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Blended Families: A Critical Review of the Current Research

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Current research on blended families is summarized to address blended family development, communication strategies, and relationships between stepparents and stepchildren. Considerations for family counselors and blended families are addressed. Implications for future research opportunities include multicultural issues within blended families and stepmothers’ relationships with their stepchildren.

Keywords: blended families; stepfamilies; stepparents; remarriage; stepfathers; stepmothers

The American divorce rate has reached a normative level, averaging about 50% (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). A large percentage of divorced couples are remarrying and increasing the number of blended families living together. It is estimated that approximately 20% of children younger than the age of 18 reside in stepparent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). As the structure of American families continues to expand in its complexity, it is imperative that marriage and family counselors conceptualize family issues and clinical interventions from an empirically based perspective. Relying on assumptions about blended families may perpetuate cultural beliefs that endorse a deficit perspective of stepfamily functioning (Malia, 2005).

The current research on blended families within the past 7 years has increasingly reflected the transition from the nuclear family to a more diverse blending of families. The recent research explored in this literature review contains important considerations for counselors on the development of blended families, relationship building between the stepparent and stepchildren, and development of resiliency factors. The results tend to suggest a confluence of variables impacting family functioning as opposed to a myopic conceptualization of family structure being the predominant factor. Implications for future research and family counseling are identified at the conclusion of the article.

DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS OF BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL BLENDED FAMILY

Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, and Turman (2001) conducted a qualitative/interpretive method analyzing 980 pages of interview transcripts with stepparents and stepchildren in response to the limited research addressing how blended families join together; the limited understanding of family communication including boundary management, conflict resolution, and role negotiation; and the limited knowledge about the role that communication plays in blended family functioning. Past literature addressing developmental stage-based models were noted to be limited in three ways—namely, being prescriptive in nature, stating how the families “should” develop, a lack of information concerning diversity within the blended family structure, and not expressing the dynamic shifts of blended family relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

Braithwaite et al. (2001) focused on gathering a holistic understanding of blended families across the first 4 years of family development by using a framework initially developed by Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999). Using a hierarchical cluster analysis, Baxter et al. created five developmental trajectories: (a) accelerated (characterized by clear assumption of parental roles by stepparent and by perceptions of children as being related to each other as siblings), (b) prolonged (characterized by low levels of solidarity and by being functional), (c) declining (characterized by an initial perception of a “perfect” and ideal family that has been replaced by a disillusioned and distraught perception), (d) stagnating (characterized by fluctuating expectations and role ambiguity),
and (e) high-amplitude turbulent (characterized by difficulty accepting new family roles). These developmental trajectories became the defining categories for Braithwaite et al.’s study.

Participants included 5 biological/adoptive parents, 15 stepparents, and 33 stepchildren. Their descriptions across the 4 years were divided into the five trajectories to identify the blended families’ development and the process of communication (Braithwaite et al., 2001). All five categories of the developmental trajectories characterized the blended families’ development as satisfying when open communication existed. The participants described open communication as the family’s ability to discuss family roles, boundaries, shared identity, acclimation into the family, diverse expectations, conflicts, and their feelings (Braithwaite et al., 2001). The participants within the accelerated, prolonged, stagnating, and high-amplitude turbulent trajectories were noted for their ability to put their differences within the blended family aside and adapt to the changes they confronted by negotiating their relationships in the family. The blended families’ ability to confront presenting issues through communication were reported to develop a high degree of solidarity within the blended family (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

These findings were substantially different for blended families within the declining trajectory (Braithwaite et al., 2001). A lack of communication and the deterioration of a blended family was noted by the participants within the declining trajectory. The participants conceptualized the family’s ongoing avoidance in communication across the 4-year time frame as having devastating effects that resulted in a family member’s physical and emotional disengagement from the blended family.

The five different developmental trajectories spoke to the forward movement of the families’ process and the individuals’ own unique pattern of development. Researchers encourage counselors, future researchers, and the blended family members not to limit their views of blended family development and to openly explore the families’ diverse experiences as a blended family. The blended families’ level of solidarity and satisfaction is connected to their ability to negotiate and communicate about role identification, boundary management, conflicts, and expectations. The researchers suggest that family counselors help the blended family members develop communication patterns that support confronting conflicts, honesty, and relationships within the blended family (Braithwaite et al., 2001).

