

**A Qualitative Study of a Stepfather's Perceptions of Their Role  
in a Successful Second Marriage in a Blended Family**

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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### Abstract

This phenomenological study aimed to comprehensively understand the unique perspective of remarried men as stepfathers within the context of second marriages in blended families. The research delved into the lived experiences of these individuals to shed light on their roles, challenges, and contributions to the dynamic of blended households. By applying Bowen's family systems theory (FST) to the constructs relevant to blended families, this study offers a resource to the professional counseling community and support for blended families facing various issues. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews focused on the stepfather's role and responsibilities within the blended family structure. The narratives were meticulously analyzed to uncover significant themes that emerged from the participants' experiences. First, being a supportive husband emerged as a factor in fostering harmonious family dynamics. Second, the process of building and nurturing relationships with stepchildren was identified as an area of significance for stepfathers. Third, the stepfathers emphasized the significance of being consistently available for their stepchildren and wives. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding remarried men as stepfathers in blended families. The insights gained from this study may enhance professional counseling interventions to foster healthier and more resilient blended family dynamics.

*Keywords:* stepfathers, blended families, second marriages, stepchildren, family systems theory, Bowen Murray, family therapy

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### **Dedication**

First, I want to thank GOD for the patience, drive, dedication, time, wisdom, and endurance to complete this study. I dedicate this manuscript to my immediate and extended family, and close friends that are considered family. It is truly a blessing to have so many people support me throughout this journey.

### **Acknowledgments**

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**List of Abbreviations**

Family systems theory (FST)

Differentiation of self (DoS)

Thematic analysis (TA)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Blended families are on the rise due to the increasing divorce rate with second marriages having a higher divorce rate than first marriages (McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007). More women than men remarry and bring biological children into the blended family. The stepfather's perspective of his role as a remarried husband and stepfather is important in obtaining insight into his experiences to aid in addressing the blended family's unique challenges. This chapter includes the Background, Situation to Self, Problem Statement, Purpose Statement, Significance of the Study, Research Questions, Definitions, and Summary.

### Background

Blended families are on the rise with more than thirty percent of children living in blended families (Higginbotham et al., 2012). More than two-thirds of women and three-quarters of men who remarry bring biological children into the marriage (Saint-Jacques et al., 2011). McCarthy and Ginsberg (2007) found that challenges couples face in second marriages are related to the relationship with the ex-spouse, children, and the ability to build a strong relationship. An estimated 40% of second marriages end in divorce compared to 32% of first marriages (Saint-Jacques et al., 2011). Although second marriages have higher divorce rates than first marriages, couples in successful second marriages experience higher rates of marital satisfaction than couples in first marriages (McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007).

Blended families from successful second marriages will be explored using Bowen's family system theory (FST) in the 1940s and 1950s. FST is comprised of eight theoretical constructs that are used to discover issues causing disturbances in families and the best way to treat them. Bowen sought to demonstrate how evolution shapes the family system and explain

how problems are formed (Priest, 2021). FST entails treating the entire family to discover and address the issues plaguing their relationships, how they react to the issues, and how they can change their reactions (Harrison, 2018).

Building good relationships in blended families is an important part of creating stability and cohesion. Second marriages and blended families face challenges that are unique or enhanced by them. Second marriages and blended families can face issues with different living arrangements, rules, styles of communication, role changes, marital adjustments, and challenging tasks (Meyerstein, 2008). In this family structure, stepfathers must determine what their role is and how to function within that role. The stepfather's perspective is important for understanding his role in the blended family. Stepfathers assume great responsibility for the blended family. The skewed self-perception of a stepfather affects a blended family's cohesiveness, which can manifest through disagreements over finances, parenting, discipline, and ex-spouses (Gold, 2010).

### **Situation to Self**

I was raised in a blended family which piqued my interest in researching this topic. I have first-hand experience in the inner workings of a blended family and how relationships can be challenging due to a variety of issues that first families do not deal with. Although I never had bad experiences with my stepdad, some were challenging. As an adult, I often wondered how my stepdad felt raising a child he did not feel comfortable disciplining. I also wondered how a stepdad managed the financial responsibility for a child he was not sure how to parent.

What did it mean to my stepdad to live in another town, get to know additional family, and adjust to being a dad to another child? What was it like having to adjust to living in the same town with my biological father (now deceased)? My biological father was not consistently in my

life, but he was no more than 5 minutes away. This study sought to answer these questions and more by delving into the minds of stepfathers in second marriages in a blended family context. I wanted to give them a voice and speak openly about their experiences and how those experiences helped them define their role.

### **Problem Statement**

Numerous studies have focused on the challenges blended families have faced related to relationships between the stepfather, his wife, and stepchildren (e.g., Amato et al, 2016; Blyaert et al, 2016; Dupuis, 2010; Favez, et al, 2019; Jensen, & Ganong, 2020), but none specifically explore the stepfather's perception of his role. Qualitative research has focused on marital satisfaction and the probability of divorce in the second marriage (Kumar, 2017; Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015). The problem is the lack of research on the stepfather's perspective of his role in a successful second marriage. The challenges of blended families warrant understanding the complexity of the experiences stepfathers face because of the new relationships he must navigate (Higginbotham et al, 2012). Blyaert et al., (2016) found that navigating those new relationships can be challenging especially when stepfathers are uncertain of their role due to the absence of a shared family history like a nuclear family. Blyaert et al. concluded that further research was needed about the experiences of stepfathers that include the early years of the stepfather-stepchild relationship. The implications for theory from their research highlight the "importance of a thorough inquiry of stepfathers' experiences, whenever they are part of a unit that seeks family therapy" (p.128).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the stepfather's perspective on his role in a blended family and what that role meant for his second marriage. The

research from FST provides the basis for understanding the stepfather's role in a second marriage and the blended family. In blended families, relationships can be difficult to reconcile because of the various people connected to the stepfather, which can lead to family disruptions. Dupuis (2010) found that when the stepfather-stepchild relationship is strained it creates conflict in the spousal and parental subsystems. Conflict in these subsystems can divide a family. When stepfathers can form good relationships with stepchildren it helps the marital relationship and the family's ability to function positively with less conflict.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study may benefit professional counselors and stepfamilies by elucidating how stepfathers' function in a blended family and second marriage. Stepfathers are often uncertain about their role in the family and bringing awareness to the unique challenges they face can inform their actions (Blyaert et al, 2016; Gold, 2010; Kumar, 2017). This research focuses on stepfathers, the complexity of their role, and the importance of their role for the blended family and second marriage.

Counselors and therapists can use this research to discover more effective ways of treating blended families. Understanding the stepfather's perspective of his role and how it impacts his daily life will provide insight into the stepfather's relationships with family members, how family resources are managed, parenting styles, conflict resolution skills, and any other challenges.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide this study about the role of the stepfather in the blended family and second marriage.

### **Central Research Question**



How do stepfathers describe their role in a successful second marriage in a blended family?

Using phenomenological methodology will allow me to uncover “what experiences are like” for stepfathers (Williams, 2021, p. 369). This question is important because it allows stepfathers to provide a personal account of their perspective of their role in a successful second marriage in a blended family context.

### **Guiding Question**

What does the role of a husband in a second marriage mean to stepfathers?

This question will help elucidate why the participants chose to remarry. It may be important to understand the stepfather's perspective and why he made that decision.

### **Definitions**

1. *Blended family* -A household that includes the stepparent, stepsibling, or half-sibling relationships (Raley & Sweeney, 2020).
2. *Ex-spouse*: The former husband and biological parent of the stepchild (Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007).
3. *Family systems theory* - A theory developed by Murray Bowen using a systems approach that brings forth patterns in families that involve growth, adaptation, and change throughout the life of the family (Keller & Noon, 2020).
4. *Stepfather* - A man who marries a woman with a child or children (Gonzales, 2009).
5. *Stepfamily* - When a parent forms a relationship with a partner who is not the biological parent of their child or children (Jensen & Shafer, 2013).

6. *Successful Second Marriage* – When partners build a strong marital relationship that includes respect, trust, intimacy, and a couple style that works (McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007).

### **Summary**

This chapter highlighted the background research related to stepfathers in a second marriage within a blended family. Most research is focused on stepfathers and their relationships with stepchildren, spouses, ex-spouses, and marital satisfaction (e.g., Jensen, 2019; Jensen & Ganong, 2020; King et al, 2015); however, there is very limited research related to the stepfather's perspective of his role in a second marriage in a blended family. This research will give stepfathers a voice which could provide new information for therapists as they work with people in second marriages within a blended family situation.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

The blended family system is on the rise due to divorce and remarriage (Kumar, 2017). The increase in the blended family phenomenon speaks to the importance of research to provide information for professionals who work with families to help them overcome unique challenges. Blyaert et al. (2016) found that research on stepfamilies has been focused on children, with minimal studies focused on stepfathers leaving out information needed to develop effective tools, techniques, and strategies for providing professional services for this family structure.

The focus of this literature review was examining stepfather perceptions of their role in successful second marriages. The concept(s) of the FST were focused on the family dynamics of blended families. Only those that applied to stepfathers and blended families were used.

