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“He’s My Dad Because He Just Is!”: Cohabiting (Step) Children’s Responses to Discursive Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Cohabiting (step)families have become one of the fastest growing family forms in the United States. This study explored the types of discursive challenges experienced by cohabiting (step)children, as well as the ways in which cohabiting (step) children might respond to potential challenges of legitimacy. In this study, we interviewed 28 (step)children who resided with 1 biological parent and their parent’s nonmarital partner for at least 2 years. Results demonstrate that despite recent increases in prevalence and acceptance of unmarried partner households, cohabiting (step)children are often called on to explain their family’s legitimacy through accounting strategies when they experience discursive challenges to their (step) family’s form.

KEYWORDS

Cohabitation; discursive challenges; remedial accounts; stepchildren; stepfamilies

In the 21st century, the U.S. family form has evolved dramatically due to demographic trends (Galvin, Braithwaite, & Bylund, 2015). One of the most striking changes in the past 50 years is the increase in cohabitation (Cohan & Klenbaum, 2002; Galvin et al., 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Cohabitation refers to the act of living with a romantic partner without marrying (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Steuber, Priem, Scharp, & Thomas, 2014). Since 2001, the population of unmarried partner households with children under the age of 15 has increased by 88% (Simmons & O’Neill, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, 2010). Additionally, over half of children living in unmarried partner households reside with one biological parent and their parent’s nonmarital partner (Manning, 2006). As such, cohabiting (step)families have become one of the fastest growing family forms in the United States (Nuru & Wang, 2014).

Like stepfamilies, defined as “families in which at least one of the adults has a child or children from a previous relationship” (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998, p. 101), *cohabiting (step)families* are premarital and nonmarital stepfamilies who live together. Given that members of stepfamilies have often reported feeling like a family prior to remarriage ceremonies (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup,

& Turman, 2001; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Nuru & Wang, 2014), we argue that cohabiting (step)families function similarly to stepfamilies in that they, too, undergo processes of redefining their family identities by negotiating new roles, rituals, and relationships (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Braithwaite et al., 1998, 2001). Moreover, cohabiting (step)families might also encounter challenges similar to those experienced by stepfamilies. Although extant literature examines various stepfamily challenges, including those involving coparenting (Schrodt, 2012; Schrodt, Miller, & Braithwaite, 2011), conflict (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001), dialectical tensions (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008), and uncertainty management (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; DiVerniero, 2011), surprisingly few studies have focused specifically on the social interactions occurring during the cohabitation phase.

Further, although cohabiting (step)families have become more common (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Nuru & Wang, 2014), often there is ambiguity about the status and future of the partnership (Steuber et al., 2014). Additionally, because cohabitation is not typically associated with any type of established standard (Steuber et al., 2014), partners are often uncertain about the extent of their relational role or expected involvement (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). For these reasons, individuals both inside and outside of the household might question the legitimacy of the cohabiting (step)family. For example, akin to stepfamilies, cohabiting (step)children might challenge the role of their parent's partner as a legitimate parent or guardian (Braithwaite et al., 1998), (step)grandparents might contest a shared family identity with (step)grandchildren (Soliz, 2007), or a lack of a legal tie could hinder recognition of the (step)child–(step)parent relationship by individuals outside of the household (e.g., school administrations, medical staff; Johnson et al., 2009). To this end, this study seeks to explore the types of discursive challenges experienced by cohabiting (step)children, as well as the ways in which cohabiting (step)children might respond to potential challenges of legitimacy.

Accounts as a theoretical framework

Historically rooted in studies focused on facework (Goffman, 1967, 1971), accounts are remedial strategies used as a means to exonerate an individual from an untoward act (Scott & Lyman, 1968). They are provided as a means to explain or justify behaviors that are perceived by others as unusual or problematic (Buttny, 1985). Accounts, therefore, are often used as a means to make questionable behavior seem more socially acceptable (Domenici & Littlejohn, 2006). Moreover, accounts help individuals make sense of social interactions by providing causal explanations (Cody & McLaughlin, 1990),

which in turn, could help individuals navigate problematic situations by allowing them to modify the meaning of the interaction (Buttny, 1985). Specifically, accounts function as coping strategies that help individuals navigate interactions in which their behaviors or identities might be contested (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012). As such, the theoretical framework of accounts allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which cohabiting (step)children might navigate potential challenges of their family's legitimacy.

