

CO-FATHERING WITH NONRESIDENT BIOLOGICAL FATHERS:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON STEPFATHERS

by

Cherlyn Lane

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of stepfathers when both the non-resident biological father (NRBF) and stepfather are involved in the parenting efforts. This study will explore the stepfather's co-fathering experiences with the NRBF and its overall effect on stepfamily functioning and marital satisfaction. The theories guiding this study are the family stress theory and the family systems theory. These two theories will help to explain how stressful events, such as stepfamily formation and the presence of the NRBF, disrupt the family's equilibrium and challenge the stepfamily to find adaptive ways to reestablish their balance. Stepfathers were recruited and participated in a semi-structured interview, in which they discussed the challenges they experienced with co-fathering with a NRBF. The results of the study showed that stepfathers had four unmet needs which prevented a healthy co-fathering relationship with the NRBF: (a) a need to be accepted, (b) a need to establish authority, (c) a need for communication, and (d) a need for guidance. This study paves the way for premarital and postmarital stepfamily educational programs which may increase the possibility for fathers to engage in a collaborative approach to parenting.

Keywords: stepfather, non-resident biological father, co-fathering, stepfamily

Dedication

I want to use this space to acknowledge a handful of special people who make my life complete. I love you all so much! I am so blessed and beyond grateful to share my life with you. First, I want to thank my entire family—Marcus, JaNae, Cherice, Ellis, Cherell, and Sharia (and to all my grandchildren, too) for your endless love and support throughout this journey. The road was daunting and arduous, to say the least, but I am so thankful for family such as you, who believed in me and wanted me to succeed. I love you all and pray that this venture will be an inspiration for you to press on in your endeavors. To my best friend and pastor, Lodina, thank you for loving me and praying me through some of the toughest times of my life. You got me, and you know that I got you—no matter what! To my beautiful mother, Grace, who left me way too soon. I miss you and I know that you are smiling proudly from heaven. It is your strength and determination that kept me going. Finally, to my father, William, who still encourages me to keep things moving when times get difficult. I love our Thursday morning chats. Keep the faith everyone and know that you “can do *all* things through Christ who gives you strength.”

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List of Abbreviations

Non-resident biological fathers (NRBF)

Parent Management Training (PMTO)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The American family has evolved from a traditional nuclear family of two biological parents to a more common family structure of the blended or stepfamily. The most common composition of stepfamilies consists of a mother, her biological children, and a stepfather. One may think that assuming the role of a stepfather is easy, but *stepparenting* a child is a lot more difficult than *parenting* a child. Factors such as having the non-resident biological father (NRBF) present and involved in the lives of the children can make being a stepfather an extremely challenging endeavor. Much research has supported the significance of NRBFs having a close and supportive relationship with their children (Amato et al., 2011), as this enhances a child's well-being. NRBF involvement, however, creates boundary ambiguity in the stepfamily. Boundary ambiguity makes it difficult to determine who is in and who is out of the family system (Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Stewart, 2005). Most stepfathers enter their stepfamily with previously held beliefs as to what it means to be a stepfather, and, unfortunately, the involvement of the NRBF may infringe on these beliefs. Boundary ambiguity, role conflict, and the overall inability to co-father with the NRBF are all contributing factors that negatively affect relationship quality and stability with the stepfather. The relationships between the stepfather–stepchild, stepfather–wife, ex-wife–NRBF, and the NRBF–child are all affected, and success depends on how the entire family system copes with and adapts to the stressful change in family dynamics (Ganong et al., 2020).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of stepfathers who must share parenting responsibility with an involved NRBF. It addressed the challenges of the stepfather and provided an overview of the impact that the NRBF

has on the stepfamily and stepfather functioning. This study also provides ways to ameliorate the co-fathering relationship so that the stepfamily and the stepfather's marriage remain healthy and strong.

This paper lays a foundation, leading up to the formation of the stepfamily. It utilizes Hill's ABC theory of stress and the family systems theory to evaluate and understand the co-fathering relationships between stepfathers and NRBFs and how such relationships can affect the stepfamily and the new marriage. As stepfathering from the perspective and experiences of stepfathers is explored, notable strategies that can help stepfathers to be more equipped for their role in blended families is discussed.

Background

Recent studies in the United States show that close to 50% of all legal marriages end in divorce. Many divorced parents rely on the courts and judicial systems to determine custody and visitation with the children, and unsurprisingly, the mothers typically retain physical custody of the children while the fathers are strongly encouraged to remain involved in the lives of their children (Kielty, 2006; Macoby et al., 2009; Maldonado, 2005; McNeely, 1998; Raub et al., 2013; Schnor et al., 2017; Sillence, 2020). In most cases, the parents find new romantic partners and eventually remarry, creating a blended family, better known as a stepfamily. As of 2019 in the United States there were almost 4 million children living in a household with a stepparent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Most stepfamily households are comprised of stepfather–stepchild relationships, due to the large percentage of mothers being granted custody after a divorce (Bernstein, 1990; Bornstein, 2019; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

This research proposes that the overall breakdown of the nuclear family is a major stressor in stepfamilies. Nuclear families are unique in that there is a special bond amongst its

members, and they draw strength from one another in times of stress (Boss et al., 2016). There are preexisting parent–child alliances, and when a stepfather is introduced into the family, it is not uncommon for the stepchildren to join forces with the NRBF as an act of loyalty. It is also not uncommon for the mother to still be psychologically attached to the NRBF, leading the stepfather to feel like an outsider in the relationship (Booth, 1985; Papernow, 2013; Visher & Visher, 1996).

Professional associations such as the National Council of Family Relations and Stepfamily Association of America have been established to better understand and to strengthen this rising family system (Cheesebrough, 2016; Ganong & Coleman, 2018). Stepfamilies are already a complex family system, with their own set of unique challenges; however, these challenges are exacerbated when a stepfather and the NRBF are both competing for the role of father. In most cases, stepfathers willingly take on crucial fatherhood roles in the family, but the biological father’s presence in a child’s life is undeniable (Jensen et al., 2017). When NRBFs are involved in their children’s lives, stepfathers must often negotiate their standings in the stepfamily (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007). This negotiation can be met with deference to the NRBF, or it can be met with resistance (Marsiglio, 2004; Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

So, how do the two fathers work out the dynamics of the stepfamily relationship? On one hand, it may appear that the children get the best of both worlds by having a stepfather and a biological father in their lives (Hornstra et al., 2020). It could be assumed that having two fathers would doubly increase their odds of improved child well-being. This is not always the case because studies have shown that one father, typically the stepfather, will take a step backwards, while the NRBF takes over (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Guzzo, 2009; Manning et al., 2003).

This is unfortunate because both fathers are influential in the lives of the children and can positively affect their well-being (White & Gilbreth, 2001).

There are several factors which may prevent stepfathers from effectively co-fathering with the NRBF. Relationship and emotional immaturity, false or unrealistic expectations for stepfamily formation, and unresolved interparental conflict between the mother and the NRBF are just a few factors which may prevent a conducive co-fathering relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Petren et al., 2018). Many stepfathers find themselves ill-prepared for stepfamily challenges, falsely assuming that it will flow just like a nuclear family (Cartwright, 2010; Marsiglio, 2004; Papernow, 2013). The stepfather is challenged with bridging the gap between the NRBF and his children, maintaining his position in the home, all while ensuring that his authority is not being usurped by the NRBF (Higginbotham et al., 2012; Pettigrew, 2013). It is, therefore, crucial to understand how stepfathers can bring a balance to their home, their marriage, and a healthy co-fathering relationship with the NRBF (Gold, 2010; Riness & Sailor, 2015).

Many stepfamilies seek counseling for their marriage because they need help integrating all new family members and adjusting to new boundaries, roles, and rules (Jensen et al., 2014; Michaels, 2006). Counselors, however, face the challenge of not relying on their experience of working with first-time families (Papernow, 2018; Visher & Visher, 2013). When counseling stepfamilies, counselors must realize that counseling is not a one size fits all approach. Interventions geared towards nuclear families will not bode well with the stepfamily population (Lloyd-Hazlett, 2021; Papernow, 2008).

Research has shown that stepfather families make up most stepfamilies; however, little is known about this underrepresented population (Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Robinson, 1984). Equally

limiting is the research addressing the co-fathering interaction between a stepfather and the NRBF (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; King, 2006). Because stepfather families are the fastest growing stepfamily formations (Jensen et al., 2017), it would behoove the counselor to better understand the common and unique challenges that the stepfathers face. Understanding these challenges from the perspective of the stepfather can help stepfathers in developing strategies for co-fathering with the NRBF, strengthening parenting skills, and helping strengthen their marriages (Deal, 2014).

Situation to Self

The goal of the study is to better understand the plight of the stepfathers who struggle to find their place within their new family structure. Most enter the situation with high hopes and grand ideals, only to find that they are overwhelmed, frustrated, and ill-prepared for the task at hand (Ganong & Coleman, 2016; Gold, 2019; Papernow, 2015). As a marriage and family therapist, I counseled many step-couples whose marriages were buckling from the weight and pressure of stepfamily functioning. The struggle of these couples includes holding unrealistic expectations as to what a stepfather should be and understanding how to balance the involvement of a difficult NRBF. They often wonder where the authority of the stepfather begins and where the NRBF's authority ends. How is it that they have agreed to take on the responsibility of being a stepfather, yet they appear to have very little control? Some stepfathers have shared in counseling that they were unprepared for the negative repercussions (i.e., hostility, bitterness, and animosity) of the failed marital relationship between their wife and the NRBF, and they were equally unprepared for the way that the NRBF interfered with family issues that pertained to the stepfamily's lifestyle. As previously stated, by the time the couples come into the office for counseling, their marriage and their stepfamily are on life support.

This study on stepfathers who co-father with the NRBF may help those in the counseling profession to better address issues that are common to blended families (Gold, 2017). Having a stable, satisfying, and successful blended family relationship should be the goal of any stepfamily; however, they do not understand that blending a family takes time, patience, and love (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Papernow, 2015). This study may help normalize the challenges of this triadic relationship and perhaps educate couples on the skills that they need to effectively blend their family (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013).

Problem Statement

Stepfathers are experiencing more stress-related challenges associated with co-fathering with the NRBF. Stepfathers expect to be able to jump into the parenting role; however, there is evidence to support that stepfathers may encounter stiff resistance to their inclusion in the family (Fine et al., 1999; Visher & Visher, 1988). The resistance frequently comes from the NRBF, who impinges on the stepfathers' ability to take on a fathering role. Rather than the stepfather and the NRBF establishing a strong collaborative relationship, which can enhance the quality of the stepfamily relationships, these two fathers establish a competitive relationship. When there is tension between the two fathers, all other relationships are affected, including the stepfather–stepchild dyad and the marital relationship of the step-couple (Hornstra et al., 2020).

There is a need to explore the stepfather's co-fathering experiences with the NRBF and its effect on overall stepfamily functioning and marital satisfaction. Most stepfathers report that they were ill-prepared for the challenges of stepparenting, much less on how to co-father with the NRBF (Cartwright, 2010; Marsiglio, 2004; Papernow, 2013). It is possible that premarital counseling specifically geared for blended families could have better prepared them for these challenges (Papernow, 2018). Unfortunately, 75% of stepfamily couples do not get blended

family premarital counseling, and the divorce rate for a blended family is approximately 70% (Wheeler, 2015), much higher than it is for first marriages. Blended family premarital preparation can reduce the risk of divorce by 30% (Deal, 2014). Clinical intervention for stepfathers/stepfamilies is necessary, but in order for it to be effective, there needs to be a better understanding of the dynamics of stepfather relationships in stepfamilies (Papernow, 2018; Pettigrew, 2013).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of stepfathers who must share parenting responsibility with an involved NRBF. Stepfather relationships are created when the custodial parent of a minor child marries a man who is not the child's biological or adoptive parent (Mahoney, 2006). NRBFs are those fathers who do not have primary physical custody of their biological child but retain legal rights to visitation, support, decision making, activities with the child, and more (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013). The theories guiding this study are the ABCX family stress theory developed by Reuben Hill and the family systems theory which was developed by Murray Bowen. These theories explain how stressful events, such as divorce and remarriage, can disrupt the family equilibrium and force the family to use *bonadaptation* and *maladaptation* to reestablish the equilibrium. The theories further help to explain how the co-fathering relationship between stepfathers and NRBFs are interrelated and impact how the stepfather connects and communicates with the entire stepfamily dynamic.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it helps to explain the key source of stress and strain between the stepfather and the NRBF, which leads to stepfamily dysfunction and step-couple

marital dissolution. In accordance with Murray Bowen's family system theory, stepfathers are best understood, not in isolation, but within the context of an interdependent and interconnected family (Keller & Noone, 2020), which includes the NRBF. This study helps to explain the interdependencies within family ties after remarriage. Hornstra et al. (2020) suggested that future research should address the ways that divorce and remarriage affect the manner in which multiple fathers may have to adjust their involvement due to the presence of other fathers. Because of the involvement of the NRBF, stepfathers are plagued with role ambiguity or lack of clarity as to who is in and who is out of the family system (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Stewart, 2005). This study further explores how the stressors induced by the ex-spousal relationship may exacerbate a negative relationship between the two fathers. Any residual conflict between the two spouses may spill over into the stepfather–NRBF dyad and interfere with the potential for building a healthy co-fathering relationship (Bush & Price, 2020; Shafer et al., 2017).

Given the complexity of the role of stepfather and overall stepfamily functioning, clinicians working with this family must have at their disposal good parenting information to help build successful step relationships (Browning & Artelt, 2012). This study assists clinicians in helping to normalize, without minimizing, the challenges that are unique to this population and to implement preemptive strikes against these inevitable challenges. Implementing stepfamily premarital programs is a means to strengthen the marital relationship by equipping stepfathers with more adaptive means of handling conflict, leading to a decrease in the divorce rate of second and subsequent marriages (Gold, 2017; Gold & Adeyemi, 2013). The significance of this research may help clinicians better understand the problems encountered by the stepfathers and be able to diagnose, treat, and implement some concrete strategies on navigating this family constellation (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Gold, 2017).

Research Questions

This research was guided by the following research questions (RQ):

- RQ1:** What are the lived experiences of stepfathers who must co-father with the NRBF?
- RQ2:** Does the involvement of the NRBF diminish or devalue the relationship between the stepfather and stepchildren? Stepfather and spouse?
- RQ3:** To what extent does the involvement of the NRBF influence the marital relationship of the stepfather and mother?
- RQ4:** What can be done to better equip stepfathers in their co-fathering role?

Definitions

1. *Bonadaptation* – A positive result to a crisis (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983b).
2. *Co-fathering* – Both the stepfather and the nonresident biological father manage a shared father identity, shared power, and a sense of familial centrality (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007; White & Gilbreth, 2001) with the goal of improving the overall well-being of the children.
3. *Family stress theory* – This theory explains the differences among families in their response and adaptation to stressors. It answers why some families struggle, while others thrive in the midst of adversity. The support received during the stressor and the meaning that is assigned to the stressful event determines if crisis will follow (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Sullivan, 2015).
4. *Family systems theory* – This theory, developed by Murray Bowen, is a theoretical approach that explains that individuals are part of a living system, and their behavior and interactions influence one another's functioning (Watson, 2012).

5. *Non-resident biological father* (NRBF; aka noncustodial parent) – Biological fathers who do not have primary physical custody of their biological child(ren), but retain legal rights to visitation, support, decision making, activities with the child, and more (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013).
6. *Nuclear family* (aka traditional family) – Family consisting of a husband, wife, and their biological children (Sharma, 2013; Skolnick, 1996).
7. *Quasi-kin* – Former spouses, relatives of former spouses, and current spouse of ex-spouses (Bohannon, 1970).
8. *Role ambiguity* – Lack of clarity regarding expectations for the stepparent role (Ganong & Coleman, 2017).
9. *Stepfamily* (aka blended family) – A household in which two adults are in a committed couple relationship and where at least one of the adults has a child or children from a previous relationship (Gold, 2010).
10. *Stepfather relationship* – Created when the custodial parent of a minor child marries a man who is not the child’s biological or adoptive parent (Mahoney, 2006).

Summary

As more NRBFs are being encouraged to maintain relationships with their children after their divorce, stepfathers are faced with the challenge to coexist and co-father with the NRBF. This collaborative approach to parenting is often met with resistance, as the stepfather may be unwilling to coordinate his involvement in the preexisting family dance (Marsiglio, 2004) and the NRBF may not take too kindly to the stepfather taking on a fathering role (Hornstra et al., 2020). Marsiglio and Hinojosa (2007) encouraged the stepfather to become a “father ally” with the NRBF, directly and indirectly supporting him in his active involvement in his child’s life. He

can be a father figure to the stepchildren without usurping the position of the NRBF. Being a father ally positively affects all aspects of the stepfamily constellation (Hornstra et al., 2020) and can keep the stepfamily stressors from turning into stepfamily crises.

Developing a good relationship with the NRBF may require the help of a skilled therapist, whose training and experience in stepfamily dynamics can help meet the challenges of stepfamily living. The stepfather is challenged to reorganize his role and expectations for this very complex family relationship and to adopt more adaptive coping behaviors (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). This may be difficult to accomplish without the help of a skilled therapist, especially when Gold (2010) suggested that the goal of therapy should be for the stepfathers to “step away” from the role of father. This goal for therapy may appear to be inefficacious; however, it leads to a healthy and respectful co-fathering relationship, a healthier marriage, and positive child outcomes (Ganong et al., 2020; Gold, 2010; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Family life has drastically changed over the past 50 years and has evolved into a system that is far different from the traditional model consisting of a husband, wife, and their biological children (Cohen & Strong, 2020; Coleman et al., 2007). Historically, a two-parent nuclear family was deemed the gold standard and the most ideal for family wholesomeness (Cutas & Chan, 2012). Today, however, the traditional family structure of two parents and their children has become dismembered and is not as commonplace as it once was (Cutas & Chan, 2012; Ganong et al., 2019; Gold, 2019). Despite the increasing social factors such as divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing, families are thriving (Kalmijn, 2015). These social factors have all contributed to the face change of family life (Lundberg et al., 2016).

Common variations in the family structure include blended families, which now outnumber the traditional, nuclear families (Coontz, 2015). While these nontraditional family structures may not have the benefit of two biological parents raising their children, research has shown that with adequate social support system, they, too, can become a well-functioning family unit (Sanders & Mazzucchelli, 2018). Research shows that blended families have their own unique family dynamics as well as a unique set of family challenges (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010; Deal & Olson, 2015).

Approximately 1300 new stepfamilies are being formed every day (Cath & Shopper, 2011), and they are gradually becoming the new normal. Stepfamilies, once deemed non-traditional, fragile families, are now outnumbering traditional, nuclear families (Brooks, 2020; Coontz, 2015; Deal, 2014; Papernow, 2015). Most of these newly formed stepfamilies are comprised of a stepfather, the biological mother, and her children (Arnold, 1998; Gold, 2015;

King et al., 2014; Kreider & Fields, 2005; Ripoll-Núñez & Carrillo, 2016; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Stepfather families constitute a disproportionate number of stepfamilies, yet stepfathers have a very difficult time becoming integrated into the family unit (Ganong et al., 2019; Gold, 2020; Jensen & Pace, 2016; Pettigrew, 2013).

This study examines the lives of stepfathers who created a blended family through marriage. It investigates the experiences and challenges of stepfathers who took on the role of stepfather, although they may have no children of their own. More importantly, this study addresses the challenges of the stepfathers when the non-residential biological father (NRBF) is still involved in the lives of the stepchildren. The relationship between the stepfather and the NRBF can significantly impact the stepfather's ability and willingness to bond with his stepchildren (Blyaert et al., 2016; Dupuis, 2010; Guzzo, 2018; Petren et al., 2018) and can also impact the marital quality of the stepfather (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Kumar, 2017; McNamee et al., 2014). It is important to understand the many ways in which the involvement of the NRBF impacts stepfamily functioning from the perspective of the stepfather. Studying and understanding from the perspective of the stepfather may help future stepfathers avoid entering the marriage with unrealistic expectations, which lead to maladaptive adjustments such as depression, anger, and increased marital stress and decreased marital quality in stepfamilies (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Fawcett et al., 2010; Visher & Visher, 1996). The divorce rate in stepfamilies is reportedly 10–25% higher than first-time marriages (Deal, 2014). It is easy for the marital relationship to become eclipsed and challenged by the roles of the stepparent and the involvement of other integral family members, such as NRBFs (Gold, 2010).

The family systems theory and family stress theory were the theoretical frameworks used to guide this study. The family system theory posits that when an individual or subsystem

experiences stress, a ripple effect takes place, and all family members are affected (Bush & Price, 2020; Cox & Paley, 1997). Every family experience stress; however, it is exacerbated with stepfamilies. This is due, in part, to not having a shared history of understanding how each person responds to stress (Skogrand et al., 2007). The family stress theory helps to define and explore the stressors that happen in all stepfamilies.

There is limited study on the stepfather and NRBF's relationship, and relatively little is known about how one relationship affects the other (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). What *is* known is that there is a nationwide push for fathers to be present in the lives of their children (National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, 2020). At the same time, there is an increase of stepfamily formations (Ganong et al., 2019), with stepfathers leading the way and stepping into an often undefined role as a parent (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010): two men, two fathers, yet both are influential actors in the lives of the children (White & Gilbreth, 2001). It is important to understand the challenges that are created when these two fathers attempt to coexist and co-father (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). It is equally important to address and understand the stressful life events that preceded the formation of the stepfamily (de Leeuw & Kalmijn, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The family systems theory and family stress theory are two theoretical perspectives which guided and provided the framework for this study. The family stress theory looks at how families adapt to various stressors (Patterson, 2004), be it physical and mental health concerns, economic stress, family disruptions such as divorce, or in this study, stepfamily formations (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). No family is immune to stress, and when a stressful event occurs, it is usually disruptive and unsettling. The introduction of stress on a family will challenge the family's equilibrium, and the family will seek various strategies to maintain homeostasis in their

family functioning (Davies, 2016; Seshadri, 2019; Sheidow et al., 2014). As the family recovers from the stressful event, following a roller-coaster pattern of adjusting (Weber, 2011), a reorganization in the family's level and style of functioning takes place (Patterson & Garwick, 1994; Wu & Xu, 2020), and homeostasis is maintained, either adaptively or maladaptively.

