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EXPLORING DIVERSE BLENDED FAMILIES: USING CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO HEAR THEIR VOICES

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EXPLORING DIVERSE BLENDED FAMILIES:

USING CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO HEAR THEIR VOICES

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B.S.W., Saint Louis University, 1989
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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Missouri-St. Louis

In Partial Satisfaction of the Requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Advisory Committee:

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Dr. Therese Cristiani, Chair

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Dr. Rebecca Rogers

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Dr. Susan Kashubeck-West

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Dr. Mark Pope

Dedication

To my own diverse blended family who has crossed

many roads, and continuing to trod. To my oldest child,

Jan, who broke multiple cycles and made me take another

glance. To all diverse blended families: may you construct

your own realities, normalize your journeys, and celebrate

yourselves, in spite of spectators.

.

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First, I give thanks to my Creator, who made me, who knows me and who said: For I know the plans I have for you; plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and an expected end. He knows my journey and has put people strategically in place over the years in my life to guide me gently.

Second, I am so grateful to the five couples who welcomed me into their lives and into their homes. They willingly shared their stories with me, revealed their life portraits and I am indebted to them. It is through their willingness to be a part of this project that their voices are heard.

Thanks to the late Andrew Moore, Sr. and Rev. Rosie Moore for giving me physical life, for it was through their union that I was born and my journey began. I thank them for their sacrifice and their love to me. Thanks Mama and Daddy for purchasing the upright black piano that I would play one day and thanks Daddy for bringing home the left over paper from the publishing company upon which I would write my first stories and draw my first portraits.

Third, thanks to my eldest sister, Jean – my friend, my protector and my memory. As a child you watched over me, fought for me and stood up for me. When I did not have a voice, you spoke up for me and you prayed for me. You were my hope as a child and I honor you as an adult. Thanks, my little-big-sister, I love you so much. For once I was a caterpillar….Thanks Jean!

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Now, I would like to thank five people who give me great joy to know; five stars, five memories, five gems in my crown: Jan, Anthony, Jason, Amir and Maya – my children. To the original three – Jan, Anthony and Jason. As a child, I was your mother, and we grew up together, through trial and error, but we have overcome many obstacles. Thanks for giving me room to change and grow. To my twins; my children of a second chance. Thanks for an opportunity to be the mommy I was meant to be: I am blessed. In all five of you, I see parts of me and pieces of my talents. You are indeed my symphony. Where I did not fly, you guys have soared. You have broken cycles, and advanced me! You are my legacy, my future, my destiny. Throughout my program it has not been untouched by trials and setbacks, but I could always look to hear encouraging words from you such as, "Mommy, I'm so proud of you," and "Keep going, Mommy, you're going to make it."

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Abstract

It has been predicted that if you were born in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a one in two chance of either living in a blended family as a child or as an adult (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). In 1989, Glick predicted that in the 21st century, blended families would be the leading family form. Today in 2010, they are far from being a new phenomenon (Stewart, 2008). They are a rapidly growing part of the American population according to Census data and over half of American families may be blended, i.e., formed by (married or non-married) partners with children. This investigation is a small scale, exploratory, and descriptive study of diverse blended family couples who are formed from married parents, non-married parents, gay parents and lesbian parents with biological children who live in the residence and are the product of former relationships. The main focus was to investigate dominant cultural models of these families and given those constructs, how did the couples conform to, transform, resist or revoice dominant or alternate-cultural models? Five diverse blended family couples were recruited and interviewed in their homes. The small sample is not representative, but largely heterogeneous. Participants varied in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, educational level, socioeconomic background and family structure. Data analysis methods consisted of a 2-step process integrating Grounded Theory (Glaser 1998) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The interest was not only in what these families were saying, but how did they say it, and what identities they took on as they said it. The findings suggested that although the couples were unanimous in defining their relationships in positive and complementary ways, depending on various variables, some of the couples had overlapping and conflicting positioning. All five couples fit into three overlapping categories: (1) Resist-Transform: two couples; (2) Resist-Conform-Revoice: one couple; and (3) Resist-Transform-Revoice: two couples. The data is

voluminous, providing numerous opportunities for additional investigation into the unique worlds of diverse blended families. A call for innovative approaches that define them positively and culturally variant studies that normalize their experiences with less comparable investigations are discussed.

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Chapter 1

It has been predicted that if you were born in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a one

in two chance of either living in a blended family as a child or as an adult (Coleman,

Ganong, & Fine, 2000). In 1989, Glick predicted that in the 21st century, blended

families would be the leading family form. Today in 2010, they are far from being a new

phenomenon (Stewart, 2008). Blended families of all forms and types are here to stay.

They are a rapidly growing part of the American population (U.S. Census Bureau

(2005b) and, according to recent Census data, over half of American families are

blended, i.e., formed by (married or non-married) partners with children. More than 25

years ago researchers began to investigate areas specific to stepfamilies as a result of an

increase in marriage dissolution and nonmarital childbearing (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988).

Since that time researchers have described nuclear/biological families as *intact*, which

implies blended families are thus broken or *not intact* (Baham et al., 2008; Berger, 2000;

Bray, 1994; Brown, 2003; Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989; Darden & Zimmerman,

1992; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Love & Murdock, 2004; Queen, 2002). Although a

growing body of research has discussed the resilience of blended families (Afifi, 2008;

Ganong, 2008; Pryor, 2008; Stewart, 2008), traditional research influenced by stereotypes

and myths has portrayed blended families as deficient (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), non-

cohesive, and prone to family dysfunction (Bray, 1994; Mason, 2007; Stewart, 2005).

Problem Statement

This study is a small scale, exploratory, and descriptive qualitative analysis of an

under-researched area within the counseling and marriage and family literature. Much of

the literature on blended families has been congruent in its themes of documenting

blended family process, family structure, lack of cohesiveness, family and parental

relationship interactions, and mostly their overall comparisons to nuclear families

(Berger, 2000; Bray, 2004; Darden & Zimmerman, 1992; Ganong, & Coleman, 1997).

More recent findings, however, show a shift in exploring both strengths and challenges of

diverse blended families from normative-adaptive perspectives (Bray, 2004; Einstein &

Albert, 2006; Furrow & Palmer, 2007; Ganong, & Coleman, 2004; Gosselin, 2007,

Stewart, 2008). According to Ganong and Coleman (2004), this paradigm shift, referred

to as a risk and resiliency model, provides a hopeful and diverse conceptualization of

blended families as "legitimate family forms" comprised of several variations including

both risks and strengths that should not be overlooked, but built upon.

Various authors have discussed a need for positive images of blended families in

media, given critical perceptions of them as less than nuclear families (Berger, 2000;

Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Stewart, 2008). Claxton-Oldfield (2001) argued that,

although media shapes social perception, both adult and children's media have not

portrayed blended families fairly. A majority of both print and visual media continue to

represent blended families from a variety of unrealistic and negative perspectives,

including the wicked stepparent perspective in Disney's fairytale myths such as

Cinderella and Snow White (Claxton-Oldfield, 2001); the abandoning and violent

stepfather in adult media (Leon & Angst, 2004); and the unrealistic and problem-free

Brady Bunch blended family (Whiting et al., 2007).

A lack of diversity in describing blended families is revealed in the growing body

of research that characterizes blended families as resulting from divorce and presuming

that all blended family systems are "remarried" unions between a man and a woman

(Bray & Berger, 1993; Crosbie-Burnett & Sykes, 1989; Ganong & Coleman, 2004;

Michaels, 2000).   Additionally, of studies that are represented, less is known about how

diverse blended family members represent themselves, given the cultural models of them in media, policy, practice, and research. The emotional wellness and family preservation of these families, therefore, need further investigation.

As the structure of the American family evolves and blended families emerge as a result of various social and demographic changes (Pryor, 2008), there are not accurate estimates of the number of these families (Stewart, 2008). Although the 2000 U.S. Census report did not count all blended families separately from nuclear families, it is widely believed that at least 75% of all households represent some aspect of blended-family structure (Richmond, 2002). The reality that the 2000 census did not identify blended families across households has increased concern among marriage and family researchers as well as professional advocacy organizations for blended families (NSRC, 2002; Peterschick, 2006; Stewart, 2008; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).

Although the number of blended families is rising in the U.S., blended families continue to be under-researched in professional literature (Darden & Zimmerman, 1992; Pryor, 2008; Stewart, 2005).   Research studies show that specific interventions uniquely designed for stepfamilies are needed because of the distinct challenges these families encounter (Hill, 1998). Recent research (Gosselin, 2008; Mason, 2007) argued for positive images of the blended family as a *viable family form*. In fact, although some studies have assessed these families from normative perspectives (Afifi, 2008; Stewart, 2008), historical perceptions that identify them as dysfunctional and lacking continue to impact societal perceptions (Ganong & Coleman, 1997).

Major criticisms are that studies are mostly homogenous, compare ethnic minority blended families to White middle-class families, and African-American blended families

are disproportionately represented (Lambert, 2005). Media portrayal of blended families also shapes social perception about them with negative and unrealistic characterizations. Stewart (2008) discussed the paradox of this issue. She stated that although studies on the relationship of ethnicity and blended families are few, of those available, African-Americans suffer double stigma of race and family configuration. In fact, of all ethnic minority groups, African-American blended families are underrepresented in traditional literature and are disproportionately represented in non-traditional literature. There is a need for culturally variant, within group studies that approach ethnic minority blended families from a strengths perspective. Thus, because of this disproportion, this study will include an African-American blended family in order to counter negative implications.

According to Bray (2005), divorce inflation, remarriage and single-parenting are equally leading causes for blended family formation. These families are faced with unique issues and dynamics that need to be addressed in research investigations (Smith, 2008). Traditional literature has characterized blended families as non-cohesive, conflicting and prone to family dysfunction. Moreover, although society has held negative perceptions of blended families due to myths that have discredited them, even less is known about diverse blended families. These families who suffer double and triple stigma as a result of their marital configuration, ethnicity, and sexual orientation have been neglected in the literature and may be at an even higher risk of negative and skewed perceptions due to a lack of positive awareness and validation of their systems.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the dominant cultural models of diverse blended families. A second purpose, given these cultural narratives, was to study how these families conform, transform, resist, or revoice such models. A gap exists in the

current research regarding how diverse blended family members define themselves and how they are impacted by portrayals of their families. Even less is known about diverse blended family types with *double and triple stigma* that are formed from: single parent unions (Crosbie-Burnett & Sykes, 1989; Michaels, 2006); non-married blended families (cohabitating) (Stewart, 2008); African-American blended families (Vereen, 2007); and lesbian and gay blended families (Lambert, 2005). This study attempts to fill this gap.

Research Questions

General systems theory, as a unifying construct, has been long associated with the examination and comprehension of complex family interrelationships (Becvar & Becvar, 2004) since its inclusion into the field of psychotherapy (Bertalanffy, 1968). It has been paramount in the research of family development and communication research mainly because it draws "attention on the holistic nature of interaction patterns" (Schrodt, 2007, p. 218). Systemic models have also provided a practical framework for practitioners in considering the multifaceted intricacies of blended families.

In this study, I have drawn upon a *systems-metatheory* as a foundation for investigating diverse blended families from a postmodern social constructionism perspective (Gergen, 1985). Postmodernists provide a basis for exploring families within their social context, with respect for their subjective realities. "From a postmodern perspective it is assumed that people live in a reality comprised of socially constructed and socially sanctioned narratives, or stories" (Becvar & Becvar, 1999, p. 9). For the purposes of this study, the contextually bound realities of diverse blended families are critical. Drawing from similar thought of Afifi (2008), the basis for integrating a system-constructionist notion in inquiry into the subjective world of diverse blended families is intended to provide a landscape to hear their voices and experiences.

This study seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. What dominant cultural models exist around diverse blended families?

2. Given these constructs, in what ways do diverse blended families conform to, transform, resist, or revoice dominant narratives of blended families?

Definition of Terms

While the terms *blended* and *stepfamilies* are defined and used differently among some professional organizations, the counseling and marriage/family literatures continue to use the two terms interchangeably. According to the National Stepfamily Resource Center (NSRC, 2002) and the Stepfamily Association of America (SAA, 2007), the term *blended* is a "catchy phrase" that confuses families and professionals. These organizations contend that the term "blended" suggests that families blend together and lose their individuality from their former family form, thus the term "stepfamily" more accurately defines the new family form.

For this study, the term "blended family" will be used to describe families that are formed through marriage, civil union or joint residence with biological children of one or both partners. While the term "stepfamily" will be used sparingly as it relates to the literature, this study seeks to escape traditional and pejorative implications. Using the term "blended family" does not support ideas that blended families lose their individuality, but more so that they merge and blend together in a new family relationship with its distinct experiences. The following are the terms that will be used within this study:

1. Married Diverse Blended Family: A family formed by female and male partners, who were single parents prior to marriage, share residence, and one or both

partners has a biological child (ren) who lives in the home and is the product of a former relationship.

2. Non-Married Diverse Blended Family: A family formed by female and male partners in a committed relationship who are not legally married, share residence and one or both partners has a biological child (ren) who lives in the home and is the product of a former relationship.

3. Lesbian Diverse Blended Family: A family formed by two female partners in a committed relationship who share residence and one or both partners has a biological child (ren) who lives in the home and is a product of a former relationship.

4. Gay Diverse Blended Family: A family formed by two male partners in a committed relationship who share residence and one or both partners has a biological child (ren) and is product of a former relationship.

5. Blended Family Dynamics: Involves the specific nature and characteristics that are distinct and normal within blended family interaction. It includes family interactions and how the family constructs meaning of their experiences and relationships.

6. Family Preservation: Traditionally a social service program model designed to prevent out-of-home placement during a family crisis. Focus for this study is on strengthening family permanency, resilience, family bonds, family support, and stabilization amidst the involuntary nature of blended family relationships.

7. Nuclear/Biological family: A family consisting of heterosexual partners who share residence with residential biological children of that union.

8. Biological child: A child that is the biological offspring of either blended family partners.

9. Residential biological child: A child that is the biological offspring of either blended family partners, and lives in the blended family home.

10. Step-child: A child that is the biological offspring of one of the blended family partners.

11. Former partner sub-system: The former partners of the blended family partners.

12. Biological-sibling sub-system: Consisting of all children within the blended family union that are biologically related.

13. Step-sibling sub-system: Consisting of all children within the blended family union that are the biological children of at least one blended family partner.

14. Language bias: The discourse of referring to and/or description of individuals in negative, stereotypical and uncomplimentary ways.

15. Emotional well-being/wellness: Involves the integration of awareness and acceptance of one's emotions and feelings as well as those of others. It also includes the cognitive ability to deal with stress, distinguish limitations, display a positive self-perception, and ability to maintain healthy relationships with others.

Significance of Study

The number of blended families continues to increase in America as one of the leading family forms (Stewart, 2008). While there are increasing numbers of studies on blended families, there seems to be a gap in the literature in regard to how diverse blended family members with double and triple stigma characterize themselves and construct meaning within their culture. Current literature continues to refer to nuclear families as "intact" and blended families as "not intact" reflecting a deficit-family model

while comparing them to nuclear/biological families. A major criticism is that studies are mostly homogenous, compare ethnic minority blended families to White middle-class families, and African-American blended families are disproportionately represented. Media portrayal of blended families also shapes social perception about them with negative and unrealistic characterizations. Although blended families are consistently referred to as remarried families, less is also known about diverse blended families with double and triple stigma that are formed from single parents, African-Americans, and same sex couples.

 Given that the main focus of this study was to explore cultural models of diverse blended families, the interest was not only in what these families were saying, but how did they say it? To what extent did they resist, conform to, transform, or take up dominant or alternate-cultural models? Thus, a strength of this research was the analysis method that consisted of a two-step process integrating Grounded Theory (Glaser 1998), and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Gee, 2004).

Rationale for using Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary paradigm concerned with the interactions and relationship between social practices, discourse, and an essential tool for analyzing talk, how people make meaning in discourse, texts and other interactions (Rogers, 2011). CDA is both a method and a theory and includes principles that are applicable to counseling for the following reasons: (1) Counseling is grounded in communication practices, (2) both counseling and discourse studies are social paradigms that approach problems through theoretical perspectives, and (3) the social world is constructed through discourse and various sign systems. Systems of meaning are not neutral, but submerged in social, political, cultural, racial, economic, and religious

constructions. Thus, socially constructed practices are assigned certain privileges and value (Blommaert, 2005; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Their approaches to discourse analysis rest on the principle that meaning construction is always an investigation into privilege and power. Using CDA methods in counseling is novel and is chosen to analyze a portion of data for this study to investigate diverse blended families as they construct meaning in an often hostile and biased society with double and triple stigma. Using CDA to examine the relationships between their discourse and the social world may provide useful interpretation, description, and explanation of their relationships and interactions. Some theories of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) are used to analyze nonverbal interactions include spoken language, gesture, head movements, and even pitch and voice tone (Norris, 2004) and may help to expand knowledge of what is already known about diverse blended families. Using these methods may be helpful to counselors and researchers in listening closely to narratives, looking beyond what clients say to include how they say it, the context in which it is said and the behavior associated with the discourse.

Summary

In the next chapter, the existing and emergent blended family literature is discussed as it pertains to diverse blended families. Dominant cultural narratives of these diverse blended family structures that exist in media, research, policy, laws, and practice will be explored as well as an overview of general systems-constructivist metatheory in understanding them.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The literature in this chapter is structured to provide first an overview of cultural

models and the history of cultural models of diverse blended families. Next, the role of

law and legal complexities is discussed. Finally, theories of change are introduced that

provide a lens in understanding the uniqueness of these families.

Cultural Models

Culture is not abstract and neither are cultural models. They are, however, taken-

for-granted storylines that unfold within the context of the social arena whereas identities

are thus formed (Gee, 1999; Holland et al., 1998). Cultural models take on various

identities. Based upon the situation, they dictate to members of a particular community

(often unconsciously) behavior that is expected, typical, and relevant (Gee, 1999).

According to Lopez-Bonilla (2010), it is through these social practices that storylines are

played out through the interaction of the characters' style, activities, and tasks. Thus,

cultural models are a result of shared knowledge through individual interaction, through

texts, and through media (Gee, 1999). Artifacts, symbols, and language and other objects

are all indicators within a cultural model that have a critical role in identity construction

and can cause certain behaviors and trigger emotions of members (Holland et al., 1998).

Cultural models are not fixed (Gee, 2004). They are frameworks that are embedded

within the social practice from which people can learn through reading, observing and

picking up in addition to interpersonal interaction.

Also referred to as "figured worlds," cultural models are ritualized through

repetitive practice (Gee) and can determine why people do what they do as well as why

and how they respond (or not respond) (Strauss, 1992). Holland et al. (1998) defined a cultural figured world as a "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation" whereas participants are known by their actions (p.52):

>...significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents (in the world of romance: attractive women, boyfriends, lovers, fiancés) who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state (flirting with, falling in love with, dumping, having sex with) as moved by a specific set of forces (attractiveness, love, lust) (p. 52).

Thus, it is through the process of social practice that beliefs are constructed, denied, and/or altered though what Gee refers to as "communities of practice." Individuals can become indoctrinated and conform in acceptable and expected ways of being by enacting a socially-constructed identity of that community. They also, however, have the propensity to reposition themselves through resisting and transforming expectations and affirmations of themselves with conflicting identities (Holland et al, 1998). This constructivist approach is not uncommon and is what Holland refers to as "social disposition" (p. 137). Regarding how these identities take shape, Lopez-Bonilla (2010) concluded that it is through looking at an individual's narratives of personal experiences and the "dialogical/dialectical relationship between the self and the environment" (p. 21).

<div align="center">Cultural Models of Blended Families in the United States</div>

Historically, stepfamilies were identified as resulting from the death of a spouse and remarriage (Hughes, 1991). The prefix "step" which comes from the Anglo-Saxon English word "steop" which means "bereaved" or "deprived," was used to categorize orphans as "stepbairn" and "stepchild" (Pryor, 2008). That there is pessimism associated

with blended families, considering the origin and association with death and dying, is not surprising (Pryor, 2008). Although multiple studies over the last 30 years have investigated various challenges of blended families, the majority of early studies characterized blended families as resulting from divorce with emphasis on remarriage issues (Ahrons, 1980a, 1981; Ahrons & Bowman, 1982; Cherlin, 1978; Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985; Duberman, 1975; Goetting, 1979; Ihinger-Tallman, 1998; Walker, Rogers & Messinger, 1977). As traditional literature almost exclusively defined blended families as remarried unions (Bray &Bray, 1993; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Michaels, 2006), those assumptions added to the invalidation of all blended families that were differently defined (Stewart, 2008). Since that time, researchers have defined nuclear/biological families as intact, assuming that blended families are thus broken or not intact (Baham et al., 2008; Berger, 2000; Bray, 1994; Brown, 2003; Crosbie-Burnett & Skyles, 1989; Darden & Zimmerman, 1992; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Love & Murdock, 2004; Queen, 2002). This study responds to the issue of the nature of diverse blended families by exploring them in their contextual interrelationships. The need for research of these families informed the research questions of this study:

- What dominant cultural models exist around diverse blended families?
- Given these constructs, in what ways do they conform to, transform, resist, or revoice dominant narratives of diverse blended families?

The Construction of the Diverse Blended Family

Stewart (2008) presented a broad perspective in the discussion of blended families, purposely focusing entirely on issues of nontraditional, diverse blended family forms vis-à-vis remarried blended families. She stated that her goal was to "uncover

stepfamilies that have been hidden from view, to understand how they have come about, and to see how they compare to traditional stepfamilies created by divorce and remarriage" (p. xiii). In wanting to know if families represent a mosaic of family forms, Stewart asserted that nontraditional pathways to stepfamilies are growing as individuals take diverse paths to stepfamily living (non-married childrearing, gay and lesbian unions, etc.), and how those paths are formed influences their blended family dynamics, relationships and their eventual well-being. In fact, Stewart emphasized that since nontraditional pathways are becoming more dominant than [traditional] ones and within a broader context of defining blended families, the traditional definition of blended families is now the *minority*.

Stewart (2008) provided a list of scenarios that identified the following diverse family forms: (1) a divorced woman who has custody of her two small children whose boyfriend moves in with them; (2) a single woman and her boyfriend break up after the birth of their child and the boyfriend moves out of state with no contact with his child; the woman marries another man, who eventually adopts her child; (3) a woman divorces her husband, falls in love with her female coworker, who moves in with her and her sons; (4) a divorced middle-aged woman with college age children who marries a widower; and (5) a boy lives with his mother while his father remarries and lives with his new wife and her three children from a former marriage. Regardless of the differences in identities of the aforementioned family forms (legal marriage, residential status, sexual orientation, age, etc.), according to Stewart, all are defined as blended families, although there continues to be no consensus among investigators, policy, and laws as to what constitutes a blended family.

One such alternate source that supports traditional definitions of blended families is The Stepfamily Association of America (SAA) (2003). The SAA defined blended families as forming after a parent marries a person who is not the biological parent of the child, which limits blended family definition to married and remarried individuals. Recent studies that acknowledge broader definitions of blended families defy traditional characterizations that ignore and invalidate the experiential realities of non-married and same sex blended families (Berger, 2000; Berger, 1998; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Stewart, 2008; Stewart, 2007).

Social and Demographic Changes

Stewart (2008) asserted that blended families are no longer formed primarily as a result of death of a spouse and or divorce. Blended families are emerging as a result of both social and demographic shifts in society; including, but not limited to, single parenting; non-married residential families; an increase in nonresident parent involvement, and increased awareness of lesbian and gay relationships (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995; Ganong & Colemen, 2004; Stewart, 2008; Teachman & Tedrow, 2008).

Teachman and Tedrow (2008) discussed examples of how household structures in America have been evolving for some time with the emergence of diverse family types. Examples included the number of traditional nuclear biological households that declined from 40% to 24% between 1970 and 2000, while during the same time, diverse blended family types (non biological) increased from 10% to 16%. Noteworthy was the awareness that a huge influx of children would live a part of their formative years in a blended family. The authors, however, concluded that the real problem is in the methodological complexities in measurement of these families (despite their growth) that have led to inaccurate numbers of them.

The U.S. Census stated that a "household includes all the people who occupy a housing unit as their usual place of residence" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). As nuclear families are defined as a household where "two or more people reside together and…are related by birth, marriage, and or adoption" (p. 1), stepfamilies are defined as a "married couple household" where at least one stepchild also resides. If the non-biological parent adopts the stepchild, however, the household is not counted as a stepfamily, nor does the Census count across households for blended families (the home of the non-resident parent). Blended family researchers and professional blended family advocacy organizations concur that this is a real problem; that the Census does not count all blended family households (NSRC, 2002; Peterschick, 2006; Stewart, 2008).

Stewart (2008) discussed the importance of studying blended families both within and across households, noting inconsistencies in how blended families define themselves as opposed to definitions in the research literature. The author stated that blended family members' definition of their families includes a compilation of non-blood relatives and family members in other households while research studies mostly define and investigate family members within the same household. Thus, across household membership, dynamics are neglected, despite how important the relationship is (as in the case of joint custody). Stewart attributed this error to the fact that researchers often collect demographic data from the U.S. Census as a sole point of reference. Cherlin and Furstenburg (1994) further explained this trend of demographic definitions of families, since it resonates with traditional Western methods of thinking about what constitutes a family in America: nuclear/biological families that live within one household.

Media Images and Cultural Models of Blended Families

There is a need for positive images of blended families in the media, given uncomplimentary portrayals and perceptions of them as less than nuclear families (Stewart, 2008; Berger, 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 1997). While more researchers have studied portrayals of blended families in print media (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1985; Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Coleman, Ganong, & Gingrich, 1985), limited studies have investigated portrayals of these families in visual media (Leon & Angst, 2004). One landmark study explored blended families in film plot summaries (e g., *Wicked Stepmother* [1989], *The Stepfather* [1987], *Radio Flyer* [1992]) with results indicating both neutral and negative portrayals of stepparents as evil and abusive more than half (58%) of the time (Claxton-Oldfield & Butler, 1998). Cherlin (1978) added that blended family function is indeed influenced by broad societal values and attitudes, which Pryor (2008) asserts that it is not a new phenomenon, given the impact of negative portrayals of blended families even in children's films such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella.*

Cultural Stereotypes of Blended Families in Children's Media (print and visual)

Cultural myths and stereotypes of stepmothers in children's literature and film (around blended families) represent images of wicked, sinister, and cruel portrayals of stepparents that reinforce fear and suspicion of all stepparents (Whiting et al., 2007). From the cruelty of stepmothers in *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, abandoning father and wicked stepmother in *Hansel and Gretle* to the unrealistic account of the problem-free *Brady Bunch*, all portrayals tend to incite apprehension and diminish hope in children that their blended families will be any different. Claxton-Oldfield (2008) also discussed the prevalence of stereotypes of blended families in visual media, film, movies, adult literature, and fairy tales where children learn at young ages about the plight of [wicked]

stepparents (especially) [stepmothers], leaving stepmothers to be perceived as "objects of prejudice" (p. 30).

Blended family experts, Ganong and Coleman (1983) were the first known researchers to examine American college students' perceptions of stepmothers and stepfathers. In this landmark study, students were asked to rate various family position labels, including stepmothers and stepfathers. Results indicated a comparison of responses (mothers to stepmothers and fathers to stepfathers) that both biological parents were rated more positive than stepparents. The authors concluded that, based upon those findings, the wicked stepmother/stepfather portrayals continue to be "in operation" (p. 921).

The role and image of stepmothers in media was investigated by Brown (1984) in an exploratory study of 51 stepmothers. The results indicated that the wicked stepmother image indeed negatively affected participants' relationships with their stepchildren, as well as their self-concept. Although all participants recognized the stepmother role as complex, 72 percent depicted, however, satisfaction with their role versus dissatisfaction.

Cultural Stereotypes of Blended Families in Adult Media (print and visual)

Several researchers have long examined portrayals of stepfamilies in print media including self-help literature (Coleman & Ganong, 1987); fiction (Coleman et al., 1985); and magazine articles (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1985), where an exploration of well known magazine articles from 1940 to 1980 indicated change over time in the representation of blended families. The findings indicated a transition in the tone of the articles from optimism in the 1940s and 1950s, pessimism in the 1960s, and caution in the 1970s. Authors found that most issues mostly discussed in the articles matched issues

discussed in the professional literature, such as relationship issues between stepparents and stepchildren, and remarried and former spouse issues more so in the 1970s.

Coleman et al (1985) investigated blended family strengths in self-help literature and adolescent fiction. This strength-based approach to studying blended families cited positive models of blended family adult intimacy, despite an emphasis on stepfamily problems. In a more recent study, Leon and Angst (2004) discussed the portrayal of blended families within the adult media arena, stating that media has the propensity to sway people's attitudes of blended families, as well as expectations of them. Using content analysis, this study explored depictions of blended families in films from 1990 through 2003 with two purposes in mind: to examine both film portrayals and to recognize media images that would be useful in promoting realistic images of blended families for remarriage education programs. Results indicated that blended families were usually portrayed negatively, with 19 of the 26 films rated as pessimistic, while only three films portrayed blended families positively. The findings raised questions for further investigation of films on non-married blended families as compared to remarried blended families due to emerging formation of blended families through cohabitation.