To date, typologies of remedial strategies conceptualize accounts as either (a) excuses, (b) justifications, (c) concessions, or (d) refusals (McLaughlin, Cody, & O'Hair, 1983; Scott & Lyman, 1968). According to Scott and Lyman (1968), excuses are accounts in which the individual accepts the behavior as unordinary, but denies responsibility for the behavior. On the other hand, justifications are accounts in which the individual accepts responsibility for the behavior, but denies that it is problematic (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Concessions are accounts in which the individual accepts responsibility for the misbehavior and shows concern for the impact of their behaviors on others (McLaughlin et al., 1983). Finally, refusals involve denying responsibility by either failing to offer an account or by denying the occurrence of the behavior altogether (McLaughlin et al., 1983).

Accounts have been used as a theoretical framework for exploring discursive identity challenges experienced by lesbian mothers (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012), among commuter wives (Bergen, 2010), and between friends (Manusov, Koenig Kellas, & Trees, 2004). Further, accounts have provided a conceptual framework for exploring remedial strategies for coping with embarrassment (Metts & Cupach, 1989), as well as understanding relational aggression among college women (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2013). Given that cohabiting (step)children might encounter discursive identity challenges directed toward their family's form, we argue that accounts provide a necessary framework for exploring the ways in which (step)children could navigate these interactions. Further, because accounts are specifically useful for exploring coping strategies, we contend that the theoretical framework of accounts will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which cohabiting (step)children make sense of interactions through which the legitimacy of their family might be contested. Thus, the purpose of this study is to extend the theoretical framework of accounts to better understand the experiences of cohabiting (step)children. As such, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of discursive challenges do children in cohabiting (step) families encounter?

RQ2: How, if at all, do cohabiting (step)children use remedial account strategies as a means to make sense of discursive challenges involving their (step)family?

Method

In this study, we sought to understand and interpret our participants' communicative actions (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) by examining "the perspectives and language choices of the individuals being studied from the 'native's point of view'" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 8). As communication scholars, we share personal and professional interests in understanding the role of communication in discourse-dependent families. As such, our goals in this study were aimed to better understand the experiences of cohabiting (step)children.

Participants

In line with an interpretive approach, we chose participants who were at least 19 years old and a child member of a (step)family who cohabited with his or her parent and his or her parent's partner so we could understand each participant's experience fully (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 2007). To reflect the extant literature, we identified participants who resided predominantly in the cohabiting (step)family household for a minimum of 2 years.

We used e-mail announcements, message board postings, and snowball sampling technique (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) as approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB) to recruit participants. Per IRB regulation, all participants contacted us to express interest in participating in this study. Our sample included 28 adult (step)children (16 women and 12 men) whose mean age was 22.36 years ($SD = 3.93$). The adult (step)children were primarily White (71.43%) and representative of the population of the large Midwestern university where these data were collected. Four of the participants self-reported their racial or ethnic identities as Black, 1 as Hispanic, 1 identified as other, and 1 did not report ethnicity. The participants discussed (step)families that had been in existence for an average of 14 years ($SD = 6.82$). The mean number of years their mothers had been divorced was 13.14 years ($SD = 7.10$) and for fathers it was 9.67 years ($SD = 5.99$). In addition to the parent and (step)parent, participants' (step)families were made up of biological children ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.00$), maternal stepsiblings ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 0.90$), paternal stepsiblings ($M = 0.36$, $SD = 0.79$), and, in some families, half-siblings (maternal $M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.71$; paternal $M = 0.36$, $SD = 0.79$).

Data collection

We conducted 28 semistructured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) with (step)children who lived in cohabiting partner households to answer the proposed research questions. During these interviews that lasted approximately 45 minutes, we used the retrospective interview technique and a detailed interview protocol to learn more about each participant's individual experience. We used open-ended questions that encouraged participants to express themselves in any way that they chose so that our participants could retain control and flexibility during the interviews (McCracken, 1998). Interview questions focused on (a) background information about the (step)family's shared identity (e.g., "In your own words, how would you describe your family's identity?"), (b) experiences of discursive challenges (e.g., "Please tell me a story of a time where you felt that your family's identity was supported or called into question."), and (c) responses to discursive challenges (e.g., "To the best of your ability, how do you remember responding when you felt your family's identity was supported or called into question?"). We also used a "family tree" to record demographic information. Rather than interviewing a specific number of participants, we used theoretical saturation (McCracken, 1998) as a measure of completeness, the point at which all themes are well developed and no new themes emerge, estimating that we reached theoretical saturation after 20 interviews. To ensure that we did not overlook new information that might have emerged in later interviews, we continued to interview eligible participants beyond the point of theoretical saturation to discover any variations on existing themes, develop a credible data set, and ensure that we had the most descriptive exemplars.

