Exploring the Role of Open Family Communication in a Child's Self-Adjustment with Stepmother

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Abstract

This qualitative research investigates the significance of open family communication in children's adaptation to the presence of a stepmother. The method of writing using a qualitative approach includes scientific procedures that advance the science of communication, data collection methods include observation, interviews, and documentation, semi-structured interviews are conducted, guided by interview protocols while providing flexibility for additional questions. Through in-depth interviews with five child informants, we explore crucial factors such as the introduction process, the journey from discomfort to closeness, and the influence of parental communication and openness on children's ability to adapt and establish relationships with their stepmothers. The study also delves into the evolving dynamics of emotional expression, acceptance, and the impact of early experiences on the relationships between children and their stepmothers. Furthermore, we examine the unique roles of stepmothers, communication challenges, and the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on the depth of conversations. The findings underscore the important role played by parents, the gradual nature of acceptance, and the importance of open communication in fostering healthy relationships in blended families, the challenges of talking about personal issues, there were significant changes during the COVID-19 lockdown, informants experienced deeper bonding moments, and the lockdown effect facilitated a more open and deep relationship with their stepmother. The findings also contribute valuable insights to understanding the complexities of children's adjustment within blended families, emphasizing the pivotal role of open family communication in nurturing healthy relationships.

Keywords: 1st openness; 2nd communication; 3rd family; 4th stepmother

Abstrak

Penelitian kualitatif ini menyelidiki pentingnya komunikasi keluarga terbuka dalam adaptasi anak terhadap kehadiran ibu tiri. Metode penulisan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif mencakup prosedur ilmiah yang memajukan ilmu komunikasi, metode pengumpulan data meliputi observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi, wawancara semi-terstruktur dilakukan, dipandu oleh protokol wawancara dengan memberikan fleksibilitas untuk pertanyaan tambahan. Melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap lima informan anak, kami menggali faktor-faktor krusial seperti proses perkenalan, perjalanan dari ketidaknyamanan menuju kedekatan, serta pengaruh komunikasi dan keterbukaan orang tua terhadap kemampuan anak beradaptasi dan menjalin hubungan dengan ibu tirinya. Studi ini juga menyelidiki dinamika yang berkembang dalam ekspresi emosional, penerimaan, dan dampak pengalaman awal terhadap hubungan antara anak-anak dan ibu tiri mereka. Selain itu, kami mengkaji peran unik ibu tiri, tantangan komunikasi, dan dampak lockdown akibat COVID-19 terhadap kedalaman percakapan. Hasil penelitian terkait menekankan sifat komunikasi keluarga yang beragam dan dinamika rumit yang terlibat dalam proses penyesuaian anak dengan ibu tirinya. Temuan ini menggarisbawahi peran penting yang dimainkan oleh orang tua, sifat penerimaan yang bertahap, dan pentingnya komunikasi terbuka dalam membina hubungan yang sehat dalam keluarga, tantangan dalam membicarakan permasalahan pribadi, ada perubahan signifikan selama lockdown COVID-19, Informan mengalami momen ikatan yang lebih dalam, dan efek lockdown memfasilitasi hubungan yang lebih terbuka dan mendalam dengan ibu tirinya. Temuan ini juga memberikan kontribusi wawasan berharga untuk memahami kompleksitas penyesuaian anak-anak dalam keluarga campuran, menekankan peran penting komunikasi keluarga terbuka dalam membina hubungan yang sehat.

Kata Kunci: 1st keterbukaan, 2nd komunikasi; 3rd keluarga; 4th ibu tiri

INTRODUCTION

The family, the smallest unit of society, consists of the head of the family and several individuals who live together under one roof in a state of interdependence. For all children, the dream is to live a life within a harmonious and intact family. This harmonious condition is achievable through good communication between family members, the establishment of affection, mutual understanding, and attention to each other. Family communication holds a pivotal role in the family system, being the first social institution recognized by children during the process of growth and development. Communication within the family occurs reciprocally and alternately, flowing from child to parent, parent to child, and among siblings. It extends beyond the simple transmission of messages, encompassing the creation and negotiation of meaning, identity, interaction relationships, and the shaping of an individual's self and their relationships within the family (Ramadhana, 2020).

