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## “Becoming a Family”: Developmental Processes Represented in Blended Family Discourse

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## **“Becoming a Family”: Developmental Processes Represented in Blended Family Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

We adopted a process-focus in order to gain a deeper understanding of how (step) blended family members experiencing different developmental pathways discursively represented their processes of becoming a family. Using a qualitative/interpretive method, we analyzed 980 pages of interview transcripts with stepparents and stepchildren. We studied the first four years of family development, using the five developmental pathways developed by Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999). Three salient issues identified in the family experiences were boundary management, solidarity, and adaptation. While the negotiation of these issues varied across the five trajectories, there were commonalities across family experiences that helped determine whether families had a successful experience of becoming a family. Implications for blended family researchers and practitioners are also discussed.

**Keywords:** stepfamily, relationship development, trajectories, boundary management, adaptation

As an institution, the American family serves a pivotal role in shaping identity, teaching us who we are in relation to others. Within the past two decades the American family has experienced a metamorphosis (Schneider, 1980; Schwartz, 1988; Stacey, 1990). According to Brubaker and Kimberly (1993), “as American society changes, the structure and functions of American families have been altered” (p. 3). This does not suggest that the family as an institution is disappearing or necessarily deteriorating, but certainly it is changing to

reflect the complexity of the personal and occupational circumstances in a postmodern society (Brubaker & Kimberly, 1993; Schwartz, 1988; Stacey, 1990). Because of increased divorce and remarriage rates and other changes in nonmarital parental relationships, step- or blended families are becoming a more prevalent family form<sup>1</sup> (Olson & DeFrain, 1997). In fact, one out of six children under the age of 18 is currently a stepchild (Stepfamily Association of America, 1998).

The increase in the number of blended families leads to a heightened need to better understand this family form. In addition to the sheer number of blended families, the complexities, both positive and negative, inherent in them warrants attention from communication scholars. Many of these complexities are different from "traditional" or nuclear families and are highly communicative in nature.<sup>2</sup> For instance, blended family members must negotiate many complex issues which are challenging to members of these families, such as defining and redefining communication boundaries between the various blended family subsystems (e.g., Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Papernow, 1994; Whitsett & Land, 1992), managing loyalty conflicts between children and (non)custodial parents (e.g., Burrell, 1995; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Visher & Visher, 1993), adjusting to change (e.g., Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Kelley, 1992; Visher & Visher, 1988), and negotiating new, unfamiliar roles within and outside the family (e.g., Anderson & White, 1986; Coleman & Ganong, 1995). The body of existing research has contributed to our understanding of the complexity of blended families by shedding light on some of the unique challenges these families confront. However, few communication researchers have yet studied the blended family and how these groups of people come together to become a family. Because of the increase of blended families in our society, it is important for communication scholars to focus on this family form to expand our understanding of family communication, in general, and, more specifically, to increase our knowledge of the role communication plays in blended family functioning. Moreover, at the root of blended family development are many issues such as boundary management, conflict resolution, and role negotiation, all constituted and enacted communicatively (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Thus, to increase understanding of blended family development, we must focus on how blended family members communicatively manage these issues.

### **Process Model of Blended Family Development**

In addition to a limited amount of research on blended family issues by communication scholars, we know relatively little about how these complexities are negotiated within a larger context of how blended families develop. Family researchers have provided a good starting place, but there is limited insight into the process that blended families follow as they develop (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). The scholars who have examined blended family development have tended to depict the "becoming a family process" as a unitary model of chronological stages or phases (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Papernow, 1993). One of the most comprehensive models is Papernow's (1993) seven-stage model of blended family development. First, blended family members progress through a "fantasy stage" in which they hold unrealistic expectations. Second, in

the "immersion stage" family members' expectations are shattered due to the realistic challenges of their daily lives. Third, the family members attempt to deal with their uncertainty and confusion in the "awareness stage." The fourth stage, "mobilization," is characterized by expressed conflicts and attempts at negotiation and resolution. The attempts at negotiation result in new agreements providing a firm foundation from which to grow in the fifth stage or the "action stage." Sixth, in the "contact stage" blended family members are able to form positive bonds with each other. Finally, the blended family moves into the "resolution stage" in which it is characterized as a solid, healthy family unit. Papernow (1993) posited that unsuccessful blended families do not reach the latter three stages of this model.

These developmental stage models are limited in three ways. First, they are prescriptive in nature, providing suggestions for how blended families "should" develop (see Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999 for a critique). Prescriptive models hold value for some blended families as they attempt to become a family. However, they do not provide depth of descriptive information from the members themselves about how different types of blended families develop. Second, these models have a tendency to oversimplify the complexity inherent in blended family development. The approach of developing a single model that fits all blended families fails to recognize the multiple paths that blended families could take in their development. Finally, stage models are problematic as they often do not capture the dynamic, "up and down" nature of blended family relationships, assuming that families move progressively forward toward greater closeness (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999).

In response to the limitations of stage-based models, Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) adopted a process view of blended family development. By focusing on process, these researchers were better able to describe the complex nature of blended family development, discovering that blended families do indeed develop in multiple ways. They studied the development of blended families over the first four years of blended family life, interviewing both stepparents and stepchildren. Participants discussed the development of their blended family by describing and graphing their family turning points and levels of feeling like a family (more detail is provided in the methods section of this research report and in greater detail in Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson, 1999). From these data, researchers identified five developmental pathways or trajectories different blended families followed as they become a family: accelerated, prolonged, stagnating, declining, and high-amplitude turbulent (See Figure 1 for a representation of the five trajectories). Their study provided a depiction of the changes in the levels of "feeling like a family" in five different patterns of the first four years of blended family life. The accelerated trajectory reflected a pattern of quick and sustained movement toward higher levels of feeling like a family. The prolonged trajectory progressed to higher levels of feeling like a family over a longer period of time. The declining trajectory began with a high level of feeling like a family, which declined to zero at the end of the four-year period. The stagnating trajectory began and ended with relatively low levels of feeling like a family. Last, the high-amplitude turbulent trajectory was characterized by a "roller-coaster" effect with rapid increases and decreases in levels of feeling like a family.

As Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) demonstrated, a process model of blended family development emphasizes multiple developmental trajectories rather than a single sequence of stages. For instance, not all blended families experience a gradual increase in closeness over time, but the closeness may fluctuate in a series of ups and downs. As can be seen in the Figure 1, the trajectories reach a very different ending point, with some families experiencing high levels of feeling like a family, and others virtually none. The trajectories depict a process perspective that recognizes that relationship development is a complex, sometimes messy, process that may be filled with turbulence (Duck, 1994). In summary, these five blended family trajectories provided us with a more descriptive picture of blended family development than previous stage models by recognizing the multiple courses these families can assume.