Gathering research for this study involved visiting the Jerry Falwell Library at Liberty University. The search engines used were EBSCO, ARPANET, Counseling & Psychology. Criteria for inclusion were peer-reviewed journal articles from 2009 to present, books, and manuals. This chapter includes Related Literature, Theoretical Framework, and Theoretical Constructs.

### Related Literature

#### Current Research on Blended Families

According to Kumar (2017), blended families are created when lives merge by marrying or cohabitation, which may include children from a former relationship. Blending two families into a single-family unit comes with unique challenges not experienced by nuclear families. The challenges include navigating ex-spousal relationships, addressing parenting issues, and developing a new marital relationship.

### **The Influence of Family Development on Blended Families and Second Marriages**

Developmental issues can emerge from the unique challenges within blended families. Braithwaite et al. (2001) conducted research related to the developmental issues of blended families. They studied blended families over four years, interviewing stepparents and stepchildren. They explored the nuances that gave blended families the feeling of family and their thoughts on the pivotal points. They found the major issues to be “boundary management, solidarity, and adaptation” (p. 241). Braithwaite et al. found that blended families exhibited complexities different from nuclear families that stemmed from communication issues. Unlike nuclear families, blended families must negotiate complex issues such as “defining and redefining communication boundaries between various blended family subsystems, managing conflict between children and (non) custodial parents, adjusting to change, and negotiating new, unfamiliar roles within and outside of the family” (p. 222).

The development of a healthy blended family may also influence the success of the second marriage. Faber (2004) posited emotional systems in families are relevant to blended families because each partner can bring emotional issues from the first marriage. Responses can be automatic when emotions are involved; however, a person with a high level of differentiation of self (DoS) can function better in these relationships because they are more “flexible and adaptable to stress and can shift from strong effect to logical reasoning when the situation requires” (Faber, 2004, p. 124).

Being able to reason logically is a level of maturity that allows an individual to make sound decisions regarding divorce and remarriage. Dupius (2010) showed that one-half of marriages end in divorce of which two-thirds of divorced women and three-fourths of divorced men remarry, with most bringing children. Zeleznikow and Zeleznikow (2015) found that 60%

of second marriages end in divorce. Based on the high rates of divorce, they conducted a case study using four blended families to study diversity and complex relationships within them. They found that issues affecting blended families are not unique and if appropriate strategies are followed, there is a higher success rate that the blended family will remain intact. Their findings were different from most of the research that concluded that challenges impacting blended families are unique. However, they added that blended families fare better with respectful communication, conflict resolution skills, and examining parenting roles. Jensen and Shafer (2013) had similar findings that relationship stability between remarried partners is important to the health of the blended family. The success of a blended family is related to the quality of the relationship between the adults. Varying factors can negatively affect the relationship between the child and stepfather, with the way the child views the relationship between the biological mother and stepfather being the most important factor. Factors such as parenting and open communication can help strengthen the bond between the child and stepfather (Jensen et al., 2013).

The high divorce rate in second marriages can be attributed to the lack of resources to help manage the expectations of family members, how the family members will work together, and the exceptional challenges they will face (Kumar, 2017). Remarried couples can experience side effects such as a decline in physical and mental health if the relationship is not good. When adults suffer in remarriage, so do the children. Researching the relationship between stepparents and stepchildren later in life offers more opportunities to gain more information for increasing family knowledge and understanding the consequences of family instability (Raley & Sweeney, 2020).

### **The Importance of Boundaries for Conflict in Blended Families**

Dupuis (2010) used systems theory to explain the unique complexities of blended families such as establishing boundaries for healthy subsystems to exist. The subsystems in a blended family include relationships between the spouses, the biological parent, children, and stepchildren. Boundaries are important for healthy systemic relationships in blended families because they help determine how relationships will function.

The lack of research and resources can make it difficult for blended families to recover from challenges (Dupuis, 2010; Kumar, 2017; Raley et al., 2020). Cherlin (1978) referred to blended families as an “incomplete institution” because society had not developed norms about the way stepfamilies should interact and treat one another (p. 634). Dupuis (2010) explained the implications of the lack of norms in a blended family as the members of the family attempt to navigate the dynamics by setting their own rules and trying to imitate a nuclear family. In trying to imitate nuclear families, blended families struggle with roles and rules because emotional connections have not yet occurred, and expectations are too high. This causes disruptions in the marital relationship because the new spouses are not able to live up to expectations. When the integration process of remarriage is challenging and prolonged, individuals are more prone to divorce.

Research has shown that imitating nuclear family systems causes more challenges when stepparents expect the same relationships from their new family that they had with their nuclear family (Braithwaite et al, 2001). “Boundaries are important to the structural development of the family as well as to members’ interpersonal relationships” because they help establish relationships and control over how relationships are managed with outside members such as ex-spouses (Braithwaite et al, 2001, p. 225). Boundaries need to be flexible enough to allow contact

with outside family members but firm enough not to allow blended family relationships to be disrupted. For some blended families, flexible boundaries mean being able to share child custody, negotiate living arrangements between households, and form new relationships.

Families with rigid boundaries have difficulty with these situations. In blended families, it would help stepfathers to have flexible boundaries to form positive relationships with biological fathers, stepchildren, and new family members.

### **The Research Related to the Systemic Relationship Challenges in Blended Families**

There have been multiple studies on relationships between stepparents and stepchildren. Coleman et al. (2015) conducted a grounded theory study on relationships between stepchildren and former stepparents to fill a gap in the literature. Forty-one participants from stepfamilies participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews that lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews began with a genogram which included family histories, family formation, dissolution of the stepfamily, and relationships with former stepparents. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and answers were assigned a code. Coleman et al. identified three patterns for how stepchildren accepted the role of stepparents: (a) claimed, (b) disclaimed and (c) unclaimed. One-quarter of the stepchildren claimed their former stepparent; the stepchild considered them a relative. One quarter disclaimed their former stepparent; after the divorce they made no effort to maintain the relationship. Half of the participants unclaimed former stepparents; they never developed a relationship with them. The results showed that stepchildren categorized their relationships with former stepparents based on their relationship during the marriage and how they felt after the dissolution of it. Some of their feelings and decisions were based on information from the biological parent.

Stepfather-stepchild relationships are important to all other subsystems of the blended family. Disruptions in this relationship impact the marital relationship, the relationship with the biological father, and can extend to other family members. Learning how stepfather-stepchild relationships have been throughout the life of the family can provide data on what makes a good stepfather-stepchild relationship, how these relationships exist over time, and how stepchildren classify their stepfathers.

Transitions between families can cause instability and adversity in children's lives. The instability may increase when non-biological parents come and go. These types of family transitions can cause children to suffer from problem behavior, health issues, and emotional issues (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Raley et al, 2020). To alleviate some issues, stepfathers and biological fathers need to ally for the sake of the stepchild to make negotiating shared households easier.

Research indicates that children fare better with shared custody because children need additional attention in a complex family (Raley et al., 2020). The relationship between stepparents and stepchildren varies and the biological mother plays a big part because more mothers remarry and bring children into the relationship. Raley et al., (2020) Concluded that even with high divorce and remarriage rates, the institution of marriage is still strong and the negative effects of divorce on adults are temporary. Although a child's well-being may be negatively affected during divorce and remarriage, more research is needed to show the magnitude of the impact across individuals and groups (Raley et al, 2020). Blending families is a complex process. Each subsystem within the blended family can present challenges when building relationships between the stepfather and new spouse, stepchildren, ex-spouses, grandparents, and others. Research indicates that when relationships do not form or break down,



especially between stepfathers and stepchildren, it can negatively impact the marital relationship (Anderson & Greene, 2013; DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017; Dupius, 2010).

### **The Stepfather's Role in Blended Families and Second Marriages**

Marital and stepfather-stepchild relationships are challenging because of their origin. The children predate the remarried couple's relationship, and the adults and children in the blended family come from different family life cycles (DeLongis & Greene, 2017). This research will explore such relationships and how remarrying into blended families challenges the stepfather's ability to form genuine relationships with his new partner and stepchildren. Ganong et al. (2019) reiterated the importance of stepfathers establishing a caring relationship with stepchildren to decrease the likelihood of conflict. Stepfathers can use strategies such as time, money, and honest communication to form a friendship that will work if the relationship with the stepchild is negative. Gold (2010) stated that stepfathers need to develop collaborative parenting relationships with the mother to form connections with stepchildren and work with the mother to determine how to lead the family to avoid marital dissatisfaction. This research includes data from questions designed to engage the stepfather in conversations and probe relationships in the blended family about how challenges in building close ties were managed.

Blyaert et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study exploring the meaning that stepfathers ascribe to their role in a blended family. They found that the stepfathers were happy to fill the position of father without being the father. They preferred to function more like a friend than a father. A limitation of the study was that the participants were happy in their roles; if that had not been the case, they might not have been as willing to participate. This study will explore the meaning stepfathers make of their role and the relationship they form with their stepchildren and explore how stepfathers feel being in a blended family. It will provide an awareness of the

adjustments stepfathers make in blended families and manage relationships with new family members. The research conducted is aligned with the suggestions of Blyaert et al. (2016) who advocated focusing on the stepfather-stepchild relationship due to its complexity, for example, their relationships with blended family members, the early years in the stepchildren's lives, and their overall experiences.