The family stress theory has been used to demonstrate how families cope with stress. This theory was developed by Reuben Hill in 1949 as he sought to understand how families adjusted to separation and reintegration following World War II (Daneshpour, 2017; Price et al., 2009; Wu & Xu, 2020). Most stress theories address stress from an individual standpoint; however, true to the tenets of family systems theory, a family can only be understood by looking at the total family as a unit (Keller & Noone, 2020). Family is best understood as a system of relationships and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Cox & Paley, 2003; Rothbaum et al., 2002). Hill developed the ABCX model of stress and adaptation to better understand family stress. The "A" refers to the stressor event that disrupted the family's equilibrium and provokes change in the family system. The "B" refers to internal and external resources which the family will utilize to help deal with the stressor (E. J. Hill et al., 2017; R. Hill, 1949; Patterson, 2004; Patterson & Garwick, 1994; Rosino, 2016). Resources are defined as the traits, characteristics, and abilities of individual family members, the entire family system, and the community (Price et al., 2017). The "C" refers to the family's perception of the event, for the impact of the event will be predicated on the meaning that the family assigns to the event. The "C" variable, in turn, produces "X," which is the stress or the crisis. If the family does not adapt to the stressful event and find ways to cope with it, a crisis may be imminent (E. J. Hill et al., 2017; R. Hill, 1949; Patterson, 2004; Patterson & Garwick, 1994; Price et al., 2017; Rosino, 2016).

Most families, however, are not in crisis due to the happening of one event or stressor (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983b). Crises hit families due to an evolution of problems over time (Price et al., 2017). For this reason, McCubbin and Patterson (1983a) modified Hill's ABCX model of family stress to more accurately reflect the variety of factors which influence the family into crisis and post-crisis. According to the Double ABCX model, "aA" reflects the pileup of stressors over time which have impacted the family. It combines the initial stressor, any hardships that have been created as a result, and family ambiguity (Weber, 2011). Unlike the "B" in Hill's ABCX model which addresses existing resources, the "bB" in the double ABCX model consists of existing *and* new resources (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983a, 1983b; Weber, 2011). Which resources within the family existed before the crisis, and which are recently developed resources? The "cC" reflects the perception, not just of the stressor/event, but the perception of the pileup of stressors, and the perception of the new and existing resources (Lavee et al., 1985; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983a, 1983b; Weber, 2011). The "xX" represents the actual crisis and the family's ability to handle the crisis (Lavee et al., 1985; McCubbin & Patterson, 1983a, 1983b; Weber, 2011). It answers the question, "What is the outcome of the crisis?" According to McCubbin and Patterson (1983b), there are two terms to describe how the family adapts—*bonadaptation* (healthy) and *maladaptation* (unhealthy). This modified version of the ABCX offers a more realistic view of how families handle and adapt to stressors (Rosino, 2016).

The family systems theory was used to provide a functional guide to understanding how the involvement of the NRBF impacts the ability of the stepfather to form a healthy relationship with the stepchildren (Jensen & Shafer, 2013). Family systems theory offers a theoretical viewpoint for explaining how family members relate to one another according to unspoken yet assumed "roles," which have been established by relationship agreements (Johnson & Ray,

2016). This theory was developed by Murray Bowen, who posited that families are emotional systems which have a degree of interdependence among its members (Dupuis, 2010; Johnson & Ray, 2016; Keller & Noone, 2020; Rothbaum et al., 2002; Watson, 2012). The roles that family members assume are designed to create and maintain balance in the family system (Keller & Noone, 2020). When a person within the family unit experiences stress, everyone within that system is affected, and adjustment is necessary for all family members (Johnson & Ray, 2016; Thomas & Priest, 2016; Watson, 2012). According to Bowen, emotional processing and the behavior of family members are influenced by each person within the subsystem (Price et al., 2017). He determined that circular causality, rather than linear causality, is the culprit in family interactional patterns of the subsystems within the families (Kelledy & Lyons, 2019). Circular causality is when each family member's behavior is caused by and causes other family members' behaviors (Tadros, 2020).

Both the family stress theory and the family systems theory are relevant to this study due to stressors and unique challenges which are inherent in most families with stepfathers. Aligning with the double ABCX model, this research examines the pileup of stressors which stepfathers encounter as they adjust to their newly developed family (Boss et al., 2016). It is not simply marrying into an already established family that causes stepfather challenges. Stepfathers are normally challenged by the involvement of the NRBF, which leads to stepfather role ambiguity, divided loyalties with the children, and power/control issues (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). As the stepfathers are challenged, they make attempts to draw from their internal and external resources, which could be in the form of applying problem solving strategies, seeking family support, therapeutic counseling, or spiritual counseling (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983b). According to McCubbin and Patterson (1983b), it would behoove the stepfathers to redefine their perception

about their situation so that the situation/stressor is more manageable. Perhaps their perception of the situation is dysfunctional, which may prevent adaptive family reorganization. When this problem is redefined, it clarifies issues, hardships, and tasks so that they are more responsive to problem solving strategies (Bailey et al., 2009).

Bowen's family system theory may prove to be useful in better understanding how the involvement of the NRBF can affect stepfather relationships. According to this model, family relationships are interdependent, and stress or conflict within one subsystem will affect all relationships within the family (Amato & Kane, 2011; Hornstra et al., 2020; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). The quality of one relationship will likely influence the quality of all other relationships (Galvin et al., 2013; Johnson & Ray, 2016; Watson, 2012). For this reason, the relationship between the stepfather, spouse, and NRBF should be understood within the structure of the family relations in which they are surrounded (Hornstra et al., 2020). When the stepfather and NRBF are reluctant to align their co-fathering responsibilities, it leads to frustration within the stepfamily and eventually marital instability (Hornstra et al., 2020; Schnor et al., 2017).

Related Literature

The nuclear family of two married heterosexual parents has been long idolized by society, but this family structure has become obsolete, replaced by a wide variety of other family types (Cutas & Chan, 2012; Popenoe, 1993). The traditional, nuclear family type was prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s at a time when the divorce rate was low, women stayed home and cared for the children, and the economic opportunity for young men was on the rise (Purdie, 2010; Ruggles, 2015). As economic changes began to take place in the early 20th century, a transformation in the composition of family was also taking place (Lundberg et al., 2016).

The nature of family and the family structure has changed considerably over the past 50 years (Purdie, 2010; Ruggles, 2015). The family structure has developed into a system that looks nothing like the traditional, typical family consisting of a husband, wife, and their biological children (Sharma, 2013; Skolnick, 1996). Once deemed the gold standard for families and representing family wholesomeness, two-parent nuclear families are no longer idolized and are not as commonplace as they once were (Cutas & Chan, 2012). The social factors that have contributed to the face change of family life include divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and death (J. Anderson, 2014; Brown et al., 2015; Lundberg et al., 2016; Sharma, 2013). By the time a child reaches his fifth birthday, 70% of unmarried mothers are not in a relationship with the child's biological father (Bzostek et al., 2012), and more than 50% of married couples will find themselves divorced by the child's fifth birthday (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010). These parents eventually re-partner or remarry, creating what is termed blended families or stepfamilies (Cartwright, 2010; Koster et al., 2021; Raley & Sweeney, 2020).

Today, 40% of the family units in the United States are comprised of blended families (Zelevnikow & Zelevnikow, 2015). Most divorced women with children will remarry within 4 years of their divorce (Kreider & Ellis, 2011), giving very little thought to the complexities of blending a family. Parental dyads in blended families can be a simple stepmother/stepfather dyad, where one spouse without children marries a partner with children, or it can be a complex stepfamily where both spouses enter a marriage with children (Ahlers, 2016). In a divorce, mothers are typically the custodial parent of the children, and the fathers have been relegated to that of a non-custodial parent or non-resident custodian (Kielty, 2006; Macoby et al., 2009; Maldonado, 2005; McNeely, 1998; Raub et al., 2013; Sillence, 2020).

The Non-Resident Biological Father

Approximately two thirds of fathers are actively involved in the lives of their children post-divorce (Cheadle et al., 2010; Kruk, 2016). There are several factors which increase active father involvement following a divorce. Having a close relationship with the children prior to the divorce, living near the children following the divorce, and the father's financial contribution are all reasons given for responsible father involvement following a divorce (Cheadle et al., 2010; Gavin et al., 2002; Haux & Platt, 2021; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018; Kruk, 2016). Studies have shown that fathers who are actively involved in their children's lives show a greater potential for positively impacting the child's emotional, academic, social, and behavioral well-being (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018; Varghese & Wachen, 2016). Many studies have demonstrated that these children have higher school achievement, are less likely to participate in criminal activity, and have more trusting relationships (Coyl-Shepherd & Newland, 2013; Flouri, 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Studies have also shown that fathers who actively remain involved in their children's lives have a higher level of emotional well-being, have a decreased sense of loss following the divorce, have a more successful career, have a happier marital relationship, and are able to better cope with stressful situations regarding co-parenting (Fogarty & Evans, 2009).

Many NRBF are unfairly stigmatized and must fight against labels such as *absent fathers* or *deadbeat dads* (Sillence, 2020). They are vilified and are seen as inadequate and uncaring fathers who do not fit into the societal expectations for what it means to be a father (C. Allen et al., 2017; Sillence, 2020). However, the non-residential status of these fathers does not qualify them to have such a pejorative label (Arendell, 1995; Seltzer, 1991). For reasons that are typically played out in the courtroom of divorce proceedings, custody of the children is usually

awarded to the mother 80.4% of the time and 19.6% of the time to the father (Grall, 2020; Nielsen, 2018; Steinbach, 2019). Although the courts may favor the mother in determining the residence of the children, recent research has found that there is an upward trend in the post-divorce involvement of fathers (Elam et al., 2016). NRBFs desire to remain involved in the lives of their children following divorce; however, due to an often highly conflictual relationship with the ex-wife, the NRBF must negotiate with the mother for this involvement to occur (Austin et al., 2013; Laakso & Adams, 2006; Walper et al., 2020). Often, maternal gatekeeping is the culprit in the NRBF's limited involvement, thereby earning him the label of a deadbeat or an absent father (Cannon et al., 2008; Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2010; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015).

The National Center for Fathering (2021) has reviewed a substantial body of research exploring the impact that fatherlessness has on society. The United States has the greatest percentage of fatherlessness in the world (Kramer, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019). The trend of fatherlessness has jumped from 8% in 1960 to approximately 23% in 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The impact of fatherlessness is seen in the homes, schools, and more prominently in the prisons (National Center for Fathering, 2021). Almost every social ill has been correlated with having an absent father in the home (Weiten, 2021). Fatherless children are at a greater risk of abusing drugs and alcohol (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), and they are four times more likely to live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), 12% of children in married coupled families lived in poverty, compared to 44% of children who lived in homes where the father was not present. Adolescents who live in fatherless homes are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal activities (Bosick & Fomby, 2018). A correlation has also been found in fatherlessness and increased sexual activities

and pregnancies amongst adolescents (Schwarzwalder & Tax, 2015). On the other hand, some may argue that fatherlessness is not the cause of these social ills and that fathers are being unfairly blamed (Rambert, 2020). There is a direct link between a fatherless family structure and what Skolnick (1996) described as a “nauseating buffet of social pathologies” (p. 421) . Although there may be a correlation, any basic statistics class teaches that correlation does not imply causation (Bewick et al., 2003).

The Biological Mother

Consistent with the family stress theory, the mother/ex-wife’s ability to adaptively respond to the divorce and the failed relationship may be compromised by the changes in circumstances and lifestyle (Amato, 2000). Rather than the divorce putting an end to spousal conflict, the divorce may give rise to new problems; mothers may be challenged with economic difficulties, loneliness, and the daunting responsibilities of single parenthood (Avci et al., 2021), which may affect the well-being of the family (Amato, 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991; Avci et al., 2021). Research has shown that the biggest challenge that mothers face after a divorce is finding an appropriate work–life balance in their newly found single status (Jarvis & Jenkins, 1999; Leopold, 2018; Lichtenstein et al., 2022; Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2020). This conflict stems from the mother having to contend with both role strain and financial strain (Jarvis & Jenkins, 1999; Lichtenstein et al., 2022).

Role Strain and Role Overload

Both mothers and fathers experience parental role strain following a divorce; however, mothers will experience it to a higher degree; if they have been awarded custody of the children, mothers may also experience role overload (Carr & Umberson, 2013; Van Winkle & Leopold, 2021). Role-strain happens when the mother has so many demands and obligations that she

experiences difficulties in meeting these roles (Erdwins et al., 2001). An example of role strain may be a mother who gets off work in the afternoon and must pick the children up from childcare, go home and cook dinner, feed the children, give them a bath, assist with homework, and get them in bed on time. The mother may feel, at times, that she is unable to effectively perform these duties (Carr & Umberson, 2013).

Role overload may happen to newly divorced mothers as they adjust to the role of sole custodian. Role overload is having many social roles (i.e., single mother, father, provider, coach, maintenance person, etc.), yet not having the proper number of resources to meet all the roles (Glynn et al., 2009). It may be somewhat daunting to have to assume the role of a single mother who must take on the primary responsibility for managing the household and taking care of the parenting needs (DeGarmo et al., 2008).

Effects of Financial Strain

Women are more financially disadvantaged than men following a divorce. On average, after a divorce, the household income of women and mothers decrease by at least 71% (Van Winkle & Leopold, 2021). Being the primary caregiver of the children, women find that their earning power has decreased while their household costs have increased (Munnell et al., 2018). The mother is generally awarded child support payments through the courts; however, child support payments from the NRBF are intended to cover the basic needs of the children, such as food, housing, and clothing (Bloomer et al., 2002; Grall, 2020). Its intent is to offset the burden of these costs so that the mother can maintain the needs of the children in a manner that the children's standard of living remains as consistent as possible (Grall, 2020). Divorced mothers frequently bear the brunt of additional expenses such as childcare, groceries, medical bills, extra-curricular activities, educational expenses including possible private school tuition, and college

expenses, for the NRBF is not legally required to help with these additional expenses. When economic conditions are strained, interparental conflict is typically increased and parenting time of the NRBF is decreased (Braver & Lamb, 2013; Paat, 2011; Sandler et al., 2013).

In ancient Greek mythology, Charon was the gatekeeper to the underworld (Hussein, 2015). He restricted access to the underworld to those who were able to pay the cost to enter their final rest. Those who were unable to pay the price were not granted access and had to wander between two worlds (Hussein, 2015). The job of a gatekeeper is to make sure that no one enters a specific territory and possibly harms the people inside that territory. Following a divorce, mothers may assume the role of gatekeeper and restrict the access of the NRBF to the children (Cannon et al., 2008; McBride et al., 2005; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015).

Maternal gatekeeping behavior is a means of exerting control over the NRBF's involvement and of restricting access through the mother's attitude and her behaviors (S. Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Puhlman & Pasley, 2017; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). This is common when there are unresolved issues regarding the failed relationship with the NRBF and when there is financial strain. While there are times that maternal gatekeeping is necessary, such as inept fathering that places the children in danger, some gatekeeping behaviors are based on perceived or manufactured harm. Research has shown that parental gatekeeping can be attributed to intrapersonal factors such as negative emotionality and low self-esteem (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015; Stevenson et al., 2014; K. K. Sweeney et al., 2017); interpersonal factors such as relationship conflict, perceived or actual low parenting skills, and re-partnering (Berger et al., 2012; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015; K. K. Sweeney et al., 2017); and economic factors such as decreased finances (K. K. Sweeney et al., 2017). It has been shown from various studies that mothers who are angry at their ex-spouses will sometimes sabotage the father's efforts to see

their children, and NRBFs will sometimes not visit with their children as a means of avoiding contact with the mother (Ahrns & Miller, 1993).

Maternal gatekeeping touches on two concepts which are consistent with the family systems theory: boundaries and emotional cutoff (Austin et al., 2013; Walper et al., 2020). Restrictive gatekeeping creates rigid boundaries which ultimately restrict the flow of information and contact between the family members, which then results in the disengagement of the NRBF (Austin et al., 2013). Research has shown that the more the mother engages in gatekeeping behavior, the less parental involvement there is from the NRBF (Kelly, 2000; McBride et al., 2005; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015; Stevenson et al., 2014; Tu et al., 2014). In addition, emotional cutoff is the means that both parents employ in order to deal with and manage their unresolved issues. According to Murray Bowen, who was the originator of the 1978 family systems theory, emotional cutoff is the separation, isolation, withdrawal, or denying the importance of the parental family (Rovers, 1998). Parents engage in this behavior as they attempt to reduce tension and stress and to separate themselves from their past to start their lives anew (Titelman, 2003).

Co-parenting Between Mother and Non-Resident Biological Father

As previously stated, and understood through the lens of the family systems theory, maternal gatekeeping prevents the parents from effectively co-parenting (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). The systems theory shows that the mother and father are interdependent individuals whose behavior affects each other. This family systems theory makes it possible to understand that the father's decision to pull back and become under-involved is due to the mother's gatekeeping tendencies and is not because he has no desire to engage with his children (Altenburger et al., 2018; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Minuchin, 1985; Walker & McGraw, 2000).

Studies show that the quality of the relationship between the mother and NRBF is an important predictor of the NRBF's involvement (Ahrons & Miller, 1993). More NRBFs remain in their children's lives because research has shown that stepping back and parenting from a distance creates weak ties with their child and can negatively affect their child's outcome (Carlson et al., 2008; Goldberg & Carlson, 2015; Manning et al., 2003). A positive and supportive relationship with their children can mitigate negative outcomes of their relationship (Hawkins et al., 2007).

Consistent with the family stress theory, a rollercoaster pattern of adjustments is experienced by both the mother and the NRBF as they navigate through the acute stressors that are common to couples who recently divorced (Mullen & Hill, 1990; Paynter et al., 2013; Weber, 2011). Adapting to life changes following a divorce can take one of two paths. The changes may overwhelm the family's ability to cope (Wang & Amato, 2000) and the parents may find themselves deteriorating under the stress of transitioning from a nuclear family to a binuclear family system or they may experience growth from it. As Hill's (1949) ABCX model predicts, the disruption and disorganization brought about by changes in the family's expectations, roles, and overall relationship, eventually give way to the recovery phase, making it possible for the co-parents to interact and develop a constructive relationship that prioritizes the needs of their children (Galvin et al., 2013). Co-parenting can only be effective once the parents have experienced growth and have made a healthy adaptation, or *bonadaptation* (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983b), to their new normal (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Mullen & Hill, 1990).

Bonadaptation for a family does not mean that there is an absence of stress or conflict. It is an indication that the parents have used internal and external resources to overcome their past challenges by engaging in effective conflict resolution skills. Bonadaptation further allows the

parents to have a more meaningful co-parenting relationship (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986), and it allows the children to become adept at living in a binuclear family system (Ahrons, 1980; Bowden & Greenberg, 2010). Cooperative co-parenting helps children to maintain a loving relationship with both parents, it allows the NRBF to be actively involved in his children's life, and the NRBF has increased decision making responsibilities regarding his children (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; Hohmann-Marriott, 2011; Macie & Stolberg, 2003).

Studies show that greater NRBF involvement is associated with a better co-parenting relationship; however, there is limited consensus on which came first, the father involvement or the co-parenting relationship (Carlson et al., 2008; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). Withholding NRBF interaction/involvement in lieu of financial contribution is a strategy that some custodial mothers employ (Bloomer et al., 2002). Research has also shown that consistent economic support from the NRBF is positively associated with increased quality of the co-parenting relationship (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2010; Hofferth et al., 2010).

Maternal Dating and Remarriage

It is healthy to experience a grieving process after a divorce, in much of the same way as one would grieve the loss of a loved one through death (Hagemeyer, 1986). Skipping the grieving process and entering a dating relationship too quickly can be viewed as a sign of avoidance of emotional hurt (Munsinger, 2017). Children need time to adjust to the new normal, and parents need time to form a new identity (Fine & Harvey, 2013). When parents start a new relationship, this gives rise to new parental figures and possibly additional children. This may lead to a new layer of stress in the binuclear family systems, including a redefinition of parental roles and involvement (Koster et al., 2021).

Research conducted by Hetherington and Kelly (2002) determined that families recover from changes within their family structure within 2 years of the divorce and they recouple or remarry within 5 years of their divorce (Ahrons et al., 2006). During this 5-year time frame, the family has reestablished equilibrium and learned to adjust to their new normal, which includes parenting, housework, time management, and a new-found social life (Öztop & Dogan, 2009; Wang & Amato, 2000).

Findings suggest that custodial mothers are more motivated to marry than divorced fathers (Morrison & Ritualo, 2000). Custodial mothers are more likely to remarry to have a relief from loneliness, increased sex and intimacy, additional economic support, additional supervision of children, a father for their children, and to alleviate the daily stress and hassles of parenting (Manning & Smock, 1999; Price et al., 2017; Tauber & Smoke, 2007). The hassles of parenting can either be infrequent and situational, such as having a sick child, or it can be a part of everyday life such as loss of sleep, lack of personal time, and endless cleaning up activities (Crnic et al., 2005; Crnic & Low, 2002). Research has shown that the cumulative nature of the daily hassles results in a tremendous amount of parental stress (Price et al., 2017), leading single mothers to seek a partner to share in the everyday tasks of childrearing. As previously mentioned, single mothers face extraordinary challenges with parenting. Having a permanent partner can mitigate the challenges of economic disadvantage, emotional demands, and minimal social support that plague so many single mothers (Price et al., 2017).

Research is inconclusive as to whether having children affects the likelihood of remarriage; however, most studies show that there is a decrease in attractiveness and desirability in the remarriage market for single mothers (Fine & Harvey, 2013; McNamee et al., 2014). Men are often unwilling to assume the responsibility of being a stepparent due to the added financial

commitment and emotional obligations associated with children, which frequently complicate new relationships (Buckle et al., 1996; Chiswick & Lehrer, 1990; Coleman et al., 2000; Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006; McNamee et al., 2014). Mediating factors such as the involvement of the biological father, custody arrangements, and the ability to have a cooperative co-parenting relationship may significantly decrease the woman's prospect of remarriage (Buckle et al., 1996; McNamee et al., 2014).

It will be helpful for this study to gain more insight into the role that the NRBF plays in the remarriage potential of his former spouse. Past studies have focused on the amount of contact that the NRBF has with his ex-wife and the relationship that the NRBF has with his children as determining factors in the mother's remarriage potential (Buyukkececi, 2021; Fischer et al., 2005). Some researchers suggested that these two factors may negatively impact subsequent relationships formed with a new partner, and can strongly influence remarriage potential (Buyukkececi, 2021; Fischer et al., 2005). Frequent contact means more interchange between the two former spouses, which may be somewhat off-putting for new partners. Parental issues, legal issues, and emotions can often spill into relationships and negatively impact them. It is plausible that maintaining frequent contact with the former spouse could be an indication of emotional attachment or preoccupation with the former spouse, resulting in conflict and early termination of new dating relationships (Fischer et al., 2005).

To better understand the interplay between post-divorce dating, the NRBF, and the eventual remarriage of the biological mother, the family system's concept of interdependence must be understood. Interdependence amongst the family denotes that a change in one part of the family system will, undoubtedly, affect the entire system. In post-divorce couples, the family system shifts from a nuclear family to that of a binuclear family system (Strong & Cohen, 2016).