According to Troll and Fingerman (Popov and Ilesanm, 2015), the bond between parent and child is a unique and distinctive relationship compared to other human relationships, particularly in terms of the level of closeness in communication. This special relationship significantly contributes to the harmonious development of family interpersonal communication. Brooks and Heath (in Rasyid, 2016) describe interpersonal communication as the process through which individuals exchange information, meaning, and feelings using both verbal and non-verbal messages. Effective communication between individuals fosters positive relationships

Every family aspires to maintain a lasting and happy marriage throughout their lives. However, the reality of sustaining such a marriage is not as simple as expected. Along the journey, every marriage is bound to encounter conflicts stemming from differences between partners. Inevitably, many couples with children choose to separate. Ongoing quarrels, disputes, and differences of opinion between parents can lead to a loss of love and affection. Such conflicts may generate hatred and resentment within the couple, eventually triggering divorce due to a gradual erosion of mutual needs and trust (Matondang, 2014).

Based on information gathered from 2017 to 2022, as reported by Databox, the projected number of divorce cases in Indonesia is expected to reach 516,334 cases in 2022. This represents a 15% increase compared to the previous year, which recorded 447,743 cases. The primary causes of divorce in 2022 are disputes and conflicts, accounting for 284,169 cases, or approximately 63.41% of the total factors contributing to the high divorce rate in Indonesia. Other reasons for divorce include financial problems, one party leaving, polygamy, and domestic violence. The reported number of divorce cases is the highest observed in the last six years (Databox, 2023). In addition to divorce, marriages can also be severed due to the death of one of the spouses. The death of a spouse is an event that is challenging for both women and men. Moreover, it brings forth social challenges, including negative stigma related to widowhood, economic implications, and more (Zulfiana, 2012).

Remarriage refers to a union between couples in which at least one of the individuals has been married before, either due to divorce or the death of their former spouse (Agnes, 2009). Remarrying serves not only as a means to have a spouse again but also provides economic stability for the family, particularly for women. Remarriage can lead individuals to positive aspects and help them find a better meaning in life. Several factors influence a person's decision to remarry, such as seeking love and affection, meeting biological needs, financial considerations, respect for

rules and culture, adherence to social norms, academic considerations for children, and gaining social status in society (Maiaweng, 2017).

The presence of stepparents in a family may not be desired by a child, often due to the stigma and widespread societal perception associating stepparents with cruelty and injustice. This stigma can be reinforced by narratives in films, such as Cinderella, depicting the figure of an evil stepmother. Media significantly influences people's perceptions. However, not all relationships between children and stepparents are negative. Children living with stepparents can develop a deeper understanding than those without. The more children and stepparents communicate openly, the more they feel understood. Every child has a different level of openness when building relationships with parents, including flexible communication (Amita, 2021).

Previous research has shown that some informants experience early rejection from their stepparents and take time to adapt (Riayanti, 2008). Despite this, informants have faith that they can adapt to their stepparents. There are also informants who still have difficulty accepting their father's marriage. In terms of communication, some informants' communication with stepmothers is limited to important matters. Others began to communicate in a limited way with their stepmothers after communication was initiated predominantly by the stepmothers. Other studies have concluded that adolescent victims of parental divorce tend to have low self-openness to their parents. This is caused by feelings of discomfort and a lack of trust in parents (Asriningtyas, 2014). Based on the information described above, researchers are interested in studying the openness of family communication in helping children adjust to stepmothers. This study will utilize the theory of openness to understand the phenomenon of a child's openness to adjustment within a family with a stepmother.

Literature Review

Communication in the family context is a process where messages are conveyed and created openly and interactively within the family, encompassing both pleasant and unpleasant situations. This process aims to address existing problems in the family through conversations conducted with patience, honesty, and openness (Hargie & Dickson, 2004). This concept manifests in real communication behavior, wherein family members, when holding a positive view of the family, are more likely to provide positive feedback. This positive feedback, in turn, has a significant impact on the behavior of family members, fostering an environment where equal treatment is received as what is given. Family communication and self-disclosure are closely intertwined, and the level of self-disclosure within a family can significantly impact the dynamics and relationships among its members.

Self-disclosure is the ability to provide information about oneself to other people. This information can be related to attitudes, behavior, feelings, desires, motivations, and opinions contained within a person (Ramadhana, 2018). Self-disclosure plays a crucial role in building trust, fostering intimacy, and strengthening relationships. It involves sharing one's inner thoughts and emotions, contributing to a deeper understanding among individuals. In the context of communication and relationships, openness refers to the willingness to reveal oneself or be receptive to others' revelations. It involves sharing experiences, thoughts, and feelings openly. The level of openness depends on an individual's comfort and trust. Success in forming or building relationships is often related to the level of openness possessed (Sagiyanto & Ardiyanti, 2018).