### **The Stepfather's Relationships with Stepchildren**

Common themes in research on blended families are the quality of marital relationships and the stepfather-stepchild relationship. When the co-parents do not cooperate well and the relationship is riddled with conflict, behavioral and emotional problems can arise in the children. Triangulation can occur, and children can be caught in the middle. To decrease the disturbance, stepfathers need to invest time into building relationships with stepchildren and establish ways to communicate and show affection to their partner (Favez et al., 2015; Jensen, 2017; Jensen et al, 2019). Good stepfather-stepchild relationships extend to other subsystems within the blended family. The stepfathers in the current study will be able to provide details on how their relationships with stepchildren and new partners have impacted each other by providing first-hand accounts of conflicts. Recording these accounts will allow further examination of the issues and help clinicians create and implement strategies to better serve blended family members.

To better serve blended families, relationships between stepfathers and stepchildren need continuous evaluation to implement best practices. Success is often based on the relationship between the mother, stepfather, and biological father when he is in the child's life. Favez et al. (2015) conducted a study on co-parenting in stepfamilies. Coparenting, once recognized as being between the two biological parents, is now recognized as two adults collaborating to raise children in all family forms. There are two family dyads in blended families, the custodial and

noncustodial parents and the biological and stepparent. They found that co-parent involvement influences cohesiveness. Children whose biological parents continue to engage in positive co-parenting post-divorce have better outcomes.

King et al. (2015) conducted quantitative research on the relationship between stepfathers and stepchildren. The participants were adolescents who had moved from a single-mother household to a married mother and stepfather household, during the first year of the newly formed family. They found that most stepfathers established good relationships with their adolescent stepchildren. One factor that contributed to the good relationship was the quality of the mother-child relationship. King et al. concluded that the relationship between a stepchild and a biological father had no bearing on the relationship with the stepfather. Anderson and Greene (2013) agreed that it is important for biological mothers and stepfathers to have good relationships because of its impact on the stepfather-stepchild relationships. Jensen and Shafer (2013) had similar findings of what contributes to good stepfather-stepchild relationships. This study examined the relationships between stepfathers and stepchildren and explored how marital relationships affected it. Also examined was the role of stepfather as husband and how all the roles play a part in the closeness stepfathers and stepchildren form.

Jensen et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative, latent class analysis to examine the closeness between stepfathers and stepchildren in blended families. They found that children reported that closeness to stepfathers was related to "family roles and parental subsystem characteristics" (p. 134). Children who felt their mothers were open, responsive, and available experienced consistency and stability during the family system changes and children who felt they were included in the process by the mother held less resentment toward the stepfather. These factors allowed the space needed for the stepchild to grow closer to the stepfather. When children see a

strong marital relationship, they can form a close relationship with the stepfather making the second remarriage a successful remarriage. Transitioning to a blended family can be traumatic for children because they are having to adjust to a new family and new family members. To help decrease the stress and anxiety that can impact a child experiencing a new family formation, it is important for the adults to be open and communicative for the children to feel safe and adjust with fewer behavioral problems. According to Jensen et al., children felt family stability when their mothers exhibited responsiveness openness, and availability.

Stepfathers provide stability and security to stepchildren when they form good relationships with their stepchildren and new wives and work well with the biological father. Jensen et al. (2019) found a connection between the quality of stepfather-stepchildren relationships and the health of the second marriage. Stepfathers do not have the advantage of being the biological father who raises his children; there is no shared history, traditions, or ways of working through conflict. These family characteristics become something a blended family must create while learning about one another and discovering a new way of being. Stepfathers take on the role of parent, yet they do not have the power that comes with being a biological parent. While stepfathers may assume some responsibilities of a biological parent, Blyaert et al. (2016) found that stepfathers desired to be "like a parent" without taking on the role of the father. Having developed good relationships with their wives, stepchildren, and biological fathers, they were content in their family position and felt the only drawback was the absence of a shared history because it would add depth to the relationship with their stepchildren.

Blended families are comprised of multiple individuals coming together to form a new family. The family members do not share a history and come from different family situations and types. Relationships in blended families can be challenging to reconcile if there is excess tension.

Adults need to enter the family with the maturity to bring family members together. If stepfathers and stepchildren do not bond it can cause marital disruptions and contribute to behavioral problems with children. In this study, the relationship between stepfathers and stepchildren were explored to determine how the stepfathers developed the relationships and the impact it had on their marriages.

### **The Role of the Stepfather in Marital Satisfaction in Second Marriages**

The relationship between the stepparent and child greatly contributes to the marital relationship (Blyaert et al., 2016; Dupuis, 2010; Kumar, 2017). According to Kumar (2017), children who have negative relationships with their biological parents have negative relationships with the stepparent and vice versa. If relationships between stepparents and stepchildren are negative, the marital relationship can be strained. Jensen & Ganong (2020) found that mothers in second marriages functioned as gatekeepers, defenders, mediators, and interpreters. These functions serve to protect children, mediate conflict with the stepparent, and cultivate empathy and understanding between the child and the stepparent. Even though the stepparent could fill the role, mothers more often perform the responsibilities because of gender role norms and pressure.

Stepfathers have different experiences than mothers but serve a key role in making the stepfamily work. One way is helping form a consensus of how the house will be run regarding finances, parenting roles, rules and discipline, resources, and relationship with an ex-spouse to maintain marital quality. A consensus can decrease problems and promote psychological adjustment for children (Gold, 2010). At the beginning of remarriage, it can be challenging to agree on how the house should be run (Anderson & Greene, 2013). Dissatisfaction and tension

are associated with discipline and the distribution of resources. Defining roles can help decrease conflict and increase cohesion in blended families (Kumar, 2017; Mirecki et al, 2013).

To establish family cohesion, remarried partners need to temper animosity toward ex-spouses. Struggles with the ex-spouse and can interfere with the couple's ability to form a satisfying and stable second marriage (McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007). Issues may include child custody, working through disagreements, and cooperation. Couples need to support one another and work together as a united front (Kumar, 2017). The stepfather needs to learn how he fits into the blended family to build relationships within the various subsystems. Children who maintain positive relationships with their biological parents tend to view their stepparents positively. If there is animosity between the biological and stepparents, it can create relationship challenges within the blended family (Kumar, 2017).

### **Summary**

Research on stepfathers indicates that they experience a range of situations in the blended family context. Stepfathers have reported issues related to marital satisfaction, relationships with stepchildren, and family resources. Overall, stepfathers that have good relationships with the biological mother have good relationships with children and vice versa. Blyaert et al. (2016) found that stepfathers generally reported good relationships with their stepchildren and were happy in their role. Blyaert et al. (2016) suggested further research into the experiences of stepfathers for marital and family therapy. This research will explore stepfather's experiences in blended families to advance counseling services regarding transition, new roles, and relationships.

### **Theoretical Framework**

FST was used to ground this research. Keller and Noon (2020) stated that FST was developed by Bowen from his research conducted in the 1940s and 1950s. In developing FST, Bowen included family researchers from different disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Jensen and Shafer (2013) iterated that FST is defined by the roles, rules, and connections of family members, not individuals. Stepfamilies that can balance roles, rules, subsystems, and resources can attain some stability and adaptability. Stability is formed from the relationship between the stepfather and the mother.

### **History of FST**

Bowen the pioneer of family psychotherapy (Haefner, 2014) developed FST from research he conducted at Menniger in the 1940s and 1950s (Rakow, 2016) and in the 1970s when he worked at the Georgetown University Medical Center, where he continued to develop his concepts and refine his theory (Haefner, 2014). Bowen believed that “as a natural system, the family has predictable patterns of growth, adaptation, and change throughout the life course responding to life events, over generations” (Keller & Noone, 2020, p. 1). The emotional relationship between family members was based on their family and knowing the family history of the stepfather is important when entering therapy. Bowen noted the stepfather’s family origin was key to his ability to be flexible and adapt to change (Blyaert et al, 2016; Bourne, 2011). Those experiences provide the information needed to assess relationship issues between himself and the multitude of relationships that can be involved in a blended family. Forming relationships can be complex and the family may need therapy to adjust and overcome them.

Family therapy began with research on clinical mental health diagnoses like schizophrenia because those who had schizophrenia did not respond to psychotherapies (Bavelas

& Segal, 1982). Sigmund Freud's way of treating mental health was different from Bowen's (Bourne, 2011). Keller and Noone (2020) compared Freud and Bowen's ideologies and reasoned that Freud "saw the problem as within the individual" but Bowen viewed the family as a "natural phenomenon" (p. 33).

Considering the family, a natural system, predictable patterns develop involving growth, adaptation, and change. In stepfamilies, these patterns change due to changes in family dynamics of the new family (Keller & Noone, 2020), causing imbalances and a reawakening of previous normative behaviors (Alvarez, 2018). For remarried couples, emotional issues stem from their family of origin and can be impacted by unresolved emotional issues from the first marriage (Faber, 2004). For stepfamilies to be successful, they need to be able to balance stagnation and rapid change that occurs in the stepfamily's formation (Jensen & Shafer, 2013). When finding balance within the blended family structure has a high level of difficulty, therapy may help. Blended family members should seek counseling from counselors and therapists who specialize in human behavior.