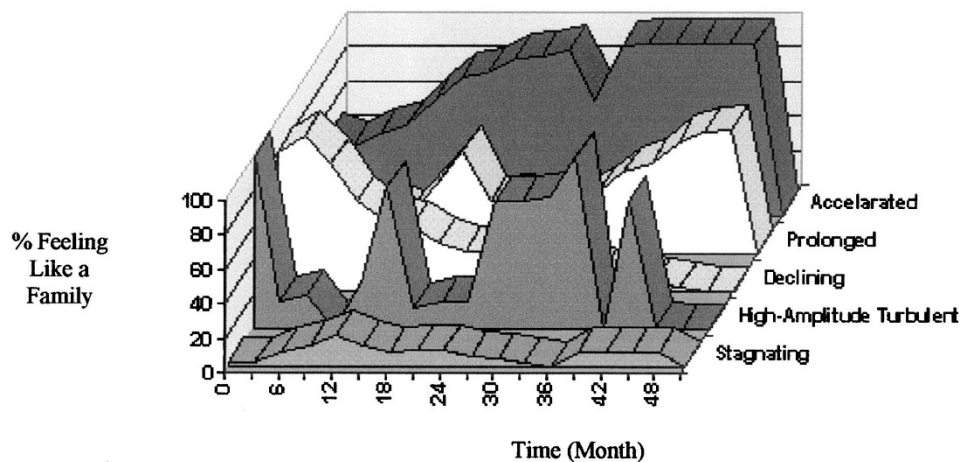


Figure 1. Turning point trajectories

While the Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) study provided a useful map of the five different pathways by which blended families develop, it produced limited insight into what is happening in the families experiencing these different developmental patterns. In other words, their study supplied little detail concerning how families experiencing these five different developmental pathways interact and negotiate complex issues surrounding becoming a family. Therefore, as a follow-up to the Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) study, the purpose of this present research is to gain a deeper understanding of how the blended family members experiencing the different developmental trajectories discursively represented their processes of becoming a family.

Theoretically, the current study extends our knowledge of the process of blended family development by providing a more in-depth look at what happens within various developmental trajectories. While process models like the one we are using are temporal in nature (see Duck, 1994), they do allow for more variability in the pathways of development than stage models. Braithwaite and Baxter (1995) argued that the focus on process in the turning point analysis is useful as it provides the opportunity to focus on transformative events, positive or negative, that alter the relationship. This form of analysis is still temporal, as it

looks at the development of relationships over time, but moves beyond a stage model approach as it captures the dynamic nature of relationships by analyzing events that contribute to change in those relationships and is predicated on the recognition that change is not unidirectional (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Siegert & Stamp, 1994). Studying the challenges that move blended families in one direction or another contributes to our understanding of how and why blended families grow, weaken, stagnate, and change with time. In order to understand some of the issues that blended families face as they interact and become a family, we provide a review of the literature on blended family issues that appear central to the process of becoming a family.

### **Blended Family Issues**

The unique challenges that blended family members face influence how these families develop. Therefore, it is important to gain a more complete understanding of these issues. According to Visher and Visher (1988) and Papernow (1994), one of the most critical adjustments for blended families is establishing appropriate boundaries and delineating these boundaries around the various blended family subsystems. In- and out-group membership may result from coalitions formed within the blended family (Fine, 1995; Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993). Loyalty conflicts are particularly common and include a child feeling caught between his/her custodial and noncustodial parents (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Visher & Visher, 1993) or a noncustodial parent feeling like their parental role has been subsumed by a stepparent (Visher & Visher, 1993). Cissna, Cox, and Bochner (1990) reported that half of the couples they interviewed discussed loyalty conflicts as a significant part of the family restructuring process.

Blended family boundaries also vary in their permeability, or the flexibility and rigidity of family boundaries (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Kelley, 1992; Visher & Visher, 1988, 1993). The pliancy of blended family boundaries is important to the structural development of the family as well as to members' interpersonal relationships within it. Yet, it is important to note that more flexibility and permeability is not always desired. Researchers have found that boundaries need to be both permeable and firm, depending upon the function they serve; permeable enough to allow access to outside family members and non-kin, but firm enough to protect developing relationships (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988; Papernow, 1994).

Blended families also face unique challenges with regard to issues of solidarity. Feelings of closeness and connection take time to develop due to the lack of a common family history, the loss of a previous parent-child bond, the geographical separation from a noncustodial parent, the addition of new children in the household, and the lack of an identifiable legal relationship with the stepparent(s) (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). The creation of the blended family can be overshadowed by the children's sense of loss over their parents' marriage, contact with a noncustodial parent, and the old family form (Bray & Harvey, 1995; Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). In addition, there is pressure to accept the members of the new entity as "family," which can add to the grief and anger over the losses already experienced (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Each of these chal-

lenges can affect all members of the blended family, as well as family subsystems. For example, feelings of jealousy and resentment may occur between stepsiblings as all strive to adjust and find their niche in the new family (Bray & Hetherington, 1988, 1993). The tensions created by these dynamics can put both original partners and stepparents in an awkward position as they strive to make things work in the new family (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994).

As a result of these challenges to blended family members' feelings of solidarity, some researchers suggest that blended families are less close or warm than continuously intact families (i.e., Anderson & White, 1986; Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Fine, Voydanoff, & Donnelly, 1993). This may be particularly true for the relationship between the stepparent and stepchild (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Whitsett & Land, 1992). For example, researchers have found that parents in blended families perceived their relationships with their own children to be closer than the relationship with their stepchildren (Fine, Voydanoff, & Donnelly, 1993; Kurdek & Fine, 1991). These different feelings of closeness have been associated with less emotional well-being of children in blended families (Fine, Voydanoff, & Donnelly, 1993; White, 1994a, 1994b). However, scholars warn that the differences between stepfamilies and original families are not as great as originally thought. Further, children from families experiencing multiple divorces are at a higher risk than those who are in blended families (Coleman, 1994).

Blended family members also must manage issues of adaptability. When individuals enter the blended family, they are often unsure of the expectations for individual and collective behavior and how, if at all, these expectations will differ from their former family. This uncertainty creates ambiguity surrounding newly formed roles and family norms (Burrell, 1995; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990). When stepparents enter a blended family, they not only gain a spouse, but they gain a child or children, along with extended familial relationships and social networks of the spouse. This plethora of additional relationships brings on additional roles, which are often culturally undefined, and ambiguous (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). Therefore, many blended family members experience role ambiguity as they adjust to all of the different relationships in their new family.

Due to the uncertainty surrounding their new roles, many blended family members may attempt to reenact "traditional" family roles or the roles they enacted in their old family. This can result in what Visher & Visher (1988) called the "myth of instant love." Stepparents may join their blended family expecting it to be similar to a "nuclear family." If an immediate connection and open relationship with the stepchild does not develop, the stepparent may feel guilty and frustrated (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Hines, 1997). As Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) found, unmet or unrealistic expectations was one of the most frequently experienced turning points in blended family development. This was especially salient for the more problematic family types of declining, stagnating, and high-amplitude turbulent.

In summary, scholars have focused on delineating the process of blended family development and on the unique challenges confronting blended families, such as boundaries, loyalty conflict, solidarity, and adaptation to change. The Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) study moved that effort forward, adopting a process approach and discovering

five different developmental trajectories of blended families. However, what is lacking is an understanding of how the issues facing blended families are embedded within each of these trajectories. Therefore, our intent was to unpack these issues by focusing on how the participants discursively represented the process of blended family development within these five pathways. With that in mind, we posed the following research question to guide our study:

**RQ:** How do blended family members experiencing different developmental trajectories discursively represent the issues experienced in the process of becoming a family during the first four years of the new family experience?

We believe this research has great potential to assist practitioners, researchers, and blended family members themselves in understanding the different roads blended families may travel and the changes and challenges they may encounter. More specifically, knowledge of the five different developmental experiences may become a useful tool for family therapists to use. They can help blended family members recognize that blended families develop in multiple ways, help them identify what trajectory their own family is experiencing, and perhaps help them identify useful strategies or pitfalls to avoid, as their family becomes blended (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). Understanding that there is no one right way for blended families to develop may help family members overcome feelings of deficiency or inadequacy if their family does not correspond with the prototypical model of family development. Clinicians could also use information from this research as a way to possibly intervene and alter a blended family's destructive path, helping them chart out a more constructive way for their family to progress. Finally, the findings in this study shed light on the issues most salient to a blended family's development and how these issues could alter the nature of their relationships.

