differences, two shared ideas pertaining to love are represented across these different films. Parental love is mainly established as love that the child can be assured of no matter the circumstances. Love between parents and stepparents often creates confusion for children, as it is not established as unconditional.

**Conflict**

In *Stepmom*, conflict between Jackie and Luke is displayed as a matter of perspective difference. In other words, conflict exists because each refuses to take a dual perspective and see the other’s side. In a meeting with Anna’s teacher, Luke and Jackie simultaneously tell a different story about Isabel moving in. On the one hand, he says,

> I’ve been seeing another woman for the past year. I saw a few women when we first split up, but I’ve been seeing one woman for the past year, and, after a lot of thought and careful discussion with her and the kids, I might add, she moved in.
On the other hand, she says, “Well, in the three short years since we’ve been divorced, he’s seen a number of women. Anyway now, without very much warning to the kids, he’s living with a woman half his age.” Luke and Jackie approach the conflict with Isabel’s move from different vantage points, allowing personal prejudices to color or influence their perceptions, which in turn, affect the relationship and issue at hand.

They do not work to resolve their conflict over Isabel; instead, they attack. After Luke says he would do anything for Anna “gladly, any day of the week,” Jackie responds, “Except for Thursday, when Isabel forgot to pick them up.” Luke raises his voice, retorting, “Jackie, she was five minutes late for Christ’s sake. She was five minutes late!” The teacher asks Luke, “I’m wondering if Anna could be responding to the underlying hostility that exists between your girlfriend and Mrs. Harrison?” Luke answers,

Well of course she’s responding to it. Mrs. Franklin, do you think any of this is easy for us? Do you think it’s easy for Jackie to watch her kids being looked after by another woman? Not to mention a woman who really has no experience being a mother. Of course Jackie’s going to be irrational, hostile, defensive.

Luke and Jackie choose to place blame on the other individual when faced with conflict. This pattern negatively affects the children’s relationship with Isabel, and in this sense, is unhealthy. The children struggle with loyalty issues, feeling disloyal to their mother if they see positive characteristics in Isabel. Continuing negative conflict patterns confuse the children rather than provide clarification.

In another scene, Ben and Anna go with Isabel to a photo shoot in Central Park. Ben wandered away and was found by the police. An irate Jackie comes to pick up Ben and Anna. Isabel tries to catch her attention when she comes in the door, “Jackie, I am so sorry.” Jackie refuses to acknowledge Isabel and pulls Luke aside, “I’m only gonna say this one time, so listen carefully. That woman is to have nothing more to do with my children.” After their terse exchange, Isabel interjects, “Don’t take this out on him. It’s my fault. I’m so sorry. But you’re not making this any easier on anybody!” Jackie raises her voice,

It is not my job to make it any easier for you. It is my job to take care of those children, and they don’t want to be with you. I’m getting a court order and you are never going to be with these children again alone. Do you understand? EVER!

This interaction, for me, suggests poor conflict communication between Luke and Jackie in a highly emotional situation. Isabel attempts to mediate the conflict by taking the blame, but doing so only serves to infuriate Jackie.

Luke and Jackie’s negative conflict patterns can be seen affecting the children’s relationship in a later scene, in which Jackie, Ben and Anna are riding horses together after the incident in Central Park.

Ben: Mommy, it’s not Isabel’s fault that I ran away.
Jackie: No, you’re right. That was your fault. But it’s her fault for not taking care of my precious son as if it was her priority—which means her most important job.
Ben: Isabel’s job is she works.
Jackie: Ben, mommies work too. They work very hard. In fact, I work harder as a mommy than I ever did when I had an outside job. I just don’t get paid.
Anna: Does Isabel make a lot of money.
Jackie: Well, people like Isabel—who think only about themselves—often do make a great deal of money.
Ben: I think she’s pretty.
Jackie: Yeah, if you like big teeth.
Ben: Mommy?
Jackie: What sweetheart?
Ben: If you want me to hate her, I will.

In this scene, we see Ben trying to point out Isabel’s positive attributes to his mother. Jackie reacts by degrading Isabel. To Ben, this demonstrates that he should also react negatively to Isabel. His poignant statement reflects the influence that Jackie’s negative conflict has on his views of Isabel. Ben’s love for his mother influences how he classifies the identity of his stepmother.

In another scene, Jackie manages conflict with Anna through conversation, and by giving her the option not to talk about it. Jackie states, “If you don’t want to talk about this now, it’s ok. Really. You don’t have to, but don’t look me in the eye and lie to me. It hurts my feelings; I get angry …” Anna sighs, “I’m sorry I said it [that Luke and Jackie were getting remarried]. I guess sometimes I just wish that you and Daddy would. I figured if I said this out loud, it just might come true.” Jackie’s direct handling of conflict with Anna elicited a positive response in which Anna opened up to her mother. This is likely not the first conflict in Jackie and Anna’s history as mother and daughter. Perhaps Anna also chose to open up to her mom because she knew from previous experience that her mom had her best interests at heart.