With binuclearity comes systemic reorganization (Ahrons, 1980) in which new family identities, new boundaries, and new patterns of interacting with one another are developed (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986). The introduction of a new partner into this binuclear family system will impact all subsystems within the family, from the parental/ex-spouse subsystem to the non-residential parent/child subsystem (Keshet, 1980; Papernow, 2015; Rodgers & Conrad, 1986). The parental/ex-spouse subsystem reacts to the *intrusion* of an outsider and the family unit once again faces the challenge of reorganization, restructuring, and redefining its roles and relationships. Dating and remarriage challenge the dynamics of the binuclear family system and act as a stressor that can impact the family reorganization process (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986).

Formation of the Stepfamily

When a remarriage with children occurs, what is commonly known as a stepfamily is created (Cartwright, 2010; Kalmijn, 2021; King, 2009; Papernow, 2015) This word *stepfamily* initially had a negative connotation associated with it and was viewed as if there was something inherently wrong with the stepfamily. Stepfamilies were perceived to be more contentious and capricious than a traditional family (Claxton-Oldfield & O'Neil, 2007; Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Saint-Jacques et al., 2020). This is due to the original Old English meaning of the word *steop*, which means bereaved or orphaned; thus a *steopcild* denotes an orphaned child, deprived of his original parents, typically through death (Berger, 1998; Pryor, 2008). The death of a parent was typically the reason for re-partnering and stepfamily formation in the past; however, it is divorce rather than bereavement that is now the most common precursor to stepfamily formation (Pryor, 2008). There used to be a social stigma related to divorce, failed marriages, and broken homes; however, society seems to have moved away from this ignominy (Scanzoni, 2004).

Divorce is a common experience with almost half of all marriages experiencing this phenomenon (Scott et al., 2013; Stevenson et al., 2014; M. M. Sweeney & Raley, 2014).

Although divorce is more commonplace in our society and stepfamilies have become more prevalent, there is still a lingering stigma attached to stepfamilies (Gold, 2019; Papernow, 2013). They are sometimes viewed as an inferior form of a family, are ignored by society since they have no legal standings (Ganong & Coleman, 1997), and have been deemed by Cherlin (1978) and Saint-Jacques et al. (2020) to be an incomplete institution which lack norms and guidelines needed for effective family functioning. This lack of societal support between the stepparent and stepchildren creates a barrier and prevents a close relationship from being established; thus, it reinforces the stigma. However, during the last decade, researchers have shown that stepfamilies represent a different form of family, not a deficient form (Visher & Visher, 1996).

Stepfamilies are unique in that they have their own patterns, strengths, and challenges, just as a traditional nuclear family. Stepfamilies make the mistake of trying to escape the stigma of a stepfamily by mimicking the nuclear family, but this proves to be counterproductive, and it produces more family stress. Researcher Sarah Ramsey (2001) stated that the stepfamily who tries to function as a nuclear family engages in massive denial and distortion of reality and will be met with resistance, both within the family and outside the stepfamily. The children in the stepfamily may reject the stepparent in their role as the parent, and the non-resident biological parent may resist the notion of being “replaced” by the stepparent (Ganong & Coleman, 2016). The stepparent will quickly find out that the acknowledgment of his parental role and outside support is not met with fanfare with those in the extended family or the community (Gold, 2015).

Challenges and Stereotypes

The American family has evolved, and the number of stepfamilies has exceeded that of nuclear families, indicating that the nuclear family is no longer the norm (Coontz, 2015). Stepfathers comprise approximately 85% of all stepfamilies (Gold, 2015), yet stepfathers have a particularly difficult time integrating into the family unit. It has been said that stepfathers must negotiate their involvement in the family around the NRBF and the mother of the children. Being a stepfather to children is not an easy task; it is nothing at all like being a biological father. Stepfathers oftentimes struggle to gain the respect and leadership from the stepchildren (Blyaert et al., 2016).

There are typically five major family challenges that stepfathers encounter, all of which may challenge effective family functioning (Papernow, 2018). These challenges include losses, loyalty binds, family cultures, insider/outsider challenges, stepparenting, and other parent challenges (Papernow, 2018). Children in a stepfamily experience loss as it relates to the breakdown of the relationship between the biological parents, or it could be loss of time and attention, as it must now be shared with the parent's new love interest. Loyalty binds are created when children are caught in an emotional tug of war between liking the stepfather and feeling that they have betrayed the NRBF parent as a result (Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Papernow, 2018). Children may resist building or establishing a new family culture because of their comfort level with the already established culture (Papernow, 2018). The stepfather seeks to connect with the family and establish positive interaction with the children; however, the challenge remains that the NRBF will almost always be considered the insider, while the stepfather stands on the sidelines as an outsider to the interaction. The NRBF shares a strong bond with his children, and

the children are often resistant to allowing the stepfather into their private inner circle (Papernow, 2018; Sanner et al., 2020).

The issue of disciplining children as a stepfather is one which frequently divides the marital couple and the stepfamily (Bryant et al., 2016; Gold, 2020; Jensen & Pace, 2016; M. M. Sweeney, 2007). What is the role and the responsibility of the stepfather in this parental dyad? Should he assume the role of disciplinarian? According to research conducted by Robertson et al. (2006), most parents engage in little preparation prior to marriage and will only address any stepparenting issues as they arise in the relationship. Research has shown that children in stepfamilies respond best to authoritative parenting and that the role of disciplinarian should remain with the biological parent (Papernow, 2018). A guideline that Papernow (2013) suggested for any stepparent is *connection before correction*. The stepfather is encouraged to establish affinity maintaining behaviors (Ganong et al., 2011) such as genuine warmth, caring, and listening before accepting the role of disciplinarian. A final challenge typical in stepfamilies is the understanding that the NRBF is, in fact, part of the stepfamily (Papernow, 2018). This may be difficult to accept due to possible interparental conflict between the biological parents and the stepparent (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Sandler et al., 2013).

In addition to the common challenges of stepfamily formation, stepfamilies are plagued by stereotypes and expectations, which give a less than favorable opinion about the structure of this family institution (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2006). As previously stated, stepfamilies have been regarded as incomplete institutions because they lacked institutionalized guidelines and support to help them effectively function (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Stepmothers were stereotyped as unkind and unskilled people, and stepfathers were stereotyped as abusive and harsh (Planitz & Feeney, 2009). Stepfathers frequently fall victim to the Cinderella effect, a

phenomenon which suggests that stepfathers have no genetic reason to invest their love, energy, or respect into a child who is not their own (Nobes et al., 2019). It can be argued that because stepfathers are less involved with their stepchildren, they have little to do with adolescent well-being (Yuan & Hamilton, 2006).

It can also be assumed that as negative views of stepfamilies evolved over the years, so have the negative stereotypes (Saint-Jacques et al., 2020). Recent studies show that the negative stereotypes associated with stepfamilies and stepparents continue to linger (Miller et al., 2018). Stepfamilies continue to be stigmatized, particularly concerning the future of the stepchildren, who are stereotyped as unstable, unloved, and insecure (Saint-Jacques et al., 2020). Ironically, stepfathers are less stigmatized than in the past; however, multiple stereotypes remain which precipitate stepfathers having difficulty forming relationships with the stepchildren and being affectionate with them (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2006). There is evidence that shows that stepfathers have difficulty adjusting to stepfamily life due to the stereotypes placed on them. Some cautiously adopt a fathering role to stepchildren because of the stereotypes of them being physically and sexually abusive to the stepchildren (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2006; Coleman et al., 2007). This stereotype, as with all stereotypes, influences the interpretation of the stepfather's behavior (Sillence, 2020).

In one study conducted by Claxton-Oldfield and Whitt (2003), participants were given ambiguous evidence of child abuse. The participants had to make a judgment of child abuse based on the perpetrator being either a biological father or the stepfather (Claxton-Oldfield & Whitt, 2003). Based on that study, it was shown that stepfathers are viewed more suspiciously than a child's biological father. Sillence's (2020) study of stepfamilies addressed the

implications associated with the abusive stepfather stereotype, finding that the stereotype created a myriad of problems for the stepfather, particularly with the NRBF.

The NRBF, who is expected to co-father with the stepfather, is not without his own set of societal stereotypes (Sillence, 2020). Because mothers typically assume the role of the primary caregiver following a divorce, the NRBF is vilified and stereotyped as a deadbeat dad who is not interested in caring for his children (Sillence, 2020). However, the NRBF may have feelings and concerns about his children that are contradictory to the stereotype. He may still desire to provide his child with emotional support and to be a provider; however, negative interaction with the stepfather and/or biological mother may change his interaction and involvement with his children (Roberts et al., 2014). White and Gilbreth (2001) reported that despite the stereotypes associated with stepfathers, many children have positive relationships with their stepfather. Furthermore, it is possible for the stepfather, biological mother, and the NRBF to have a healthy family interaction, but it will take time to adjust to new family functioning (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Papernow, 2015).

Impact of the Nonresident Biological Father

Cartwright and Gibson (2013) determined that the co-parenting relationship between the biological parents can affect the stepfamily dynamic. There is typically a struggle with the NRBF accepting his ex-wife's new relationships, which is often exacerbated when this new partner is introduced to the children (Gold, 2019). When a stepfather is introduced into the family and the parent-child dynamics shift, it makes it difficult for the stepfather to be integrated into the family (Dupuis, 2010). NRBFs report an increase in stress, as they may feel the need to compete for the affection of their children (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013; White & Gilbreth, 2001). There appears to be a negative correlation between the mother's remarriage and NRBF involvement (Bronstein

et al., 1994; White & Gilbreth, 2001). It has been reported that some NRBFs choose to step back and parent from a distance, creating weak ties with their child and negatively affecting the child's outcome (Cheadle et al., 2010; Manning et al., 2003). The role of the NRBF diminishes to a minimum if he abdicates his involvement due to the entrance of a stepfather (de Leeuw & Kalmijn, 2020). The more time a family spends together in the same household, the stronger the connection and transmission process (de Leeuw & Kalmijn, 2020).

Other research has shown that the involvement of the NRBF may hinder the stepfather from effectively integrating into the family, thus creating poor stepparent–stepchild relationships (Petren et al., 2018). The stepfather expectations may collide with the expectations of the NRBF (Petren et al., 2018), creating role conflict, ambiguity, and frustration. Any conflict with the NRBF can negatively affect the children in the home and undermine any efforts at forming a functional stepfamily (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). The NRBF invokes a certain amount of influence on the ex-spouse (McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007), disrupting the couple's efforts to establish proper balance within the family (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Research further asserts that when NRBFs harshly judge and negatively criticize the stepfather's parenting efforts (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013), the couple's marital satisfaction is threatened (McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007). When the role of the stepfather lacks clarity, it could be argued and assumed that the biological mother would provide direction, but this leads to further confusion and conflict (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Studies have shown that mothers must act as the gatekeeper to conflict and to the establishment of a relationship between the two fathers (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013). In his research with stepfathers, Gold (2019) determined that it is the relationship between the NRBF and his child that determines the fathering role of the stepfather.

When there is unity and effective negotiation strategies between the stepfather and the NRBF, the stepfamily functioning is strengthened and more durable (Maclean et al., 2016). The co-fathering relationship between the stepfather and NRBF determines the trajectory of the stepfamily relationship, for when there is a positive balance, the results are decreased between internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013). Furthermore, when the mother and NRBF have worked out, or are working out their postmarital conflict, the dynamics of the stepfamily are more workable, more feasible, and lead to less marital stress (Gold, 2010).

Co-Fathering

There is an overwhelming amount of research recognizing that fathers are pillars in the home and have an important impact on their children (Flouri, 2006; Hornstra et al., 2020). Rather than studies taking a deficit perspective on what fathers are *not* doing for their children, research has shifted to a more generative perspective, which shows the benefits and contributions of having involved fathers (Hohmann-Marriott, 2011). Nationwide efforts, through federal, state, and local initiatives, have been implemented to increase the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. Coincidentally, as studies show that the number of biological fathers in the homes appears to be decreasing, studies have shown that there is an increase in the number of reconstituted or blended families. Leading the way in the formation of the blended family structure are stepfathers who willingly accept the role of the father figure in the home. Sixty-four percent of all married stepfamilies are comprised of mother and a stepfather (Price et al., 2017). There are more stepfather families than there are stepmother families due, in part, to most children living with their mothers following a divorce (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006).

Having a stepfather is quite common in many families across the United States and other countries globally. Studies have shown that close to 120 million people in the United States have

a stepfather or have a relationship with a stepparent (Pew Research Center, 2019). These data also show that more than 60% of men in the United States and other countries either live with spouses and their non-biological children or help raise children in that regard. Such information and data are crucial in understanding the dynamics of a stepfamily, especially a relationship between stepfathers and NRBFs. Over the years, several institutions have been established to understand family dynamics, especially in blended families. Institutions such as the National Council of Family Relations have been committed to understanding the impact of stepfathers and biological fathers' role in such blended families (Petren et al., 2018).

With studies showing a correlation between fatherlessness and socially maladjusted children (Weiten, 2021), could it be that having a stepfather in the home can ameliorate the problem? There are some researchers who have concluded that stepfather involvement may not benefit the stepchild at all. M. M. Sweeney (2007) found that, when comparing a biological father living in the home with his biological children and children living in a stepfather home, the children in the stepfather home are associated more with low emotional well-being. M. M. Sweeney suggested that stepchildren are at a far greater risk for being psychologically maladjusted, suicidal, and becoming sexually active at an early age (Amato & Keith, 1991; M. M. Sweeney, 2007; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006). Other studies show that stepfathers do have a detrimental effect on the well-being of their stepchildren (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). According to the evolutionary psychological perspective, the biological ties of the NRBF are more important because relationships with genetic connections are more significant and satisfying; it was previously supposed that stepfathers had lower social and emotional involvement when compared to biological fathers (Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006).

Recent studies, however, show an emerging consensus that engaged stepfathers do impact the well-being of stepchildren and that stepfathers have similar effects to biological fathers (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Hawkins et al., 2007; Hetherington, 1993; Jensen & Pace, 2016; White & Gilbreth, 2001; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006). Various sociological and criminological studies seem to suggest that having other males in the home might be able to substitute for NRBFs and may be able to mitigate some of the negative effects of father absence (E. Anderson, 1999; Steffensmeier & Harer, 1996). This is not to minimize the importance or relevance of the biological father, nor is it meant to signify that the stepfather is a suitable replacement for the NRBF. What the studies do imply is that a fatherly presence in the home has huge implications on the children's cognitive and emotional development (S. Allen & Daly, 2002).

Through the research, there have been many ideas brought to the forefront that children benefit from a good, complementary relationship between both the NRBF and the stepfather (White & Gilbreth, 2001). NRBFs are typically limited to interacting with their children through scheduled visitations, which can help to mitigate the negative effects of the family dissolution (DeGarmo et al., 2008); however, it has been determined that contact via scheduled visitation alone is insufficient to make a change in the well-being of the child. Likewise, simply having a stepfather in the home has been shown to be an insufficient variable. Stepfathers typically have a difficult time bonding with the stepchildren (King & Lindstrom, 2016), especially if the NRBF is involved in the children's lives. Rather than taking a leadership role with the children, many stepfathers choose to disconnect from their stepchildren emotionally and withdraw from their daily responsibilities (White & Gilbreth, 2001). They are there, present in the home, yet they offer little to change the dynamics of the family relationship or the child's well-being (White & Gilbreth, 2001).

Conversely, the relationship between the stepfather and children is positively influenced by the *substitution effect*, which suggests that the stepchild may substitute the absence of the NRBF by building a stronger relationship with the stepfather (Kalmijn, 2015). Due to the limited amount of time that the NRBF has to spend with his own children, the stepchildren gravitate towards the stepfather and overcompensate for the lack of fatherly attention and love (Hornstra et al., 2020).

It has been determined through studies, that having two *actively* involved fathers ensures improved well-being of the children (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; White & Gilbreth, 2001). Having daily physical contact, as is in the case with the stepfather, coupled with having a parental, biological bond, is the best overall option; however, building a healthy interpersonal family relationship will take a concerted effort on the part of the two fathers. A NRBF who invests significantly in his child's life and spends time with his child can influence the father-child relationship, which can have an overall impact on how the stepfather relates to the stepchild. It does not necessarily mean that the relationship between the child and the stepfather will be adversely affected (Jensen & Ganong, 2020), as there are several variables to consider, such as the age of the stepchild, the stepchild's maturity level, and most importantly, the manner in which the NRBF and stepfather communicate with one another.

As much research has already shown, the biological father has more impact on his children's well-being, due to his biological ties to the children; however, researchers Yuan and Hamilton (2006) showed that both fathers, the stepfather and the NRBF, can beneficially and detrimentally affect the well-being of the children. Rather than clashing and working against one another in their efforts to be a father, it could be proposed that the distressed symptoms of the biological father and the functionality of the stepfamily can be mediated by positive interaction

between the biological father and the stepfather. As previously stated, the child's bonds with the stepfather were positively associated with the attitude and relationship between the two fathers (Hornstra et al., 2020).

There is an interdependence among family members which aids in the formation of the stepfamily and impacts the co-fathering relationship (Jensen et al., 2018). The co-fathering relationship can determine the trajectory of the stepfamily relationship and can ease the transition into a stepfamily. When there is a positive balance between the stepfather and biological father, this results in decreased internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013). When there is unity and effective negotiation strategies between the two fathers, the stepfamily functioning is strengthened and is more durable (Maclean et al., 2016). According to Hornstra et al. (2020), the stepfather-child bond is positively associated with how well the NRBF and the stepfather respond and interact with one another. Once again, the biological mother is a key player in the effective interaction between the two fathers. When there is maternal gatekeeping behavior, it can negatively affect the establishment of a relationship between the NRBF and the stepfather (Hornstra et al., 2020; Ladage, 2015).

Studies show that biological mothers in the stepfamily are more apt to behave in ways that are intended to create feelings of solidarity and to facilitate formation of an idealized family unit (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Ideally, this would be a cohesive relationship between the mother, stepfather, the NRBF, and the children. If this is not possible, the stepfather-stepchild relationship is usually encouraged. Most mothers believe that it is their responsibility to bring balance to the stepfamily and to create bonds between the stepfather and stepchildren, notwithstanding the already established bonds between the NRBF and his children. It has been shown through studies that stepfathers want to have a positive relationship with their

stepchildren, but uncertainty about their roles, responsibilities, and behaviors hinders them. In addition, research has shown that the stepfather is slow about forming bonds with children out of respect for the biological father, being careful not to quickly assume the position as father to the children (Blyaert et al., 2016).

As Jensen et al. (2017) proposed, the child's behaviors are influenced by positive stepparent-child relationships; however, if stepfathers are typically reluctant to form bonds out of respect for the biological father (Blyaert et al., 2016), research must investigate the influence, roles, and duties of the NRBF. How does the nonresidential biological father's role relate to, impact, or influence stepfamily adjustment and stepfamily functioning? Could the stepfather's deference to the NRBF impact the stepfather's marital quality and satisfaction?

Marital Quality and Satisfaction

The involvement of the NRBF not only impacts the stepfather-stepchild relationship, it is suggested that his involvement can also positively and negatively affect the marriage of his ex-wife and her new husband, the stepfather (Margolin et al., 2001). Research states that the involvement of the NRBF creates more time for the mother and stepfather to share in enjoyable activities (LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981; Ross & Mirowsky, 1988). It further supports the notion that some stepfathers welcome the involvement of the NRBF because it denotes fewer parenting responsibilities and it lessens the economic burden of having to care for the children (McNamee et al., 2014). This is relevant because financial challenges can negatively impinge on marital satisfaction, stability, and overall marital quality (Barton et al., 2018). Also, NRBF involvement can mean that the mother experiences less stress and mental health issues because she and the NRBF are sharing the parental burden (LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981; Ross & Mirowsky, 1988).

Less stress in the relationship is a good indicator of increased marital quality. Much research has shown that there is a negative association between stress and marital quality (Buck & Neff, 2012; Story & Repetti, 2006; Timmons et al., 2017). When stress levels are low, there is less vulnerability to spillover (Timmons et al., 2017). Marital relationships have spillover when the stress that one person experiences spills over and begins to negatively impact the marital functioning. This spillover effect is consistent with the systems theory, for the family is an interconnected system in which an event affecting one person will echo across the system and impact all included in the family. Therefore, positively accepting the involvement of the NRBF and his place in the stepfamily relationships will be the best approach to increased marital quality and stability (Ganong & Coleman, 2016; Hornstra et al., 2020).

When there is stress spillover, perhaps due to interparental conflict between the mother and the NRBF, the step-couple's marital satisfaction can be negatively affected (Buck & Neff, 2012). Frequent and on-going conflict with the NRBF can influence child adjustments into the stepfamily, and it can also spill over into the marital relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Parents who divorced amid high marital conflict will continue to have postmarital conflict. Ex-partners may be legally divorced, but they are still emotionally connected. There is evidence that some NRBFs have a difficult time accepting the new marriage of the ex-spouse and may overtly or covertly cause problems in the ex-spouse's marital relationship (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). Permeable boundaries with the NRBF are created and the NRBF can negatively affect the relationship quality of the married couple. Evidence for permeable boundaries includes having highly negative or highly involved interaction between NRBF and his ex-spouse (Kumar, 2017). The NRBF may undermine and challenge any attempts of the stepfather to effectively blend with the family, and he may harshly judge and negatively critique the stepfather's parenting efforts

(Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). The stepfather, in turn, may not welcome the challenge and may become disheartened and disillusioned with not only his marriage, but with his ability to have a successful blended family (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007).

A study was conducted by Clingempeel (1981) to determine the impact that involvement of the *quasi-kin* has on marital quality. The terminology *quasi-kin* refers to former spouses, relatives of former spouses, and the current spouse of ex-spouses (Bohannon, 1970). Clingempeel hypothesized that there was a negative correlation between frequent quasi-kin involvement and marital satisfaction. The outcome of the study showed that there was no linear correlation between the two variables and that frequent or infrequent contact with quasi-kin (NRBF) had no bearings on how satisfied the couple was in their remarriage. Clingempeel further emphasized the importance of boundaries with quasi-kin/NRBFs. The more rigid the boundaries are surrounding quasi-kin, the more of an impact that would have on the stepfather–stepchild relationship. This, in turn, may negatively affect the husband–wife relationship. Conversely, the couple who has very permeable and open boundaries with quasi-kin, as evidenced by high levels of contact, will find their marital relationship inundated with role strain, role ambiguities, and a less than satisfactory marriage. It is vital for there to be an appropriate balance to the involvement of the NRBF for marital cohesiveness and the formation of healthy stepfamilies to take place (Clingempeel, 1981).

Premarital work and counseling, in addition to a widespread acceptance of the new family, are common themes which appear in the formation of healthy stepfamilies (Michaels, 2006). In addition, the couple's commitment to marriage and family, calmness, and patience are all said to be a predictor and the foundation to stepfamily success (Michaels, 2006). These will help the family to traverse their way through their difficult adjustment period. It takes an average

of 3 to 5 years for a stepfamily to establish itself and work through the family formation process (Michaels, 2006; Robertson et al., 2006). Immediate blending of the family is not probable, and the stepparent/stepchild dynamics can become a destabilizing factor in the marital relationship (Liu, 2002). This destabilization results in stepfamily conflict and is a culprit in the increased divorce rates amongst stepfamilies (Deal, 2014).