The important role of communication within stepfamilies was supported by the findings of Golish (2003), who employed a qualitative methodology to examine stepfamilies’ communication strengths. A total of 90 in-depth interviews were conducted with stepparents, parents, and stepchildren from 30 stepfamilies. The study examined the communication strategies that differentiate “strong” stepfamilies from stepfamilies having more difficulty forming a blended family (Golish, 2003). Golish found all families to experience the same seven primary challenges regardless of the families’ strengths and development including “feeling caught,” regulating boundaries with a noncustodial family, ambiguity of parental roles, “traumatic bonding,” vying for resources, discrepancies in conflict management styles, and building solidarity as a family unit.

In Golish’s (2003) study, stepfamilies who reported using everyday talk engaged in family problem-solving, promoted a positive image, and demonstrated consistent awareness of problem severity as a strong blended family. She also stated that communication strengths are essential to any family; the manner in which they are applied in stepfamilies may be unique because the “rules” for communication in a stepfamily system are complicated by a web of boundaries (Bray, 1999; Golish, 2003; Madden-Derich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999). Families were identified as developing communication strategies in a different manner leading to diversity in stepfamily communication development. Golish (2003) has supported Braithwaite et al.’s (2001) research exploring blended family development. The researchers concluded that all blended family development is unique and is based on the family’s communication patterns (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish 2003).

The developmental model of pathways for blended families explores the overall interactions and functioning of the family unit (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Other contemporary research examines the different factors related to family functioning. Some research focuses on the role of the stepparents (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001; MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002), whereas other research addresses the well-being and perceptions of children (Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rasbash, & O’Connor, 2005; Morin, Milito, & Costlow, 2001).

**STEPFATHER AND STEPCHILD RELATIONSHIPS**

MacDonald and DeMaris (2002) examined the quality of the stepfather’s relationship with stepchildren. The researchers conducted a study analyzing the data from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The study administered a multistage probability sample of 13,008 people aged 19 or older, who were able to communicate in English or Spanish and lived in households in the United States (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). The study selected one adult from each household to be the primary respondent. Respondents selected were either cohabiting with one child or married with children.

The researchers explored stepfathers’ negotiation of family roles and development of the stepchild relationship. The researchers hypothesized from normative resource theory (Szinovacz, 1987) that the effect of the stepparent’s demand
for conformity (i.e., following directions, controlling tempers, and following rules) depends on the biological father’s involvement in the stepchild’s life. The prediction is based on the nonresidential biological parent’s support of the child, and the time they spend together is predicted to decrease stepchildren’s likelihood to accept the authority of the stepparent compared with stepchildren who spend less time with or never see their biological parent.

The researchers measured the stepfather’s demand for conformity from the stepchild through a four-item summary scale (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). The stepchild’s relationship with the biological father was measured by the mother’s report of the child’s participation with the biological father in the following four types of activities: (a) leisure activities, (b) religious activities, (c) talking or working on a project or playing together, and (d) school or other organized activities. The biological father’s influence on parental decisions was gathered to provide input regarding the child’s education, health care, and religion.

The results indicated that conflict between the biological parents negatively affects stepfather-stepchild relationship quality and that contact between the stepchild and his or her biological father weakens the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). Stepfather and stepchild’s relationship quality is dependent on the stepfather’s demand for conformity. The biological father’s input did not appear to matter on the stepchildren-stepfathers’ relationship as long as the contact time between the biological father and stepchild was minimal. Thus, this study provides a more clear understanding of how child-biological parent relations impacts child-stepparent relations and emphasizes the importance of quality time as compared to conformity demands. In addition to exploring the relationship of stepfathers with children, there is also research that specifically examines the relationship of stepmothers with children.

**STEPMOTHER FAMILY STRUCTURE**

Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, and Stewart (2001) investigated relationship quality and well-being across five different family structures: (a) two-parent biological families, (b) single-mother families raising biological children following divorce, (c) stepfather families, (d) stepmother families, and (e) adoptive families. The study included data from the 799 families who participated in the 1992-1994 NSFH (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996). Two hundred twelve children between the ages of 10 and 18 years were randomly selected within the 799 families and were interviewed over the telephone to provide self-reports of their well-being and the quality of their relationships with family members. At least 1 parent from the above sample was interviewed separately in a face-to-face interview.

