ACHIEVING POSITIVE STEPFAMILY RELATIONSHIPS:
NEGOTIATING FAIRNESS, FORGIVENESS, AND ACCEPTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Being part of a stepfamily is a common experience for many children and parents in Aotearoa New Zealand. This type of family structure comprises a range of complex relationship dynamics that need to be negotiated, nurtured, and developed into healthy family functioning.

This research was based on a positive psychology perspective (the study of wellbeing) and examined the typical fairness issues stepfamilies encounter, and the strategies they used to resolve those issues. Each family member’s emotional reactions to those situations, and if forgiveness was given and why, were also investigated.

Forty one stepfamilies were recruited to participate in this research, from which 79 were stepchildren and the rest were a combination of step and biological parents.

The research involved holding a family meeting, which was supported by an instructional DVD. During this meeting each participant recorded their responses in a specifically designed research booklet, and the Brief FAM General Scale was used to assess family functioning.

Each participant was asked to recall and offer a situation and a resolution in regards to fairness that they had instigated. From this all other family members would respond by rating their emotions, fairness, and forgiveness in their response booklets.

Descriptive statistics and Generalised Estimating Equations were used to analyse the quantitative responses, and thematic analysis tools to analyse the qualitative responses.

Fourteen scenario categories and seven resolution categories were developed from the 589 situations recorded. The top issues were differential treatment of children,
fighting amongst children, household chores, and missing out. The main resolutions were compromise, communication, and sharing.

Emotionally participants were more negative towards themselves than other family members around these situations. Situations causing the most emotional distress were when children missed out due to either living between two households or were neglected by their other biological parent. Forgiveness generally occurred when a situation had been rectified or improved, or a person wanted to move on from it. Forgiveness tended not to be given when a perceived offense was reoccurring or not rectified. Step relationships did not significantly influence fairness or forgiveness ratings compared to the nature of the situation and the resolution end result, both of which significantly influenced these ratings.

Advice was provided by the participating stepfamilies for other stepfamilies that are either in the beginning stages of their stepfamily development, or not functioning as well. Seven themes emerged from this advice using qualitative analysis: hold family meetings to work through issues; spend quality time with each other, listen to each other, use compromising and negotiation strategies, show every family member respect, treat all family members equally, express love to each family member, and do not bring your children into you and your ex-partner’s feud.
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A very special thank you to the New Zealand Families Commission who generously funded this research project which helped made it possible for this to be a nationwide study. I sincerely hope that you will find the research results useful and worthwhile for your organisation.

Thank you to Brett Hunt, and Dr Dalice Sim (Victoria University of Wellington) for your help and tutoring with the very difficult statistical model this research required, you both are brilliant!

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A very big thank you to all the amazing families that took part and contributed towards this research with their precious time, enthusiasm, and opinions. Without you all
this research would not have been possible, and from your involvement other stepfamilies will be able to benefit from it.

Thank you to both my stepmother’s for their input into my life and the inspiration they gave me for this project. They are living proof that stepparents can be essential to one’s life and also make wonderful parents, thank you.

And last but certainly not least I am especially grateful to my wonderful husband James, who has supported me in every way during the years whilst I have been doing my doctoral study, and sharing the load while we had our two children (Gabriella and Hugo) during this time. You have been my rock, thank you so much my darling - I love you.
FOREWORD

It can be a difficult and at times thankless role for anyone to ‘step’ into an already established family as a new parent. It is difficult to create a new relationship with children, carrying with it the expectation to love and care for them immediately as if they are your own. I come from a large blended family where I have the experience of two stepmothers; one who brought me up from 5 years old, and the second who came into our family when I was 10 years old. The label of stepmother with all its baggage does not quite hold the true meaning of the relationship that I have with my Mum-Sera, my first stepmother, who I consider an additional parent as well as a loving person in every way. As far as I am concerned I have three parents that influenced who I am today (my father, mother, and Sera). If someone was to look closely at my personality they could make the mistake of assuming that I am actually Sera’s biological child, as we not only look similar but I have gained several similar personality traits. The relationship that Mum and I have is one type of relationship that is possible between a stepmother and stepchild.

My second stepmother Yukiko and I have a different relationship. It was a little rocky when I was an adolescent but now that I am an adult there is mutual respect and love. Time can strengthen relationships and bonds if two people are willing to work at it, and our relationship is another type of stepmother-stepchild bond.