### **Progression of FST**

After World War II, scientists and therapists began looking at human behavior from different points of view (Johnson & Ray, 2016). In the 1950s, psychotherapy became the preferred treatment for families (Bavelas & Segal, 1982). That was when Bowen developed FST. It started as an experiment conducted at the Menninger Foundation (Rakow, 2016) and led to his work on family therapy at Georgetown University (David, 1979).

FST was developed to explain how family problems have shaped the evolution of the family system (Priest, 2021). During the time FST was being created and refined, researchers were just beginning to discover what shapes human behavior and family interactions. Over the



course of thirty years, researchers have gained more knowledge on the effects that evolution and genetics have on the family system (Priest, 2021). Currently, more is understood about the family's biological systems and how they are impacted by emotional issues. With new understanding, family therapy and the way human development and family relationships are studied have changed (Erdem & Safi, 2018). Through family studies, sciences, and concept clarification, the theory continues to be developed (Keller & Noone, 2020).

As the ideology about family systems evolved, it was applied to multiple types of families and the subsystems that exist within them including blended families. Blended families have complex subsystems that are challenging to navigate. Braithwaite et al. (2001) found that blended families had to define and redefine communication boundaries between subsystems. They posited that challenges in the blended family stemmed from communication. Kumar (2017) found within these subsystems (step and custodial parent, biological parent, stepsibling, in-laws) establishing positive relationships early in the process contributed to the family's longevity. Jensen and Shafer (2013) suggested the ability to balance change creates a level of stability.

FST has evolved and gained momentum and has been applied to different family types, including blended families (The Bowen Center, 2023). Blended families are a combination of individuals with different connections. Stepfathers are in the outside position because they do not have a shared history with the biological children. Stepfathers carry learned behaviors from their family of origin that affect how they resolve problems, develop relationships, and work through trust issues. Using FST, the stepfather needs to collaborate with the biological mother to reestablish roles and relationships that create stability in the blended family. Sometimes the stepfather may have to let go of ineffective learned behaviors obtained from his family of origin

as he differentiates himself and exhibits appropriate behavior resolving problems and confronting challenges.

### **Theoretical Constructs**

To understand FST in the context of blended families and the role of stepfathers, the foundational constructs must be explored. Of the various constructs that make up the structure of FST, DoS, and triangles were used to demonstrate family dynamics in blended families and how stepfathers' function in their new role.

#### **Differentiation of Self**

DoS involves the ability to regulate affect, observe and manage reactions, and the degree to which a family functions (well or poorly) depending on its level of differentiation or autonomy (Harrison, 2010; Jankowski & Hooper 2012; Tobin-Ashe, 1979). According to Tobin-Ashe (1979), well-functioning family members can maintain differentiation or personal autonomy, be goal-directed, and maintain good relationships with family members over many generations. Poorly functioning families are not able to meet any of these positive family interactions and suffer from physical or emotional illness, social dysfunction, family cutoffs, and family anxiety and stress. Negative interactions created by low levels of DoS indicate that the adults did not learn to regulate their emotions during the stage of "emerging adulthood" (Jankowski & Hooper, 2012, p. 226).

Brown (2008) conveyed that the ability to differentiate requires the ability to respond to situations with less emotion and more intellect. Maintaining good relationships in a stepfamily creates stability and positivity. To achieve this goal, and for the health of the marital relationship, stepfathers must be able to work through their problems by thinking before responding and expressing their feelings "under the restraint of thoughtful goals and principles that give any

member of a family an increased sense of being solid in their relationship” (p.13). Stepfathers in blended families with positive marital and stepfather-stepchild relationships exhibit positive parenting behaviors (Fitzgerald et al, 2020).

When blended family members have difficulty adjusting, the family becomes unstable. Hadley et al. (2019) found that individuals bring their life experiences into relationships, and the way one reacts is important. They reported that stepfathers need the ability to react to various situations maturely to build family cohesiveness and stability. Stepfathers must be able to separate the way they responded in the previous marriage from how they respond in the second marriage. The issues from the first marriage should not be brought into the second marriage. Maturity and DoS is required.

Faber (2004) concluded that marital satisfaction in remarriages can be difficult because issues from the first marriage can affect trust. Building trust can cause anxiety and make it difficult to think clearly, behave appropriately, and solve problems. If problems go unresolved or are hard to resolve, the learned behaviors of dealing with conflict manifest in the remarried couple. The same behaviors may have impacted the first marriage and contributed to its dissolution. Stepfathers with high levels of differentiation are more able to come to a resolution because they can separate the emotional reactions they had with their previous wife from their reactions with their new wife. They recognize they are two different people and remain objective in the face of anxiety and react with emotional restraint.

Stepfathers in remarried relationships need to examine how they react and respond to issues that affect their marital relationship. Reacting based on first marriages or inappropriately based on experiences during their upbringing, they could create a more challenging situation

with divorce being offered as a resolution. Stepfathers need to be able to differentiate in conflict and learn to not overreact by maintaining a level of calm and thinking before reacting.

### **Triangular Relationships in the Blended Family**

Triangulation occurs when conflict arises between a marital couple and a third person is brought into the situation to decrease the tension and stress (Faber, 2004; Klever, 2009; Papero, 2014). Although there can be many forms of triangulation, the most common is that between children and parents. Adults with low levels of DoS may suffer from marital conflict and are more apt to triangulate their children (Song et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2021).

Overreacting to conflict increases tension and stress. Shortal (2004) posited, in a blended family triangle, the biological mother loves her children and husband but lives in a state of conflict which is difficult for her because, "she is the connector" (p. 3). Being the connector means the biological mother influences their relationship. Research indicates that the stepfather and the biological mother's relationship influences the child's feelings toward the stepfather. Poor stepfather-stepchild relationships can lead to low marital satisfaction. Stepfathers must take an active role in building and maintaining good relationships with their wives to decrease the need for triangulation by using effective conflict resolution skills, respect, a functional couple style, and counseling if needed (McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007).

The emotional reactions of people during time of anxiety can cause behavior patterns of closeness and separation to constantly shift within the triangle (Papero, 2014). Klever (2009) determined that a parent's family of origin, their primary triangle, determines how they emotionally react to situations. Similarly, Dallos and Vetere (2011) concluded that emotional attachments determine how an individual reacts to a situation. Being that triangles can be formed from biological parents and children, a "parent, and/or another family member, such as a

stepparent or grandparent” (Klever, 2009, p. 140), it is important to understand that when spouses triangulate their children, the children will side with the parent they are close to. In blended families, the child will likely side with the mother instead of the stepfather thus causing more conflict. Stepfathers and their spouses need to not overreact in stressful situations and think logically to manage the situation without triangulating anyone (Faber, 2004).

New families have a high probability of triangulating because of the stress and tension involved in forming new relationships, revising roles, and dealing with parenting challenges. During this time of tension, family members are continuously pushing and pulling one another which influences each participant's level of functioning. Tension in the blended family can cause a “series of interlocking triangles” (David, 1979, p. 260). During times of tension, stress can transfer from one relationship to the next in a triangle which makes conflict resolution difficult. Martin-Uzzi and Duval-Tsioles (2013) examined the effect of first marriages on second marriages in a blended family. They discovered that the biological parent and child side with one another more than the mother and stepfather. This is when differentiation of self of the stepfather is needed for him to appropriately respond to problematic situations. Triangles can only resolve when adults evaluate conflict to find a suitable solution.

### **The Connection of FST to Second Marriages in Blended Families**

Conflict resolution is a valuable skill for remarriages. McCarthy and Ginsberg (2007) stated that sixty-five to seventy percent of remarriages end in divorce. Zeleznikow and Zeleznikow (2015) found that sixty percent of remarriages will end in divorce even though blended families have begun to exceed traditional nuclear families. Although remarriages have a higher divorce rate than first marriages, marital satisfaction and pride is greater in successful second marriages. Factors that contribute to successful second marriages include letting go of

emotions and feelings from the first marriage, choosing a second spouse wisely, and building a resilient, strong marital bond with respect, trust, and intimacy (McCarthy et al., 2007).

FST is based on the emotional connections between family members and the ability to evolve beyond learned reactions and react appropriately to difficult situations. In times of turmoil, couples might experience high anxiety related to the outcome of the first marriage. It is important for marital couples, during times of conflict, to be able to deal with conflict, to remain objective, and not be emotionally reactive (Faber, 2004; McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007). FST also states that the family is defined by roles, rules, and connections between family members. As a result of seminal testing of the theory of human family functioning at the National Institute of Mental Health Institute, Bowen changed the original concept of the theory from individuals to the family, concluding that all family members are eventually impacted by changes in one member (The Bowen Center, 2023; Rakow, 2016). The changes and adjustments that occur in forming and maintaining a blended family are more challenging when stepfathers have difficulty adjusting to the change. Difficulties can create challenges that are hard to overcome causing blended families to dissolve.

Transitioning into a blended family involves issues developing relationships amongst multiple people with the possibility of it going wrong (Gonzales, 2009). The subsystems within a blended family need to work together to make the transition smoother; however, the multiple relationships of a blended family can create a disconnection and the family to suffer (Higginbotham et al., 2012). The way to correct such family dysfunction is to deal with unresolved issues and have open and respectful communication to assuage issues from the earlier marriage (Faber, 2014; Tobin-Ashe, 1979). When problems arise and anxiety set in, individuals may fall back on their old, learned behaviors, become defensive, and prone to self-protect. These

tendencies reflect the ability to differentiate when in conflict can impact the stability of second marriages and (Faber, 2014).

