

The Narrative of the Blended Family:

A Pilot Study Analyzing College Students Attitudes Regarding Stepfamily Systems

Andrena Brandy Mathis

University of North Georgia

The Narrative of the Blended Family: A Pilot Study Analyzing College Students Attitudes
Regarding Stepfamily Systems

The family structure has an effect on children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, as well as academic achievement (Amato 2005, Ginther & Pollack 2004). The challenge for stepfamily systems is how to ameliorate any negative impacts this structure may have on the wellbeing of the children.

A variety of theories have been used to explore the blended family system including relational dialectics theory (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner 2004, Braithwaite 2006, Braithwaite, McBride, Chad, & Schrodts 2003, Braithwaite, Olsen, Golish, Soukup, & Turman 2001, Schrodts 2015), systems theory (Amato 2005, Dupuis 2010, Ginther & Pollack 2004, Golish 2003, Schrodts, Braithwaite, Soliz, & Tye-Williams 2007,), and the narrative theory (Allison 2005, Gould, Fisher, & Bikel 2013, Hart 2009, Jones 2003, Kellas, Koenig, Baxter, LeClair-Underberg, Thatcher, and Routsong 2014). For the purposes of this pilot study, the narrative theory will be used to explore perceptions students have about family structure.

The divorce rates in the US according to Psychology Today are "50% percent for first marriages, 67% for second, and 73% for third marriages" (Banschick, 2012). By assessing the perceptions of stepfamily units; strategies can be developed to increase the relational satisfaction for the participants (Braithwaite, Olsen, Golish, Soukup, & Turman 2001, Caughlin 2003, Golish 2000, Schrodts & Braithwaite 2010, Schrodts, Soliz, & Braithwaite 2008, Sobolewski & King 2005).

Narrative Paradigm and Narrative Theory

The narrative paradigm is communication theory created by Walter Fisher that contends that man is a story telling creature, *homo narrans* (Fisher, 1984). He states that narrative paradigm “is a theory of symbolic actions-word/and or deeds-that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. The narrative perspective, therefore, has relevance to real as well as fiction world, to the stories of the living and to stories of imagination” (Fisher, 1984). It is through the sharing of stories that human beings experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, each with its own conflicts, characters, beginning, middle, and end.

Narrative theory has origins in structuralism. Narrative theory examines the ways that narrative structures perception of culture and one’s place in it (Felluga, 2011). Sean Sullivan of the Ohio State University’s Narrative Project states that “Narrative theory starts from the assumption that narrative is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with fundamental elements of our experience, such as time, process, and change” (Sullivan, 2016).

Each actor in the family unit has a story they assign to their experience of the family. Narrative is a power tool that can help to understand and shape how each actor is viewed and how they experience their family story. The origin story for these families can fall into five different categories: Sudden, Dark-sided, Ambivalent, Idealized, and Incremental (Kellas, Baxter, LeClair-Underberg, Thatcher, Routsong, et al).

As families move from the forming stage to the norming stage, each player in these mini-dramas must find their role and fight against stereotypes, particularly the myth of the “wicked stepmother” (Allison, 2005). The myth of the ideal family can also plague these families as they

struggle to find their unique story to tell with in the American culture that elevates the traditional family unit and stigmatize any other family structures (Caughlin 2003, Jones 2003).

In any story there is conflict, and in blended families conflict can abound, particularly for the stepmother to stepdaughter relationship. Stepmothers have to conceptualize what being a “good stepmother” is and portray that to the stepchild (Hart 2009). The dynamics in these stories can be quite complex and confusing, especially for the children. Openness in communication can reduce conflict, but topic avoidance can escalate conflict and diminish relational satisfaction (Golish 2000). Narrative can be a vehicle used to change not only how the families view themselves, but change how culture views non-traditional family structures.

As the divorce rates in America change the structure of the family unit, research is needed to understand the impact of these changes on children and society. Research can find strategies and insights in how to improve the function of blended family units so all participants can find relational satisfaction in their family experience. Communication research can help these families find ways to improve how they relate to one another and create a new narrative of what blended families can be in this culture. In order to understand how student’s view, the different family structures and what the implication are, this pilot study will ask:

- RQ₁: What are college student perceptions of family structures including traditional, step or blended, single, and adaptive?
- RQ₂: Is the traditional family structure elevated in America?
- RQ₃: Are stepfamily structures stigmatize in this culture?
- RQ₄: Can changing the personal narratives of participants in stepfamilies increase the satisfaction levels of the family members?

- RQ₅: Can changing the political, economic, and media narratives of stepfamilies decrease stigmatism associated with family structures that are not traditional?
- RQ₆: Do millennial students have a different attitude toward stepfamily systems than other generations like Generation X or Baby Boomers?

Method

The target participation pool will be college students at the University of North Georgia. The researcher will ask for volunteers to take the survey at both the Gainesville and Oconee campuses. Oconee Campus has the smallest percentage of non-traditional students at 8%, while Gainesville has the largest population at 23% as of 2015 academic year. The researcher hopes to obtain a mixture of both populations to assess if the age of the students has a bearing on the attitudes they have toward different types of family structures.

