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Studying stepfamilies, surfacing secrets: A reflection on the private motivations behind efforts to humanize family complexity

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Abstract

Feminist family scholars have long called for greater transparency of the partial perspectives embedded within family science. In this paper, I employ feminist reflexive autoethnography to unpack the private motivations that guide my research on family complexity. Using critical storytelling, I trace the personal developments that led to a research program on structurally complex families—families shaped and reshaped by divorce, separations, repartnerships, and remarriages. I explore my commitments to *naming the invisible*, *embracing the messy*, and ultimately, *humanizing* the complicated and meaningful emotions and relationships in families navigating structural changes. I draw upon personal, embodied experiences to theorize about issues and phenomena that have yet to be named in the (step)family scholarship. Finally, I invite others to heed the calls of feminist scholars whose work invites us to consider how private experiences can be leveraged to generate new insights into the complexities of family and social life.

KEYWORDS
autoethnography, divorce, family structure, reflexivity, remarriage, stepfamilies

INTRODUCTION

There is a small, unframed photo next to my grandmother's bed. It is one inch wide and serrated along the right edge, indicating it had been torn from a larger photograph. The image shows a young man with thick dark hair and a mustache. He is wearing a turtleneck, looking at

something or someone out of frame, smiling—seemingly unaware that the photo is being taken. It took me decades to ever notice this picture on my grandmother's nightstand. It is tucked into a framed photograph of her grandchildren.

My grandmother is a storyteller. There is not a story from her childhood that I have not heard, likely more than once. She did not live an easy life. Born into the Great Depression, her father left the family in her infancy, never to be heard from again, and her mother sent her away to a boarding school where she was raised by the stern Catholic nuns of the Society of the Sacred Heart. She met my grandfather when she was 17; they married, had three children, and then he ran off with the woman next door. My grandmother never remarried.

As the oldest of her nine grandchildren, I enjoyed an especially close relationship with my grandmother. I told her all of my deepest secrets, and I sensed that she told me all of hers. She saw our family through trying times—divorces, remarriages, and redivorces. When she lost her daughter, my aunt, to cancer, our relationship became even closer. Over the years, we would speak on the phone for hours. Our lunch dates often consumed our afternoons as she recounted stories from her life that became more vivid with every narration. There was nothing I did not know about her. I cherished the depth and intimacy of our relationship.

I worried, though, that my grandmother was lonely. Despite her closeness to her children and grandchildren, loneliness seemed to be a thread of continuity woven throughout the chapters of her life. One afternoon when I was in college, she drove the two hours to my university so we could have lunch. I asked her a question I never had before: Why did not she date after my grandfather? Why did she never remarry? She uttered a name I had never heard. "Well," she said wistfully, "I had Don."

Don. I had never once heard of Don, but I learned that afternoon that she met him at work in the years after her divorce. I learned that they dated over a span of nearly 40 years, from her 30s until her 70s, including throughout my childhood. I learned that he was, by all accounts, the love of her life. He was a gracious man, a patient man, a kind man. Also, a married man.

She had only one photo of Don, she said. It was next to her bed.

Studying secrets

As a family researcher, I am drawn to the invisible topics that exist in the most intimate spaces. My work engages the delicate practice of unearthing secrets we keep *within* our families, *from* our families, and even, from ourselves (Poulos, 2018; Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997). I am especially interested in how larger cultural forces—for example, nuclear family ideologies, or the internalized supremacy of the "traditional" two-parent family (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Levin, 1993)—shape the creation, maintenance, and protection of family secrets. What secrets do we safeguard—what rough edges do we sand off, which inconvenient truths do we hide—to reduce family complexity and squeeze ourselves into the frame of family normalcy? I am interested in how and why family secrets wield power and what is risked when they are exposed. In other words, *why* some secrets are unspoken and unspeakable? What do they reveal about ourselves and our relationships? Who and what is served when we deny these complex aspects of our humanity?

Studying stepfamilies

I am especially interested in invisible topics that exist in *structurally complex families*—families shaped and reshaped by divorce, separations, repartnerships, and remarriages (Sanner et al., 2020). Stepfamilies are rich sites for exploring the unsaid and unspoken (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Formed in the aftermath

of family transitions, stepfamilies have—baked into their very being—histories, memories, and the scars of wounds healed, or the scabs of wounds still healing (Jensen et al., 2017; Papernow, 2018). Family transition requires family members—exes, co-parents, (step)parents, (step)children, (step)siblings—to (re)negotiate boundaries, relationships, and routines, all while navigating a range of possible feelings and anxieties related to family change (Emery, 2011; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Jensen, 2021b). In my research, I strive to peel back the layers of the complicated, multidimensional emotions and relationships that comprise (step)family life. I seek to name invisible dynamics and, by bringing hidden aspects of family life to the surface, normalize and *humanize* the complexity of people, relationships, and family.

