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Successful stepfamily development: Issues and implications for counselors

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Abstract

The traditional meaning of "family" as the biological unit of father, mother and child(ren) can no longer be assumed in today's society. There are many other types of structures functioning in our society fulfilling all of the traditional family roles and responsibilities, and an increasingly prevalent one of these is the "stepfamily". One definition of stepfamily in the literature was the complex description offered by Sager, Walker, Brown and Rodstein (1981) of "one that is created by the marriage (or living together in one domicile) of two partners, one or both of whom have been married previously and was divorced or widowed, with or without children who visit or reside with them" (p. 3). A more simplified explanation was given by Prosen and Farmer (1982), "A stepfamily is any family in which at least one adult is a stepparent" (p. 393). This latter definition is the one to be used as the operational definition for this paper.

SUCCESSFUL STEPFAMILY DEVELOPMENT:
ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

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The traditional meaning of "family" as the biological unit of father, mother and child(ren) can no longer be assumed in today's society. There are many other types of structures functioning in our society fulfilling all of the traditional family roles and responsibilities, and an increasingly prevalent one of these is the "stepfamily." One definition of stepfamily in the literature was the complex description offered by Sager, Walker, Brown and Rodstein (1981) of "one that is created by the marriage (or living together in one domicile) of two partners, one or both of whom have been married previously and was divorced or widowed, with or without children who visit or reside with them" (p. 3). A more simplified explanation was given by Prosen and Farmer (1982), "A stepfamily is any family in which at least one adult is a stepparent" (p. 393). This latter definition is the one to be used as the operational definition for this paper.

Johnson (1980) estimated the number of existing stepfamilies upwards from 15 million. Every year one-half million adults become stepparents, and one out of every six American children under eighteen is a stepchild (Prosen & Farmer, 1982). Of the two million men and women who divorce each year, four out of five will remarry; and one in every four marriages today involves formerly married people (Westoff, 1975). Using these and other available similar statistics,

it came as no surprise that Prosen and Farmer (1982) believed that by 1990, the stepfamily could well be the norm. Relative to this information about the large numbers of people currently living in stepfamilies, Visher and Visher (1979) stated that stepfamilies "are not going to disappear in the foreseeable future, and they need to be understood, valued, and supported in their attempts to achieve their potential" (p. xvii).

One thing that was clear in the literature on this topic was that although each stepfamily is a unique entity with its own personality and brings this unique make-up to the experience of trying to create one whole family out of at least two parts of other families, there are common issues that need to be successfully resolved for optimal development of the stepfamily. These common areas of concern result in implications for counselors and other helping professionals who wish to be of assistance to these struggling family units. The purpose of this paper was to review the literature in this area to extract two lines of thought: (1) common issues stepfamilies must deal with to become functional, and (2) resulting implications for the counselors who wish to be of help to these families.

Common Issues

There are no clear role definitions or models in our society for stepfamily members to follow or relate to, either

socially or legally (Clingempeel, 1981; Wald, 1981). To complicate this lack of role models, the stereotypes that do exist are negative as depicted by the stepmothers in "Cinderella" and "Hansel and Gretel" (Skeen, Covi, & Robinson, 1985). Thus people do not know what to expect as they enter a stepfamily. As a result, the expectations they do have are often too high and unrealistic (Visher & Visher, 1979). One such unrealistic expectation is that of "instant love." Because a man and woman love each other does not automatically mean they will love each others' children from previous marriages. Prosen and Farmer (1982) pointed out that instant families have not had the luxury of time to form bonds and pass through necessary developmental stages before children arrived. Johnson (1980) stated it more succinctly when she said, "A reality is that happy relationships, mutual love or even liking do not necessarily occur between stepparents and stepchildren" (p. 306). Couples considering remarriage need to be aware of this and to discuss it openly. This helps prevent inappropriate guilt feelings when the instant love fails to materialize (Einstein & Albert, 1986; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1983; Visher & Visher, 1979). This doesn't mean that love doesn't happen in the stepfamily, because it often does develop, but it is more realistic to expect this love to evolve over time (Lutz, Jacobs, & Masson, 1981).

Along with the myth of instant love were many myths that surround marriage, divorce and remarriage (Coleman & Ganog, 1985) that only served to make successful adjustment to stepfamily life difficult at best, impossible at worst. People tended to react to negative experiences by going completely in the opposite direction. Couples considering remarriage needed to look at past experiences and future expectations as objectively as possible to achieve the best results in their current and future relationships (Coleman & Ganog, 1985; Messinger, 1976; Wald, 1981).