Through the open-ended questions included in the interview protocol, we focused on prompting each participant to explain interactions that occurred during the time he or she cohabitated with his or her parent and his or her parent's partner to elicit rich detail so that comprehensive meanings could be understood and interpreted (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010; McCracken, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). To test for fluency, we conducted two pilot interviews and made minor changes in the question order following the pilot interviews to improve interview efficiency and clarity.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and verified against their original recordings. All names and identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms. Data for this study were 568 pages of double-spaced interview transcripts. We used an "ideographic approach" where we observed one transcript before moving to the next transcript to fully explore the interactions that occurred during cohabitation that transformed (step)children's perceptions about the family (Smith,

1995, p. 19). We reviewed all of the transcripts in this manner to ensure that we carefully interpreted each of the participant's perspectives accurately. We then looked for overall themes, answered the proposed research questions by grouping the emerging themes on a master list, and identified consistent patterns among the responses of the participants (Smith, 1995).

Verification

To ensure the accuracy of results and minimize bias, we participated in an interactive data conference with several experts in the field (Creswell, 2007). These experts were selected based on their extensive scholarship on stepfamily development and interpretive research design. Additionally, members of the data conference included (step)children whose personal experiences helped render the data intelligible. Each member was provided a document that listed all research questions, themes, and exemplars. Data conference members helped us check, critically analyze, and refine categories for consistency and clarity (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Minor differences were resolved through discussion.

Findings

In this study, the researchers explored the types of discursive challenges experienced by children in cohabiting (step)families. Three types of discursive challenges emerged: (a) challenges of commitment, (b) challenges of legitimacy, and (c) challenges of morality. Additionally, we examined how (step)children use remedial account strategies as a means to make sense of discursive challenges directed toward their (step)family. Expanding Koenig Kellas and Suter's (2012) work, our findings provide insight into the ways in which children in cohabiting (step)families use four accounting strategies to make sense of discursive challenges to their (step)family's identity: (a) justifications, (b) refusals, (c) preemptive responses, and (d) direct responses. Each of these strategies contained specific account subtypes. At least one of these accounting strategies, and usually multiple strategies, was identified across all 28 interviews. To follow, we first discuss the types of discursive challenges. Then, each accounting strategy is discussed in turn in order of frequency from most mentioned to least mentioned. An overview of these four accounting strategies and the specific account types appears in Table 1.

Discursive challenges

The first research question asked about the types of discursive challenges experienced by cohabiting (step)children. Participants reported three types of

Table 1. Overview of account strategies and specific subtypes.

Accounting strategy	Definition	Specific subtypes	Example
Justifications	"Accounter discounts the importance of the problematic, claims it does not have negative consequences, or claims it has positive consequences" (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012, p. 487)	Length of time committed Feeling like family	"I guess we never really noticed [they weren't married]. She's like my stepmom because she's been there since before I can remember." (IV 12, 14–15) "He's more of a dad to me than my biological father. ... He may not be connected to me by blood or marriage, but he's been there—he's my dad because he just <i>is</i> !" (IV 18, 118–123)
Refusals	"Refusing to account when challenged, denying that an infraction or failure event occurred, or accounting in such a way that 'proves' one's 'innocence' from any wrongdoing" (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012, p. 486)	Avoidance Ambiguity	"When people ask me about all that, I just try to distract them. Avoid the question, ya know?" (IV 2, 145–146) "I just hate when the question comes up, like why do you care how we're all related? So, I kinda give just a vague answer so they stop talking about it." (IV 13, 28–30)
Preemptive responses	"Responses that were not preceded by an explicit challenge. These were accounts given for anticipated challenges" (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012, p. 487)	Leading with explanation of family ties Using first names as identifying labels	"You can just tell—when someone is wondering who everyone is—because none of us look alike, we don't match at all—and like you can see it on their faces. Before it gets awkward, I say something like, 'my mom's boyfriend' or 'my mom's boyfriend's kids' to break the ice." (IV 20, 210–212) "I call her by her first name. That way, it's assumed that she's not my mom. People get it." (IV 14, 8–9)
Direct responses	Responding to challenges of legitimacy by answering questions candidly or explaining relational roles in a matter-of-fact manner (Koenig Kellas & Super, 2012)	Directly answers questions about family ties	"I say it how it is: That's her family. They live with us. My dad is with her. No, they aren't married." (IV 4, 11–12)

discursive challenges to their (step)family's form: (a) challenges of commitment, (b) challenges of legitimacy, and (c) challenges of morality.