Second marriages that form blended families are plagued with problems that can cause a multitude of issues between the subsystems. FST explains the interconnecting emotional relationships that make this possible. How individuals react to these issues is often based on automatic behavior learned from their family of origin. It is important for remarried couples not to overreact to problems to curb triangulation. Learning to react appropriately to issues helps improve marital satisfaction and create good relationships between stepfathers and stepchildren.

### **FST Applied to Stepfathers and Blended Families**

FST describes and explains the dynamics of family relationships and holds that what affects one family member will eventually affect all family members. While Bowen did not apply the constructs of FST directly to blended families, from a family systems perspective, these families have a chance to be more successful if the basic principles of FST are applied to (Jensen & Shafer, 2013).

Blended family members do not share a history which makes it challenging to develop close relationships (Kumar, 2017). The lack of shared history also makes it difficult to resolve issues because of unfamiliarity with how blended family members resolved conflict before blending their families. This suggests that families are defined by the roles, rules, and connections of family members. For blended families to be successful, they need to be able to balance roles, rules, resources, boundaries, and goals to obtain stability (Jensen & Shafer, 2013).

Forming stability in a blended family involves the relationships between the couple and the children. Children in blended families may have difficulty adjusting to the new family and developing a relationship with the stepfather. If the mother and stepfather do not have a good

relationship and have a high level of conflict, the stepchildren will have difficulty adjusting and vice versa (Hanson & McLanahan, 2001). Positive relationships between stepparents and biological parents can increase the bond between the stepfather and stepchildren. A positive stepparent-stepchild relationship can increase emotional and financial support from the stepfather (Kumar, 2017). In blended families with good relationships, triangulation is not as prevalent nor needed to resolve conflict.

A positive relationship between the stepfather and stepchild adds to marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction in a remarriage takes time because of unrealistic expectations couples may have and the children in the relationship. Blended families have more difficulty balancing subsystems (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). Remarried couples need a style that works well for them. It should create a functional relationship, allow for weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and address conflict effectively (McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007). The ability to resolve conflict with emotional intelligence rather than overreacting helps lower conflict.

Conflict resolution is important in helping blended families remain intact. Stepfathers are tasked with taking on the responsibility of a parent but face the reality of not having the power of being in a father's position such as caring for a child that he might not feel comfortable disciplining and forming a relationship with. Through the lens of FST, the stepfather will need to connect with the stepchildren and new spouse to bring stability to the family. When experiencing problems in the marital and stepfather-stepchild relationships, the stepfather needs to be aware of how he reacts. His reactions could stem from how he handled issues in his first marriage and learned behaviors from his family. High levels of DoS occur when the stepfather possesses the ability to react with more intellect than emotion.



### Summary

FST offers a unique perspective for understanding the blended family and the stepfather's role in a successful second marriage. Current literature focuses on the impact children have on blended families. Limited research has been conducted on stepfathers in remarriages and blended families. Further research is needed to explore how stepfathers describe their experiences in a blended family and the impact this type of family has had on their life experiences.

This research addressed the stepfather's role in a successful second marriage in a blended family. The study provided awareness of how stepfathers feel they fit into the role and how it feels to be a husband in a second marriage. The results of this research can provide counselors and therapists with data to treat stepfathers and blended families adding effective tools, techniques, and strategies.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the stepfather's perspective on his role in a blended family and what that role meant for his second marriage. This chapter includes the Design, Research Questions, Settings, Participants, Procedures to Follow for This Study, Researchers Role, Data collection, Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, Ethical Considerations, and Summary.

### Design

#### Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology was used for this study. Edmund Husserl is considered the father of philosophical phenomenology in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Eliada & Guillen, 2019). Husserl believed it was the best way to help individuals become acutely aware of their own experience of a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2012). Marvin Heidegger (1927/1962), a student of Husserl's, took a different position. Heidegger believed in an interpreted world and developed a psychological form of phenomenology, hermeneutical phenomenology (Smith, 2015). Hermeneutical phenomenology involves describing and reflecting on a phenomenon to understand the essence of the lived experience by using bracketing to dismiss subjective components and pre-understandings (Dörfler & Stierand, 2020; Smith et al., 2012). Heidegger focused on how people see the world and how they make meaning of it through interpretation (Smith et al., 2012). Hermeneutical phenomenology elucidated the stepfather's interpretations of his role in a successful second marriage and what his role as a husband meant for the blended family.

#### The Methodology for This Qualitative Study

Holley and Harris (2019) posited that qualitative methodology is “centered on interpretation and situated in a specific context or setting” (p. 114). Phenomenology provided the appropriate methodology to explore stepfather’s perspectives of their role as husbands and fathers in a blended family context. Interviews were the primary means of data. Open-ended questions allowed greater exploration of the stepfather’s lived experiences by showing how a “phenomenon shapes a person’s life” (Holley & Harris, 2019, p. 115). Hermeneutic phenomenology was used because it allowed interpretation of the stepfather’s perspective of their lived experiences for a successful second marriage (Mohamed, 2017). Once data was collected and analyzed, I was able to use the research to bring more attention to the phenomenon.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the stepfather’s perspective on his role in a blended family and what that role meant for his second marriage. The following research questions were used.

#### **Central Research Question**

How do stepfathers describe their role for a successful second marriage in a blended family?

#### **Guiding Question**

What does the role of a husband in a second marriage mean to stepfathers?

### **Setting**

The sites were physical and/or virtual based on the comfort level of the participants. COVID-19, was a relevant factor when designing this research. A physical location afforded privacy and allowed participants to feel comfortable being open and honest. Home visits were offered if participants wanted to meet in a physical setting if the interview could be conducted

without distractions. Neutral locations were also offered which can be safe and come with minimal distractions. According to Durdella (2020, p. 4) neutral locations can be favorable because, “you drive, walk, bike, or take public transit and arrive at some place where you can open a door or enter a location that is touchable.” If participants preferred virtual interviews, the same considerations were made as in physical settings. The interviews were conducted with minimal interruptions and the participants were made to feel comfortable sharing information on that platform. Reliable internet service was a criterion for virtual interviews.

### **Participants**

Selection was conducted using purposeful sampling to ensure consistency in the study and selected for convenience through personal contacts. I choose the initial participants and employed snowballing, recommendations from participants (Smith et al, 2012; Stratton, 2021). According to Smith (2015), there was no single correct sample size, and it was posited that the researcher should always be pragmatic and choose the sample based on participants prepared to participate. Durdella (2020) made a similar statement that phenomenology generally had a smaller sample size. This study followed the pattern from the phenomenological literature by maintaining a small sample size of 8-12 participants. Eight to twelve participants was a good size for conducting and transcribing interviews and providing sufficient data to answer the research questions. A larger dataset had the potential to hinder the time, reflection, and dialogue for a successful analysis (Smith et al., 2012). The participants were not ethnic or age specific but were stepfathers in second marriages and had been married for at least six months.

### **Procedures**

Approval was granted from the Institutional Review Board before fieldwork began. Once permission was granted, participants were contacted to discuss their participation, ask questions,

and voice concerns they had about participating. Participants were engaged in a conversation about the study, the purpose of the study, and their role in the study. The participants received a form that described the interview as the primary form of data collection, the transcription process, consent to record the interview, and the option not to participate.

Interviews were semi-structured and validated by allowing participants to review the transcriptions for accuracy. Per Smith et al. (2012), transcribing interviews verbatim allows an analytic interpretation in detail with support from the verbatim quotes of the participants. All words and interactions that occurred during the interviews were included in the transcriptions. Long pauses and utterances were noted but not coded. The margins were large enough on the sides of the pages and between interview questions for coding notes. Completed transcriptions were reread for accuracy, emerging and recurring themes, and final edits (Gourley, 2000). Paper trails or audit trail notes were used to document stages of analyses to facilitate following the research to check its validity (Smith et al., 2012).

### **The Researcher's Role**

I was interested in this phenomenology because I am a product of a blended family with a stepfather. I have never fully understood the role of a stepparent, specifically a stepfather. My stepfather always appeared to be afraid or uneasy about parenting. It is important to conduct this study to find out how men perceive their role in a blended family. Their perceptions might help in areas such as counseling. This unique form of family needs different strategies, tools, and counseling services than nuclear families. The participants for this study were acquaintances, referrals from participants, and family that fit the participant profile. To control biases, notes were kept during the entire process to make sure they did not impact the study in any way.

### **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews and documents were used for data collection (Smith, 2015; Smith et al., 2012). Interviews allowed participants to provide detailed, rich descriptions of their experiences with the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2012). During interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions to encourage conversation about their experiences and how they made meaning out of them allowing for the potential of follow-up questions based on their answers (Smith, 2015). The interview schedule is included in Appendix A. It was created through reflecting about the questions and considering what should be asked based on the literature related to the topic, their order, and how to address participant hesitation (Smith, 2015; Smith et al., 2012). The questions were led by the research topic and phrased to ensure the comfort of participants. The interview schedule helped with the flow of the interview and interaction between the interviewer and interviewee (Durdella, 2019).