Unveiling private motivations

As family scientists, we are generally socialized to keep secret the private motivations that guide our work—to state them openly and transparently is to risk public scrutiny for the "hidden agendas" we bring to the empirical process (Allen, 2000, 2023). The expectation of emotional remoteness in our research is evident in the conventional practices we adhere to for ensuring rigor (Allen, 2000). We are expected to minimize or eliminate our biases and put aside our personal perspectives, and too often, the result is a research product that has been emotionally and intellectually sanitized—that feels disconnected from how we *really* live, what we *really* think, how we *really* feel, and how we *really* experience family life (Walker, 2009). Inevitably and undeniably, our histories, values, and social locations are infused into our scholarship (Allen, 2000, 2023). Perhaps no one has called more attention to positivist framings of family epistemology—and argued for something different—than feminist family scholar Katherine Allen (1988, 1995, 2001, 2016, 2023). For us to truly serve the families we study, Allen (2000) argues, "we must be willing to risk stating what we really believe and what really motivates our work" (p. 6). Feminists have called for developing a critical consciousness through feminist reflexive practice, involving lifelong self-examination to foster a deep awareness of how we are shaping, and are shaped by, our research (Allen, 2000, 2023; Freire, 1997/1970; Stacey, 1988). "Knowledge is not pure," Allen (2000) writes, "but comes from some partial perspective" (p. 7). Until we understand these partial perspectives and critically analyze how they are embedded in our research, we risk idly reproducing our biases under the guise of objectivity, unaware of how to carefully and intentionally leverage our unique histories and vantage points *for good*, in service of authentic, transformative scholarship.

The purpose of this paper is to lay bare the forces and ideas that guide my work and to locate myself in the heart of my research. I use reflexive feminist autoethnography, a research method that merges the genres of art and science in the form of critical storytelling (Allen, 2023). In addition to drawing and making explicit the connections between my personal life and my professional research, I combine personal life with feminist theorizing "to examine how the *particular* of private experience can shed light on general social structures and processes, and vice versa" (Allen, 2023, p. 901). That is, I draw upon personal, embodied experience to theorize about issues and phenomena that have yet to be named in the (step)family scholarship. Reflexivity is more than mapping how we arrived at our professional interests, although that is part of it. Reflexivity also is using our unique life experiences as a springboard for generating *new insights* about the complexity of family and social life—insights not yet captured by or reflected in mainstream discourse about families (Allen, 2023). Reflexive writing aims to complicate our collective understanding of the human experience, tapping into the power of story "to stretch, to heal, to transform" (Poulos, 2018, p. i). With this piece, I join scholars who have argued that embracing feminist reflexive practice will create paths toward deeper, more holistic understandings of ourselves, of each other, and of the families, we study and serve (Allen, 2000, 2023; Thompson, 1992; Thompson & Walker, 1995; Walker, 2009;

Wood, 1995). As Walker (2009) poignantly articulated, "Research that makes life experience come alive for the reader, that shows why change is necessary, will have a bigger impact on the field than research that maintains the status quo" (p. 26).

I organize my narrative into three parts. First, I describe the personal foundations of my work, narrating how my family background brought me to a research program studying family complexity. Second, I describe my professional journey study stepfamilies, paying particular attention to the theoretical perspectives that undergird my research. Third, I bring the personal and professional perspectives in conversation with each other, illustrating how I have turned personal curiosities into research inquiries, and how personal experiences have led me to deeper levels of scholarship.

PART I: PERSONAL FOUNDATIONS

People who study families often are asked how they arrived at their profession. My research centers on emotional and relational complexities in post-divorce families and stepfamilies, so people often ask how I came to study divorce and remarriage. The easy answer is that I grew up with a unique example of cooperative co-parenting between my parents and stepparent, and I wanted to study the contexts and processes that contributed to healthy dynamics in stepfamilies (Ahrons, 2007; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Jamison et al., 2014). My parents separated when I was five, and my father married my stepmother when I was seven. I have loved and felt loved by my stepmother since the moment I met her; she is a parent to me in every way that matters. When strangers would approach us in public and say kindly, *you look so much like your mother*, I was glad when she did not correct them, but simply smiled, gave me a knowing wink, and thanked them.

I loved her, but what amazed me as I grew older was that *my mother let me love her*. She let me claim her as a parent; she let me let her into my heart. To the extent that my mother wrestled with complicated emotions internally—and I'm sure that she did—she never let me see it. She never made me feel like I had to choose, like love was a finite resource of which she would receive less if my stepmother received more (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). All three of my parents demonstrated a sincere commitment to putting their children's best interests first—to not claim our fealty, badmouthing each other, or triangulating us into loyalty binds (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2008).