Challenges of commitment

The first type of discursive challenge to emerge from the data set involved reports of interactions through which (step)children were questioned about their family members' loyalty to one another. In these instances, (step)children often recalled interactions whereby others expressed concern about the devotion of the (step)parents, both to each other and sometimes with the (step)child. For example, Mari recalled:

I remember [my friends] were all laughing and joking around about how it was kinda like a hippie thing that [my (step)parents] were together—monogamous and all but just—not getting married. ... They kept saying that [my (step)parents' relationship was] just like how we do it. Ya know, like “Oh I’m seeing this person or I’m seeing that person” but it’s not like marriage or anything “serious.” Kinda like they weren’t as close—weren’t as committed as their parents, even though they’ve been together longer—longer than I can remember—because they weren’t married. (IV 19, 45–61)

Here, Mari explained that although her parent and (step)parent have been in a long-term, monogamous relationship, she remembers moments when her friends contested the sincerity of her parents’ commitment to each other because they were not married. Mari’s friends compared her parents’ relationship to one they might have had, whereby they date partners without forming meaningful attachments. Of the participants who reported challenges of commitment, most described instances in which the extent of their parents’ relationship was called into question.

Challenges of legitimacy

Challenges of legitimacy emerged as the second type of discursive challenge experienced by cohabiting (step)children. Challenges of this type were characterized by questions about the legality of the cohabiting (step)family. Given that schools, hospitals, and other institutions are required to interact with only the child’s legal parents or guardians (Johnson et al., 2009), often (step)children reported encounters whereby administrative personnel challenged the validity of the cohabiting (step)family. Across the data set, (step)children reported that when they would volunteer their cohabiting (step)parent for events involving the school (e.g., chaperoning field trips, requesting signatures for school records) they would often encounter questions about their (step)parents’ legal ties to the family. For example, Lou shared:

It didn’t make any sense. My dad was out of town on work a ton and it would’ve been so much easier if they just took her signature for stuff but they never did ... because she wasn’t my “real” mom. ... She wasn’t legally my parent so Dad had to always go like out of his way to fax things from hotels on the road. ... It really sucked actually that every time I went into the office it was like a whole thing about how she wasn’t my mom and we’d have to call Dad even though they saw her every day picking up me and [my sister]. (IV 5, 97–112)

Similar to several other participants, in this instance, Lou articulated experiences of discursive challenges to the legitimacy of her (step)parent as a member of her family. Although she and her sister lived predominantly with her (step)mother during times when her father worked out of town, her (step)mother was not recognized as a guardian by the school’s administrative staff because their relationship was not legally sanctioned. Lou explained that each time she visited the school’s main office, she would encounter

challenges of legitimacy as the staff was not permitted to recognize her (step) mom as a legal guardian. Overall, participants who reported challenges of legitimacy overwhelmingly described interactions through which the family's identity was contested due to legal constraints.

Challenges of morality

The third type of discursive challenge to emerge from the data set involved reports of interactions through which (step)children were questioned about the virtue of their parents' relationship. In many cases, (step)children would describe situations in which their parents' morals were challenged. Ryan explained:

My dad was like really big into the Catholic Church when he and my mom first got married. . . . In the Catholic Church you really can't get divorced—well like its just kinda frowned upon. . . . So when my mom and dad got divorced and then he moved Sally right in, I remember my buddies were like what's going on with that. . . . Sally was younger than my mom and I remember some people—like from church—were acting weird like she shouldn't have lived with us until my dad and her were engaged. . . . That was a pretty hard time—It was pretty hard on us because in a way we didn't want them to get married right away either. (IV 27, 203–221)

For Ryan, being questioned about his father's values proved to be difficult. He shared that following his parents' divorce, he encountered discursive challenges of morality when his friends asked him about his father's intentions of marrying his (step)mother, Sally. Ryan explained that because of his father's religious beliefs, fellow churchgoers would often question the ethics of his decision to live together with Sally and his children as an unmarried partner household. As such, Ryan described that often doubts were raised about the morality of his father's new relationship, and therefore, their cohabiting (step)family. Across the data set, participants often voiced experiences through which they encountered challenges of morality. Of the participants who voiced challenges of morality, the majority described instances in which others contested the (step)parents' long-term arrangement to cohabit without intentions of marrying as an ethical concern.