Participant participated in one interview in a location of their choosing. The location of the interview was important to ensure the participant's comfort and to minimize distractions (Smith et al., 2012). Easy questions were asked first, then more challenging topics were discussed (Smith, 2015; Smith et al., 2012).

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis section followed the analytical procedures of Braun & Clark (2012). Thematic analysis (TA) was used. TA helps establish patterns and themes across a dataset and allows researchers to make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. Using TA provided a means for discovering themes relevant to the research questions. TA is flexible and accessible and different forms of it can be used to analyze data.

The data were coded using transcribed interviews, a coding book, and software programs designed to analyze qualitative data. Coding text helped establish patterns and themes (Belotto, 2018). Johnny Saldana's book (2021) was used to gain more knowledge on understanding coding, what to code, and the different methods of coding.

Braun & Clarke's recommendations (2006) were used to guide the thematic analysis by taking the following steps. **Phase 1: *Becoming familiar with the data*** - Interviews were transcribed and reviewed by participants for accuracy. I immersed myself in the data by reading and rereading it to identify emerging themes and patterns. **Phase 2: *Generating initial codes*** - Words, phrases, and sentences were marked by highlighting them, using Post-it Notes, or making side notes. In this phase, it was important to code for several potential themes/patterns, code data extracts inclusively, and code individual extracts of data in as many themes as possible. **Phase 3: *Searching for themes*** - In this phase, codes were analyzed to look for overall themes. Data were reviewed for similarities or overlaps between codes and clustering of codes. This process determined if the codes shared similarities that described data patterns. Codes and themes were written on paper, Post-it Notes, or typed on the computer to organize them. This allowed time to discard codes that did not form a theme, but they were kept in case it was determined they needed to be included later. **Phase 4: *Reviewing the theme*** - Codes and themes were reviewed and assessed for pattern cohesiveness. If there were any issues related to the cohesiveness of the data or themes, the data was reviewed to make adjustments. **Phase 5: *Refining and naming themes*** - Each theme was accompanied by a detailed analysis to provide a complete picture of how the theme fit into the overall research. Theme evaluations were conducted to determine sub-themes. If the scope and content of the themes could not be explained in a couple of sentences, they were refined. Once themes were fine-tuned, they were named.

**Phase 6: *Producing the report*** - A report provided a detailed analysis of the literature and the research questions in a way to, “convince the reader of the merit and validity” of the analysis (p. 93).

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research emphasizes exploring individual experiences, describing phenomena, and developing theory (Cope, 2014). To show that the research findings could be trusted, the following criteria were used: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. These criteria were utilized to show that the research aligned with the participant's view, could be applied in other contexts, findings were supported by and derived from the data, and researcher biases were excluded (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

### **Credibility**

Cope (2014) posited that credibility relates to the truth of data from the participant's view and the researcher's interpretation and representation of them. Multiple methods of achieving triangulation for data collection i.e., member checking, reflective journaling, and audio recordings were utilized. Using multiple methods of triangulation allowed an “articulate, comprehensive view of the phenomenon” (p. 90). Reflexive notes were taken during the entire process which helped decrease research bias. They allow researchers to note personal experiences and preconceptions about the participant's experiences (Smith et al., 2012). Audio recordings captured the information from the participant's experiences, making the interview process more efficient (Smith, 2015).

Cope (2014) found that prolonged engagement, audit trails, and member checking aided in trustworthiness and credibility. Prolonged engagement allows the researcher to develop a participant relationship to build rapport and get detailed rich, detailed answers. I built rapport



through multiple contacts throughout the process. Audit trails or a collection of notes and decisions made by the researcher, can be used by another researcher to replicate the study, and see if the conclusions match. Audit trails were also included in the reflexive journal containing notes, decisions, and assumptions made during the study (Cope, 2014). Member checking occurs when the researcher gets feedback from participants regarding themes participant quotes (Cope, 2014). Participants were provided a copy of the transcribed interview to verify the information and ensure agreement with allowing their quotes and answers to be used for the study.

### **Dependability, Confirmability, and Transferability**

Dependability and confirmability were achieved through thick, rich descriptions from participants that readers can use to critique the credibility of the study and verify the interpretations. Confirmability was demonstrated by explaining how conclusions and interpretations were derived (Cope, 2014). Smith et al. (2012) found that using thick, rich descriptions is a way to verify confirmability and allow the reader to connect to the study, their personal and professional experience, and claims in the literature. This study was interpreted and written in a way that allows readers to transfer the results of this study to “contexts which are more, or less, similar” (p. 51).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were made through various means. I requested and received permission from the Institutional Review Board before beginning fieldwork. Once permission was granted, informed consent was obtained from participants. According to Smith et al. (2012), participants must be asked to sign a consent form before being interviewed and after receiving a detailed explanation of the process. Before interviews began, consent was revisited the participants were asked for oral consent. Participant privacy was respected, and confidentiality

was given as much as possible including removing participant identifying information.

Participants were given the option to review any materials chosen for publication to decide if they agreed to it being shared publicly. Participants were given a specific date or time frame in which they could withdraw, and they were be provided a chance to review the transcript for accuracy. Documents and information gained through electronic means were password protected, and only I have access to the password. Transcripts are in a password-protected electronic file that only I had access to.

### **Summary**

The methodology of this qualitative phenomenological study was described in this chapter. The research questions driving this study were included along with the various components of the study itself. The chapter included the Overview, Design, Research Questions, Settings, Participants, Procedures to Follow for this Study, Researchers Role, Data collection, Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, and Ethical Considerations.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

Phenomenology was used to explore stepfathers' perspectives of their role in blended families and what that role means for their second marriages. In phenomenological research, the participants need to have lived the experience to show how they make sense of their social and personal world (Smith, 2015). Convenience and snowballing sampling were used. The sample includes eight stepfathers who experienced the role for at least six months. Summaries of the participants' experiences are provided. Confidentiality is protected using pseudonyms. The themes that resulted from the data were used in the results.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using various steps to discover themes. After reviewing the coding methods, I read and reread the transcripts and listened again to the audio recordings. Rereading the transcripts and listening to the recordings again helped me become more familiar with the data and start to discover merging themes. Next, each data set was reviewed line by line to identify words, phrases, and sentences that would suggest a theme was emerging. Words, phrases, and sentences marked as codes were then isolated and written on Post-it Notes for each participant. This process was done repeatedly. After writing the codes on Post-it Notes, they were placed on a board under similar pattern headings presented as themes (Braun et al., 2006). The themes were then organized on a Word document several times to ensure the patterns were true to the data. After the themes were determined, they were reviewed and finely tuned. The names of the themes give the reader an idea of what the theme is about (Braun et al., 2006).

To address validity and credibility, several steps were taken. To establish rapport and facilitate engagement, contact was initiated with the participants for participation in the study

(Cope, 2014). Participants were asked to sign that confirmed their willingness. Subsequently, participants were asked to determine suitable dates, times, and locations for interviews. Regular communications with the participants fostered rapport, particularly with the stepfathers (Cope, 2014).

The recorded interviews were transcribed. To ensure accuracy, participants were furnished with copies of their respective transcripts and encouraged to carefully examine them and confirm their accuracy. To enable readers to comprehend the alignment between the study's findings and the content, the data was presented with thick, rich descriptions that provided contextualization (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To enhance data credibility, a comprehensive audit trail system was employed, enabling peer review and meticulous examination for potential replication (Cope, 2014). The peer review process involved three qualified degreed professionals who discussed the findings. They were granted access to the data analysis and audit trails, facilitating an exhaustive assessment (Cope, 2014). The reviewers concurred with the findings, and no aberrant results beyond the research scope were reported. The collective agreement among the reviewers confirms the consistency of the results and the reliability of the findings. The commitment to this peer review process supports the overall credibility of the data, instilling confidence in the study's outcomes.

### **Participants**

The participants were stepfathers who had been married for at least 6 months in a second marriage. Ethnicity was not a criterion but was added to their portraits for a rich description of their identities. They enthusiastically shared their lives and told interesting and intriguing stories of how they met their spouses and blended their families into a now common, yet unique, family.

Demographic information of each participant is listed in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identity.

**Table 1**

*Participants Demographics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b><u>Number of Children</u> Biological/Stepchildren</b>
Drew	53	African American	1-2
Charlie	42	Caucasian	0-3
John	58	Caucasian	3-2
Raymond	52	African American	2-2
Brett	43	African American	2-2
Todd	71	African American	1-2
Russell	56	African American	5-2
Tyler	56	African American	2-2

Drew was a 53-year-old African American who worked construction and other jobs. During the recruitment process, he was hesitant to participate. After a couple of conversations, he agreed. The interview took place at a residence where there was privacy to conduct the interview. He had been remarried for about sixteen years in a blended family. He had one biological child and three stepchildren. When he remarried, his stepchildren ranged from elementary school age to adulthood. His biological child was in the infant-toddler age when he remarried. At the time of this study, his stepchildren were grown and lived independently. His biological child was a teen in high school. He is a product of a blended family, and his first marriage was a blended family. During the interview, he expressed loving his family and wanting to make sure all the children were happy when he stated, "They love me. And, and, and I'm glad that I was able to, you know, show them, love, you know, without, you know, partiality."