The articles explored in this section have highlighted various portrayals salient in blended family relationships within print and visual media. In summary, studies have shown a problem-focused approach, with less attention on strengths. The findings of these works also indicate a similarity in dominant models of blended family portrayal that mirror professional literature characteristics of them that are uncomplimentary. The stereotypes and stigma associated with blended family portrayal were identified as vague and neutral and a consensus in the findings did not indicate that these impressions were geared toward positive assumptions, but rather leaned toward negative ones. Claxton-

Oldfield (2001) indicated that this trend in the media has to change. Researchers agreed that media has a responsibility to be balanced in its portrayal of blended families with a fundamental role in representing blended families positively (Claxton-Oldfield, 2001; Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Pryor, 2008). Ganong and Coleman (1997) stated it most succinctly: "A more balanced emphasis by the media on the positive and negative aspects of stepfamilies would be helpful in setting expectations and attitudes" (p. 102).

Blended Families as an Incomplete Institution

Cherlin's (1978) theoretical model for understanding the unique experiences of blended families has received widespread acknowledgement as a viable framework and has been cited by many studies that investigated blended families (Berger, 2000; Hall & Kitsen, 2000; Stewart, 2008). In Cherlin's observance of parental-child interrelationships within first-married families in comparison to stepparent-stepchild interrelationships, a higher degree of institutionalization within nuclear (biological) families than in blended families was found. He argued that, in families of origin, norms and rituals are born that guide relationships among family members as well as among family members and society. He further concluded that this privilege is missing in blended families, as they were not families of origin. Some researchers argued that is it unfair to compare blended families to nuclear families and that a majority of blended family research continues to be problem-focused, despite recent studies of them that are strength based (Afifi, 2008; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Ganong, Coleman, & Fine, 2000).

Blended Family Strengths and Challenges

Despite conflicting portrayals of diverse blended families, a growing body of research has discussed their resilience (Afifi, 2008; Ganong, 2008; Pryor, 2008; Stewart, 2008), as well as their unique challenges (Stewart, 2008). Berger (1998) discussed

blended families from a historical and clinical perspective, without portraying them from a deficit family model. Her inclusive and normative model highlighted healthy family functioning, although she stated that a [universal] model of blended families did not exist. Berger concluded that blended families should be assessed with the knowledge that there are differences not only between blended families and nuclear families, but distinctions within different blended family types with their own particular norms. Of distinct types, Berger specified that racial and ethnic experiences of Black blended families impact their unique issues. Triple stigmatization of same sex blended families call for careful assessment and conceptualization.

Examining within-group blended families is not a new phenomenon. In 1993, Visher and Visher found that there was a need for researchers who investigate blended families to adopt more normative-adaptive approaches by examining factors that increase blended family function and healthy relationships vis-à-vis exploring what makes them dysfunctional. The authors suggested that in applying the risk and resiliency approach, investigators intentionally seek broader perspectives of blended family portrayal.

Hetherington and Kelly (2002) also suggest alternate and positive paths in assessing and understanding blended families. For instance, they found that, although various studies continued to examine negativity and dysfunction of blended families (in comparison to biological families), the risk and resiliency approach in assessing within group blended families allowed for broader interpretations that were positive and protective. The authors further found that, based upon the risk and resiliency approach, blended families are portrayed as [functional] rather than [dysfunctional] and that children in these families grow up just as emotionally healthy as children from nuclear families.

Schrodt (2006), in a discussion of the complexities of different blended family types, explored diversity within these families from a resilience perspective, comparing within-group blended families in terms of communication patterns and levels of function. He surveyed 586 children from blended families and constructed a typology of distinct types of blended families: bonded, functional, ambivalent, evasive, and conflicted. Results show that children in the functional and bonded blended families reported more involvement, expressiveness, less dissension, and avoidance than children from the other blended family types.

Golish (2003) investigated the resilience of blended families according to their apparent strength. He interviewed 30 blended families including, children, stepparents, and parents. He found that, despite their strength, these families experienced similar challenges. He also found that the strength of the family determined *how* they discussed and managed their challenges. Strong families were considered as those who were adaptive, used open communication, had problem solving skills, empathy, and humor.

These aforementioned results may add to existing literature the importance of investigating blended families from with-in group comparisons in understanding their complexities, without comparing them against the standard of nuclear family function. Despite growing positive assessments of blended families, however, Papernow (2008) concluded that as long as society refers to the nuclear family as the "ideal" family composition, by which all other family forms are compared, blended families will continue to be stigmatized as defiant and deficient when compared to nuclear families. Moreover, Papernow stated that the use of nuclear family maps to assess challenges of blended families continues to occur often and is misguided with flawed results.

Stigmatized Diverse Blended Families

Diverse blended families that suffer double and triple stigma tend to be families that are characterized as non-traditional and non-biological (Berger, 1998; Stewart, 2008). Being that all blended families are considered as deficient when compared to nuclear families, remarried blended families (referred to as traditional blended families that form after divorce or death of a spouse) do not tend to carry the same rank of stigma as non-married blended families, African-American blended families, and same sex blended families (Stewart, 2008). As a result of their double and triple stigma status, these diverse blended family forms, although resilient, may suffer misinterpretations, discrimination, and bigotry.

Blended Families Formed by Married Couples (who were single parents)

Traditionally referred to as nonmarital childbearing families, with illegitimate children, blended families that are formed in marriage by single parents with children have not been systematically explored (Stewart, 2008). Although not a new phenomenon, little is known empirically about how these families compare to traditional blended families who form as a result of the death of a spouse or divorce (Ganong & Coleman, 1989). This study defined this particular blended family form as first time married male and female partners who share residence and at least one of them has a biological child who lives in the residence that is a product of a former relationship. Even though not fairly represented in professional literature, these families suffer a social and moral stigma, coupled with countless misconceptions of them.

Strengths, Resilience, and Issues of Concern

Bumpas et al. (1995) are the first American researchers to widely investigate these families. They found that, dating back to the 1970s, at least one-third of children in

blended families in America were born to unmarried mothers. According to Coleman and Ganong (2004) a lack of substantiated studies on these families have, however not been conducted since that time which compared them to traditional blended families that resulted from divorce or death of a spouse.

Common myths that traditionally identified these families are: (1) most unmarried mothers are teenagers; (2) children are unplanned and unwanted; and (3) single mothers are not in committed relationships (Stewart, 2008). The following studies, however, refuted these and other myths. According to Bianchi and Casper (2000) only 15 % of births in the U.S. were to teenage mothers. The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) (2002) reported that 45 % of births to unmarried women were planned and wanted and a population study reported that 40 % of single mothers were living with their child's father at the time of the child's birth (Bumpass & Lu, 2000).

Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2001) found that, despite strengths in these families, results of investigations about them are bleak and they are regarded as "fragile," partially due to pessimistic portrayals of them. Stewart et al. (2001) found that single fathers who fathered children out of wedlock favored (cohabitation) rather than marriage and high numbers of non-married blended families suggest that the children of these unions may not have opportunities to experience a "married" household, thus being deprived of the legal, economic, and social benefits of being in a married household.

In conclusion, Stewart (2008) found that a major limitation of examining these families was due to a lack of investigation of the patterns that follow after the single mother either marries or joins a "cohabitating" union. Nonetheless, Stewart asserted, these families are stigmatized as being the most vulnerable and frail, given they exist

outside of the institution of marriage and lack the support and resources available to married families.

<div align="center">Blended Families Formed by Non-Married Couples</div>

A blended family formed by cohabitation is another diverse blended family form that suffers stigma (Stewart, 2008). Living together or "cohabitating" blended families are not a new trend in America and although these families dominate a large, growing portion of American households, they remain under researched in the blended family literature since most studies on "cohabitation" investigated couples without children (Booth & Johnson, 1988; Nock, 1995; Thomas & Colella, 1992). Statistics have shown that between 1980 and 1984, two-thirds of children were a part of a non-married (heterosexual) union (Bumpass, Raley & Sweet, 1985) and one fourth of all blended families were in committed non-married unions in the 1990s (Stewart, 2001).

For the purpose of this study, this family form is defined as male and female partners who share residence in a committed relationship and at least one of the partners has a biological child who lives in the residence who is a product of a former relationship. This family form is not to be compared to single parent families where a partner may visit or (stay over) periodically. In non-married blended family households, there are household and family norms for all family members including rules, discipline, etc.

Most of the literature on these families was based upon comparative studies of non-married blended family function to remarried ones (Graefe & Lichter, 1999; Morisson & Ritalo, 2000), whereas Wu and Matinson (1993) discussed how children's well-being was affected by the family's instability and changes in structure. Nonetheless, despite dismal findings, Bumpass et al., (1995) provided an exception to the rule in their

findings that non-married blended families were not as likely to break up as blended families who formed through marriage.

Stewart (2008) emphasized that non-married blended families are more common within most ethnic groups as compared to White families and tend to have fewer economic resources than blended families formed by divorce and remarriage. Wu and Wu (2008) stated that the emotional well-being of children in these families tended to be lower when compared to traditional remarried blended families, and the problem could stem from younger, less educated mothers with fewer resources than remarried mothers. King et al. (2004) reported that the lower emotional well being of children in these families might derive from issues of the non-resident biological fathers versus young mothers; (e.g., lower levels of visitation, compared to blended families formed by divorce and remarriage). Stewart also discussed that subsequently, elevated numbers of non-married blended families are thought to suggest that the children of those unions may be deprived of opportunities to experience a "married" household, thus deprived of the legal, economic, and social benefits of living in a married household.

Mahoney (1994b) discussed the importance of future studies of investigation into the well being of children of these unions since some studies reported low level quality relationships in non-married families. To conclude, researchers have argued for additional qualitative studies to better understand these families, as some family scholars conclude that non-married blended partners are less committed to their relationships compared to married partners.

Blended Families Formed by Lesbian and Gay Couples

Lesbian and gay blended families are a growing family form (Claxton-Oldfield, 2007). Although it is estimated that there are one to five million lesbian mothers and one

to three million gay fathers in America (Hall & Kitson, 2000), inaccurate measures of these families are due to various reasons, including the concealment of their identity for risk of harm to their families and fear of losing custody and/or visitation rights (Hare & Skinner, 2008; Lambert, 2005; McIntyre, 1994). Whereas the 2000 Census Bureau reported over 600,000 same sex partner households, of which many included children (Oswald & Clausell, 2006), literature about these families continues to be limited. Moreover, increased investigations into these families may expand awareness of their experiences (Lambert, 2005). Baptist (1987) however wondered if the scarcity of studies mirrored a social reaction of: if you do not recognize them, then you can assume that they are not there.

Blended families are already widely perceived and portrayed as less functional than biological families, but when paired with a gay and lesbian identity, this emerging family type is considered to have multiple stigmas (Berger, 1998; Stewart, 2008). There is some conflict among researchers as to what constitutes a gay and lesbian blended family, and how they are formed (e g., donor insemination, adoption.). Usually the most common definition, however, is: one or both partners have a biological offspring from a former heterosexual partnership, and ultimately entered a same sex partnership. Thus, having children through adoption or artificial insemination does not constitute the characteristics of a blended family, as these children are considered a "product" of the union (Stewart, 2008, p. 166).

Triple Stigmatization of Lesbian and Gay Blended Families

Pope (2001) inclusively defines the GLBT community as a *cultural minority group* within a multicultural society with specific needs as a result of historical oppression and discrimination. Consensus among researchers is that gay and lesbian

blended families are perceived negatively as a triple stigmatized family form mostly due to pessimistic attitudes about their triple minority status (Berger, 1998, 2000; Porche & Purvin, 2008; Stewart, 2008). Stewart (2008) defined the triple stigmatization as: (1) blended family identity; (2) being lesbian or gay; and (3) being a lesbian or gay parent. Being stigmatized for their sexual orientation and family configuration continues to cloud normative perspectives of these couples as functional individuals.

Patterson (1994) discussed the extent of gay and lesbian blended parents being ostracized within some LGBT communities, with the most pressure on gay fathers by other gay childless men who believe that gay parenthood is a contradiction. Berger (2000) further discussed the dilemma of gay parenting sometimes seen as a contradiction since parenthood is usually associated with heterosexuality.

In a study on lesbian and gay parents' identity development transitions, Lynch (2004) brought attention to the complex transitions same-sex couples go through when they become blended families, stating that in today's society, the gay/lesbian step parenting identity may be the most complicated parenting role. Although these families address similar issues common to blended heterosexual families (former partner issues; visitation; boundary and role ambiguity; overall adjustment; and parenting issues, they do not share the privilege of heterosexual couples and are constrained by social unacceptability and a lack of legalization to protect their family interests.

Lynch (2004) further argued that prior developmental models do not meet the emergent needs of these families nor provide understanding of their new identities. Overall results showed that couples that chose to have children were better prepared for challenges and life transitions of being a sexual minority blended family than families who entered a relationship with a partner who was already a biological parent. For

individuals who came out after having children or did not plan to have children, results revealed that they had to create connections with no available guidelines. Despite the transitions of identity development, Lynch (2004) found, however, that lesbian and gay families reported strong bonds and commitment in establishing "stigma management strategies (ways in which to avoid and combat external and internal homophobia), and they had resolved and come to terms with the loss of heterosexual privilege" (p. 49).

Lesbian and gay blended families suffer widespread stereotype from institutional and structural perspectives and there is little sensitivity to the triple minority membership of these families (Lynch, 2004). Schools do not consistently provide alternate family models (Benkov, 1994), therapists often typically focus on the sexual orientation of the couple without assessing the family holistically by looking at their unique challenges and dynamics, and most churches do not provide spiritual support, but ostracize them (Hall & Kitson, 2000). Lynch pointed out how scholarly literature also largely neglects sexual minority families, while concentrating on structural issues, they disregard other salient topics. In their discussion of clinical implications and training, in association with internalized heterosexism, Kashubeck-West et al. (2008) urged counseling psychologists who work with sexual minorities to advocate for social change at a macro level by providing studies that reveal the comparable psychological wellbeing of children raised in opposite sex and same-sex households.

An Even More Incomplete Institution Stigma

Hall and Kitson (2000) drew upon Cherlin's (1978) Incomplete Institution Model of remarried families with children to understand and explain the dilemma of gay and lesbian blended families, stating that they experience many of the same problems heterosexual blended families encounter since they also lack institutionalized guidelines

to support and protect their family interests. Stewart (2008) stressed that gay and lesbian blended families could be viewed as the "ultimate test" of Cherlin's model because they face more discrimination than other diverse blended families, including African-American blended families (because gay rights are far behind laws that address racial discrimination), non-married (cohabitating) blended families, and blended families formed by single parents.

While Berger (1998) discussed the stigma these families experience because of their sexual identity and being in a blended family as overwhelming because "they get the worst of both worlds" (p.98), Johnson (2001) explored the mounting concerns of these families. He found that they *often* face increased stress with the pressures of parenthood amidst a lack of social unacceptability.

Resilience in Lesbian and Gay Blended Families

Various studies indicated that there tend to be more lesbian blended families than gay blended families in America (Claxton-Oldfield & O'neil, 2007; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Lambert, 2005; Stewart, 2008). Studies on gay male blended fathers may be less prevalent, because they are primarily non-residential parents with biological mothers having custody of children (Ganong & Coleman, 1983; Goldstein & Erera, 2004; Stewart; 2008). Goldstein and Erera (2004) argued that lesbian-headed stepfamilies are best explored from a strengths perspective and found that these families have strong and committed familial bonds. Earlier studies also found that lesbian families have long experienced emotional closeness, love, and security within their families (Hare, 1994), while more recent investigations report the same. Despite the discrimination these families suffer, many have been resilient in establishing supportive and positive homes (Hall & Kitson, 2007; Patterson, 2000; Stewart, 2008).

Despite the stigma that same sex blended families are not legitimate family forms, research has not supported this assertion. Berger (1998) argued that it has not been proven that blended families are responsible for maladjustment of children in gay and lesbian families. Moreover, there are no known studies that suggest that these children have low self-esteem, emotional and cognitive disorders, nor deficient communication skills. The emotional well-being of children was further investigated by Patterson (2000) who found that children of same sex blended homes were as normal as other children from heterosexual blended families with respect to mental health, self concept, behavior problems, moral judgment, and peer relationships.

In fact, a recent study investigated the psychological adjustment and well being of children from birth to adolescence raised in lesbian households not only substantiate these findings, but preceded them (Gartrell & Boss, 2010). In the first longitudinal study to track children raised by lesbian mothers, the findings suggested that although these children had comparable scores with children of heterosexual homes on social behavior and development, they had higher scores on some psychological measures of confidence and self-esteem. According to authors, they found more than they anticipated:

> We simply expected to find no difference in psychological adjustment between adolescents reared in lesbian families and the normative sample of age-matched controls… I was surprised to find that on some measures we found higher levels of [psychological] competency and lower levels of behavioral problems. It wasn't something I anticipated (p. 23).

Moreover, children in lesbian homes whose mothers separated did not do any less than children whose mothers remained together.

Other findings in the study stated that 41 % of the adolescents reported peer related acts of discrimination, teasing and/or ostracism because of their family type. These children at age 10 reported more discrimination and demonstrated increased signs of psychological distress than at age 17. Researchers wondered whether, since the feelings had resolved by age 17, other factors such as family support and educational diversity appreciation may have been evident to help to ease the challenges these adolescents faced. Moreover, Gartrell suggested that lesbian mothers are usually very active in their children's lives and it is not uncommon for them to address topics such as diversity, tolerance, and sexuality early on with their children because of the social indifference and discrimination they face.

As the literature on the resilience of same sex blended families is evolving, lesbian headed households are sometimes unfairly investigated as compared to nuclear families in terms of relationship satisfaction (Fredricksen-Goldstein & Erera, 2003). These authors found that although the literature portrays these families as experiencing similar relationship and familial challenges as heterosexual couples and families, same-sex families suffer blatant discrimination and isolation in a heterosexist and homophobic environment that invalidates their relationships, safety and family existence. The authors discussed, however that examining lesbian-headed families has given cause to revisit traditional views about care giving, roles, parenting, and couple relationship, since lesbian families report greater couple satisfactions after having children as compared to heterosexual families that decrease in couple satisfaction after having children. One reason for this phenomenon, according to Acock and Demo (1994), may be that lesbian families tend to sustain egalitarian roles in their families after having children, while heterosexual families tend to be more patriarchal. Demo and Allen (1996), further

discussed the issue of equity and friendship as determining factors for the high level of

satisfaction reported in these families, whereas lesbian headed families (in general) tend

to have equal relationships in terms of status and power, child care, and division of labor.

Another strength of lesbian and gay blended families is their endurance in long-

term relationships. Connolly's (2005) qualitative study investigated 10 lesbian couples in

relationships of 10 to 25 years and found that, although they suffered unique stressors,

relationship resilience over time safeguarded and sustained them in midst of adversity.

The author discussed the prevalence and presence of resilience as not merely an activity,

but a *process* for these couples and stated that it "involves functioning successfully in the

milieu of high threat" (p. 268). The success and longevity of these long-term couples

were reported as attributes to their process of overcoming and rebounding from cultural

marginalization. The study also noted a specific life stressor that increases strain includes

the deprivation of legal rights and benefits for their families. In a discussion of how these

families may thrive within a culture that does not legitimize their relationships, Laird

(1996) explained that it is not uncommon for lesbian couples to invent, reshape, and

integrate new meaning.

More recently Porsche and Purvin (2008) also investigated long-term gay and

lesbian couples and blended families who had been together for 20 years or more.

Participants were interviewed the first year that same sex marriage was legalized in

Massachusetts. The authors examined both stressors and supports related to the longevity

of their relationships and to what extent those factors contributed to the couples' option to

legally marry after long-term relationships. Porsche and Purvin found that, although all

couples reported constraints to be heterosexist and homophobic attitudes toward them,

similar strengths were reported that sustained and solidified their long-term commitments

to their families. Strengths reported included legal agreements and commitments such as estate planning, home ownership, parenting, seeking counseling and maintaining monogamous roles. The study reported that, although eight of the ten couples opted to legally marry, and the other two reaffirmed and maintained their commitment, couples had already sustained marriage-like commitment milestones over the years.

Fredriksen (1999) found that despite negative assumptions of lesbian and gay blended families being abandoned by their extended families, substantive support and encouragement were reported. He discussed that this resource is often overlooked since there are documented reports of other non-residential extended family members seeking custody of children raised in same-sex households.

In summary, although sexual minority blended families are a growing family form and increased studies investigate their uniqueness, overall, they continue to be under researched. They are portrayed as having a triple stigma: being in a blended family, being lesbian or gay, and being a lesbian or gay parent. They suffer prejudice and are assumed to not have viable family relationships, but research suggests the opposite. In fact, studies have shown that same-sex couples have resilient, long-term committed relationships with children as emotionally healthy as children in heterosexual relationships. Lesbian families also report greater relationship satisfaction after having children when compared to heterosexual families that have children.

The Impact of Race and Ethnicity on Diverse Blended Families

Research on how race and ethnicity shapes blended families is limited. A strong criticism of blended family research is that it is largely homogenous, as studies continue to be conducted on White, middle class families, thus limiting generalizations and neglecting normative experiences of ethnic minorities (Lambert, 2005). On the other

hand, Stewart (2008) stated that, although few studies focus on minorities, of those available, ethnic minority blended families are disproportionally compared to nuclear families, and are disproportionally African-American. Moreover, Stewart affirms that she found no estimates on Asian, Latino, or American Indian blended families. Other studies that have investigated a broader view of blended families have also reported the disproportion of African-Americans (Krieder, 2003; Krieder & Fields, 2005). Krieder and Fields (2005) reported that the 2001 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) indicated that, while 15 % of Black children live in married or cohabitating blended families, only 9 % of White children live in these family configurations.

African American Blended Families: Surviving the Double Stigma

Recognition for culture-specific studies that identify unique family patterns and structure is increasing (Kane, 2000). Moreover, Kane argued, "Although cognizant of the risk that any attempt to identify general patterns may be misused in the form of stereotypes, therapists also recognize that a prerequisite to understanding a particular family is consideration of the context in which the family operates, and culture is one aspect of that context" (p. 691). African-American families, already stigmatized as deficient, are portrayed with a "double stigma" when they are a part of a blended family and thus, derogatory images of them are magnified (Stewart, 2007). African-American blended families are reported as more stigmatized than White blended families (Berger, 1995) and labeled as wearing a double badge of difference because of their family type and skin color (Boyd-Franklin, 1989).

Hines and Boyd-Franklin (1996) argued that negative perceptions about African-Americans could be traced to historical origin. The authors argued that mainstream researchers, who originally conducted studies in the 1960s, presented negative views of

African-American family structure as disorganized, deprived, and disadvantaged. The negative perception of African-Americans has roots in the Moynihan report, written by Senator Daniel Moynihan and published for the U.S. Dept. of Labor in 1965. The report depicted Black families as unstable and weak. In an effort to "fix" the Black family, Moynihan concluded: "at the heat of deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family…It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time" (p. # 1). The report further portrayed the Black family as both pathological and dysfunctional.

Bishop (1996) argued that Moynihan's report reflected a negative viewpoint of African-American families mainly because they did not fit into a normative traditional model and based upon an overall "dominant paradigm of white supremacy" (p. #1). More recent views regarding family value assumptions and family structure found that assessment and evaluation processes continued to be based on perceptions and expectations of middle-class, nuclear, European American definitions of family (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; Stewart, 2007; Sue & Sue, 2008).

Challenging the Deficit-Family Model

In light of research that has historically and inaccurately portrayed African-American families, various authors have discussed the need for a paradigm shift from a deficit-family model to a normative perspective (Banerjee, 2004; Kane, 2000; Vereen, 2007). Despite "popular myths and stories that discredit them" (Bray, 2005, p. 5), literature that examines the strength and benefit of cultural identification is becoming available (Brown, 2008). In a review of the literature on African-American family structure, Vereen (2007) found that, because of the comparison of African-American families to middle-class European-American families, their needs have been

insufficiently recognized in therapy and counseling, which hinders a strength-based counseling relationship. Inasmuch, the same dilemma exists when investigating African-American blended families. A majority of blended family studies reflect traditional studies of European American middle-class nuclear families as a point of reference, therefore, confirming African-American blended families as grossly under-represented in professional literature (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005). Cain and Combs-Orme further acknowledge this as a disservice to African-American blended families because the lack of research undermines their strengths and uniqueness, supports stereotypes, and devalues the significance of investigating them.

In an effort to investigate the diversity within African-American family functioning and to establish a broad typology of Black family function that encompassed various socioeconomic levels, Mandura and Murray (2002) examined 116 African-American adolescents and their married and blended family parents, assessing their perceptions. Three family types were identified as:

1. Cohesive authoritarian (described as cohesive, stressed personal growth and development and critical thinking, education, moral and spiritual support and focus on the well-being of children);

2. Conflictive-authoritarian (characterized with conflict, less critical thinking, a lack of family activities, but spiritual support and education achievement is encouraged);

3. Defensive-neglectful (described as no emphasis on spiritual growth, education, morality, nor child-well-being, characterized as emotionally neglectful, and the most dysfunctional family type than the other two).

Authors stated that results might be helpful in highlighting diversity within Black

families amidst research that disproportionally investigates lower socioeconomic and

female single-headed household families.

Cain and Combs-Orme (2005) also challenged the deficit family model frequently

used in research on African-American families. The authors sought to examine African-

American families contextually and investigated 93 African-American families using a

risk and resiliency approach from a cultural-variant perspective to explore the impact of

stress and parenting on family structure. The study encouraged the importance of using

culturally variant lens in investigating Black families that portray family circumstances as

unique vis-à-vis atypical. Results revealed great diversity in living arrangements and

socioeconomic differences accounted for the most difference among families rather than

family structure. Additionally, results showed that family stress was influenced by

economics and not family structure.

Resilience of African-American Blended Families

In a recent study on African-American family resiliency, racial socialization, and

social support were discussed as protective factors (Brown, 2008). In the face of

challenging statistics of African-American families including an increase in female

single-headed households, absent fathers, literacy, crime, and the poverty level, many

African-American families [middle and lower socioeconomic] regularly triumph over

social and economic adversities (Miller & MacIntosh, 1999). Results also found that

upward mobility, academic success and self-empowerment were not uncommon lessons

encouraged within African-American families.

Kane (2000) studied structural and relationship dynamics within many African-American families. He found that Black participants made strong affirmations of positive experiences within their families of origin. Pipes-McAdoo (2002) attributed this extensive support system to African-Americans' capacity to triumph over harsh conditions. Boyd-Franklin (1989) affirmed that, although a focus on strengths of African-American families became apparent in professional literature in the 1960s, their capacity for resilience and endurance existed much earlier. The authors discussed the history of "fictive kin" in Black families which was a common practice during post slavery when African-American adults assisted in raising children from the plantation whose parents had been killed or sold, informally adopting them and taking in (doubling-up) individuals who were not non-blood related.

Stewart (2007) referred to these customs as strengths for African-American blended families, stating they may adjust easier to blended family systems than their White and Hispanic counterparts because of this enduring quality. Hill (1972) referred to this custom as an informal adoption practice that African-Americans developed in response to a historical rejection to formal adoption, and it inadvertently strengthened kinship bonds that provided emotional support and encouragement within their communities.

Significance of Religion and Spirituality

At the center of African-American culture is a common thread and foundation that is rarely disputed: the significance of religion and spirituality among many African-American people. Religion/spirituality has been a primary support system and a source of resilience with historical relevance for many African-American families. W. E. B. Dubois (1898) in the beginning of the twenty-first century wrote passionately about what was

then called "The Negro Church". He spoke to its importance, structure, and endurance when he wrote, "The [Negro] church is the only social institution of Negroes which started in the African forest and survived slavery" (p. 6).

Sanders and Bradley (2002) affirmed, "The organized Black Church is the oldest and most influential organization founded, maintained, and controlled by Black people" (p. 73). Depicted as a social agent, the Black Church has historically provided multiple functions for African-American families and the level of support many African-American blended families receive is a part of the village-communal support system that encourages their identity as a blended family. The authors reported that, with its many challenges and complexities, African-American blended families have often turned to their church for support and strength. Within the Black Church that Hill (1998) called the pinnacle of self help institutions within Black communities, these families may perceive a sense of normalcy about themselves, which has positive impact on their self-esteem and emotional wellness.

In conclusion, research on how culture and ethnicity shapes blended families is limited, and there are even fewer research investigations available on ethnic minorities besides African-Americans. The fact that studies are largely homogenous, with most studies on White, middle class families and that African-Americans are disproportionately represented is a problem. Growing concerns are that studies on African-American blended families are not culturally specific, focus is on a deficit-family model, represents lower-income families rather than an overview of the African-American population in general, and are unfairly compared to White middle-class and nuclear families (Cain and Combs-Orme (2005). The resilience of African-American blended families is present in their cultural identification, strong kinship bonds, and

spiritual orientation. Future research on strength-based risk and resilient/cultural variant

model approaches in investigating these families are needed that could increase

knowledge and awareness of the diversity and resilience within these families.

<center>The Role of the Law: Legal Complexities and Stress</center>

The role of the law regarding relationships between stepparents and stepchildren

has been limited, vague, and ambiguous (Atkin, 2008; Ganong & Coleman, 1997;

Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & McDaniel, 1998). Although a few states are slowly

acknowledging diverse family forms with some policies that require stepparent financial

responsibility for residential stepchildren, the debate over what constitutes a family

continues to privilege nuclear married families (Atkin, 2008), thus ignoring diverse

blended family forms such as non-married, gay and lesbian blended families. While legal

complexities surrounding blended families are not new (Ganong & Coleman, 1994),

researchers argue that existing ambiguous and limited policies may contribute to

additional stress and strain in blended family relationships, hindering the development or

continuance of close bonds (Fine, 1989; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Ramsey, 1986).