## **Method**

The overall design of the study was in the qualitative/interpretive tradition, seeking to describe recurring patterns of behaviors and meanings from the experiences of participants (Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Members of blended families and interviewers participated together in semistructured, focused interviews that targeted informants' perceptions and experiences of the early years of life in their blended family (Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988). Data gathering ceased when recurring patterns were identified and a point of saturation reached (Leininger, 1994).

### ***Participants/Informants***

Data for the current study were transcripts from a study previously conducted by Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999). Participants were originally recruited through announcements in university classes and offices at a large midwestern university and a small southwestern university. Interviews were conducted with one member from 53 blended families: 5 biological/adoptive parents, 15 stepparents, and 33 stepchildren. Of the 53 informants who participated in the interviews, 40 were female ( $M = 27$  years) and 13 were



male ( $M = 31$  years). At the time of the interview, the mean age of the stepparents and parents was 41, and the mean age of the stepchildren was 20. Although the participants were asked to reflect on the first four years of their blended family's development, they came from blended families of various lengths ( $M = 62$  months;  $SD = 20$  months). Forty-four of the families were complex blended families (both adults brought children into the remarriage), 5 were simple stepfather families (a man parenting his spouse's children), 3 were simple stepmother families (a woman parenting her spouse's children), and 1 was a de facto family unit (a woman with children cohabitating with a man). Thirteen percent of the couples also had biological children together. No compensation was provided for participation in this study.

### *Procedures*

In contrast to the approach used by most of the previous stepfamily researchers, the researchers asked the participants to define for themselves the date the family began, rather than having the research team establish cohabitation or the marriage of the two adults as the beginning point (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). This became important in the analysis, as many of the participants indicated that their family started well before the date of marriage or cohabitation. Interviews focused on the first 48 months of the family's history as researchers have suggested that blended families go through a two- to four-year period of transition, tending to "make or break" at the fourth year (Mills, 1984; Papernow, 1993). Trained interviewers from the two universities participated in interviews with the 53 blended family members. In-depth interviews, conducted in a single session, lasted between 90 and 150 minutes. Informants and interviewers discussed the development of the blended family during its first four years (or less, if the family had a shorter history). Interviewers and participants talked about family development via a discussion of blended family turning points. Participants diagrammed their blended family's development, creating a graph of the individual turning points by approximate date (X axis) and by the percentage of "feeling like a family" (Y axis) from 0% to 100% for each turning point. To provide an anchor point for the graph, the participants were asked to assess what 0% and 100% "feelings like a family" (FLF) meant to them (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). When describing what "100% FLF" meant to them, the respondents used the following descriptors: "support," "openness," "caring," "sharing," and "comfort." In contrast, "0% FLF" was represented by the absence of these qualities. The participants then went on to describe each of their turning points in great detail.

### *Data Analysis*

The interview audiotapes were transcribed verbatim, resulting in approximately 980 single-spaced pages of text-based data for the present analysis (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999). The transcripts represented aggregate data, combining stepparent's and stepchildren's perspectives. While we recognize that individual blended family members have unique standpoints concerning their role in their family, the goal of this study was to gather a holistic understanding of blended family development. In addition, smaller sample sizes used in qualitative projects like this one, even though yielding very large amounts of data, discourage dividing the analysis by even smaller groups.

Several steps were taken in the data analysis. First, we prepared data for our analysis by dividing up the interview transcripts into five developmental trajectories: accelerated, prolonged, declining, stagnating, and high-amplitude turbulent. Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) previously identified these trajectories using hierarchical cluster analysis. These authors also categorized the participants as belonging to one of these trajectories and we used that analysis. Second, since the participants talked about their family development chronologically, we divided each of the interview transcripts into four one-year periods to investigate more specifically each of the four years of blended family development. Our rationale for dividing the analysis by each year was also driven by the desire to provide an accessible way to describe the trends in family development to professionals and laypersons, thus increasing the potential usefulness of the results. Third, we developed comprehensive narrative descriptions of the family development for each trajectory over each of the four-year periods.

The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) was used to analyze the data. In general, the constant comparative method entails identifying emergent themes while continually comparing them for similarities and differences to existing themes. Each time a new theme emerges, a new category is created (Creswell, 1998). To complete these processes, the data analysis comprised six steps. First, the transcripts were sorted by trajectories and equally distributed between the three members of the analysis team. Each coder received 17 or 18 transcripts from a mixture of the five trajectories. Second, each transcript was read in its entirety two times to garner a holistic understanding of the experiences in the blended families. Third, each analysis team member recorded emergent themes, including descriptions and labels for each. Fourth, the analysis team came together and synthesized the findings and discussed the themes in detail to obtain consensus between members, choosing exemplar quotations for the research report. Fifth, the findings were written together to ensure that the voices and themes of all informants were included in the study. Finally, the transcripts were read again and the entire research team checked the analysis to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the categories, looking for any rival-explanations of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

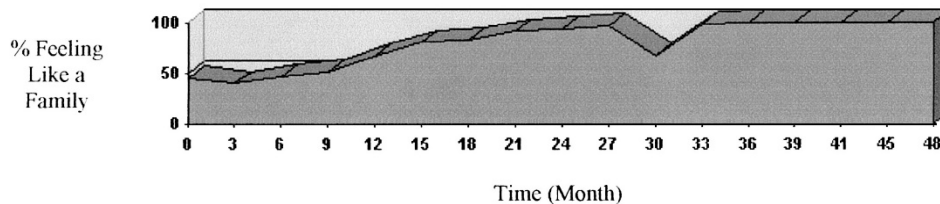
## Results

We present the results of our analysis by trajectory type, divided into four-year periods. We have organized the results to present the “positive” pathways first, in the accelerated and prolonged trajectories, as they represented 56.6% of the families. Next, we present the more “negative” pathways of declining and stagnating, which accounted for 18.9% of the families. We end with the challenging high-amplitude turbulent trajectory, which represented 20.8% of the blended families.

### *Accelerated*

The accelerated trajectory represented the largest number of families in these data, ( $n = 16$ , 30.2%), reflecting a pattern of quick movement toward 100% FLF (feeling like a family) (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999) (See Figure 2). A characterization of the develop-

ment and “feeling like a family” starts at just below 40% at the beginning of year one, progressing to 60% at the end of the year. In the second year, these families experienced a substantial increase in FLF, rapidly climbing to 92%. Year three was characterized by only a moderate increase of 8%, bringing FLF to 100%, where it stayed through year four as well.



**Figure 2.** Accelerated trajectory

*Year 1—“We called her sister from the very beginning.”*

In year one of the accelerated trajectory, family members took on roles comparable to those found within traditional families. These roles helped create the patterns and norms of the family that carried throughout the next three years. Stepparents were often referred to as “mom” and “dad” and played the ascribed roles of parents in “traditional” families. One stepson stated, “He [stepfather] started coming to all of our little league games with our mom and when my mom couldn’t make it, he would show up by himself” (53:4, 102–105).<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the participants sought to meet the expectations of the traditional family as well. One stepdaughter reflected, “It was Christmas and we just felt we got along . . . they all called me ‘sister’ from the very beginning without making a big deal about me being *just* a stepsister” (14:1, 28–31). For some participants this transition into new family roles was relatively easy, while for others, the transition was more awkward. A stepfather explained, “I was still kind of hesitant about playing a father role for her children, while she was kind of hesitant about playing the mother role for my children” (26:1, 33–36). At this point, the new roles were somewhat ambiguous for some of the informants.