Charlie was a 42-year-old Caucasian middle school English teacher. He did a virtual interview using Zoom. He had been remarried for 3 years in a blended family and had three stepchildren. When he remarried, his stepchildren were fifteen, thirteen, and eight years old. At the time of the study, his stepchildren lived at home. This was his first experience being married in a blended family. He worked diligently to build a relationship with his stepchildren. The most challenging had been with his stepson showed resistance due to his age and another male figure in his life. Charlie continued to work at overcoming the challenges because he loved his family and helping his stepchildren become successful adults.

John was a 58-year-old Caucasian working in the restaurant business. He had been remarried for two years in a blended family and had three biological children and two stepchildren. When he remarried, his stepchildren were seventeen and nineteen years old. At the time of the study, his biological children lived independently, and his stepchildren lived at home. This was his first experience being remarried in a blended family. John had issues with the way his stepchildren were raised; he felt their upbringing had contributed to their lack of responsibility. However, he understood that some could be attributed to their parents' divorce. He loved his family and had interesting relationships with his current and previous wife. They all worked at building their relationships with one another for the betterment of their children. He described how they went out as a family after his oldest son's college baseball game, "it wasn't uncommon for us to go to Charlotte, watch a game, and then go out as a family with my ex-wife and my new wife." He wanted the best for his biological children and his stepchildren.

Raymond was a 50-two-year-old African-American military veteran working in the dental profession. He had three biological children and two stepchildren. When he remarried, his stepchildren were 2- and 5-years-old. At the time of this study, his stepchildren lived

independently, and his biological children lived with their mother, and the daughter he had with his wife lived at home. This was his first experience being remarried in a blended family. He is in love with his wife and loves his family. At the beginning of his marriage, his biological children were young and went through a stage of not understanding how he could live with his new family and not with them. He was able to reassure them that he loved them and was there for them no matter what because he was still their dad. He did not have any long-term challenges with his stepchildren. They were able to make it work with the cooperation and involvement of all the parents for the sake of the children.

Brett was a forty-three-year-old African American working as a probation parole officer. He had two biological children and three stepchildren. When he remarried, his stepchildren ranged from toddlers to young adults. One of his biological children was an adult in college and the other lived with his mother. Brett's oldest stepdaughter and stepson live on their own, and his youngest stepdaughter lives in the same household. This was his second experience being remarried in a blended family. Brett had some unpleasant experiences in his previous marriages, and they contributed to what he looked for in a relationship and a marriage. It also helped him grow and understand himself. He found what he was looking for in his current wife whom he had been married to for ten years. Although he had challenges in his relationships with his biological and stepchildren stemming from relationships with their mothers, he continued trying and standing by all his children to build better relationships. He was satisfied with the progress. He loved his family and wanted nothing but the best for them. Through the experiences and turbulence of being married and remarried he shared, "I lived by myself for a while and took time to know who I, who I was so I guess patience was one of the first things I learned, learned about myself, what I needed."

Todd was a 71-year-old African-American pastor. He had a biological child and five stepchildren. All the children were grown and lived independently. This was his first experience being remarried in a blended family. When he remarried, his biological and stepchildren were young and lived at home. They did not have any issues with their children getting along. Todd stated they tested their children by letting them stay home together and to their surprise, there were no issues. The kids got along well and had a good time together. Todd loved his family and was there for them when they needed him. He told a sweet story of how he met his wife and the love he instantly had for her. He knew she was “the one” as soon as he saw her:

Like Rose was already there, and I came with my little nephew, because I was taking care of my mom and dad. My little nephew asked me if was I going to assist with today, and I told him to let me make sure Grandma and Granddad can handle things, and I did. I went to the church with them and on the way, after service, Miss Rose pulled up, and I rolled down my window a little bit, so she could see my eyes. “That girl,” I said to myself, I say, “yeah,” I sure did, and that was the first and only time, and I knew that was her.

Russell was a 56-year-old African American entrepreneur, high school, and AAU basketball coach. The biological and stepchildren are grown and living independently. This was his first experience being remarried in a blended family. He had challenges in relationships with some of his biological children but seemed to have a good relationship with his stepchildren. He had a great relationship with his in-laws, and they did not interfere in his marriage. This gave him space to build a good relationship with his wife whom he loved dearly. His wife, who is from a blended family, helped him adjust to marrying and forming a blended family. He loved his family and was there for them.



Tyler was a 56-year-old African American military veteran working as an entrepreneur. At the time of the study, he was raising his granddaughter. When he remarried the second time, his stepchildren were in their pre-teen to teenage years. All the children were grown and living independently. His second wife was his first experience being remarried in a blended family. During his second marriage he and his wife, who has since passed, presented a united front and agreed on how they would parent and the roles each would function in. He was the head of the household, but they made decisions together. He described their communication about parenting:

We both met our children early on in our relationship, and trust was quickly established in respecting how we both raised our children and the similarities in our approach as parents. We had an agreement that we would have a united front in how we communicated and disciplined our children, and that united front remained in place during our entire relationship.

They faced challenging times and divorced, but he maintained respect for his wife and stood by her faithfully. Although his relationship with his stepchildren had challenges, he maintained a relationship with them and still held the role of a father. He was remarried and raising his step-granddaughter. At the time of the study, his wife was helping raise his step-granddaughter, because his stepdaughter was not able to assume the responsibility. He had a great relationship with his wife and in-laws. His biological children and grandchildren had a good relationship with his wife. He loved all the children and grandchildren and wanted the best for them. Regarding the relationship with his in-laws, he said it was "extremely positive. My wife and I have agreed that in the event her mother becomes ill or can no longer support herself that she will move in with us. We purchased our home with that plan in mind."

The participant portraits provided insight about their decision to remarry and form blended families. Their journeys transformed in different ways with the same goal; to merge their families into successful blended families. The themes that were developed from data analysis are described in the next section. Table 2 provides the research questions guiding this study and themes that emerged from the data.

## Results

**Table 2**

*Research Questions and Themes*

Research Questions	Themes
RQ1: How do stepfathers describe their role for a successful second marriage in a blended family?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Supportive husband</li> <li>2. Building and maintaining relationships with stepchildren</li> <li>3. Being available at all times</li> </ol>
RQ2: What does the role of a husband in a second marriage mean to stepfathers?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Loving and respecting their wives</li> <li>2. Father figure</li> <li>3. Overcoming challenges</li> </ol>

The themes that emerged were described using textural and structural descriptions. Textural descriptions are used to describe each participant's perception of his experience and structural descriptions are used to describe how the participant felt and connected to the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The textural themes explained the participants' transformation into blended families and the structural themes explained how the participants experienced being

a remarried stepfather in a blended family. Participants were frank about remarrying into a blended family. Thirty-seven percent questioned their decision to remarry for varying reasons. Drew questioned his decision to remarry due to his religious affiliation and what it meant to remarry with a living ex-spouse. He did not feel “it was the right thing to do by faith,” but others who had been through counseling, “assured me that, you know, you know, you’re not doing anything wrong.” Charlie questioned the decision to remarry briefly because, “[I was] kind of wondering, like, what have I got into. It’s not, not, so much remarried but remarried with children. It’s just more challenging than I thought.” Brett’s past experiences with marriage caused him to question his decision to remarry, but they were able to work through their problems and “learned to be with each other because we want to be with each other.”

Structural descriptions were used to describe how the participants experienced the phenomenon. All the participants had challenges and successes with blending their family. They were determined to make their families work by building and maintaining strong marital and stepfather-stepchild relationships, but they experienced the phenomenon differently. Charlie, Drew, and Raymond had in-law issues but were able to resolve them for the success of their marriage and keeping their families together. Brett, John, Russell, and Tyler had issues with their stepchildren and children. Brett’s youngest stepchild was a teen when he married his mother and Brett did not feel he could or should try to instantly parent him. John did not like the way his stepchildren were coddled by their mother but decided to function more as an extra person in their lives than a parent. Russell did not go into detail about the issues but admitted there were some. Tyler had issues with his stepchildren, and the biggest was his stepdaughter’s accusation of being abused (later dismissed). Todd did not have issues with his stepchildren and shared that the families immediately clicked and the remain good at the time of this study. The participants’

descriptions of their experiences create a better understanding of how they experienced transitioning to and maintaining a blended family.

### **Themes for the Central Research Question**

The three themes are the result of analyzing the data related to the central research question. Stepfathers were asked to describe their role in successful second marriages in a blended family. The themes that emerged were (1) being a supportive husband, (2) building and maintaining relationships with stepchildren, and (3) being available at all times.

#### ***Theme One: Supportive Husband***

Although some of the participants questioned their decision to remarry, they all made references to how much they loved their wives and wanted to make them happy. During the interview, they discussed their relationships with their wives and their stepchildren, co-parenting, and providing support for their families..

Drew mentioned that marriage was about compromise and overcoming differences. In forming a relationship, having a child, and getting married, he reflected that his wife, “wasn’t for being with somebody that had kids, but it didn’t matter to me because I cared about her.” He had an unwavering commitment to his family, including his stepchildren, and understood that he would have to create a relationship with them and interact with their biological father. In support of his wife, he worked through the challenges with his stepchildren and “made sure that the kids were all treated equally, even, you know, with mine and my stepdaughters.”