When problems arise in marriage, including the stepchildren responding in maladaptive ways, a couple of questions are raised. Do the children in stepfamilies act out negatively because of the marital issues and their loyalty towards the biological mother, or are the marital issues a result of the children behaving in maladaptive ways (Jensen et al., 2017; Papernow, 2018)? A common misconception is if the couple focuses on improving their relationship, then the children will display less maladaptive behaviors (Papernow, 2018). Research has found that children's adaptive behaviors are influenced by positive parent/stepparent-child relationships (Jensen et al., 2017) instead of a positive couple relationship. The strongest predictor of marital quality and satisfaction is the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Gold, 2010). The strength of the marital relationship is a determining factor in the inclusion of the stepfather into the family system (Fine & Kurdek, 1995).

With the involvement of the NRBF having either positive or negative implications for the marital quality of the step-couple (McNamee et al., 2014; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006), several questions remain to be answered: What is the best approach to helping the stepfamily to become more successful and functional? How should an engaged stepfather-to-be adequately prepare for the upcoming challenges of co-parenting with the NRBF? Research shows that taking a psychoeducational approach is the best way to help these fragile families (Gold, 2010). A study conducted by Robertson et al. (2006), showed that the children receive very little preparation for

their upcoming family transition. The parents of the stepfamily also engage in little preparation prior to marriage, and they typically choose to work out stepparenting issues as they arise in the marriage (Robertson et al., 2006).

Psychoeducation for the Stepfather

Benjamin Franklin once said, “Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.” This is the state in which most stepfamilies find themselves as they blindly approach this challenging endeavor. Naively thinking that a blended family will function in the same capacity as a nuclear family is a recipe for disaster and for years of heartache (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Papernow, 2015). Becoming not only a stepfather but also a co-father with the NRBF is an experience that can be both rewarding and challenging. Rather than being intimidated and/or blindsided by this experience, there are things that the fathers can do to develop their relationship in a positive direction, thus strengthening the stepfamily relationship. Being empowered with knowledge and skills is the best approach to conquering this challenge (Scott et al., 2013).

The most important first task for the stepfather is to admit and acknowledge that his family will be different and his role as a father will be different from a traditional, biological standpoint (Papernow, 2013). Acknowledging these two important factors can help the stepfather to have a more realistic and more grounded perspective about his family. Papernow (2013) suggested that the stepfather needs to understand that he is entering into an already established system in which he will be deemed as the outsider. The NRBF already has bonds with his children, and children are often hard-wired to connect with their biological parents (Papernow, 2013). The second most important key factor is for the stepfather to understand that blending a family takes time and patience. This expression *blending a family* can be misleading in that it is the stepfamily’s misperception that forming a stepfamily is simple. In his book *The Smart*

Stepfamily, Deal (2014) uses kitchen appliances as a metaphor to describe the best way to “cook” a stepfamily. Styles that stepfamilies employ to bring cohesiveness to the family unit are likened to the following:

Blender style describes those who mistakenly think that a stepfamily becomes functional merely by mixing all ingredients (aka family members) together at a quick and fast speed. This is not a good way of coming together, because this blending implies that one’s individuality, histories, and traditions are lost in the mix. The mindset is to forget about yesterday and simply create a new and improved family. Each person in the family unit should, however, be allowed to maintain his/her unique sense of self (Deal, 2014).

Pressure cooker style forces acceptance and love through pressure and high expectations. The family is under great duress because there is pressure for all members to meld in complete unity and to make the new stepfamily work. This pressure can include forcing the children to like the new stepfather simply because the mother likes him and chose to marry him (Deal, 2014).

Microwave style is used by families who desire things to change instantly in the stepfamily. This style does not want to be identified as a stepfamily and they avoid/resent the label of stepfamily, thereby choosing to disregard the unique dynamics of their situation. This creates underlying issues which can lead to pain and dysfunction in the family. They operate under the presumption that their family will operate just like a nuclear family, usually out of fear that they will be considered a second-rate family (Deal, 2014).

Crockpot style is the preferred way of becoming a stepfamily. In a crockpot, all ingredients are thrown into a pot together, yet each ingredient maintains its individuality. Crockpot families acknowledge and accept the unique origins and characteristics of each family

member. The key to a crockpot is that it takes time, patience, and low heat. A stepfamily is “cooked” in the same manner (Deal, 2014).

As previously mentioned, it takes at least 7 to 10 years for a stepfamily to effectively function (Papernow, 2013). Stepfamilies need time to adjust to one another, their roles, rules, and responsibilities. A slow-cooking mentality in stepfamilies requires the stepfather to simply relax in the moment and take small steps towards integrating with the family. Pushing family members to blend too quickly may have detrimental effects which may prevent family bonding and may result in an unappealing “dish” (Deal, 2014). Embracing the crockpot cooking style is not typically the go-to method for remarried couples. Integrating the family in a slow and deliberate fashion seems to be contrary to building a healthy and functional stepfamily, particularly because stepfamilies have bought into the “Brady Bunch delusion” (Alsdorf & Alsdorf, 2010).

Most stepfathers have a difficult time transitioning into stepparent families and most are not prepared for the challenge of raising a stepfamily, perhaps due to unrealistic expectations on the stepfather’s part and on the part of the biological mother (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Fawcett et al., 2010; Visher & Visher, 1996). Stepfathers will undoubtedly experience an inability to manage the internalized and externalized behaviors of the stepchildren. They will have to deal with loyalty issues with the children and the biological father. There will be role ambiguity as the stepfather tries to find his place in this new relationship (Cartwright, 2010; Stewart, 2005). It has been shown through various studies that more evidenced-based research and premarital education would have equipped these ill-prepared fathers in managing a stepfamily. Most stepfamily couples avoid communicating about difficult and challenging issues either out of ignorance of what to expect when they marry or because they are uncomfortable with the discussion (Cartwright, 2010). They typically seek out therapy when the stress in the

home is high and integration seems almost impossible. It is imperative for stepfamilies to seek professional guidance from those who understood the stepfamily experience and for the couple to readily apply the useful information (Visher & Visher, 2013).

Most research has supported the effectiveness of couples and relationship education programs to positively influence overall family functioning and parenting (Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012). Some research calls into question the effectiveness of certain premarital education programs, as it does not show a positive effect on marital quality and marital satisfaction; however, these programs focus on increasing couple communication but do not effectively address or evaluate how to implement skills learned in real life situations (Fawcett et al., 2010). For stepfamilies, the best option for premarital education is evidence-based programs which are specifically developed for stepfamilies and fragile families (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). Programs such as the Oregon model of Parent Management Training (PMTO) help stepfamilies to understand the effects of loss on children and the importance of the stepfather not being a replacement for the NRB (Bullard et al., 2010; Michaels, 2006). The PMTO model has been shown to be effective in increasing marital relationships and marital satisfaction (Bullard et al., 2011). Stepfamily education programs such as PMTO can be used as an intervention for stepfamily adjustment. They can be used to challenge myths associated with stepfathers and stepfamily dynamics, can alter stereotypes, and can ultimately initiate a positive shift in society's perceptions of blended families (Riness & Sailor, 2015).

Summary

As traditional nuclear families continue to decline, there is a rise in the number of stepfamilies. In 2004, the United States Census Bureau reported that there are more stepfamilies than nuclear families, and these stepfamilies have unique characteristics that may place them at a

higher risk for negative outcomes (Thomson et al., 1994). Remarriage after divorce is the most common explanation for the formation of stepfamilies, and custody of children typically awarded to the mothers is the most common explanation for stepfather families. Much research supports the need for NRBFs to be involved in their children's lives, but it has been shown that stepfathers in the home can prevent or hinder this relationship. Stepfathers do assume a parental role in the stepfamily, but they are cautioned not to assume the role of a replacement parent (Gray & Anderson, 2010).

The substitution effect has been the basis for much research concerning the involvement of stepfathers and NRBFs. Studies seem to favor the expectation that the involvement of the two fathers is an either/or type relationship: either the stepfather fails to see the need to step in as a father figure because the NRBF is involved or the NRBF takes a step backwards, perhaps due to conflict with his ex-spouse. In essence, one father will substitute his poor parental involvement with the expectation that it will strengthen the other father's involvement (Hornstra et al., 2020; King, 2006; White & Gilbreth, 2001; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006).

A healthy co-fathering relationship *can* exist between the NRBF and stepfather and is supported by White and Gilbreth's (2001) two-father hypothesis. White and Gilbreth made an argument that both a stepfather and a NRBF can work together to improve child well-being. Stressors such as conflicting family cultures and unrealistic expectations for family bonding, role ambiguity, stepparenting and discipline issues, and co-parental conflict, which contribute to stepfamily dysfunction (Jensen et al., 2014; Pace et al., 2015), can challenge the mother, stepfather, and NRBF triad.

The step-couple typically seeks the help of a clinician when the struggles of stepfamily adjustment have become too tense. For the clinician to adequately address the issues and help the

distressed couple, it is necessary to first understand their plight. To date, there is a plethora of research on the experiences of biological mothers and biological fathers as it pertains to post-divorce relationships; however, there is a dearth of information on the experiences of the stepfathers. Many unanswered questions loom and warrant closer attention. There is an expectation that the stepfather and NRBF have a contentious relationship, but studies have shown there are some stepfathers who are willing to have a friendly, father-ally type relationship with the NRBF (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007). A challenge for these stepfathers who are working as father allies is to be able to help the NRBF to maintain his relationship with his children while at the same time establish his own fatherly relationship with the same children (White & Gilbreth, 2001).

The narratives of the stepfathers are very instrumental for clinicians in their work with stepfamilies. First, understanding the experiences of the stepfather will assist the clinician in finding appropriate therapeutic interventions to guide the stepfather and NRBF in a positive and supportive relationship with one another instead of one that is confrontational. The input of stepfathers may also be helpful for the clinician who is interested in developing a parenting education program that is specifically geared towards this growing population. As stated earlier, many parenting education programs are geared towards educating the nuclear family, not the blended family (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). It would behoove any stepfamily parenting education program to recognize that the NRBF is an extension of the stepfamily and should not be relegated to that of “visitor” of his children. Finally, understanding the experiences of the stepfather would aid the stepfather in adjusting better to his stepfather role, further creating a more desirable outcome for his marriage. With less stress and more unity in the family, all subsystems in the family will be positively impacted, resulting in

increased marital quality and happiness and more positive relationships with stepchildren (Ganong et al., 2019; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011).

This study addresses how stepfathers can build and strengthen their relationship with the stepfamily without succumbing to the involvement and, oftentimes, the interference of the NRBF. Many stepfamilies are destroyed because of lack of knowledge and their failure to adapt to stressful events that have overtaken the family (i.e., divorce, remarriage, and stepfamily formation). Rather than remaining in a culture where stepfathers feel like an outsider in their own home, stepfathers can enhance their experiences by developing a more collaborative and healthier style of shared fathering with the NRBF (Marsiglio, 2004).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This paper explores stepfamily functioning and marital stability as it relates to the stepfather when the non-resident biological father (NRBF) is involved. It aims to address two things: (a) how the stepfather's parenting is affected by the biological father's involvement in the stepfamily and (b) the effects that the involvement of the NRBF has on the marital quality and stability of the stepfather. Research has shown that managing a stepfamily in the role of a stepfather is already very challenging; however, when a NRBF is in the picture, it creates greater hardships, role conflict, ambiguity, and frustration (Guzzo, 2018). When the NRBF is involved, the stepfather's progress with family integration is impeded, and poor stepparent–stepchild relationships are created (Petren et al., 2018). Poor stepparent–stepchildren relationships are a strong predictor of marital quality (Gold, 2010).

Design

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this phenomenological qualitative study. A qualitative, phenomenological method has been chosen for this research as a means of studying how the involvement of an NRBF impacts the overall functioning of a stepfather as he adjusts to stepfamily formation. For this study, a qualitative study is preferred over a quantitative study because of the unique depth of understanding gained from this open-ended approach. Qualitative research is used when a researcher wants to make sense of a person's experiences, behaviors, and belief system. There is no need to begin with a hypothesis or to conduct an experiment because qualitative research collects information that occurs naturally. A qualitative study focuses on words instead of numbers, and it addresses *how*

and *when* research questions, which are not easily explained with a quantitative approach (Cleland, 2017).

The phenomenological method is the preferred research design when one seeks to understand a common or shared experience amongst a group (Heppner et al., 2016). Phenomenology is a scientific research method stemming from the philosophical views of German philosopher, Edmond Husserl, and was later transformed by Martin Heidegger (Christensen et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2001). Husserl surmised that objective science is external to subjective experiences, and that researchers should pay closer attention to the verbal judgments of research participants to better understand the event that is being studied (Blum, 2006; Williams, 2020). Husserl endorsed descriptive phenomenology (transcendental) in which researchers *explore* and *describe* experiences to gain understanding of a phenomenon (Giorgi, 2012; Heotis, 2020). Husserl believed that knowledge relates to conscious awareness and intentionality, the avenues through which understanding comes. Heidegger, on the other hand, ascribed to interpretative oriented phenomenological research (hermeneutics) in which the researcher is to *interpret* and *explain*. The focus of interpretative phenomenology is on interpretation and the meaning of *being* (Heotis, 2020). Meaning is established through a collaborative understanding between the researcher and the participants, which gives a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Whether the phenomenological approach is descriptive or interpretative, its approach is designed to describe the nature of a particular phenomenon by exploring it from an experiential perspective of individuals within a particular group (Creswell, 2013; Neubauer et al., 2019). The goal of a phenomenological study is to accurately describe the lived experiences of common

individuals and to describe the meaning that those experiences hold for each person (Creswell, 2013).

For the purposes of this study, I adopted Heidegger's hermeneutic approach to phenomenology. The phenomenon addressed the lived experiences of stepfathers whose marriage and stepfamily have been impacted by the involvement (or interference) of the NRBF. This study is of importance for stepfathers so that their role as a stepfather will not be denigrated or upended by the sheer involvement of the NRBF. The experiences of the stepfather can be normalized and clarified, thereby, increasing stepfamily functioning and, as a bonus, increasing marital quality and satisfaction. There are limited studies on stepfathers/NRBF interactions and how these relationship affects the stepfamily. This study may help counselors/therapists to better understand what the stepfather believes, how he behaves, how he functions, and how his interactions with the NRBF shape the relationships in the home of the stepfamily (Teherani et al., 2015).

Qualitative studies are very effective in conducting research with stepfamilies (M. M. Sweeney, 2010). A phenomenological qualitative study is the most ideal approach for the following research questions, for this type of study can deepen the understanding of this complex family system. It allows exploration of stepfather perceptions, discovers role expectations of the stepfather and the NRBF, and understands relational connectivity and its impact on all members connected with the stepfamily. It also allows me as the researcher to better understand stepfathers as they discussed ways that their behavior has changed as they responded to the context of their environment (Cridland et al., 2015).

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of stepfathers who must co-father with the NRBF?

RQ2: Does the NRBF diminish or devalue the relationship between the stepfather and stepchildren? Stepfather and spouse?

RQ3: To what extent does the involvement of the NRBF influence the marital relationship of the stepfather and mother?

RQ4: What can be done to better equip stepfathers in their co-fathering role?

Site

The chosen site for this study was Grace Counseling Center (pseudonym) in a well-populated area of central Texas. This therapeutic setting was centrally located for convenience purposes, and the selected participants resided in or work in the central Texas area, within 90 miles of the chosen site. The limitation of the mile radius made face-to-face interviewing possible. Choosing a therapist's office for the interview site allowed a non-judgmental atmosphere in which meaningful conversation could take place. There was less chance of disruption and the stepfathers had a safe place to speak freely, which helped protect the quality of their responses.

Participants

The sample size of participants was determined by data saturation. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), data saturation is reached when a sense of closure is attained as the maximum information on the phenomenon has been reached. The data received from the participants began to yield redundant information once saturation had been reached. The participants in the study included heterosexual, resident stepfathers who have both frequent communication and interaction with the NRBF. In addition, stepfather participants met the

following criteria: (a) stepfather must be in a marital relationship with the biological mother of the child(ren), (b) must have been married for no more than 7 years, and (c) must be experiencing marital challenges, perhaps due to the involvement of the NRBF.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were selected using criterion and snowball sampling techniques. Criterion sampling was used to select and study participants who had met the pre-determined set of criteria. Other participants were recruited through referrals from previously selected participants, via the snowball sampling method. Previously selected participants passed the information of the study on to other eligible candidates (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Participants for the research were recruited through passive and active recruitment strategies (see Appendix B). Passive strategies, or those without direct interaction with the potential participants, included means such as local newspapers, flyers, public service announcements, targeted mailings, and social media (Estabrooks et al., 2017). Locations for solicitation included the local military base, churches, community centers, and local counselors. Active recruitment are those strategies which involve direct interaction or contact with potential participants (Estabrooks et al., 2017). For this study, active recruitment included outreach telephone calls or face-to-face contact with the targeted population. During the initial conversation with the participants, a demographic survey was conducted to confirm inclusion criterion (see Appendix D).

Procedures

Prior to collecting any data, IRB approval was attained (see Appendix A). Semi-structured interviewing was used for this research project (see Appendix E). Semi-structured interviews are the most common interviews used in qualitative methods research. These interviews allowed in-depth conversations to take place between me (as the researcher) and the

stepfathers. The responses to the interview questions were strongly guided by the stepfathers' perceptions, opinions, and experiences (Cridland et al., 2015). For this research, a variety of approximately 20-25 open-ended questions related to the research goals were conducted. The questions elicited information about stepfathers' lived experiences. Stepfathers were able to explain in their own words how they think, feel, or believe that the NRBF is impacting their relationship with the stepchildren and with their marriage. By asking open-ended questions of the stepfathers, firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon as it was experienced is gained.

Understanding how the stepfathers make sense of their experiences was the main goal of this phenomenological study (Riness & Sailor, 2015). With permission from the participants, interviews were audio-recorded to be accurately transcribed into a report. All participants were allowed to review their transcriptions for accuracy of the data collected. The total amount of time to complete the assessment was approximately 1-2 hours per participant.

The Researcher's Role

Just as the stepfamily cannot operate and function as a nuclear family, a qualitative study cannot operate on the same standards of quantitative research. One is not merely a modification of the other. In quantitative studies, the researcher uses various data instruments, such as statistics, to analyze and draw meaningful conclusions. Quantitative researchers are interested in the numbers that will prove the points of their research. In qualitative studies, the researcher *is* the instrument. It is the job of the researcher to access the thoughts and feelings of the participants rather than using numerical, quantitative data. The qualitative researcher uses the words of the participants to better understand meaning, thoughts, and experiences related to the phenomenon in question (Sutton & Austin, 2015). With qualitative research being primarily subjective in approach, it is imperative that the researcher engages in reflexivity while collecting

data. Information gathered during qualitative studies will be influenced by the biases and underlying beliefs of the researcher. For rigor and credibility of the study to be maintained, reflexivity is necessary to allow for critical reflection and examination of points where the researcher's own beliefs and opinions about the phenomenon might have influenced data collection or analysis. Reflexivity is all about the researcher acknowledging his or her role in the research process.

Ideally, the role of the researcher should consist of being an objective, impartial, unbiased seeker of truth whose beliefs, opinions, and values do not contaminate the research in any way (Heppner et al., 2016). However, this is not possible, as instrumentation rigor and bias management are major challenges for qualitative research (Chenail, 2011). Being mindful that the greatest threat to the fidelity of qualitative research is the researcher, the researcher should be cautious to not allow objectivity to be compromised. If the researcher feels that objectivity will be compromised, finding other persons to conduct the interviews may be necessary.

Bracketing or *epoché* is used as a means to protect the integrity of the study, as it is a moment of self-reflection. In phenomenological studies, bracketing is the process in which the researcher sets aside any personal biases, beliefs, experiences, and preconceived notions about the phenomenon that is being studied (Chan et al., 2013). This process is done at the beginning of the study, before any participant is asked any interview questions. Bracketing at the beginning of this study ensured that researcher bias did not influence the stepfather experiences, and the I approached the study with a fresh perspective on the phenomenon (Hays & Wood, 2011). It is necessary that the views of the stepfathers are understood through their own lenses, rather than having their view fit mine.

Often in research studies, the interviewer is not the researcher; however, in this study, I assumed a dual role as the clinician/professional and the researcher. Balancing these dual roles can be a challenge for the clinician/researcher because of the inclination to offer opinions, information, and therapeutic interventions; however, interventions threaten the objectivity of the data (Hutchinson & Wilson, 1992; Jack, 2008). Clinician/researchers must maintain self as the role of a researcher and not of a clinician. The main purpose of the interview with the stepfathers was to collect data from them, not to provide intervention (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Jack, 2008; Morse & Field, 1985). As the clinician-researcher, I needed to ensure that the participants were clear as to the role in which I was engaging. I clearly defined my role at the beginning of the interviewing process, being sure to let the participant know that therapeutic intervention would only be offered at the end of the study, as part of the stepparent education class. Careful consideration was given to how my role as clinician-researcher may influence the information that was discussed by the stepfather.

In addition to managing role conflict, my role as the researcher was to make sure that all participants clearly understood the basics of the research study so that there were not misunderstandings or different assumptions (Heppner et al., 2016). I was mindful of non-verbal bias leading to unintentional expectancy effect (Heppner et al., 2016) and administered the interview questions the same way to each participant, although participants were sometimes asked to expound more on their answers (Chenail, 2011; Heppner et al., 2016).

Data Collection

The primary source of data collection for this phenomenological study was one-on-one, open-ended interview questions. The interview questions were designed to elicit information related to shared experiences of the stepfathers. The questions were semi-structured ,which

allowed the participants to elaborate on their answers. Semi-structured interviews are befitting for studies where open-ended questions require follow-up inquiries and the interviewer may need to ask more probing questions (Adams, 2015; Creswell, 2013). Interviews were conducted at a time that was convenient for both the stepfather and myself, and at a time when there was the least number of distractions at the preferred site.

Those chosen to participate in the research were notified via email or telephone, at which time they were provided written confirmation of their appointment. McGrath et al. (2019) advised researchers to also send a short summary of the research to the participants prior to the interview, so that they could be informed as to what to expect. The purpose of the interview is reiterated, giving the participant an opportunity to ask questions, if there are any. Researchers should avoid setting up an interview without a defined time frame, for this may discourage the participants, and they may feel that the interviewer is infringing too much on their time (Seidman, 2006).

It is best to have a prepared interview guide of strategic, predetermined questions. The questions are used and phrased in the same manner with all participants. Questions start off broad and easy to build rapport with the participant. Once rapport has been established, the questions become more focused and relevant to the study. Caution must be taken to ensure that the interviewer does not ask lengthy and leading follow-up questions, for this can derail the interview process (deMarrais, 2004; Roberts, 2020). The questions asked are not intended to confirm the suspicions or to validate the expectations of the interviewer (Gesch-Karamanlidis, 2015). The purpose of the interviews in this study was to encapsulate the perspective and experiences of the stepfathers. The entire interview was audio recorded, with the express written consent of the participant, and was transcribed verbatim within 1 week. This type of transcription

is the most accurate and time-consuming (Poland, 1995), but there is little room for misunderstanding or misquoting what the participant has said.