Mum (Sera) brought up my brother and me as an extension of her own children. After asking her how she felt about us when we first came into her life she replied:

"My first thoughts of you Celia when I first met you was this tiny little 5-year-old girl that was a little nervous, wore glasses but very mature for your age, acted very brave to come into my home, and seemed to accept me straight away. From that moment our connection was solid although you were often teary as you were frightened because you were so confused and worried about both of your parents."
You soon became clingy to me and started to call me Mummy Sera and became adjusted to your new family very quickly.

You became my little buddy and you were always happy with me no matter what we did and where we went. When you dropped calling me Mummy Sera to MUM and hearing two little children calling me Mum made me very proud and very important in your life.

Money was scarce but we seemed to get by. You and Andrèa were just as important to me as my own children. I nursed you both when you were sick, bathed you, took you to school and school concerts, and took you both backwards and forwards to your Mother’s every school holidays and every second weekend.

It broke my heart having to drop you off at boarding school and seeing you get distressed when I left, but I was rewarded with a big smile when I used to pick you up.

I sometimes have tears in my eyes when people ask me about you and Andrèa; they are tears of love, joy, and memories. You and Andrèa are my children and I will love you both forever.

Celia you have made me proud.

Love you,

Mum.”
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>iv</td>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv</td>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi</td>
<td>FOREWORD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ix</td>
<td>CONTENTS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xii</td>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiv</td>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xvi</td>
<td>LIST OF APPENDICES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: AN INTRODUCTION OF STEPFAMILY RESEARCH</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Foundations in Positive Psychology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Harmonious Functioning Stepfamilies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Stepfamily Dynamics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Issues that Stepfamilies can Encounter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Resolution Strategies that Stepfamilies Use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Fairness in Families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Emotions and How They Influence Family Interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: THE PRESENT STUDY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: METHOD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials and Measurements</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The task</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructional DVD</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The response booklet</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Brief FAM: General Scale</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. The Variables</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Rationale for Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses Methods</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Categorisation of the Scenarios</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Categorisation of the Resolutions</td>
<td>74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Quantitative Analysis of Five Key Variables: Fairness, Emotions,</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance, Forgiveness, and Family Functioning</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario themes and descriptive analysis</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution themes and descriptive analysis</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional summary</td>
<td>103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>108</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Family functioning ................................................................. 116

F. Qualitative Analyses .............................................................. 123

Why did you forgive? ............................................................... 124

Why did you not forgive? ......................................................... 126

What would you have preferred to happen? ............................. 127

What advice do you have for other stepfamilies? .................... 130

In summary. .............................................................................. 136

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION ...................................................... 137

The Scenarios and Fairness ....................................................... 137

Resolutions and Fairness ........................................................ 141

Emotions .................................................................................. 143

Achieving Acceptance ............................................................. 145

Achieving Forgiveness ............................................................. 150

Stepfamily Member Differences ............................................. 152

Advice for Stepfamilies ........................................................... 154

Methodology, Recruitment, and the Task ................................. 157

Limitations .............................................................................. 159