The participants will be given a survey questionnaire that features ordinal level questions using a Likert scale to assess attitudes toward different family structures. There will space provided for students to elaborate on their answers. The questionnaire will also include open-ended questions to gather content data to be analyzed alongside the information provided by the Likert scale. This pilot study aims to acquire at least 25 students to take the survey.

After the data is gathered and the numbers tabulated in SPSS, the data will be analyzed to create a benchmark of what the attitudes toward stepfamily systems are currently. This will be compared to the literature to see if there is any change in attitudes and if so what those changes are and what they mean for research in the future.

Data Gathering

The data was collected from two campuses at the University of North Georgia. The researcher asked students in the Student Center and student workers from various departments at the Oconee campus to fill out the survey. At the Gainesville campus students from the Communications, Media, and Journalism department and Orientation Leaders consented to take the survey. A total of 32 surveys were completed, 11 from the Oconee Campus and 21 from the Gainesville campus.

The students were instructed to answer the questions in the context of their primary family or the family system they spent the majority of their formative years. The students were also instructed not to put their names on the form in order to ensure anonymity. Each survey was given a number as an identifier for coding purposes. The data was then entered into SPSS for analysis.

There were four sections on the survey: Demographic Information, Attitudes about Family Likert Scale (AAFLS), a modified Relational Satisfaction Scale (RSL), and two Open Ended Questions (OEQ). The AAFLS was measuring the attitudes college students have towards traditional and stepfamily systems. This is a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This scale was used to gather data for the following research questions:

- RQ₁: What are college student's perception of family structures including traditional, step or blended, single, and adaptive.
- RQ₂: Is the traditional family structure elevated in America?
- RQ₃: Are stepfamily structures stigmatized in this culture?

The RSL was used to measure the satisfaction levels student feel toward their family systems. This information can be used assess if there is a statistical difference in the satisfaction

levels for students in traditional families versus the other categories. This is modified version of the Family Satisfaction Survey created by David Burns (1993), which is a version of the Relational Satisfaction Scale used by researchers in various branches of the social sciences.

The OEQ’s were used to assess the attitudes of the participants in the study regarding the following research questions:

- RQ₂: Is the traditional family structure elevated in America?
- RQ₆: Do millennial students have a different attitude toward stepfamily systems than other generations like Generation X or Baby Boomers?

The use of OEQ’s for these research questions allows the participants to expand on why they answered yes or no to the question. A content analysis of the answers will be used to determine if there are common themes and if the college student’s answers reflect the current literature.

Participants

There were 32 participants in total between the two campus surveyed for this pilot project. At the Gainesville Campus there were 21 students survey, accounting for 66% of the participant pool. The Oconee campus had 11 students consent to the survey, for a total of 34% of the sample.

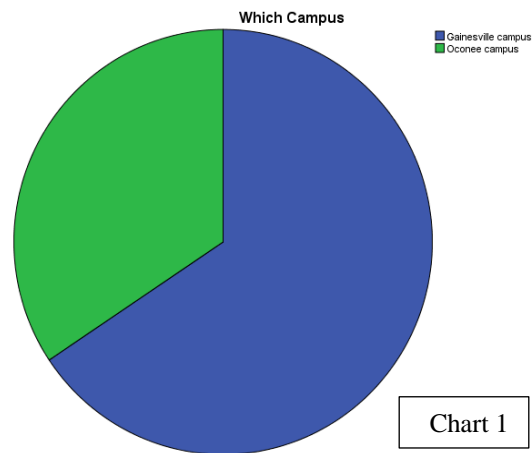


Chart 1

Which Campus					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Gainesville campus	21	65.6	65.6	65.6
	Oconee campus	11	34.4	34.4	100.0
	Total	32	100.0	100.0	

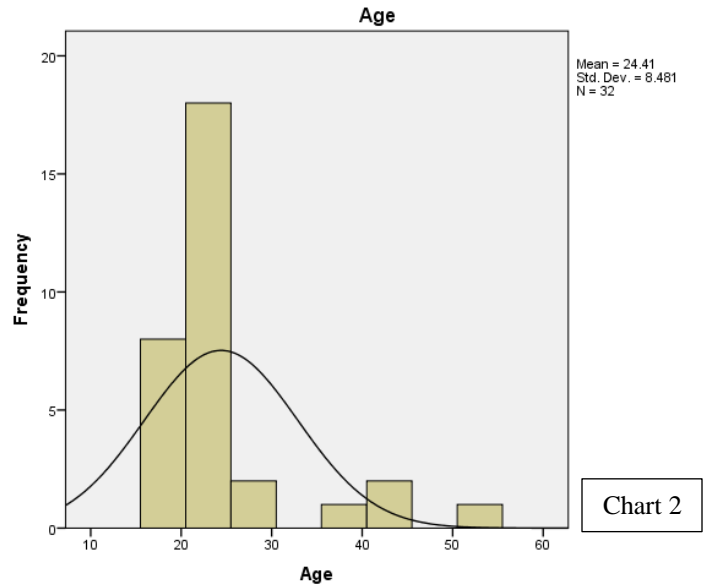
Table 1

In the demographic section of the survey it was found that 66% of the participants were female and 34% were male.