Interview Questions

The following standardized open-ended semi-structured interview questions were asked of each participant:

1. Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.
2. How long have you been married and how many stepchildren do you have living in the home with you? What are the ages of the stepchildren?
3. How long did you and your spouse date before getting married?
4. What was the involvement with the children like before marriage?
5. How was the NRBF involved with the children and your spouse before you got married?
6. What are some benefits or advantages to having the NRBF involved in your stepfamily?
7. What are some expectations that you had with becoming a stepfather?
8. What are some expectations that you had for the NRBF?
9. What specifically would you say is your role as a stepfather, knowing that the NRBF is still parenting his child?
10. Describe a time that you felt that your role was eclipsed by the NRBF, and you felt as an outsider.
11. What are some unique challenges that stepfathers face (with stepchildren, NRBF, and/or spouse) as they are adjusting to stepfamily life?
12. How do you see the stepchildren simultaneously relating to both you and the NRBF?
13. How has your relationship with the NRBF impacted your relationship with your stepchild?

14. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being poor and 10 being exceptionally well, how would you scale your relationship with your stepchild?
15. What kind of relationship did you think that you would have with your stepchildren?
16. Has the NRBF affected your ability to parent your stepchild?
17. Who would you say is more instrumental in strengthening your relationship with your stepchild: your spouse or the NRBF?
18. What would you say is the role of the mother in handling NRBF challenges?
19. What are some typical areas of conflict between the mother/NRBF dyad?
Stepfather/NRBF dyad? Mother/stepfather dyad?
20. Of the challenges that you just identified, which would you say was the most significant, and why?
21. Interparental conflict between the biological mother/NRBF and biological mother/stepfather has been shown to have damaging effects on marital quality and child functioning. How has interparental conflict impacted marital and child relationships?
22. How would you describe, in detail, your current relationship with the NRBF?
23. Do you think it possible for two men to non-competitively work together in a co-fathering relationship?
24. What value would there be in strengthening your relationship with the NRBF?
25. What advice would you give to future stepfathers who will have to co-father with a NRBF?
26. What do you think will help prepare the stepfamily, including the NRBF, for this journey?

27. We have covered a lot of ground and I really appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to speak so candidly with me. I have one final question: What else do you think would be important for me to know about strengthening a co-fathering relationship between stepfathers and NRBFs.

Questions 1–5 were rapport-building questions designed to ease the participant into the flow of the interview. They were premarital questions whose purpose was to get an idea of what the relationship was like prior to committing to marriage and becoming a stepfather. The ability to establish rapport is a salient skill for effective interviewing. Rapport is described as a feeling of connectedness, comfort and conversational ease between the participant and the interviewer (Bell et al., 2016). Once rapport is established, trust and respect are increased, paving the way for effective communication. Getting the participants to talk about themselves and to get an idea of what their life was like pre-marriage was a non-threatening topic that assisted in building rapport.

Question 6 was designed to look at positive aspects of the relationship with the NRBF before having the stepfather delve into troublesome aspects. Sometimes it is beneficial to ask a positive question up front because once the participant starts speaking critically, it may be difficult to change to a more positive tone. Similar to the *exception questions* in solution focused therapy, asking a positive question first helped the stepfather to see that the problem with the NRBF is not always a problem.

Questions 7 through 8 helped to better understand that expectations that the stepfather had for his stepfamily. When forming a stepfamily, both the stepfather and the mother typically have unrealistic expectations as to how their family will function and how quickly they should blend. Typically, they assume there will be instant love, acceptance, and cohesion, and not much

thought is given to the impact that the NRBF will have on the family cohesiveness. The involvement of the NRBF on the stepfamily is often an afterthought; however, much research supports NRBF involvement as being beneficial to the well-being of the child (White & Gilbreth, 2001; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006). The involvement of the NRBF typically means that he and the stepfather will have to share fatherly roles, which may or may not be welcomed.

Questions 9–10 gave the stepfather the opportunity to discuss what he presumed would be his role in the stepfamily. Presumptions about roles lead to role ambiguity and role conflict in the family. Studies have shown that stepfathers who do not have biological children report that there is more competition between the two fathers (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). These questions helped me understand fatherly competitiveness, which leads to interpersonal conflict. Questions remain unanswered as it relates to who is actually the outsider in the stepfamily. The stepfather would be considered the outsider, as the biological family has already formed interlocking blood bonds. On the other hand, the NRBF would be considered the outsider within the confines of the stepfamily. One may speculate that as the NRBF tries to maintain his position of authority with his children, the stepfather may begin to feel that his role and position are eclipsed by the NRBF.

Questions 11–12 were used to address the normal challenges of stepfamilies. Asking specific questions about his adjustment showed whether his experiences support the popular conclusion that the challenges withing a stepfamily are similar and consistent.

The purpose of Questions 13–17 was to get an inside peek at how the stepfather perceives his relationship with his stepchildren. It also addressed the impact that the NRBF has on the stepfather's ability to parent. Some stepfathers choose to disengage when the NRBF is involved, and some choose to form a supportive alliance with the NRBF (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007). The approach that the stepfather reportedly took is a factor in stepfather/stepchild relationships.

Questions 18–23 were designed to gather information for intervention purposes. They addressed the conflict and stress that are prevalent in the relationship and helped to determine the direction to take with stepfamily education classes.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis begins with the organizing of all data that has been collected through face-to-face interviews with the stepfathers. Consideration must be given to how their stories need to be presented. Through the process of data analysis, there is a complete immersion of all data which has been precisely transcribed. The transcription must be thoroughly read through to become familiar with all the content. Qualitative data analysis is a very challenging and time-consuming endeavor, for all data from separate interviews must be combined and attached to themes, which ultimately provides answers to the research questions.

The next step in the analysis process is to code the transcripts. Coding is a way to analytically organize and understand the transcribed data to find themes and patterns for analyzing (Tracy, 2013). To keep from having to manually code the data, computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), such as NVivo, may be used to help with data management and coding.

An inductive coding scheme was used to ascertain initial codes. This is a bottom-up approach where codes are built from scratch, based on the available raw data. There were no preconceived coding schemes. As the transcribed data were explored, I looked at each sentence and made a judgement as to its meaning and its usefulness to the research. A code, or label, was assigned and the next time text a similar meaning was encountered, it was assigned the same code. After all data had been coded, the initial codes then went through a second cycle of coding. The initial codes were analyzed and sorted into higher level categories which ultimately reflected

themes (Gioia et al., 2013; Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019), which told the same story from the different perspectives of the stepfathers. Themes assisted in capturing and giving voice to the participants' life experiences.

The seven steps of Colaizzi's phenomenological methodology were used to give meaning to a participant's experiences through themes (Wirihana et al., 2018). The Colaizzi's steps of data analysis included the following:

1. Familiarization of all transcribed accounts of the stepfathers were thoroughly read;
2. Identified and extracted significant statements which are relevant to the phenomenon;
3. Formulated and identified meaning of each significant statement (ensuring to bracket preconceived opinions about the phenomenon);
4. Organized the identified meanings into clusters of themes that are common across all accounts;
5. Wrote an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, being sure to incorporate all themes;
6. Condensed the exhaustive description into a short statement that was essential to the structure of the phenomenon;
7. Returned to the stepfather participants and sought verification of the fundamental structure, looking to see if it captured their experiences (Beck, 2021; Morrow et al., 2015).

It was important to look for contextual meaning and horizontal meaning to the statements of the stepfathers (Colaizzi, 1978). This means going beyond what was stated by the participants and discovering hidden meanings, while assuring that the original meaning was not changed.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is said to be the equivalent to reliability and validity in quantitative research. It refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods that were used to certify the quality of the study (Connelly, 2016; Polit & Beck, 2012). Most researchers agree that trustworthiness is an essential component of research; however, there is no solid consensus as to what constitutes trustworthiness (Connelly, 2016; Leung, 2015). Lincoln and Guba (1985), however, suggested that there are four tenets of trustworthiness as it relates to qualitative research: credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility

Credibility, the most important criterion of trustworthiness, refers to how confident the researcher is in the truth of the study's findings (Polit & Beck, 2012). It suggests that the data are representative of the participants and their experiences. To establish credibility and to demonstrate truth, there must be a distinct link between the findings of the study and the participants' reality. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described numerous strategies and techniques to establish credibility in research. For this study, member checking was used to establish validity of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Before the data were analyzed, participants were allowed to verify the accuracy of their transcripts, and then provide feedback on the accuracy of the researcher's analysis and interpretation. This gave me an opportunity to correct wrong interpretations.

Persistent observation is another strategy that was used to ensure credibility. With persistent observation, all data were thoroughly read and reread, analyzed, theorized, and revised accordingly. The data were studied until depth of insight had been established (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Dependability and Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree of neutrality in the findings of the research, indicating that the findings of the research are derived from the narratives of the participants and not from the biases of the researcher. The researcher must be able to show how conclusions and interpretations have been reached (Nowell et al., 2017; Tobin & Begley, 2004). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), confirmability is already established once there is credibility, transferability, and dependability. Dependability refers to the extent that the study can be replicated by others, and they will arrive at similar findings (Nowell et al., 2017). A dependable study is one that is consistent and accurate.

One way that this research study demonstrated confirmability and dependability is through reflexivity. Reflexivity is the process of examining my own judgments and belief system as I collected, transcribed, and analyzed the data (Nowell et al., 2017; Tobin & Begley, 2004). The goal of reflexivity was for me to be mindful of how my personal beliefs may have inadvertently affected the research. This was accomplished by keeping a personal reflexive journal/diary (see Appendix F) to track my experiences, thoughts, opinions, and feelings with the participants and their responses, or as Tobin and Begley (2004) stated, to keep track of my internal and external dialogue.

Another means for this research to ensure confirmability and dependability was by employing audit trails. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), audit trails are records that describe how the research has been conducted. It documents all the steps that have been taken in the research, from the beginning of the research until the research is completed. It outlines what specifically was done in the investigation. Records that were kept to create a clear audit trail

included raw data, field notes, transcripts, audio recordings, and my reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Transferability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability is the degree to which research findings can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings; however, transferability judgment lies solely with the reader of the research study who may desire to replicate the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researcher cannot prove that study will be applicable in all settings, but the researcher must provide evidence that the findings *could* be applicable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I accomplished this by doing a thorough job of describing the context of the research and any assumptions that may have been significant to the research. This is referred to as providing a thick description of the participants' behaviors and experiences and the overall research process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Beneficence and nonmaleficence, to do good and avoid doing harm, are two ethical principles that should guide any research study. Full consent, which outlined the purpose, objectives, procedures, and risks/benefits, was obtained from all research participants (see Appendix C). They understood that participation in the study was strictly voluntary, and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, without feeling an obligation to continue. I respected the dignity of the participants, ensuring not to engage in any shaming, judgmental, or discriminatory behaviors. To maintain ethical integrity in this research, precautions and safeguards were put in place to protect the privacy of all participants. The participants in the study were assigned pseudonyms and numerical codes to ensure that they were not personally identifiable. All participants have a right to privacy; therefore, to lessen the risk of breach of

confidentiality, all confidential personal data were stored securely in a locked cabinet when it was not in use. I stored paper records in a locked file cabinet, only accessible by me. I transported signed consent documents in a folder and stored them directly in the filing cabinet. Signed consent documents were stored separately from the data collection material that included the participant's pseudonym. Only trained staff members and I handled the confidential information. Audio files and transcribed documents were uploaded on a personal computer which was password protected. Finally, I refrained from research misconduct, such as falsifying and exaggerating data or misrepresenting the results.

Summary

This qualitative study followed Heidegger's hermeneutic approach to phenomenology. This specific approach is appropriate as it helped me gain insight and understand the experiences of stepfathers whose marriages and families have been impacted by the involvement of the NRBF (Ritchie et al., 2013). Participants for the study were selected through criterion sampling which ensured that they met the pre-determined set of criteria. Data were collected using face-to-face semi-structured interviews, with questions consistent for all participants. Sample size was determined by data saturation (Hennink et al., 2019). Once the data reached a point where no new information was discovered, saturation was reached, and the sample size was attained. Participant interviews were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed for meanings relative to the phenomenon. Safeguards, such as the use of pseudonyms and numerical codes, were assigned to the participants to ensure confidentiality and the protection of personally identifiable information. The trustworthiness of this research was achieved by credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, this research was guided and

governed by ethical guidelines which protected the research participants from various forms of harm.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This qualitative phenomenology study provides insight into the lived experience of married stepfathers who are co-fathering with an involved non-resident biological father (NRBF). The purpose of the study was to examine whether the relationship between the two fathers significantly impacts the stepfather's ability to bond with his stepchildren. It further examined whether the stepfather/NRBF dyad impacted the marital quality. Stepfamily relationships are challenging enough already; however, adding the NRBF as a variable may produce less than ideal results. Using the family stress and family systems theories, the interdependence of family relationships and the stressors encountered by stepfathers as they adapted to their newly developed families were explored (Amato & Kane, 2011; Boss et al., 2016; Hornstra et al., 2020; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978).

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants, and data collected from the interviews were transcribed, carefully analyzed, and inductively coded (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Using Colaizzi's phenomenological methodology, four themes were established (Wirihana et al., 2018): (a) the need to belong/be accepted, (b) the need to establish authority, (c) the need for communication, and (d) the need for guidance. Chapter Four discusses the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. Brief descriptions of each of the five participants are given, allowing the reader an opportunity to better understand the participants' experiences and perspectives. Emergent themes are discussed, along with excerpts from the semi-structured interviews. At the conclusion of the chapter, all discussed components are summarized.

The data collected from this research study answered the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of stepfathers who must co-father with the NRBF?

RQ2: Does the involvement of the NRBF diminish or devalue the relationship between the stepfather and stepchildren? Stepfather and spouse?

RQ3: To what extent does the NRBF influence the marital relationship of the stepfather and mother?

RQ4: What can be done to better equip stepfathers in their co-fathering role?

Participants

In this research study, five stepfather participants volunteered to share their experiences of co-fathering with an NRBF. The names of the participants have been changed, and pseudonyms are used to protect their identity.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Stepfather Name	Spouse Name	Years married	Ages of stepchildren living in the home
David	Carmen	2 years	16 years (F)
Jerome	Terry	10 months	11 years (F)
Robert	Denise	7 years	23 years (F), 17 years (F)
John	Bree	3 years	28 years (M), 24 years (F)
Anthony	Rene	6 years	14 years (M)

David

David has been married for 2 years and has one 16-year-old stepdaughter, Meagan, living in the home with him and his wife. David's wife has other children, but they are much older and do not live in the home. This is David's second marriage in which he was a stepfather to his wife's children. David believed that because he had the experience of being a stepfather, this present stepfamily dynamic would be no different, and it would be easy for him.

David and his wife dated for approximately 6 months before they decided to get married. David was not very involved with Meagan during the dating period. He was living in another state and occasionally spoke to her on the phone. These phone conversations with Meagan allowed them to “get a good feel of one another,” and Meagan felt comfortable with the man that her mother was dating. Meagan saw that David made her mother happy, and she eventually “consented” to her mother marrying him. David felt, at that moment, that Meagan would love and accept David in her heart and would welcome him into their home. David had a lot of love for Meagan. He vowed that he would be a good father to her and that he would love her like his own children.

Neither David nor his wife, Carmen, factored in the NRBF, who played a major part in Meagan’s life. Meagan and her biological father spent a significant amount of time together and she was frequently at his home on the weekends, making it difficult for David to bond with her. David realized that this stepfamily relationship was not going to be as easy as he thought it would be.

Jerome

Jerome and his wife, Terry, have been married for 10 months. Terry has an 11-year-old daughter who lives in the home with them. Prior to getting married, Jerome and his wife dated for approximately 18 months. For the first 6 or 7 months of their dating relationship, Jerome had no interaction with Adele. Terry was very cautious about whom she brought around her daughter; she wanted to make sure that the relationship was solid before she introduced a man to her.

When Jerome and Terry established a serious and committed relationship, Terry allowed Jerome to start coming over to the house to spend time with her daughter. Adele was very distant

towards Jerome, deliberately choosing not to engage with him. Adele loved her biological father, and he was actively involved in her life. Adele secretly wanted her mother and father to reconcile their relationship, so when Jerome entered the picture, Adele was somewhat disheartened by this. Jerome and Terry did marry, and Jerome continues to struggle with establishing a relationship with Adele, particularly because of the strong bond that Adele has with her father. Jerome has not become discouraged, however. He has hopes that he and the NRBF can forge a co-fathering relationship that has Adele's best interests at heart. He is very aware of the challenges of accomplishing this and is approaching this feat one day at a time.

Robert

Robert and Denise have been married for 7 years. Denise has two daughters, ages 23 and 17, from her previous marriage, and they both live in the home. Robert and Denise dated for almost three years before they got married. During the first year of their dating, Robert had a lot of interaction with Denise's daughters. There were plenty of planned family activities so that Robert and the daughters could have a chance to learn one another. After the first year of dating, Robert and Denise decided to move in together. The daughters were 7 and 13 years old at the time.

Although the children got along well with Robert and enjoyed the family activities, it was not a quick and easy adjustment to having a new person living in the home. The children had gotten used to having Denise all to themselves, now they had to share her. The oldest daughter had the hardest time adjusting, and the younger one warmed up to Robert more quickly.

Robert believes that the ages of the children played an important part in the adjustment period. The oldest child still had an attachment to their biological father, with whom she was still maintaining an active and steady relationship. The youngest daughter did not have a bonded

relationship with her father because she was very young at the time that he and Denise divorced. The NRBF did not live in the same town as his daughters, but he paid child support and frequently visited them. Despite the adjustment challenges, Robert and Denise married approximately 2 years after moving in together.

John

John and Bree have been married for 3 years, and they have been together for 12 years. There are two adult children living in the home, but the youngest child has an intellectual disability, and the oldest child has “psychological issues.” John says that although Janet is considered an adult, “it is like having a child in the home.” Their father, who lives in another state, understands the challenges that his children have and is very vocal in how they are being cared for.

John and Bree dated for 9 years before they decided to get married. It was 3 years into their dating relationship before John ever met her children and eventually moved in with Bree. Because they were not married, John did not want to assume the role of father to the children; he only wanted to provide them with some male supervision. They spent time together as a family taking vacations and spending time with extended family members. Little by little, John began to assume the role of father, advisor, and disciplinarian.

When John and Bree got married, the role and expectations for John did not change. The NRBF maintained a distant relationship with his children, and he was still very vocal in what John and Bree should be doing with and for his children. John has made numerous attempts to forge a relationship with the NRBF, but the NRBF remains aloof.

Anthony

Anthony and Rene have been married for 6 years, and Rene has a 14-year-old son, Trey, who lives in the home with them. The couple dated for approximately 2 years, during which time there were frequent interactions between Anthony and Trey. Anthony did not have any children, but he loved kids and was excited about having the chance to “pour into” the life of a young man. Unfortunately for Anthony, the NRBF was a barrier to this type of relationship. Rene had ended her relationship with the NRBF approximately 2 years earlier, but there remained residual conflict due to unresolved issues. Although Trey enjoyed spending time with Anthony, the NRBF took offense to this and did not want his son around Anthony.

Anthony continued to pursue a relationship with Trey, and Anthony hoped that one day the NRBF and he could have a cordial relationship. After Anthony and Rene got married, Anthony noticed that the NRBF became less resistant to the idea of his son being around Anthony.

Results

The results of the study were gathered by analyzing data from the interviews with the stepfathers. The interviewing process of participants continued until saturation was attained. In qualitative research, saturation determines sample size and is met when the maximum information on the phenomenon has been reached (Hennink et al., 2019; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Once the stepfather participants began to express redundant information regarding themes, ideas, and experiences, then the interview process ended.

Colaizzi’s phenomenological methodology (Wirihana et al., 2018) was applied to interpret the research data and to generate an exhaustive description of the phenomenon (Gumarang et al., 2021). Significant statements were extracted from the data, and meaning was assigned to these

statements. These statements were then assigned codes, which were later condensed into themes.

The themes can be found in Table 2.

The results of this study showed that stepfathers had four basic needs as it pertains to co-fathering with a NRBF. From these four basic needs, emergent themes were noted: (a) the need to belong or be accepted; (b) the need to establish authority; (c) the need for communication; (d) the need for guidance. These four themes accurately reflect the lived experiences of the stepfather participants of this study, and they support the theoretical framework of the study.

Table 2

Assignment of Codes and Themes

Codes	Theme
Insider/Outsider Attachment Cordiality with NRBF Unrealistic Beliefs	The Need to Belong/to be Accepted
Stepfather Role/Expectations Adjustment Expectations for NRBF Power/Control Stress/Conflict	The Need to Establish Authority
Talk to One Another Cooperate or Compete	The Need for Communication
Faith in God Advice from Others	The Need for Guidance

Theme Development

In the following section, the stepfather narratives are displayed to support the emergent themes. Verbatim quotes are used to provide an invaluable perspective about the phenomenon in the stepfather's own words.

The Need to Belong/To Be Accepted

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, people have a psychological need to feel that they belong to and be accepted with a specific social group (Crandall et al., 2019). All the stepfathers in the research study indicated that they had a desire to be included and a desire to feel accepted in this preexisting biological family dynamic. In the following sections, the narratives for the participants reflect their experiences with feeling they are an insider/outsider, attachment, cordiality, and unrealistic beliefs as it relates to their need to belong and to be accepted.

Insider/Outsider. In his interview, David reflected on how he "prayed to God that his stepdaughter would love and accept him like he did her." David saw how much his stepdaughter loved her biological father, and he desired the same type of relationship with her. Whenever his stepdaughter gets upset, he longs for her to come to him for advice, but she will instead seek counsel from her mother or the NRBF. David recalled a time when he tried to get his stepdaughter to share her concerns with him, but she did not feel comfortable doing that. David felt rejected. "I'm just trying to find my way in, and I do not know if I will ever find it."

Attachment. John recognized that he would never have the same type of relationship with his stepchildren as the NRBF. Even though he lived in the home with the stepchildren and the NRBF barely came in town to see them, John knew that there was a shared history between them and there was an attachment there. John "never tried to break up the relationship that he [NRBF]

had with his children. I knew that they loved their father and no matter what I did for them, they would always prefer their father.”

Jerome recalled that because his stepdaughter has a strong attachment to the NRBF, he has a difficult time getting to know her and building a relationship with her:

Sometimes I may want to do things with her and she made arrangements with her father.

That has happened before where I wanted to take her to one of her favorite stores, and she said that she did not want to go. And she went with her daddy instead. I guess they had made arrangements. I guess I got the memo late or whatever.