According to Malia (2008), laws that impact blended families are limiting, and

conflicting. Blended family law practices are controlled by federal and state jurisdictions

which have ambiguous guidelines. Although state laws govern traditional probate and

family law issues, federal laws encompasses a wider spectrum of programs and

assumptions that include blended families. Another distinction is state laws are known to

follow a "stranger model" (p. 552), which involves ignoring stepparents as having no

legal rights over their stepchildren while married or after divorce. Federal guidelines,

however, referred to as operating from a "dependable model" (p. 552), provide for

stepparents to carry stepchildren on their federal taxes, claim them as dependents, and if

stepchildren are receiving welfare benefits, they can be discontinued if the stepparent is financially providing for the child (ren). The dilemma rests with contradiction, that in the event of death or divorce, stepchildren are not legally eligible to receive benefits from the stepparent. Inasmuch, while some statutes provide for visitation and custody hearings after blended families dissolve, petitioning the court is a difficult process for stepparent (Malia, 2005).

The following are among questions raised by Atkin (2008) about the state of legal policies for blended families: (1) In what ways should law and policy be available for "re-formed" families: what should be the condition of liability of stepparents? (2) Should stepchildren have similar rights as biological children in terms of child support, visitation rights from stepparent as well as inheritance? (3) Should laws support the interests of married [resident] blended families as well as interests of divorced, separated, and diverse residential blended families? These questions lead to a growing concern among diverse blended families, who have double and triple stigmatization as non-nuclear, non-married and non-heterosexual family forms.

Although some laws provide sanctions for heterosexual blended families, lesbian and gay blended families suffer greater stress from a lack of legal protection for their families (Allen, 2007). According to Lynch (2004), while legal barriers to marriage and the privilege of benefits are deprived, so are the rights of children in these families not protected.

Theories of Change

Theories of change that have been used with a typology of families have consisted of a systems-metatheory model that views family networks in all of its unique interdependent parts (Whiting et al., 2007) and is based upon the belief that investigating

the holistic nature of a phenomenon will amplify awareness and understanding (Galvin, et al., 2006). Systemic models have also provided a practical framework for practitioners in considering the multifaceted intricacies of blended families. At base, this approach has been conceptually necessary when analyzing antecedent and subsequent behaviors of families within societal and cultural contexts as well as within their familial systems.

<div align="center">Systems Theory: An Overview</div>

General systems theory, as a unifying construct, has been long associated with the examination and comprehension of complex family interrelationships (Becvar & Becvar, 2004) since its inclusion into the field of psychotherapy (Bertalanffy, 1968). It has been paramount in the research of family development and communication research mainly because it draws "attention on the holistic nature of interaction patterns" (p. 218, Schrodt, 2007). Inasmuch, it is through processes of assessing family members' interactions that provides understanding (Corey, 2005). The meaning of these interactions are not static, in that one family members' behavior or problems can be understood as a function of patterns within the system and not only due to maladjustment or psychosocial development. Although systems theory is frequently integrated into practice with blended families and cited in clinical literature (Ganong & Coleman, 1986a), research shows that fewer empirical studies are available using a systems perspective (Schrodt et al., 2007).

Systems-Metatheory Basic Premises

1. General systems theory is a *unifying theory* based on cybernetics, and thus does not suggest the study of individuals separately, but in relationship to each other. Focus is unequivocally on understanding family members contextually (Becvar & Becvar, 2004).

2. In systems theory all *human interaction is reciprocal* in nature rather than linear/cause-effect. Both antecedent and subsequent behaviors within the familial system as well as within the broader societal and cultural realm: as such there are no unrelated occurrences, nor starting points of reference as all behavior is interconnected in "causality."

3. *Contextual relativity* suggests that nothing within the system is analyzed independently but all interaction (behaviors and conditions) is understood within the context with which it derives.

4. *Theoretical relativity* is a modernistic perspective that refers to the assumption of total connectedness within the system, which suggests a shift to *observing* from that of *observed,* thus *truth* is a constructed term. From this perspective, there is considered no absolute good, thus good and bad are considered to be innate within all frameworks.

5. *The whole is greater than the sum of its parts:* $1 + 1 = 3$. Systems theory states that interaction between two individuals plus the (relationship dynamic) is a part of the synergistic interaction equation. Thus, it is vital when examining a family that one also looks at the system or structure of the organization, which emerges as a function of the interaction of the members of that system. Consistent with systems thinking is that behavior is better understood when individuals are studied in the context of the whole. (Becvar & Becvar, 1998).

<div align="center">Social Constructionism</div>

Social constructionism was born as Gergen (1985) and other philosophers began investigating how individuals construct meaning within their lives. As this paradigm surfaced in the family therapy field, its concepts had some comparisons with

anthropology and ethnography (Laird, 1983). Basically, meaning is known and understood through the lens of a subjective postmodern worldview and that an individual's reality is not disputed, whether perceived to be rational or not. Reality is, therefore, *socially constructed* and situated within the use of language, where meaning is construed.

In 1984, Laird explained how her interest in cultural anthropology merged with ideas from social constructionism to design a formula for teaching family therapy practice. She referred to her search for meaning as a "critical stance…a search for meaning of one's own experience… a sensitivity to the power of language to shape what we see and hear; a secret for collaboration and empowering approaches to work with families are some of the pervasive themes that shape the teaching and learning environment" (p. 77). Her narrative operationalized her intent of inquiry further:

> I had begun to believe families were most like tiny societies that over time
>
> seemed to develop their own system of meaning and belief, their own
>
> methodologies and ritual practices, their own cultures. It seemed to me that the
>
> study of anthropology or what anthropologist did, one begins to experience first
>
> hand a world that is socially and culturally constructed, one comes to understand
>
> that one's world is known or created through our words and our own beliefs about
>
> it, our telling of it, our writing about it, even though the terms "construction" and
>
> "social constructionism" may never have been uttered (p. 77).

Nonetheless, despite innovative approaches in investigating the diversity within families, many family researchers have consistently used a problem-focused approach in exploring diverse blended families for decades (Afifi, 2008). In doing so, most studies on blended families exist that document their difficulties and challenges.

Atwood (1996), among other investigators, was concerned about the deficit portrayal of blended families in empirical investigation and thought that there existed a need for a shift to social constructionist paradigm. He proposed a six-stage therapeutic model for understanding the experiences of intervention with diverse blended families including: (1) joining the family meaning systems; (2) proposing the notion of a socially constructed family meaning system; (3) learning the family's meaning system; (4) challenging the family's meaning system; (5) amplifying the new meaning system; and (6) stabilizing the new meaning system. For the purposes of this study, contextually bound realities of diverse blended families are critical. Drawing from similar thought of Afifi (2008), the basis for integrating a system-constructionist notion in inquiry into the subjective world of diverse blended families is intended to provide a landscape to hear their voices and experiences.

Conclusion

Systems theory is a meta-perspective that provides a way of analyzing families within their causal and contextual interrelationships. Key to systems theory is its premise of *wholeness*, that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts in human interaction. The descriptive nature of systems theory affords information gathering as well as exploring relationship patterns. Moreover, emphasis of inquiry is on *how* systems work versus *why*, and thus fully understood only within the context in which they originate. As emphasis is on relational change within the system, change in one family member will incite regulation and feedback in the larger systems process; positively or negatively. Positive feedback provides for change in the systems (growth, learning), while negative feedback sustains the equilibrium and status quo of the system's structure. A postmodern-social constructionist notion is applied as an innovative metatheory to extend

discussion on *how* diverse blended families may construct identities and to identify the

participant-observer relationship of researchers, media, and practitioners who study,

portray, and work with them. The following section is an examination of some of the

concepts of this theory as it relates to understanding and investigating the overall process

and development of *change* (despite a myriad of complexities) within diverse blended

family function.

<div align="center">Systems-Constructionist Meta-theory and Diverse Blended Families</div>

Using a systems meta-theory as a dominant interactional framework in analyzing

and understanding the normative processes of diverse blended families as different and

expanded rather than *broken* and *not intact* is not new (Crosbis-Burnet & Ahrons, 1985).

Diverse blended families continue, however to be portrayed as dysfunctional and

incohesive, in unfair comparisons to nuclear families in professional and clinical

literature (Vereen, 2008), as stereotypically wicked in children/adult media, and folklore

(Seltzer, 2000), and virtually ignored and left out in policy and law (Mason et al., 2000).

Thus, the state of diverse blended family identity (with double and triple moral and social

stigma is examined from a systems-constructivist metatheory to understand how their

stigma may impact the structure of their households and relationships; how they construct

boundaries, and define rules/roles within their systems.

Structural Characteristics

Allen (2007) stated that much can be said about the manner in which diverse

blended families function, their interrelationships, the identities and roles available for

them, and how they construct meaning within their newly formed structures that are

always established from some level of loss. It is stressed that the structural approach is

best understood as:

A body of theory and technique that approaches the individual in her social

context and therapy based on this framework is directed toward changing the

organization of the family. When the structure of the family system is

transformed, the positions of members in that group are altered accordingly. As a

result, each individual experiences change (p. 2).

Although investigations of all blended families have addressed structural challenges, they

ignored many issues that are specific to diverse blended families, for example, issues

unique to gay and lesbian blended families (Lynch, 2004). Accordingly, Lynch

concluded, that investigations into gay and lesbians as parents are "incomplete" (p. 26).

Research shows that gay/lesbian studies, while structural issues were considered,

structural diversity was ignored, with focus primarily on the sexual identity of

individuals versus their family type.

Other structural issues, unique to diverse blended families are those sometime

common to first-married (formally single parent households) and non-married blended

families regarding the complexities of their systems when they enter the marriage or live

in unions with children (Stewart, 2008). Cherlin (1978) referred to blended families as

complex when both partners brought children into the newly formed blended family and

simple blended families, when only one partner brought children. Less is known about

the complexity of diverse blended families where either one or both partners' resident

and non-resident children have multiple non-resident parents. The study of structural

differences in blended families is widely investigated and found to be one of the biggest

differences between blended families and biological ones (Allen, 2007; Stewart, 2008).

Research has shown however that, when diverse blended family structure is defined

within its own unique system of understanding without comparisons to other family

forms, the many challenges and complexities can be addressed successfully (Papernow, 2008).

Boundaries and Roles

Boundaries are defined through system theory as implicit and explicit guidelines that delineate the movement of the diverse blended family within and among their familial systems and within the broader context (Becvar & Becvar, 1998). As a basic premise of systems theory, boundaries are crucial in establishing that families need clear boundaries to establish identities, parameters, and to know who is or who is not a part of the system (Crosbie-Burnet & Ahrons, 1985). Blended families are long associated with the construction of boundaries, rules, and social roles in their development and success as a family (Stewart, 2004). Unlike families of origin where boundaries, rules and social roles/norms are insinuated into average commonplace family process, a lack of clarity and boundary ambiguity exist among individuals in newly formed systems (Schodt et al., 2007).

Boundary/Role Complexities and Ambiguous Loss

Descriptive metaphors have taken on unique roles within diverse blended families that are conceptually different as to how boundaries and roles are developed in nuclear and traditional remarried families (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985). Boundary and role ambiguity in diverse blended families calls attention to the vague uncertainties that are common in blended families as to who belongs (physical ambiguity); who does not belong (psychological boundaries); and how roles are constructed within their systems (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989). These concepts are commonplace in newly formed families that originated from former familial systems where roles and boundaries were already defined. Additionally, Berger (1998) discussed the emotional toll on diverse

blended families, being formed from multiple losses and survival within a "built in"

experience of loss (Berger, 1995; Visher & Visher, 1996). Hal and Kitson (2000) found

that lesbian blended families experienced similar boundary and role ambiguity as other

diverse blended families; however, their parent roles are even more so ambiguously

defined as a result of heterosexist and homophobia attitudes that are supported in

American society.

Few empirical studies have investigated boundary ambiguity, and of those

examined, children and adult children's perspectives and portrayal of their systems

exceeded perceptions by parents (Stewart, 2005). Various earlier studies found unique

differences related to boundaries in blended families. They were found to be ambiguous,

permeable, variable, and loosely defined (Crosbie-Burnett-Ahrons, 1985; Ihinger-

Tallman, 1989; Pasley, 1987). While Boss (1987) investigated adults' perceptions,

methods were not inclusive of a systems perspective. Thus, he drew from an individual

experience, ignoring counter experiences of that person's larger familial context. This has

been a gap in the literature, that broad opportunities for qualitative perceptions of blended

families are limited. Again, this practice has resulted however, in skewed perceptions of

boundary issues that have been widely documented.

Pasley's (1987) study is an example of such an investigation. He explored

boundary ambiguity among a small sample of "remarried" blended families, thus

excluding diverse blended family forms discussed in this study, such as non-married

(cohabitating), first-time married, African-American and lesbian and gay blended

families. Stewart (2008) confirmed that often, boundary ambiguity issues are higher in

diverse blended families, especially [heterosexual] cohabitating family forms, which

were found in some instances to have less commitment than married blended families.

This assumption is, however proven untrue in studies on lesbian and gay families that report long-term, successful relationship commitments, and greater relationship satisfaction than reported for heterosexual couples (Connolly, 2005). Papernow (1993) believed that boundary issues would subside with more clarity over time, while Furstenburg disagreed (1987). He found that *time* was not a factor in clearer boundaries, especially in the acknowledgement of stepchildren's experiences.

The impact of race and ethnicity on boundary and role ambiguity in diverse blended families is not conclusive (Stewart, 2005). Berger (1998) found, however, that diverse blended families continued to be compared to White nuclear families. It can be misleading (Vereen, 2007) for scholars to use White nuclear families as a frame of reference in understanding boundary complexities within diverse blended families, because it minimizes the ability to focus on unique cultural issues. Moreover, more recent studies concluded that ignoring the uniqueness of difference in the structural framework of diverse groups ignores strengths and resilience and increases stereotypes and myths (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; Louis & Zhao, 2002; Stewart, 2008).

Likewise, first married blended families with residential and adult children experience different kinds of boundary confusion in their newly formed families and Stewart (2008) discusses these challenges. First time married blended families have to adjust to role and boundary ambiguity of having another adult (in-charge), after being accustomed to single parenting. Research show however, that non-married blended families experienced similar concerns as married blended families since both families are formed from former committed relationships and have experienced loss.

Portrayed with a triple stigma status, gay and lesbian blended families are considered the most vulnerable of all other diverse blended families (Fredriksen & Erera,

2003). Establishing workable boundaries in their newly formed blended families often depends on various variables including the age of the children; identity development of the gay and lesbian parents; and extent of relationship with non-residential heterosexual parents (Stewart, 2008). These families experience similar boundary issues and concerns as traditional heterosexual blended families, but since their households face constraints due to heterosexist attitudes, it is unfair to compare their boundary ambiguity to traditional blended families and other diverse blended families (Stewart, 208; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Erera, 2003). Even though other diverse blended families address issues with former partners, lesbian and gay partners suffer invalidation and a lack of respect of their family type from social, legal, institutional, and religious perspectives (Claxton-Oldfield & O'neil, 2007).

Studies show that the most complexities may evolve in newly formed lesbian and gay families where biological parents were in former heterosexual relationships and older children not only have to adjust to a new stepparent, but also must adjust to a same sex stepparent. Research shows, that if the non-residential parent is heterosexual and does not accept the child's gay or lesbian parent' relationships, it may provide for added difficulty in the adjustment process for children (Huggins, 1989). Other factors such as social undesirability and homophobic attitudes may further hinder adjustment.

Berger (1995) discussed the multiple emotional transitions diverse blended families experience a loss of privacy, a loss of autonomy or a shift in roles, unfamiliar home and neighborhood; and including what the author called an "exclusivity of relationships" (p. 96), due to parents having to share their parenting with the new partner and children having to share their parents with the new partner/spouse, step parents and half-siblings. The full transition to the new family then triggers the first loss from the

divorce, breakup, single living or (move from a relative's home), and thus it is inevitable that the former union is over and the new system has evolved (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985). Similarly, Berger also found that same sex blended families may suffer different losses as a result from their *triple-stigma* status such as loosing visitation rights, custody battles, and sometimes being ostracized from other family members.

Katherine Allen (2007) related the term "ambiguous loss" (p. 175) to define the extent of her losses after her lesbian partner in a blended family of 12 years, left her, taking her biological son, as well as the non-legal custody agreement she had previously granted the author. Ambiguous loss is a contextual stress framework applied to structural ambiguity in reference to who is in or out of one's family and considered to be more traumatic than typical loss because the "assault never lets up' (Boss, 2006, p. 41.). The author reported that viewing her situation through the lens of family systems theory helped her to conceptualize the situation better and understand "what" she felt she had lost. Using the concepts of "boundary ambiguity" and the "psychological family" was critical in recalling how she and her partner had constructed a family unit and the impact of losing it:

> When my partner left, she left our family unit, a carefully constructed, deliberate mix of chosen and biological ties. We were an intentional family; raising sons aged 13 and 6 at the time of our breakup. Because we lived in a state where legal rights for same-gender partners, parents, and their children were denied (e.g., marriage and adoption for our family were not a possibility), we constructed alternative legal and social protections for our family, consisting of a commitment ceremony, a civil union in Vermont, power of attorney agreements, joint home ownership, and wills. I had joint custody of my non-biological son….but when

my partner left, she took her biological son with her and my ability to see him

ended. She terminated custody she had formally granted to me. Now my son and I

are legal strangers to each other. (p. 177).

Overall, Allen concluded that ambiguous loss is a theoretical framework that applies to

the state of gay and lesbian blended families: being legally and politically invisible.

Amato (2000) reported that, although adult relationships end, continuity with children

should be continued.

Robinson, Nelson, and Nelson (1997) argued that despite the legal system's

child-centered post-divorce arrangements for heterosexual families (e.g., visitation, child-

custody, etc.), this protection is not available for children of gay and lesbian blended

families. In summary, Allen (2007) concluded that applying ambiguous loss concepts

may be a helpful and hopeful framework in understanding loss and the process of change

in complex family systems that are forming, dissolving, and reconfiguring.

Conclusion

A systems-constructivist metatheory framework in understanding and analyzing

both normal processes and unique complexities of diverse blended families was applied.

This framework has allowed for portraying these diverse families from positive

perspectives and provides a lens to explore to what extent their double and triple stigma

identity affects their family structure, boundary construction and role distinction within

their systems. All four diverse blended family forms: formed from single parents, non-

married blended families, African-American blended families, and same sex blended

families are reported to have similar structural and boundary issues as traditional blended

families after forming new blended families. Lesbian and gay blended families, however,

are reported as the most vulnerable due to social unacceptability, including invalidation

and heterosexist attitudes regarding their families. While all diverse blended families are formed from the loss of some former relationship, lesbian and gay families may suffer "ambiguous losses" after the break-up of their blended family, lacking the legal protection that some other heterosexual blended families may have.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature related to diverse blended families who have double and triple stigma; blended families formed by single parents, non-married blended families, African-American blended families, and same sex blended families. Traditional research portrayed these families from a problem focused model who were considered inferior to biological families, while more recent works use risk and resilient models from a cultural variant perspective. Despite mounting challenges and stigma, these families are overall resilient. They facilitate strategies to function in an often hostile environment that is invalidating, are resourceful, have meaningful relationships, and raise emotionally well children. While they are often unfairly investigated in comparison to nuclear or traditional blended families, more recent studies discuss the importance of exploring them from a broader lens. Systems theory was used to explain to what extent they construct meaning within their systems, establish boundaries, and define roles and rules. The focus of this investigation will be to understand the dominant cultural narratives of diverse blended families and how these families conform, transform, resist, or revoice such narratives in midst of stigma and constraints. In the next chapter the methodology for conducting this study is presented.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design to investigate the complexity of blended families from the perspective of blended family members. A grounded theory theoretical framework was preferred because of its emphasis on theory development. In this chapter the methodology of this research is discussed.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate dominant cultural models of diverse blended families. Secondly, given these cultural narratives, to study how these families conform to, transform, resist, or revoice such models. A gap exists in the current research regarding how diverse blended family members define themselves and how they are impacted by portrayals of their systems. Even less is known about diverse blended family types with double and triple stigma that are formed from: single parents (now-married) (Crosbie-Burnett & Sykes, 1989; Michaels, 2006), non-married blended families (Stewart, 2008), African-American blended families (Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005), and lesbian and gay blended families (Lambert, 2005). This study attempted to fill this gap.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study were designed to unearth the experiences of diverse blended families within their social contexts. The following questions are:

1. What dominant cultural models exist around diverse blended families?

2. Given these constructs, in what ways do diverse blended families represent themselves? How do they conform to, transform, resist or revoice dominant models of blended families?

Research Design

A qualitative research design was chosen as the most appropriate passageway to enter the unique world of the diverse blended families under study, an under researched topic in the blended family literature (Stewart, 2008). It is within this framework that the voices of these individuals may be heard (Merriam, 1998). Although new questions may emerge and ongoing investigation may better serve these diverse blended family types, realities can be experienced and understanding can be better shared though a qualitative lens (Glaser, 1998).

Rationale

A grounded theory framework is preferred because of its emergent and inductive process theory development (Glaser, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Moreover, the epistemological characteristics and procedures are straightforward, descriptive, and interpretive (Glaser, 1998) in examining the diverse blended families in this study. Qualitative research is long associated with the process of understanding social phenomena in their social context (Merriam, 1998) and grounded theory methods are designed to motivate a fundamental philosophical assumption about reality that it is constructed by interactions of individuals within their social realm.

Qualitative investigators want to understand the meanings people construct and the extent of their experiential perceptions which often emerges during data collection and analysis (Glaser, 1998). Inasmuch, Maturana and Varela (1987) asserted that individuals construct their world while in interaction with it, which can consequently alter perception. Thus, grounded theory methods have been chosen for this study since all interactions among participants become variables under study from a socially constructed and holistic perspective. Glaser (1998) concluded that it is virtually the overall emergent

quality of grounded theory that differentiates it from other methods and presents it as a viable process where not only theory is emergent, but the data and interpretations also mount up. As research paradigms provide ways of explaining and thus understanding reality, the comprehensive style of this methodology allows for rich and substantive data which may provide inexhaustible opportunities for innovative theoretical conceptualizations.

<div align="center">Sampling Procedures</div>

The proposed population for this study initially consisted of four couples (eight adults) that identified as diverse blended families. One additional couple who was recommended by a colleague was added because of the couples' contrasting family type of interest, and its significance for the study. Purposive sampling was originally planned as the most appropriate sampling strategy because of its assumption for selection criterion where participants are chosen for their "special experience and competence" (Chein, 1981, p. 440). In qualitative research, purposive, or nonprobability sampling, is a common and appropriate strategy to select participants (Merriam, 1998). Honigmann (1982) asserted that nonprobability sampling is long associated as a logical choice in answering qualitative investigation regarding inquiry, discovery, and "relationship linking occurrences" (p. 84). It was proposed that selecting participants that meet certain criteria of characteristics of diverse blended family types might provide for information-rich cases that would provide a wealth of information from which to learn (Patton, 1990).

Rationale for Selection of Criteria

The criteria for selection included diverse blended families formed by single parents-now married, a non-married couple, and gay and lesbian partners in committed relationships. The rationale for selecting participants included four criterion. First,

selected participants had to identify as diverse blended families whose description made them an alternative to traditional stepfamilies who were formed by divorce and remarriage or death of a spouse (Tillman, 2007). The second criterion suggested that four distinct types of diverse blended families would be chosen that represent the leading diverse characteristics of blended families neglected in the blended family literature (Stewart, 2008). The third criterion suggested that participants would be chosen who have lived in the same residence for duration for at least one year. The fourth criterion set the standards for defining blended family households. Couples with resident children who were adopted or born through donor insemination were not selected as participation, as these children were considered a "product" of the couple and thus, did not constitute characteristics of a blended family (Steward, 2008, p. 166).

Activities prior to carrying out this proposed study included meeting all procedural requirements and deadlines of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Missouri - St. Louis (UMSL), including completing the NIH human subjects training through the school website.

<center>Participants</center>

A qualitative study of five couples that identified as diverse blended families as defined in the blended family literature were recruited as participants in this study. The diverse blended family types include the following:

1. Married Diverse Blended Family: A family formed by female and male partners where at least one of the partners was a parent prior to marriage, and one or both partners has a biological child (ren) who lives in the home and is a product of a former relationship.

2. Non-Married Blended Family: A family formed by female and male partners in a committed relationship who are not legally married, who share residence and one or both partners has a biological child (ren) who lives in the home and is a product of a former relationship.

3. Lesbian Blended Family: A family formed by 2 female partners in a committed relationship who share residence and one or both partners have a biological child (ren) who lives in the home and is a product of a former relationship.

4. Gay Blended Family: A family formed by 2 male partners who are in a committed relationship and share residence. At least one partner has one or more biological children who live in the family home and is a product of a former relationship.

Because of the under representation and disproportion of African-American blended families in traditional and non-traditional literature, this study intended to include at least one African-American blended family couple that match characteristics of one of the blended family types listed. Despite purposive sampling that intentionally sought a balance with race and ethnicity in the study, three of the five couples identified as African-American.

While the participants are not representative, however, they are heterogeneous in respect to age, sexual orientation, race, socioeconomic, and diverse blended type (see Table 1). Other race, ethnicity, and geographical location have been described from a questionnaire survey administered to participants (see Appendix A). These characteristics are measured for the purpose of providing context and not the main analysis for this particular study.

How Participants Were Recruited

I recruited the particular blended family types by requesting referrals from professional colleagues and friends. I made contact to colleagues and friends through email and phone contact specifically requesting those couples that fit the characteristics of the families to be studied. Five diverse blended family couples were identified, but only four of the five couples met criteria. I contacted the four couples within 24 hours by phone, conducted a short phone interview and requested their mailing address. I briefly discussed the study and all of them agreed to participate. I mailed them a letter further explaining the study and the Survey of Family Form survey questionnaire for additional identifying information particular to the research study, and Informed Consent forms that included researcher and advisor identification information.

Participants were instructed to return the survey in the stamped envelope I provided for them. Upon the return of the surveys, all four couples continued to meet criteria for the study. I followed up with a phone call and briefly discussed the study, answered any question, and set appointments for the couple interviews. During the couple interviews, I set up individual interviews.

Initially, all interviews were planned to be conducted at the University of Missouri School and Family Counseling Center, however only couple decided to have all three of their interviews there – one couple and two individual interviews. All of the other interviews were conducted at participants' homes. The names of participants were coded with assigned identification numbers to secure confidentiality and all participant data were stored on a password-protected computer, and kept in a locked office.

Initially only three of the desired blended family types were present in the four couples who met criteria: Formed from Single parents, Cohabitating, and Lesbian

couples. None of the couples met criteria as a Gay Male diverse blended family couple with at least one biological child that lived in the family residence. I decided to change the composition to include *any* gay male couple with at least one biological child of either partner, but the child did not have to live in the family residence for the couple to meet criteria. I contacted colleagues by phone contact and email explaining the new criteria for a gay male couple. I also contacted friends and colleagues that were gay and lesbian. After data collection had begun, a gay male diverse blended couple was recommended whereas one partner had a biological daughter from a previous relationship. I contacted the couple and followed the same procedure as with the other couples to be sure they met the criteria.

Instrumentation

Considering that the research topic describes an under-researched area in the blended family literature, existing instruments did not accurately represent this study's research questions that reflect diverse blended family types. The Survey of Family Types that all participants completed was adapted from Andresen's (1991) Survey of Family Types, but modified to reflect the diverse blended family types in this study (see Appendix A).

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol consisted of semi-structured and open-ended questions (See Appendix B). This protocol was developed using the guidelines of Scheele and Groeben (1988) who constructed a working model of investigating *subjective theories* in relation to studying everyday life, defining "subjective theory" as referring to the complex stock of knowledge of the interviewees about the topic under study. Questions were structured (with probes) that provided opportunities for couples to share their

intimate stories, stress their concerns, state their hopes, aspirations, their perceptions, and suggestions for blended family success. Although the protocol format replicates Andresen's model (goal/question/probes), the topic areas and form of questions were constructed for this study to answer the research questions**.**

<div align="center">Construction of Protocol Questions</div>

Andresen's Survey (1991) provided five categories for adult blended family partners that provided information about family relationship dynamics, self-portrayals, and how they believe diverse blended families are portrayed in society: (1) Blended Family Resident Relationship/Metaphors; (2) Blended Family Non-Resident Relationship/Metaphors; (3) Structural/Boundary Issues and Changes Over Time; (4) Internal Portrayal; and (5) External Portrayal 1-Society, 2-Role of Religion and Spirituality.

Blended Family Resident/Non-Resident Relationship Metaphors

The goal of this set of questions was to become familiar with how blended family partners represented themselves, what metaphors they used to define their systems, which individuals they included/excluded, and how they functioned. The protocol topic areas were constructed in a particular order that would allow participants to begin to casually talk about their residential family dynamics and then their non-residential family dynamics: how they self-describe, describe and refer to other family members, who were in and who was not included in their family system, roles, rules, power differentials, and discipline. Early questions and probes also sought to know how participants felt they were similar or different from biological families, as well as how they thought they compared or contrasted to other blended families. In the second category of topic area, participants answered questions about non-residential parents (their ex-partner and/or

their partner's ex-partner) and the dynamics of those relationships. It was anticipated that rapport would increasingly develop by this time, and participants would be comfortable to share their stories that included former partners. Examples: How do you describe your resident family? Which adjectives can you use? What is special about your family? How do you describe your relationship with your former partner? Can you talk about those relationship dynamics over time? (see Appendix B-1, Code I & II.)