Sex					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	11	34.4	34.4	34.4
	Female	21	65.6	65.6	100.0
	Total	32	100.0	100.0	

Table 2

The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 55 years of age with a mean age of 24.41 years. The curve is a normal bell shape but is skewed slightly to the left because 26 of the participants were traditional aged students and six were non-traditional students



Only 30 of the participants

disclosed their GPA for this study. The mean GPA was 3.33 with a 4.0 maximum and 2.7 minimum among the students in this study. The curve is skewed slightly to the left.

There were four out of five types of families represented among the participants. There were no adoptive families identified for this survey sample. The largest group represented was the traditional family unit at 65.6%, while the smallest group at 3% was the other category. Stepfamilies came in second 18.8% and single parent families at 12.5% came in third. This is

not consistent with the literature which suggests that due to the divorce rate in America more children grow up in family structures other than traditional.

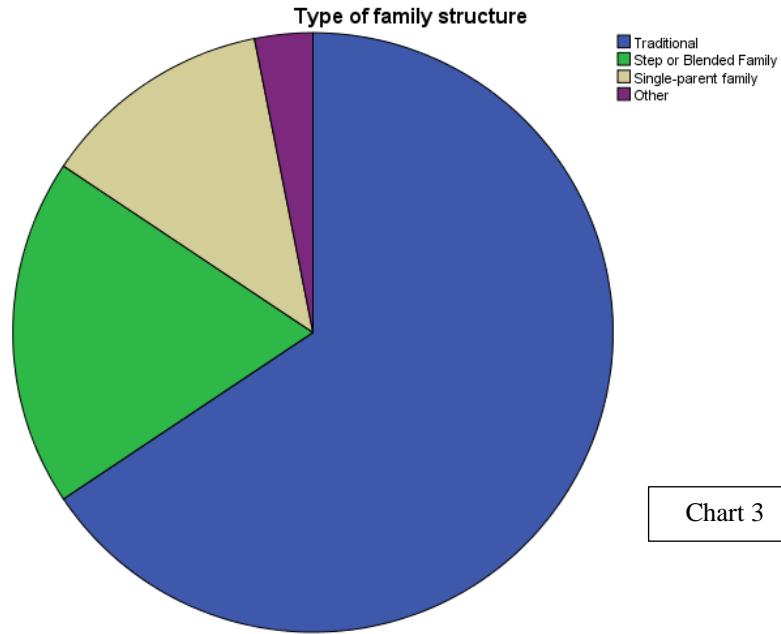


Chart 3

Type of family structure					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Traditional	21	65.6	65.6	65.6
	Step or Blended Family	6	18.8	18.8	84.4
	Single-parent family	4	12.5	12.5	96.9
	Other	1	3.1	3.1	100.0
	Total	32	100.0	100.0	

Table 3

Findings

The Attitudes about Families Scale (AAFS) provided insight into the perceptions of college students in this study. There were five statements on this portion of the survey and four of the shapes were normal bell curves. The interesting finding was that students only felt neutral or agreed with the last two statements, no one disagreed. The last statement had a shape that skewed to the far right as 75% of the students strongly agreed that there is no shame in being from a stepfamily. The tables and charts below show how the participant pool responded to each of the five statements on the AAFS portion of the survey.

Attitudes About Families Statistics						
		Stepfamilies face discrimination in America	Stepfamilies are valued same as traditional families	Media negatively portrays stepparents	Traditional structure has positive impact on child development	No shame in being from a stepfamily
N	Valid	32	32	31	32	32
	Missing	0	0	1	0	0
Mean		2.66	3.13	2.97	3.84	4.72
Median		3.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	5.00
Mode		2	3	3 ^a	3	5
Std. Deviation		.971	.942	1.110	.808	.523
Skewness		.317	-.015	-.089	.300	-1.721
Std. Error of Skewness		.414	.414	.421	.414	.414
Kurtosis		-.166	-.249	-.742	-1.391	2.324
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.809	.809	.821	.809	.809

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Table 4

Stepfamilies face discrimination in America					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SD	3	9.4	9.4	9.4
	D	12	37.5	37.5	46.9
	N	11	34.4	34.4	81.3
	A	5	15.6	15.6	96.9
	SA	1	3.1	3.1	100.0
	Total	32	100.0	100.0	