*Year 2—“Still a different set of rules.”*

In year two many of the family members found it relatively easy to adopt the new family roles and norms. In the accelerated trajectory, the second year brought the formation or normalization of family rituals and norms. Family vacations, holiday rituals, and recreation activities were enacted for the families. For example, in one family, members of both the old and new families came together to play football together “for the sake of the children.” The parents from both families put their differences aside to combine the families and the football game became a ritual for the family. For other families, the new roles and norms were more difficult to adopt. The strain between biological parents, stepparents, and ex-spouses created conflict in some families in year two. One stepmother expressed, “I felt more comfortable with my role in terms of what to say and what not to say . . . but it was still a different set of rules” (4:2, 59–69). Although participants experienced role strain, eventually they were all able to work through their difficulties and awkwardness.

*Year 3—“Like a father-son relationship.”*

For the families with difficulties, the role conflicts were more effectively resolved and managed by year three. A positive pattern of interaction continued and familial satisfaction was high. Some blended families had grown so close that family members strove for greater connectedness with other family members. For example, one stepdaughter described that, when she came home from college, her stepbrothers were excited to see her and gave her their undivided attention. But when her sister entered the picture, the stepbrothers shifted the attention onto her, which created some feelings of jealousy, albeit with positive results. She explained,

When just my dad would come to get me from the airport . . . the boys would fight over who was going to sit in the back seat with me. And that felt good. But when my sister went with me, they were excited about us coming together . . . But I felt jealous because here they wanted to talk to her and were fighting over the backseat and who could sit next to her. (14:5, 148–151)

*Year 4—“Feeling very secure.”*

In year four, the positive patterns established in the previous years continued. The newly assumed roles were comfortable and satisfying for family members. The relationships had been negotiated and defined in ways that were satisfactory for family members. In addition, conflict and role strains were effectively managed. A stepmother discussed her relationship with her stepdaughter, “We were able to talk a lot more when concerns came up for or things . . . that are a part of the family. Responsibilities were easier for her to understand. And if she didn’t like it, we could talk about it” (4:3, 121–124).

In summary, blended families experiencing the accelerated pattern developed rather traditional families, families’ roles, norms, boundaries, and expectations, resulting in high levels of feeling like a family. These families often entered the first year of their family with the expectation that traditional nuclear family roles and norms would evolve. Similar to other blended family types, these families encountered conflict and adaptation issues, particularly in their second year of formation. However, the primary reason why these families experienced a smooth transition into their new roles and felt a high degree of solidarity was because they were able to put their differences aside and adapt to the changes they confronted. Family members demonstrated a willingness to adapt existing expectations to the uniqueness of the blended family in order to negotiate satisfying family relationships.

***Prolonged***

The prolonged trajectory represented fourteen ( $n = 14$ , 26.4%) of the families in these data and described families that progressed to higher levels of FLF, although not as quickly as the accelerated trajectory (Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson, 1999) (See Figure 3). A characterization of the development and FLF for these families was that they started out low (5%), gradually increasing to approximately 20% at the end of the first year. The second year found FLF peaking at 30% midway through the year, then dropping back down. The third year saw a steady increase from 30%, a slight decrease, and then a gradual climb to 50% FLF. Year four ended with a climb to 70% FLF.

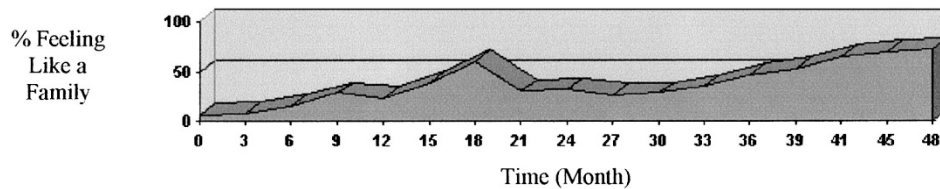


Figure 3. Prolonged trajectory

*Year 1—“Not dysfunctional, just disjointed.”*

Like other trajectories, in the very beginning, these participants described low levels of solidarity as they began the process of negotiating family boundaries. The newly formed interpersonal relationships created a sense of uneasiness within the blended family. Initially, informants expressed discomfort, awkwardness, and/or a desire to cling to the past. A few stepchildren described experiencing pain and grief over the loss of the life they felt forced to leave behind. One stepdaughter told of the difficult transition: “It was like death, because I really felt like our whole past was gone and we were never going to have a future at that house, the family, . . . we were never going to be that again. Also, it was like my mother’s last name changed and it was just different” (19: 57–60).

Unlike other trajectories, however, these participants did not compare themselves to a “traditional” family. Rather, they expressed a willingness to allow a new definition of family to emerge for themselves. For example, one stepson discussed his uneasiness with being around his stepmother.

My dad expected my sister and I to immediately get along with her [stepmother] and it wasn’t that easy. He is kind of in La La land. The more we saw her the more we got used to her and talked to her . . . started to feel more or less comfortable. (36:6, 166–170)

Importantly, while they remained open-minded about the process of forming a new family, it was still a very uncomfortable transition for the family members.

*Year 2—“Getting to know each other stage.”*

Although discomfort and skepticism about the newly formed blended family persisted, in year two there were signs of increased trust, solidarity, and acceptance. Family members had more open communication about their backgrounds, expectations, and roles. As one stepson expressed, “Everyone was in the early stage of relations, of taking it easy, not really boosting their personality to an extreme. Kind of getting to [know each other] stage” (41:4, 156–158). Even though there was increased communication, the participants recognized that establishing a sense of family and achieving comfort with one another was a process that would take time. By the end of year two, roles became more solidified and blended family members were adjusting to one other. Family rituals such as Christmas celebrations, for example, were adjusted to include other family members. There was a high amount of

adjustment needed, but they saw this change as positive, often resulting in higher amounts of feeling like a family.

*Year 3—“This was going to stay a family.”*

In year three, participants described more positive communication patterns in the family. Norms and roles became increasingly clear and family solidarity continued to improve. Family roles and communication norms were negotiated and more cooperative and democratic rather than adversarial family relationships were formed. In one family, the stepmother and the divorced mother had developed effective communication strategies by year three, even though they had started out with great animosity and conflict over parenting styles and household rules. The stepmother said that she included her husband's ex-wife in decisions about her stepdaughter, Jessica: “She is Jessica's family. That's something we can't separate, and I don't want to separate her from this family” (4:3, 118–122).

*Year 4—“Everyone is comfortable.”*

While each blended family situation was unique, the overall pattern by year four demonstrated a successful negotiation of each of the dimensions of boundaries, solidarity, and adaptation. Even though blended family members' initial expectations for their new family form was rather unrealistic, they were able to adjust to the demands of changing roles, rules, and boundaries. There was an overall sense of satisfaction with their shared family identity. The successful negotiation apparent in this trajectory sets it apart from the negative family types (i.e., stagnating and declining); whereby, the negative types failed to accept the unique quality of the blended family and relied too heavily on preconceived expectations of what it meant to be a family. Also apparent in this trajectory is the subjectivity inherent in what it means to feel like a family. To some blended family members, any positive change since the time of formation may be perceived as a substantial improvement. For example, one stepdaughter described a prolonged pattern, which moved from 0% to 20%, which to her meant that any improvement was significant.

In conclusion, the prolonged trajectory can be described as adaptable, flexible, and relatively satisfying. While families experienced the uncertainties of a new blended family, the participants described a willingness to negotiate family-specific roles, norms, boundaries, and expectations. These families started out with low levels of FLF and high amounts of uneasiness. However, unlike the accelerated pattern, these families did not compare themselves to the traditional nuclear family. Rather, they were able to successfully transition into their new family by keeping an open mind and creating their own definition of what it means to be a family. Even though skepticism and conflict continued in their second and third years of formation, these families were open to communication about their roles and expectations.