Later in the film, Luke tells Isabel that he will call the babysitter for the weekend they have with kids, since he will be gone on a business trip. A conflict ensues between the two of them.

Isabel: What for?
Luke: Well, I don’t expect you to handle them yourself.
Isabel: Can’t handle them myself. That’s what you mean, isn’t it?
Isabel: You don’t trust me to be alone with your kids.
Isabel: Luke, by keeping me apart from them, it’s like you’re saying: hey kids this is fun. Keep on hating her.
Luke: No, I don’t say that. They don’t hate you.
Isabel: Really? Look in their eyes honey. Look in your ex-wife’s eyes.
Luke: Jackie’s just trying to protect the kids. What do you expect? It’s hard for her and it’s complicated. You don’t understand. You don’t have kids.
Isabel: Ok, so. It’s just complicated for you and Jackie. For me, it’s pretty simple because I don’t have kids.
Luke: Look, I’m just trying to make things work here. Trying to give you guys some time to get used to living together.
Isabel: All right then. Back off just a little bit and give me a chance. Ok?

Isabel assertively handles conflict with Luke by directly addressing issues. Luke attempts to avoid the conflict by saying the situation is complicated. Isabel’s assertive approach encourages Luke to constructively handle conflict.

In another scene, Isabel and Anna get into a conflict standoff. This occurred when Anna was disrespectful to Isabel, after Isabel gave her and Ben a new puppy. Anna ran to her room and slammed her door shut. Isabel followed her and turned off Anna’s blaring stereo.

Isabel: Listen young lady, let’s get one thing straight!
Anna: Don’t touch my things!
Isabel: Look, I would really like it if we could get along.
Anna: I don’t have to listen to you.
Isabel: Yes you do.
Anna: No I don’t. You’re not my mother!
Isabel: Thank God for that! [pause] What I meant and perhaps I didn’t say it well, is that you have a great mom and you don’t need another one. But I would like to be treated with some respect when you are in this house.

Anna: Well, this is my Dad’s house.

Isabel: Well, this is my house too.

Anna: Well, this is my room so treat it with some respect and get out.

In this instance, we see that Isabel handled conflict with Anna quite differently than Jackie. Isabel relied on emotional confrontation in the moment of frustration. She demanded rather than persuaded. Isabel’s conflict skills with Anna did not earn her the same openness that Jackie’s conflict skills did.

A scene in *The Kids are All Right* also provides an example of complex conflict. Joni rode home with Paul on his motorcycle and both are confronted by Nic when they get home.

Nic: Wow, funny how someone conveniently forgot to tell me that they were driving home on a motorcycle. Do you know how many people I’ve seen come into the hospital because of motorcycle accidents?

Paul: I’m a very safe driver, Nic.

Nic: Yeah, that is so not the point I’m making here Paul. Joni knows that this is something that I just never allow.

Joni: Mom, I’m eighteen years old. I won’t be living here in a month.

Nic: Yeah, you’re living here now.

Joni: Yeah, why don’t you get a jump on it and pretend like I’m not. (She walks away.)

Nic: Whooo. She’s never talked to me like that before.

Paul: You know, if you backed off a little bit on the restrictions, you probably wouldn’t have so much conflict.

Nic: Oh really. You think so, Paul? Is that how it works?

In this moment we observe that Nic handles confrontation directly and aggressively; her approach alienates both Joni and Paul. We also see that Joni is direct and challenging in her conflict approach, while Paul attempts to stay more neutral. Paul’s neutrality is an attempt to cautiously mediate the relationship to his daughter and her parents.

In the beginning of *Life as a House*, Peter, Robin and their two sons are waiting on Sam for breakfast. Robin has asked Peter to talk to Sam about Sam’s behavior and actions. Sam enters, “Thanks for talking about me behind my back. It’s useful in court.” Sam’s stepbrother mutters, “Queer.” Robin exclaims, “What did you say?” Sam’s stepbrother shrugs, “Dad said it first.” Robin glares at Peter until he shrugs his shoulders and gives a half smile. In this moment, we can see the interconnectedness of conflict. Sam pushes Peter until Peter responds negatively and Robin disapproves of both of their actions. Sam and Peter both have negative views of each other and Robin wishes to improve those views.

In *Yours, Mine, and Ours*, after Frank and Helen announce they both want to adopt each other’s children, Helen gently says, “Colleen, we thought you children would be happy to be adopted.” Two of Helen’s children retort, “Happy to forget our real father’s name? And get lost in a jungle full of Beardsley’s?!” Frank tries to calm the situation, “We want this to be one family.” All of the children leave the dinner table. Frank says, “I’m sorry; I didn’t think I was committing a federal offense. I thought they’d want me for a father.” In this scene we perceive that Helen and Frank both attempt to mediate the conflict through calm responses while their children respond emotionally angry and hurt.