Table 5

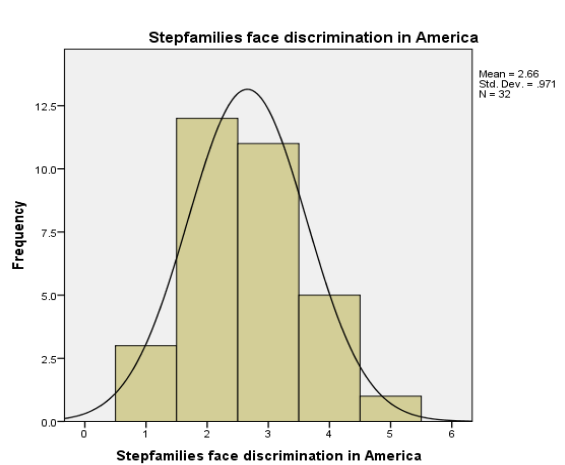


Chart 5.1

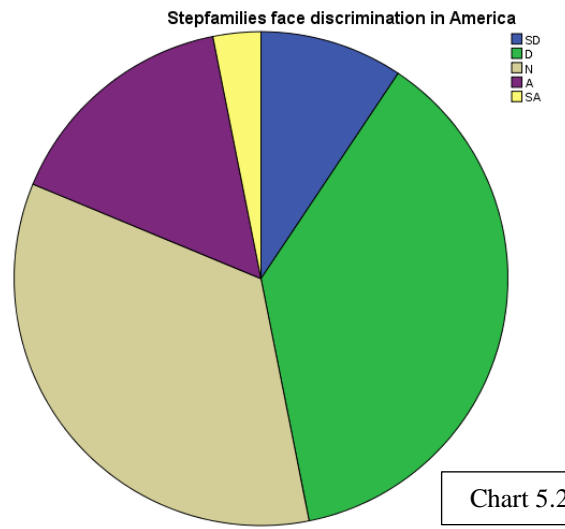


Chart 5.2

Stepfamilies are valued same as traditional families					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SD	1	3.1	3.1	3.1
	D	7	21.9	21.9	25.0
	N	13	40.6	40.6	65.6
	A	9	28.1	28.1	93.8
	SA	2	6.3	6.3	100.0
	Total	32	100.0	100.0	

Table 6

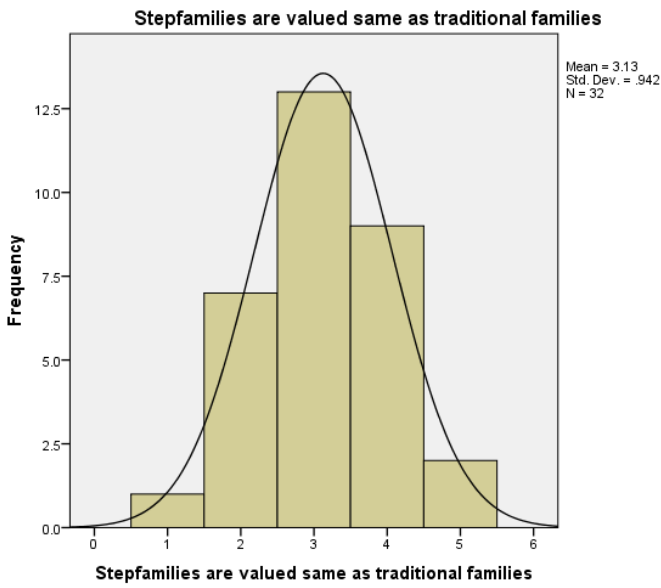


Chart 6.1

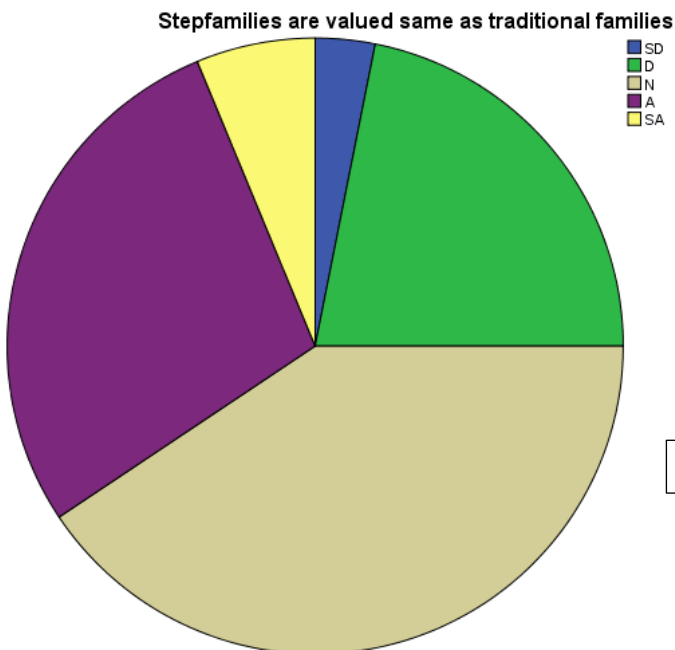


Chart 6.2

Media negatively portrays stepparents					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	SD	3	9.4	9.7	9.7
	D	8	25.0	25.8	35.5
	N	9	28.1	29.0	64.5
	A	9	28.1	29.0	93.5
	SA	2	6.3	6.5	100.0
	Total	31	96.9	100.0	
Missing	System	1	3.1		
Total		32	100.0		