Structural/Boundary Issues and Change over Time

The main goal in this section was to identify how blended family partners defined the structure of their home/lives and if the non-resident parent was considered an extension of their family structure (part decision-maker, etc.), to identify and explore boundaries and how the couple conformed or resisted change over time. Participants were asked questions about their household structure and boundary issues, including details about: rules, who was defined as a family member, how they made decisions, questions about discipline, and if their roles were egalitarian, etc. Examples: How do you describe the overall structure of your household? Who determines the rules, guidelines, norms? What kind of relationship does your former partner/non-custodial parent have with your child? Does she/he have input regarding the child in your home? What does that look like? (see Appendix B-1, Code III.)

*Internal and External Portrayal (*Society and Role of Religion and Spirituality)

The main goal with this set of interview questions was to identify and explore the participants' thoughts and perceptions about dominant models of diverse blended families within society. Although a growing body of research has discussed the resilience of blended families (Afifi, 2008), traditional research, influenced by ongoing stereotypes and myths, has continued to portray these families as deficient (Ganong & Coleman,

2004) and prone to family dysfunction (Stewart, 2008). Participants were asked questions about their perceptions (Internal Portrayal) of their diverse blended family type that have double and triple stigma status, and how their relationships have been impacted by those perceptions. Participants were asked questions regarding their perceptions of how diverse blended families are portrayed (External Portrayal) in media/society and the role of religion and spirituality in respect to diverse blended families. Questions also explored if and to what extent participants have been impacted by external portrayals of their families, and in what ways have they conformed, transformed, resisted, or revoiced dominant blended family models. Examples: How do you feel about your identity as a diverse blended family member? If you could change something about how you identify as a diverse blended family member, what would it be and why? How do you believe your blended family is portrayed in society? Can you give examples? Are you affected by those portrayals? How? How do you want to be portrayed? (See Appendix B-1, Code IV & V.)

Pilot Field Test

Prior to conducting the study, I proposed to conduct a pilot field test interview with a diverse blended couple that met the characteristics of the study criterion (see recruitment process), but who would be separate from the other couples. Considering that the sample was already small and initially one diverse blended family type was unavailable, I approached the first couple interview as the pilot interview. This interview provided important feedback that resulted in the rearranging and rephrasing some of the questions and probes. The pilot interview served beneficial in providing evidence of validity and a final revision of the interview protocol was conducted.

Data Collection

Each couple participated in two separate interviews: one couple interview and one individual interview. Although participants shared a rich tapestry of data about their children and step-children, the children were not included in any of the interviews. The couple interviews ranged from 1 – 2 hours and individual interviews were usually an hour long. Total interview time for each couple was approximately three hours. A focus group interview of all of the couples was initially proposed to provide opportunities to compare and contrast views and perceptions among participants in a naturalistic setting; however, time constraints prevented this opportunity. Thus, there were a total of 15 interviews.

Data Sources

There were two data sources; the survey questionnaire and the audio-taped interviews. The survey questionnaire was used primarily for informational, rather than for analysis purposes. Information included identification, ethnicity, family type, gender of family members. This information was categorized with other participant data. Interviews consisted of semi-structured audio-taped sessions that provided a rich and voluminous amount of data.

Rationale for family pictures

Participants were asked to bring photographs of their family members to the individual couple interview (with no specifications). They were not led as to what pictures to bring, of whom, or how many. This request was made because I believed that a family's structure, beliefs, and values may be evident in how they were presented in photos. Couples provided some pictures, and we discussed pictures that were on display in their homes.

Talking to Families: The Interview

My interviews welcomed me into the unique and often challenged realities of diverse blended families. Participants willingly shared intimate parts of their lives with me, a stranger; but then at times I was not a stranger at all. At times my role as a researcher was a key research tool, even more so than the protocol itself. Although I prefaced my position to my participants as a member of a diverse blended family, always ultimately cognizant of the unfinished business of that identity, and sensitive to stigma these families encountered, I yet was not prepared for what I experienced. My initial goal in the interviews was to get a glimpse of their different worlds, but the results of the study surpassed expectations and intentions. I ended up getting an in depth picture of their lives. Interviews included familiar discourse, but it was important to me to remain an embedded investigator of inquiry. So, there were instances when a topic may have seemed familiar to me, but I was very careful to inquire and probe all the while.   It was through these instances, in fact, that I aided in my own unearthing of intention and purpose. Thus, as the interviews followed a pathway of familiarity, I remained alert to my own personal biases and vulnerabilities.

There was a sense of comfort in all of the interviews. Of those in participants' homes, we sat on the couch and chairs in their living rooms, around the kitchen table and even the interview at the counseling center was in a room furnished to resemble someone's den. The general atmosphere was relaxing with minimal interruptions, except for a pet at one interview who wanted to remain in the room while his owners talked to me and during one interview a couples' 7 year old daughter/step daughter was getting ready for bed and often peeped in on us, calling for her moms to do various things for her before she turned in for the night.

Prior to each interview there was small talk to build rapport, I reviewed the consent forms, reiterated confidentiality, and briefed participants of their right to not answer certain questions or to stop the tape if desired. Initially, I explained the categories of questions, then prefaced each section as we changed topics within our talk, without being mechanical. There were times when certain questions led to topics that would come later in the protocol, but it was appropriate to follow the lead of the interview as it evolved, making notes to go back and cover areas that were left out or passed over. I found that as talk emerged, the interview flowed better.

There was an array of emotions, and it was expected. There was laughter and anger. Sometimes there were tears. Talk of hope and an aspiration for their families was drenched in optimism. Then a lot of times there was a time when I recalled my counseling skills and allowed participants to break their own silence. At the completion of interviews there was always post talk with participants as I prepared to leave that I remembered to make note of when I got to my car, as well as salient observations during the interview. I thanked each couple and sent thank you cards to further show my appreciation.

Data Analyses

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Recognizing and understanding the relationships among language and social practices is the ultimate purpose of Critical Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2004).   When people talk about their lives, their families, the structure of their homes, and even how they interact, they are constructing the social worlds though their narrative structures and are calling on the cultural models that exist in the world (Rogers, 2004). During this process, they not only reproduce cultural models, but are constructing their realities –

who they are and who they might become. In other words, in representing themselves, they sometimes reflect media portrayals and expectations of themselves or they may deny traditional portrayals and represent themselves in new and defiant ways. Theories of Critical Discourse Analysis offer tools for researchers to understand how participants construct meaning and make sense of their lives in not only what they say, but how they say it, and the context in which it is said. As such, is the extent of human communication that involves far more that verbal discourse, but an interaction of various non-verbal communications such as gestures, voice tone, use of space, and head movement (Norris, 2004). Analyzing nonverbal communication takes it all further, involving analyzing interactions of a multiplicity of interactions as CDA attempts to define, describe, interpret and explain complex meanings in relationships.

How Data was Analyzed

Data analysis methods consisted of a 2-step process integrating Grounded Theory (Glaser 1998) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), (Gee, 2004). These methods were chosen together to provide a broad approach in recognizing themes and theory development in the data as well as an in depth investigation of how participants construct meaning in their lives.

Step 1 - Glaser (1998) asserts that the main goal of grounded theory is the search to determine theory that is embedded within the data. Thus, the overall analysis for this study began with a grounded theory approach to organize and make sense of the huge amount of data (Glaser, 1998). Given that the main focus of this study was to explore how these families responded to dominant cultural models of diverse blended families, the interest was not only in what these families were saying, but how did they say it, and

what identities they took on as they said it? To what extent did they resist, conform to,

transform, revoice, or take up dominant or alternate-cultural models?

Step 2 drew on discourse analysis methods to determine how meanings and

cultural models were represented and constructed among the couples. CDA tools

provided opportunities to look more closely across the same couple interactions to

construct meaning through what was said, unsaid and the behavior surrounding it.

Nonverbal analysis was instrumental in making meaning out of what was happening

during particular discourse and interactions such as gestures, positioning, posture and

proxemics.

A portion of narrative was used with one couple to look closely at discursive

patterns within a case study to investigate how diverse blended couple adults responded

to external portrayals. The couple I chose was Mike and Tom, a gay male couple with

unique and conflicting relationship dynamics that surrounded the couple's multiple ways

of defining and representing themselves.

Step 1: Grounded Theory Methods

Working with the Transcripts

Each couple had their own file that consisted of the *Survey of Family Types*

questionnaire, telephone notes, field notes, memos, transcripts, and consent forms.

Fictitious names were assigned for identifying and analysis purposes (Couple 1: Mary &

Diane); Couple 2: John &Sue; Couple 3: Lori & Sally; Couple 4: Mike & Tom; and

Couple 5: Chester & Melanie).   Interview transcripts yielded voluminous data;

approximately 150 pages total, I listened to, watched and analyzed over 27 hours of audio

and video discourse and transcribed 10 pages of narratives.

Open Coding

I initially read the transcripts twice and made notes in the margins. I began the analysis process with open coding procedures that included breaking down, exploring, conceptualizing, and categorizing the written and audio interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). First, to develop codes, I hand sorted and broke down the data (reading line by line, sentence by sentence) and divided the data into meaningful units. I then made continuous comparisons across data sets for the purpose of identifying key points and similarities within the data. Both memos and field notes were included in this process and memos were written on index cards to refer back to later in the analysis process. Even though all interviews were audio-taped to record observations, field notes (actual observations) were kept throughout the data collection period and immediately after an interview, coupled with memos (notes to myself) that were written throughout the data analysis period as well, serving as reminders. Often interview data tended to be structured in three-sets: Pre-interview small talk/rapport building, semi-structured interviews, and post-interview debriefing/chatting. Although only the semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, field notes and memos came in handy in capturing an ethnographic portrait of the holistic interview experience.

Categories

Secondly, to construct a thick description of the interviews and understanding of the data, my main goal was to read and re-read the field notes to identify categories and sub-categories and how they were interrelated (Glaser, 1998). All patterns, categories and themes resulted in connection to the research questions, systems-constructivist themes, and the coding categories of the protocol. In identifying and naming the categories, I followed a process of questioning what was referenced in the data for clarity and to further identify relationships among the variables. My goal was to look at the

transcripts and identify patterns across the narratives versus only looking at individual narratives. It is through this process that additional themes and theory began to emerge gradually as categories were constructed from what participants said, how they said it, the context in which they said it, what they did not say, along with the interpretations of dialogue.

Sorting

Finally, I sorted the memos and other data that were written earlier in the research process and organized them based upon themes that emerged from the data. This procedure provided an organization of the data to develop the first draft of writing.

Step 2: CDA Methods

My approach to CDA drew on the theories and methods related with James Gee (2007), Norman Fairclough (1992), and Singrid Norris (2004). I used the following frameworks "ways of interacting," "ways of representing," and "ways of being," as analytic tools. The main focus was on how the families constructed meaning during interaction. "Ways of interacting" also defined as genre, refers to the organization of interactions and includes the following discursive features: structure of the text; particular wording, aspects of language such as repetition, humor, metaphor use, etc.) (Gee, 2004). "Ways of representing" refers to discourses and includes the following discursive features: the formality or informality of language, types of sentences, and particular social practices. "Ways of being" refers to style, including discursive features such as identities and the use of language in self-identity, and the use of verbs and pronouns, absence of talk, etc. These characteristics also refer to how Gee (2004) defines socially situated identities in describing ways that individuals take up a particular identity and how that identity shapes self-concept, family concept, resilience, or the lack of it.

The following procedures were structured to analyze how participants took up certain positions and the extent of their use of language and positioning during their blended family discourse that included using four analytic tools to describe and interpret interactions across a portion of couple interview: (a) discourse, (b) social language, (c) situated meanings, and (d) cultural models (Gee, 2004). As a particular sample of the data was analyzed using all four tools, the main focus was on how these families constructed meaning in midst of double and triple stigma.

Using CDA methods, I began to interpret a selected portion of verbal transcriptions of one diverse blended family couple categorized by *genre* (ways of interacting), *discourse* (ways of representing), and *style* (ways of being). Being that all three utterances are known to compliment each other in constructing meaning (Rogers & Mosley, 2006), this format would provide an excellent pathway into further analysis. First, I read through the transcript searching for discursive patterns in terms of "ways of interacting" where I looked at how interactions were structured and organized in terms of sentence structure, themes, repetition, language use, and turn-taking structure: including who spoke, the number of turns taken, how long, etc. I looked to see how participants were involved in ways of representing which included identifying social practices; whether language used was formal or informal. I then identified how interviewees self-identified (ways of being) and the way in which it was done (for example, the use of first or third person in language, types of verbs, nouns/pronouns, adjectives to describe family members). I used colored pens to differentiate themes, occurrences, and patterns as I made several passes over the transcript. I made notes as patterns emerged.

Next in this analysis, I divided the narratives into stanzas. I then made another pass over the transcript and coded each stanza relating to the social languages, socially

situated identities, situated meanings, and cultural models. Identifying conflict within

identities and social languages was easier after coding each utterance individually. I

looked to identifying how participants responded to, drew on, resisted or took up

dominant (or alternate, counter-narratives) cultural models. Social language is reflected

by how the participant talks or uses language to take on a particular identity (Gee, 2004).

Social languages are thus relative processes by which individuals may take on or act out a

socially situated identity (Gee, 2004). Situated meanings, then, reflect meaning given to

words that are spoken within certain contexts. This understanding provided an open

venue to closely looking at how participants talked about their experiences in a diverse

blended family, how they made use of the social language in discourse, and what socially

situated identities they seemed to be taking on during different sections of the interviews:

was it formal or informal? I looked for ways in which participants may have enacted a

particular socially situated identity in respect to their diverse blended family identity and

if there was a contrast or direct connection to their use of social language.

   Third, using cultural model as an analytic tool, I looked for patterns of how

participants' identities as diverse blended families may have been constructed and how

those identities may have shaped their self-image, family concept, or resilience.

Understanding that cultural models are storylines that infer what is appropriate,

inappropriate, or just plainly how a phenomenon is "supposed" to be carried out shed

light on this particular section of analysis. I made several passes over the transcript

making notes of the relationship between participants' social language, social practices,

and dominant cultural models of diverse blended families. Sometimes the relationships

were conflicting and ambiguous just as they also reflected harmony and consistency.

Fourth, I constructed two separate spreadsheets for analysis: (1) a chart divided by the three categories: Genre, Discourse, and Style with the findings under each section and (2) a Critical Discourse Analysis chart categorized by a segment of transcript, social language, situated meanings, and cultural models.

Fifth, I analyzed nonverbal interaction using the same principles of CDA, analyzing genre, discourse, and style. Analysis of visual discourse, however, extended language by examining a multiplicity of modes including gesture, eye gaze, body language, proxemics, the use of artifacts, and the use of space. As Norris (2004) declared: all interaction is multimodal and the point of analysis is to uncover and convey the various modes of expressing communication. Thus, analyzing nonverbal interaction was useful in synthesizing various expressions of communication during dialogue: spoken and unspoken. I analyzed a selected visual/discourse segment that represented an unfolding of Idea Structuring, Participant Role, and Multimodality that related to the research questions and emerged themes. I numbered and named the frames with the discourse on one side of the spreadsheet with space available for descriptions of the various modes on the opposite side.

For the case study I analyzed a portion of visual observation. I went over the data provided, looking for patterns and asked myself the following questions: What was the major idea of the discourse? How many turns did each individual take during a particular time-span? What was the exact behavior I was observing? How was space used? What was the body language saying? What role did the interviewee take on during that segment of discourse, and what did it mean? Next, I described what was going on in a particular instance of discourse. I looked for additional patterns and themes – what was happening with posture and movement? Were there any relationships among modes? I recorded my

findings in the space provided. Two different variations of verbal/nonverbal spreadsheets

and charts were constructed that analyzed modes in interaction and all analysis of

findings is presented within the results section.

<div align="center">Tom and Mike's Case Study Analysis</div>

For analysis I chose the segment of transcript that asked the questions: How is

your diverse blended family portrayed in media and society, and how are you impacted

by those portrayals? Have you ever conformed to any negative images of your blended

family? I chose this particular narrative of Tom and Mike because it included the many

conflicting ways that they portrayed themselves as a couple, defined their relationship as

a diverse blended family with Tom's daughter from a previous marriage who lived with

her mother, and how they believed they were portrayed. This particular segment was

mostly important because it provided several opportunities to investigate how one couple

responded to external portrayals and how those portrayals impacted family relationships.

Although the other four couples had equally unique circumstances, Mike and Tom's

situation demonstrated the complexities of conforming, revoicing, and yet resisting

dominant cultural models of diverse blended families. Using tools of CDA helped in

analyzing how they constructed meaning during conflicting instances of positioning and

described their use of language and behavior when they took on certain identities.

Although there was conflict in how they identified their relationships, CDA tools helped

to normalize their situation, motives, and bring to light the oppression they suffered as a

gay blended family and how they made contradictory decisions for the sake of survival

for their family.

First, I divided the selected portion of Tom and Mike's transcript into 113 stanza

lines. Second, I used the same CDA methods discussed earlier to identify their ways of

being, language use, and ways of representing. I made a list of identities both men took

on during their discourse and made note of nonverbal behavior during those instances.

Conclusion

Using CDA methods for analysis was helpful in incorporating multiparty

interactions to trace modes (linguistic and visual data) and in examining relationships

among social identities, cultural models, social practice, and texts (Fairclough, 1992). At

this level of analysis, a multiplicity of meaning emerged as to *how* diverse blended

families portrayed and identified themselves in spite of stigma and how they compared

and/or contrasted with each other. Using these methods to analyze and interpret diverse

blended family data may add to theory building in the field of counseling and family

therapy research.

Enhancing Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness and validate the findings of this study, I periodically

conducted member checks by asking participants to confirm accuracies at different

intervals throughout the study; midway and at the end of the interview (Merriam, 1998).

Mostly, participants confirmed my interpretation. There were other times, however, when

participants disagreed with me and clarified what they had said earlier so that I could get

a clearer picture and rationale of their stories. This process did impact my interpretations

in that it made me more aware of the importance to not make assumptions and to ask

questions for clarity during the interviews.

Role of the Researcher

Assessing the researcher's role as investigator is a critical component to this study

as well as acknowledging a certain level of bias and privilege. The researcher's

experiences of living in a diverse blended family as an adult have been a driving force

behind this project. Also significant to me was the sensitivity and concern regarding the myriad of challenges diverse blended families encounter. Because of this reality there are assumptions and predisposition to certain themes, just as there are unanswered questions, failed opportunities and unfinished business within the researcher's repertoire of blended family experience. With this in mind, it was the hope and desire of the researcher to guard and protect participants during the study by sharing with them a statement of the researcher's role, interest, and precautions. Moreover, while the researcher's familiarity of the phenomenon no doubt had the propensity to impact interviews and shape interpretation of data, the researcher conceded not to misuse, nor attempted to influence responses (see Appendix F).

Chapter Summary

This chapter includes a qualitative research design to investigate the complexity of blended families from the perspective of blended family members. A grounded theory framework was chosen because of its emphasis on theory development. The purpose of this study was to investigate diverse blended families and to study how these families conform to, transform, resist, or revoice dominant models of blended families. The research questions that guided this study were designed to unearth the experiences of diverse blended families within their social context.

The population for this study consisted of five couples that identified as diverse blended families. Purposive and snowball sampling was chosen as the most appropriate strategies, as participants were chosen for their personal experiences and they referred others who they believed met criterion. To enhance trustworthiness and add to validity, a discussion and rationale of the researcher's role and past experience in a blended family system was presented as acknowledgement of both personal sensitivity and researcher

bias. Limitations of this study reflect the bias of the researcher; one-sided interpretations of blended families (with no participation from non-residential parents); and recognition that participants only represent a single moment in time perspective. The children of blended family couples are also excluded from this study, as their input would not answer the research questions.

In the next chapter the findings that emerged from this study are presented.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

Get up, get clothes ready, eat breakfast, get to work, you know how

it goes, I'm hungry, you already ate. The day-to-day routine, stop

fighting, get in the car, leave your sister alone, okay, you're in trouble.

Funny, happy, loud, busy, talented, chaotic, different, but unique: that's

how you'd best describe us. Yeah, a lot of discrimination, we worry about

our kids; don't want them treated differently, like our family is not

family cause it doesn't fit the norm because we're not married. That's

ridiculous!

I hope she never feels embarrassed about the family she comes from

or upset, or burdened, or uncomfortable about having a different

kind of family. I want her to be happy in life, to feel good about herself.

You never know, coming out so late in life, I felt like I was dumping

this on my family. I worried that it would challenge the relationship,

and it did with some people, but not with who matters the most.

What makes us unique is that I was the single parent, the male,

my child lives with me, he visits his mother, and my wife never

had a kid, and I think that's rare in our community. My wife plays an

active role in his life, she's not in the bleachers just looking on,

watching me do everything. She's supportive. This is our family

These are the voices of diverse blended families - formed from single parents, cohabitating parents, lesbian and gay parents. Of all of their many differences, uncertainties, times of challenge, and times of joy, there is one constant – they are families that are constructing their worlds and raising their children with hopes and aspirations for their futures. They pay bills, they vacation, they get broke, they buy groceries, they laugh, and they cry. And at the end of the day they are a family.

The central focus of this study was to investigate how diverse blended families conform to, transform, resist, or revoice dominant cultural models of blended families. Interest went beyond what these couples said to include how they said it, how they represented themselves, ways of interacting through social practice, and how that process aided in a subjectivity of identity formation. They shared their stories and let their voices be heard as they discussed their relationships, family structure, dreams, aspirations, regrets, the pain of double and triple stigma, and yet gave central place to a "cultured-figured" world in which they carried no stigma.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from the grounded theory analysis and describe five diverse blended families from their unique perspectives. Analysis of the data revealed emergent themes and a surplus of revealed normative day-to-day realities. In hearing their stories, their portraits are revealed.

This chapter includes the overall findings and themes that emerged from the data: (1) participating couples; (2) family sketches: how the couples described themselves; (3)

relationship styles, dynamics, and communication with former partners; and (4) household structure/roles/rules/boundaries.

<center>The Sample</center>

Participating Couples

Five families identified as diverse blended families, but only four met the initial proposed criteria on the Survey of Family Types which included having at least one "biological child" that lived in the family home. Initially each Diverse Blended Family Type was represented except a gay male couple with a biological child that lived in the family home. After the study commenced the criteria for this particular family type was adjusted to allow for at least one biological child, regardless where the child lived. Upon that adjustment, a gay male couple was recommended by a colleague who met the new criteria.

The small sample is not intended to be representative, but was largely heterogeneous. Participants varied in terms of race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, educational level, socioeconomic background, family structure, and religion. They were all willing to participate and eager to share their stories. They were encouraged that their participation might provide help in "some way" to not only other diverse blended families, but to counselors and other professionals who work with these families. The average couple took pride in their identity after suffering crisis and ostracism and wanted their stories told in affirmative ways. Typical responses were:

> I stand proud. I'm not ashamed to be me. Even though I
>
> went through a period when I was afraid to be me just because
>
> of the rejection I would get from my mother because I'm a lesbian
>
> and this is the way we raise our family. This is who I am; this is

what I want, and this is how we do it…and maybe that can help

somebody.

Even though we're not legally married, you know, we are still

a real family… like, these are our kids, our house and I feel great

about who I am for real. I mean…you are who you are, and if

we can help somebody, you know, that's all good, cause people

'oughta be feeling good about themselves, we don't want our kids

to be feeling bad about themselves, I don't care what some-

body else say about you, you know?

It's not easy for us all the time but it's doable and generally we make it

work …and I think its honorable to be able to share that with others who

may be experiencing similar situations, like, you know, we don't mind

sharing if it can help.

It was encouraging that each couple, early on seemed to have some level of

commitment to the study, other than being participants. During pre-interview and post-

interview discourse as I thanked them for their participation and all of them shared their

appreciation for the research being conducted.

A summary of the data on the four couples is presented in Table 1(page 61). Each

couple represented a particular category of diverse blended families as discussed in the

literature: Type A: Non married Diverse Blended Family (formed by opposite-sex single

parents); Type B: Married Diverse Blended Family (formed by opposite-sex single

parents); Type C: Lesbian Diverse Blended Families (formed by two same-sex females); Type D: Gay Diverse Blended Family (formed by two same-sex males); and Type E: African-American Diverse Blended Family. There were three African-American couples who crossed identified in the sample and are presented in the following manner: Type A/E; Type B/E; and Type C/E.   There were two lesbian diverse families; one African-American and one White. These couples are presented in the data summary accordingly: Type C/White and Type C/African-American. Pseudo names have been applied for confidentiality and some areas are composite to further protect the identity of the participants.

The amount of years these couples were together ranged from 4-10 years. The age range was from 25-41 years old. All individuals were employed full time and half of them had college degrees. The couples had jobs that ranged from blue collar and technical career positions (factory worker, medical assistant, mental health technician) to professional careers such as (psychologist, project manager, licensed counselor, engineer, and high school teacher).

All five blended family types had at least one biological child that lives in the couple household and they had custody, except for the Type D couple (Tom and Mike) whose biological child lives with her mother. There were a total of 10 children in all of the households, of which 6 of them were step children. The children's ages ranged from 2 – 14 and three of the couples had children together in addition to their step-children. One out of five couples had previously gone for counseling to address blended family issues and one of the couples attended a workshop and participated in a program for same gender parents regarding blended family topics and support.

Family Sketches: How The Couples Described Themselves

This section includes self- portraits of all five couples presented through three

kinds of information: demographic data; descriptive metaphors; and what is unique about

their families.

<u>John and Sue</u>

John and Sue identified as a Cohabitating/African-American Diverse Blended

Family formed by Single parents (Type A/E). They are both 26 years old and have been

living together for nine years. Sue has a 10 year old daughter that she had when she was a

teenager and she and John have 6-year-old twins together. Sue's daughter does not have

a relationship with her biological father. Sue said that she knows him, and has talked to

him before, but he has been incarcerated most of her daughter's life; in and out of jail and

that is the extent of the relationship. John does not have any other children. John and

Sue both describe their family as "typical – just without marriage" and define their

household as a place where their children feel comfortable and are happy:

> I think it's good for the most part, we function one day at a time. We
>
> have all the bits and pieces that we have that we can put in a pot and
>
> make it what we want - I mean, we're not the Huxtables, but we are
>
> a family, and we make it work, and it does work.

John and Sue introduce each other as boyfriend/girlfriend, my man/my woman, and refer

to each other as "my children's father or my children's mother." The way that many

people identify individuals that are parents and not married are terms that Sue detests:

> I'm not a Baby- Mama, and he's not my Baby-Daddy. You're not

going to address me like that. I say I'm his kid's mother and that's

my kid's father. I'm not gone be a baby-mama and a baby-daddy

kind of person. I was never addressed like that and my friends

know not to address me like that. And I will never let anyone

address him like that. NO, that's not my baby-daddy! That's my

kid's father, and I'm not the baby-mama!

John said he refers to Sue's daughter as his stepdaughter and that she calls him by his

first name, even though he has been in her life since she was one year old. He said he and

Sue talked about it early in the relationship, and since Sue's daughter had her own father,

they agreed that she would call him John. When asked about his relationship dynamics

with his stepdaughter, John responded:

> Oh, we're good. We communicate, she respects me, I respect
>
> her, that's the way it's always been. I mean, we play roles that's
>
> supposed to be played, you know, Stepfather, and everything. I
>
> take care of her like she's mine, and I don't treat her any different
>
> than the twins.

Sue stated this as special and unique in their diverse blended family, that John has helped

her raise her daughter since they got together, and they were only 17 years old:

> I mean, I came with the child and John accepted her from one
>
> year old, and he basically raised her cause her father wasn't around.

I appreciate that, and she feels okay with him too. That makes me

feel comfortable.

Although both John and Sue feel positive about their family situation, they stated that they experience pressure from people because they are not married and others look down on their family because of it. It bothers them that her children will suffer from such accusations:

We treat our kids to be respectful and we are not different as a

married couple with their family. The only thing different is the

piece of paper. I mean, we don't have to be married to continue

living the way we are, we make it work. We can get married

tomorrow and things not going to change.

John agreed that they are making it work, but differs on the importance of marriage in their lives:

We do make it work, it's still our family, married or not, but I think we

get the blessings of God with marriage, and I'd like to have that.

But I don't want to dive in first into it and be slapped by the water.

Lori and Sally

Lori and Sally identified as a Lesbian Diverse Blended Family (Type C/White). They were legally married four years ago in Massachusetts, but their marriage is not honored in the state of Missouri. Lori has a 6-year-old daughter from a previous Lesbian relationship. She and her former partner have joint legal custody and Lori has physical

custody. The former partner lives across the street from them with her new partner and she has weekly visitation to see Lisa, and Lisa spends the night with her on weekends:

> So, when we split up, there was no legal separation…so we were
> both her legal parents.

Both Lori and Sally have different ways of describing each other and their union. Sally follows more contemporary descriptions, while Lori prefers more traditional terms:

> I would say this is my wife and our daughter. I use to be
> uncomfortable with the term 'wife', but then really, once we
> got married, I find it now sort of, like an entitlement. I say,
> this is my wife Sally, for the most part she's says "partner."
> She's more than comfortable with that. The wife word used to
> bug me, but since we've been married, I don't know, I just changed
> my impression of it. I say wife, cause to me, I think it symbolizes
> something to society that partner doesn't, like there's legitimacy
> to it, or maybe there's just more official connotation like we are
> actually married and I'm entitled it.