Cordiality. Jerome felt that the NRBF’s relationship with him dictated the stepchild’s relationship with Jerome. He felt that he wanted to and needed to keep a cordial relationship with the NRBF so that the stepdaughter would not feel that she had to side with her father. “I wanted her to see that her two fathers could get along with one another and that there would not be any arguing.”

Anthony reflected on his feelings that “enough brokenness” had already happened in his stepson’s family. He did not want to continue adding to his sadness by having a hostile relationship with someone he loved. “If I showed him that I could have a pleasant relationship with his father, then maybe he would accept me as someone positive.”

Unrealistic Beliefs. Robert admitted that he was a bit disillusioned with how he thought his stepfamily would be. He was in a previous dating relationship where he was a “stepfather” to his girlfriend’s children. He thought that his current situation would be a similar experience. He had

high hopes that everything and everyone would fall into place and that we would bond together quickly. After all, I have been a stepfather before and that is how it was. Being a

stepfather is just an extension of the parenting that the NRBF wants to do. Shouldn't the father and the stepdaughter want an additional person around that shows love and care?

David explained a similar misconception about becoming a stepfather. He stated that he did not want to be considered a stepfather to his stepdaughter. He wanted her to see him as another father:

I am just like her regular dad. That's my daughter! I treat her like one of my own kids.

When my daughter leaves to go with her NRBF, that's his daughter, but when she returns home, she is now MY daughter.

Anthony expressed a different kind of disillusionment with his stepfamily. He assumed that because his wife was no longer married to the NRBF, that she would automatically see things his way and "side with him": "I don't understand why she just don't leave that guy [NRBF] alone. We don't need him in our lives. I got this family! I can take care of them!"

The Need to Establish Authority

All the stepfathers indirectly expressed their need to have some type of authority in the home. They entered their stepfamily with expectations that they would have respect and leadership authority almost immediately. It had not entered their mind that this was something that would have to be fought for, as the family adjusted to their coming into the home. This section of the study addresses adjustment issues, stepfather role expectations, expectations for NRBF, power/control, and stress/conflict as it relates to the stepfather's need for authority.

Adjustment. Robert discussed the ways in which his family struggled to adjust to the structure he was implementing in the home. He had retired from the military and valued structure and discipline. It was not just the stepdaughters who had difficulty adjusting, but his wife, Denise, balked at the idea, as well:

Discipline was always an important piece. If you tell the girls to do something, then there should be an expectation that they were going to do it. If they do not do what they were told to do, then there would be repercussions. This was a bit of an adjustment for Denise. She was a single mother and she worked late hours. She did not enforce a lot of punishments that she gave the girls. And then I came along and if they did something and Denise punished them, and she said three days without TV, then that meant three days without TV. I did not budge too much on that—if that was the punishment that she handed down. It took a little while for everyone to get used to this. It was her rules, but I was the enforcer of the rules and that was hard to get used to.

Robert was the new voice in the home, and it was a voice that not everyone was happy to hear at times.

Jerome shared a similar story about how his stepdaughter struggled to adjust to another person in the home. Jerome's stepdaughter has a very close relationship with her NRBF and talks to her father about everything. Jerome established one rule in the home, which was that Adele, the stepdaughter, was not to discuss with her father private matters that went on in the home. He established boundaries with her and told her, "I am the leader of this household, and I am not going to abuse my authority, but you need to know where I stand with this." It is very important for Jerome that his household is run in an orderly and respectful manner, and he is the one who determines what is orderly and respectful. Jerome and his wife do not always see eye to eye on what is considered orderly and respectful.

It is not just the wife and stepchildren who struggle with adjustment in stepfamilies, but the stepfathers struggle as well. John recalled that a big adjustment for him was living in the home with two adult children, one with special needs and an intellectual disability, and the other

with psychological issues. As John tried to establish authority in the home, he repeatedly ran into these two barriers, and he struggled to understand how to navigate around them. His stepdaughter Janet presented the biggest challenge for him:

It seemed like I could not win. Janet is special needs; she is lightly mentally challenged. She is very demanding and very challenging. Janet accused me of sexually abusing her and I was arrested. She told her NRBF that I abused her, but he did not believe it. After being accused several times, I just cut her off. I do not have a close relationship with her.

Stepfather Role Expectations. Anthony stated that his expectation was to be a second father to his stepson, Trey. He expected that he would be a disciplinarian and bring some structure to the home. His wife was a disciplinarian in the home, but she was not always consistent. Anthony said this about his expectations to being a second father to Trey:

I knew that I would ruffle a few feathers whenever I tried to put my foot down about certain things. There are certain behaviors that I will not tolerate. I wouldn't be a good father if I allowed certain things to continue. I am supposed to put my foot down even though he [NRBF] may have something to say. I cannot let Trey think that his father is in charge of my household. I don't even want Trey to think that I am a punk and will back down to his father.

John initially did not enter the relationship wanting to be a father to the stepchildren since "they already had a father." He looked at his role to be "a support to Bree. I wanted to help her keep them on the right path. Make sure they got up on time for school and did not have discipline problems." He had no desire to come into their lives as a bulldozer and assume the role of dad.

At the end of the day, these are their kids. They are not my real responsibility. I will feed them, provide housing, and keep them out of trouble. I do not want to be labeled as the “evil stepdad.” If they need me to be a father figure, I will do it.

Role of NRBF. Robert indicated that he had very few expectations for the NRBF. He wanted that NRBF “to respect him as a man and respect him as someone who is there for his stepchildren.” Robert also addressed the stress and drama that the NRBF continuously brought to Robert’s wife. He expected the NRBF

to stop provoking arguments with his wife and just take care of the kids. There is nothing to argue about, she is not his wife anymore! Just take care of the kids! But if you can’t do that, then they’ll still be alright.

Jerome did not want the NRBF to think that Jerome was trying to compete with him. “I needed him to know that I am not trying to compete. I only want to enhance what is already in place.” He also wanted to make sure that a healthy relationship was established between the two fathers so that they could co-father.

Power/Control. All the stepfathers interviewed felt the need to establish boundaries outside the home with the NRBF, and inside the home with their stepchildren. It was not a means to assert power and control over anyone, but to establish a guide for what was acceptable and what was not acceptable in the home. Boundaries were established early on with Jerome. He recognized that his stepdaughter and her NRBF had an extremely close relationship, and he told her:

When I am not around, I want you to respect the household and what we have going on here. Do not talk to your dad about anything that is supposed to stay in our household. I know you love him, but you have to respect the boundaries and privacy of the home. . . .

I had to set boundaries for her father also, because he would come over and think that he was going to hang out with his daughter on the couch till all hours of the night. He should have come over a bit earlier. I don't mind him coming over, but all that lounging around the house, I'm not playing that. . . . Her dad needs to know that he cannot call my wife at inappropriate times like 10 p.m. or 11 p.m., nor should he be having conversations with her that do not involve their daughter.

Stress and Marital Quality. Stress takes on many forms in the lives of these stepfathers, and all have stated that the stress has taken a toll on their marriage. All the stepfathers are eyewitnesses to the harm that interparental conflict has on marital quality. Anthony discussed the many times that he tried to squash all the conflict between his wife and the NRBF: "Not only does it stress my wife out, but it spills over into the peaceful home that I strive for."

Robert questions his wife as to why she allows the NRBF to get her all riled up: "He's the same person that you divorced. You divorced him because of these same issues. Why do you expect anything different from him? His behavior is what it is, and you cannot change him." The NRBF does not pay child support on a regular basis, and this causes stress on the mother. Robert desires to have a conversation with the NRBF to discuss a way to eliminate financial and emotional stress since the NRBF will have confrontations with the wife but will not be negative towards Robert.

The stress that David experiences is a result of the NRBF excessively spoiling the stepdaughter. David does not feel that he has any authority in the home because he believes that his stepdaughter is being "bought" by the NRBF. It is hard to compete when his stepdaughter is being handed everything that she wants.

Michael reported that the main source of stress in his family comes from the two adult children:

They don't want to listen, and the father don't want to intervene. The kids are not doing what their mother tells them to do, and this puts strain on her. She complains to me about everything that they are not doing, but they won't listen to me either.

The Need for Communication

Communication in any type of family structure can be challenging. How family members talk and act with one another indicates how well they will function as a family. These stepfathers desire to have healthy communication with the NRBF, but not one of them was able to accomplish this. This section expresses the stepfathers' desire to talk with the NRBFs as well as their desire to have a collaborative parenting relationship.

Relationship with the NRBF. David spoke about his communication with the NRBF as being nonexistent; there is very little interaction. "He is so unapproachable. He keeps his distance and I keep mine." He explained,

My expectation for him is that maybe one day we could talk, that we could open up to one another. After all, we share the same thing. That's your daughter, but she's my daughter, too. Just open up and talk to me. I don't know what the situation is. I haven't done anything to him. But I asked Carmen, why he don't talk to me? Why is it when I see him, he doesn't say anything? Carmen said, "That's just the way he is. He's been like that his whole life." But my expectation is to one day talk to him, to say, "What's up, how you doing?" I want to go over to him so bad and just say, "Hi Mr. Kenneth, how are you doing?" I feel like, well he is not going to open up to me, and what if I go over there to shake his hand and he doesn't respond with a "How you doing?" or whatever. I want him

to know that I am just trying to have a conversation. I want him to know that when Meagan leaves here, that's my daughter. She is his daughter, but when she leaves him and comes home, she is now my daughter. I just want to have a relationship with him where we can be cordial with one another. That's it. I don't know how to approach that man. I don't know if he is going to come to me the right way or the wrong way. So, I just keep my distance.

Robert discussed a somewhat different experience. He has no desire to be friends with the NRBF and he indicated that he is not sure if the NRBF would be able to understand the difference between friendship versus co-fathering:

I see no value in strengthening my relationship with him [NRBF]. I don't need a friendship with him. I don't need to be buddy buddies, or anything. It's strictly about the girls. So, me having a relationship with him, it's not gonna do anything for the girls, to be honest. He came down for his daughter's graduation and he seemed overly friendly, considering the circumstances. He hung out with me quite a bit—it was very awkward.

Anthony believes that it is important that his stepson sees that he and the NRBF are communicating with one another. He thinks that it will help to strengthen the relationship with his stepson. He recalled how the relationship with the NRBF got off to a rocky start, but he believes that it was because

he didn't know anything about me. As far as he knows, I was just some joker from off the streets trying to tell his son what to do. But he's better now. We don't hang out or anything, but when he comes around, we are civil and cordial with one another. I would like to get in his head to see what he is thinking.

Cooperate or Compete. Jerome wanted to make it clear that he had no desire to compete with the NRBF. He mentioned that he “only wanted to enhance what was already in place. I do not have any jealousy towards him, so I don’t need to compete with him. For what?” Jerome was the only stepfather interviewed who considered the NRBF to be a part of the family. Jerome would like it if the NRBF “came around more and do something more like a family function. Then I could take the initiative and talk more. I’m not trying to be his friend, but I can be cordial and talk to him.” He added, “We cannot function as a family if we compete with one another.”

Although Robert does not consider the NRBF to be family, he does see the benefit of working together towards a common goal of raising the children. “The girls love him, and they want him to be around in their lives. Coming together for an event like bowling or dinner would be okay.”

David, also, has no desire for competition with the NRBF, and sees the benefit of co-fathering together. However, before they can effectively co-father, David stated that they have to get to know more about each other. He does not think that the NRBF would express a desire to co-father because the NRBF knows nothing about David:

I always try, whenever he drops Meagan off from school, for the summer, or when school is out, or whatever. I’ll say, “What’s up, Kenneth. How’s it going, man?” And he’ll speak, but that’s it. It is never a conversation. And I just get back in the car. And my wife and him will say some words, like I’ll pick her up at whatever time, and that’s it. That’s how it’s been. I don’t know what else to do. I want a conversation with him. I want to have a relationship with him because we both have the same daughter. But it will take God to do that. Right now, he don’t even know what kind of guy I am. All he knows is that I am a guy that Carmen married, and I am around his daughter. No, he should get to

know me! So, I really want to get to know this man, but I can't open up to him, and he won't open up to me.

The Need for Guidance

No one knows what to expect when a stepfamily is formed. Most stepparents eagerly enter their family situation having high expectations and high hopes. When the challenges set in and they find that their family is not blending as quickly as they imagined, many become disheartened. These stepfathers indicated that it is their faith in God and wise counsel from others that has helped them to navigate the murky waters of stepfathering with an involved NRBF.

Faith in God. Anthony is a man of faith, who believes that God placed him in this family unit for a specific purpose.

Although the enemy wants nothing more than to see me walk away from this, I am committed to my family. I am here for Trey and I am here for Rene. I pray daily and ask my God to give me strength and wisdom to know how to be a father to Trey. I'm not taking anything away from his father, but I know that God has an assignment for me, as well.

Anthony stated that he also prays for the NRBF that he would be more involved in the co-fathering part of the relationship. He believes that God is working on them both.

David is also a man of faith, and he prayed for this family. Before he married his wife, he prayed that God would send him a godly woman who would love him and that he could love back. He knows that God is working in this situation, so he does not worry. He believes that God will show both he and the NRBF how to improve on their relationship for the sake of their daughter.

Advice from Others. Jerome acknowledges that sometimes he feels that he is in too deep. He has family members who are in stepfather relationships, and they have weathered the storm. Jerome gets counsel from them, and he takes their advice. Jerome wished that there was some premarital counseling that could have better prepared him for this journey.

We need counseling in every aspect for everything that we are doing. Whether that be for the marriage, or for becoming a stepdad. We need more of that. I think that should be part of the pre-marital counseling, and he [NRBF] should be included. This way you can see, in each other what his values are and see how he is. See how each of our dialogue is and see where he stands and see where his values are. Also, to give some direction on what to expect and how to properly do things, so it doesn't cause conflict. The counseling would give advice on how to have a healthy dialogue with the biological father. What things to do and what not to do and what's a good time frame to do certain things. Maturity has to be there for both parents. The biological and the stepfather because you know with some people it's hard to have a dialogue because they may still want to be with the mother, or they may not be in a happy place, and just may be immature.

David has a different view on getting advice on how to prepare to co-father with a NRBF:

I do not think that premarital counseling for stepfamilies would have been helpful to us, not if it was going to have to include him. I am gonna be honest, I don't think that he would have part in it. I would be down for it. It would have been helpful for me.

Knowing how to communicate, but we don't have that. It would have helped out a lot.

In preparation for his role in this journey of being a stepfather, Robert stated that he would have sought the advice of others, and maybe premarital counseling:

I think having somebody to talk to, who has been through this, would have helped. Having someone who lived it to go through the pros and cons. For me, watching TV, or the real-life examples that I've had, everything was peachy keen as far as I can tell. There were no issues, just adjustment periods, but never no long-term issues. Having someone to really talk to about that I think would have made a big difference. It would have really honed me into some of the things that could happen, some attitudes, some emotions. I used to be a super patient person, but now my patience is really thin. Some of these situations can wear you out, especially being younger, you think you know everything anyway. It could have been nice to have a couple of people that I could talk to just to warn me about some of the things that could happen.

Research Question Responses

This study sought to examine the experiences of stepfathers who were in a co-fathering relationship with the NRBF. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the stepfather participants, and their responses were sufficient to answer the research questions. The four themes (the need to be accepted, the need to establish authority, the need for communication, and the need for guidance) supported all the research questions.

RQ 1: What are the lived experiences of stepfathers who must co-father with the NRBF?

The four themes depict the needs that stepfathers try to convey to their family. Stepfathers' lived experiences are best understood as their basic needs are explored. First, there is a need for stepfathers to be accepted and to feel that they belong in this preexisting family system. This is challenging because the biologically related parents and their children have had a longer time to get to know each other, and there is a shared history. Stepfathers, on the other hand, are trying to fit in with their new family without upsetting the family dynamic. They often

feel that they are viewed with a “you don’t belong, outsider” perspective. In the case of the stepfathers in this research study, their attempts to fit in were often met with resistance. The resistance was partly due to their disillusionment with how they thought the stepfamily was supposed to work, and partly due to the stepchild’s strong attachment to the NRBF.

The second theme has to do with the stepfather’s need to establish authority in the home. It is not uncommon for stepfathers to feel as though they are outsiders in the relationship. There are times that the NRBF’s presence is felt inside the home of the stepfamily, even though the NRBF is not there. David recalled incidents when his stepdaughter would run to her father whenever David told her that she could not have something. “For example, she wants to get her belly button pierced, but I told her ‘no’ and so did her mom. She went to her father, as if he was going to tell me what to do in my home.” David believes that he has to assert to his daughter that he is the “the king of his castle and not her dad.” Robert, on the other hand, enforces structure and disciplinarian action as a means of establishing authority in the home. This is not always an acceptable thing to do, and it made his wife, Denise, uncomfortable. She had a difficult time adjusting to his structure because she did not want to see her girls hurt or sad. Sometimes it was easier for her just to let them act out or do whatever they wanted to do, instead of attacking the problem. Robert recalled becoming irritated and angry about his wife’s conflicted feelings in regard to establishing structure in their home.

Thirdly, the stepfathers have a need for effective communication. They want to know and understand the NRBF, and they want the NRBF to get to know them. The NRBFs, however, are only interested in being involved with their children. They do not have a connection with the stepfathers, and they do not appear to be interested in establishing a relationship with the stepfathers. This leaves the stepfathers feeling unimportant and underappreciated. This is

concerning for Anthony for he feels that “the least he could do is get to know me. For all he know, I could be a serial killer that is around his son. Or he could say, ‘Hey man, I appreciate you stepping in and caring for Trey.’”

The last theme, the need for guidance, expresses a concern with the stepfathers that they just do not know how to be an effective stepfather. They need help understanding how to navigate stepfamily life and how to make it work with the NRBF in the picture. Most of the stepfathers feel that the two fathers working together should be able to give the stepchildren a great advantage in life, but they do not know how to go about making this happen. Spiritual guidance has helped David and Anthony with this challenge. They pray to God for wisdom and seek help from within the church. Other stepfathers have found their strength coming from male peers who are in or have been in similar situations.

The stepfathers do not always present their needs in the best possible manner, but their intentions are pure. They had difficulty articulating what their concerns were, for they expected that everything was going to simply fall into place after the marriage ceremony. They came into their marriage with the mindset that everything would flow just like a natural family, but this was the furthest from the truth. Their willingness to take on the task of caring for another man’s child is sometimes thankless and also taken for granted at times. Both Robert and Anthony have noticed that once the NRBFs saw that they were committed to their stepfather role, the NRBFs somewhat disengaged from the family. Anthony explained, “Once he saw that his kid was being properly cared for, he stopped causing much of a scene”. Robert noticed that the NRBF started breaking more promises to his daughters and eventually moved out of state. Instead of this being an opportunity for Robert to grow closer to his stepdaughters, the NRBF’s move caused an increase in the stepdaughter’s acting out behaviors.

RQ 2: Does the involvement of the NRBF diminish or devalue the relationship between the stepfather and stepchildren? Stepfather and spouse?

The involvement of the NRBF does not necessarily devalue or diminish the relationship; it simply eclipses it. The relationship has never held value. In order for something to be devalued, it would first have to have a status of importance. The NRBF and his child's relationship is one that is already solid and is held in high regard. This is not the case with the stepfathers, as there was never an opportunity for the stepfather and stepchild to form a healthy and solid relationship.

The involvement of the NRBF does make it more challenging for the stepfather to establish a stronger relationship because most stepchildren do not see the benefits of having two caring and loving fathers. They typically resist the stepfather's advances at having a relationship. Loyalty binds to the NRBF make children believe that they must choose sides or maintain loyalty to their biological father. Most of the stepfathers in the study believed that their stepchildren had the mindset that if they were to accept them as a stepfather, then that meant that they were rejecting their biological father. An unspoken alliance is then formed with their father out of fear that their biological father will be ousted from the family.

Lack of boundaries appears to be the culprit when the marital relationship is devalued by the NRBF. David recalled a time when his stepdaughter was asking for a car, but he was opposed to the idea. His wife, however, crossed a boundary line and asked the NRBF about buying the stepdaughter a car. When the wife involved the NRBF in that decision, David became very uneasy and distrustful of their co-parenting relationship. Though he was uneasy with their relationship, he realized that sometimes stepfathers must take a back seat to the NRBF, which is often stressful for the stepfathers.

RQ 3: To what extent does the NRBF influence the marital relationship of the stepfather and mother?

There are times that the marital relationship is influenced by the NRBF when the wife feels that she must cater to the needs of the NRBF because he is biologically related to the child and because he pays child support. Although paying child support does not give a father any more rights than one who does not pay child support, the mother at times feels as though she has to be very accommodating. Jerome expressed his dissatisfaction with this attitude whenever the NRBF spends time with his daughter. The daughter would invite him over, and the NRBF would be hanging out with his daughter on the couch a little too late at night. Jerome questioned his wife about this several times, which sometimes led to heated disagreements. Jerome found it necessary to establish boundaries with visits, and his daughter balked at the boundary setting.

Interparental conflict between the NRBF and the ex-wife appears to have detrimental effects on the marital relationship. Robert discussed how arguments between his wife and the NRBF would often spill over into their relationship at home. He explained that it changed her whole mood at home. “He [NRBF] might call her while she’s at work and she will come home in a foul mood because of something that he said to her.” Because Denise had conflict with her ex, it would cause her to have a negative attitude at home, which led to frequent arguments. Spillover from interparental conflict between the two biological parents makes it hard for the partners in new marriages. Stepfathers may feel as though their hands are tied, because these conflicts are usually a result of unresolved issues of the former spouses’ marriage.

RQ 4: What can be done to better equip stepfathers in their co-fathering role?

It has been noted from all the stepfathers in this research, that they believe that they would have fared better with co-fathering with a NRBF had they had premarital counseling.

Each of the stepfathers stated that they had premarital counseling, but it was not geared towards stepfamily dynamics. Premarital counseling for stepfamilies would help to strengthen the marital relationship by equipping stepfathers with the means of handling conflict with NRBFs, helping all parents to define their roles and have realistic expectations for their stepfamily journey.

Unfortunately, most stepfathers watch television shows such as the Brady Bunch and imagine that their families will blend like this fictional family. The Brady Bunch did not have the NRBF or mother staking a claim and affecting the family system. Their family dynamics were much simpler and more fictional.

All the stepfathers believe that the NRBF has unspoken expectations for the stepfather which includes keeping his children safe and not harming them in any manner. Counseling or education on stepfather roles would be instrumental in helping to dispel the myth that stepfathers are abusers of their stepchildren.

Summary

This phenomenological study allowed stepfathers to describe their lived experiences of co-fathering with an involved NRBF. Research consisted of five stepfather participants who were married for less than 10 years. They participated in a semi-structured interview where they answered a series of questions pertaining to their experiences. The collected data were digitally recorded, carefully transcribed for accuracy, and grouped into themes. These themes helped to capture the stepfathers' lived experiences.