Table 7

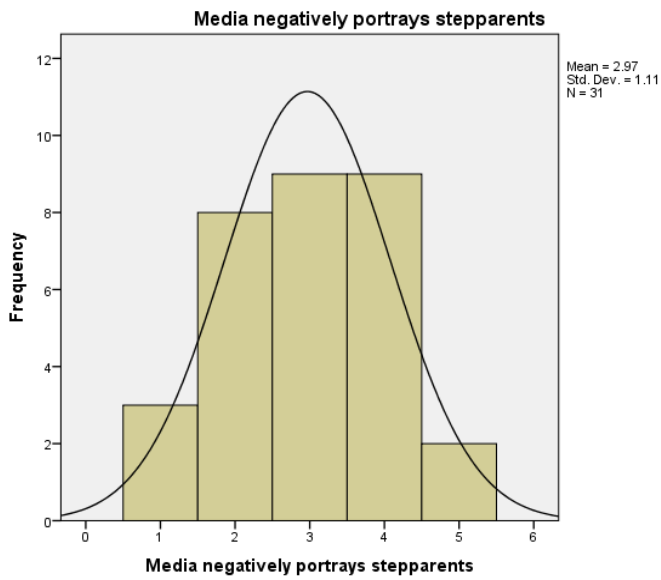


Chart 7.1

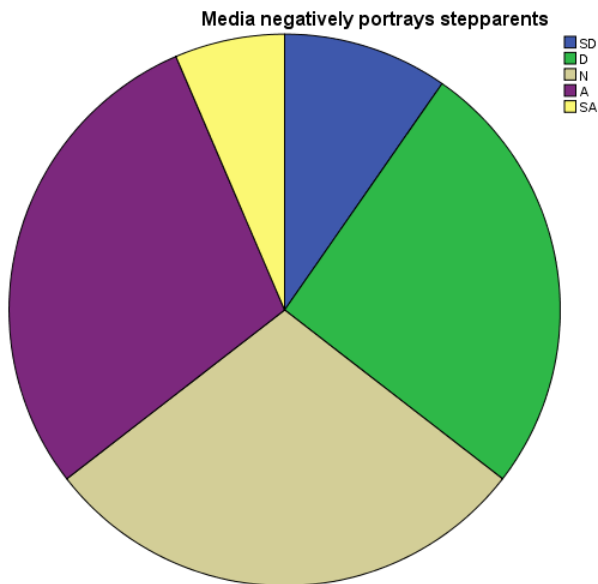


Chart 7.2

Traditional structure has positive impact on child development					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	N	13	40.6	40.6	40.6
	A	11	34.4	34.4	75.0
	SA	8	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	32	100.0	100.0	

Table 8

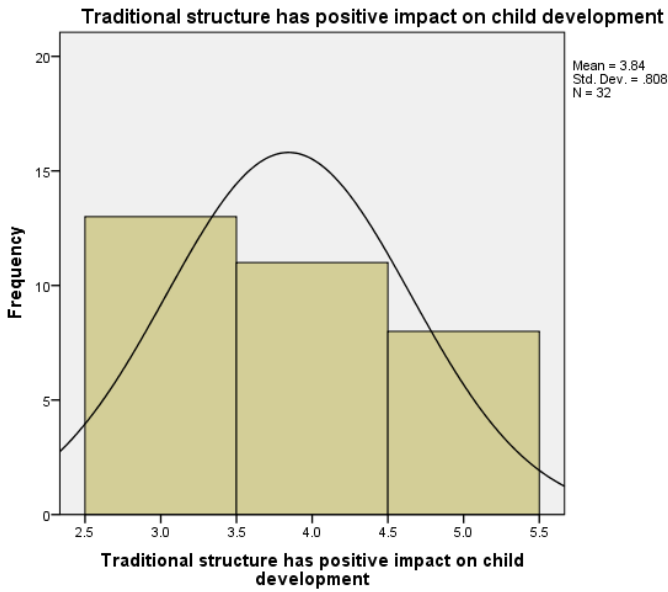


Chart 8.1

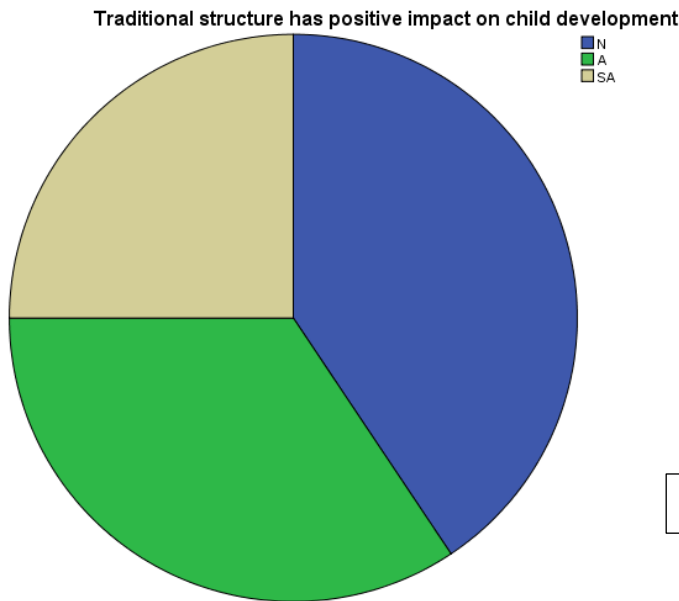


Chart 8.2

No shame in being from a stepfamily					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	N	1	3.1	3.1	3.1
	A	7	21.9	21.9	25.0
	SA	24	75.0	75.0	100.0
	Total	32	100.0	100.0	