From a developmental perspective, the primary role of the family is to provide care and socialize children. Through the socialization process, children internalize beliefs, values, and behaviors deemed important and appropriate by adult family members, particularly parents.

Communication between parents and children is a key element in this process, playing a vital role in educating children. The relationship between parents and children is interconnected, affording both the right to express opinions, thoughts, information, or advice (Suciati, 2015).

METHOD

Research is a scientific method aimed at understanding and solving problems to acquire scientific truth, acknowledging the existence of other truths like philosophical and religious truths that may lie beyond scientific thinking (Idrus, 2009). Research methods, particularly in communication research, encompass scientific procedures utilized to discover new insights, test or validate previous findings, and advance communication science (Pujileksono, 2015).

This study adopts a qualitative approach, as recommended by Moleong, which involves collecting data in the form of narratives and original language without personal evaluation from researchers (Moleong, 2017). The focus is on understanding how children's communication adapts to stepparents in families, specifically exploring family communication openness during this adjustment in the Bandung city area. Five late adolescents (C1, C2, C3, C4, and C5) aged 20-23 years, unmarried, with stepmothers, and residing in Bandung, Indonesia, were recruited as key informants for this research. The selection criteria aimed to ensure relevance and appropriateness of information for addressing the research problems.

Data collection methods included observation, interviews, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, guided by interview protocols while allowing flexibility for additional questions. The collected interview data will be analyzed by the researcher to derive simplified insights.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Research Results

The beginning of self-disclosure lies in the willingness to express oneself, such as when introducing personal identity to others. This identity extends beyond mere name and residence, encompassing abilities or expertise. According to the source, the meeting with her stepmother occurred a few months after the wedding. Although their initial encounter was awkward, the interviewee felt that her stepmother played a significant role in feminine matters. Despite C1's tendency to be indifferent in junior high school, the proactive efforts of his biological father in strengthening their bond stand out as an essential aspect. During interviews, sources conveyed that:

> *"...I was introduced to her when I was in junior high. After a few months of marriage, my father asked me to go to his house. In fact, before the wedding, my father said he wanted to introduce his new wife, but I said I wasn't ready, so I met a few months after they were legally married. When we first met, it was definitely awkward, we introduced ourselves to each other and greeted each other like usual, and then there were a lot of small talk from her, maybe because she was a fellow woman, so in the past her approach was that I got a lot of help with things that women needed. The initial bonding was because my father initiated it so that we could have time together. It's just that*

when I was in junior high, I tended to be more indifferent, I could say it was only my stepmother who made the effort to talk."

Based on interviews with multiple participants, diverse experiences were noted in the introduction and integration of new family members following parental marriage. The approach to introductions varied, with some informants experiencing strong assistance and support from their parents in cultivating relationships with new family members. Challenges emerged when introductions took place after the official marriage, resulting in a sense of indifference or difficulty accepting change for certain informants. Key factors influencing the integration and acceptance process include open communication and official acknowledgment from parents regarding the status of new family members.

The source notes that since 2020, there has been a change in C1's emotional expression, with increased openness when feeling happy. However, during times of anxiety or disappointment, C1 tends to withhold or not share feelings with his stepmother, indicating that complete emotional openness has not been achieved. The interviewee asserts a greater emotional openness with her biological mother compared to her stepmother, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of their relationship. Despite infrequent communication, the source maintains that the relationship with her stepmother can be considered good, though not overly close. The statement is as follows:

"Since 2020, I've become more expressive. If I'm happy and my mother (stepmother) is around, I'll definitely show it, depending on the situation. If she asks, I'll answer openly and won't hesitate to express my happiness. However, if I'm worried or disappointed about something, I won't share it or show it to my mother (stepmother) because perhaps I haven't fully opened up emotionally. Emotionally, I am more open with my birth mother. I don't worry about maintaining a certain image; I simply don't talk often. I can say we get along, or maybe we don't get along, but I can't definitively say either way." (C1)

Based on interviews with multiple informants, it was observed that all participants underwent changes in emotional expression triggered by specific events. Some interviewees exhibited increased openness towards their stepmothers while still grappling with feelings of anxiety or disappointment. Others found comfort in family interactions, particularly with emotional support from their stepmothers. On the contrary, some interviewees encountered challenges in establishing an open and deeply communicative relationship with their stepmothers, despite frequently sharing their feelings with their fathers. This pattern illustrates the intricate and varied dynamics of relationships between the informants and their stepmothers, showcasing different levels of openness and emotional comfort.