The origin of many of the conflict areas that stepfamilies must deal with is the absence of a "blending phase" (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Einstein & Albert, 1986; Poppen & White, 1984). In an original marriage, each partner brought his/her own perceptions into the marriage and these were blended together over time before children became a part of the family. They decided together what their families priorities were and how they would rear their children (Capaldi & McRae, 1979). In a stepfamily usually each partner has been part of this process before with someone else, and possibly each reached very different conclusions. This needed to be clarified very intentionally with a couple considering remarriage who had children from previous marriages (Hyatt, 1977; Visher & Visher, 1979; Westoff, 1975). This didn't necessarily mean one partner

was right and the other wrong; but it did mean they couldn't assume each one of them felt or believed the same about childrearing as the other (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977). This blending phase was also the time that other family decisions were made, such as what holidays to celebrate and how to celebrate them (Capaldi & McRae, 1979). Since so many important decisions had been made during this phase, the lack of it in the creation of a stepfamily left a large blank space and room for a multitude of misunderstandings. This needed to be addressed directly with a remarried couple and the issues usually resolved in this phase in an original family needed to be specified. Then joint decision making by the remarried couple could facilitate a smoother transition to a functional stepfamily (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Einstein & Albert, 1986; Visher & Visher, 1979).

Finances and how they were to be handled was another crucial aspect in the development of a stepfamily. Whether it was to be as Fishman (1983) delineated it, a "Common Pot" economy or a "Two Pot" economy, the task for each stepfamily was to develop an economic model that took into consideration both family and individual needs. Messinger (1976) cited finances as the second-most troublesome area (children being the first) in remarriage. She saw this financial area as one that was poorly resolved and sensitive, often reflecting

hesitation in making a commitment to the new marriage. Tight finances, Espinoza and Newman (1979) found were often a reality for most stepfamilies. When one "breadwinner" was providing for two (or more) families, the situation had to be viewed as realistically and as objectively as possible if successful resolution of this problem area was to take place. This area was often the one that was discussed more openly and blamed for the problems being experienced by a stepfamily even when it was not always the culprit (Fishman, 1983). It was usually easier to say, "I resent the money you have to give your ex-spouse," rather than, "I resent the time you're taking away from me to give to your previous family" (Wald, 1981). If this was the case, the underlying issues needed to be dealt with before the financial issues could be clarified (Einstein & Albert, 1986; Wald, 1981).

This led directly into another area of concern, and that was "continued ties" to the past and how they effected the present and future of the remarriage and the development of the stepfamily. These ties came in many forms, ex-spouses, ex-inlaws, and even ex-friends (Espinoza & Newman, 1979; Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977), but probably the most troublesome of these was with the ex-spouse, especially if all the divorce issues hadn't been dealt with and resolved (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977). Usually when two people had a child

together, they were connected in some way the rest of their lives. This seemed to be easier to come to terms with on an intellectual level than on an emotional level (Visher & Visher, 1979). Open communication about feelings in regard to ex-spouses and ex-relatives and friends helped remarried couples to feel more comfortable and secure in their current marriages (Einstein & Albert, 1986; Visher & Visher, 1979).

The consensus of the literature reviewed was that the critical ingredient in the development and maintenance of a healthy stepfamily was a strong couple bond. This was the tenth "commandment" in the Turnbull and Turnbull (1983) article; "maintain the primacy of the marital relationship" (p. 229). Both partners need to remember that their relationship is primary to the stepfamily. Even though parenting was a central aspect in a remarried couple's relationship, both partners needed to commit energy and time to the development and maintenance of a strong couple relationship; this bond included but should have been greater than their parental responsibilities (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1983). Skeen et al. (1985) stated that it was important for counselors to aid stepparents in developing satisfying couple relationships separate from their parenting roles. A goal for stepparents proposed by Prosen and Farmer (1982) was to increase an awareness of the need for the remarried couple

to invest efforts towards the bonding of their relationship separate from their relationships with the custodial and visiting children. This idea went along with Capaldi and McRae's (1979) belief that this couple bond must be firmly cemented to avoid the possibility of family problems or the children driving a wedge between them. The couple bond is important in any marriage, but in the stepfamily it really is the glue that holds the whole unit together. One thing that is the same for a stepfamily as a nuclear family, the children will grow up. It's the couple bond the family begins with and that relationship that's left after the children are grown and gone; and it deserves and needs some nurturance through the years (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Einstein & Albert, 1986; Visher & Visher, 1979; Wald, 1981).

In summary, these were the common issues that face all potential stepfamilies: lack of societal and legal role models and definitions; negative stereotypes that exist about "step" relationships; unrealistically high expectations of potential stepfamily members; other myths surrounding marriage, divorce and remarriage; the absence of a "blending phase;" financial stress; continued ties to the past; and, the development and maintenance of a strong couple bond. Knowing that there are these inherent issues to be dealt with and resolved should make it easier for counselors to prepare themselves for their work with stepfamilies.

Implications for Counselors

Sager et al. (1981) stated that most current therapy methods were not adequately meeting the needs of the growing population of stepfamilies. Because these family systems were different and more complex than those of the usual intact family, old models were no longer applicable. Counselors who wished to be of help to these families needed first to develop a better understanding of the structure and dynamics of the stepfamily (Messinger, 1976; Sager et al., 1981; Skeen et al., 1985). One of the most critical issues for counselors who were going to be working with stepfamilies was to know and to believe that these families were not "sick;" but rather they were struggling with some very complicated developmental issues. This knowledge should have been shared with their clients to help alleviate initial stress and resistance (Sager et al., 1981; Visher & Visher, 1979).