My parents' households complemented each other well; my father and stepmother's was one of routine and stability, and my mother's was one of change and spontaneity. My mother's life tended to reorganize itself frequently—the primary way I mark the chapters of my childhood is based on who she was dating or engaged to at the time. As a child, I once half-wrote a memoir where each chapter title was the name of a different ex-boyfriend, as this felt like the most obvious organizing principle. Her jobs changed with similar frequency, and she sometimes worked multiple jobs to make ends meet. These were generally happy years, and even in the more difficult moments—when my mother's ex-fiancé vandalized our car, or when our heat was shut off one winter for non-payment—I was protected by having a deep bench of parenting support. My three parents worked together to ensure that my and my brother's needs were centered and cared for (Braithwaite et al., 2008).

This co-parenting dynamic became difficult to maintain in my mother's second marriage. After a rushed engagement (much like the *sudden* stepfamily origin stories described by Kellas et al., 2014), my mother and stepfather married in a small ceremony witnessed by her two and his three children. Problems in their marriage surfaced before the ink was dry, and from the ages of 12–17, I lived in a stepfamily household rife with addiction, depression, infidelity, and abuse. We lived down the street from a pond with a park bench, where I would often retreat between the hours of 1:00 to 3:00 a.m. when fights erupted. Once, my mother's screams

penetrated my deepest sleep when I awoke to her yelling, frantically and repeatedly, for me to call the police.

I mentioned none of this to my father or stepmother. Nervous to disrupt the status quo of my parents' allied co-parenting, I kept what I saw in that house locked in a vault. To tell my parents in one household the truth of what was happening in the other household was to risk disturbing their amicable relationships; I feared it would put my father and stepmother in the uncomfortable position of revisiting well-established custodial arrangements. And, I wanted to protect my mother. And, I wanted to protect my family's reputation. Insofar as a *model family of divorce* existed, we were that, and that reputation had become something of an identity. I took pride in it. So, when the inconvenient truths of my family's reality did not match the family in my mind's eye, I hid the truth. I sanded down the edges until we fit into the box a model stepfamily (Visher & Visher, 1990). Rather than becoming disillusioned with stepfamily life, however, these experiences deepened my belief that healthy dynamics in complex families *are possible*. My exposure to two distinct models of stepfamily dynamics planted the seeds of my curiosity about the contexts and processes that made these experiences so different.

One similarity between my two stepfamilies was that both of my parents had children in their second marriages; my father and stepmother had my brother, and my mother and stepfather had my sister. Though my (half-)siblings were on different sides of the family and shared no biological or legal connection with each other, they grew up thinking of each other as siblings. My (half-)brother's first babysitter was my mother (his father's ex-wife). Once, when he was in kindergarten, he was asked to draw a picture of his family. There among the smiling stick figures of his household, were my mother and sister, labeled as *his* stepmother and *his* stepsister. His teacher, knowing that his biological parents were still married, was unsure as to how he could have a stepmother. But there was no word for him to describe his relationship with *my* mother, his father's ex-wife, or her daughter from her second marriage.

Language is tricky in complex families (Cherlin, 1978; Koenig Kellas et al., 2008). The absence of labels to describe certain relationships in families reflects a cultural assumption that these relationships do not exist (Sanner & Jensen, 2021; Sanner et al., 2021). For instance, there is no word to describe my mother's direct relationship with my stepmother, only an indirect relationship mediated and defined by a third party (e.g., her ex-husband's wife, her children's stepmother). But the framed photograph of my three parents smiling together mid-laugh at a wedding showed me that these relationships *do* exist, however, inadequately labeled and understood. Many years after that photograph was taken, the inscription in my doctoral dissertation would read:

> To my three parents. No words can capture the depth of my love and appreciation for you. The friendship among the three of you is the most treasured gift you could ever have given your children, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

So, what brought me to my profession was a desire to shed light on positive dynamics in complex families—to challenge depictions of divorced families and stepfamilies as broken, lacking, or ridden with conflict. I turn now to my professional experiences studying stepfamilies, paying particular attention to the theoretical perspectives embedded in the foundations of my work.

PART II: PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES

In 2012, I met Marilyn Coleman (then the Director of Graduate Students at the University of Missouri) who invited me (then an undergraduate student at the University of Missouri) to sit in on weekly research team meetings with her graduate students. They were working on a paper

about what happens to stepparent–stepchild relationships after divorce, based on qualitative interviews with stepchildren who experienced stepfamily dissolution (Coleman et al., 2015). The intellectual vitality of those meetings, coupled with my personal interest in stepfamily dynamics, immediately drew me in. In 2014, I began my doctoral studies with Marilyn Coleman and Larry Ganong–two pioneering stepfamily scholars who have spent their careers producing and advocating for a *normative-adaptive* agenda of stepfamily research (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Coleman et al., 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 1984, 1994, 2017).