Remedial account strategies

The second research question asked about the ways in which cohabiting (step)children used remedial account strategies as a means to make sense of discursive challenges involving their (step)family. Four specific accounting strategies to make sense of discursive challenges to their (step)family's identity were identified: (a) justifications, (b) refusals, (c) preemptive responses, and (d) direct responses. To follow, each accounting strategy is discussed in order of most mentioned to least mentioned.

Justifications

Justifications emerged as the most frequently reported response to discursive challenges. We defined justifications as instances when “the accouter discounts the importance of the problematic, claims it does not have negative consequences, or claims it has positive consequences” (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012, p. 487). Participants justified their family identities in two ways. First, participants would use the length of time that their parent and (step)parent were in a committed relationship as a means to reject the perceptions about cohabiting households as unusual. Many participants discussed their parents’ relationship in terms of “common law” marriage given the length of time spent cohabiting. Emma stated:

I consider my dad and his girlfriend pretty much as married because they have been together since the beginning of time. My parents got divorced when I was a baby and my dad found Cindy pretty soon after that. ... Even though they never, like, officially got married or anything—like what is common law marriage? Ten years, right? Then they are already pretty much married, ya know? I just say that—I say that they’ve been together so long. (IV 25, 200–215)

Like Emma, many participants used the length of time to justify their family’s identity. By affirming that their parent and (step)parent have been in a relationship for a considerable amount of time, participants justified their family identity as a lasting entity. These types of reports often involved comparisons of marriage and divorce rates to “prove” that their family was just as or more committed than other family forms. Cole explained:

People always think that my dad is just dating some lady—they don’t see her as like my stepmom because they never got married. ... But when you think about how many marriages end in divorce after just a few years, and then you think about them—I mean, they’ve been together for twelve years strong—it says something. (IV 23, 45–53)

Here, Cole affirmed his family’s identity by pointing to the length of time his parent and (step)parent have been in a committed relationship.

Second, participants described feeling like a family as a way to respond to discursive challenges about the legitimacy of their family. In these types of responses, participants would note that their (step)parent felt like a family member based on an affection for, and often a loyalty to, the (step)parent. Léon described this type of account by recalling a conversation he had with his nonresidential biological parent about his (step)parent:

One time I was talking to my mom and I slipped up and called Nancy “ma.” ... My biological mom was all like “Don’t call her that! You only have one ma!” And, I mean, I get that. But it’s not right to not call her mom or like put her as a mom on the family tree because she’s like a bonus mom. ... We go too far back and it’d be disrespectful to treat her like that. (IV 28, 150–162)

Here, Léon explained that because of his history with his (step)parent, he feels a sense of loyalty to her in a way that would be disrespectful to refer to her as anything other than as a parent. Overall, participants who voiced using accounting strategies of justification pointed to length of time committed and feeling like a family to affirm their family's identity.

Refusals

Refusals emerged as the second most frequently reported response to discursive challenges. We defined refusals as “refusing to account when challenged, denying that an infraction or failure event occurred, or accounting in such a way that ‘proves’ one’s ‘innocence’ from any wrongdoing” (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012, p. 486). Notably, participants discussed refusals as accounting strategies exclusively in terms of declining to account when challenged. Participants refused to account in two ways. First, participants described using avoidance as a means to refuse. In these cases, participants would attempt to change the subject or redirect conversations to more palatable topics. Adam shared:

I grew up in the Bible belt and having two unmarried parents living together was just not a thing. . . . I wanted to be like, ya know what? Who the hell cares! But it was just easier to just change the subject. So that's what I did. . . . Whenever people would ask about [my family] I would just avoid it—I'd talk about sports or something else instead. (IV 26, 113–120)

In this instance, Adam explained that when approached with a discursive challenge, he would avoid the conversation altogether by changing the topic of conversation from his family to sports. In doing so, Adam illustrated how he used avoidance as a means to refute.