Table 9

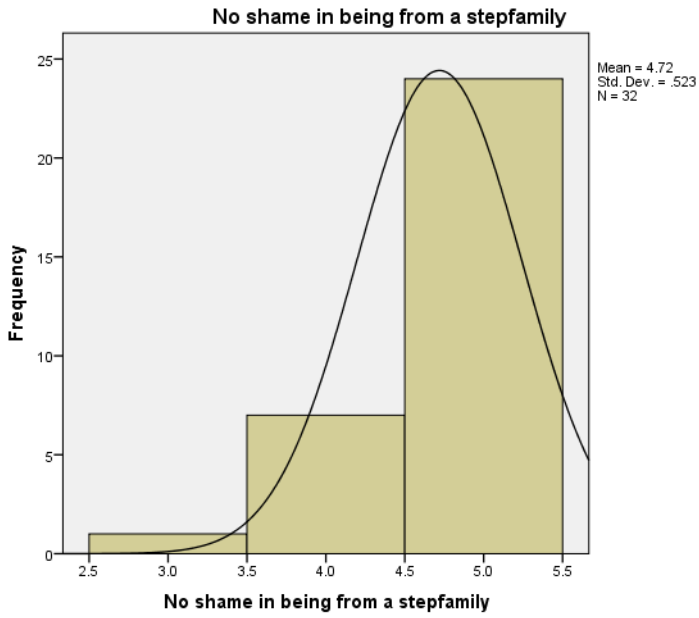


Chart 9.1

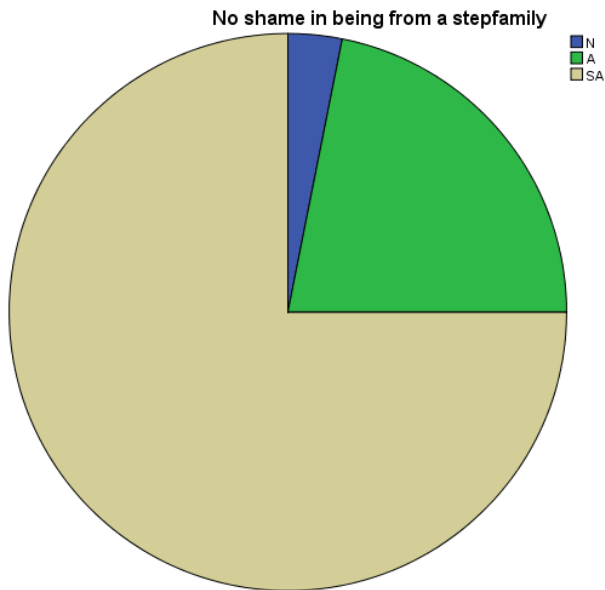


Chart 9.2

The modified Relational Satisfaction Scale (RSL) showed that the students surveyed had a mean satisfaction score of 29.28, which reflected in a normal bell curve.

Statistics		
FAMSTATSCOR		
N	Valid	32
	Missing	0
Mean		29.2813
Median		29.0000
Mode		27.00
Std. Deviation		4.84758
Skewness		.163
Std. Error of Skewness		.414
Kurtosis		.202
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.809
Minimum		19.00
Maximum		40.00

Table 10

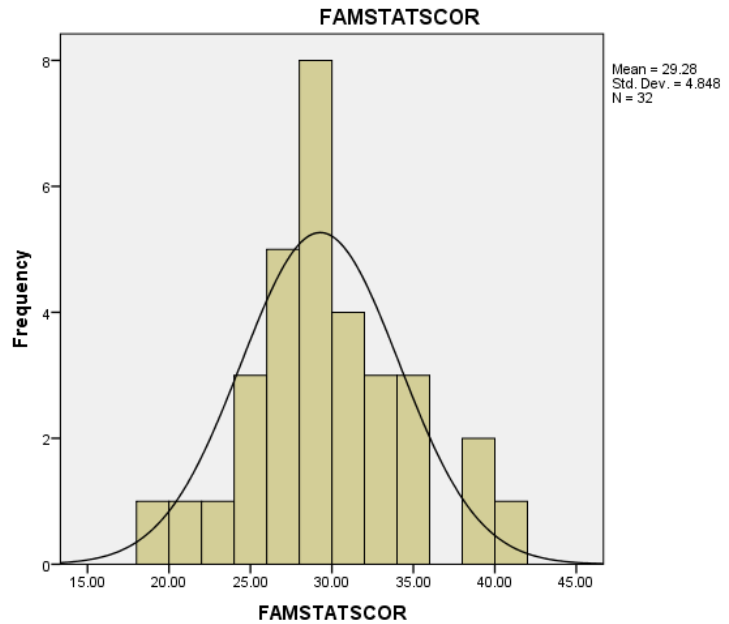


Chart 10.1

The majority of the students surveyed were satisfied with the structure of the family they grew up in while only three respondents were considered unsatisfied by this scale.

Level of Satisfaction	Total Score
Dissatisfied	0-23
Satisfied	24-34
Very Satisfied	34-40

Chart 10.2

For the statement about openness and communication only 6.3% of respondents were dissatisfied, while 53% were satisfied and 25% were very satisfied with the communication in their families. The percentages were similar for resolving conflicts, intimacy with biological parent, and intimacy with siblings. The statement regarding degree of affection and caring for family members resulted in no respondents disagreeing with this statement. There were 21.9%

responses of neutral, 34.4% responses of satisfied, and 43.8% responses of very satisfied when it comes to the affection in the family. The other statement that had no disagreement was satisfaction with role in the family, where the responses were 21.9% neutral, 34.4 satisfied, and 37.5 very satisfied. As this respondent pool had a higher percentage of traditional families compared to the national average, and resulted in only 6 students answering the statement regarding intimacy with stepparents with a 50/50 split satisfied and unsatisfied.