Normative-adaptive perspectives

Normative-adaptive approaches to studying stepfamilies emphasize stepfamily resilience. Although they do not deny the possibility of problems in stepfamilies or attempt to mask stepfamily challenges, they do seek to avoid focusing solely on negative dimensions of stepfamily life by shedding equal light on adaptation and functionality in complex families (Ganong & Coleman, 1994, 2017). The focus on resilience has been a necessary corrective to the nuclear family bias that has long plagued stepfamily scholarship (Clingempeel et al., 1987; Gamache, 1997; Ganong & Coleman, 2018). Both in family science and in society more broadly, the Standard North American Family (SNAF), characterized by two (White, middle class, cis-gender, heterosexual, monogamous, married) parents and their shared biological children has long been centered as the normative and ideal family form (Smith, 1993). It follows that research on separation, divorce, and stepfamilies has been framed from deficit perspectives that position family complexity as bad for children and society. Such assumptions are evident in the language of early research on family structure; for example, two-married-biological-parent families were called *intact families*, families with separated or divorced parents were called *broken families*, and stepfamilies were called *reconstituted families*, suggesting that remarriages represented (or should represent) an attempt to restore the family back to the nuclear ideal (Bowerman & Irish, 1962; Goldstein, 1974; Nye, 1957). In an early review of stepfamily literature, Ganong and Coleman (1984) called attention to the overwhelming application of deficit-comparison approaches to studying stepfamilies (i.e., approaches that compare children in stepfamilies to those in first-time families, with the assumption that stepchildren will fare worse) and critiqued the tendency of researchers to obscure non-significant differences or minimize mixed findings. They pointed to the futility of deficit-comparison approaches given that stepfamilies are structurally and dynamically different from nuclear families, arguing that "stepfamilies should be studied in their own right and not as inferior 'alternative' family forms" (p. 402).

Nearly 40 years later, reviews of the literature show that deficit-comparison approaches to studying diverse family structures remain the dominant approach (Jensen & Sanner, 2021; Sanner, Russell, et al., 2018). These studies generally have the consequence of (re)stigmatizing diverse family structures as broken, non-traditional, or innately lesser than nuclear families (Russell et al., 2022; Sanner, Russell, et al., 2018). For decades, Ganong and Coleman's strengths-based approaches to studying stepfamilies have challenged and countered these deficit perspectives. In joining their research team, I was joining scholars who were committed to exploring resilience in complex families—to identifying processes that contributed to close step-relationships and the positive development of stepfamily members (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). For example, our research team explored the conditions under which stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren developed and maintained meaningful relationships (Chapman et al., 2016, 2017, 2018; Sanner, Coleman, & Ganong, 2018; Sanner et al., 2019)—projects that, for me, were a tribute to my own loving stepgrandparents (my stepmother's parents), who immediately claimed my brother and me as grandchildren and never made us feel like anything less. We explored how stepparents develop close relationships with stepchildren, identifying factors that facilitate stepparents' efforts to bond with stepchildren and finding that close stepparent-stepchild relationships promote marital quality

and stepfamily cohesion (Ganong, Jensen, Sanner, Russell, & Coleman, 2019; Ganong, Jensen, Sanner, Russell, Chapman, & Coleman, 2019; Ganong et al., 2020). We explored relationship development among half- and stepsiblings, illuminating the perspectives of younger half-siblings and exploring how stepsiblings manage conflict and develop close ties (Ganong, Landon, et al., 2022; Landon et al., 2022; Sanner, Russell, et al., 2018). In a series of projects, we conducted systematic reviews of the literature about *what works* in stepfamilies, distilling research evidence about actions employed by parents and stepparents that are linked to children's positive outcomes (Ganong et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d; Sanner et al., 2022).

Normative-adaptive perspectives that shed light on resilience in complex families are the foundation of my work. Efforts to highlight the strengths of stepfamilies (and of non-nuclear family forms more broadly) remain necessary, and those who are committed to these efforts should know that they are in good company (see Acosta, 2021; Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2020; Beckmeyer et al., 2020; Bergeson et al., 2020; Bermea et al., 2020; Braithwaite et al., 2018; Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Jensen, 2022; Oliver-Blackburn et al., 2022; Papernow, 2018; Petren & Ferraro, 2022; Russell et al., 2022; van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013; Waldron et al., 2018). In my journey of working toward a more holistic understanding of stepfamily life that challenges deficit perspectives of family complexity, another theoretical home also has been foundational to my thinking and scholarship: feminist theory.

Feminist theory

In 2014, I took a *Gender in Families* course taught by Tyler Jamison (Jamison, 2019; Jamsion et al., 2017, Jamison & Beckmeyer, 2021) which, in hindsight, was one of the most formative experiences of my graduate career. (Every young scholar should have the opportunity to learn from someone as supportive, sagacious, and empowering as Tyler.) Among the first assigned readings was a chapter by Allen, Lloyd, and Few (2009) about reclaiming feminism for family science. I still remember reading this text for the first time, absorbing its contents and highlighting passages about how feminist family scholars "deconstruct family as a privileged site for understanding intersectional inequalities, and reclaim family as a source of resistance and change" (p. 4). The writings of intersectional feminist thinkers we read that semester–with their embodied understandings of power, privilege, oppression, and the embeddedness of families in complex social systems–felt alive with ideas that *mattered*, ideas that were capable of spurring social change (Allen et al., 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Few, 2007; Freedman, 2002; McGraw et al., 2000; Thompson, 1992; Walker, 2009). I decided to pursue a collateral area in Women's and Gender Studies, alongside my doctorate in Human Development and Family Science.