> For me, it depends on the situation, depends on the environment
> and who I'm talking to, people I'm comfortable with or not, or
> talking to someone I don't know how they would feel about something.

Despite the dissimilar ways in which they introduce and define each other, both of them

define their family identification as 'two moms':

> I consider us as two moms for sure, and Lisa (daughter) will
>
> say she has three moms, and you (pointing to Sally), you
>
> specifically say "Step-Mom'. I asked her (Sally) if she wanted
>
> to be called mama or anything like that.

> Lori and her ex-partner had Lisa. That's how there's three moms.
>
> Yes, I'm a mom, and at school when I pick her up, her
>
> friends say I'm her mom when I get her, but Lori is Mom,
>
> the ex is Mommy, and I'm Sally. The only time she calls me
>
> mommy is when she is at school and her friends will say, Lisa,
>
> your mom is here. Other than that, she usually just calls me
>
> Sally. I've known her since she was two. She knows I'm her
>
> Step-Mom, she knows they were together and I came into the picture.

Lori prefers that her daughter call Sally a parental term because she said they have a very

close bond that is often more maternal than her biological mother-daughter relationship:

> I would say they have a very maternal-mother/child kind of
>
> relationship. I do think she sees you (Sally) as a mother. She calls
>
> out to Sally more than me even…for help; they've always been
>
> the closest really. Cause Sally's mostly a friendly person, always

> open with Lisa, she answers her very matter-of-factly…they just
> have a really good relationship. They talk a lot. I am a little less
> accessible. Sally's more open, I think I'm a lot more inaccessible.
> She's more outgoing and friendly, I'm a lot more reserved, and
> she's a school teacher.

When asked what adjective they could use to define their family and what was unique and special about them, Lori responded:

> Awesome, loving, fun, open, honest, close active and unique.
> What is most unique and special is that we are two women with a
> child that was conceived thru another same sex relationship,
> via in vitro where one carried the other's egg. You know it's
> becoming more common, and since we've done it, some of
> our friends have done it…but it's definitely not typical.
> it was my egg, but I actually had to adopt her, since my ex was
> the birth mother, so, we're both legal parents.

Mary and Diane

Mary and Diane identified as a Lesbian/African-American Diverse Blended Family (Type C/E). They have been together in a committed relationship for seven years and they are in their 30s. Mary is divorced from a previous marriage to Ralph and they had two sons together who are now 8 and 10 years old and live with Mary and Diane.

Mary has full custody and Ralph has visitation rights. The couple also has a 2-year-old daughter that was born in their union. Mary and Diane consider themselves a "different: but "normal" family. They describe themselves as a domestic partnership of two moms with three children. Both women described their family as an average unit with average day-to-day occurrences that involve children:

> Like driving in the car, the baby is cranky, I guess it's as typical
>
> as anything else, its standard, we are a family. There's noise
>
> and chaos, a lot of ongoing communication with the kids, parenting:
>
> don't treat your sister like that, she's a baby. She's not trying to irritate
>
> you, take care of her, she just wants to sit on your lap, she wants to
>
> watch Scooby do with you, don't kick her off the couch. Just regular stuff.

The couple stated that they have many challenges and are aware that their particular diverse blended family suffers bias, but they take pride in reframing their experiences and described themselves as having two unique situations. First they instill in their sons and their daughter to accept who they are and their unique dynamics because it is their family, their reality: they have a two-mom household, they are their primary caregivers and they love them.

Their second unique situation is that the couple decided to have a child together through "natural impregnation" which was different for them, but Diane (who gave birth) said it was worth it to get their daughter:

> We planned her. Yes, she was planned; thought it out and we didn't
>
> opt for in vitro. We looked into it, it was expensive, but I had a friend

who was willing to give it to us, so it was natural. It was hard, but I went

through it to have my child.

Mary, on the other hand, talked about the difficult side of the coin and what it was like to

be on the outside looking in:

It was at our home, and I was there, and he was nice, we spoke, we

talked afterwards, and you have to be strong to be able to do that,

but I wanted her to be at home, to be comfortable. It only had to

take place five or six times; we had a calendar and we knew when

she was ovulating, and he was okay with that. We started in October,

made sure she was ovulated and it happened quick; she was pregnant

by Christmas. But it was very hard. Oh, it made my stomach hurt. I

go back to that. When you're confident in your relationship and you trust

that's all there is you make some very firm statements up front, that it is

XYZ, and nothing else, no intimacy, no big build up, you're not

gonna make love. You just get in there and you do it, and it needs

to be over in ten minutes, or I'm coming in.

Mary and Diane describe their household as a "whole unit" not distinguishing between

which children belong to whom, and the baby girl is considered a child of the union, as if

her birth had been in vitro insemination. The boys, however, do make some distinctions

to their friends, referring to Mary as their Mom, Diane as their Stepmom, and other times

labeling them as "two Moms: their Strong Mom and their Smart Mom:

They'll say this is our Strong Mom and that is our Smart Mom. I

laugh, it's funny though, cause they come to both of us for different

reasons. I'm the math and science mom and she's the reasoning, you

know: writing and all that. So I'm the sports mom and she's the

cheerleader on the side (laughter). But I love it; I just wanna hug 'em.

Like the other day I was lifting a bike over the fence and their friend said,

wow, your mom is really strong. And even at home, if it's a math

question, they come right to me, and not to their other mom.

Both Mary and Diane believe in their family and are not rude to others that ostracize

them. They do not make excuses for their family and are unashamed of how they identity

themselves. They were asked the question if they ever had to clarify or justify

themselves and they said yes, it happens:

Even when we're out it's like, this is my partner. If we go to a

program at the school, this is who we are, I'm the mom and she's their

other mom. It's just matter of fact. We have this mindset that if someone

asks, if they need clarification, I'm gonna give it to you, because if you're

bold enough to ask, I'm gonna make sure I explain it to you so you don't

have to second guess anything. I think it comes from us not being the norm

or people not being committed to the situation to be okay or understand,

or *want to understand*. Sometimes people know, but they don't ask, they

don't acknowledge it, they don't disrespect it, they exist around it: the

elephant in the room, if you will, not really saying anything. It can be

hurtful. Yeah. Depending on who the person is.

Tom and Mike

Tom and Mike identified as a Gay Diverse Blended Family (Type D/White). They have been in a committed relationship for 10 years, and have lived together for three years. Tom and Mike define their relationship as a committed couple with a child from a previous relationship who does not live with them full time. Tom is divorced and has a 14 year old daughter from a previous marriage. His ex-wife has full custody and he has visitation rights on alternate weekends. When asked how they introduce their family to others Mike went first:

> I just say that she's Tom's daughter. So, I don't say Step-daughter,
>
> or our daughter. I just say she's Tom's daughter, Jamie.

Both Tom and Mike stated that they are always cognizant of how everything they do or say might impact Tom's daughter since she is so sensitive about her father's sexuality and does not want others to know, and her mother told her that nobody else has a gay father:

> She's more sensitive, doesn't want to stand out…it's
>
> uncomfortable for her talk much about it…and she's known Mike
>
> since she was four…she loves him, but her mom didn't want
>
> us to discuss our sexuality with her, and so we just didn't until
>
> she was about 12. So, we're careful how we introduce her.

Mike described what was unique and special in their lives based upon his relationship

with his partner's daughter:

> I never really had a strong paternal instinct that I had to
>
> have a child. It's something I've thought about and tossed
>
> around, but was not a priority in my life, so having met
>
> someone as wonderful as Tom and then to have the added
>
> bonus of having Jamie as well to me is just the most ideal
>
> situation I could be in. It's really a joy more than a burden
>
> and I feel so joyful that I've found this situation, or that it's
>
> found me, .and we've grown together. I think we bonded when
>
> she was a very early age. The first time I met her, she walked down
>
> those stairs; she just lit up, and I lit up, and she was four,
>
> and she stole my heart back then. But I'm reluctant to say
>
> parental figure because I don't claim to be her parent, or
>
> have any authority over her, or you know, I would certainly
>
> never discipline her, I'm more of an adult friend or role model.

<u>Chester and Melanie</u>

Chester and Melanie identified as a Married Diverse Blended Family, formed by a

Single Parent (Type A/D). They have been married for 8 years and they are 31 and 32

years old. Chester had a son from a previous relationship who is now 10 years old and

they have a 2 year old daughter together. Although Chester and his son's mother have joint legal custody of his son, his son lives with him and visits his mother periodically.

When asked how do they describe, introduce and/or refer to each other, Chester stated that he has recognized that he puts a designator before his wife's name when introducing her and his children to people:

> I've been criticized by my friends, and it's something I've tried to adjust and that's that I say: She's my daughter's mother, and she's my son's step mom. And why is that valid? Why is that even important to the scenario? You know? Why do I put that designator in front of her name…I mean, she is his mother, she does all the things for him. So why do I do that? It's something I've actually tried to break, and so I think I describe my family and unfortunately I go: It's me, I'm the Dad, and then it's my son's stepmother, my daughter's Mother, my kids. So I think I even put a stigmatism on my own relationship.

> And it's funny, my son calls her by her nick-name, Ms. Melanie. And he's called her that since he met her. That's always been his name for her and I think he thinks that's what he's supposed to call her. When he was in daycare he was instructed to call all adults by Mr. or Ms. in front of their first name.

Melanie agrees that she does some things similar when she introduces their family:

I think I describe it very similar as Chester, but in different words. I

feel it is somewhat segmented in some ways. So I see exactly the same

point he made. I say this is our daughter, this is Chester, my

husband, and this is my stepson.

On the other hand, both Chester and Melanie see themselves as a "typical family."

No one would know they are not a biological family until they put a designator of "step"

before the wife or the son's name. Chester, however sees Melanie as a non-nurturer,

which if changed could change dynamics in how the self-describe:

We eat dinner together, she comes to his parent teacher's conferences,

she operates in the same manner that his mother would. So I think we

operate as a typical family until we designate ourselves as "not a

typical family." I'm more of the emotional type and Melanie is not too

nurturing. I just wish she could be of a nurturer to him because she

does everything else and she can provide what I can't provide. It would

be good if she checked on him, or if he feels sad, she'll sit down and talk

to him; put her hand on his thigh.

Melanie agrees that she is not much a nurturer but sees the importance of working on it

for her stepson's benefit:

I think I saw myself outside of that mother's role and I don't

know if I wanted it, and Chester and I talk openly about it and it

was a big adjustment for me, because I really didn't want kids,

but that was the package that presented itself, so it has taken me

a while to get acclimated to that. I have always known that his

biological mom is no consistent in his life, so there's probably a

very specific need for that for him, so I am doing better. Yeah,

I think I have to do very intentional and deliberate things to make

happen.

Other than this challenge, both Chester and Melanie spoke on what makes them unique

and special and they define their family as a complete unit and a role model for others.

Melanie spoke to their blessings and cultural uniqueness:

Honestly, I think it feels like a very stable family. I feel like we

have a lot of blessings, we're safe, we were not affected by the

recession. We are a professional couple, and we make the needed

sacrifices for our family. And I tell my husband that what makes us

so unique is that prior to meeting him, I had never encountered a

man who was the sole provider and the biological mother is

somewhat inconsistent. So, I think it's unique that he (partner) is

the most responsible party. You don't typically see the mother

not there and the father there being the most responsible.

When asked if they thought their uniqueness was attributed mostly to the statistics in the

African-American community where there are significantly a disproportionate amount of

female headed households, Chester responded:

> No, not with my friends, I have a lot of friends who are single
>
> fathers and we push each other and that's what we told each
>
> other you put your foot down and take charge of your child's future,
>
> and all if them either have joint or full custody of their children.
>
> From a minority standpoint, I think it's important to bring men
>
> back into the home, and I think that the society we live in
>
> nowadays…it's hard to find a spouse that doesn't have a previous
>
> relationship or a child that's produced from a previous relationship.
>
> But it gives us all opportunities to create a strong community by
>
> building strong families.

Conclusion

The previous family sketches were presented as an introduction into the unique

worlds of the families. They couples were diverse not only in how they identified, but in

how they referred to each other and why, and in the different ways they defined their

uniqueness. All of the families shared the importance of the institution of family as a

unifying structure - as one unit.

In the next section the current relationship styles with former partners are

explored. All five couples shared similar dynamics ranging from non-existent to cordial

when the relationship existed because of visitation purposes alone.

Relationship Styles, Dynamics, and Communication

with Former Partners

The question about former partners was used to investigate current relationship styles, dynamics, communication patterns and boundaries. This was a way to explore more in depth dynamics about the couple's former partnership. Who was in, or who was out of their family systems, as well as why and how those dynamics impacted the current blended family and household relationships. Former partnership types fell into four categories of the five diverse blended family couples: (a) No Relationship-No Visitation/Abandonment; (b) No Relationship w/Visitation/Biased (c) Partial Relationship w/Visitation/Biased; (d) Collaborative Relationship w/Visitation/Strained; and (e) Cordial Relationship w/Visitation/Distant.   The preceding descriptions are defined for this study alone and not presented as research supported descriptions of overall blended family relationship types. Nor have they been assessed by any instruments that designate one over the other. Particular types were given names based upon participants' descriptions of their former relationship dynamics.

No Relationship - No Visitation/Abandonment

John and Sue identified as having no contact and no relationship with Sue's former partner. Sue was only 15 when her daughter was born and the girl's father has been in and out of jail every since. Sue stated that there has never been visitation for her 10-year-old daughter, nor anything besides phone calls every now and then:

> I don't talk to him at all. When he grew up, he had no
>
> direction as a child, and he's just been in and out of
>
> incarceration, just terrible. So that's all there is to him.

We don't; aint never had no kind of relationship, no dynamics.

Good thing is, he aint no problem either, so you know that's it.

He know about her too; just don't do nothing about it.

No Relationship – No Visitation and No Relationship w/Visitation/Biased

Mary and Diane fell into two separate, but similar relationship types with Mary's ex-husband and Diane's friend who fathered her and Mary's 2-year- old daughter via a "natural conception/known sperm donor method." Mary has neither relationship, nor communication with her 8- and 10- year-old sons' father since they were divorced. He does, however have weekend visitation rights, is biased with regard to her lesbian household, and talks negatively to the boys when he visits with them. Mary described her relationship with her ex-husband as follows:

Our relationship is a non-relationship. It is strained, distant

disconnected, aloof to reality. He is inconsiderate. You can

write those out three times. He'll say things to the boys that he

shouldn't say, and they'll come home asking questions, and I'll say,

what were you all actually talking about? He teaches them to

disrespect me, indirectly.

Mary is concerned that her ex-husband affects her sons when he talks negative to them about her, then seems to try to punish her by not picking them up regularly:

That's why no matter what I think of their father, they won't

know it; they will never hear me say anything unkind. Even

when they come to me with craziness – when they come back

from a visit, I just handle it and I'll go behind closed doors

and verbalize it.   They go through a lot with him…he just

doesn't seem interested. If he called at least once through

the week to see about them, it would be nice, but nothing,

nothing, no effort, no interest, no nothing. He is supposed

to get them every weekend: Saturday and Sunday afternoon.

Sometimes we look up and it's 6 pm and he hasn't called. The boys

will ask, why haven't they (father and step mother) come to get

them yet. He thinks he's getting back at me by hurting them,

but he's hurting himself in the long run.

Diane's friend, who agreed to be a sperm donor through natural conception and to

have a relationship with the child, has not contacted them since he found out that the

child was born. Mary discussed that the relationship with the toddler's father was non-

existent, but she had hoped for more than him just giving them the baby and

disappearing:

I just wanted it for her (the toddler); the relationship. I grew up in a home

with both parents, married over 30 years still. And so, you just

need to know your people. And I just hoped that could be for

her and maybe one day something will happen for him and

he'll contact us, but for right now, its non-existent.

Diane talked about not really wanting more from the friend, although she is concerned

how his non-involvement will affect her child one day. Diane's description of that

relationship is as follows:

> To be honest, it really doesn't matter to me as much, because
>
> I knew she was going to grow up in a home with two moms.
>
> But people know him, and see him and he never asks about her.
>
> It hurts me for my baby, not for me. She's gonna want to know.

Partial Relationship w/Visitation/Biased

Mike and Tom identified as having a very strained, partial and biased relationship

with Tom's ex-partner, who has legal and physical custody of Tom's 14 year old

daughter. Tom talked about the dynamics of that relationship where he has visitation

rights:

> Our relationship is civil. It's gotten easier to work together
>
> since our daughter has gotten older, but she's very resentful.
>
> I think she thinks I married her long enough to get a child and I
>
> pulled one over on her, and got a divorce and she had very much
>
> given herself to the relationship and felt very rejected and hurt.
>
> There's always tension under the surface. Say, my ex-wife's had a
>
> difficult day or ummm, her two other kids are being a challenge,
>
> it's very easy for her to lash out. And I've gotten used to it over
>
> the years, of kind of just just the burden I bear. I'm not

gonna do anything to get her angry, its' not worth starting a fight;

picking a fight over something I can avoid.

When asked the question of how does the ex-wife's resentment for him affect his relationship with his daughter, Tom discussed the following:

Basically, she told Jamie that nobody else has a gay father, so she

shouldn't talk about it with anyone; she would get teased, people

won't understand. I regret that my daughter feels that she has

to hold the secret down. That's not a comfortable way to live,

you know, gay and lesbians have kind of felt that way for

some period of time, till they finally decided to, you know,

face it themselves; couldn't hold it any longer. So, I kind of

see that pattern with my daughter. At some point she'll be more

comfortable, she'll have friends that come over and spend the

night with us, but for now it's a challenge for her.

Mike added his comments regarding his relationship dynamics with Tom's ex:

We're not even associates; we have no relationship. We've

encountered each other, and we've actually met and shook

hands, I think once, and then we've been at some sporting

events in support of Jamie. Then a couple of times dropping

Jamie off at her mom's house, we've seen each other…but

we don't wave and certainly don't have conversation. So

whatever the term is. It certainly is not "associate."

Although Tom and his ex's relationship is distant, and he regrets the pressure she puts on

their daughter to be ashamed of his sexual orientation, he talked about the positive side of

their relationship:

Out biggest strength is easy: that we both want what is best for

Jamie, and we both are willing to sacrifice monetarily, physically,

also sacrifice our emotional needs…our need to be right with

each other to do what is right for Jamie.   On the plus side, she tends

to be very structured and disciplined and that is a big part of what

has helped Jamie turn out so well. She's been a very good mother.

Of all the complaints I may have, she's raising our daughter well,

and is raising her boys very well.

Collaborative/Strained Relationship w/ Visitation

Lori and Sally who have physical custody of Lori's 6 year old daughter identified

as having a collaborative, but strained relationship style with Lori's ex-partner. Lori

talked about those dynamics:

I would describe that relationship as challenging. We

approach life differently . We approach life so *very*

differently, which is why we're not together, and so we

also approach, I think, parenting very differently, so we

do our best to keep it friendly and workable for Lisa.   If we

didn't have Lisa we would *never* speak to each other; don't think

we'd have anything to do with each other, you know, and

she was: I'm gonna see her, she's my child too, and you know,

they moved across the street. So we've come to an arrangement that's

working for now. We never did anything legally. Like I mean, well

legally, I actually had to adopt Lisa, she was the birth mother, so

I adopted her, so we're both legal parents, so when we split up there

was no legal separation. So were both her legal parents.

In a surrogate situation the surrogate would have to sign away her

rights. But in this situation it didn't make since because she would've

signed it away and I adopted her. So the birth mother; whoever

gives birth is the mother in the eyes of the   law…we're both

legal parents unless there's some document signed ahead of time.

She's the birth mother and I am the adopted mother. We're both legal

parents.   It's up and down. We definitely had periods of unrest and

difficulty, but um, we ultimately, we just wanna make it easier

for Lisa, so we work together for Lisa's sake

Sally sees herself more of an associate with Lori's former partner and describes that as

follows:

> Yeah, I just sort of view the whole situation from an outside
>
> perspective. I mean, I deal with her as minimally as I
>
> possibly can, umm, she tends to do things that are frustrating often,
>
> towards her best interest and not Lisa's best interest. That's been
>
> the biggest part of contention in this whole dynamic . She will
>
> consistently put herself first and convinces herself it is what Lisa wants.

Cordial Relationship w/Visitation/ Distant

Chester and Melanie who have custody of Chester's 10 year old son identified their relationship style with Chester's ex-partner as "cordial" but distant. Chester described the dynamics of that relationship:

> I think it's cordial, above average respectful, but distant. I mean,
>
> there's obviously a relationship in the past history. We are not
>
> out giving each other high fives or anything, but over the last
>
> couple of years it has improved. And at the end of the day, I
>
> describe it to my friends that it is cordial, and I'm alright.
>
> And it has grown to be cordial.

Melanie talked about her relationship with her husband's ex as no relationship at all:

> I don't think we have one. She and I have never had a conversation.
>
> She'll call and is respectful, I mean, it's not tense or anything like
>
> That…it's just there isn't any communication. So, she'll call and ask

To talk to her son. I say hold in a second, I'll get him, you know.
If he's not here, I say, I'll tell him to call her back, but we
really don't have a reason to communicate either. When she
she needs to communicate with Chester, she'll call his cell
phone, and they communicate about things they need to
communicate about.

Chester acknowledges that part of the reason his ex has no relationship with his wife is what he told her when his son first came to live with him:

I told her at the beginning that things that needed to be filtered
through me. Don't filter things through our son, and don't filter
things through my wife. If there's an issue in my household, she
was to come through me directly. And she obviously hasn't had
any issues with Melanie, but if she had, she would've filtered it
through me, so I think I'm the one that created the non-relationship
because I feel like if there's someone who's not there a lot,
they should not have much of a role or input on the structure of
his life or his upbringing.

When asked the question of was there any role or input Chester's ex had in their son's life, Chester responded as follows:

No. She has no say. …but you know what, I'm gonna hold myself

and say she does. There are certain things that she honestly just

wants to be apart of, and I think that's the fear of losing

all control of his life to Melanie.

Chester added that there were some strengths regarding his ex, despite her inconsistency

in her relationship with her son:

I think the biggest strength is in her heart…she loves her son.

I would never question that. I think she lacks the ability to do

the things that a good mother should do. But I've seen her

soul…I've seen her eyes when I drop him off; she really loves

her son. That's a strength. Biggest challenge is the lack of instability.

Conclusion

All five families had either conflictual or no relationships with former partners

and none of the former partners were considered within the family system. Boundaries

were rigid and closed in terms of former partner participation or input in the blended

family household.   In one home, the former partner had abandoned the child. In four out

of five families, custody was within the blended family household and one couple had

visitation rights with his daughter. Two of the three same sex families suffered bias and

resentment against their household by former straight partners because of their sexual

orientation, and they either discussed their discontent with the children, and/or

discouraged the children from being open to their parents' sexual orientation. In three of

the households the former partners had visitation rights, but visits were mostly strained

due to inconsistency with 2 households and associated stress with one of the households. None of the step parents had viable and open communication relationships with their partners' former partners. All of these relationships were defined as non-existent. Once constant among three of the five couples was positive affirmations of working together with their ex-partners for the sake of their children's happiness, with their children's best interest in mind.

Household Structure: Rules, Roles, Responsibilities, Boundaries

In this section the families' household structures are presented in terms of how they compared and contrasted in household roles, rules, and responsibilities. The three categories of findings were (1) Traditional Roles; (2) Non-Traditional/Shared Roles; and (3) Both: Traditional and Shared Roles.

Traditional Roles

Two diverse blended households identified as constructing traditional roles within their household structure: Lori & Sally and John & Sue.

Lori talked about how although she and her partner identified as two moms in their lesbian blended family household, she preferred to refer to her partner as her wife. Since they legally married, she feels a sense of entitlement to the term. That mindset seemed to have crossed over into how their home was structured in a traditional sense:

> I think it's sort of traditional: I am the Dad; we definitely
> contribute a lot equally; equal contributors, but in different ways.
> I have made a more demanding job, she manages the money, I'm
> primarily the bread winner, not the sole, but more traditional
> 8-5 kind of schedule. Sally's more cooking, picking up Lisa.

We've joked about she's the C.E.O. of the home; she does the grocery

shopping and stuff. It works for us. It's not like I sit around and

don't do anything. I just have less time at home.

Regarding discipline and decision making, Lori and Sally's household remained in a

traditional format:

I don't know if anyone sat down and said this is the way it's

going to be, but it sort of plays out that way. Discipline? We

we both pretty much do, but me mostly, ' cause Lori lets

her get away with too much and I'm home with her the most.

But with any big decision, no one really has the final say.

We don't do anything unless we both are on board with it.

John and Sue also demonstrated traditional roles in the structure of their

household and compared with Lori and Sally in their description of how their household

ran and how discipline followed:

I mean, I'm the man, doing what I'm supposed to do, working,

making money, you know, it's traditional. She be cooking,

and cleaning up and organizing stuff, you know, how women

be doing, and that works out for us. Discipline? Well we do split

that up more, but she say I'm too lenient. Well you know you

can't have two stiff necks in the house, the kids would've lost

their minds. So I mean, I discipline 'em, but I try and let 'em

be kids to a certain degree too, you know.

Sue agreed with John in his description of his lenient discipline tendencies, but talked

about the exception to their traditional structure that mirrored Lori and Sally's exception:

But we do make big decisions together, more so now than we used to.

Ordinarily, in the beginning, I use to make all the decisions, but we

have grew a lot.

Both John and Sue and Lori and Sally make joint decisions about the children's

schedules, outings, visits to grandparents, etc. Both couples also participate in family

time, although since Lori and John have more rigid work schedules, a lot of family time

involves Sally and Lori's daughter, and Sue and her three children.

Non-Traditional – Egalitarian Roles

Mike and Tom's household was the only household that fell into this category

entirely. Both men said that, when it's just them and Tom's daughter is not visiting, they

don't have a lot of structure. There is more structure with set schedules that surround

visitation:

I don't think we have very traditional roles, I think what is

interesting about our relationship is that we tend to have

very similar views on sort of the big things that are important

to us, you know, question of the heart and what is important

to you. In the more traditional roles around the households,

we share pretty equally in household chores, so the day to

day stuff like cooking and laundry and repairs, we attack

with the same sort of energy, umm, and usually skill level.

Regarding norms and traditions, Tom learned early on the importance of structuring and

planning the time he would spend with his daughter when she visited:

One thing when I was separated from my ex-wife, even before

we were divorced, I was looking for books on how to be a good

father. I read a book about a father who had two daughters about

6 and 8, and when he got a divorce, he established tradition for

every Thursday night they went out to the same diner. That was their

thing. So on the night he had visitation, he sort of built their schedules

around that. And I started taking Jamie out to a bagel shop or

sometimes Sunday mornings, sometimes we go out for coffee. And

it kind of got to be my habit and so that's something we do; we

go around different places.

Mike commented on how Tom's including him in his ritual with his daughter helped his

relationship with Tom's daughter to grow and bond:

And what's really beautiful about that though is that he did include

me at an very early stage in our relationship, and even though

that was his time with his daughter and the thing that constant

that she could always depend on when she was with her dad…

he invited me along.

Although Tom and Mike make decisions together and share responsibilities, Tom does not regard Mike as another Dad for his daughter. He is an adult figure in her life who does not share in any decisions regarding Jamie's life, nor is ever regarded in a stepfather role:

I decide discipline for her. One day she told me: Dad, I have

three fathers: my step dad, he just does whatever mom tells him.

With you, I can get in trouble, but with Mike, I cannot ever get

in trouble.   She's my child, and it's different that the arrangement

she has with her mom or her stepdad. When she's here, she's with

me most of the time and Mike gets to be the fun adult.

Traditional – Egalitarian Roles

Two couples: Mary and Diane and Chester and Melanie fit in this joint category where the household structure operated from both a traditional sense with shared duties and responsibilities.

Mary and Diane credited the way in which the organization of their household helped establish and maintain relationships among their family with three children. Mary talked about how their structured evolved:

Our roles just sort of came natural for us. We have the regular morning

hustle and bustle, the daily struggle like most households, .getting

the boys out of the bed, doing the 2-year-old's hair, you know we

really just share that responsibility. The girl will be like, Mama, do

my hair; it's team work though. We do it together and I am more

of the house work.

But yes, we share the duties. There is no one person responsible

for this and one is responsible for that. It just comes natural for

everything that need to be done. I get off early and cook, and

the kids have responsibilities as well and that's clear…they need

that, they have specific things they have to do to.

Although Mary and Diane share household roles, and make joint decisions together, they

answer to traditional roles that Mary's boys labeled them, referring to their mother as the

Smart Mom who's specialty is writing and analysis, and they refer to Diane as the Strong

Mom because of her physical strength. Diane also referred to Mary as the cheerleader,

while referring to her self as the sports mom. Diane further talked about how their

daughter emulates Mary in dress up:

She's so girly-girl. Wants to do everything Mary does.

`   she wears her heels, puts on her perfume and wants her hair

done like Mary's. She's not interested in dressing like

me; I wear sweat shirts and jeans and dress down. Yeah

she's girly-girl.