The willingness to accept and listen to others for who they are is measured by the indication of accepting others as they are. This acceptance aspect begins to emerge in the context of long-standing interpersonal relationships, involving the acknowledgment of both advantages and disadvantages, recognizing that everyone possesses their own strengths and weaknesses.

According to the source, she initially underwent a phase of rejection and struggled to accept her stepmother after her father's marriage. A transformative moment occurred during a deep conversation in 2020, leading to C2 feeling a closer and more open connection with her stepmother. Over time, the interviewee developed a more mature attitude, transitioning from a stance of rejection to one of openness and empathy. While the stepmother doesn't have a significant

regulatory role, especially in matters related to beauty or fashion opinions, the interviewee frequently seeks her stepmother's input. However, the primary role in governance still lies with the biological mother, indicating that power dynamics in the family are maintained, even though the source is more open to her stepmother. The statement is as follows:

> *"...I didn't accept it right away, of course; there was denial at first, and that was also a lengthy process. When my father remarried, I was still in the 2nd grade of junior high school, so I initially viewed my stepmother as a stranger. However, several months after their marriage, when I was introduced to her house, I wanted to get to know each other, not because I immediately accepted it, but more because I felt sorry for my father. Initially, we just chatted casually until a time when my father and stepmother had a strained relationship, perhaps because I was the one who could chat the most compared to my older siblings. She invited me for coffee, and during that time, she shared her point of view, how she saw my father and his children. Everything was explained in 2020, and since then, she has contacted me more often" (C2).*

Based on interviews with multiple informants, it was observed that the acceptance process of stepmothers varied among the five participants. Some experienced a transition from initial rejection to a more open and empathetic acceptance over time, aligning with their growth into adulthood. They became more accepting of their stepmothers' presence, although the primary role in family arrangements still rested with the biological mother or father. In contrast, another interviewee (C4) adopted an open and indifferent approach, accepting his stepmother as both his father's mother and wife from the beginning, driven by openness and an awareness that his parents deserve happiness.

On the contrary, the interviewee (C5) still harbors feelings of rejection towards his stepmother, stemming from a lack of introduction and communication before the wedding, despite logically accepting her presence. While being more open to listening, consideration, and feedback, interactions with her remain infrequent, focusing more on logical discussions than emotional openness.

A relationship evolves when individuals begin to open up about more personal issues. Without reaching an adequate level of closeness, expressing individual problems becomes challenging. The depth of discussions broadens as intimacy in a relationship increases, covering various topics. The interviewee mentioned that in interactions with her stepmother, C3 tends to avoid discussing personal problems or romantic relationships. Conversations with stepmothers typically revolve around general matters, such as academics or casual talk about pets. The limited shared moments also impact the depth of their conversations. The interviewee is concerned about not causing worry or sadness for her parents with her personal problems, so she refrains from sharing them. However, she is very open if the stepmother initiates the conversation, indicating that with an active role from the stepmother in creating communication opportunities, the interviewee is willing to open up emotionally. Here is the statement:

> *"I never talk about my love life or discuss personal problems when I talk to my stepmother; we just engage in general conversations. She is one of the people who cares about my academics. We chat about small things depending on the current*

circumstances, especially since we don't live under the same roof, and we don't have many moments together. If I have a personal problem, I don't share it with my parents because I don't want to burden them or make them feel sad. However, for less sensitive matters, I share them with my mom (biological mother). Moreover, I can't discuss personal problems yet; it's not that I don't want to, but I'm also unsure about what to do if I suddenly want to confide because, until now, I've focused on making small talk. But if she reaches out to me first, I'm very open (C3)

Based on interviews with various sources, it was observed that interactions between informants and stepmothers typically remain in general conversations and seldom reach an intimate or deep level. Several interviewees prefer to keep discussions focused on general topics like academics, family, or daily life, with limitations on addressing personal problems or romantic relationships with their stepmothers. Unlike one informant, C2, who feels comfortable sharing personal problems with both their biological mother and stepmother due to a close emotional connection. While some informants are open if their stepmother initiates the conversation, the majority tend to be reluctant or find it challenging to delve into sensitive or emotional topics. This indicates that, despite bonding moments, more profound and emotionally open conversations do not regularly occur or reach significant intensity between informants and their stepmothers.

Discussion
Willingness to Express Yourself
The role of parents in the introduction of stepmothers

The role of parents in introducing stepmothers is a crucial factor in shaping relationships within newly formed families. The impact of parental recognition on individuals' comfort in expressing feelings and accepting new family members is evident. Interviews highlight variations in the approach to parent-facilitated recognition, but a prevailing trend suggests its significant influence on how individuals disclose themselves and accept the presence of new family members. The anticipation of parents playing a crucial role in initiating interactions and providing support is a common theme among informants, whether this recognition occurs before marriage or extends over an extended period.