Two principles of feminist theory have been particularly central to my work on stepfamilies. First, feminist theory emphasizes that families cannot and should not be understood outside of the larger social contexts in which they are embedded (Allen, 2023). That is, an understanding of what happens *within* families must be understood in relation to what happens *outside* of them. Second, feminism challenges dualistic binaries that offer false oppositions of family life, inviting scholars to view tensions and contradictions in families as points of entry for deeper understanding (Allen, 2023; Connidis, 2015). I discuss each of these feminist ideas below, highlighting their implications for my work.

Situating stepfamilies in context

Understanding families as embedded within larger social contexts means attending to how broader social forces exert influence on (step)family life. There are two aspects of context that I

attend to in terms of their impact on stepfamilies: institutions (i.e., laws, policies, norms) and ideologies (i.e., beliefs, values, messaging).

Attending to institutions

Understanding stepfamilies in relationship to institutions means recognizing how they are shaped by structural conditions that privilege the SNAF (Letiecq, 2019; Smith, 1993). As the quintessential standard of kinship, the (White, middle-class, heterosexual) SNAF is institutionalized by a set of social norms, habitualized behavior, shared language, and support systems within instructional structures, such as state agencies or social policies, all of which contribute to the unity and stability of family life (Cherlin, 1978; Letiecq, 2019). For example, policies and laws disallow federal benefits, rights, and protections (e.g., social security, tax, health insurance, family and medical leave) to family members who do not conform to SNAF-like configurations (Letiecq, 2019). SNAFs also are institutionalized by shared norms. Habitualized behaviors, for example, assist family members in solving common problems that families experience. Cherlin (1978) argued, "We take these behavioral patterns for granted until their absence forces us to create solutions on our own. Only then do we see the continuing importance of institutionalized patterns of family behavior for maintaining family unity" (p. 637). When families are without the institutional support and social norms that guide family life, they are incompletely institutionalized (Cherlin, 1978). For example, compared to first-time families, stepfamilies lack clear guidelines for family roles and behaviors (e.g., What does it mean to be a "good stepmom?" What blueprints exist for how fathers and stepfathers should relate to one another?), which creates ambiguity in stepfamilies (Jensen, 2021b) and leaves stepparents "on their own" to determine the type of roles and relationships to develop (Ganong et al., 2011; Ganong & Sanner, 2023; Jensen, 2021a). Similarly, stepfamilies lack the agreed-upon language to describe many of the relationships that exist within them—evidence of being incompletely institutionalized. Stepfamilies also lack the institutional support that comes from legal recognition of step-relationships; for instance, stepparents often encounter challenges in legitimizing their roles when interacting with institutional systems (e.g., schools, hospitals, government agencies) (Acosta, 2021; Ganong & Coleman, 2017).

Importantly, feminist frameworks and allied theories (e.g., critical race theory) also sensitize researchers to understanding how SNAF privileging intersects with other privileges (e.g., White privilege, heterosexual privilege) to fundamentally shape family life (see Acosta, 2021; Bergeson et al., 2020; Clinkscales, 2019; Goldberg & Allen, 2013; Moore, 2008). White parents in stepfamilies, although they may experience stigma related to their family complexity, also experience the privileges of navigating institutional spaces in a White body. Black and Brown parents in stepfamilies navigate these spaces against the backdrop of different racialized narratives. For example, Black family complexity has long been pathologized, stigmatized, and politicized (Billingsley, 1968; McAdoo, 1988). White supremacist messaging routinely frames Black family complexity as responsible for a host of family and social problems (think of "broken family" narratives), without attending to how structural racism (e.g., generations of racist policies) has sought to destabilize Black families since America's founding (Cross et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2022). Navigating family complexity in the contexts of White supremacy and heteronormativity has implications for stepfamily members who occupy multiple marginalized statuses. For instance, Black queer stepfamilies and queer interracial step-couples have described the importance of engaging in *racework* or the daily strategies performed to foster intimacy and facilitate family recognition and visibility in public spaces (Acosta, 2021).