The first OEQ’s asked students “Is the traditional family structure idealized in American culture, why or why not?”. Over half of the respondents at 56.3% answered yes, 28.1 %

answered no, and 15.6% answered with maybe or I don’t know to this statement. One student wrote “Yes, because American culture and society makes people think that is the best way for a family to be structured”. One student used the words “the only way to properly be raised” is in in the traditional family

Is Traditional Family Idealized				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	18	56.3	56.3	56.3
Maybe or I don't know	5	15.6	15.6	71.9
No	9	28.1	28.1	100.0
Total	32	100.0	100.0	

Table 11

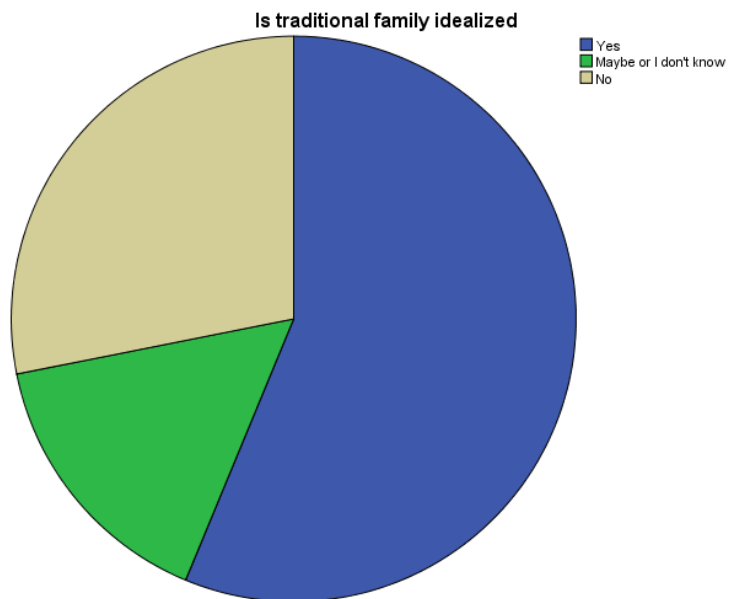


Chart 11

structure. Another student wrote about how the media ‘s portrayal of families idealizes this structure and another said it is because America is a “competitive society”.

The second OEQ asked “Do Millennial student view stepfamilies differently from older generations”. As seen in the Table 12, 68.8% answered affirmative to this question, while only

Do Millennial Students View Stepfamilies Differently from Older Generations					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Did Not Answer	1	3.1	3.1	3.1
	Yes	22	68.8	68.8	71.9
	Maybe or I don't know	5	15.6	15.6	87.5
	No	4	12.5	12.5	100.0
	Total	32	100.0	100.0	

Table 12

12.5% answered in the negative. One respondent stated “Yes, they have newer ideas of family” and another said that “our minds have adapted”. One non-traditional student answered “Yes, even though being blended

isn’t as accepted as traditional families, it is still more accepted today than it was previously”. These statements show that attitudes may be changing in America as a response to the changes in the nuclear family and the variety of family systems experienced by students.

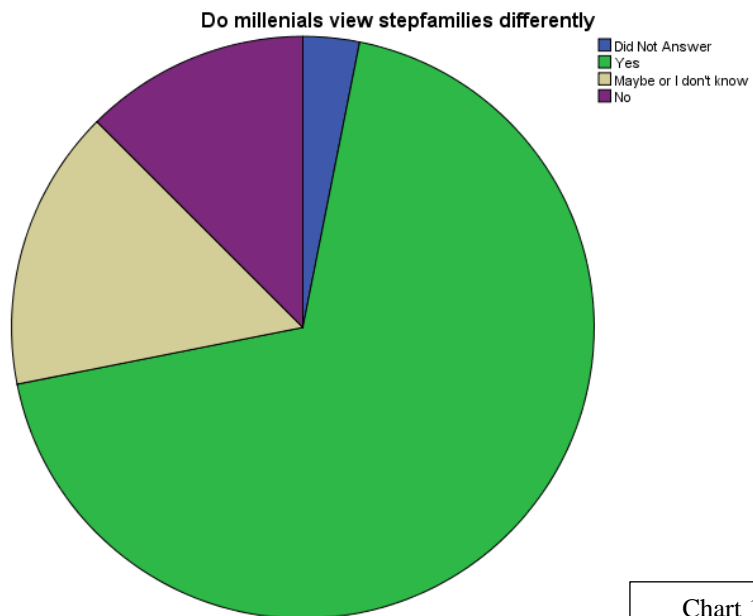


Chart 12

Discussion

This pilot study had a small sample pool of students. The data may be slightly skewed because of the higher percentage of traditional families in this data set. In future research a larger pool may be more reflective of the national makeup of family structures and help to prevent any bias. This pool also lacked any adoptive families and only a small percentage of non-traditional students. The participants did not report any issues with understanding the questions on the survey.