In terms of self-disclosure, it is apparent that formal introduction or acknowledgment of stepmothers by parents has a substantial impact. This recognition influences the level of comfort informants feel in expressing their feelings and accepting the new family situation. Parental recognition is deemed important as it fosters stronger bonds, facilitates learning about new family members, and aids in adjusting to their presence. The concept of family communication, particularly discussions about conversation and uniformity, is linked to how individuals within the family interact and express themselves (Hasriyadi & Ramadhana, 2019). In the context of stepmother recognition, the way biological parents facilitate conversations and open communication channels regarding new family members is deemed crucial, creating an environment where new family members feel encouraged to participate and express themselves without limitations.

The journey from discomfort to closeness

The journey from discomfort to closeness is marked by a pattern depicting the transition from an initial awkward or uncomfortable situation in interactions with the stepmother to a closer level of intimacy. The informant highlights the challenges of introductions, especially when they

occur after the official marriage or lack formal acknowledgment from the parents regarding the new family member's status. The informant aspires to achieve comfort and ultimately cultivate a close relationship with the stepmother. This process significantly impacts the trajectory from discomfort to closeness, influencing the adaptation to the presence of new family members and the integration process within the family sphere. This journey holds importance as it lays the groundwork for establishing healthy family relationships in the future.

From a developmental perspective, the family's primary role is to provide care and socialize the child. Through the socialization process, children internalize beliefs, values, and behaviors deemed important (Suciati, 2015). The informant's adaptation from discomfort to closeness with the stepmother reflects the socialization process in the child-parent relationship. The informant undergoes changes in values, behavior, and adaptation to the new role of their stepmother.

The importance of introduction before marriage

The theme emphasizing the importance of recognition before marriage emerges from patterns indicating that the recognition process between children and prospective stepmothers before marriage significantly influences adaptation and the establishment of healthy relationships in the new family environment. Informants express the expectation of having the opportunity to acquaint themselves, interact, and develop a more intimate relationship with the future stepmother before marriage. This process plays a crucial role in integrating children with new family members, particularly stepmothers, thereby minimizing awkwardness or adaptation difficulties after parental marriage.

Openness, defined as the process of sharing feelings and information with others, is highlighted. Success in forming or building relationships is often associated with the level of openness possessed (Sagiyanto & Ardiyanti, 2018). The importance of recognition before marriage is closely linked to the openness of communication between the child and the future stepmother. Children need to feel comfortable opening up, expressing feelings, and understanding upcoming situations. When there is openness from both parties, the child's adaptation to family changes can occur more smoothly.

The concept of child adaptation to the presence of prospective stepmothers before marriage aligns with the concept of family communication, which underscores the importance of conversation and conformity in family communication (Hasriyadi & Ramadhana, 2019). Children have the opportunity to talk and interact with future stepmothers, fostering communication that allows them to feel more comfortable and connected before any change in family status.

Challenges of parental communication and openness

The theme of communication challenges and parental openness arises from patterns indicating variations in parents' approaches to stepmother recognition and how those interactions impact the involved children. Informants express the expectation of clear communication and openness from parents regarding family changes, including the introduction of new family members. The challenges in communication and parental openness appear to significantly influence how children navigate adaptation to the stepmother's presence and establish relationships with her.

Open parenting in communication related to marriage and stepmother introductions plays a crucial role in facilitating children's adaptation, minimizing discomfort, and aiding in the formation

of better relationships with stepmothers. The communication patterns between parents and children serve as a foundational element in understanding how these interactions affect the children involved. Parents bear the responsibility of involving and creating mutually acknowledging and supportive interactions, both morally and emotionally (Budyatna & Ganiem, 2014). Challenges in communication and openness from parents can have a substantial impact on how children manage adaptation to family changes and form relationships with new family members.

Willingness to Express Feelings, Thoughts, and Expressions
Changes in feelings, thoughts, and emotional expression

The theme of change in feelings, thoughts, and emotional expression arises from a pattern suggesting a shift in how informants express their emotions towards their stepmothers over time. Several informants described changes in their attitudes towards their stepmothers, particularly since 2020, marking a significant turning point in their interactions. Informants reported feeling more open and courageous in expressing their feelings to their stepmothers, influenced by factors like important moments or newfound courage from specific interactions.