Similarly, some participants described instances in which they would refuse to account by responding with ambiguity. In these instances, participants noted that instead of acknowledging the discursive challenge as offensive, they would respond to the challenge with vague answers to thwart subsequent questions and conversations. Audrey explained:

Sometimes they ask you and it's harmless. They don't mean to pry but still, it's not like I want to have the whole long conversation about it. . . . Most of the time I answer them, but not fully. I'll give them bits and pieces here and there so that they stop asking me questions but they feel like they got what they were looking for. (IV 7, 93–101)

In this example, Audrey explained that in an attempt to refuse to account, she would address discursive challenges by responding in ways that were purposely ambiguous. By giving challengers “bits and pieces” of her family's story, Audrey noted that her goals were simply to curb conversations about her family's legitimacy. As such, Audrey explained that by responding with ambiguity, she avoided the need to account altogether. Overall, participants

who reported that they used refusals as a means to avoid accounting engaged in strategic avoidance and ambiguity.

Preemptive responses

Preemptive responses emerged as the third most frequently reported response to discursive challenges. We defined preemptive responses as those “responses that were not preceded by an explicit challenge. These were accounts given for anticipated challenges” (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012, p. 487). Accounting strategies of this type emerged in two ways. First, participants highlighted circumstances through which they would feel compelled to lead conversations with explanations of family ties. In these cases, participants anticipated the occurrence of discursive challenges, and therefore, attempted to prevent uncomfortable conversations by discussing their family’s identity early on. For example, Michael recounted an instance at a parent–teacher meeting when he preemptively responded to a potential discursive challenge by leading with explanations of his family’s ties:

My dad worked all the time so whenever we had things at the school—like meetings with the teacher or field trips—Lisa would always go. ... I knew she was coming in that day and I wanted it to go smooth. ... Instead of waiting to get the third-degree I just told my teacher that Lisa was coming for my dad. ... I just laid it all out there ... told her everything that way we wouldn’t have to talk about it when Lisa got there. (IV 3, 23–29)

Here, Michael explained that at the onset of his parent–teacher meeting, he anticipated that his teacher would have questions about his family members and Lisa’s role in his life. To prevent uncomfortable conversations from arising later, Michael explained that he led the conversation with explanations of each member’s family ties. In doing so, Michael illustrated how he addressed potential discursive challenges with a preemptive response.

Likewise, other participants reported that they would use their (step) parents’ first names to preemptively respond to discursive challenges. Participants who reported using this type of accounting strategy explained that often they would introduce their (step)parents in conversation by using solely their first names to highlight degrees of separation. Julie shared:

My mom passed and we were all still grieving We definitely considered Arthur as family but we didn’t want to take away anything from our actual dad. ... We still lived with Arthur. ... At the wake, I just remember thinking that people probably weren’t sure which man our dad was. ... I would try and introduce him quick as “Arthur” to beat them to the punch, because what kid is going to call their dad by their first name? (IV 1, 68–80)

In this excerpt, Julie noted that before assumptions could be made, she would anticipate encountering discursive challenges about her family. To counter uncomfortable conversations, Julie explained that she would “beat

them to the punch” by introducing her (step)parent by his or her first name rather than as “dad.” In this sense, Julie was using first names as identifying labels to preemptively respond to potentially distressing conversations. In all, participants who reported that they used preemptive responses as an accounting strategy often led conversations with explanations of family ties and used first names as identifying labels.

Direct responses

Direct responses emerged as the least frequently reported response to discursive challenges. Direct responses refer to instances in which participants would address discursive challenges head-on. In these instances, participants described scenarios in which they would answer questions about their family in a manner that was straightforward and to the point. For example, Rachel recalled a time when she was questioned about her (step) mother:

Instead of beating around the bush, I just told them flat out: she’s my dad’s girlfriend. I mean, what else is there to say? They get that she lives there because all of her stuff is there. . . . That’s all they really need to know—she’s not my mom. Her kids aren’t my siblings. She is just dating my dad. End of story. Ya know? (IV 4, 22–28)

Here, Rachel described how she used direct responses to address discursive challenges. Rather than “beating around the bush,” Rachel noted that one accounting strategy she would use to explain her family identity was to explain each of her cohabiting family members’ roles “flat out.” As such, Rachel diffused subsequent challenges by addressing concerns directly. In sum, participants who described using direct response as an accounting strategy confronted challenges in an explicit and clear-cut manner.