Future research is still needed to assess how much attitudes and relational satisfaction will change as more and more students grow up in a variety of family systems. Also research into media portrayal of family systems and if it is representative of the American experience with the current divorce rate would be useful in determining if bias exists towards alternative family systems. Expanding the participant pool to include more universities across the state of Georgia would help to determine how much and how quickly attitudes toward all family systems are changing and what those changes mean for the children, parents, educators, media, and policy makers.

References

- Allison, C. (2005). Contesting the myth of the 'wicked stepmother': Narrative analysis of an online stepfamily support group. *Western Journal of Communication, 69*(1), 27-47.
- Amato, P. R. (2005). The impact of family formation change on the cognitive, social, and emotional well-being of the next generation. *The Future of Children, 15*(2)
- Banschick, M., (2012). The high failure rate of second and third m, marriages, Psychology Today.com.
- Baxter, L. A., Braithwaite, D. O., Bryant, L., & Wagner, A. (2004). Stepchildren's perceptions of the contradictions in communication with stepparents. *Journal Of Social And Personal Relationships, 21*(4), 447-467.
- Braithwaite, D. O., & Baxter, L. A. (2006). "You're my parent but you're not": Dialectical tensions in stepchildren's perceptions about communicating with the nonresidential parent. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 34*(1), 30-48.
- Braithwaite, D. O., McBride, M. C., & Schrod, P. (2003). 'Parent Teams' and the Everyday Interactions of Co-parenting in Stepfamilies. *Communication Reports, 16*(2), 93-111.
- Braithwaite, D. O., Olson, L. N., Golish, T. D., Soukup, C., & Turman, P. (2001). "Becoming a family": Developmental processes represented in blended family discourse. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 29*(3), 221-247.
- Caughlin, J. P. (2003). Family communication standards: What counts as excellent family communication and how are such standards associated with family satisfaction? *Human Communication Research, 29*(1), 5-40.

- Dupuis, S. (2010). Examining the Blended Family: The Application of Systems Theory Toward an Understanding of the Blended Family System. *Journal Of Couple & Relationship Therapy, 9*(3), 239-251.
- Felluga, D. (2011). "General Introduction to Narratology." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Purdue.edu
- Fisher, W.R. (1984). Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument. *Rhetoric, Reason, and Public Morality*. 265-282.
- Ginther, D. K., & Pollak, R. A. (2004). Family structure and children's educational outcomes: Blended families, stylized facts, and descriptive regressions. *Demography, 41*(4), 671-696.
- Golish, T. D. (2000). Is openness always better?: Exploring the role of topic avoidance, satisfaction, and parenting styles of stepparents. *Communication Quarterly, 48*(2), 137-137+.
- Golish, T. D. (2003). Stepfamily communication strengths: Understanding the ties that bind. *Human Communication Research, 29*(1), 41-80.
- Gould, J. W., Fisher, N. B., & Bikel, D. (2013). How children experience the blended family. *Family Advocate, 36*(1), 4-7.
- Hart, P. (2009). On becoming a good enough stepmother. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 37*(2), 128-139. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10615-009-0202-8>
- Jones, A. C. (2003). Reconstructing the stepfamily: Old myths, new stories. *Social Work, 48*(2), 228-36.
- Kellas, J. K., Baxter, L., LeClair-Underberg, C., Thatcher, M., Routsong, T., Normand, E. L., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2014). Telling the story of stepfamily beginnings: The relationship

between young-adult stepchildren's stepfamily origin stories and their satisfaction with the stepfamily. *Journal of Family Communication*, 14(2), 149-166.

Relational dialectic theory (2016). Communication Theory.com

Rothwell, J. D. (2013). Group as Systems. *In mixed company: Communicating in small groups and teams*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning 8th ed.

Schrodt, P. (2015). Relational frames as mediators of everyday talk and relational satisfaction in stepparent–stepchild relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

Schrodt, P., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2011). Coparental communication, relational satisfaction, and mental health in stepfamilies. *Personal Relationships*, 18(3), 352-369.

Schrodt, P., Braithwaite, D. O., Soliz, J., Tye-Williams, S., & al, e. (2007). An examination of everyday talk in stepfamily systems. *Western Journal of Communication*, 71(3), 216.

Schrodt, P., Soliz, J., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2008). A social relations model of everyday talk and relational satisfaction in stepfamilies. *Communication Monographs*, 75(2), 190-217.

Sobolewski, J. M., & King, V. (2005). The importance of the coparental relationship for nonresident fathers' ties to children. *Journal Of Marriage And Family*, 67(5), 1196-1212.

Speer, R. B., & Trees, A. R. (2007). The push and pull of stepfamily life: The contribution of stepchildren's autonomy and connection-seeking behaviors to role development in stepfamilies. *Communication Studies*, 58(4), 377.

Speer, R. B., Giles, H., & Denes, A. (2013). Investigating stepparent-stepchild interactions: The role of communication accommodation. *Journal of Family Communication*, 13(3), 218.

Sullivan, S. (2016). "What is Narrative Theory" *The Narrative Project*. OSU.edu