Lansford et al. (2001) investigated the importance of family structures in predicting psychological well-being and relational quality of family members. Initially, the researchers hypothesized that socialization by two parents is optimal (Demo & Acock, 1996) and single parents, stepparents, and adoptive families would evidence lower levels of well-being and relational quality. Stepfather and stepmother families reported fewer disagreements than did mothers in two-parent biological families. The results indicated that mothers reported somewhat lower well-being than married households; however, they did not consistently differ from other families, and children from the various households did not report a difference in well-being or relationships. Also, the authors initially hypothesized that stepfamilies, adoptive families, and single-parent families would have a disadvantage when compared with traditional two-parent families. The findings concluded that stepmothers and biological mothers reported children to have fewer behavioral problems than did mothers of other types of families. The final hypothesis controls for family process variables using the MANCOVA to determine which family structure increased well-being among the family members. The overall results concluded that family structure differences in mothers’ well-being and mothers’ reports of their child’s well-being were no longer significant after controlling for the family process variable, which is the disagreement between the spouses and between mothers and children.

In conclusion, Lansford et al. (2001) speculated on stepmothers’ heightened perceptions of problems within the family structure compared with other family structures to be a result of the cultural expectations for stepfamilies to have an increase in family problems. The authors contemplated whether or not the stepmothers’ perceptions of family problems within the family structure and the well-being of the family members are a result of the increased sensitivity to any signs of problems because of the expectation that stepfamilies will have an increased rate of problems. Lansford et al. cautioned that the perceptions of problems may once again be related to the stigma related to stepfamilies being more susceptible to problems than two-parent biological families, resulting in stepmothers’ awareness of problems and fathers’ lack of awareness and potential denial of problems.

**STEPFATHERS’ MONITORING OF CHILDREN**

Fisher, Leve, O’Leary, and Leve (2003) examined the effects of parental monitoring of children’s behaviors. Parental monitoring involves tracking the child’s whereabouts and activities (Bulcroft, Carmody, & Bulcroft, 1998; Fisher et al., 2003). This research was informed by previous studies that found that stepfamilies are characterized by lower levels of control and monitoring than two-parent biological families (Fisher et al., 2003; Henderson & Taylor, 1999) and that stepfathers’ monitoring tends to be lower than stepmothers’ moni-
toring, indicating a difference among stepfamilies (Kurdek & Fine, 1993).

In this specific study, participants consisted of 32 stepmother/biological father families, 77 biological mother/stepfather families, and 82 two-parent biological families (Fisher et al., 2003). All participating families had a child between the ages of 5 and 8. The participants were recruited via a newspaper advertisement, flyers placed on bulletin boards, and newsletters. The participants needed to be married or to be in an ongoing relationship for at least 6 months.

The sample demographics indicated several differences between stepmothers, stepfathers, and biological families. Biological families reported having longer established relationships than stepfamilies. Scheffé post hoc comparisons indicated significant differences in stepmothers'/stepfathers' level of education compared with biological two-parent education levels, which were reported to have completed college or graduate school. In addition to increased education levels, biological two-parent families were also older than stepfamilies.

The differences in family type and the level of monitoring were examined by conducting a one-way ANOVA. The results of the post hoc indicated that the biological family's level of monitoring to be approximately .5 standard deviations higher than that for stepfamilies. Stepfathers appeared to have lower monitoring levels than stepmothers.

In conclusion, there was no difference in the elements of monitoring between stepmothers, stepfathers, or biological families despite the initial hypothesis that the level of monitoring would be less between stepmother and stepfather families than two-parent biological families. The researchers conducted an additional analysis to control for demographic issues. The biological two-parent family held higher levels of monitoring when controlling for relationship lengths and compared with stepfathers. There was no significant difference found between stepmothers' and biological two-parent families' level of monitoring. Therefore, stepfathers may need additional assistance in taking on a more parental role of monitoring their stepchildren. In addition to exploring parental monitoring in various family structures, there are numerous research studies that specifically examine the experiences and perceptions of youth in blended families.

**YOUTH IN BLENDED FAMILIES**

The research that empirically and directly explores the experiences and perceptions of children and adolescents within stepfamilies tends to focus on youth well-being (Manning & Lamb, 2003) and the influence of family dynamics on behavioral issues (Jenkins et al., 2005; Morin et al., 2001). Risk and protective factors provide important information for family counselors as they work to support the resiliency of the family and its members. Factors influencing adolescent well-being encompass externalizing and internalizing dimensions and tend to include problems in school, delinquency, academic achievement, academic expectations (Manning & Lamb, 2003), aggression, depression, anxiety, isolation (Jenkins et al., 2005), peer support, neighbor support, school attachment (Rodgers & Rose, 2002), and perceptions of discipline (Morin et al., 2001). Overviewing the individual research studies creates a more comprehensive understanding about how these issues manifest in blended families.