Chester and Melanie also share household rules, make joint decisions, have

shared responsibilities with their children and oversee the structure in their home as Mary

and Diane do. Melanie talked about their routine as follows:

> I think we are Monday-Friday; a little more flexibility
>
> on the weekend, and I think lately there's been more of an
>
> expectation on Saturdays that we do something, We get out
>
> out of the house and do destinations, come home, get dinner
>
> prepared, we share the responsibility of things; sometimes
>
> I cook some time, umm, balancing the check book, and
>
> like on the weekend we are trying to regroup to start the
>
> the next week.

Where Chester and Melanie differ from Mary and Diane is in how Chester conceptualizes

role differential for he and his wife with the 60-40 rule he initiated:

> But if you look, you look at our home as compared to
>
> homes in the 1960s, I'm not the sole breadwinner and I don't feel
>
> like the household responsibility is solely hers. As you see
>
> I change diapers, I put kids to bed, I read books and she does the
>
> same thing, she does household duties, and I do the heavy ones
>
> like the bathroom and stuff. We try to make it a 60-40 house
>
> structure, like we defined it when we first met each other and talked
>
> about spending the rest of our lives together. Its 60-40 in that
>
> I take care of 60% of the financial responsibilities in the home,

It's guaranteed, and obviously it exceeds that, and she takes care

of 60% of the household duties. I pick up 40% of the household

duties and she picks up 40% of the financial duties. No matter how

you look at the typical or traditional home, it balances out.

Melanie did not agree, however, that it always balanced out as expected:

I mean, I'm aware of the 60-40 benchmark…and sometimes

I would say that the housework is a little bit more than that sometimes.

It feels like 90-10.   But I will say that we are getting better, and

when I'm starting to feel that way, he ramps it up more.

and I'm not taking that away from him, I just think that because

we are egalitarian and we both have careers it is hard sometimes

to maintain the house and structure and do all those things and

still have a career. So it's challenging. But sometimes I just feel

like, it's easy to go out a make a check; I can make a check, but

the housework is a different story.

Conclusion

All of the families were very specific about how they constructed their

households. Much of their day-to-day routines revolved around their schedules and plans

for their children, whether kids lived in the family home, or had visitation in the family

home. The families talked about their traditional, egalitarian and joint roles they have

established and how their particular systems of operation worked for their individual

families. There was some dis agreement in one couple's 60-40 benchmark where the

husband took on 60% of the finances and the wife took on 60% of the household chores and both partners took on 40% of the other load of the other partner's responsibilities. Although the husband thought this system worked well and balanced out despite couples' traditional or typical roles, his wife pointed out discrepancies to the model. Overall, all five families operated on various comparable and contrasting systems that aided in the growth and organization of their households.

<center>Chapter Summary</center>

This chapter presented a portrait of five diverse blended family couples: a detailed description of their separate and unique types, their perspectives of how they self-identify and refer to their blended family members, their relationship styles, home structure, and how they respond to criticism. It also includes reflection of how one of the couples took up dominant cultural models of diverse blended families. Their subjective paths have been explored and revealed as their voices resonated their collaborative needs to be recognized as viable family systems in their own right. These findings are never intended to be exhaustive, but echo a small portion of how these families made meaning within their family systems.

Chapter 5

Research Questions – In What Ways Did Couples Conform to, Transform, Resist,

or Revoice Dominant Models of Diverse Blended Families

This chapter focuses on the answers to the research questions using theories of

Critical Discourse Analysis. The research questions that led this study were: What

dominant cultural models existed around diverse blended families? Given those

constructs, in what ways did diverse blended families conform, transform, resist, or

revoice dominant narratives of blended families? The questions were framed in such a

way to inquire about the experiences of diverse blended families, and how the couples

responded to external portrayals of their family systems. Also, depending on how they

responded, were there multiple ways of presenting? How did they take up or reject

dominant models of diverse blended families?

The findings suggested that amidst their differences and similarities, the couples'

responses to external stimuli were diverse. Although the couples were unanimous in

perceiving and defining themselves and their relationships in positive and complementary

ways, findings suggested that depending on certain variables, some of the couples had

overlapping and conflicting positioning. An underlying concern to me was how

portrayals impacted the couples' partnerships and family relationship functioning. The

following findings are divided into two sections: an overview of how the five couples

responded to the research questions and an illustrative case study of Mike and Tom. The

following questions are answered: how the couples (1) conformed to expected rules and

guidelines for their particular diverse blended families; (2) transformed, changed or

altered their positions; (3) resisted or denied portrayals; and (4) revoiced or echoed

matching dominant portrayals. All five couples fit into three overlapping categories: (1)

Resist-Transform – two couples; (2) Resist-Conform-Revoice – one couple; and (3)

Resist-Transform-Revoice – two couples (see Table 2). To begin I remind the reader of

the definition of cultural models, figured worlds, and positional identities.

Revisiting Cultural Models/Figured Worlds and Social Identities

Cultural models, also referred to as figured worlds are taken for granted storylines

that are played out through social practice and dictate to members' expected and relevant

behavior (Holland et al., 1998). Much of the ritualized social conditioning is embedded in

the social practice, can be conscious or unconscious and can determine why people

behave, think, respond, or not respond to situations. Thus, participants' social identities

are constructed through interaction, observing, reading or even picking up on behavior

(Gee, 2004; Straus, 1992).   A central feature of identity building is that it is constructed

though interaction within these communities of practice and individuals either conform

social identities, or they resist these socially constructed ways of being and transform

through social disposition. These conflicting ways of being are not uncommon as

individuals can experience contradictory identities and positioning based upon certain

situations, stressors, and life experiences.

Resist-Transform

Mary and Diane (committed union formed by African-American Lesbian parents)

and Chester and Melanie (married couple formed by African-American single parents)

responded to the research question by opposing and denying stereotypical assumptions,

then constructing (transforming) their realities into practical and viable systems of

function. Mary and Diane's experiences as a African-American Lesbian family confirm

the literature that suggest that these family types may be the most challenged with their

triple badge of difference and triple stigma because they are a blended family, they are African-American and they are lesbians (Stewart, 2008). Inasmuch, they resisted traditional and current cultural models of Lesbian parent households from several perspectives. Despite much ostracism, they do not (a) internalize failure or think of themselves as less; (b) they say they do not conform to expected rules and guidelines of stereotypical African-American families as less cohesive; and (c) they do not buy into assumptions that their children are damaged for life because of not having heterosexual parents (Gartrell & Bos, 2020). While defying traditional assumptions, the couple does confirm recent literature on the progress of Lesbian headed families with strong bonds and supports their children as confident, psychologically happy and high functioning (Gartrell & Bos, 2010).

While facing ostracism and stereotype on two main levels, including Diane's mother who was not accepting of their relationship and Mary's ex-husband, who verbally put down her lesbian relationship to their 8- and 10-year-old sons, they also opted for a non-conventional method of conception/insemination that may be rare among lesbian couples. No studies were found that investigated this method of conception which a friend donated his sperm through sexual intercourse with one of the women. The most common form of conception among lesbians is through donor insemination (DI) where anonymous donor sperm from a sperm bank is purchased (Patterson, 1994.) Known sperm donor methods are not uncommon, but a woman chooses this course typically because she wants her child to have relationship with her or his father, it is less expensive and more personal. There are also legal implications concerning donor insemination that women should be aware of that differ by state (Wald, 2010). In Diane and Mary's case, they discussed the risks of not only choosing a known donor, but the implications of that

decision on their relationship. Finances did have an impact on their decision, which was a lot less expensive than [in vitro] donor insemination

Mary's ex-husband's hostility to her lesbian partnership is not a new phenomenon. Research has shown that many problems revolve around newly formed lesbian and gay families when the adults had former heterosexual partnerships, with increased difficulty when the non-resident (or resident) heterosexual parent demonstrates resentment and homophobic attitudes toward the new union and the new gay or lesbian step parent (Huggins, 1989). Mary experienced this level of social unacceptability on a constant level after coming out and divorcing her husband, but especially when she and Diane moved in together. Mary's ex-husband's resentment was punitive and reflected toward her by not being an active parent in their sons' lives; not picking them up consistently on weekends, nor calling them through the week. In reinventing and reframing their experiences, both Mary and Diane discussed the importance of what Lynch (2004) called "stigma management strategies" (p. 49). Through this strategy, the couple intentionally address the ostracism the boys received or would receive from others as well as from their own father, increasing their confidence in midst of abandonment and discrimination. Discussions of reframing "their particular normalcy" helped to instill in the boys their reality as a functional family, in spite of challenge. Neither Diane nor Mary instilled negativity into the boys' minds regarding their father and taught them to respect him regardless of his behavior.

Constructing a healthy sense of normalcy was a more difficult task in light of ongoing ostracism from Diane's mother. Diane longed for a relationship with her mother, wanting her to be involved in her 2-year-old daughter's life and embrace her partner and her two sons. Despite her mother's refusal to accept her daughter's family, Diane and

Mary reframed the relationship by staying involved with Diane's mother, attended family functions, traditions and holidays, but yet refused to conform to the mother's restrictions for their lives. Although difficult for both partners because of sullen treatment, they responded in positive ways that would help them grow in integrity.

Chester and Melanie also resisted cultural assumptions and expectations of African-American families and responded by transforming and reinventing alternate realities. With the grim statistics of young African-American males in America as absent fathers (Stewart, 2008), Chester was proud to say that he and many of his friends who are single fathers sought joint and sole custody of their children, and his friends succeeded with his support. Chester credits his wife for encouraging him in taking charge in his child's future and he in turn encouraged his single father friends to "put their foot down" and change the course of their children's futures. Melanie, as a single African-American professional female, when she met her husband was surprised to see his level of involvement in his son's life and when he was awarded joint custody, she did not know any one else that resembled his situation. More typically, single African-American women bring a child into the blended family marriage. Although one couple, their blended family arrangement still discredits the stigma that Black families are unstable, dysfunctional, deficient and disadvantaged family forms.

Not only have Chester and Melanie reinvented their family's realities, but both partners feel that their family is also externally portrayed in positive ways because it serves as a role model to follow. This couple does not see themselves as the exception to a rule because they are a functional Black blended family, but they are (a) an exception because they defy cultural models of their family type; (b) do not accept or internalize stigma; and (c) are often portrayed from positive lens because they do not fit the mold,

but broke it. It is their "normal" that was conveyed. This couple does not see themselves as "special" but rather who they were supposed to be and what they are supposed to be doing to maintain a viable, healthy family with commitment, responsibility, and endurance where the woman is a stepparent versus the man. Chester did state that their diverse blended family was applauded often by others because of his family convictions, commitment, and endurance which made it seem like they were an exception to a rule. This couples' success and the positive portrayal provided them may be based upon a social-moral expectation and privilege because they are legally married.

Resist-Conform-Revoice

Mike and Tom, a gay male couple with visiting rights for Tom's non-resident biological daughter, was the only couple who fit in this category. A portion of their narrative was used for analysis using Critical Discourse Analysis to help understand how this couple took up and resisted cultural models of their family simultaneously and what it meant for their relationship. While resisting, conforming, and revoicing negative narratives, a contradiction in ways of being is presented that is not uncommon among sexual minorities who came out after having children (Lynch, 2004). Results further demonstrated that couples who planned children were more equipped to address challenges and life transitions of being a sexual minority blended family than families who entered a relationship with a partner who was already a biological parent. Individuals who came out after having children had to create connections with no available guidelines. This challenge was true for Tom and Mike's family.

Tom and Mike resisted cultural narratives of negative portrayals of gay male parents by their 10 year long relationship commitment and endurance despite stigma and ostracism. Previous literature, however discusses ostracism and dilemma within GLBT

communities, with gay fathers suffering the most bias because gay parenthood is a contradiction (Patterson, 1994) and associated with heterosexuality (Berger, 2000). Further, it is stated that some of the ostracism comes from other gay childless men. Mike and Tom's family form is not unique, but is an increasing family form as more gay men opt to become fathers. Gartrell and Bos (2010) suggested that gay male parenting is newer than lesbian parents because of their options of surrogacy and adoption; however Mike and Tom fit common characteristics of gay men who fathered children in heterosexual partnerships and came out later in life with ex-wives having custody (Stewart, 2008). Such is the case that reflects how the couple conforms and revoices negative portrayals of their family type that centers on Tom's relationship with his 14-year-old daughter.

Tom and Mike experienced similar resentment from Tom's ex-wife that was like that experienced by Diane and Mary from Diane's ex-husband. She blamed Tom for coming out and depriving her of having more children. She also warned their daughter to remain silent about her father's sexual orientation, telling her that people will not understand and most people do not have gay fathers. This portrayal has contributed to his daughter's lack of comfort level when with her father and Mike in public. She is apprehensive about people knowing he is gay, especially her friends. Tom is concerned that his daughter has to "keep the secret" and compares her to many gay individuals who have had to keep their sexual identity a secret for fear of ostracism and homophobic responses. He worries about the long term affect this will have on his daughter's development. Tom is also afraid of losing connection with his daughter if he and Mike are openly affectionate. Both men, therefore position themselves as heterosexual males when walking down a public street together, on family outings, at Jamie's school and

sports' events and especially when they take her to church. Conforming to expected rules and acceptable ways of being also seems easier to them; to walk down the street and have a conversation, rather than hold hands and risk that information getting to any of Jamie's friends. Being openly affectionate also encourages stares and comments, which the couple seeks to avoid.

Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, and Meyer (2008) discussed how same sex couples lack validation of their relationship and fear this type of social rejection from family and friends. They even face deficient legal protection that could put them at risk in child custody cases. Such was true for Tom. He did not share custody of his daughter with his wife and was always cognizant of meeting the ex-wife's demands for fear of losing visitation rights. As the couple conformed to certain social identities, they also revoiced and echoed stereotypical messages in their narratives when they discussed how they could pass for "straight male friends" (safer) and in their rationale for not attending a gay church over a mainstream religious service. They preferred the traditional service because, while at the gay church, they felt that couples were overly affectionate just because they could be. Hall & Kitson (2000) discussed this common occurrence of sexual minority parents concealing their identities and revoicing negative portrayals of themselves due mostly to risk of harm to their families and fear of losing custody and visitation rights. Tom was inundated with conflicting discourses about being a gay father in a diverse blended family household and revealing his intimate role in his partnership with Mike.

Although Tom and Mike's conflicting identities are presented as protective measures for their family, their behavior is equally reflected as Internalized Heterosexism (IH) in the literature that impacts many aspects of an individual's life (Szymanski et al.,

2008). IH is defined as "the internalization of negative messages about homosexuality by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people – has been a core concept in LGB psychology since 1972" (p. 525).

Resist-Transform-Revoice

Lori and Sally (married union formed by White Lesbian couple) and John and Sue (committed union formed by cohabitating African-American couple) both fit into this tri-category with conflicting characteristics in how they responded and internalized external portrayals of their families. Lori and Sally's family form confirm the literature in several ways – they are a married couple with strong family bonds and are very involved in Lori's daughter's life, who is well adjusted and intelligent. Despite the many differences in both lesbian blended families in the study, these factors hold true for them equally. Gartrell (2010) concluded that active involvement by the mothers in lesbian homes was not uncommon, but more than the norm. Equally, she was not certain why children in lesbian households were more likely to do better than children in heterosexual households on some factors, but she had a theory: Lesbian mothers are very present in the children's lives. There is good communication, they are present in schools, aware of what's going on at school, and involved in their entire lives holistically. That, Gartrell concluded, was a great recipe for well-adjusted children with healthy results.

In resisting traditional cultural models of sexual minority parents, this couple transformed and altered their realities in such a way to live their lives and raise their daughter within their blended family household. Their transforming was not without challenge because they also wear the "double badge of difference" with double stigma as a blended family and a lesbian family. Both women, however, discussed different experiences of acceptance in their place of employment that impacts how open they are in

regard to their sexual orientation.   Sally is a high school teacher who asked her boss if

her sexual orientation was going to be a problem when she began working there, only to

be exposed to daily commonplace homophobic comments by teachers and students.

Although her boss said her sexual orientation was not a problem, and she does not

pretend to be straight as a teacher, but at the same time, she does not have the freedom to

be out either. Lori, on the other hand works in a supportive advertising company where

she does not recall being treated with bias or being ostracized.

The donor method Lori used in her former partnership is unique and provides her

and her ex-partner with legal custody and biological relationship with their daughter. The

literature refers to the procedure as egg donation/ovum sharing or partner assisted

reproduction (Belge, 2010) where one woman carries the egg that was conceived by a

donor sperm and her partner's egg outside of the body. This is similar to traditional

surrogacy, when a woman has a child for another person, sometimes using the father's

sperm and a donated egg or her own egg.

The way in which this couple revoices cultural models of blended families is they

have a very traditional patriarchal type family where Lori considers her self "the

husband' and calls Sally her "wife." These heterosexual terms also trickle over into their

household structure and roles each partner plays. Although they have some shared labor,

for the most part their roles and responsibilities are more traditional rather than

egalitarian with Lori being the primary bread winner and, even though Sally is a full time

educator, she is the nurturer, cooks, runs the house and has more mother-type

responsibilities with her stepdaughter.

John and Sue (formed by cohabitating African-American couple) also responded

to the research question with conflicting ways of being: resisting cultural models of

unmarried African-American blended families, transforming and reinventing their own realities that work for them, yet John revoiced narratives of expectations of cohabitating couples – that they should eventually marry.

This couple's experiences may confirm the literature that there is a moral objection and bias toward this family type (Wu & Matinson, 1993). Stigma follows cohabitating families because they are not married, assumed to have structure instability, assumed to be not stable as married blended families, and more likely to break up (Ganong & Coleman, 1994b). John and Sue, however, overall reflect characteristics that present them as the exception to traditional models, mirroring Bumpass et al. (1995) findings that these families tended to stay together as much as married blended families. This couple defies, resists, and transforms stereotypes in various ways. Sue had her first child when she was age 15 and she and John began living together at age 17 and have been together for nine years, with 6-year-old twins and Sue's 10-year-old daughter from a former partnership. According to research the emotional wellbeing of children in these family types are likely to be lower, perhaps stemming from less educated young mothers with fewer resources and non-residential biological fathers (King, 200). In John and Sue's household their children are psychologically stable, happy, confident, talented, and intelligent. Moreover, despite dismal findings about young African-American single-headed households (Stewart, 2008), Sue graduated from high school and college with an associate degree while a mother of three small children. John also is an exception to negative narratives and statistics of young African-American males without a college degree. He did not have children before having the twins with Sue, has never been arrested, earned his G.E.D, and attended and graduated from a technical college.

John presents multi-voicedness in his narrative. He stressed satisfaction and growth in his cohabitating blended family and stated that he did not want to marry Sue and did this only because people pressured him to. Neither did he want to rush into a marriage to satisfy others. He concluded, however, that he really believed that they would get the blessings of God if they did get married and he would like to eventually have that blessing. John's revoice of a cultural narrative that a union is not complete if it is not sanctioned by marriage, was revealed. Sue did not agree with him, and felt that they were already a complete family union the way they were, but did state that from a religious perspective, she agreed that they should be married.

An Illustrative Case Study of the Cultural Models in One Diverse Blended Family

A case study is presented to analyze the discursive construction of cultural models of diverse blended families from the perspective of one diverse blended family couple. The couple chosen for this analysis was Mike and Tom who are in a long term committed relationship with Tom having a 14-year-old daughter who lives with her mother who has physical and legal custody. For analysis, the following questions were asked: How is your diverse blended family portrayed in media and society, and how are you impacted by those portrayals? Have you ever conformed to any negative images of your diverse blended family? The complexities of cultural models are presented in this case study that demonstrate the couple taking on various conflicting identities available to them as a result of their blended family identity such as out gay men, concern for Tom's daughter, and fear of their sexual orientation being exposed.

Background information

Tom was in a heterosexual marriage, came out to his wife. They soon began divorce proceedings. Their relationship has been distant and strained since the divorce.

Tom's ex-wife was awarded legal and physical custody of their daughter and Tom's

biggest regret is that he did not fight for joint custody. He said he felt he was to blame for

the break-up, so he made it as easy as he could for his ex-wife by not fighting for joint

custody. He was granted visiting rights. He feels powerless in that, although he agrees

with many of the decisions his ex-partner makes for their daughter, he does not have the

power to challenge anything regarding his daughter's life. His relationship with his

former wife is also affected by the fact that she encourages their daughter to keep her

father's sexual orientation a secret, telling her that she will be teased and ostracized by

others and people will not understand if they find out.

In these findings I interpret and explain how Tom and Mike conformed to,

resisted and revoiced cultural models of their diverse blended family form through their

discursive practices in a particular narrative. According to Gee (1999), people reveal

through narratives, their embedded concerns as well as methods to solve problems. Thus,

I was interested how (a) Tom and Mike's situated identities took shape, (b) what

concerns they had about how gay men in a blended family were portrayed in society, (c)

and in what ways did they respond to those cultural models through their social language

and social practices. Results also include analysis of their overall discourse style and the

use of language when taking on certain situated identities, i.e., proxemics, posture, turns,

etc. Other ethnographic modes are included in analysis such as a discussion on the

possible relationship between modes.

Tom and Mike shared very candidly their beliefs with regard to how their

particular diverse blended family was portrayed. They revealed their multi-voiced

responses to those portrayals by resisting at times, but yet conforming and revoiced

(consciously and subconsciously) via certain situated identities. By analyzing how Tom

and Mike interpreted cultural models in their narrative, I identified four different social practices and various episodes of positioning: (1) Social Practices/positioning - Tom being a caring and protective father; (2) Tom and Mike presenting as heterosexual male friends; (3) being a gay couple in [hiding]; and (4) fraternizing with straight friends. The following is a Stanza chart from Tom and Mike's interview narrative. The Stanzas are divided into Lines and various ways that the couple position themselves and situated identities they take on, sometimes overlapping.

Stanza Chart (see Appendix C for the full transcript)

Stanza 1	Lines 1-23	Caring, Protective Father
Stanza 2	Lines 7-23	Normal Father
Stanza 3	Lines 24-45	Challenges to Fatherhood
Stanza 4	Lines 34-49	Cautious Partners: Hiding Identity
Stanza 5	Lines 49-55	Protective/Cautious Father
Stanza 6	Lines 56-68	Concerned and Loving Father
Stanza 7	Lines 69-73	Out Gay Man/Advocate
Stanza 8	Lines 74-98	Heterosexual Male Friends
Stanza 9	Lines 99-105	Open Gay Partners
Stanza 10	Lines 106-113	Cautious Partners: Hiding Identity

In stanza lines 1 -23 Tom positions himself both as a caring, protective father and a non-gay man in order to validate his normalcy to his daughter. When Tom answered the research question of how was he portrayed in media as a diverse blended family, he said that he did not know that there was a good portrayal of their version (the clichéd version), "the kind of oversexed guys that are off having a good time" (stanza 1/line 6). The situated meaning of that phrase specifies the social language used within

the context that he perceived. Given the meaning of "cliché" being a character with predictable or superficial behavior, Tom is revealing how the portrayal of his diverse blended family elicits a particular (negative) expectation from others. In line 7, Tom immediately resists the cultural stereotype by stating "I always want to show her that we're normal." He positions himself as a normal, caring and loving father by representing the following statement: "We are normal, I am normal." Here, he is saying: *we are not abnormal* and I want my daughter to know that about my partner and me, so I'll show her.   In lines 8-11 he does that by deciding to intentionally socialize with family and make sure straight (socially-acceptable) individuals in their social circle are around his daughter so that she is able to see that he is indeed "like everyone else." He explained as follows:

8	and one thing I think that helps
9	is when we spend time with people in our family
10	and our social circle and she can see that they are interacting with us
11	just like anybody else
12	she goes out with her mom, her step dad, her brothers on a family picnic
13	its just like dad and Mike on a picnic with our families
14	I think that helps

Further in the narrative Tom describes how he often intentionally associates his daughter with heterosexual couples (normal people) in his quest to prove to his daughter his normalcy:

15	and there are frequent times when I try
16	to consciously bring along *straight couples* to mingle with us and Jamie
17	our neighbors;
18	the wife is a good role model for Jamie,
19	and they have a fun relationship,
20	and we've done things with them
21	Jamie she kind of sees them
22	and understands what their relationship's like
23	and see them interact with us, and say, awe…

In the preceding narrative Tom resisted the cultural model of "abnormal gay men – with a child,"   by wanting to demonstrate to his daughter that he and his partner were indeed normal by enacting "new ways of being" within an acceptable social practice (socializing with heterosexuals) to validate to his daughter a figured identity of a normal father *like everyone else's father*.

Mike was enacting a particular socially situated identity as a protector of Tom's daughter as well when he said he was *very* cautious of he and Tom's behavior at Jamie's school sports events, wondering who might notice that they are a gay couple: "When I go to her sporting events, umm, what's the reaction you get from the crowd? Not that much you get from her mother's family, umm, but the rest of the crowd, you know, if they are picking up on, we certainly aren't very demonstrative in public, we're just not that way at all. But I do wonder if the other parents attending those functions do pick up on that at all, so I don't know if that necessarily affects me or my… I don't think I modify my behavior, but it is something I have thought about (stanza 4, lines 34-46).

Eventually Mike gets to his biggest fear as his narrative unfolds: a "trickle down affect" (line 54). Will parents pick up that he and Tom are gay, mention that to their kids, and will the kids ultimately take it out on Jamie? When Mike said earlier that he is not sure if it necessarily affects him or if he modifies his behavior, his position is in conflict because in stanza 107 he comes to the conclusion that he and Tom do in fact conform: "I'm always conscious of it, so we do tend to conform at times, I think It's comfortable to us (stanza 9-10, lines105-107).

Tom corroborates with Mike when he admitted that it is easier that way: "…as I'm sure we *cross the line* in things that are just easier to avoid. Also, it's something that's easy for us, if you will. Certainly our friends that are more obvious in their

orientation are harder for them to cover. They can't go anywhere together and not be obvious…so it's easier for us to some degree" (stanza 10, lines108-113).   The term "cross the line" suggest that it is understood that that particular behavior is not acceptable, or should not have been done, but it was necessary to do it.   When Tom said "we cross the line" his body posture changed. He was sitting erect and he put his arm in his lap and looked in another direction away from Mike. Mike looked toward him, lent his body forward, but then looked in the opposite direction. Tom concludes later in the narrative to the extent of enacting new ways of being where it may be equally safe and less trouble to conform: "…we can go out and have dinner together and who knows if its two best friends or a couple…umm, so there's time when we're holding hands walking down the street…part of that's not us and partly… I think partly that's not us because we're trying to conform and you know we get stared at, and when someone's making comments it's easier to just walk down the streets and have a conversation whether try to hold hands, and so I'm sure that carries over to when we are in public with Jamie or with just ourselves" (stanza 8, lines 80-89).

In this episode of positioning Tom and Mike are conforming to a particular cultural model, substantiated in the social practice notion of "this is the proper socially thing to do, to not be obvious that you are different" (especially when difference is an unacceptable practice). What is critical in understanding in this instance, however, is the possible underlying motive for Tom and Mike's behavior. How much of their behavior is embedded in fear and internalized heterosexism? Is it easier to conform and "hide" their affections and relationship when they think about what will happen if Jamie's friends find out her "secret", and how will that affect Tom's overall relationship with his daughter?

Will it get back to Jamie's mother and will that knowledge affect visitation he has with Jamie? Or do they conform because it is safe from harsh responses from others?

Earlier in the narrative Tom clarified that his daughter told him that she does not want anyone to know about his sexual orientation because she is "uncomfortable being different" (stanza 6, line 59). Tom is, however aware of the pressure on his daughter and discontent that her mother has already told her not to disclose that her father is gay (stanza 6, lines 65-68). Tom took a definitive role, positioning himself as an advocate for "being out" when he said: "You know, and I look at that and say, you know that's exactly what every gay man or lesbian ever did is hold the secret till you can't hold it any longer. So I worry about the effect that has on her long term…it's really not her secret, obviously, it bothers you" (stanza 7, lines 69-73). Here, Tom demonstrates that it does indeed troubles him. He is not passive on the topic and he is not conforming here. Nonverbal analysis revealed various modes interacting during this particular episode in the narrative. Tom, who ordinarily spoke with a softer voice tone throughout the interview, spoke with a louder and firmer voice tone when he made the declarative statement. His posture changed from somewhat slumped into the back of the couch pillow to an erect position with his back straight and body leaned forward. His eye gaze was sort of fixed straight ahead and he shook his head in slow side to side motion in a "no" fashion a few definitive times at the end of this declarative statement, as if to solidify it, then he tightened his lips. Mike's body language had changed as well. It was more conciliatory as his head nodded back and forth in agreement, then he stopped moving and just looked forward. Toward the end of the narrative, Mike seemed to take on a similar advocacy position by validating an aspect of their partnership that is not altered: "…maybe when we're in pubic...when we're saying goodbye at the airport,

getting in your car in the parking lot, our normal tendency would be to kiss goodbye or hug and whenever we do that and we're not at home" (stanzas 9, lines 99-104).

Themes of double voicedness – conforming to and resisting cultural models is reflected in Tom and Mike's narratives as they position themselves as heterosexual pals, but yet expressing affection and taking a stand against Jamie having to keep their relationship a secret. In stanza 108 Tom admitted that they were both cognizant of their actions that they obviously did not necessarily prefer: that they crossed the line. It was revealed that they have learned what is expected of them and to position themselves in a particular (acceptable) fashion that coincides with the figured world of the behavior of a father, his daughter and the father's [pal], when Tom's daughter is around and even in public when she is *not around*. What was interesting was that although Tom and Mike did conform to cultural models of "how a father and his friend are supposed to behave in public," in contrast, they remained a committed couple that lived together openly in a long term relationship despite their multivoiced identities, with strong family bonds that included Tom acclimating his entire life around what was best for his daughter (when she visited and when she was not there). By doing this, Tom was openly resisting traditional cultural models of gay fathers as unordinary and a contradiction.