### *Declining*

The declining trajectory represented only three ( $n = 3$ , 5.7%) of the families in these data (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999) (See Figure 4). Interestingly, these families began with a high level of FLF (80%), which declined to zero at the end of the four-year period. In year one, the FLF score started quite high (80%) and steadily dropped to 40%. Year two

brought a gradual decline from 40% to 30% FLF, with no dramatic shifts. Year three saw the level of FLF start at approximately 30%, take a very small rise to 32% before dropping dramatically to about 10% at the end of the third year. Year four brought a steady decrease in FLF, beginning the year at 10% and ending with a FLF score of zero within the last three months.

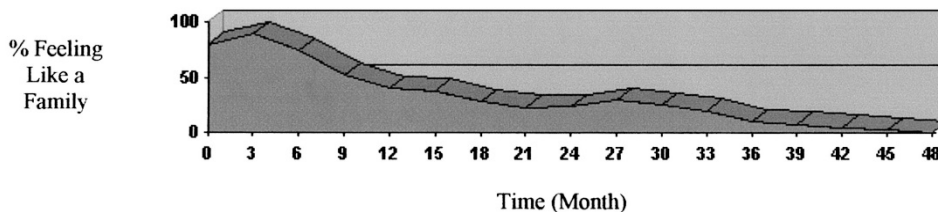


Figure 4. Declining trajectory

*Year 1—“Not the Brady Bunch.”*

In the analysis of the individual years one to four, blended family members expressed high initial expectations for life in this newly formed blended family. One stepmother explained, “First of all my expectations were to have this ‘Brady Bunch’ family” (10:1, 15–16). These family members had high expectations for enacting “traditional” family roles and norms that would be stable and gratifying, thereby increasing family solidarity. Taking part in family rituals, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, were some of the high points in year one and helped to begin establishing cohesiveness and develop the initial hopefulness that many anticipated.

However, the feeling of solidarity was short-lived as members began to experience family instability even in the first year of formation. One salient problematic dimension involved loyalty conflicts. Boundaries began to emerge, dividing blended family members by bloodlines or generations. For example, one stepdaughter commented that her brother was physically beaten because “he was not my [step]father’s child, he was my mother’s child, so my [step] father had no kin relation to him” (18:5, 188–191). In another instance, this same stepdaughter did not view her stepmother as a part of her family because she believed her stepmother instigated conflict and blamed the children for family problems.

A second theme that emerged was the family’s inability to adapt to changing roles and norms within the adaptation dimension. Participants expressed conflicts over the appropriateness of address terms and behaviors of family members. One stepdaughter recalled that she resented that her stepmother expected she would call her “Mom” when she didn’t feel comfortable doing so. She stated

She would always, you know, she would say she wasn’t trying to take the place of my mother and she couldn’t take the place, but yet she was forcing it on me. I was like forced to call her “Mom.” I called her “Mom” out of a guilty conscience. (18:6, 198–201)

Problems with adaptation dramatically altered the new family's sense of solidarity, leaving expectations unfulfilled. The stepmother who had earlier expressed dreams of being like the Brady Bunch, later acknowledged that "it wasn't the Brady Bunch and it was never going to be . . . it got worse instead of better" (10:1, 28–29).

*Year 2 — "Like a Battlefield."*

A pattern of tension and conflict emerged strongly in the second year. The participants expressed more intense role and loyalty conflicts in their new blended families. For example, one stepmother described the climate in her family, "There was . . . a battlefield right there and there I was stuck in the middle" (10:8, 285–286). Membership boundaries of inclusion in the family became more rigid and impermeable. Members were both literally and figuratively separated from one another and members often avoided contact and communication with one another.

*Year 3 — "It just wasn't there."*

By year three, the decline was even greater. Participants described their families as fraught with unresolved tensions and conflict. The physical boundaries became so extreme that some family members removed themselves from the household and went to live elsewhere. One mother described the effects of this festering tension and conflict on her new husband, "Bob developed allergies from the tension . . . [he] move[d] out partially due to allergies and stress" (24:3, 88–89, 107–108). By the end of year three, the participants described a sense of pending doom for the family's survival: "it just wasn't there, it just really wasn't there" (10:11, 374–375). The optimism and search for traditional family roles and norms of the early years shifted to pessimism in the third year, represented by the drop to 10% FLF at the end of year three.

*Year 4 — "Bob moves out permanently."*

Year four was characterized by a complete loss of hope and no sense of family membership or solidarity. By this point, family members had physically or emotionally disengaged from the blended family structure. Patterns of avoidance, alienation, and jealousy became the family norms. Not surprisingly, by the end of year four the percentage of FLF had dropped to 0%.

In summary, the declining trajectory was characterized by loyalty conflicts, ambiguous and strained familial roles, and divisive family boundaries. While they started with high, and perhaps unrealistic, expectations (evidenced by a FLF score of 80%), these quickly diminished and ended at zero, preventing the members from ever forming feelings of solidarity and identity as a family. In particular, these families experienced intense loyalty conflicts, creating impermeable boundaries among family members by bloodlines and generations. The struggles often resulted in avoidance of communication and/or physical removal of family members from the household. What once started out as hopefulness for the future of the family ended in a sense of hopelessness and impending doom by year four.



### Stagnating

The stagnating trajectory represented seven ( $n = 7$ , 13.2%) of the families in these data and described families that “never took off” (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999) (See Figure 5). A characterization of the development and FLF scores was that they began and ended with relatively low levels of feeling like a family. Participants reported 10% FLF level in year one, climbing to a high point of only 20%. Year two began at 20%, dropping to 5%, and declining to zero in year three. The fourth year brought very little change, as the FLF scores rose from zero to only 5% at the end of the four-year period.

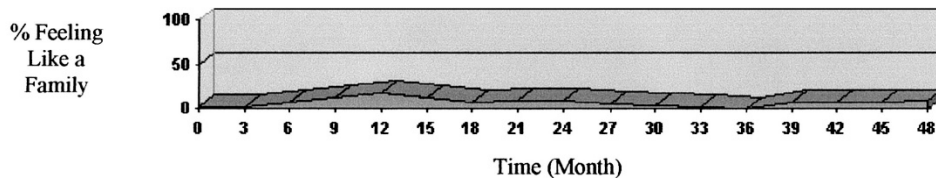


Figure 5. Stagnating trajectory

*Year 1—“They just kind of threw us together.”*

Several of the family members experiencing this trajectory described the sense of being in an “instant family” that was thrown together and immediately expected to feel like a family. One stepdaughter described, “They just kind of threw us together and pretended we were one big family and we really weren’t” (9:2–3, 142–143). Another stepdaughter recalled her experience with this sudden change, “They ran off and got married and didn’t tell my sister and I, and then came home in very nice clothing and told us they were married, and Jess and I were going to have to deal with it” (11:1, 16–19). Participants described a sense of solidarity that was manufactured and felt like a façade erected to meet expectations. They described their experiences as if they were simply “going through the motions” of the family life that now seemed to be expected of them.