Open communication underscores the importance of sharing experiences, thoughts, and feelings within individuals, depending on the level of trust (Sears in Sagiyanto & Ardiyanti, 2018). Changes in the way informants express their feelings to their stepmothers indicate an evolution in emotional relationships. These changes are crucial as they reflect the development of the emotional connection between the informant and their stepmother. It suggests the informant's efforts to adapt and overcome the initial discomfort, fostering more open and intimate communication with their stepmother. These changes signify shifts in family dynamics that can impact the emotional growth of informants within a changing family environment.

Impact of early experiences and relationships

The theme of the impact of early experiences and relationships emerges to illustrate how changes in the informant's emotional expression were influenced by their early experiences and the dynamics of the relationship with their stepmother. Informants highlighted the crucial role that important experiences or moments of togetherness played in altering the way they conveyed their feelings to their stepmothers. Open communication is characterized by sharing experiences, thoughts, and feelings within each individual (Sagiyanto & Ardiyanti, 2018). This underscores the significance of open communication in family dynamics when describing changes and developments in the informant's emotional relationship with stepmothers. Therefore, these early experiences and relationship dynamics bear significant implications for shaping the quality of emotional communication and openness in future family relationships.

Discomfort and difficulty in communicating

The theme of discomfort and difficulty in communication emerges to depict how the informant experienced challenges in communicating with his stepmother. The informant expressed feelings of anxiety, disappointment, or happiness to other family members rather than to his stepmother. Opening up involves sharing feelings about what has been said or done with others (Johnson in Hope & Ahmad, 2014). The informant restrained certain feelings and found it challenging to convey emotions openly to his stepmother. This indicates that the informant encountered difficulty in the process of sharing his feelings with his stepmother, suggesting that the element of openness in family communication may not be fully met.

The role of the stepmother in creating a comfortable environment

The theme of the role of stepmothers in creating a comfortable environment emerges from a pattern that illustrates how the informant's relationship with his stepmother influences the emotional environment. Some informants noted that the presence of their stepmothers played a crucial role in creating a comfortable and supportive atmosphere in family interactions. For instance, the friendly presence of C4's stepmother makes them feel more comfortable, even though they don't interact deeply often. Similarly, significant changes in relationships, as experienced by C2 and C3, mark how their willingness to convey feelings to their stepmother has an impact on changing family dynamics to become more open and comfortable. In open communication, it was found that significant changes in the informant's relationship with his stepmother affected comfort in the family environment. The informants express hope to improve relations with their stepmothers to create a more open, comfortable, and supportive environment. Thus, the informants aim to reduce anxiety or discomfort that may act as an obstacle to healthy family communication.

Willingness to Accept and Listen to the Opinions of Others

Gradual admission process

The theme of the gradual acceptance process arises, illustrating that the acceptance of the stepmother doesn't occur suddenly. Instead, it involves stages and gradual changes in the attitude, perception, and interaction of the informant with the stepmother over time. The informant revealed that accepting her stepmother was not instantaneous but rather a process that included changing attitudes from initial rejection or difficulties to better acceptance over time. This process allows for better adaptation and integration into family dynamics, strengthening emotional bonds and favoring the personal development of informants. This is supported by previous research indicating that children experience early rejection of their stepparents and need time to adapt (Riayanti, 2008). The gradual acceptance process becomes crucial in building healthy relationships and facilitating good adaptation to changes in the family.

The gradual acceptance process reflects how communication in the family context takes place. The concepts of conversation and conformity in family communication theory illustrate that open and mutually supportive interactions between family members play an essential role in the process. Acceptance of the stepmother does not occur instantly but rather through stages involving changing attitudes and the informant's interaction with the stepmother over time. The concept of openness in interpersonal communication is also reflected in the gradual acceptance process, showing that informants gradually open up to the role and position of their stepmothers in their lives. This reflects the concept of openness in relationships, where informants seek to accept the presence of their stepmothers in their lives.

Influence of emotional and adult development

The theme of the influence of emotional and adult development arises, indicating that the process of emotional and adult development is a crucial factor in changing attitudes and acceptance of stepmothers by informants. They undergo a change in attitude from initially experiencing difficulties, rejection, or a lack of acceptance of their stepmother to a more mature and open acceptance as they develop with age and maturity. The influence of emotional and adult development significantly impacts the way informants interact, receive advice, and open up to the influence of their stepmothers. This process profoundly affects the dynamics of the child-

stepmother relationship, allowing informants to be more open, accepting, and understanding of their stepmother's role and contribution in their family environment. The process describes how a child's ability to open up to others, especially in terms of self-disclosure, changes with emotional development and maturity. The informants were observed to undergo a change in attitude from initial difficulties or rejection of their stepmothers to a more open acceptance, reflecting a shift in their communication openness.