The couple did, however, make apparent changes and moderations in other aspects of their personal lives that were conflicting. While they were strong advocates against keeping secrets about their identities, they enacted certain kind of situated identities at certain times in their public lives that were secret, for the purpose of appeasing their relationship with Jamie and also for the sake of avoiding ostracism from others and rumors that could get back to her.

There was one instance in the narrative where interesting dynamics occurred in Mike and Tom's discourse that warrants analysis. Mike continued to change the subject as Tom described how he and Mike intentionally spent time with heterosexual friends and the success of those interactions in proving their normalcy to Jamie. In stanza 1/lines 21-23 Tom said: "Jamie, she kind of sees them and understands what their relationship's like and see them interact with us, and say, awe…" Mike's turn-taking is abrupt when he interrupted with the following:

"…and it's not totally fabricated…she likes them."

Then there was silence for a few seconds, he changed his glance to look at Tom, leaned forward and changed topic again in the midst of his statement, as if he was thinking or wondering about something else:

"You know in society I kind of wonder also if it would be acceptable

(purely hypothetical) if say Jamie at a younger age where she would

need someone to pick her up from school, and whether or not I could or

would be included in the list of the available people to pick her up, and

so I don't know the answer to that, but I would bet that I would not, I'd

have to be a family member."

Tom responded quickly: "You could in fact; when Jamie was that age, she would not have wanted you, but you can put anyone on that list that you want to." Mike did not respond to Tom's comment but immediately changed topics a second time and began to talk about how self-conscious he is when he goes to Jamie's school event, sports event, etc., wondering about reactions from the crowd and wondering if people are picking up that he and Tom are partners.

In this particular narrative several things are occurring. It was evident that as Tom confirmed that he and Mike are indeed appearing to be normal to Jamie since they mingled with a heterosexual couple for an example for Jamie, Mike was wondering about the extent of his relationship with Jamie, how he was not included in past years and ultimately how self-conscious he is and careful that others not discover that he and Tom are partners. Mike's sudden interruption by using the adjective phrase: "and it's not completely fabricated" says that Mike believes that Tom's method is somewhat superficial and fictitious, although Jamie does like the couple. He jumps right to a hypothetical consideration of their true reality that connects to his last statement as if he is really saying to Tom: "You are mingling with the straight couple to prove that we are alright and acceptable, but in reality, the way things really are, I could not even be considered as a person who could pick her up from school if needed, and now I'm always so self-conscious whenever we are around Jamie that somebody is going to find out about us." Mike's narrative exposes his frustration that he does not talk about to Tom. Tom abruptly defended himself by stating that he could put anyone on the list he chose to, but Jamie would not have wanted Mike to pick her up anyway.

Mike is making reference and benefiting from the cultural model of heterosexual privilege when proving that he and Tom are considered okay now that Jamie has grouped them with a straight couple. The situated meaning of Tom's social language of the straight wife as a "good role model" for Jamie, and "we've done things with them" in context means a lot more than a generic definition of average role models for adolescence girls and association with others. It does, however, point to a particular situated identity of the type of persons that he wants his daughter to view he and Mike as. The social practice of Jamie seeing the straight couple and "understanding" their relationship is a

direct connection to cultural models of expected and typical behavior for the proper and acceptable relationships of individuals.

Additional Nonverbal Summary

Various modes worked together to create a message about Tom and Mike's blended family household and partnership including home layout, body language, posture, talk, tone of voice, and gesture. Tom and Mike's home decorations with pictures represented the relationship boundaries that Tom discussed earlier in the interview, that he and Mike are not considered as "two Dads" for Jamie, but rather Mike was considered an adult friend for her. There were several pictures in the living room of Tom with his daughter, pictures with Tom, his daughter and family members, and one wall had pictures of Jamie as a small child and as a teenager. There were no pictures of Tom, Mike and Jamie together and there were no pictures of Tom and Mike together. Both Tom and Mike's body language shifted from relaxed to rigid and erect when they discussed how they conform and take up contrasting identities for the sake of keeping their partnership a secret. Tom's posture always adjusted when he made a declarative statement; he would sit up and lean forward and stay in that position until the statement was over, then he would nod his head one final time. Mike's tone of voice was mellow and soft throughout the interview, while Tom's tone changed to a louder tone when he discussed his dissatisfaction about Jamie having to keep his sexual orientation a secret. His gaze was fixed for several seconds; he did not blink and would nod his head from left to right occasionally. Neither Tom nor Mike made lots of hand gestures, but Mike used more gestures when he questioned being an acceptable person to be able to pick Jamie up from school when she was younger and his self-consciousness about people at Janie's school

picking up that he and Tom were partners. Other times, Mike kept his hands in his lap or arms folded.

Chapter Summary

All five couples were presented in unique and different ways as they took up, resisted, reinvented, and revoiced dominant cultural models of their respective family types. All of them confirmed and/or denied traditional and current literature and statistics that characterized their families. Some of the couples took on conflicting identities that did cause some unrest within their relationships, and overall all of them transformed their realities and established various aspects of normative identity for themselves aside from traditional and contemporary narratives of their diverse blended families. Their voices were heard and their voices were clarified as to what was important for them and their children to succeed.   In their narratives, as they visited with me, they all established what it took to make them individual families and the various methods they used to define their own sense of normalcy.

An illustrative case study of how one of the couples took up and resisted dominant cultural models of diverse blended families was presented. Overall, results demonstrated a multiplicity of modes in interaction that helped to convey how Tom and Mike made meaning within a particular segment of interview narrative, and how they enacted conflicting socially situated identities that revealed their vulnerabilities, self-concept, family relationships, defiance, and aspirations as a diverse blended family in the midst of bias.

Chapter 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

This research has investigated the unique worlds of diverse blended families and provided a platform for their voices. In the last chapter an overview of the findings were presented through sketches of their lives from several perspectives. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings of this study in the context of the reviewed literature and interpret meaning of the couples' sketches that may provide a venue for further understanding of how these families operate; not only surviving but thriving in midst of compromise.

The results are examined and discussed from several perspectives: (a) Challenges and Nuances in the Study; (b) Relevance to Systems Metatheory Constructs; (c) Implications for Clinical Practice; (d) Limitations; (e) Implications for Research; (f) A Call For More Research; (g) Significance of CDA Methods in Counseling; (h) Concluding Comments.

Challenges and Nuances in the Study

Approaching the task of investigating diverse blended families has been enlightening, interesting, and not without challenge for the researcher. I met this project with enthusiasm, passion, and optimism, yet early on recognized that the voluminous data and a 3-step analysis process would be very time consuming and often exhaustive. It was, however, the interest in the topic, joining with the couples, and my concern about how to best organize such a large and important project that kept me involved and encouraged. Overall my questions were many. At the onset of interviews I asked myself the following question: How do I keep balance as an investigator, co-investigator, while

also a member of a diverse blended family? How do I remain unbiased, neutral, and ethical in all of my discussions? At the beginning of the analysis my questions for me were: How would I best reveal the many voices of the couples I talked with? How would I be non-biased in selection of data to represent? How could I be careful to not misrepresent or leave out important data? What did I want to convey from this study and how would I present the findings?

I soon came to a conclusion. It was always crucial to be ethical in all of my process, but my process would not come to fruition without irregularities and bias of some sort. At that point I took a deep breath and exhaled. My role as a researcher in and of itself put me both at an advantage and disadvantage and I would attempt to make known the many voices of the couples I talked with as ethically and realistically as possible, with purpose, conviction, and integrity.

There were many interesting characteristics within the study beginning with sample size. I initially decided upon five diverse blended families: (1) one unmarried couple formed by a single parent and partner; (2) one married couple formed by a single parent and partner; (3) one couple formed by a gay male parent and partner, (4) one couple formed by a lesbian parents, and (5) one couple formed by a lesbian parent and her partner. Within the sample I wanted at least one of the couples to cross-identify as an African-American couple, to investigate this population since African-American blended families were disproportionately underrepresented in the blended family literature. The sample did not substantially deviate from the proposed sample, but it was different. There were a total of five couples and, although the couple formed by single and cohabitating parents were identical of those couples sought, instead of one lesbian couple there were two – one African-American and one White, who sought two distinct methods

of conception. The gay male couple had a biological child of the blended family relationship, but the child did not live in the home. Three of the couples identified as African-American and two of the couples were White.

While the sample was heterogeneous, and not large enough to infer solid conclusions, there were yet distinctive similarities and differences among them and a wealth of rich data. One of the couples had gone to blended family counseling, One of the couples had been exposed to and attended a support workshop for blended families, one couple had visitation rights while the other four couples had custody, and all of them had very supportive relationships from parents and grandparents, with the exception of one partner in a lesbian union who was ostracized by her mother. All of the couples had distant and strained relationships with former partners. All of them had shared household responsibilities, although only two couples had traditional roles versus egalitarian ones. All of the couples had similar concerns for their children's futures, that their children not be burdened with stereotype and stigma related to their family type. Of all characteristics that were important information for the study, the couples positively defined themselves in midst of double and triple stigma, controversy, and judgment. In contradiction to external portrayals of their families as deficient, broken, and non-cohesive (Baham et al., 2008), all five couples defined themselves from a normative strengths perspective – describing themselves as functional, intact, and vibrant despite challenge.

Inasmuch as these couples told their stories and shared their ambitions for their families' future, the data may be very vital and useful to both clinicians and researchers in assessment, conceptualization, and in documenting diverse blended family progress – such as family structure, relationship strategies, parenting, former partner relationships and overall endurance in midst of controversy. The data may also direct us toward a

working model that would increase research investigations into the unique worlds of these families and reframe them in the literature as they see themselves – as intact and whole.

<div align="center">Relevance to Systems Meta-theory Constructs</div>

A Family system-constructionist meta-theory was used as an interactional framework in understanding the unique realities of the families in this study. Given that all five couples reflect double and triple stigma because of their race, sexual orientation and/or marital status, bound by traditional and current cultural models of their family forms, they are too often portrayed as dysfunctional and deficient when compared to traditional married blended families as well as biological families. Spectators are in need of a new set of lens to approach these families and to define them. A family system-constructionist lens provides a pathway to see more clearly and understand how diverse blended families constructed their realities and their social identities specifically within their individual context. The data fell into the following two overlapping categories – boundary/role ambiguity and membership rules/roles.

Boundary/Role Ambiguity

As much as setting and maintaining boundaries are critical in establishing how families are able to form identities, set parameters, and to know who is or who is not a part of their system, it is no wonder that in diverse blended families, boundary ambiguity would be a critical component (Crosbie-Burnet & Ahrons, 1985). This perspective alone supported one of the main arguments in the literature regarding the complexities of boundary setting in diverse blended families when roles and boundaries were already defined and established from former relationships. A common thread among the stories of all five couples was the existence of a set of conflicting boundaries versus clear ones

with former partners and the level of contact that seemed to depend upon: (1) the overall communication level between former partners; (2) the relationship style of former partners; and (3) the level of involvement with the non-resident parent and children. Among all five couples there were various levels of boundary permeability, but none of them were very open and flexible.

In John and Sue's relationship, Sue's former partner had no relationship with them, and had never been in the daughter's life, thus boundaries were very closed and rigid, and discussions and decisions about his involvement in the daughter's life were non-existent. The lack of involvement, however, opened up different levels of involvement for John in his step daughter's life. Although she did not call him "daddy," John was the only father figure she had and not sharing that role with the biological father provided him opportunities to act in the father role without speculation or interference from a biological father. John did not, however, take on the role of fatherhood toward his stepdaughter. Instead his role remained as the live-in boyfriend who is the twins' father. Although the stepdaughter is aware who is in (John) and who is out (her biological father), John's role and expectations are not clear to him, Sue, and may be even more confusing to Sue's daughter.

Mary & Diane had a distressed relationship style and no communication with Mary's ex-husband and no connection with the friend who impregnated Diane. While both relationship styles were distressed, Mary's relationship with her ex-husband's was more so complicated with loose/ambiguous boundaries because he did have weekend visitation rights with direct contact with his sons. He was not included in any decisions about them, never a part of school events or activities, did not call them on the phone during the week or make any effort to be integrated into their lives besides weekend

visitation. At times boundaries were rigid and closed, but opportunities for open boundaries were available because Mary wanted the boy's father to have more direct contact with them, and he had legal rights to be more involved. The biggest challenge, however, was that he was resentful and hostile about Mary's lesbian relationship, often taught his sons to disrespect their mother and was not consistent with visitation. Because of that component, Mary is not sure how she and Diane would deal with a more active role from him when the relationship is already so stressed.

With Lori and Sally, Mike and Tom and Chester and Melanie, boundaries were not open, nor flexible and ambiguous. This resulted from stressful relationship types with non-resident parents. Lori and Sally had the most ambiguous boundaries with Lori's ex-partner who shares legal responsibility with their 6 year-old-daughter. While the relationship with the former partner is strained and defined as "collaborative-stressed" she moved across the street from Lori and Sally to be close to her daughter and to guarantee her input in the child's life. Lori said that if they did not have the child together she would have nothing to do with her former partner, but both mothers have come to an arrangement that works for all involved. Although the non-resident parent has shared parental responsibilities, picks Lisa up once a week, keeps her for a few hours and has her every other weekend, she has no say in the child's life. They do not share traditions or holidays, visit each other's homes, or have joint outings with Lisa. The collaboration is centered solely on visitation, limited in communication, and no joint decision making. Although both mothers have legal custody, Lori's physical custody supersedes the former partner's voice in any matters.

Although boundaries between Lori, Sally and the non-resident parent were clearly closed, they were open in significant ways that caused additional stress for the blended

family and ultimately for Lisa. She suffered emotional distress from the conflict between her parents that was demonstrated at her school. The school suggested that all family members participate in counseling and play therapy to address the problems Lisa was experiencing.

The boundaries in Tom's life with his ex-wife are also somewhat ambiguous and often very rigid. Tom has visitation rights and usually gets his daughter on weekends, but his ex-wife has total control on decision making. Their relationship style was defined as "partial distressed" and on the social level they are cordial with limited conversations that only involve visitation arrangements about their daughter. The boundaries between Tom and his daughter are also conflictual and controlled by Tom's ex-wife. Tom stated that he regretted not fighting for joint custody when he and his ex-wife divorced. He remembers feeling guilty then because he was the one who came out during his marriage to her and he felt responsible for the divorce, so he did not challenge custody arrangements. He works to not offend her for fear of difficulty seeing his daughter. Mike is not considered a part of the family on Tom's ex-wife side of the family and not included nor referred to as "extended family" like her new husband is. Moreover, Tom does not consider Mike a "second father" for Jamie, but rather an adult friend who is in her life.

The dynamics that occur in families where there are stressed relationships among blended family members are discussed in the literature as common when there are changes in family structure, boundaries, rules and roles that incorporates or refuses others into the "newly formed" system (Becvar & Becvar, 1999). Although Jamie is growing up and has begun to contact her father regarding visitation times, changes, etc., a context of flexibility of boundaries has not been established between them that would provide the

daughter increased opportunities to make decisions about not only seeing her father, but re-integrating him into areas of her life that extend visitation outings.

Chester's relationship style with his son's mother was the only one of the five couples that were defined as "cordial with visitation." The fact that Chester has custody of his son and determines when his mother will visit or pick him up puts him at an advantage over her, but she has a level of flexibility not experienced by the other non-resident parents. She is able to call freely, visit her son's home, and told Chester that she wanted to be the one that had a talk with her son about "the birds and the bees" when he gets older. Although Chester has the last word regarding his son, he has welcomed his ex-partner some participation in decision making that makes the boundaries very fluid, but with limitations, because she is not welcomed or included as a "member of the family."

There are very ambiguous and loose boundaries that exist between Melanie and her stepson. As with John and his stepdaughter that lives in his home, Melanie has not fully acclimated herself into an intimate mother role with Chester's son. Chester hopes that his wife will become a nurturer for his son and notices that even though she insists that nurturing is not natural for her, she is nurturing toward their daughter. Although this may not cause direct conflict in their family system, it does add to the ambiguous boundaries that exist between them and is covertly conflictual and impacts their relationships.

Among the couples, boundaries and roles between former partners were closed. Even in situations where the non-resident parent had visitation rights and some participation in the child's life, boundaries were polarized and ambiguous with conflicting rules. Boundaries between children and non-resident parents were also

conflicting and stressed where there was stress between ex-partners. Similar in all couple relationships was the level of stress and clearly closed boundaries among new partners and old partners that ranged from no contact at all to cordial greetings. The most stress, however, was seen in same sex partnerships where there were former heterosexual relationships. Those Relationship dynamics seemed to include resentment, hostility, and ostracism because of the ex-partner's sexual orientation.

It is important to note that the sample is too small to be considered representative; however, it presents important particulars on variables that may extend knowledge about boundary permeability within diverse blended families.

Membership Rules//Roles

Significant outcomes of this study included who the newly formed family constituted as members of their family, the roles they all played and the rules that governed those relationships. Coined as "contextual relativity" in the literature, it highlights the importance of understanding theses families within their context Becvar & Becvar, 1998). The way that couples constructed their realities and made meaning is not considered good or bad, right or wrong, but based upon what was appropriate according to the context of those relationships. This was evident and helped to conceptualize these diverse families from a broad perspective.

Some couples set rules that determined boundaries and the extent of the roles available for ex-partners that seemed to encourage more inclusive family interaction and participation between non-resident parents/children and children/resident stepparent relationships. In contrast, other couples set rules that did not warrant inclusive parental roles between resident stepparents/children and non-resident parents/children which limited decision making.

Lori and Sally identified their family as "two mothers" for Lori's daughter. Although Sally referred to herself occasionally as the "step mom" she performed as a parent, she had parental roles of discipline, care, responsibilities, and at times, Lisa and her friends at school referred to her as "Mom." This role-participation was seen in Mary and Diane's household as well. They also identified as "two-moms" for Mary's two sons and Diane's daughter (that was conceived during their relationship). Both women claimed mutual and shared parental responsibilities for all three children and share discipline. They both refer to the children as "theirs" yet, at times, identify them as "Mary's boys" and "the toddler." There is some ambiguous reference toward "the toddler" in that natural conception was planned as a joint decision by both women and the known biological father was expected to participate in the child's life. This may explain why the toddler is often referred to as "Diane's daughter" by Mary and "my daughter" by Diane rather than "our daughter." It may be that since there is a known father who impregnated Diane, rather than an anonymous "sperm donor" that the child is seen within that context of Diane and the donor as "biological parents." These references did not seem to impact the level of bonding and love shown to the child by both women. The child was discussed as a child of the relationship, however how they described her may raise a question as to how roles, boundaries, and rules may be played out and understood in this blended family type when natural conception is chosen over donor insemination by an anonymous donor or known donor without parental rights.

In John and Sue's family, although Sue's former partner is non-existent with no relationship with their daughter, and John has been with Sue since the girl was one year old, John has not taken an intimate parental role with his step daughter. Diane has not acclimated him into a parental role, and often refers to her daughter as "her daughter,"

not "their daughter." John's membership as a family member is clearly defined. He provides financially for his stepdaughter as he does for his two biological children. His role, however, with the step daughter is marked by ambiguous boundaries and rules within the home. It did not seem to be deliberate or conscious to the couple that there were differences in how they referred to their family members or how their family dynamics played out. It did seem to be relevant, however, that the differences were significant enough to cause certain behaviors and assumptions from the three children regarding division in the home.

In Chester and Melanie's home and Mike and Tom's home, similar and dissimilar rules and roles seemed to definitely guide how boundaries were regulated. Although Chester wanted his wife to nurture, discipline, and bond with his son – his son continued to call his stepmother a formal title: "Ms. Melanie." Melanie also continued to refer to him as "Chester's son." Since children and former partners were not interviewed in this study, it is unclear what part Chester's ex-partner may have in this triangle with Chester's son and his stepmother. Although she is not a major decision maker in Chester's home regarding their son, she does have some input and an ongoing relationship with her son.

With Mike and Tom, rules regarding Mike and his daughter's relationship were clearly defined to include Mike as only an "adult friend." Mike agreed that his role was never as a father image for Tom's daughter, and although they have lived in the same residence for ten years, both men stated that they never see themselves as "two dads" for Jamie. Therefore, Mike's role does not include decision making or discipline, but he is included in some outings and in household activities when Jamie visits.

Conclusion

Understanding diverse blended families through the lens of Systems-constructionist meta-theory has been useful in conceptualizing how meaning is known within these families' contextual interrelationships and assist in how researchers investigate and reframe them. Each couple's subjective experiences of role identity, rules, and ambiguous boundaries were not uncommon, but expected as these families established new rules and defined roles that guided their boundaries.   What was unique were the various ways that couples constructed meaning within their systems: how boundaries were defined with former partners, and current ones, the extent of boundaries between ex-partners/children, and children/resident stepparents.   There were some connections with regard to how couples defined each other, the extent of the interrelationships, and expectations of family members.   The couples' stories revealed the emotional toil on their distinct diverse blended types that supported the literature on blended family functioning regarding boundary/role/rule ambiguity, having been formed from multiple losses and survival within a "built in" system of loss. Critical to this research, however, was the extent of ambiguous loss that was present in same sex blended families who also experienced social undesirability and heterosexist attitudes. Chester and Melanie experienced many instances of privilege as compared to the other couples that may be because of *marriage privilege*.

Although some inferences have been made, the primary focus of the analysis and discussion of the data has been to talk about the "what" and "how" instead of the "why." Despite all challenges, the couples achieved their own level of function that was unique and useful for their individual family's success; that if described out of context, may be distinctly different and dysfunctional for their family.

Implications for Clinical Practice

This study has investigated one angle of diverse blended families: the personal and intimate perspectives of the resident couple. Although everyone involved was not included in this study, there are children in these families and former partners that do indeed have voices and stories to tell that are critical, useful, and they should be approached with sensitivity and a broad view. Yet, despite the small sample, the data has been significant and may provide opportunities for professionals who will work with them. They are sensitive and they are strong. They are vulnerable and they are unashamed. They have complexities that are compounded but they are unique and do not see themselves as deficient or abnormal. They talked with me and wanted their voices heard. They were asked the question: What do you want counselors, psychologists, ministers, students in training and other helping professionals to know about your particular diverse blended family. In this section their concerns are revealed as well as suggestions that may be useful in approaching these families should they present for counseling.

Overwhelming similar themes prevailed among the responses from the five couples: they want the helping field to be sensitive to their uniqueness, have an understanding of their particular diverse blended family type, debunk myths, and be prepared to witness their individual sense of normalcy. Chester and Melanie do not want to be "lumped' into a category with other blended families: "They need to know the make up of the dyad, the structure of the family they're working with; know what's right for us and what has worked for us; ask us. They also should never assume; like thinking the mother is the nurturer because of her gender." Melanie added: "It's a real challenge for me; raising someone else's child. Sometimes for me it just doesn't come natural. I love

my stepson, and even though I'm in the helping field…this is difficult for me, and I

realize I am different with my daughter…but maybe that's normal for me?"

Mike and Tom agreed: "Every blended family is different, and you really have to

dig a little bit deeper into the dynamics and not make any assumptions based on what you

see: two males having a child…or two females. I mean you really have to pick it apart.

And I would imagine that's true of any counseling, you really can't judge the person from

what you see, you really have to talk to them and find out what's going on with them. So,

I'd say specific to our situation that there really aren't any stereotypes. I don't think we

are the stereotype, unless the stereotype is two fairly happy individuals that have a

daughter from a previous relationship."

Mary and Diane, one of two couples that have had some version of counseling

specific to their diverse family type remember the LGBT workshop that discussed how to

talk to children about being present in a same sex family: "Counselors who work with the

kids have to be aware that kids are still kids and very impressionable; they are not adults.

There are creative ways to help them deal with issues and understand what is happening

in their lives. I would want a counselor to approach us from a normal view. Even some

counselors are not really broad minded; people so narrow minded and only see diversity

in terms of race or color; they don't respect diversity in broad ways, and that's needed.

People so biased and don't look at the big picture; step outside the box and see the big

picture." Mary and Diane are also ostracized by Mary's mother and want clinicians to

feel their experience, yet recognize they are a family of parents and children: " We want

counselors to understand how much of a challenge it is dealing with the negatives,

feedback, comments, and situations that comes from being a diverse blended family.

We're not man and wife, we're step children, we're two moms with different kids, and so

we have a double wammy against us with that alone. But as for professionals, for us to

spread the word of acceptance across the board, even when we encounter clients that may

resemble what my partner's mother looks like, try to help people open their minds and

step outside of their box, to know that they are forfeiting a relationship of love, the life,

the experience of having your child fully in your life when you're closed and turn away

cause she's not who you want her to be; she's still yours."

Lori and Sally are optimistic about their family and want counselors to approach

their situation from a normative perspective: "Sometimes I think blended families are

almost seen as a failure, you know, as a result of failed situations, or less positive. In my

experience at least, this is a much healthier environment than the original union with the

child that was a product of that union, and I don't think people see it that way. They see

us as broken or some kind of odd conglomeration. But in reality for us, at least, it is the

most healthiest, happiest situation that the three of us as individuals have even been in.

In a general day-to-day situation, we're pretty normal, like normal in comparison to other

people. The same stuff is going on day-to-day in their households: it's truly the same:

gotta go shopping, whose picking up the child, what you doin' this weekend? Feed the

dog…It's just the same kind of stories…just different."

John and Sue feel ostracized and pressured by others, pressuring them to marry,

as if that's the only part of their lives, and as if they are not a family unless they are

married. They want counselors and especially ministers to see them and the presenting

issue if they go for counseling to address blended family topics and not try to get them

married:

> We make it work. Everyone is not the same and people who work with you
>
> should look at why you came to them in the first place. We might want to deal

with stuff about my daughter and how to deal with her father not being in her life, but John is the father of her sister and brother, and he's in the house. We already know we're not traditionally married in the eyes of the law, but we love each other and we still a family together. Just deal with the problem we might be having. They cant see you for seeing what they don't like about you. In due time, if we want to marry, we will, but that's not why we came to you for counseling. Just let the blended family live the way they are. Let us alone.

Although John and Sue are optimistic about defining and perceiving themselves as a family unit, Sue's frustration is evident due to the level of pressure they have endured because they chose not to marry and are reluctant to seek counseling for fear of the presenting issue being overlooked. Her past experiences have proven to her that this is a risk and prevents her and Mike from pursuing counseling to address their issues of concern within their family. John and Sue's concerns were shared in this study.

The three same sex couples: Tom and Mike, Lori and Sally, and Marry and Diane stressed their concerns of the focus only on their sexual identity, while bypassing their issues as parents raising children (and stepchildren). Additionally, Chester, as an unmarried African-American man who had joint legal custody of his child before marrying Melanie, does not want to be seen by professionals as doing something *so special*, because of grim statistics of young African-American males in America. He wants his situation normalized, because it is what works for their family and it is normal for them, as well as many other African-American diverse blended families who are not represented in the literature as functional and healthy. If they seek professional help from a counselor, Chester wants their unique issues addressed, not a pat on the back.

The suggestions I propose for working with diverse blended families emerge from the couples' stories. I think it is critical for counselors, marriage and family therapists, ministers, and other clinicians to first reframe their position as clients present in therapy. If professionals would but momentarily suspend their titles and professional degrees and backgrounds, what is left is what is most useful: we are here to serve. We begin that journey by relying on existing multicultural literature: addressing ourselves first, then the presenting issue (Sue & Sue, 2008).

Working Suggestions for Working with Diverse Blended Families

1. Complete ongoing self-assessments and check ins. Sue & Sue (2008) stated that it is easy to associate an individual's difference to pathology and defiance because of unconscious social conditioning in America. Ask yourself the following questions: How do I feel about working with this couple/family? How do I feel about how they construct their realities and values? Do I believe in their success as a family and do I even think they should be characterized as a family? Can I approach them from a strengths, culture-variant perspective? If you do not share their values as a family form, that is not reason enough to not serve them.

2. Research a wide variety of diverse blended families. This study has presented four family forms. Of course there may be other family forms of adults with children that are not formed by divorce or death of a spouse and carry double and triple stigma.

3. Seek to create a safe and comfortable environment for the couple to share their story and presenting issue. Although less is known about how and if these families present in counseling, be aware of the external stigma associated with their family forms and the reluctance they may have.

4. Decide therapeutic goals/strategies that will encompass all involved in the presenting household, including non-resident children or former partners, (if it is desired by the presenting couple). Former studies suggested a therapeutic approach that was in the best interest for the children (Wilbur & Wilbur, 1988). Recent studies suggest a balanced view of an approach that is best for parents and children alike. A constructivist approach takes it even further. Understand the family's socially constructed belief about their family particular process. How have they constructed meaning, vis-à-vis; what will work for them? Do not fit them into a therapeutic model but fit the model to their unique situation and needs.

5. All Blended Families Are Not Created Equal.

   a. Normalize the particular family form.

   b. Ethically speaking, respect their unique functioning and forget everything you know about what works best for biological families.

   c. Understand that each diverse family form has distinct rules, roles and guidelines that are unique to their family functioning and cannot and should not be generalized and compared to other diverse blended families, nor diverse blended families that have the exact characteristics.

   d. Avoid referring to the children as "the couple's children" or saying to the children, "your mom/dad/parents." Do not refer to the children as "stepchildren." Ask the family during intake how you should refer to family members, even if the children refer to the stepparent as "mom or dad."

e. In same sex households, do not assume that the couple identify as "two moms" or "two dads." Ask the couple: how do you identify; how do you want to be addressed?

f. In cohabitating families, do not assume that they are less committed, because they are not legally married.