Like in the declining trajectory, family members also experienced significant role ambiguity and loyalty conflicts. One stepson described his experience,

Yeah, ‘stepfather,’ I didn’t know what that meant. I don’t think I knew anyone with a ‘step.’ I probably didn’t know how I was supposed to react to him. That was what was scary. I knew I couldn’t call him ‘Dad.’ I didn’t know how to deal with it. (37:5, 120–122)

One stepmother also recalled her feelings of tension as a result of her role ambiguity. She talked about her stepdaughter, Beth, whose biological mother had left the family years before they became a blended family. She described how Beth had become “the lady of the house,” caring for her father and brother. The stepmother then explained the tension that developed when she entered their family:

So I came into their lives, and I was there in a very active role, much different than what her mother had been. And I think she felt like, you know, there was a competition there. And, um . . . that she was displaced and she couldn't figure out what her place was. Little did she know that we were *both* trying to figure that out. (30:4, 140–145)

With the addition of new family members, loyalty conflicts became an issue because of perceived threats to established family relationships. Stepchildren were especially likely to describe difficulties dealing with intrusions upon their parent-child bonds, rituals, and norms from the old family. For example, one stepdaughter resented her stepfather's newly assumed role as her mother's caretaker. She told him, "I know how to take care of her, I know what's best for her, she doesn't need you to help her feel better when she's in a bad mood" (33:3, 71–72). The role ambiguity and loyalty conflicts led to a stagnating pattern of apathy that continued into year two and beyond.

*Year 2— "All of this at once."*

During this year, the participants continued to express problems with issues of adaptability and boundary management. Blended family members struggled to establish trust and to define their roles in this newly-formed family. One stepdaughter related the difficulties of adjusting to all the changes going on:

This is the first time to be a family. This is the first time that he [stepfather] had his stuff there and my mom had her stuff there . . . there is no desensitizing to that point. I wasn't ready for that shock and you just arrive there, plus in a different town, in a different school, and you are start[ing] school yourself. So, it was a very big letdown and to be a family . . . all of this at once. (37:9, 234–243)

Family members continued to confront and experience loyalty conflicts. One stepdaughter expressed the struggle she had defining her relationship with her stepmother. "She's not my mother, you know. It's not like my mom is dead" (9:8, 159). Another stepdaughter discussed her resentment toward her stepfather, as she perceived him interfering with her relationship with her mother,

I always bought my mom my own presents and every holiday he'd ask me, offer me [saying], "I saved up money so you could buy your mom a present." And that's always bothered me because I always bought my mom my own present and he was trying to interfere. (35:4, 108–111)

Finally, at this stage in the blended family's development, the participants expressed a fluctuating sense of solidarity which was reflected in beginning the year at 20% FLF (the highest point these families ever reached) and ending down at 5%. Many of the respondents felt as if important family decisions and roles were being forced upon them and they had little or no input. One stepdaughter gave this example:

I got along with my stepmom because Dad asked me to. He took me into his room and he asked me, "Please get along with her. Just to like her, talk to her, you know. She tries to be nice to you and she tries to be, you know, like your mother" (9:8, 156–157).

The informants' narratives demonstrated that relationships with blended family members appeared artificial or contrived, forcing members to try and assume roles from "traditional" families.

*Years 3 and 4—“Everything was just normal.”*

These two years were collapsed together due to their similarity and represented a pattern of equilibrium, with periodic, but temporary, feelings of solidarity. For example, one stepdaughter described an instance of temporarily high solidarity while her stepmother was undergoing chemotherapy for cancer. Many times prior to this interaction, the stepdaughter felt like an outsider in the blended family. However, during this crisis period, her feelings of group membership increased significantly:

And I saw her without her wig. And she just looked at me and she looked like she was going to cry. And I said, "It's okay." And she said, "Are you okay with seeing me like this?" And I said, "Yeah." . . . From then on she left it [the wig] off . . . right now, I didn't have to ask to do things in the house. If I wanted to make a phone call, I used the phone. If I wanted to go swimming, I used the pool. . . . Everything just felt . . . everything was just normal. (9:12, 242–249)

Similar to this stepdaughter's experience, participants in other stagnating families expressed sporadic feelings of solidarity. However, the level of FLF fluctuated little, ranging from only 0% to 5%. Several of the participants helped promote stability, by enacting avoidant patterns of conflict management—choosing not to confront problematic issues in the blended family.

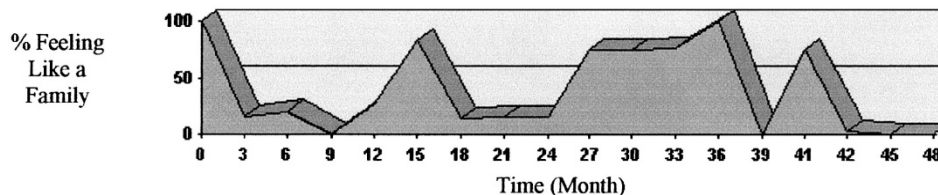
Overall, these participants clearly sought high solidarity and to enact the roles and norms they associated with "a normal family." Ironically, the harder these family members worked toward normalcy, the more change and instability they experienced. We speculate that this was due to unmet expectations, since members did not feel comfortable filling these traditional family roles or having them enacted by others. While the families did not end, the stagnating families did not develop closeness either. By the end of year four, five of the seven participants found life in the blended family "bearable." However, for two of the participants, the blended family was very unsatisfying, resulting in family members emotionally and/or physically distancing themselves from each other. For instance, one stepmother commented, "We just can't do the phony-baloney family get-togethers anymore" (30:15, 592–593).

In summary, stagnating families experienced family life as being "thrown together" and awkwardness concerning familial roles and expectations. While the families sought a "normal" or "traditional" family arrangement, the instability and unmet expectations led to

consistent feelings of dissatisfaction and artificiality. Family members often felt as if expectations to become an instant family were being forced upon them. The more the family members pushed to become a traditional family, the more resistance they experienced. These family members also encountered loyalty conflicts, which often represented intrusions or threats to pre-existing family relationships. Children in these families also resented their parents and stepparents for not including them in important family decisions, such as an upcoming marriage. As their FLF scores indicated, there was some small fluctuation in feeling like a family, but that fluctuation was small and this stagnating pattern revealed dissatisfaction and apathy toward the blended family.

### *High-Amplitude Turbulent*

The high-amplitude turbulent trajectory represented eleven ( $n = 11$ , 20.8%) of the families in these data (Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson, 1999) and was, in essence a blend of both positive and negative family experiences (See Figure 6). Their development and levels of FLF suggested the sense of being on a roller coaster, with dramatic up and down shifts in FLF scores. Year one was characterized by fluctuations of FLF, ranging from 100% to 0%. The second year brought changes from 30%–90%, with a sudden drop to a series of 10%–15% peaks and valleys in FLF. Year three brought with it a leap up to 80%, followed by the same series of peaks and valleys, ending at 100%. Finally year four saw a crash to zero, back up to 80%, and ending at 0%.



**Figure 6.** High-amplitude turbulent trajectory

#### *Year 1—“A major adjustment for me.”*

The turbulent trajectory was difficult to conceptualize. By definition, the trajectory precluded consistency. Nonetheless, the instability of the turbulent trajectory seemed to foster some patterned behavior in the families. A theme that emerged in the first year, which was common to several other trajectories, is that family members experienced the unrealistic expectation of the “instant family.” For several of them, this was an extremely difficult transition. One stepdaughter explained,

In the beginning it was just, “no way,” he was nothing to me, a stranger. He was taking away my mother, almost negative. But then he bought me tapes and he started hanging around more . . . it wasn’t like family, it was just some feeling toward someone being there all the time, but not . . . a family member. (38:3, 88–92)

For other families, the awkwardness of a new, blended family was compounded by the inability to meet societal expectations of being a member of a "traditional" family. Members experienced tensions between wanting to be part of the family but not knowing how to carry out the new role. Even though several of these participants experienced the discomfort and strain associated with sudden formation of a new family, some individuals still described their relationships as satisfying and positive.