Conclusion: Implications for Stepfamilies ............................... 160

REFERENCES ............................................................................ 163

APPENDICES ............................................................................. 171
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participant Numbers in Each Category of Family Role and Gender ................... 51
Table 2. Participants in Each Age Group and Each Group’s Mean Age ......................... 63
Table 3. Possible Family Member Relationship and Observation Counts of Relationship Occurrences When Presenting Scenario and Resolution Examples ......................... 64
Table 4. Potential Predictive Variables of Fairness and Their Results on an Individual and a Multivariate Analysis Level Using the GEE Model ................................................. 94
Table 5. Pre and Post Emotions from Total Observations ............................................. 96
Table 6. Predictive Variables of the Emotion Post Happy Using GEE and Their Results on a Bivariate and a Multivariate Level ................................................................. 98
Table 7. Predictive Variables of the Emotion Post Fine Using GEE and Their Results on a Bivariate and a Multivariate Level ........................................................................ 99
Table 8. Predictive Variables of the Emotion Post Annoyed Using GEE and Their Results on a Bivariate and a Multivariate Level ................................................................ 100
Table 9. Predictive Variables of the Emotion Post Angry Using GEE and Their Results on a Bivariate and a Multivariate Level .................................................................... 101
Table 10. Predictive Variables of the Emotion Post Sadness Using GEE and Their Results on a Bivariate and a Multivariate Level .............................................................. 102
Table 11. Predictive Variables of the Emotion Post Guilt Using GEE and Their Results on a Bivariate and a Multivariate Level ............................................................... 103
Table 12. Post Emotions and Age Group Means and Standard Deviations ................. 104
Table 13. Mean, Standard Deviations and Number of Cases of Post Emotions and of Scenarios and Resolutions .......................................................... 107
Table 14. Predictive Variables of Post Acceptance Using GEE and Their Results on a Bivariate and a Multivariate Level .................................................................109
Table 15. Post-Acceptance Mean Ratings, Standard Deviations, and Number of Observations (Cases) for Relatives Scenarios and Resolutions...............................111
Table 16. Predictive Variables of Forgiveness Using GEE and Their Results on a Bivariate and a Multivariate Level .................................................................113
Table 17. Predictive Variables of Perceived Family Functioning As Measured by the Brief FAM: General Scale t-Scores Using GEE and Their Results on a Bivariate and a Multivariate Level.................................................................118
Table 18. Family Roles and Their Mean and Standard Deviations of Their Family Functioning as Measured by the Brief FAM t-score ........................................119
Table 19. Emotional Means, Number of Observations, and Standard Deviations of Emotional Ratings towards Other Family Members ........................................212
Table 20. Relatives scenario choice * Forgiveness Crosstabulation .............................214
Table 21. Relatives choice of resolution * Forgiveness Crosstabulation ....................216
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Distribution of different numbers of family members within one household who participated.................................................................51
Figure 2. The ages of the family member participants categorised into their family roles and age groups. ..................................................................................................................52
Figure 3. Frequencies of participant scenarios chosen for the research task. ................79
Figure 4. Frequencies of scenarios and the groupings of the family roles. ....................80
Figure 5. Percentages of the family roles within each scenario category. 81
Figure 6. Percentages and frequencies of age groups within each scenario category, .....81
Figure 7. Percentages and frequencies of gender within each scenario category. ........82
Figure 8. Time span between when the scenario had occurred and when the research task had taken place. ..................................................................................................................83
Figure 9. Participant's chosen resolutions and their frequencies. ................................84
Figure 10. Frequency of family role within each resolution category. ........................85
Figure 11. Percentage and frequency of family role within each resolution category. .....85
Figure 12. Percentages and frequencies of age groups within each resolution category. 86
Figure 13. Percentages and frequencies of gender within resolution categories. ........86
Figure 14. Frequencies of each resolution used within each scenario category. ........88
Figure 15. Percentages and frequencies of the resolutions used within each scenario category .................................................................................................................................89
Figure 16. Fairness percentages and frequencies for scenarios. ..................................92
Figure 17. Fairness percentages and frequencies for resolutions. ..............................93
Figure 18. Pre and Post mean emotions and standard deviation bars from the total of participant observations with the research task. .................................................................97
Figure 19. Graph of the mean ratings for all the post emotions in regards to fairness. ...106
Figure 20. Participant post-acceptance mean ratings towards the family member who is
presenting their scenario and resolution. .................................................................110
Figure 21. Scenario categories and frequencies of forgiveness received. ......................115
Figure 22. Resolution categories and frequencies of forgiveness received. ....................116
Figure 23. Mean Brief FAM t-scores from each age group.......................................119
Figure 24. Participants’ choice of scenario and their mean Brief FAM t-scores...........121
Figure 25. Participants’ choices of resolutions to their scenarios and their mean rating of
family functioning as measured by the Brief FAM t-score. ..................................121
LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Advertisement in School Newsletters .................................................... 172
APPENDIX B: Sample Advertising Poster ................................................................. 174
APPENDIX C: Family Task Response Booklet ............................................................. 175
APPENDIX D: Information Sheets ................................................................................. 203
APPENDIX E: Generalised Estimating Equations Model .............................................. 210
APPENDIX F: Emotional Ratings Means and Standard Deviations .............................. 211
APPENDIX G: SPSS Cross Tabs Tables for Forgiveness in Scenarios and Resolutions ......................................................................................................................... 214
APPENDIX H: Instructional DVD .................................................................................. 218