From the data collection, it was determined that four themes were common in all the stepfather experiences: the need to belong/be accepted; the need to establish authority; the need for communication; and the need for guidance. The first theme, the need to belong, encompassed attachment, cordiality, insider/outsider perception, and unrealistic beliefs. The second theme, the

need to establish authority, implied that there was a relationship between authority and stepfather role expectations, adjustment concerns, expectations for the NRBF, power/control, and stress/conflict. The third theme, need for communication, showed the stepfather's vulnerability as they expressed a desire to have talks with the NRBF, and to cooperate or collaborate with him in parenting the stepchild. The final theme, need for guidance, is essential in understanding their need for spiritual insight or elderly wisdom.

These themes address the main question of the research which asked how stepfathers and NRBFs work together to co-father the children. The question and the responses given allowed the researcher to gain better insight into this phenomenon, so that the damage caused by ill-prepared stepfathers and NRBFs may be mitigated. These fathers need careful guidance and instruction on how to develop and integrate into a stepfamily. The data from this research are instrumental in creating solutions for this population.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand the experiences of stepfathers who are co-fathering with an involved biological father. Understanding this phenomenon is vital so that stepfathers can have a more positive experience cultivating a relationship with their stepchildren. In Chapter Five, interpretations of the findings from the stepfathers' lived experiences are explored, as well as the themes that have emerged from the data. There is a discussion of the literature and theory, methodological and practical implications are presented, and delimitations and limitations are addressed. Chapter Five concludes with recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

When addressing the lived experiences of stepfathers who co-father with a non-resident biological father (NRBF), they envisioned greatness for their stepfamily but received less than mediocre outcomes. They expected that their blended family would blend quickly, and they would live happily ever after. Instead, their experiences in the stepfamily are fraught with challenges that have some of the stepfathers wondering if it is all worth the hassle. A major challenge that stepfathers face is the involvement of the NRBF, whose presence can be intrusive, at times.

The stepfathers recognize that the NRBF's involvement is needed, but it comes at a cost, which is usually peace in the home and limited involvement with the stepchildren. Stepfathers do not wish the biological father away, but they want him to respect their role in the home. In this phenomenological study, the need to belong and to be accepted appears to be a big challenge with stepfathers. This theme recognizes that stepfathers want to feel wanted and appreciated for

the sacrifices that they make for their new families. The stepfathers realize that they are entering into a preexisting, ready-made family who may not take too kindly to an outsider coming in and changing the family dynamic. There is a need for the NRBF and the stepchildren to understand that the stepfathers are not coming into the family to take over the role as a father, nor are they trying to diminish the relationship that the NRBF has with his children. One of the stepfathers, Robert, stated that he desires to take nothing away from the NRBF. Robert acknowledged that his role in the family is merely to supplement what the NRBF is doing.

These stepfathers take on a great deal of responsibility for their stepchildren, performing many tasks of the NRBF, yet they do not get the appreciation for what they do. Their need to belong and to be accepted often comes out in their frustration. This was evident in the case of Anthony who was very eager to “pour into the life of his stepson,” Trey. Trey’s biological father, however, was not as eager for Anthony’s involvement and had a difficult time accepting Anthony in his role as a stepfather. He challenged Anthony’s position in the home and had frequent conflict with his ex-wife over Anthony’s involvement. The NRBF was not quite sure that he wanted to accept Anthony as an “insider” until he knew that Anthony was committed to the relationship and committed to caring for his son. This frustrated and hampered the stepfather/stepchild bonding process and was a test of endurance for Anthony. Anthony did not give up trying to build a relationship with his stepchild, as was the case with all the stepfathers in the study. Stepfathers who feel the need to rush the bonding process are doing it more so out of a need to be accepted.

Unrealistic expectations or beliefs also guide the stepfathers’ need to belong and to be accepted. They want so badly for their stepfamily to be accepted as a loving family, and they want it to look and operate just like a nuclear family. Stepfathers inaccurately believe that family

blending is supposed to happen immediately and that there will be instant love. They are idealistic in their belief that they and the NRBFs will have the emotional maturity to be able to collaboratively work together in fatherhood. They also believe that they and their wife will share the same values and beliefs about parenting and discipline. Because these are all unrealistic expectations, the stepfamily dynamic is usually riddled with miscommunication, misunderstanding, and much confusion.

A common myth among stepfathers is that they must come in right away and establish authority in the home. While this may not be the best approach, this is the approach that some of the stepfathers in this study took after the formation of their stepfamily. They wanted to let it be known that they are the “man of the house” and that they are coming in to bring structure and discipline. A few of the mothers welcomed this approach, as they were weary of the parental challenges they faced as a single mother; however, the stepchildren and the NRBF were not in favor of this approach.

Some of the stepfather participants were careful not to attempt to take authority too soon, as they did not want to sabotage their relationships with both the stepchild and the NRBF, and some were encouraged by their wives to increase their role as disciplinarian. John and Robert thought that if they used their authority, they would be able to establish and maintain order within the family. This backfired, and the stepchildren built up resentment and expressed their dissatisfaction to their NRBF. This led to power struggles within the home and with the NRBF. Comments such as “You are not my father” or “I don’t have to listen to you because you are not my father” were heard in the homes of both John and Robert, leaving them both feeling angry and defeated.

The involvement of the NRBF does not diminish or devalue the relationship between the stepfather and stepchildren, but his involvement does make it more difficult for the stepfather to bond with the children. As the stepfamily is transitioning and adjusting to the stepfamily life, the stepchildren feel the stress and confusion of loyalty binds. There is resistance to accepting the stepfather out of fear that the NRBF may feel jealous or replaced. The stepchildren are loyal and committed to their biological parents even though the stepfather is doing everything right in caring for the stepchildren. Trey, Anthony's stepson, was mindful not to let his biological father know that he enjoyed being around Anthony; it felt like a betrayal to Trey.

As much as stepfathers want to feel that they are fathers to their stepchildren and that there is no difference in having a non-blood relationship, the fact is that the stepchildren do not feel this way. There is a clear distinction between being a stepfather and being the biological father. Some of the stepfathers in the study believed that if the NRBF were not in the picture, the stepchildren would appreciate all the sacrifices that the stepfather makes and would value the relationship.

The marital relationship between the step-couple is challenged by the involvement of the NRBF. When there are boundary violations between the mother and the NRBF, the stepfather feels disrespected. Whereas the NRBF may feel that he has open access to his child, the mother has to act as a gatekeeper in her home. Jerome had to ensure that his wife assumed the position of gatekeeper whenever the NRBF would come over to the house to spend time with his daughter. Both the NRBF and the stepfather struggled to adjust to one another's roles during a visit with the stepdaughter. They both had expectations as to what they believed the other should be doing, but neither communicated with the other to discuss these expectations. There was an

expectation from the NRBF that he would be able to visit his daughter without much interference from the stepfather, and vice versa.

Even though the stepfather is married to the mother and is financially responsible for the home, the stepfather still expects that the NRBF will continue in his role to provide financial assistance in the form of child support. Failure of the NRBF to provide for the children creates a financial hardship on the marital relationship, which in turn will place stress and strain on the marriage. Stepfathers expected the NRBF not to be a contributor of stress and conflict in the home and in the marriage. This equates to the NRBF not arguing with the mother and/or stepfather about parenting concerns. The NRBF having respect towards the stepfather's spouse and respect towards his home are two major expectations for all the stepfathers in this research study.

The stepfathers realized that they did not have the wisdom nor the insight to form a "successful" stepfamily. They were forced to rely on spiritual guidance as well as guidance from other men who successfully managed to weather the storm of stepfathering. All the stepfathers in this study wished that they had some sort of premarital counseling specifically geared towards stepfamilies or geared towards how to father with a NRBF. They expressed the necessity of having a collaborative co-fathering relationship with the NRBF, as they believe that the stepchildren can benefit greatly from having two loving fathers in their life.

Discussion

This discussion section addresses the findings of the research study in relationship to the reviewed literature and theoretical framework. Many of the findings in this research were consistent with the literature reviewed, yet there were parts that diverged from the research. The family systems theory and the family stress theory were used as the theoretical framework for

this research study. The findings reinforced both theories as it relates to the relationship between the stepfather and NRBF as they attempted to co-father together.

Theoretical Literature Discussion

Family systems theory, developed by Murray Bowen, is a framework used for understanding families as systems and how their relationships are interconnected. The theory considers the family as a whole unit and individual family members as parts of the system that affect and are affected by each other (Watson, 2012). The theory suggests that families play a role and contribute to the functioning of the system as a whole. The premise behind the family system theory is that when an individual experiences stress, a domino effect takes place, and stress is experienced by all other family members (Bush & Price, 2020; Cox & Paley, 1997).

In this study, the family systems theory was utilized to understand the co-fathering relationships between stepfathers and NRBFs and how their relationship affected the entire stepfamily and the new marriage. In order to understand the stepfamily dynamic so that co-fathering can take place, the researcher was expected to look at the total family as a unit (Keller & Noone, 2020). Although the NRBF is not living in the home, he is considered in this stepfamily dynamic because of the influence and involvement that he has with his children. The NRBF exists as an outside family member, yet he impacts how the stepfather connects and communicates with his stepfamily.

Although there are many key concepts associated with the family systems theory, there are three concepts that are prevalent in this research study of stepfathers who co-father with NRBFs: equilibrium, role conflict, and boundary ambiguity. The concept of equilibrium, as it relates to family systems, is when the family attempts to establish emotional stability or homeostasis during a stressor or a crisis (Seshadri, 2019). The introduction of a stepfather into a

stepfamily is a stressor, which created several challenges. The participants' need to establish authority was actually an attempt to establish some sort of equilibrium within the family. Equilibrium was further established whenever the stepfathers set clear boundaries with the NRBF and the children and when they stressed the importance of communication amongst all family members.

Family systems theory acknowledges the importance of roles within a family. Roles within a family are designed to create and maintain balance in the family system (Keller & Noone, 2020). Prior to the stepfather arriving on the scene, a nuclear family was in place in which the mother/wife operated within her defined role, the biological father/husband operated within his defined role, and the children operated within their role. However, when the stepfather joined this preexisting family dynamic, the roles became skewed and there was role conflict and boundary ambiguity (Cartwright, 2010; Cartwright & Gibson, 2013; Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Stewart, 2005).

This study confirmed the assumption of role conflict within the family systems theory. The stepfathers sought to establish roles within the family, while at the same time they sought to reestablish roles with all other members. Role conflict arose because there is typically no clear-cut, defined roles assigned to a stepfather (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010); he comes to the family with his own agenda as to what he thinks his role should be. Conflicting obligations and expectations between the stepfather and NRBF became imminent as the stepfathers sought to claim their role. At times, this resulted in a disruption in the stepfamily's functioning as tension and often conflict between the stepfather and the NRBF arose. This sometimes spilled over and affected the marital dyad, as well as the stepfather/stepdaughter dyad.

Emotional cutoff and triangles are key tenets in the family systems theory, and they were prevalent in this research study. Emotional cutoff, the act of emotionally distancing or withdrawing from family members (Rovers, 1998), was seen in two families. For the other stepfathers, the NRBF remained engaged with his children despite the stress of the stepfamily dynamic. Because he remained engaged, the stepfather and NRBF were able to maintain an amicable relationship, which is conducive to them being able to co-father. This also had a positive influence on the stepfather/stepchild dyad. When there is conflict between the biological parents, the child who has loyalties to the parents will frequently side with the biological parents, creating a triangle. Triangles were noted in Jerome's home whenever he attempted to enforce his wife's discipline. The oldest stepdaughter became upset at Jerome's "harsh" discipline and whined to either the mother or NRBF. They, in turn, became empathic towards the daughter and coddled her. As a result, Jerome feels disrespected and resentful of the mother and also of the NRBF.

The second theory which guided this research study was the family stress theory. The premise behind this theory is that a significant pattern is created within a family whenever they face a crisis. The family member's perception of the stressful event is usually indicative of how they would cope with the event (Patterson, 2004). Failure to adaptively cope with the stressor will undoubtedly lead to crisis. The more negative the perception, the more difficulty there will be with coping with that event.

The ABCX model of stress was used to explain the specific pattern that families tend to follow when faced with a stressor. The "A" represents the stressor; "B" represents the internal and external stressors that families employ to deal with the stressor; "C" represents the family's perception of the stressor; and "X" represents the actual crisis. This model was further modified

by McCubbin and Patterson (1983a, 1983b) because they felt that Hill's model inaccurately postulated that a crisis was the result of only one incident. They theorized that it was a pileup of stressors that eventually led to a crisis.

The findings from this research study are best explained using McCubbin and Patterson's (1983a) double ABCX model of stress. "aA" refers to the buildup of stressors; "bB" refers to ways that stepfathers cope using existing and new resources; "cC" refers to how the stepfathers perceive the stressors; and "xX" refers to whether there was bonadaptation (positive) or maladaptation (negative) to the stressors.

The participants in the study expressed that marrying into a stepfamily was their initial stressor and having the NRBF involved added to an already stressful situation. Additional stressors brought on by the NRBF, such as boundary violations, failure to communicate, decreased financial support, and broken promises to the stepchildren wreaked havoc on the emotional state of the stepfathers. The double ABCX stress theory focuses on the accumulation of these stressors and the ways in which the stepfather best dealt with the pileup of stressors. According to this theory, when people are placed in stressful situations, they employ various coping strategies to prevent a crisis from happening. This means that they must tap into their personal, internal, and social resources (Plunkett et al., 1997). The stepfathers in this study coped with their stressors by focusing their energies on areas such as praying, avoiding the stressor altogether, spousal conflict, or engaging in counseling services. These resources played an integral role in the stepfather's ability to adjust. The stress theory suggests that if the stepfathers avail themselves of appropriate resources, the less problematic the stepfather will perceive the involvement and interference of the NRBF. Based on the results of this study, the stepfathers were not always in favor of the NRBF's behavior, but the stepfathers perceived that the NRBF

was a necessity in the overall well-being and functioning of the stepchildren. This belief, on the part of the participant stepfathers, averted a crisis, resulting in bonadaptation. The stepfathers were able to make changes in their roles, responsibilities, and expectations in order to reflect a new family system (Bowden & Greenberg, 2010).

According to the family stress theory, role conflict and boundary ambiguity, which are prevalent in stepfamilies, create stress with the stepfathers, NRBFs, and sometimes, with the mother. This is supported in the findings of this study. For example, both David and Anthony struggled to find their place within the stepfamily. Their unmet need to be accepted in their role as fathers led to family dysfunction and disequilibrium within the system. When there was stress or disequilibrium within the step-couple's marital relationship, there was a decrease in their marital happiness. This was evidenced in the marital relationship between Jerome and his wife. Jerome came into the relationship with structure and discipline at the forefront of his mind, but his wife did not feel comfortable with him assuming that role so soon. Jerome's stepchildren also balked at the idea of someone coming into the home with rules. True to the components of the double ABCX model of stress, the stressors built up and became unbearable. Jerome and his wife almost divorced had they not dug deep into their internal and external resources, namely relying on their support systems and counseling.

Empirical Literature Discussion

With stepfamilies on the rise and becoming the norm, much research has been conducted on the importance of the NRBF remaining involved in his child's life, and there has been almost an equal amount of research supporting the importance of stepfathers building relationships with their stepchildren. To date, there have been few, if any, studies which address the phenomenon of this study—the ability or inability of the two fathers to co-father in a healthy manner

conducive to optimal stepfamily functioning. The co-fathering relationship between stepfathers and NRBFs is virtually unexamined.

A research study conducted by White and Gilbreth (2001) acknowledged the increasing stepfather and NRBF dynamic, but, at the time, questioned whether their relationship was significant enough to account for. In their study, they explored whether the child's relationship with the stepfather was affected by the child's relationship with the NRBF, and whether the child's outcomes were impacted by the stepfather when there was a good relationship between the child and the NRBF. Their study suggested that there is a negative correlation between the two fathers' relationships. The stronger the relationship with the NRBF, the less likely the stepfather will have a solid relationship with his stepchildren. The findings of the White and Gilbreth (2001) study supported the data found in this study. The stepfather participants struggled to be accepted into the family system, simply because there was already a father present. The stepchildren did not dismiss the stepfather altogether, but there was a strong preference for the involvement and support from the NRBF. Although the age of the children was not considered in either of the studies, it is possible that the age of the children may be a relevant factor when it comes to the child's preference of the NRBF.

In Chapter Two of this study, it was stated that most studies on stepfather and NRBF relationships tend to lean towards substitution effect, where one of the fathers steps up in his role as a father while the other father takes a step back. Either the stepfather fails to see the need to step in as a father figure due to the presence of the NRBF, or the NRBF takes a step backward, perhaps due to role conflict or interparental conflict with his former wife (Hornstra et al., 2020; White & Gilbreth, 2001). This study did not support the substitution effect; instead, an "accumulation model" best supports the participants in this research. The accumulation model

suggests that *both* fathers play an important role and contribute to positive outcomes with the children. The participant fathers did not back down or shirk their parenting responsibilities or their involvement with their stepchildren. They did not emotionally disconnect from their stepchildren or withdraw from their daily responsibilities, as was suggested in the White and Gilbreth (2001) study. There were many challenges with role confusion and ambiguity, but they pushed forward and forged a semblance of a relationship with the NRBF.

White and Gilbreth (2001) asserted that a healthy co-fathering relationship can exist between the NRBFs and the stepfathers; however, as this phenomenological study suggests, a healthy co-fathering relationship can only be done if the stepfathers' need for acceptance, authority, communication, and guidance is met or is at least considered by the NRBF.

Previous research indicates that a healthy relationship between the two fathers is impeded by the NRBF, who impinges on the stepfather's ability to take on a fathering role. It was posited that the NRBF would offer resistance because he may not like the stepfather taking on a fathering role (Hornstra et al., 2020). Therefore, instead of the two fathers establishing a collaborative relationship, a competitive relationship is formed between them (Fine et al., 1999; Visher & Visher, 1988). The results of this study diverged somewhat from previous research.

The participants of this study were not very comfortable sharing the "father spotlight" with the NRBF. They had a difficult time acknowledging that there was a shared history, complete with its own set of idiosyncratic behaviors. The NRBF was confident in his role as father; therefore, there was nothing for him to prove. He is dad and he will always be dad. The stepfathers were somewhat threatened by the role and position taken by the NRBF. They were insecure in their unestablished role in the home. Jealousy and insecurity played a part in David's resistance to the NRBF. David did not like it when the NRBF would call and speak to his wife:

“I don’t even like her talking to him, because he don’t talk to me. I feel some type of way when Carmen talks to him. Sometimes I want to say, ‘That’s *my* wife!’” Other participants do not necessarily view the NRBF with jealousy, but they do not like the power that he maintains in the family or the deference that is given to the NRBF. Robert expressed dissatisfaction that the NRBF still maintained a form of power and control over his wife’s emotions; he felt that the NRBF intentionally engaged in negative behaviors such as not showing up for visits with the girls, not paying his child support, and starting silly arguments with Robert’s wife, knowing that it would bother her and stress her out. In turn, it caused Robert and his wife marital strife. As Robert was quick to point out to his wife, if the NRBF was a difficult person when they were married, then he would continue to be a difficult person. The key is to not let the NRBF stress her out.

Interparental conflict with the biological parents and a low tolerance for boundary ambiguity create a strain on the marital relationship of the step-couple. Baum (2004) stated that there is a struggle for NRBFs to make a transition from being a husband and a father to just being a father. There is a connection that has yet to be broken and NRBFs struggle to redefine their roles and build new identities. Although the research addressed the challenges of the NRBF to accept his new role, the mother also appears to be challenged with cutting emotional ties to the former spouse. Maintaining frequent contact with the former spouse could be an indication of emotional attachment or preoccupation with the former spouse, resulting in conflict (Fischer et al., 2005). This failure to cut emotional ties keeps the NRBF involved in unhealthy ways and decreases marital quality. This is evidenced in the unhealthy manner in which Robert’s wife continued to engage in arguments with the NRBF, and with David’s wife who reached out to the NRBF to repair a broken vehicle. It is not necessarily the boundary ambiguity that decreases the

quality of the marriage, it is the increased stress that is the factor. When there is stress spillover, due to interparental conflict between the mother and the NRBF, the step-couple's marital satisfaction can be negatively affected (Buck & Neff, 2012).

Implications

Researchers have noted that stepfamilies are increasing (Ganong et al., 2019), and most stepfamily formations are with stepfathers leading the way. Oftentimes, they step into an undefined role as a parent (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). Biological fathers are still very much encouraged to establish and maintain relationships with their biological children. This has led to a demand for a change in the way that families are represented. Much research has been conducted to understand the stepfamily dynamic and the stages of growth within the stepfamily. There have been multiple strategies implemented to help families adjust to forming a stepfamily. However, there has been very limited, if any, research addressing the importance of incorporating a stepfather into a family relationship that is already owned and dominated by the NRBF. This phenomenological study sought to address the research and literature gap by looking at the lived experiences of stepfathers who are co-fathering with an involved NRBF. This section addresses the theoretical, empirical, practical, and biblical implications which will help to explain the stepfather experiences and their challenges.

Theoretical Implications

Evaluating the study of stepfathers who co-father with NRBFs helps to support the family systems and family stress theories as the theoretical frameworks for this study. The family systems theory was appropriately used to explain the interdependence of all members in a family, in which the behavior of each individual is influenced by and influences the behavior of others. The findings of this study indicate that stress and conflict in one subsystem undoubtedly

affects all relationships in the stepfamily (Amato & Kane, 2011; Hornstra et al., 2020; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). The NRBF, although he is not living in the home, is still considered part of the stepfamily, and his presence and involvement has a direct and indirect influence on the functionality of the stepfamily.

This theory has significant theoretical implications for understanding stepfather and NRBF relationships. According to the findings of this study, stepfathers have four basic needs related to co-fathering with the NRBF: the need to belong or be accepted; the need to establish authority; the need for communication; and the need for guidance. The needs of the stepfather to effectively co-father with the NRBF cannot be fully met unless roles and boundaries have been established (Johnson & Ray, 2016).

Roles and boundaries are significant concepts within the family systems theory. The findings of this study suggest the importance of roles, which help the stepfathers to understand their place and to maintain balance within the stepfamily system. When the stepfather does not understand where his parenting and fathering responsibilities begin or end, it throws the entire family system into chaos and leads to dysfunctional behavior patterns. Central to the family systems theory and apparent in this phenomenon are boundaries, the invisible lines that separate and exclude the unwelcomed. The stepfather participants encountered permeable boundary lines with the NRBF, but these lines were presumed because of the NRBF's former relationship with his ex-spouse and children. These boundary lines have never been challenged by the former spouse and are problematic in the marital relationship.

The double ABCX family stress theory (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983a, 1983b) provides a useful framework for understanding how the stepfather participants cope with the stress of raising a stepchild when the biological father is present and very involved. This model also

allows an understanding of how their coping, or lack thereof, influences marital satisfaction. There is a relationship between the double ABCX model, stress, and marital satisfaction.