*Year 2—“Let-down phase.”*

The second year brought with it increased instability, chaotic household boundaries, and unmet expectations of perceived family roles and norms. For instance, one stepdaughter commented, "I had to get adjusted to my stepfather and stepbrothers and I'd have to say that was another adjustment . . . It was real hard to be myself at that point" (21:3, 86–90). Family members began moving in and out of households as a result of conflict. One stepdaughter, for example, ran away from home and moved in with her grandmother because of the high degree of conflict and lack of solidarity in her blended family. Other family members perceived an intense betrayal and had difficulties establishing trust in their new family members. Extreme or inadequate conflict strategies were also implemented among the family members, particularly the couple. Another key issue that continually emerged was the lack of solidarity between the parental couple. Often these couples were unable to create a unified front for the children, but rather competed with one another for the children's attention and love.

*Year 3—“This is like the stock market.”*

Perhaps the best way to describe this year is in terms of a "fork in the road" metaphor. Family members either confronted their instability and conflict, which made their road much easier, or continued to avoid them, resulting in escalation of instability and conflict. Those individuals who experienced escalation of negativity continually dealt with their conflict using avoidance tactics. Major issues in their family, such as health problems, alcohol and drug abuse, emotional manipulation, and verbal abuse, were characterized by either passive or aggressive strategies, which, in turn, drove feeling like a family up and down wildly. The issues were either denied, or they exploded in aggressive confrontations. One stepdaughter described her stepsister's passive-aggressive behavior: "My mom has severe allergies. We couldn't use perfume for a while and obviously you couldn't smoke. And Laura would sit downstairs in the basement and smoke" (38:8, 244–247).

The family members who constructively managed the turbulence in their family also initially used avoidance tactics but eventually confronted the conflict, airing differences and unmet expectations. One stepmother stated, "We talked openly about a lot of things, which wasn't our usual type of communication about feeling, about what we perceived, about lying to one another, and it seemed like we were having better communication" (7:4, 193–195). As this quotation indicates, confronting family issues finally helped open their lines of communication.

*Year 4—“Keeping communication lines open.”*

For those individuals caught in the negative cycle, the conflict perpetuated into year four. One stepmother described her explosive episodes with her new husband:

I remember yelling at each other . . . I remember throwing . . . I don't remember who threw it . . . throwing a remote control. Got a major dent in my wall . . . Hung a picture there so the dent wouldn't show . . . I remember I didn't want to talk with anybody. Here we are back in town. I could have talked to my parents, could've talked to Pastor Rich, and just really thinking, you know, screw this whole deal . . . I made a mistake. I never should've gotten married. I just . . . He didn't understand. He was a man and I didn't want anything to do with him. (31:20, 266–272)

Overall, the participants caught in the negative cycle described feelings of hopelessness and a desire to avoid confronting the problems of their families.

On the other hand, families that engaged in a more positive cycle opened the lines of communication. One stepdaughter described her increasing connectedness and relationship with her stepfather, explaining, “At that point, I'd been in the family long enough to really feel more of a bond with my stepdad, and just knew that I belonged there and he belonged there . . . I really felt he was my Dad, as opposed to being my stepdad” (32:5, 90–98). Even though FLF would shoot up and down due to conflict, these participants described confronting the conflict, resulting in feelings of higher solidarity.

In general, as the name implies, the turbulent trajectory was characterized as diverse, unstable, and unpredictable. Similar to many of the other family types, unrealistic expectations of forming an instant family was associated with discomfort and strain. Participants often experienced feelings of betrayal and a lack of trust among new family members. A common theme among these families was a lack of solidarity between the couple. The blended family couples were unable to communicate a unified front for the children and demonstrate positive conflict management strategies. The amount of conflict these families experienced reached an impasse in year three. This “fork in the road” was often met with extreme behavioral patterns of avoidance or aggressive confrontation. However, the families that positively confronted the conflict and instability tended to perceive more satisfying family relationships, while the families that avoided the conflict and instability experienced greater dissatisfaction with family relationships.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study underscore the utility of looking at the development of blended families not as a unitary model moving always forward but as a process involving different developmental pathways, each with its own unique pattern of development (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Coleman & Ganong, 1995). A process perspective emphasizes that individual blended families may experience family development in different ways. Recognizing that blended family development can occur along various trajectories avoids the tendency that researchers, counselors, or blended family members themselves

have to prescribe a single pattern for the successful development of blended families. This avoids trying to model the blended family after television's "the Brady Bunch" or a more traditional family form. Unitary perspectives often infer "one right way" for families to develop, making those who do not follow such paths feel inferior or defective. Unlike the chronological, prescriptive stage models, a process model, that allows for variation in blended family development, helps us better understand the complexity inherent in this family form. Accounting for such diversity allows researchers and practitioners to move beyond a unitary approach to one that is more inclusive and, thus, representative of a larger number of blended families. Knowledge of the multiple ways in which blended families develop can be especially useful to mental health professionals and blended family members themselves because they can be cautioned to avoid the assumption that there is only one way to "become a family." Contrary to past work, which has cast blended families as different from or inferior to traditional families, the results of this study also legitimate the blended family as a unique family form capable of success, and demonstrates that success can come via multiple pathways and timelines.

Moreover, the results of this study provide, through reflective discourse, a detailed understanding of how blended family members negotiate their way through the various pathways—some of which are healthy, constructive paths and some of which are destructive ones. By focusing specifically on how blended family members described their first four years of family development, our findings provide researchers and practitioners insights into the lived experiences of this unique family form. The three most salient issues we identified in these data were boundary management, solidarity, and adaptation. While these issues were evident in our analysis, we discovered that how they were negotiated varied by trajectory. More specifically, we found that issues of boundaries, solidarity, and adaptation were central to the enactment of the different pathways of becoming a family. Blended family members in our study frequently discussed how, in their first four years of development, they dealt with family group membership, feelings of closeness, and flexibility to change. From our analysis, we observed that their negotiation of these issues varied across the five trajectories. And yet, there were some commonalities across family experiences as well.

First, in terms of family boundaries, our results revealed that individuals who experienced the more constructive trajectories were more likely to describe successful and flexible boundary management. For many of these families, it meant the ability to negotiate movement of blended family members from one household to another due to shared custodial parental or extended family relationships. For others, it meant a relatively smooth transition to in-group membership within the newly created blended family. Importantly, while the management of these boundaries was not always easy, the accelerated and prolonged trajectories were both characterized by their members being able to eventually negotiate the new boundaries successfully. In contrast, individuals who experienced the declining, stagnating, and high-amplitude turbulent pathways shared an inability to successfully negotiate newly formed family boundaries. In fact, in some of these families, boundaries became extremely rigid and impermeable, demarcating bloodlines and generations. These findings support research by Visher and Visher (1988) and Papernow (1994) who argued that appropriate boundary management is one of the most critical adjustments

blended families face. Successful management of newly formed and previously existing family boundaries was indeed critical to our participants' descriptions of their blended family development as well, setting apart the more positive patterns (those who eventually achieved high levels of feeling like a family in the accelerated and prolonged patterns) from the less positive family experiences.

With regard to solidarity, our findings demonstrate that most people enter into blended family situations with at least some sense of optimism, wanting to be part of a family and feel like a family, even though they are often upset about the loss of the old family. Families in each of these trajectories started out with a desire for solidarity, even if short-lived, or even if that sense of solidarity was more of an artifact of what members thought they should feel, rather than what they were actually feeling. In the accelerated and prolonged pathways, the solidarity did develop in these families; most quickly in the accelerated pattern. Happily, these two trajectories represented more than half of the families in the study (56.6%). In the other three pathways, the push for family solidarity seemed to cause more tension and conflict as family members strove to be what they were not. While the declining and stagnating patterns represented families with severe problems that did not achieve high levels of feeling like a family, the high amplitude turbulent pattern, representing 20.8% of the families, did have high levels of feeling like a family at times. What we noted in this pattern was that it appeared to us that those families that were able to constructively confront conflict and deal with the constantly changing nature of the blended family situation seemed to report a more positive experience and were able to cope with the ups and downs of this family type. From our analysis of their discourse, while their road was a rocky one, we noted that these families reported feelings of solidarity if they were able to effectively manage conflict and change.