In 2001, Morin et al. explored differences in how adolescents perceive discipline based on the structure of their family. Forty-five adolescents completed a questionnaire that explored attitudes and perceptions of discipline in the home. The adolescents in blended and intact families responded similarly to several issues such as the typical discipline issues (i.e., complying with house rules, peers), most severe punishment received, and the reason for the most severe discipline. There were a couple of meaningful differences that emerged for the two groups. First, the results reveal that 22% of the adolescents residing in stepfamilies (n = 15) identified family relationships as a discipline issue as compared to 6% of the adolescents living in families with both biological parents (n = 30). This suggests that a challenging developmental task of stepfamilies is to create parent-child relationships. Second, 20% of adolescents from intact families reported forgetting the reason for receiving the most severe punishment, whereas no adolescent in the blended family group forgot the reason. Such a difference highlights the importance that adolescents in stepfamilies place on the interaction of parents with rules and boundaries. Although this study focused on one dimension of parent-child interactions, other research broadens the exploration of risk and resiliency factors and creates a more global context for our understanding.

Three recent studies explored the role of family structure on promoting risk and resiliency factors for adolescents. First, Manning and Lamb (2003) examined risk behaviors for 13,231 adolescents who participated in the National Longitudinal Household Survey of Adolescent Health. This study is unique because it expands the understanding of stepfamilies by differentiating between married stepfamilies and cohabiting stepfamilies. The measures of well-being included whether the adolescent had been expelled or suspended, whether the adolescent struggled to get along with teachers and other students or to complete homework, frequency of engaging in delinquency acts, grade point average, desire to attend college, and scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. The results suggest that adolescents residing in cohabiting stepfamilies have a higher likelihood of engaging in acts of delinquency, being expelled or suspended from school, receiving lower grades, performing at a lower level on the vocabulary test, and experiencing problems at school. An important finding was the lack of statistically different results between married stepfamilies and married families with two biological parents. Manning and Lamb concluded that roles in married stepfamilies and married biological families may...
be more clearly defined and developed as compared to cohabiting stepfamilies that may be characterized by role ambiguity.

Role ambiguity may also be a factor that explains the results of Rodgers and Rose’s (2002) study of 2,011 adolescents (mean age = 14) in 7th, 9th, and 11th grades that explored risk and resiliency factors. Rodgers and Rose conducted a self-report survey that encompassed adolescent perceptions about parental monitoring, parental support, peer support, school attachment, neighbor attachment, externalizing behaviors (i.e., substance use, fighting, sexual activity), and internalizing behaviors (i.e., depression, suicide, self-esteem). The results indicated that lower levels of parental monitoring were related to higher levels of externalizing behaviors for all types of families. Adolescents in stepfamilies reported higher levels of externalizing behaviors at all levels of parental monitoring in comparison to intact families. The researchers hypothesized that parental monitoring might function as a less effective protective factor in blended families because of the role ambiguity related to effectively monitoring.

Interestingly, peer support did not function as a protective factor for the adolescents in stepfamilies. Parental support and neighborhood support did emerge as variables that protected adolescents in stepfamilies in that adolescents experiencing higher levels of parental and neighborhood support reported lower levels of internalizing behaviors. In conclusion, Rodgers and Rose (2002) found for adolescents in blended families that parental monitoring functioned as a buffer for externalizing behaviors and that neighborhood and parental support functioned as buffers for internalizing behaviors.

The role of internalizing and externalizing behaviors in families was also explored by Jenkins et al. (2005) from the perspective of how it influenced marital conflict. This study was longitudinal in nature and collected data from 127 families (35% biological families, 35% stepfamilies, and 30% from complex families) at two different times in the span of 2 years. The research collected data from multiple sources—namely, teachers, parents, and children (n = 296). Stepfamilies in the study experienced significant increases in marital conflict across time if the children’s externalizing behaviors increased as compared to other family types. The researchers hypothesized that the role of the nonbiological parent in discipline may account for the difference and concluded that this needs to be investigated in future research.