The role of the biological mother and the dynamics of family power

The theme of the role of the biological mother and the dynamics of family power arises, revealing a pattern that shows the relationship between informants and stepmothers is often influenced by the role of the biological mother in the family and the existing power dynamics. Informants consistently faced the process of accepting their stepmothers, but the role of the birth mother significantly influenced the way informants formed relationships with their stepmothers. Despite the emergence of acceptance of the stepmother, the primary role in guiding and governing remains held by the biological mother. In child and parent relationships, factors such as interpersonal needs, power, and interpersonal conflicts influence communication patterns (Ruben & Stewart, 2013). The role of the birth mother still influencing family dynamics suggests that the power in the relationship between the informant and her stepmother remains largely tied to the roles and dynamics existing with the biological mother.

Open attitude and awareness of the role of stepmother

At the level of openness in communication, the informant exhibits the development of an open attitude towards the presence of his stepmother. The process of open communication within the family, encompassing the ability to express feelings, views, and responses to changes in the family, plays a crucial role in gradually accepting the stepmother's existence. Additionally, the parent-child relationship is key to understanding how informants begin to recognize the role that stepmothers play. Openness in family communication and awareness of the role of parents in family relationships become essential in understanding how informants experience the journey towards accepting their stepmothers. This process unfolds alongside the development of an open attitude and a deep understanding of the role of parents in family dynamics.

Willingness to Express and Listen to Personal Problems as Measured by the Narrowness of the Type of Topic Communicated

Limited interaction on common topics

The theme of conversations limited to general topics arises due to a common pattern in interactions between informants and stepmothers, where conversations tend to be restricted to more general or everyday subjects. Some informants prefer to discuss lighter topics, family matters, or everyday conversations, avoiding deeper discussions about personal or emotional issues. Initiating conversations about personal matters spontaneously is challenging for them, but they express willingness and comfort when the stepmother initiates a more profound conversation.

One of the factors influencing a person's self-disclosure is the dyadic effect, creating a sense of security and strengthening self-disclosure (Suciati, 2015). This aligns with the dyadic effect occurring in response to the openness of others. When the stepmother initiates a deeper conversation, the informant responds with greater openness. However, their interactions are currently limited to general topics, impeding the development of a closer emotional relationship between the two. Although the informant anticipates the potential evolution of their interactions

to become closer in the future, at present, their discussions remain constrained to general matters. This is consistent with prior research indicating that children often communicate with stepmothers limited to essential topics, and some informants initiate communication dominated by stepmothers' initiatives in opening up to their stepchildren (Riayanti, 2008).

Changes to the lockdown period

The theme of change during the lockdown period arises from a significant transformation in the depth and nature of conversations between the informant and his stepmother during the COVID-19 lockdown. Several informants reported a positive change in the depth of conversation, experiencing deep emotional bonding moments that allowed them to open up more profoundly. For instance, C2, initially engaged in general conversations, later developed a closer and more emotionally open connection with his stepmother.

Informants like C2 express an expectation for opportunities to broaden the scope of their conversations, feeling more comfortable sharing personal or emotional issues with their stepmothers. This change has a noteworthy impact on expanding the topics of conversation and deepening the relationship between the informant and his stepmother. The concept of conversation in the family emphasizes the significance of open and unrestricted interaction among family members. The positive change observed in the depth of conversation between C2 and his stepmother reflects a shift toward more open, deeper, and more frequent interactions— characteristics of healthy family conversations.

This matrix provides a comprehensive overview of various themes related to openness in family communication based on the information provided.

Table 1. Open Family Communication Theme Matrix

Theme	Key Points
Role of Parents in Introduction	Parents play a crucial role in introducing stepmothers.
	Parent-facilitated recognition significantly influences individuals' comfort in expressing feelings and accepting new family members.
Journey from Discomfort to Closeness	The process of acceptance of stepmothers doesn't happen suddenly; it's gradual.
	Changes in attitude and acceptance occur over time, impacting adaptation and integration within the family sphere.
Importance of Introduction Before Marriage	The process of recognition between children and prospective stepmothers before marriage has a significant impact.
	Early recognition allows children to integrate better with new family members, minimizing post-marriage adaptation difficulties.
Challenges of Parental Communication and Openness	Parental communication challenges affect how children manage adaptation to the stepmother's presence, and open parenting in marriage-related communication is