Third, in terms of adaptability, our results highlight the omnipresent nature of change in blended families (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Kelley, 1992; Visher & Visher, 1988). This is consistent with previous research. For example Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) found that change was the turning point reported most often in the first four years of blended family life. Role ambiguity and the reenactment of "traditional" family roles are often key to the amount of change experienced by, and adaptability needed, within blended families. In our analysis, we found that struggles ensued (except in the accelerated pattern) when family members attempted, and perhaps felt pressure to, replicate traditional family roles and norms. With the exception of the accelerated pattern, the expectation of the "instant family" was an unrealistic goal (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). It was clear that blended family identity and roles take time to develop through these periods of great change. Hetherington and Jodl (1994) stressed that blended family roles necessitate "negotiation among all family members, including the children, biological parent, noncustodial parent, and even grandparents" (p. 58). Additionally, blended family members need to be open to developing roles that may be different than ones enacted in other family forms (Kelley, 1992). Hence, understanding and accepting this as part of the process of "becoming a family" will be helpful for immediate blended family members, as well as their extended network of family and friends.

In addition, one element that seemed to add to members' ability to accept change was what happened in the premarital stages of the family. There are strong indications in these



data that the adaptation to the new family and the development of solidarity within the family began well before marriage, and in fact, began in the dating period of the parental couple. We agree with Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) that it is important for researchers to take this premarital period into account and to allow research participants to determine when the family started. Choosing the date of marriage, or even cohabitation, is arbitrary and leaves out important steps in family development. From an applied perspective, adults who believe early on that a new relationship might lead to permanent blending of families should be cognizant that the blended family is taking shape from the earliest interactions. Thus, having realistic expectations, and trying to develop healthy communication patterns, norms, and roles from the start will be useful. How this can be done is beyond the scope of the present study, but is certainly a worthwhile enterprise for researchers and practitioners to take on.

From our results, it appears that families who were patient, expected and accepted change, and understood that it would take some time to feel like a family tended to see closeness develop. Those who fought changes or were not able to "roll with the punches" when it came to boundaries and adaptation of roles and norms experienced great struggle and conflict. Similarly, those who tried to force-fit close relationships from the start experienced disappointment. This reinforces the need to see closeness in most blended family relationships as evolving, and it cautions family members about the importance of having patience and realistic expectations of themselves and others. Our results point to the importance of the family as a whole working through this entire adjustment period, to give the new family the opportunity to develop their own unique and flexible boundaries, feelings of solidarity and closeness, and roles and norms adaptive to the needs of the new family. When family members, especially children, were not given the opportunity to adjust before the marriage of the parents, problems persisted. This premarital stage was also an extremely important time in these families because of the myth of the instant family that was expected by many of the parents in the first year of marriage. The more that family members let themselves take the time and opportunity to grow together, the more positive the experience. In addition, some of the families used direct communication, such as regular family meetings, to air issues surrounding the adjustments to becoming a family.

Moreover, in terms of managing conflict, blended families that were characterized by flexibility, open communication, and constructive conflict management were able to handle almost anything that occurred. In contrast, when individuals or families were unable to develop constructive ways to manage conflict, problems persisted. While all blended families experience some conflict and negative experiences (as do all families), those which were able to remain flexible considered themselves successful (Visher & Visher, 1988). Our results also lead us to agree with other scholars that, while blended families experience challenges, there is no reason to conclude that all blended families are problematic and inferior to other family forms (Coleman, 1994; Kelley, 1992; Kurdek, 1994). Instead, scholars should glean the success stories from blended families and spend more time identifying what successful blended families do.

While our study sheds light on some of the nuances of blended family development and the unique issues that affect development, it also has several limitations. First, only one member from a blended family took part in the interviews. Even though it may be more

difficult to do, we suggest that researchers solicit the perspectives of multiple family members from a given family. In addition, a larger number of participants will better allow us to compare the experiences of parents, stepparents, and stepchildren, to see how they are similar and different. We also suggest that researchers include the perspectives of families from different cultural backgrounds. Finally, we are aware that, like all families, blended families are part of larger social networks. Like many researchers before us, we have also largely ignored the influence and perspective of extended family members, such as grandparents, parents and siblings of the couple, friends, and fictive kin.

Taking these limitations into account, we do believe that these findings provide new insight into, and extend our theoretical understanding of, these blended family developmental issues by recognizing that not all families experience them in the same way. In fact, we are convinced that it is absolutely essential that scholars and practitioners need to stress that there is no singular "right" way for blended families to develop and that feeling like a family is a process that takes time. Rather than generalizing and essentializing the blended family experience, our results suggest that the negotiation of these issues varies by developmental pathway. More specifically, as reflected in their discourse, the blended family members' successful or unsuccessful management of these issues coincided with the type of trajectory they experienced. Individuals experiencing the constructive pathways described being able to more successfully manage the issues of boundaries, solidarity, and adaptation. In contrast, blended family members who had experienced the less healthy trajectories described an inability or difficulty in managing these same issues. As communication researchers, we are also keenly aware that there is much more work to be done to identify the specific communication messages and behaviors that will lead families to develop flexible boundaries, feelings of solidarity, and the ability to adapt and find workable expectations and roles within different developmental pathways.

In addition, our findings have important implications to practitioners working with members of blended families. First, because of the reflective nature of discourse, our findings suggest that a practitioner could gain insight into the developmental course a particular blended family has charted by listening to how she or he describes these issues. Second, by recognizing that the issues are experienced differently by trajectory, the practitioner could then use the discussion of the issues as an intervention tool and help change the way the blended family negotiates these issues and, thus, chart a different developmental path. If these trajectories are to be a useful tool for professionals and family members, we need to examine their applicability in applied settings. Some of our research team are involved in a new study where research participants are shown the five trajectories and asked to identify which represents their blended family experience. If they are able to do so, this will give an indication that the tool that would be possible for professionals and family members to use. By "translating scholarship into practice" (Petronio, 1999), we hope that our work will encourage practitioners and applied communication scholars to "transport" the findings to their professional interactions with members of blended families. Functioning as "transporters" of scholarship, those working with and living in blended families can use this information to help identify families heading into the declining, stagnating and turbulent trajectories and facilitate their move toward more positive, adaptive, and successful pathways.

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### Notes

1. As communication scholars, we are sensitive to the labels used to describe families. We recognized the emotional loading of the term “stepfamily” (Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990; Preston, 1984), and found “remarried” family (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 1994) to be inadequate, as it assumes all the couples heading blended families are married, and, more importantly, it views the family from the perspective of the parents’ marital status alone. Therefore, we adopted the term “blended” family (e.g., Arliss, 1993; Preston, 1984).
2. We also struggled with how to refer to the “original” or “old” family and the “new” blended family. Most scholars refer to the “original,” “biological,” “natural,” or “family of origin” (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Again, we recognized both the emotional loading and the inaccuracy of those labels—for example, blended families may contain some or all nonbiological children. We use “old” family to refer to the family(ies) from which members of the blended come and blended or “new” families to refer to the present family configuration in which members live.
3. These numbers refer to interview number, page number, and line numbers in the transcripts. Hence, (53:4, 102–105) refers to interview #53, page 4, and lines 102–105.

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