Contemporary research on youth in stepfamilies suggests a more complex and interactive confluence of risk and resiliency factors than the assumption that the role of family structure is the most powerful factor. These findings encourage family counselors to attend to a multiplicity of factors and to explore how they mutually interact within the system. Specific implications for family counselors are important to consider.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY COUNSELORS**

Current research on stepfamily development and the well-being among stepfamily members has increased over recent years. The research overviewed in this article challenges some of the assumptions related to the functioning of blended families. The research spoke to the unique challenges that stepfamilies may face as they develop into a blended family structure. Braithwaite et al. (2001) concluded that blended family development varies across the five trajectories. The blended family members who participated in the interviews did not fit into a single developmental process or communication style; therefore, family counselors and family members need to be cognizant of the family’s experience and not mold families into a single model for success. Also, a central theme of the research findings was that the factors influencing stepfamily well-being and functioning are more multifaceted and complex than family structure alone. Family counselors must attend to the confluence of communication (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003), parental monitoring (Fisher et al., 2003), boundary management, conflict (Jenkins et al., 2005), relationship interaction (Lansford et al., 2001), role definition (Manning & Lamb, 2003), solidarity, and similar variables in both the assessment and conceptualization of stepfamily functioning.

The main theme across the literature speaks to the benefits of communication on the blended families’ well-being, conformity, and monitoring levels compared with biological two-parent families. The blended families who openly communicated and addressed the struggles dealing with role identity, relationships, and the new family development were able to transition into a blended family more smoothly than those who refrained from open communication (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Golish, 2003). Family counselors may address and explore with the stepfamilies the benefits of open communication, boundary development, role identification, and the ambiguity of developing a new family structure to increase the blended family’s awareness of the process and promote discussion on the process and their experiences. In addition, Golish (2003) stated that all stepfamilies vary across communication abilities. Therefore, counselors need to assess the family’s communication strengths and help the family build open communication across the primary challenges.

It is imperative that family counselors develop a framework to explore their personal beliefs about stepfamilies and the stereotypes that may exist. Acknowledging our personal beliefs, values, and attitudes is an important step in continual counseling development. Specifically, family counselors are encouraged to explore the stepfamilies’ dynamics and acknowledge their own stereotypes (if any exist) regarding the relationship between family type and monitoring (Fisher et al., 2003). These authors suggested that all family types establish guidelines to increase child monitoring through increased communication between community, school, and
parents regarding the child’s whereabouts. The parents’ tracking of their child’s activities may potentially decrease the likelihood that the child will follow a deviant path. Overall, parents who spend time with their children and pursue an interest in their lives will potentially be preventing future problems related to education, peers, and the child’s chances for deviant behavior (Fisher et al., 2003).

In conclusion, current research challenges family counselors to assess their existing assumptions and beliefs about the challenges experienced by stepfamilies and to shift to an empowering perspective that acknowledges the multiplicity of factors influencing blended family well-being. Educating stepfamilies about parental monitoring, role definition, communication styles, and conflict management is necessary to support their development processes. Furthermore, family counselors need to be cognizant of differences among stepmothers and stepfathers so that the unique factors of these families are addressed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Current research on blended families does not speak to the diversity and need for awareness of multicultural issues. Recent research indicates the importance of understanding the diverse needs of blended families; however, no information currently addresses blended families of color, gay and lesbian blended families, and the joining of culturally different families. Within the literature on youth experiences, the representation of non-White participants ranged from .04% (Morin et al., 2001) to 27% (Manning & Lamb, 2003). The articles reviewed did not directly speak to the cultural differences among the blended families. MacDonald and DeMaris (2002) included Spanish-speaking participants in their interviews; however, the results did not highlight cultural differences among the blended families. This is especially salient given the importance of communication within families. The limited multicultural research on blended families demands future research endeavors.

The data from the research studies overviewed tended to be extrapolated from national surveys that were collected 10 years ago. This data design is helpful in capturing a larger, more representative sample, and yet more recent exploration of the perceptions and experiences of stepfamilies need to be conducted to provide more timely and relevant findings. Ongoing research is needed to clarify how various variables of family process and interaction manifest in stepfamilies and impact their development and well-being. The research that specifically addresses the experiences of stepmothers seems to be even more limited and restricted than research exploring the experiences of stepfathers. Future research could target stepmothers as primary participants to address this gap. Qualitative studies are also necessary to create rich and descriptive understandings of blended families.

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