Understanding (step)families as embedded within larger social contexts grounds me in the importance of identifying institutions that privilege SNAFs, and targeting *those* sites as sites for improving family functioning. In other words, how can *systems* be changed to be more supportive of diverse family structures? Given that my work also involves identifying what family members themselves can do to ease family transitions, herein lies a tension in my work: I aim to

empower family members by identifying what they can do to contribute to close step-relationships or the positive development of stepfamily members *and also* recognize that the extent to which families struggle or thrive does not rest solely in the hands of family members (Sanner et al., 2022). The stressors that stepfamilies experience—and the extent to which they have the bandwidth to employ certain relational practices—are shaped by their environments (Jensen, 2020), including the extent to which families are supported at the local, state, and federal levels. Any discussion of family functioning is incomplete without recognizing that our systems, institutions, and governing officials play key roles in shaping and supporting communities that promote family well-being. Feminist perspectives ground me in the importance of tying my research to the contexts in which families are situated.

Attending to ideologies

Toward understanding stepfamilies as embedded within social contexts, I also am interested in how *ideologies* (i.e., belief systems and external messaging about families) shape our internal realities. I am particularly interested in *nuclear family ideologies*, or the messages, beliefs, and values that position the two-parent family as best (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Levin, 1993). For example, the internalized supremacy of the SNAF can be a powerful undercurrent shaping feelings and relationships in stepfamilies (Afifi & Keith, 2004; Papernow, 2018). In both children and adults, feelings of hurt and loss can derive from the loss of an idealized image of family life—the loss of the socially constructed "happy family" and the promise we have been conditioned to believe it offers (Ahmed, 2010, 2020). I am curious about the power of the "happy family" SNAF messaging. I am curious, for example, about the cultural impulse to celebrate marital longevity over nearly any other measure of family success. Just think of the uncritically adoring reaction to hearing that a couple has been married 50 years, or the uncritically sad reaction to hearing a couple has divorced.

Feminist perspectives invite me to imagine something different. In a time when family transitions are common, I wonder about a world where transitions were not viewed as inherently bad or disruptive, but as a healthy indicator of individual and family growth—as opportunities to create villages of parenting and family support. Although we often recognize the dissolution of non-marital relationships without children as healthy and necessary for personal growth (Jamison & Sanner, 2021; Norona et al., 2017), less often is the dissolution of relationships with children framed this way. There is an automatic tendency to project negativity onto family structure change when children are involved (Jensen & Sanner, 2021). But what if family transitions were viewed as normative, even constructive? What if separation and divorce were not symbolic of something broken or something failed, but of something evolved? I think this would change how children and adults respond to family transitions. While people may benefit from family stability (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2019), how well they adjust to family complexity likely has much to do with broader cultural messaging about the (ab)normality of their family structure. Feminism keeps me grounded in understanding *families in context*, including how dominant cultural messaging (e.g., about divorce, about stepfamilies) shapes how we respond to family change.

Deconstructing false binaries

The second principle of feminist theory that has been central to my work is that feminism challenges dualistic binaries that offer false oppositions of family life (Allen, 2023; Connidis, 2015; Lorde, 1984; Walker, 2009). As Allen (2023) described, the post-Enlightenment, Western European emphasis on categorization and hierarchy created a tendency to view things in either/or terms—to see "human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior" (Lorde, 1984, p. 114). This thinking is evident in

our discourse about family life and relationships as either positive *or* negative, as either harmonious *or* conflicted. Feminist analysis of families involves deconstructing false binaries by recognizing that "both human interactions and social structures are characterized by tensions and ambivalence" (Allen et al., 2009, p. 4). Indeed, the concept of *ambivalence* is central to feminist theorizing (Connidis, 2015). As a theoretical concept, ambivalence sensitizes us to "the coexistence of contradictory sentiments, expectations, and forces as characteristic of family and of social life" (Connidis, 2015, p. 77).

Applied to stepfamilies, ambivalence takes us beyond dualistic views of stepfamilies as *good* or *bad*, *well-adjusted* or *not*, *resilient* or *dysfunctional* and instead invites us to explore the gray areas of (step)family life, making sense of the tensions, contradictions, celebrations, and challenges. It also invites us to understand how experiencing ambivalence at the individual level (i.e., simultaneously holding positive and negative sentiments about family relationships) is a reflection of experiencing ambivalence at the structural level (i.e., when socially structured relations [family, gender, class, age, race, ability] offer opposing guidelines or directives for socially expected behavior) (Connidis, 2015). For example, stepmothers experience structural ambivalence when gendered notions of the appropriate familial roles of women collide with expectations of the appropriately distanced role of stepparents (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). In other words, stepmothers are expected to be highly involved as women in families whereas being less involved as stepparents (Sanner & Coleman, 2017). Stepmothers' positioning at the intersection of contradictory guidelines for expected behavior makes them particularly susceptible to experiencing ambivalent emotions and relationships in stepfamilies (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). "A key premise of ambivalence," Connidis (2015) explains, "is that the ongoing negotiation of contradictions in family relationships is intricately connected to the ways that social life is organized and structured" (p. 78). When kinship networks have less established ways of *doing family* (i.e., they are incompletely institutionalized; Cherlin, 1978), they are more vulnerable to experiencing ambivalence (Connidis, 2015). Indeed, there is evidence of greater feelings of ambivalence in post-divorce families and stepfamilies compared to first-married nuclear families (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011; Widmer, 2010). Guided by feminist perspectives, I see ambivalence as where the "important stuff" happens—an entry point for richer and *realer* understandings of the messiness of family life. My work aims to tease apart this complexity and to understand it as a byproduct of the larger contexts in which (step)families are embedded.