Each of these four films present unique portrayals of American stepfamilies, and each share common themes of conflict across all four. Conflict is handled differently by each parent, stepparent, and sibling. Conflict is best approached when approached calmly and clearly—without emotion; however, emotion is often prevalent in the examined stepfamily conflicts.
**Discussion**

Through this study I analyzed the film portrayals of four unique stepfamilies. I examined the depicted communication within each family, specifically looking at identity, inclusion, love and conflict.

For the stepfamily characters in each film, identity showed itself to be a continual negotiation process. Characters negotiated both personal and family identities and, at times, these negotiations overlapped. Personal identity often hinged on family identity. Identity negotiation was both an individual process and a process in which the stepfamily members co-created family identity.

Each stepfamily member experienced inclusion and exclusion at different points in time. Stepchildren often felt excluded when parents and stepparents made decisions that changed their family. Stepparents may also feel excluded from parenting decisions. To some of the characters, inclusion of the stepparent did not automatically result in exclusion of the parent. For each stepfamily member, particularly the stepchildren, inclusion was an earned privilege.

The stepfamilies in each film displayed love in unique ways. Parental love mainly was depicted as being unconditional and involving caring about and questioning the decisions and actions of their children. Stepparent love for stepchildren mainly was illustrated as a growing feeling as the stepfamily progressed and grew. Children’s love for parents often came easier than love for stepparents. In some instances, children were confused with what appeared to be a double-standard of love as unconditional between parent and child and love as a conditional feeling between parent and parent or parent and stepparent.

Finally, conflict was lived differently by different family members. In some instances, conflict between parents was seen as a difference in perspective. In other instances, conflict between parents or parents and children was confrontational and direct. For children, conflict often involved challenging the authority of their parent and/or stepparent. Parents and stepparents handled conflict in distinctively different ways—at times positive, other times negative. Across each of the stepfamilies, conflict was emotionally charged.

In many instances, the concepts of identity, inclusion, love and conflict intertwined. For instance, love was discussed during a particular conflict episode between parents in which inclusion was also a factor. In a different scene between stepfather and stepdaughter, explicit identity statements occur in a conversation demonstrating inclusion. In another example, love and inclusion are displayed a conflict episode between father and son. For the purpose of analysis, I examined examples of the concepts separately; frequently, two or three of the concepts were indicated by the same moment.

These films ranged from 1968 to 2010. There are a number of differences that can be seen between the earliest film—*Yours, Mine, and Ours* from 1968—to the later films from 1998, 2001, and 2010. In *Yours, Mine, and Ours*, both parents entering the stepfamily expect their stepfamily to act and feel similar to their original nuclear family. When this expectation is challenged, they question whether they “will ever be a real family?” In *Yours, Mine, and Ours*, the stepfamily is created by the culturally appropriate re-marriage of two widowed individuals. In *Stepmom* (1998) and *Life as a House* (2001), the stepfamilies are created through divorce and new relationships. These family shifts are culturally prevalent. Finally, *The Kids are All Right* (2010) presents a contemporary stepfamily of a lesbian couple, their two children, and the sperm donor dad. This stepfamily faces issues both unique and similar to those faced by other stepfamilies. For example, each mother operated both as a mother and as a stepmother to the child not biologically related in some instances, while still operating differently than the sperm donor dad. Each film reflects some of the cultural expectations for families and stepfamilies for that time.

**Limitations and Recommendations**

The four films I analyzed portray the experience of White, middle-class stepfamilies. While these families are uniquely different and represent the changing nature of stepfamilies to some degree, future research could examine a group of even more culturally diverse film representations of stepfamilies. I examined only four films; a future study could examine a larger number of films. A future study could also consider a sample of films which considers many variations of stepfamilies.
Conclusion

American stepfamilies are complicated and diverse. The films that depict stepfamilies often display the complex experiences of stepfamilies and the process each stepfamily member goes through. While stepfamily experience is often closely depicted, films present problems in stepfamilies that are usually unrealistically resolved by the end of the film.

In this study, I examined four unique stepfamilies. Each stepfamily did not fit the traditional definition of a stepfamily, which speaks to the cultural shifts in family relationships. There are stepfamilies that are legally created and stepfamilies that are relationally created. My study examined both types.

Within my textual analysis, I found instances of stepparents functioning as part of the family at times, and functioning outside the family at times. This supports previous research placing stepparents as “intimate outsiders (Coleman & Ganong, 1997). The film portrayals illustrated that stepfamilies generally function best when parents and stepparents work together to co-parent and towards what is best for the children.

Finding that the experiences of stepfamilies in real-life are often reflected in media depictions supports the claim that media (television, film, etc) portrayals are resources which mirror many common cultural beliefs and values. Through this study, the researcher has supported the idea of media influencing beliefs on the suitable way a family should function, in spite of the fact that media representations do not offer completely realistic views of stepfamily complexities.
References