Two important characteristics which distinguished stepfamilies from other families were identified by Schulman (1972). These were: (1) fantasies and hopes played a much larger role in stepfamily members' expectations; and (2) the stepparent expected more gratitude and acknowledgement from the stepchild than from his/her own biological child. Counselors need to put these findings together with their expanded knowledge about stepfamily dynamics and the inherent

problematic issues discussed in the first section of this paper to adequately prepare themselves for working with stepfamilies (Messinger, 1976; Sager et al., 1981; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1983; Visher & Visher, 1979).

Five major goals for stepfamily treatment were stressed repeatedly in the literature reviewed. As having a functional healthy identity is the basis for individual therapy to build on, so helping stepfamily members define themselves: (1) in relation to each other; (2) in relation to society; and (3) as a family unit should be given a high priority in any treatment plan (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Coleman & Ganog, 1985; Visher & Visher, 1979). It has been found that the myths and stereotypes abounding in our society need to be exposed and placed into proper perspective to free each stepfamily to develop its own unique way of relating to each other (Schulman, 1972; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1983).

As emphasized repeatedly by all the experts in the field, the couple bond must be strong if a stepfamily is to survive and become more than two single-parent families co-existing in the same domicile. This is an area where a counselor can be of immense service to the stepfamily (Capaldi & McRae, 1979; Johnson, 1980; Skeen et al., 1985; Visher & Visher, 1979). A counselor can be of assistance both by helping the remarried couple see the necessity for their relationship to

be extra strong and by providing possible means of accomplishing this (Prosen & Farmer, 1982). Often because of all the day-to-day activities and chores that had to be accomplished to keep a stepfamily physically functioning and all the time and energy that took, Visher (1985) found that remarried couples needed to receive permission and encouragement to spend some of that limited time and energy on themselves. This was considered an extremely important treatment goal.

Effective communication skills are important in all relationships, but took on extra significance in a stepfamily where there were many different combinations of relationships with so much potential for misunderstanding (Einstein & Albert, 1986; Visher & Visher, 1979). Learning that feelings were ok, even negative ones, was especially important in a stepfamily (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1983). Expressing these negative feelings to a spouse, especially if the spouse's children were involved, was often best accomplished with an impartial counselor present--at least initially until the couple knew how to listen, hear and understand each other correctly (Johnson, 1980).

A counselor, in working with a stepfamily, was often called upon to act as a teacher and/or an interpreter (Lutz et al., 1981). Papernow (1984) offered an excellent developmental model of the stepfamily that could be shared

with the stepfamily members in therapy. Since people were not usually aware of what stepfamily life was going to involve, this educational aspect was essential to help them adjust their expectations to realistic, achievable goals and to see that there was hope for creating a very functional, loving, healthy family unit (Papernow, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1979). Wald (1981) found that in the earlier stages of treatment, a counselor might be called upon to interpret what one spouse said to another. For instance, if a stepmother was continually criticizing her teen-age stepdaughter for staying up so late at night, maybe the real issue was that the wife needed more time with her husband and didn't know how to ask for it.

Lastly, but certainly not the least important, was that a counselor was an excellent person to stress the potential rewards from being a part of a stepfamily (Messinger, 1976; Visher & Visher, 1979; Wald, 1981). Some of these potential benefits included: (1) extra parents for children to get their needs met and to learn from; (2) a variety of experiences too often available in a nuclear family; (3) the chance to learn increased tolerance and acceptance; (4) extra love and support for each stepfamily member; and (5) eventually, the great feelings of achievement that will be theirs as they work their way through the troublesome issues and finally become a "family" in its truest sense (Messinger, 1976; Prosen

& Farmer, 1982; Sager et al., 1981; Skeen et al., 1985; Visher & Visher, 1979; Wald, 1981).

In summary, the first and foremost implication for counselors has been that rather than being sick, stepfamilies are dealing with troublesome developmental issues. Both counselors and clients need to know this. Counselors need to prepare themselves with accurate knowledge about stepfamily structure and dynamics if they are to be of assistance to stepfamily members as they try to build a functional, healthy family unit. Secondly, the five treatment goals implied by the common issues stepfamilies dealt with in attempting to develop successful family units were: (1) to help stepfamily members define themselves in relation to each other, in relation to society, and as a family unit; (2) to help strengthen the couple bond; (3) to help develop good communication skills; (4) to act as a teacher/interpreter when necessary; and, (5) to stress the potential benefits available to them as a stepfamily. These were certainly not the only treatment goals that can and should be used with stepfamilies; but according to the literature reviewed, they were basic and any additional goals can be used to enhance the treatment plan.

Conclusion

Working professionally with this population can be extremely rewarding. Because these clients are not presenting

with pathology, the chances of optimal resolution of their presenting problems are extremely high. This being the case increased the odds of these clients and the counselors working with them having successful counseling experiences.

Although there is excellent literature on this topic available for the professional community, there is definitely a need for more research and more work in this area as this population is increasing at a rapid rate. There is also a great need for more lay literature to allow stepfamilies and potential stepfamily couples to have access to accurate information as they struggle to build and maintain this often complex and potentially rewarding family unit.

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