With an understanding of the personal and professional perspectives that guide my research, I now return to a discussion of how the personal and professional perspectives inform each other, offering examples of how I have turned personal curiosities into research inquiries. I illustrate how lived experience has led me to deeper levels of scholarship, and how deeper levels of scholarship have led me to a more holistic understanding of family.

PART III: TOWARD DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

Thus far, I have named the "easy" answer for what drew me to my profession: a desire to shed light on positive dynamics in complex families and to challenge depictions of complex families as broken, lacking, or ridden with conflict. There is a more complicated answer, though, about the private motivations that drive my work. I believe that many of us have an easy answer and a more complicated answer if we think about it.

It is true that I seek to add a more nuanced and strengths-based understanding of complex families to the literature, but more than that, I ask questions in my research that I am too scared to ask of the people I love because I know the answers are messy and complicated. I want to untangle the delicate threads of love, loyalty, loss, power, pride, and pain. I want to understand the family dynamics that I knew were present but that I could not name. The answers to these questions might hurt me, for reasons I do not fully understand. They might reveal secrets that

have been locked away in service of clean narratives and preserved relationships. They might complicate my understanding of my family and of myself. Experience has taught me, though, that these questions will lead me someplace deeper, someplace more real, and that I will find comfort and beauty in the messiness of the answers.

I am interested, for example, in the narrative that *love* (not blood) makes family, embraced especially by families where genetic ties are absent or inequitable (Goldberg, 2010; Goldberg & Scheib, 2015; Oswald, 2002; Weston, 1991). In LGBTQ-parent families, for instance, there is an emphasis on social constructionist and queer perspectives of the family—a tendency to deprioritize biology and emphasize *choice* and *social ties* in family definitions (Allen & Lavender-Stott, 2020; Oswald, 2002; Weston, 1991). Similarly, when adoptive parents or step-parents have both biological and nonbiological children, there is a certain fervor with which the relevance of genetic relatedness to family and kinship is dismissed—a certain intensity with which we cling to the narrative that *blood does not make a family; love does*. My own life has long depended on my family embracing this narrative; my stepmother's claiming me as her own has been essential to my sense of stability and well-being, well into my adult life.

I am curious, though, about the ambivalence created by a public dismissal that genetic relatedness matters, and a private recognition that it *does* matter. Female-partnered women in Goldberg and Scheib's (2015) study grappled with this tension in their explanations of why they chose donor insemination over adoption, both espousing the significance of genetic relatedness as a reason for why they chose biological maternity, while also emphasizing that "genetics isn't everything," and that their partners (who were biogenetically unrelated to their child) were just as much of parents as they were (p. 733). Tensions in the meaning and relevance of genetic relatedness are present in stepfamilies, too. My stepmother has both biological and non-biological children, and I have always wondered about her ability to navigate the tension of loving her children equally *and* loving her biological child differently. Her favorite necklace has my brother's birthstone at the center, and I have wondered if, in her commitment to loving us all equally, these small expressions of a different kind of love reserved for her biological child were all she had access to.

I have never asked this of my stepmother, but I have asked it in my research. For my master's thesis, I studied stepmothers' sources of ambivalence as they navigate complex family dynamics and have few outlets to express themselves, lest they reinforce stigmatized perceptions of stepmotherhood (Sanner & Coleman, 2017). I explored what it is like for women without children to fall in love with someone *with* children—someone who had already begun a family, who would always have chapters that did not include them. Surely my stepmother never *intended* to be a stepmother. Indeed, no one in my study said, "I always dreamed of becoming a stepmom," or, "I always wanted two children and two stepchildren." I spoke with them about what is was like to (re)construct their family images and to sometimes grieve the loss of an idealized image while feeling sincere love and appreciation for a new one (Sanner & Coleman, 2017). When it was hard for stepmothers to admit something was how I knew it was important. I surfaced their secrets, and in doing so, I felt I was unearthing my *stepmother's* secrets, giving voice to things that she, in her love for us, could not have voiced herself. This is what my work aims to do: explore the complicated truths within and bring those truths into the light.