Discussion

Responding to the call to more holistically represent the child’s perspective (Braithwaite et al., 2008) in premarital (Baxter et al., 1999) and nonmarital (step)families, our goals in this study were aimed at shedding light on the experiences of (step)children living in cohabiting partner households. In this study, we explored the types of discursive challenges experienced by cohabiting (step)children, as well as the ways in which cohabiting (step) children interpret and respond to challenges to their family’s identity. Results demonstrate that despite rapid and recent increases in both prevalence (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Galvin et al., 2015) and acceptance (Steuber et al., 2014) of unmarried partner households, cohabiting (step)children are often called on to explain their family’s legitimacy. Specifically, our findings reveal that cohabiting (step)children report experiencing three types of

discursive challenges to their (step)family's form: (a) challenges of commitment, (b) challenges of legitimacy, and (c) challenges of morality. Additionally, four accounting strategies used by cohabiting (step)children to interpret experiences of discursive challenges were identified: (a) justifications, (b) refusals, (c) preemptive responses, and (d) direct responses. Emergent within each of the four accounting strategies, our findings also revealed specific account subtypes.

One of the most noteworthy, albeit surprising, findings of the study was the extent to which reports of discursive challenges to the (step)family's identity focused on their parents' likelihood to remarry. Participants overwhelmingly reported that challenges to their family's authenticity were enmeshed in discourses pertaining to others' expectations that cohabitation should lead to marriage. Although these expectations might not have been shared by the cohabiting (step)families, these data illustrate that others' assumptions about the parents' rationale for not marrying propelled challenges of commitment, legitimacy, and morality. These findings suggest that although contemporary Americans are less likely to marry than in any previous era (Galvin et al., 2015) and unmarried partner households containing children are steadily rising (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, 2010), there is a dominant cultural ideology that presumes deviance if adult partners live together without the intention to marry. To this end, these discursive challenges function to call the family's shared identity into question and to imply negative evaluation about the (step)parents' relationship.

Building on Koenig Kellas and Suter's (2012) research, the results of this study further underscore how remedial accounting strategies help individuals define and make sense of their family's identity. Complementing previous literature on account-making in other contexts (Bergen, 2010; Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012), our analysis showcases specific types of accounts that might be unique to members of cohabiting (step)families. For instance, emergent from the account strategy of justification, cohabiting (step)children reported using length of time committed or feeling like family to validate their (step)family's identity. In doing so, cohabiting (step)children countered unsettling challenges to their family's authenticity by highlighting how they already felt solidified as a family unit. Overall, this study offers a unique contribution in that to date, no other study has examined the specific ways these accounting strategies are used by members of cohabiting (step) families.

There are limitations to this study as well as opportunities for future research. First, interviews involved only (step)children, without attention to the experiences of other members of the (step)family. Although we sought to understand the experiences from the perspective of the (step)child, it is important to also explore the perspectives of (step)parents, (step)siblings, and members of the extended (step)family. As such, future studies should explore the larger system within the cohabiting (step)family household and beyond. Second, recruitment produced a

sample that was disproportionately heavy in the number of student participants. Relatedly, the findings of this study reflect a primarily White sample. Future researchers need to investigate the encounters of discursive challenges experienced by cohabiting (step)families within other ethnic-racial groups.

Despite these shortcomings, this study contributes to both scholarly and practical understandings of cohabiting (step)families' experiences. First, our findings advance understandings about the role that communication and accounts play in constructing meaning about family identity from the (step)child's perspective. Galvin (2006) argued that the more discourse-dependent a family is, the more that they rely on communication strategies to negotiate their family's identity. Through our analysis, we highlight how remedial accounting strategies are used by cohabiting (step)children as a means to navigate challenges to their family's authenticity. As such, we illustrate how cohabiting (step)children make sense of their family's identity and how they communicate about the family to outsiders. Second, in addition to helping (step)children facing similar discursive challenges, the insights gleaned from this study could also benefit counselors, practitioners, and school administrators by reducing ambiguity about (step)family functioning (Johnson et al., 2009).

To conclude, this study sheds insight into how (step)children experience, interpret, and respond to discursive challenges about their family's identity. These findings can serve as a heuristic framework for scholars interested in the communication practices used by discourse-dependent families.

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