The stepfathers in this study encountered many stressors that could have decimated their already fragile family system. When it comes to marital satisfaction, the double ABCX model suggests that perception of the stressors and the coping resources available to the stepfathers are critical in determining the impact of the myriad of stressors on the marital relationship. Coyne and Smith (1991) found that families with strong coping resources had higher levels of marital satisfaction even in the face of significant stressors. Conversely, families with limited coping resources had lower levels of marital satisfaction, and they were more likely to experience negative changes in their marital relationship. These findings suggest that the stepfathers in this study use a variety of internal and external resources to get them through their challenges. They do not yet see themselves as one big happy stepfamily, with a NRBF in tow, but it appears that the strongest resource that these stepfathers employ comes internally, in the form of patience and commitment. Their ability to co-father with the NRBF is a work in progress, but there appears to be bonadaptation to the co-fathering process.

Empirical Implications

While previous research has focused on stepfamily deficits and strengthening the stepparent/stepchild relationship (Jensen et al., 2017), this study focused on the impact that the NRBF has on the stepfather's ability to parent and the ability of both fathers to co-father. This research is novel, and there are very limited studies that address the phenomenon of stepfathers and NRBFs co-fathering. Ganong and Coleman (2016) acknowledged the emergence of studies on NRBFs; however, most studies centered on the NRBF's co-parental relationship with the mothers and the NRBF interactions with their biological children.

The participant responses to this study provided a broad perspective on the stepfathers' desires, needs, and challenges and/or barriers that they experience as they try to have an overall healthy stepfamily. The stepfathers were aware that the NRBF was a factor in the relationship prior to marrying into the family. They were aware that they were entering into a preestablished system in which they would be deemed as the outsider. Literature by Papernow (2013) found that the NRBF already has bonds with his children and the children are often hard-wired to connect with their biological parents. This does not necessarily mean that a relationship between the children and the stepfather will be adversely affected; however, it does mean that it will take a concerted effort on the part of the two fathers to make co-fathering possible (Jensen & Ganong, 2020). Research provided by Yuan and Hamilton (2006) supported this study by showing that both fathers, the stepfather and the NRBF, can beneficially affect the well-being of the children. The results of their study showed that rather than the two fathers clashing and working against one another in their efforts to be a father, the functionality of the stepfamily could be mediated by positive interaction with the biological father and the stepfather. Children benefit from a good, complementary relationship between both the NRBF and the stepfather (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; White & Gilbreth, 2001). The co-fathering relationship can determine the path of the stepfamily relationship and can make the transition into a stepfamily easier. Unity and effective negotiation strategies between the two fathers strengthen stepfamily functioning (Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Maclean et al., 2016).

Practical Implications

This study has practical implications for therapists, counselors, clergy, and others involved in the behavioral health field who work with families. There have been several societal trends which have redefined the American family, and two of the trends have implications and

are relevant to this study. There has been an increase in the number of stepfamily formations (Ganong et al., 2019), led by stepfathers, and there has also been an increase in the number of biological fathers who maintain relationships with their children following a divorce (Coleman et al., 2007; Ganong & Coleman, 2017). These stepfather-led stepfamilies will undoubtedly cross paths with the NRBF, and there will be a myriad of challenges that come along with these sticky situations. Stepfathers are seeking therapeutic counsel to help with their adjustment to this family dynamic. It is important for therapists to understand the challenges that are created when the stepfathers and NRBF exist together and try to co-father (MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002).

Previous studies have shown that the involvement of the NRBF can have either positive or negative implications for the stepfamily and the marital quality of the step-couple (McNamee et al., 2014; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006). Therapists who work with individuals in stepfamilies should be prepared to answer several questions: What is the best approach to helping the stepfamily to become more successful and functional? How should future stepfathers adequately prepare for the challenges of co-parenting with the NRBF? Therapists who work with stepfamilies should already know that this population should not be treated as a traditional family. Stepfamilies are very distinct, with a set of unique challenges and should not be treated as reconstituted nuclear family units (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Visher & Visher, 1996). The goal of therapy should not be to function as a nuclear, traditional family.

As this research study indicated, the needs of the stepfather are very different from the needs of the NRBF. The stepfather's needs to be accepted, to establish authority, for communication, and for guidance are not something that NRBFs typically needs. The results suggest that therapeutic intervention should center around providing information and support to the stepfathers so that their needs can be appropriately met.

Gold (2010) showed that a psychoeducational approach is the best way to help these stepfathers. This study, along with the study conducted by Ganong and Coleman (2017), suggested that premarital and postmarital education should be offered to step-couples. Topics of discussion should include stepfamily challenges and issues, stepfamily development, unrealistic expectations/myths about stepfamily relationships, and normalizing stepfamily experiences (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Teaching skill-building strategies and educating stepfamilies on these specific topics are necessary and would increase awareness of the stepfamily dynamic; however, according to the results of this phenomenological study, it may prove to be beneficial to take a different approach in order to establish a healthy co-fathering relationship between the stepfather and the NRBF.

It may be in the best interest of therapists, clergy, and others involved in behavioral health to devise a curriculum that would address the traditional topics of treating stepfamilies, but several other components should be added. The overall goal of the educational program is to coach the *entire* stepfamily system (those directly involved) on how to become a fully functional stepfamily. Necessary family members include the stepfather, mother, children, and the NRBF. Additional topics should address such issues as stepfathering/stepparenting, role clarification, having a healthy relationship with the former spouse, integrating the NRBF into the new marriage, integrating the stepfather into the family, communication, and healthy boundaries within the marriage. These topics should be instrumental in meeting the needs of the stepfather, thereby paving the way for healthy and effective co-fathering.

Biblical Implications

When considering the biblical implications of this research study, one cannot help but turn to Jesus and focus on His earthly father, Joseph. Joseph assumed the role of stepfather to

Jesus. He acknowledged that God was Jesus's heavenly Father whose presence was very real in the life of Jesus. Joseph did not try to replace Jesus's Father; he knew being a stepfather was a role that had been entrusted to him. Joseph was the perfect model for all stepfathers. He loved, cared for, and provided for Jesus, and most importantly, he accepted Jesus and never tried to strip Jesus of His identity.

Luke 2:41–52 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017) details the story of Jesus being lost and separated from his parents for several days. Upon finding Jesus sitting in temple courts, Mary and Joseph were met with Truth, but did not fully realize what was happening. Although Joseph and Mary expected Jesus to return home with them, Jesus chose to stay behind and be with His Father, in His Father's house. In essence, in that moment, Jesus was torn between two houses.

The stepfathers in this research study faced similar situations in which they felt that preference was given to the NRBFs, despite the love, care, and provisions that the stepfathers made for their stepchildren. Like Jesus, there were times that the children were torn between two houses. This was the case with Jerome, who could not understand why his stepdaughter always wanted to spend the weekends with her father. Rather than remaining defensive or feeling rejected, Jerome had to acknowledge that his stepdaughter's love for her NRBF did not minimize or negate the love that Jerome would continue to show his stepdaughter.

Some of the participant stepfathers acknowledged that it is their faith in God that helps them get through the tough times. As they pursue their need for guidance, stepfathers could look at the life of Joseph for the best guidance. Joseph showed that co-fathering does not have to be an either/or type of situation. He gave deference to Jesus's heavenly Father. Because Joseph did not cross boundary lines and force his authoritarian parenting, Jesus grew in wisdom, stature, and

favor, with God and with man. Jesus was able to fulfill His purpose. This, too, should be the desire of all stepfathers.

Hosea 4:6 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017) states, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” Many stepfamilies are perishing because there is limited knowledge on how to work through the challenges of a blended family. The NRBF may not even be considered as relevant to the stepfamily dynamic, but this is not the case. Stepfathers may go into this fragile family situation blindly, without a full understanding of what a co-fathering relationship with the NRBF will look like. This makes it necessary for the entire stepfamily unit (mother, stepfather, NRBF, and children) to educate themselves on what to expect in the stepfamily, and how to approach the inescapable challenges of stepfamilies.

Delimitations and Limitations

The delimitations of this study revolve around the number of years that participants were married. The participants could not be married for more than 10 years. The reason for this criterion is that studies show (Papernow, 2013) that it takes 7 to 10 years for a stepfamily to adjust to stepfamily life. For the purposes of this study, it was necessary for all participants to still be in their adjustment phase. Since the family stress theory guided this research, it was important that the stepfathers were still experiencing stress with their attempts at co-fathering. A second delimitation was that the participants had to be in a married stepfather relationship. A cohabitating stepfather relationship may lack the commitment of a stepfather who is married into the family. A phenomenological study was appropriate for this study as all stepfather participants shared the experience of trying to be a father to their stepchildren while the NRBF is involved and affecting the stepfather/stepchild relationship.

Limitations for this study included there was no control for the race of the participating stepfathers. Coincidentally, all participants were minorities, African American and one Native American. Another limitation is that there were no controls for the age of the stepchildren. Jensen and Ganong (2020) suggested that the age of the stepchildren could have an impact on the stepfather/stepchild relationship. A final limitation was that there were no controls for what constituted an “involved” biological father. Was the NRBF considered to be involved because he paid child support, or was it because he was actively engaged?

Recommendations for Future Research

This study sought to bring understanding of the plight of stepfathers who try to co-father with NRBFs. Their attempt at this feat is often met with resistance by the NRBF who, for undisclosed reasons, challenges the stepfather’s actions. Though this study jump started a conversation on what needs to happen to bring these two fathers together, there is still another voice that needs to be considered and heard: the voice of the NRBF.

Future research should consider the NRBF to see what themes are present in his need to maintain control of his “spot” as father. Questions such as, “What concerns you most about allowing another man to raise your child?” or “If you could have a candid conversation with the stepfather, what would that conversation look like?” could be asked and would offer additional insight into strengthening the co-fathering relationship. Addressing how the NRBF constructs the roles assigned to the stepfather would be helpful towards future research. The NRBF could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the stepchild and any concerns that the child may have as it relates to the stepfather/stepchild relationship. Also, it may be worthwhile to conduct a study to find out if the findings of this study are gender specific. More specifically, would these findings be consistent with stepmothers and biological mothers.

Summary

Based on theoretical frameworks of Bowen's family system theory (Watson, 2012) and McCubbin and Patterson (1983a) double ABCX model of family stress, this phenomenological study was conducted to understand the lived experiences of stepfathers who are co-fathering with an involved NRBF. Following a divorce, more biological fathers are maintaining their relationships with their children, while at the same time, stepfather-led stepfamilies are becoming a common occurrence. There is a need to better understand the barriers that are encountered by stepfathers as they step into the previously and currently occupied role of father.

Four themes emerged from the data analysis which included (a) a stepfather's need to be accepted into the family system, inclusive of the NRBF; (b) a need to establish authority in the home; (c) a need for increased communication; and (d) a need for guidance. While all four needs are relevant, it appears that the most immediate need was the stepfather's need to be accepted into the preestablished family circle. Participants shared their experience with trying to get their needs met, and how the presence of the NRBF negatively impacted their ability to effectively father their stepchild. Furthermore, the presence and involvement of the NRBF negatively impacted the step-couple's marital relationship.

This study was focused on four research questions which revealed the experiences of the stepfather participants and addressed the gap in the literature. This research permitted the stepfathers' voice to be heard: they are not in the family to replace the NRBF, but to be co-laborers in the fathering effort. As a result of the stepfathers sharing their experiences, it is hoped that a premarital/postmarital stepfamily educational program may be developed to assist fathers in effective co-fathering strategies, leading to a healthier marriage and more stable stepfamily environment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 7, 2022

Cherlyn Lane
Christopher Garner

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-947 Co-Fathering with Non-Resident Biological Fathers: A Phenomenological Study on Stepfathers

Dear Cherlyn Lane, Christopher Garner,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Greetings,

As a graduate student in the School of Community Care and Counseling at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Marriage & Family Counseling. The purpose of my research is to explore the experiences and perceptions of stepfathers who must share the parenting responsibility with an involved biological father. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be heterosexual stepfathers who are in a marital relationship with the biological mother of the stepchild(ren). The stepfather must be married for no more than seven (7) years and must be experiencing marital challenges within their relationship perhaps due to the involvement of the biological father. Participants, if willing, will be asked approximately 20-25 open-ended questions, explaining how they think, feel, or believe that the biological father is impacting his relationship with the stepchildren and with his marital relationship. The interview will be audio recorded and it should take approximately one to two hours to complete. The interview will be transcribed into a report and all participants will have an opportunity to review transcriptions for accuracy (approximately 30 minutes). Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

A consent document will be given at the time of the interview, (or emailed to those participating in a remote online interview), once it has been determined that all participation criteria has been met. The consent document contains additional information about the research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

At the conclusion of the study (after reviewing the transcribed report), participants will be compensated with a \$25.00 (twenty-five dollar) Visa gift card.

Sincerely,

Cherlyn Lane, MA, LMFT

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Title of the Project: Co-Fathering with Non-Resident Biological Fathers: A Phenomenological Study on Stepfathers

Principal Investigator: Cherlyn Lane, MA, LMFT, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a heterosexual resident stepfather who has both frequent communication and interaction with the biological (non-resident) father of stepchildren. Stepfathers must be in a marital relationship, living with the biological mother of the child(ren); and must have been married for no more than seven (7) years.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of stepfathers who share the parenting responsibility with an involved biological father. It will address the challenges of the stepfather and provide an understanding of the impact that the biological father has on how the stepfamily and stepfather function.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. You will be asked to participate in an interview where you will be asked approximately 20-25 questions related to your role and experiences as a stepfather. The interview will be audio-recorded and should last approximately 1-2 hours. The recorded interview will then be transcribed for your review and approval.
2. Once the transcription has been completed, participants will return to site/online to review all transcriptions for accuracy. This should take approximately 30 minutes to review.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include helping clinicians to better understand stepfamily dynamics and be able to diagnose, treat, and offer appropriate therapeutic interventions for stepfamilies. The study will also be helpful in developing a parenting education program that is specifically geared towards stepfamilies. Clinicians will be able to support stepfathers and biological fathers in establishing a positive co-fathering relationship.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

This study includes a researcher who is a mandated reporter. The researcher may become privy to information that triggers mandatory reporting requirements for child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others. If researcher has or is given such information, she may be required to report such information to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
-

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the end of the study, after participant has approved transcription of data, the participant will receive a \$25.00 (twenty-five

dollar) Visa gift card. There will not be a prorated amount of monetary benefits if the participant does not complete the study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with ### or Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or you can withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Cherlyn Lane. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ##### or you can email her at *****@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Christopher Garner, at cgarner@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix D: Screening Questions

Hello, thank you for your interest in my study on Stepfathers Co-Fathering with Biological Fathers. Before we continue, I would like to ask you a few questions to confirm that you meet the criteria to participate in the study.

1. Are you a heterosexual stepfather who is currently residing with your wife and at least one of her biological children?
2. Have you been married for seven years or less?
3. Do you have frequent communication and interaction with the biological father of your stepchildren?
4. Are you currently experiencing marital challenges perhaps due to the biological father's interaction?

Appendix E: Interview Questions

The standardized open-ended semi-structured interview questions are as follows:

1. Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.
2. How long have you been married and how many stepchildren do you have living in the home with you? What are the ages of the stepchildren?
3. How long did you and your spouse date before getting married?
4. What was the involvement with the children like before marriage?
5. How was the biological father involved with the children and your spouse before you got married?
6. What are some benefits or advantages to having the biological father involved in your stepfamily?
7. What are some expectations that you had with becoming a stepfather?
8. What are some expectations that you had for the biological father?
9. What specifically would you say is your role as a stepfather, knowing that the biological father is still parenting his child?
10. Describe a time that you felt that your role was eclipsed by the biological father, and you felt as an outsider.
11. What are some unique challenges that stepfathers face (with stepchildren, biological father, and/or spouse) as they are adjusting to stepfamily life?
12. How do you see the stepchildren simultaneously relating to both you and the biological father?
13. How has your relationship with the NRBF impacted your relationship with your stepchild?
14. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being poor and 10 being exceptionally well, how would you scale your relationship with your stepchild?
15. What kind of relationship did you think that you would have with your stepchildren?
16. Has the biological father affected your ability to parent your stepchild?
17. Who would you say is more instrumental in strengthening your relationship with your stepchild: your spouse or the biological father?
18. What would you say is the role of the mother in handling biological father challenges?

19. What are some typical areas of conflict between the mother/ biological father dyad?
Stepfather/ biological father dyad? Mother/stepfather dyad?
20. Of the challenges that you just identified, which would you say were the most significant, and why?
21. Interparental conflict between the biological mother/biological father and biological mother/stepfather has been shown to have damaging effects on marital quality and child functioning. How has interparental conflict impacted the marital and child relationships?
22. How would you describe, in detail, your current relationship with the biological father?
23. Do you think it possible for two men to non-competitively work together in a co-fathering relationship?
24. What value would there be in strengthening your relationship with the biological father?
25. What advice would you give to future stepfathers who will have to co-father with a biological father?
26. What do you think will help prepare the stepfamily, including the biological father, for this journey?
27. We have covered a lot of ground and I really appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to speak so candidly with me. I have one final question: What else do you think would be important for me to know about strengthening a co-fathering relationship between stepfathers and biological fathers.

Appendix F: Researcher Reflexive Journal

Date	Entry
08/05/2022	<p>I am thinking about stepfathers and the challenges that they face. I am taking note of how I feel about interviewing them. I am concerned that I will slip into counseling mode with them and want to offer them solutions to their problems. Stepfathers, I think, are caught between a rock and a hard place. They want to be there for their stepchildren, but they face so much opposition from the biological father. Then again, some are happy and relieved that they do not have the responsibility of caring for additional children. Will these stepfathers look at their stepchildren as a burden? Are they only trying to be a part of the family because they feel that the children are a ‘package deal’? I am thinking about my personal experiences with my ex-husband as a stepfather to my children. He did not want the biological father to have any dealings with me. He was threatened by their involvement, and it caused problems in my marriage. I am excited to be able to gain firsthand insight into what a stepfather really wants or needs from the biological father. I wonder about what would the biological father have to say about the stepfather, but I know that I will not have answers to that right now. Sometimes I think that stepfathers and biological fathers will not want to work together in raising the children because they are two men who are competitors. Men like to compete with one another. They don’t want another man doing what they should be doing. Who should have ‘rights’ to the child? Who wins the prize – which is the children? Mom is always caught in the middle. She does not know who to side with. Who has the power – the bio dad or the stepdad? I think that the biological father has all power.</p>
08/13/2022 3:30 pm “John”	<p>It is Saturday and I just finished doing a class on Anger Management. I’m tired but I had to push my counseling hat aside and go right into researcher mode. Today I interviewed John, and it was mentally exhausting. He was all over the place with his responses, and I had to redirect him numerous times. I had to remind myself that I am not his counselor, especially when he began to talk about not really wanting to be a father to his stepchildren. He only wants to be a positive role model. His stepdaughter with special needs accused him of inappropriately touching her and I found myself judging his character, wondering if this man can be trusted. I found myself a bit irritated at his tangential speech and that I have to ‘chase him’ around a mulberry bush to get a straight answer.</p>
08/19/2022 1:30 pm “Jerome”	<p>This is the first of two interviews that I have today. This one is via Zoom and I am looking forward to interviewing this stepfather. Jerome was very pleasant to talk to and he seemed like a loving stepfather. I was pleased that he acknowledged that his stepdaughter loved her biological father and that he did not want to interfere with that relationship. Jerome spoke about his spouse</p>

	<p>with admiration, and I liked that. They are newly married and he does not have any children of his own. He is challenged in parenting but I was impressed that he seeks guidance from elders in his family and in church who have been down the stepfather path. Jerome was a pleasure to talk to. He had great insight for such a young man. I don't know why, but I did cringe a bit when he said that his home is his castle, and he is the king. I know there is truth to this statement, but it makes me wonder why that did not sit right with me.</p>
<p>08/19/22 5:30 pm "David"</p>	<p>This is my second interview today. I feel rushed because I have another engagement at 7:30. I met with David and he was very excited to be interviewed. He had a lot to say about his role as stepfather, and about the biological father. I listened to him as he talked about his wife and bio dad spoiling the daughter. He gets so angry about that. I want to put on my counseling hat and ask him questions about his anger towards the spoiling. I feel sorry for him, at times, because he feels like he is in a losing battle. I encourage him as he speaks about his faith in God. I hear all kinds of cognitive distortions and irrational thinking. I found myself drifting off thinking how badly he needs to be counseled. I was also thinking about how much I would love it if he was my client, but I knew that my role, on this day, was not to counsel. I wonder, as he is talking about wanting a deeper conversation with the biological father, what stops him from attempting to engage in conversation. Fear is the culprit. How much more could he accomplish if he faced his fears?</p>
<p>09/01/2022 4:30 pm "Robert"</p>	<p>Kind of looking forward to interviewing Robert. Robert is known to me in another capacity so I was curious as to how things would progress with the interview. Questions loom in my mind if he will be comfortable disclosing private information? Confidentiality and privacy were stressed again. Robert has a strong and dominant personality, and he loves structure in the home. As he is talking, I'm thinking to myself how I would feel in that situation. I am empathetic to his wife and stepchildren. I'm thinking, he means well, but he is going about structure in a counterproductive manner. I wish that I could help him understand, but I am not in counselor mode today. The biological father is involved, but I wonder if he is intimidated by Robert. Did he back off because of Robert's strong personality. I'm thinking about his marriage and what could be done to help it. I had no idea that they were having all these marital difficulties. Now that know, what do I do? What do I say?</p>
<p>10/08/2022 11:00 am "Anthony"</p>	<p>Anthony arrived for the interview with his stepson. They had somewhere to go afterwards, and he asked if his stepson could stay. I did not want the child to hear the questions, so I set the child up in a separate room and turned on the white noise machine. Anthony loves his stepson, and I believe that he would adopt him if he was ever given the opportunity. I like their relationship. Anthony and the biological father clashed at the beginning of the relationship, and I can't help but wonder if Anthony's attachment to the stepson was too much for the biological father. Was there subtle competition on Anthony's part. Why else would the biological father be threatened? Anthony said that he</p>

	was not trying to take over as dad, but was he? I am thinking that Anthony needs to understand what he is doing.
09/15/2022 – 11/18/2022	Transcribing the interviews is extremely time consuming. I had no idea how exhausting this would be. Purchased transcribing software, which was helpful, but did not save me much time. Had participants look over their transcribed interview and they gave their approval.
01/02/2023	Manually coded the data. Nvivo software was not user friendly. In coding the data, themes emerged. I noticed that each of the stepfathers had the same unmet needs as it pertains to the biological father: <i>need to be accepted, need to establish authority, need for communication, and need for guidance</i> . Reviewed the research questions to make sure that the stated themes appropriately answered the questions and that the participant experiences were fully captured. Participants were also asked if the themes adequately expressed their needs.
01/10/2023 – 02/20/2023	Completed chapter 4 and chapter 5 of dissertation project.