	crucial for facilitating children's adaptation and forming better relationships with stepmothers.
Change in Feelings, Thoughts, and Emotional Expression	Informants experience shifts in emotional expression influenced by specific events or moments.
	Changes in emotional expression indicate an evolution in the emotional connection between informants and their stepmothers.
Impact of Early Experiences and Relationships	Early experiences and moments of togetherness play a crucial role in changing how informants convey feelings to their stepmothers.
	Open communication is key in describing changes and developments in the emotional relationship between informants and stepmothers.
Discomfort and Difficulty in Communicating	Informants face challenges in expressing feelings, leading to difficulty in communicating with stepmothers, and difficulties in expressing feelings suggest that the element of openness in family communication may not be fully met.
Role of Stepmothers in Creating a Comfortable Environment	Some informants note that the presence of stepmothers plays a crucial role in creating a comfortable and supportive family atmosphere, and a closer emotional relationship is anticipated to reduce anxiety and discomfort in healthy family communication.
Gradual Acceptance Process	Acceptance of stepmothers is a gradual process, involving changing attitudes over time, and the gradual acceptance process is key in building healthy relationships and good adaptation to changes in the family.
Influence of Emotional and Adult Development	Emotional and adult development is a significant factor in changing attitudes and acceptance of stepmothers by informants, and changes in attitude reflect a shift in openness of communication with stepmothers.
Role of Biological Mother and Family Power Dynamics	The relationship with stepmothers is often influenced by the role of the biological mother and existing power dynamics, and despite acceptance, the main role in guiding and governing remains with the biological mother.
Openness in Communication	Open communication within the family is crucial for accepting the stepmother's existence, and an open attitude and deep understanding of the role of parents in family dynamics contribute to the acceptance process.
Conversation Limited to General Topics	A common pattern is the limitation of talking about personal or emotional matters between informants and stepmothers, and informants tend to avoid deeper

	conversations, but willingness increases if the stepmother initiates more in-depth discussions.
Change in the Lockdown Period	The COVID-19 lockdown period brought positive changes in the depth and type of conversations between informants and stepmothers, and opportunities emerged for more open, deeper, and frequent interactions, fostering healthy family conversations.

Source: Research Results, 2023

CONCLUSION

Based on the research analysis and discussion in the previous chapter, the following conclusions are drawn regarding the openness of family communication in adjusting children to stepmothers. *Willingness to Express Oneself*, the role of biological parents significantly impacts the child's introduction to the stepmother, indicating that parental involvement plays a crucial role in facilitating the child's adjustment. The journey from discomfort to closeness between the child and stepmother affects adaptation to the presence of new family members, highlighting the importance of developing a close and comfortable relationship over time. The recognition of the child before the wedding plays a key role in facilitating adaptation to the presence of the stepmother, emphasizing the significance of formal introduction and acknowledgment.

Willingness to Express Feelings, Thoughts, and Expressions, changes in the child's feelings, thoughts, and expressions towards the stepmother over time are influenced by important moments and courage derived from specific interactions. Early experiences and moments of togetherness play a crucial role in changing the way children express feelings and accept the existence of their stepmothers. Many informants find it challenging to communicate openly with their stepmothers, indicating difficulties in expressing emotions and forming deeper connections.

Willingness to Accept and Hear Opinions, the acceptance and adjustment of children to stepmothers do not occur instantly but through stages and gradual changes in attitudes, perceptions, and interactions. The emotional development and maturity of children influence their attitudes towards stepmothers over time, impacting their interactions, receptiveness to advice, and openness. Despite accepting stepmothers, the role of the biological mother significantly influences the child's relationships, with the main guiding and regulating role still held by the biological mother. The informant undergoes a process of acceptance and adjustment to the stepmother through the development of an open attitude and awareness of the stepmother's role.

These conclusions emphasize the multifaceted nature of family communication and the intricate dynamics involved in the process of children adjusting to their stepmothers. The findings underscore the critical roles played by parents, the gradual nature of acceptance, and the importance of open communication in fostering healthy relationships within blended families.

In the aspect of the willingness to listen to personal problems, as measured by the narrow breadth of the types of topics communicated: a) Limited Interaction on General Topics, most informants face challenges in discussing personal or emotional problems with their stepmothers. Children tend to limit conversations to general topics, avoiding more profound and personal discussions, b) Significant Changes During the COVID-19 Lockdown Period, During the COVID-19 lockdown period, there was a notable positive change in the depth of conversation for one

informant. The informant experienced deeper bonding moments, and the lockdown effect facilitated a more open and profound connection with the stepmother.

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