6. Be aware that all boundaries are not created equal.

a. The literature suggests that the most successful blended family is the one with open and flexible boundaries with former partners and that it provides for *functional* relationships. This study has shown that open boundaries with hostile former partners/parents that create havoc for the resident couple relationship can be damaging to the new family and children.

b. The term "functional" is a relative reference in diverse blended families. What is "functional" for one family may be dysfunctional for another.

c. Get a clear understanding of who is in and who is out of the presenting couple's household and if they desire a change.

7. Stay cognizant of the presenting issue versus the couple's identity.

8. Remember there are no absolutes with some diverse blended families. They are continually constructing their realities, changing, and ever becoming.

9. Minister or church counselor: Be sure to not ostracize the couple or turn them away because you disagree with their family form. You have an opportunity to exemplify true messages of love and acceptance: to serve, grow, learn and expand your knowledge base.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations of this study that are significant.   The populations studied were all from Saint Louis, Missouri which limited data collection to a specific geographical area. The subjective experience of the children of blended family homes and former partners were left out. Considering that a systems-constructionist meta-theory was chosen as a lens toward awareness and understanding of diverse blended families, the interactions and behaviors of all household members would add to a rich tapestry of data. For this study, however, the researcher was interested in the opinions, ideas, and portrayals of parents and stepparents that lived in the diverse blended family household. Including the children's and non-resident parents' perspectives for this study would not have answered the selected research questions, but may add additional dynamics that would be important for another study. Also important is that data was examined within a single moment in time, limiting opportunities for repeated observations and interpretations. Finally, although measures were employed to enhance trustworthiness to validate findings, researcher bias may have remained a major limitation.

Implications for Research

This study was about how diverse blended families construct their realities, make meaning, and respond to cultural models of diverse blended families. It was also about looking through multiple lens to analyze them and their family process using a qualitative paradigm and theories of CDA. The implications for future research are presented as follows: (1) Redefining diverse blended families (2) A call for additional research; and (3) Themes that need additional development.

Redefining Diverse Blended Families: Diverse and Whole vs. Broken and not-intact

This researcher joins other investigators who are committed to changing how all blended families, but especially diverse blended families are described and defined. Traditional and some current literature continue to describe these families in derogatory ways. Terms such as not-intact and broken continue to permeate research, policies, text books, and discussions of their process. It may be that as long as these families are portrayed in uncomplimentary ways, perceptions of them will not change but worsen. Implications as second best and less-than has cast a shadow over certain expectations of this emerging family form in America for decades and describing them in positive and resilient ways may impact how they are approached in future studies, how they are assessed in counseling, and how they are portrayed in media and policy. All four family types carried some aspect of social stigma that impacted them in significant ways: formed by single parents, formed by cohabitating parents, formed by gay parents, and formed by lesbian parents. Seeing themselves as diverse families and redefining the term "normal" was a common element of all involved and they deserve adequate investigations of their families that recognize them as families raising children first, then what made them different next.

This study calls for innovative approaches in defining diverse blended families as diverse and whole versus broken and not-intact: they are not less, but different, not broken, but blended, not second best but something new, and not incomplete but whole. Useful studies should investigate from a culturally variant and positive perspective that normalizes these families' experiences, with less comparable investigations and opportunities to reshape interpretations of them.

A Call for More Research

The data has been voluminous providing numerous opportunities for additional investigation into the unique worlds of diverse blended families. In this section a call for additional studies on data that was missing from my research is discussed as well as themes that need additional development.

More Data Needed

The subjective perspective of children and non-resident parents was not included in this study. Designing future studies around discussion with them may provide a wealth of data and new implications. This study omitted their perspectives because it would not have answered the research questions and investigation was limited to resident household adults. The children's voices may provide insight into how they construct their realities while a resident or non-resident member of a family with double and triple stigma. How do they cope and what are their strategies for survival? How are they impacted by ambiguous and relative boundaries in homes where roles are not always clear and how do they define who is in and who is out? How are they impacted by the strained relationships among their parents and step parents and finally, is there a relationship between how they address each other, boundaries, and family interaction/expectations and roles?

Approaching non-resident parents from a systems-constructivist meta-theory lens may present a more inclusive assessment of resident and non-resident dynamics regarding strained relationships, parenting arrangements, and a broader picture of the boundary situation among them. Since this study investigated a single dimension of the diverse blended family, the perspective and rationale of non-resident parents may fill in gaps and add to interpretation where information was lacking in this study.

Lastly, since this study was conducted within a single moment in time, longitudinal studies may provide more accurate repeated observations and interpretations in investigating trends, family process, success, and the full extend to how these families take up or resist dominant cultural models of diverse blended families and the impact of these dynamics on long term self-concept, family preservation, and parenting.

Themes That Need Additional Development: What's Good About Diverse Blended Families?

While conducting a workshop on diverse blended families someone asked the question: What's good about blended families? The person went on to discuss what was bad about it; the challenges of beginning a family on the foundation of levels of loss, ambiguous boundaries, raising other people's children, and the overall stress and dynamics associated with non-resident parents (in often strained relationships with the resident parent). The literature is full of studies which focus on the many ways that traditional blended families and diverse blended families are deficient, prone to dysfunction, described from a deficit family model, and as "incomplete institutions." Participants were asked the same question during interviews: What is good about your particular diverse blended family? The composite responses were overwhelming as couples poured out their hearts about what they felt was special and unique. All of them attributed their particular family type and unique circumstance as special for them and not a burden. That they were making their relationships work in the midst of challenge and stigma was special. More than one couple said that it was an opportunity to sacrifice and give of yourself to a child that was not your biological family.

Heterosexual Marriage Privilege

A potential direction for additional investigation was an emerging theme of heterosexual marriage privilege that one couple experienced. Although comparisons among diverse blended families were not a central part of the study, the findings presented a significant difference in Chester and Melanie's overall experiences when other stigmatized couples faced oppression. A lesbian couple was married, but the marriage was not recognized in Missouri, and they did not benefit from the legal and social benefits of heterosexual marriage. Chester and Melanie had favorable media portrayal, the role of religion and spirituality not only had a positive impact on their lives, but when discussing the topic, one of the reasons for wanting to attend a church was for the benefit it would serve their marriage union, while the other couples were ostracized by traditional denominations because of their family form: being gay, lesbian, and cohabitating with children. As a professional, educated middle-class Black man in America, Chester did not portray stereotypical characteristics as a single father, but rather had joint legal custody of his biological son who lived with him and his wife, who also had a graduate degree. In many ways, although a diverse blended family being formed from a single parent, Chester and Melanie were applauded, looked up to, and emulated by friends, family, and people at work. It is not suggested that this one instance is widespread; however, further research is needed to investigate the experiences and dynamics of this particular blended family type and how they are portrayed amidst various variables.

Boundary Ambiguity Diversity

Prior studies have concluded that the most successful blended families are those with permeable boundaries where contact is free and open with former partners

(Stewart, 2008, Walker and Messenger; 1979). The findings in this study suggest otherwise. A diverse blended family's boundaries seemed to be a relative and constructivist process with meaning embedded into the context of their relationship dynamics with partners, former partners, and overall family relationships. This topic needs to be further pursued to understand the extent of boundary diversity in these families including the perspectives of non-resident former partners.

<div align="center">Significance of CDA Methods in Counseling</div>

Theories of critical discourse analysis/multimodal analysis is a novel analytic framework in counseling and was chosen to analyze a portion of data for this study to foreground the power and potential of CDA theories and methods for future research. One of the main purposes of CDA is to look at relationships between language and social practice and provides tools that help to define, describe, interpret and explain complex meanings in relationships. Although individuals either reflect media portrayals and expectations, or defy traditional portrayals and present themselves in new ways, sometimes they represent conflicting portrayals. Tools of CDA may serve as innovative pathways into a deeper understanding for counselors to understand how clients construct meaning and make sense of their lives when they face stigma and ostracism. These methods may be a very useful tools for research in counseling for the following reasons: (1) There are unlimited opportunities to investigate the overlapping cultural model complexities families with stigma experience due to systems of meaning that are embedded in political, legal, racial, and cultural formations that discredit some families and welcome others, and (2) emerging themes may contribute to existing theories in understanding the resilience and success of these unique families that can impact

assessment and treatment. I am hopeful that new approaches in defining, describing, interpreting and working with these families will be established.

Concluding Comments

This study attempted to investigate diverse blended family cultural models and given those constructs, in what ways did four couples conform to, transform, resist, or revoice those models? The research was not exhaustive, and the results cannot be generalized. However, there were many opportunities to examine these couples and their families in significant ways. If we are conditioned to acknowledge cultural models through repetitive cultural practice, then it can only be through cultural practice that we un-learn by reconditioning. It may be through this process that anti-bias practices toward diverse blended families, through routine interaction, shared goals, conscious and unconscious knowledge will reframe how these unique families are portrayed.

The journey has been different and ambitious. The couples were resilient, poignant, and bold. The families inspired me. They allowed the researcher to see their vulnerabilities. They shared their stories; their joys, disappointments, hopes and aspirations. They are unlike any other family forms, yet from day to day they participate in common place family activities, challenges, and the ups and downs of raising and nurturing children, despite bias. They have revealed themselves…and we have heard their voices.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Diverse Blended Family Types

You have been asked to participate in a research study about diverse blended families. For this study diverse blended families are defined as stepfamilies that are not formed from the result of divorce or death of a spouse. Diverse blended families are formed from single parents who marry, unmarried female and male partners in a committed relationship, and gay and lesbian partners in committed relationships. All four types will have one or more biological children who live in the home and are not a product of the current relationship.

This questionnaire is voluntary and designed to retrieve specific information about your diverse blended family. Your participation will be helpful in gathering information for this study. Please answer all questions that apply to you and your family.

The study is being conducted by Robin Moore-Chambers, a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the Doctor of Education Degree. Thank you for your participation.

Directions: Please fill in the following information.

Person #1 (First Name only) _____
How do you identify ethnically?_____
Phone_____ **Alternate Phone#**_____
Best Time to Call

Person #2 (First Name Only) _____
How do you identify ethnically?_____
Phone_____ **Alternate Phone#**_____
Best Time to Call_____
Couple Address_____

For the following questions please circle YES OR NO.

1. Are you currently married and share residence?   YES   NO

2. Are you in a committed relationship and share residence? YES   NO

3. Do you have one or more biological children?   YES   NO

4. If so, does your child (ren) live with you?   YES   NO

5. Do you have children from a previous relationship?   YES   NO

  If so, circle the response that best describes that relationship:
      • Committed relationship
      • Civil Union
      • Legal Marriage

6. How many years were you in the previous relationship?   _____

7. How many years have you been in your present relationship? _____

8. The following four selection categories describe diverse blended family types for this study. Which of the following best describes your family type? Please circle the letter preceding the blended family type that matches your blended family type.

       A. Married Blended Family: A family formed by female and male partners who were single parents prior to marriage, who share residence and one or both partners has a biological child (ren) who lives in the home and is not a product of the current relationship.

       B. Non-Married Blended Family: A family formed by female and male partners in a committed relationship who share residence and one or both partners has a biological child (ren)who lives in the home and is not a product of the current relationship.

       C. Lesbian blended family: A family formed by 2 female partners in a committed relationship who share residence and one or both partners has a biological child (ren) who lives in the home and is not a product of the current relationship.

       D. **Gay Blended Family**: A family formed by 2 male partners in a committed relationship who share residence and one or both partners has a biological child (ren) who lives in the home and is not a product of the current relationship.

       E. **None of These**

9. How many children live in your home? _____

10. For each child that is a part of your blended family, please answer the following questions, whether they live in the family home or not.

```
Child #1
Child's Initials_____
Age_____     Sex: M_____    F_____
Is this child a product of the current relationship?        Y/N
Is this child a biological child of one of the adult partners?   Y/N
Lives in the family home?                                    Y/N
If yes, how many years? _____
```

```
Child #2
Child's Initials_____
Age_____     Sex: M_____    F_____
Is this child a product of the current relationship?        Y/N
Is this child a biological child of one of the adult partners?   Y/N
Lives in the family home?                                    Y/N
If yes, how many years? _____
```

```
Child #3
Child's Initials_____
Age_____     Sex: M_____    F_____
Is this child a product of the current relationship?        Y/N
Is this child a biological child of one of the adult partners?   Y/N
Lives in the family home?                                    Y/N
If yes, how many years? _____
```

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

ADULTS

CODES

    I.   Blended Family Resident Relationship/Metaphors

    II.   Blended Family Non-Resident Relationship/Metaphors

    III.   Structural/Boundary Issues and Change Over Time

    IV.   Internal Portrayal

    V.   External Portrayal (Society and Role of Religion and Spirituality)

I.   Blended Family Resident Relationship/Metaphors

Goal: To become familiar with how blended family partners represent

               themselves: what metaphors they use to define their systems; which

               individuals they include/exclude, etc., and how they function.

Questions: 1) How do you describe your resident family members and relationships;

               those who live in your home? Which adjectives can you use? (See

               attached checklist).

               2) What is special and unique about your blended family?

               3) What is each person's role?

               4) How do you introduce each other?

               5) How are you different/similar to nuclear families where the parents are

                  the biological parents of the children?

               6) Who is in charge; who has the power to decide what the family does?

               7) Who decides discipline with biological children/stepchildren?

               8) How are you different/similar to other blended families?

II. <u>Blended Family Non-Resident Relationship/Metaphors</u>

Goal: To become familiar with how blended family partners describe and

discuss the non-resident former partners; to identify metaphors they use to

define their overall extended familial systems and feelings toward them.

Questions: 1) How do you describe your relationship with your former partner (or

your partner's former partner? Which adjectives can you use?

2) Do you characterize your relationship as friends or associates?

Why?

3) What is the biggest strength/challenge of your relationship with your

former partner/partner's former partner?

III.   <u>Structural/Boundary Issues</u>

Goal: To identify how blended family partners define the structure of their

                 home/lives and if the non-resident parent is considered an extension of

                 their family structure (part decision-maker, etc.). To identify and explore

                 boundaries and how the couple conform or resist to change over time.

Questions: 1) How do you describe the overall structure of your household?

                 Who determines the structure of the household? Rules, guidelines, norms,

                     etc.

                 What is your relationship with the non-residential parent? Does she/he

                     have input regarding their non-residential child while in your

                     household? Whether yes or no, how is your household impacted by the

                     input or lack of input?

IV.   <u>Internal Portrayal</u>

Goal: To identify how blended family partners define themselves as diverse

                blended family members. To identify and explore if and how participants

                are impacted by their diverse blended family identity based upon being

                formed by single parenting, African-American ethnicity, non-marriage,

                and lesbian and gay partnership.

Questions: 1) How do you feel about your identity as a diverse blended family

                    member?

                Does your diverse blended family identity affect your relationships?

                    Which ones and how?

                If you could change something about how you identify as a diverse

                    blended family, what would it be and why?

                What are you most pleased about your blended family?

V.   <u>External Portrayal 1 (Society)</u>

Goal: To identify and explore if and how participants are impacted by external

dominant models of diverse blended families in society. To explore if and

to what extent participants are impacted by external portrayals of them

based upon being formed by single parenting; African-American ethnicity,

non-marriage, and lesbian and gay partnership. To explore in what ways

do diverse blended family partners conform, transform, resist, or revoice

dominant blended family models.

Questions: 1) How do you believe your blended family is portrayed in society? Can

you give examples?

2) Are you affected by those portrayals? If yes, in what ways? If no, are

you aware of any diverse blended families that believe they are

portrayed a certain way?

3) How do you want to be portrayed? Please give examples?

4) Have you ever conformed or transformed to a certain image of a

blended family that did not realistically reflect your blended family?

Give examples? What was it like? How did it turn out?

5) If you could change anything about your blended family or how you

are perceived, what would it be? Give examples of how the change

would look?

External Portrayal 2 (Role of Religion and Spirituality)

Goal: To identify and explore if and how participants are impacted by the role of

religion and spirituality regarding their diverse blended family. To explore

in what ways do diverse blended family partners conform, transform,

resist, or revoice dominant blended family models from a religion and

spirituality perspective.

Questions: 1) What is the role of religion and spirituality in your diverse blended

family relationships?

2) How do you believe your diverse blended family type is portrayed

from a religion and spirituality perspective? Can you give examples?

2) Are you affected by those portrayals? If yes, in what ways? If no, are

you aware of any diverse blended families that believe they are

impacted by how their diverse blended family is portrayed?

3) How would you want the role of religion and spirituality to be related

to your diverse blended family? Please give examples?

4) Have you ever conformed or transformed to a certain image of a

family type that did not realistically reflect your diverse blended

family? Give examples? What was it like? How did it turn out?

5) If you could change anything about the role of religion and spirituality

as it pertains to your diverse blended family, what would it be? Give

examples of how the change would look?

Directions: Please circle as many words as possible that describe or remind you of

family members that live in your family home.

1. Nice	21. fearful
2. Open-minded	22. discrete
3. Fun	23. disappointment
4. Happy	24. excitement
5. Quiet	25. afraid
6. Alone	26. disgraceful
7. Angry	27. mad
8. sad	28. lonely
9. Distant	29. sick-n-tired
10. Funny	30. hopeful
11. Mean	31. embarrassing
12. Sneaky	32. euphoric
13. Shameful	33. dishonorable
14. scandalous	34. delightful
15. fed-up	35. sexy
16. compatible	36. soul-mate
17. incompatible	37. kind
18. trustworthy	38. irreplaceable
19. combative	39. corrupt
20. silly	40. pleasure

APPENDIX C

CDA Transcript of a DBF Interview Narrative with Tom and Mike	
QUESTION:	How are you portrayed in media/society as a diverse blended family?
1 Tom	I don't know that there's a good portrayal of our version
2	it certainly in the media and
3	when I look at my daughter
4	she doesn't have that experience
5	you know the clichéd version'
6	the kind of oversexed guys that are off having a good time
7	I always want to show her that we're normal
8	and one thing I think that helps
9	is when we spend time with people in our family
10	and our social circle and she can see that they are interacting with us
11	just like anybody else
12	she goes out with; her mom, her step dad, her brothers on a family picnic
13	its just like dad and Mike on a picnic with our families
14	I think that helps
15	and there are frequent times when I try
16	to consciously bring along straight couples to mingle with us and Janie
17	our neighbors;
18	the wife is a good role model for Jamie,
19	and they have a fun relationship,
20	and we've done things with them
21	Jamie she kind of sees them
22	and understands what their relationship's like
23	and see them interact with us, and say, awe…
24 Mike	and its not completely fabricated….she like them
25	you know in society I kind of wonder
26	also if it is… if it would be acceptable (purely hypothetical
27	if say Jamie at a younger age where she would need someone
28	to pick her from school, and whether or not I could or would be included
29	in the list of the available people to pick her up
30	and so I don't know the answer to that
31	but I would bet that I would not, id have to be a family member.
32 Tom	You could be in fact, when Julie was that age she would not wanted you.
33	but you can put anyone on that list that you want to.
34 Mike	you know and I'm also very conscious
35	of when I go to her sporting events…umm…what's her reaction
36	you get from the crowd
37	not that much from her mother or her mother's family
38	ugh but from the rest of the crowd, you know,
39	if they arte picking up on
40	we certainly aren't very demonstrative in public
41	we're just not that way…umm,
42	but I do wonder if the other parents attending those functions
43	do pick up on that at all.
44	so I don't know if that necessarily affects me or my behavior

45		I don't think I modify my behavior,
46		but it is something that I have thought about
47 I		**Are you wondering about it because you're thinking about how**
48		**Jamie is thinking about it, or the negative portrayals?**
49 Tom		Yeah I think it is the negative portrayal,
50		I think more is, you know, would it ever or could it ever get back to
51		Jamie...like would that affect that person's relationship with their
52	child…like would anything be said to their child….and would that
53	child then take it out on Jamie
54	its more of a trickle down affect that would ultimately affect Jamie
55	and her relationship with her classmates.
56 I		**What about you Mike, how are you affected by those portrayals?**
57		**Has she ever brought that to you?**
58 Tom		yes she did at this point she doesn't want any of her friends to know
59		She's uncomfortable being different.
60		being 14 years old is going to be a lot that way.
61		when she's here or doing things with our friends
62		the places we normally go,
63		she hasn't had any overtly negative reactions when we've been together
64		I'm nor sure what kind of conversations she's had with her mom
65		other than, I know what her mom has told her not to tell anyone
66		that you'll be teased,
67		people wont understand,
68		and it is better if you just don't say anything
69		you know, and I look at that and say,
70		you know that's exactly what every gay man or lesbian ever did
71		is hold the secret till you cant hold it any longer
72		so, I worry about the effect that has on her long term
73		its really not her secret, obviously...it bothers you.
74 I		**Have you ever conformed**
75		**to any negative images of your diverse blended family?**
76 Tom	I think we're just not romantically demonstrative to begin with
78		so its…we could pass right?
79		neither one of us are overly flamboyant
80		we can go out and have dinner together and
81		who knows if its two best friends or a couple
82		umm, so that there's time when we're not holding hands
83		walking down the street…part of that's not us and partly
84		I think partly that's not us b/c we're trying to conform and
85		and you know we get stared at,
86		and when someone's making comments
87		it easier to just walk down the street and have a conversation
88		whether try to hold hands.
89		and so I'm sure some of that carries over to
89		when we are in public with Janie or with just ourselves.
90 Mike		I never really thought of it that way
91		that maybe we're not just that demonstrative
92		because we did always have that influence of having Jamie
93		know it hard to say
94		I don't think I was ever very demonstrative in the past

95	and I don't know if you ever were
96	we've been together for ten years now
97	so its kind of hard to say at this point
98	cause its such a major part of our life now
99	maybe when we're in public
100	when we're saying goodbye at the airport
101	getting in your car in the parking lot
102	our normal tendency
103	would be to kiss goodbye or hug
104	and whenever we do that and we're not at home,
105	Im always conscious of it.
106	so we do tend to conform at times
107	I think its comfortable to us
108	as Im sure we cross the line in things that are just easier to avoid.
109 Mike	Also...Its something that's easy for us, if you will
110	certainly our friends that are more obvious in their orientation
111	or harder for them to cover
112	they cant go anywhere together and not be obvious
113	so it's easy for us to some degree.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Tom's Narrative

Transcript	Situated Meaning	Social Language	Cultural Models	Situated Identities
Tom: " I don't know if there's a good portrayal of our version."	There are no positive cultural models of gay men blended families.	Use of language to enact his identity as a concerned partner	Cultural Models of gay men as fathers is rare with negative connotations	A concerned partner
It certainly in the media, and when I look at my daughter , she doesn't have that experience…you know, the cliché version.	A confirmation of the impact of media portrayal	Use of language: "It certainly" = Without doubt, media misrepresents me/but daughter loves me		A caring father: (ways of representing)
The kind of oversexed guys that are off having a good time	Resisting stereotype/stigma	Feels offended	Derogative images	Concerned about the image of his family type: This does not represent us
I always want to show her that we're normal.	"we're normal" in context suggest that Tom knows he is portrayed as abnormal.	"I always want to" Use of language emphasizes endearing quality to consistently prove sense of normalcy	Normal Fathers are straight, not gay	Concerned father, concerned partner
And one thing I think helps is when we spend time with people in our family and our social circle	Tom feels a need to prove that he and Mike are okay		Typical relevant family activity	Validated as viable partnership with Mike
And she can see that they are interacting with us Just like anyone else		Feels oppressed, infringed upon as not good enough	Normal and acceptable activity; proof he and Mike are worthy	
She goes out with her mom, her stepdad, her brothers on a family picnic., it's just like Dad and Mike on a picnic with our families I think that helps	"Its just like…" affirmation of acceptable behavior to emulate	Stated in a way to insinuate that this is acceptable and its universally accepted	Acceptable family forms as standard of respect	Confirmed now

APPENDIX E:

An unfolding within a segment of interview narrative where Tom's conflicting role identities were constructed

Time/Line	Ideas	Turns	Participant's Role in idea construction	Multimodality
1:00 56-75	The idea presented earlier in the interview centers around how Tom thinks his diverse blended family is portrayed and how is affected by those portrayals	Tom 2 Mike 0	Tom is talking about how the long term effect upon his daughter for having to keep his sexual orientation a secret is the same impact of pressure on sexual minorities who "keep the secret" until they cant hold it any longer.	*Tom sits up erect in his seat and leans forward from the couch.* *Mike gazes at the voice recorder as Tom speaks. Tom's voice is a bit louder, his lips are a bit clenched Mike shifts his gaze to look at Tom*
4: 25 76-81	Tom is asked if he ever conformed to any negative images of his diverse blended family.	Tom 2 Mike 0	After Tom earlier enacts a socially situated identity as an advocate for sexual minorities, he immediately shifted his position and role to that of conforming to cultural model that reflects heterosexual privilege as the appropriate behavior for two male out to dinner together: "We can go to dinner together and who knows if its two best friends or a couple…"	*Tom positions himself back into a somewhat relaxed position on the couch. Mike sits up and leans forward , his facial expression does not change and he watches Tom speak, making gestures, nodding his head in agreement, etc.*
5:10 82-89	The idea here is conforming to expected social practices that are related to situated meanings, and the importance of impressions	Tom 1	Tom shifts again in the middle of his discourse to certain ways of being as he explains a rationale for walking down the street as "friends" rather than as a couple: "we're stared at." He goes on to explain that its easier to walk down street and talk versus holding hands; avoid comments, and demonstrates same behavior when with his daughter in public	*Tom turns toward Mike, as if seeking approval and nodding his head a couple of times. He rests his arm on the couch and leans up against the side and gazes at Mike. Mike nods in agreement, his arms are folded, then he smiles and turns and looks at the researcher*
5:15 90-98	Idea at this point has shifted to validation and justification for conforming that largely centers around Jamie is their lives	Mike 1 Tom 0	Mike: "I never thought of it that way…" He goes on to reveal that they've been this way since they have had Jamie: "…because we did always have that influence of having Jamie"	Mike leans his head over to one side, closes his eyes, then opens them again. He says: (Hmmm) before he speaks, as if he has a revelation. Tom gazes in his direction and smiles, nods his head one time.

APPENDIX F

Researcher Role Statement

1. It is my interest to investigate the experiences of diverse blended families ethically and competently.
2. As a member of a diverse blended family there is sensitivity, unfinished business, and failed opportunities.
3. I will be careful not to shape interpretation of data in any way or fashion.
4. I will not misuse or attempt to influence responses.

APPENDIX G

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Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

Exploring Diverse Blended Families: Using Critical Discourse Analysis and
Multimodal Analysis Frameworks to Hear Their Voices

Participant _____ HSC Approval Number **100316M**

Principal Investigator **Robin Moore-Chambers**

PI's Phone Number **314.398.2796**

1. You are cordially invited and requested to participate in a research study about diverse blended families conducted by Robin Moore-Chambers, a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri-St. Louis in partial satisfaction of the requirement for the Doctor of Education Degree. Therese Cristiani, Ed. D. is the Faculty Advisor for this research. The purpose of this research is to investigate dominant cultural narratives of diverse blended families. Secondly, given these cultural narratives, to study how these families conform, transform, resist, or revoice such narratives.

2. a) Your participation will involve [3] separate interviews. See the following:

   - Individual Interview:
     You will be asked to participate in [1] individual interview with the researcher at the University of Missouri School and Family Counseling Center. Through a series of open-ended questions you will be asked to talk casually about how you self describe as a member in a blended family, who you include in your family, your family dynamics, your household structure, boundaries, roles, and your perceptions of internal and external portrayals of diverse blended families in society.

   - Couple Interview:
     You and your partner will be asked to participate in [1] joint interview with the interviewer at the university's School and Family Counseling Center. In a series of open-ended questions you will be asked to talk casually about your experiences as a blended family couple, your family dynamics, step parenting, non-residential parent dynamics, boundaries, roles, and external perceptions of your partnership.

- Focus Group Interview:
  All four diverse blended family partners will be asked to participate in [1] joint interview with the interviewer at the university's School and Family Counseling Center. Participants will be asked to discuss their separate experiences and overall portrayals of diverse blended families.

  All interviews will be audio and videotaped for analysis purposes and approximately four couples; [8] participants may be involved in this research.

b) The amount of time involved in your participation will be 1-2 hours for
individual interviews, 1-2 hours for couple interviews, and 1-2 hours for the focus group interview. 10-15 minutes is expected to complete the Survey of Family Form. A total of 3-6 hours and 15 minutes of your time is requested for interviews. The days and times of interviews will be arranged.

3. There may be certain risks or discomforts associated with this research. They include *(e.g., uncomfortable feelings that might come from answering certain questions).*

4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about blended families and may help society.

5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. By agreeing to participate, you understand and agree that your data may be shared with other researchers and educators in the form of presentations and/or publications. In all cases, your identity will not be revealed. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection). That agency would be required to maintain the confidentiality of your data. In addition, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer, and tapes will be kept in a locked office.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Robin Moore-Chambers, (314) 398.2796 or the Faculty Advisor, Therese Cristiani, (314) 516.6083. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research Administration, at 516-5897.

   I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date   Participant's Printed Name

_____   _____
Signature of Investigator or Designee   Date   Investigator/Designee Printed Name