I am curious, too, about my mothers' unspoken truths. For example, I am interested in the invisible emotion work done by mothers who let their children embrace stepmothers, who create a space for them in the family. In a cultural context that idealizes and gives primacy to biological mothers' roles in family life—that reinforces the heteronormative nuclear blueprint that children have *one mother*—I am curious about the emotional work involved in unlearning these internalized models. I give my mother *so much credit* for the family we created—for the family she allowed us to create. There is a scene in the film *Stepmom*, starring Julia Roberts and Susan Sarandon, where the mother (Sarandon) is bantering with her impressionable children about their new stepmother (Roberts), her dislike for their stepmother thinly veiled. Light-heartedly

but with sincerity, the seven-year-old son turns to his mother and says, "Mom, if you want me to hate her, I will," and the camera pans to Sarandon, whose face sobers with recognition of the power she has over her children's feelings.

Indeed, mothers hold *so much power* in the impressions their children form of surrounding family members, and my mother wielded that power ever so carefully. She created the conditions that allowed me to develop meaningful step-relationships, and I am curious about what allowed her to do this. I want to understand the ways in which her emotions were likely much more complicated than what she let on, and what she did with those emotions–*where she put them*–as she made a space for my stepmother to stand beside her.

I have not asked this of my mother, but I am asking it in my research. I currently am conducting interviews with mothers about their feelings toward their child(ren)'s stepmother, seeking to understand, on a deeper level, what stepmothers *represent* to mothers (e.g., what they symbolize, what they surface). Preliminary insights reveal that mothers grapple with rich tensions—for example, *be a good stepmother, but not too good. Love my children and treat them well, but not so well that I feel threatened. Do not be a better mother than me.* Their narratives parallel the research on stepmotherhood, which suggests that stepmothers walk a tightrope in fulfilling *mothering but not a mother* role, treating stepchildren with maternal love (lest they be stereotyped as wicked stepmothers) but treading ever so carefully on the sacred ground of motherhood (Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

The relationship between my mother and stepmother will always be the heartbeat of my research. I currently am carrying out a long-held dream of a research study about *Mother-Stepmother* (and *Father-Stepfather*) *Allies*—a tribute to my two mothers and their remarkable relationship. I am conducting joint interviews with mothers and stepmothers (and fathers and stepfathers) in the same stepfamily, examining how they develop close, cooperative co-parenting relationships, especially in the context of cultural narratives that often pit them against each other. Because I am interested in understanding the more delicate truths of these relationships, I also am conducting follow-up solo interviews with each participant, allowing them to voice thoughts that perhaps they could not share in their joint interviews, even in the contexts of relationships that are close. Indeed, even the closest, most well-functioning relationships have privacy boundaries (Petronio, 2010)—especially those ties that are structured by ambivalence (Connidis, 2015). I want to understand the things that are difficult for family members to admit, and more than that, I want to understand how those feelings are a reflection of broader, internalized cultural values and ideals.

For every empirical road traveled, there is one that I am not yet ready to take. Some questions are still forming, still bubbling up from somewhere inside of me, though I trust they will eventually find their way into my work. When they do, I know they will lead me someplace deeper. Eventually, I want to study the experience of being "the other woman," as my grandmother was for so many years. I want to know how the revelation of family secrets changes the stories we tell about our families and about ourselves. I want to explore what it is like to be the child of "the other woman," as I have been. When my mother received a phone call from her boyfriend, on speaker phone with his wife and children to announce that he was choosing his family over her, my heart ached for her. I cried complicated tears. No one thinks about the other woman's broken heart.

Above all, I want to do work that embraces the messy, names the invisible, humanizes complexity, and illustrates that "life is uncertain and contradictory—rarely are things what they seem to be on the surface" (Allen, 2023, p. 925). Today, the close co-parenting relationships among my three parents do not exist as they once did. Eventually, the relationship between my amicably divorced parents became *too* close, and while my father and stepmother's marriage survived, the framed photo of my three parents was removed from the mantle. Birthdays and Christmases are now separate. For the first time, in my 30s, I finally feel like a child of divorce.

Try as I might to sand off these rough edges—to hide the inconvenient truths and squeeze into the box of the model stepfamily—feminism reminds me that I do not have to choose between the false binary of the broken or the happy family. We are neither. We are both. We are *all of it*. What a gift. Families are tumbling spheres of love and heartache, of hurt and healing, of sacrifice and vulnerability, of beauty and imperfection. Like feminist scholars before me (Allen, 2000; Connidis, 2015; Walker, 2009), I urge family researchers to create a loving home for the tenderness and messiness of this tumbling sphere of human emotion. The more we honor the rough edges, the closer we move toward more honest representations of this brief and complicated human experience.

CONCLUSION

Reflexivity is a lifelong journey, not only of examining how we shape our work but also how our work shapes us. It is a deep privilege—indeed, *life sustaining*—to do the hard work on topics of great personal significance (Allen, 2023). There is healing power in doing work that brings clarity to complexity. Allen (2000, 2023) reminds us that the first step toward developing a critical consciousness is being willing to risk stating what really drives our work. I hope that, in pursuit of honest and transformative scholarship, others will join me and my colleagues who dare to do this work in pulling back the curtain of the partial perspectives embedded in family science.

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