Like Drew, Charlie understood that supporting his wife meant forming relationships with his stepchildren and being fully involved in the life of the family. Charlie had to overcome challenges to build a good relationship with his stepchildren; his youngest stepchild, his stepson, being the most challenging. He had confidence that they would be able to work through the

challenges. His focus was to “get them to adulthood and be successful, navigate the teenage years.” Financially he helped pay the bills and supported his stepchildren.

Conversely, John did not question remarrying into a blended family. His stepchildren were older. He did have challenges with his stepchildren's lack of responsibility. He understood that how they were raised and the things they were allowed to get away with were related to their parents' divorce, but he did not excuse the behavior. John used the example of cleaning up and how their perspective was different from his:

I'll give you a good example is cleaning up around the house (chuckle). If they're my kids I'm going to be like this and we're going to get it taken care of, um, with her kids because of how they were grown up and how their perception of how the house was asked to be kept or needed to be kept, I wasn't there and I didn't have an influence on that, so for me to take the tone of this needs to get done, this needs to get done, that thing is very difficult because it's not the norm of how they were raised. So, my frustration now lends to her in the fact that this is not acceptable. You need to go handle this as opposed to me just taking the initiative myself because I never want that blowback of, “You're not my father, you're not going to tell me what to do.” But she's always their mother and I think over the two years that we're married they have seen a little of me come out in her, um, in that influence but it's never come from me to them, only because it's not my place you know what I mean.

They were able to work through this challenge and others by working together and supporting one another. After several conversations and compromises, they were able to work it out and move forward. Making everyone comfortable with him in the house, being able to cook, and making them laugh were expressions of love that John continued to contribute to his family.

Raymond did not question his decision to marry but had to overcome challenges with his stepson. At the time of their marriage, his stepson was five and in the protective mode of his mother. Raymond understood had to meet that challenge head-on to work through it. He explained the challenge and overcoming it:

He's protective of his mom so I had to actually understand that and be like, okay, you know, I know this little guy is protecting his mom, you know. I have to spend a little bit more time with him, but we went through that phase where, hey look, if I'm going to be here, I have to be here, in order, not just in presence. I have to be here to discipline him as well if I feel he is not doing something he is supposed to do. So, we both dealt with that for a little while.

While discussing the ways he supported his wife, Raymond shared how they met and the understanding they had with one another:

and everything that I do and, so today, like even me graduating and going to graduate school. When I have, so my wife, she says congratulations. I'm like, "No, congratulations to the two of us, we both did this. So, whatever I do as for you and I, it's not just for me." So, I've learned not to be selfish.

Raymond also supported the family financially. Raymond shared that he supported his family as a husband, father, and stepfather by, "my leadership. My ability to love you throughout no matter what you go through and be willing to go through with you and grow with you."

Brett questioned remarrying because of his prior experience. He had reservations based on how his previous marriages ended and the "unforgivable" relationship he had with his first wife. The relationship with his current wife was helped from forming a friendship first:

[I] learned a lot about compromise and listening. Umm, I'm still learning a lot, but it helps that we work together and she kind of knows what I'm going through, and I know what she's going through somewhat, and it helps that we can relate like that their ability to relate to one another on such an intimate level helped them build a strong relationship. They both came to the marriage with children and had to navigate co-parenting. Although his children did not live with them, her children did. He had to establish a relationship with his stepchildren and work through relationship challenges. He contributed financially and through his "ability to protect and provide."

Todd did not question his decision to remarry. He was smitten the first time he saw his wife. Their children were younger and had a great relationship from the beginning:

I went to the church with them and on the way, after service, Miss Rose pulled up and I rolled down my window a little bit so she could see my eyes. "That girl," I said to myself, I say, "yeah." I sure did and that was the first and only time and I knew that was her.

In the face of any issues, he remained levelheaded and offered good instruction to his children and spouse. Todd supported his family financially and

honestly being in love and being levelheaded as a man you know, weighing you know, I can talk to her sons in front of her to where a man needs to be talked to, and she can talk to my daughter the way that a woman should talk to her daughter.

Russell did not question his decision to remarry. They dated for ten years, did not have an engagement period, and married at the end of the dating cycle. Russell stated, "My relationship with my wife is awesome." Russell did not share any struggles with his stepchildren, the

struggles came from his biological children. He had to work through the issues with his children. Russell provided support for his family financially and by being a

wise person that does not, mind helping to keep discipline and order with moral ethics.

Someone that is easy for the step kids to talk to and a husband that will protect their mother's heart and soul with the love that they need to keep my step kids from worrying about their mom.

Tyler did not question his decision to remarry. A friendship ended in a marriage built from a good relationship. Being a supportive husband involved developing a good relationship with his stepchildren. From the beginning, he created an environment of respect, family, and a united front with his ex-wife. At the time of this study, he maintained a relationship with his stepchildren and was raising his step-granddaughter with his current wife. In his previous marriage, he supported his previous wife by standing by her and any way he could, especially with co-parenting, emotional support, and financial support for the entire family. He provided the same support for his current wife and described their relationship as, Excellent!!! We are extremely supportive of each other. We have an excellent relationship on both sides of our families." He provided support for his family financially and through being a "positive male role model, stability, and unwavering support for my wife."

The participants described how they supported their wives and stepchildren including contributing to co-parenting, financial support, being understanding, and being available which provided a sense of security. They recognized a strong marital relationship forms the foundation of a healthy blended family, creating a strong family unit.



***Theme Two: Building and Maintaining Relationships with Stepchildren***

The participants discussed the challenges and rewards of establishing relationships with their stepchildren. They emphasized the need for understanding and genuine effort to build trust and respect in building such a complex relationship. The participants discussed the importance of being involved in their stepchildren's lives and open communication. They understood the impact a positive and healthy relationship with their stepchildren had on the ability to maintain a successful marriage.

Drew stated that one of the ways he relaxed was, by "spending time with my children." He was referring to his children and his stepchildren. He noted, "the kids were very loving" and reflected on his challenges of becoming a stepdad. Although transitioning came with challenges, he "made sure that the kids were all treated equally, even, you know, with mine and my stepdaughters." He said he loved his stepchildren was able to "show them, love, you know, without, you know, partiality."

Charlie also had challenges transitioning into the role of stepfather but was determined to work through them and establish a positive relationship with his stepchildren. Most of the issues bonding with his stepchildren was with the youngest child, a stepson. Charlie explained the situation:

I mean it's just a mix of things, personality he's the younger child, um our transition getting married, you know, a new male figure in his life. I think there are a lot of reasons but those are some of the primary reasons.

He felt that since his stepchildren were older, his job as a stepdad was to "get them to adulthood and be successful, navigate the teenage years."

According to John, the challenges with his stepchildren stemmed mostly from the way they were raised which he felt caused them not to be as responsible as he thought they should be. John's idea of a responsible teenager and young adult differed from what he was witnessing with his stepchildren. They spent every other week with their biological father, and John was constantly reminded that the biological father was involved in their lives. John stated that he, "never felt the need to kind of be a second father" because their biological father was close by." John described his way of dealing with challenges:

If an issue came up with Rebecca concerning the kids, and she would give me her opinion and then the opinion of her husband, um, I would weigh if I was in that situation, what I would do, but I never tried to influence their decision making, um, because I kind of felt like I never wanted to have anything kind of fall back on me and saying you told us to do this or you told us to do that um, so I kind of let them do their own thing. But I would always give my wife feedback. If like, if she had a issue or a concern with why Darren did this or did that, I could give her the viewpoint of a male as opposed to how a female thinks.

He summed up his role as a stepdad as "an additional set of ears and maybe a uh different opinion from what they might be getting from their mom or dad."

Raymond had more challenges with his biological children than with his stepchildren. The challenges stemmed from being separated and living in a different household with his new family. He was able to resolve those issues by assuring his children that he was there for them and would always be their father. He also had challenges with his stepchildren, mainly his stepson. His stepson was five years old and in the protective mode of his mother. Raymond stated he, "had to actually understand that and be like, okay, you know, I know this little guy is

protecting his mom, you know. I have to spend a little bit more time with him.” By doing so, Raymond was able to build a good relationship with him. Raymond vocalized, growing into the role of a stepdad:

I just want to show them that I'm there for them. I had to, in the beginning, I had to show them like, “Look, I love you, just as well as your mom, that's reason I'm here. So, when I got married to your mother, married your mother, I married you guys as well.”

Raymond was just as proud of his stepchildren as he was of his biological children and enjoyed spending time and doing various activities with them. For his dream vacation, he wanted to take them all on a trip to Greece:

I want, I want to do that with them. That would be more of a dream for me to do it with them because I feel as though your education just doesn't stop within the classroom, it is being exposed to different perspectives, different optics, so I think that would be the reason why I would want to go on a trip with the kids. So that way, I can expose them and to more than just what's here in the United States, I want to expose them to the world.

Brett, like the other stepfathers, had challenges transitioning into the stepfather role and establishing trusting and positive relationships with his stepchildren. He described his role as, “filling the void when I see it there or something is lacking.” He said, “My current wife, she has two children that's not mine that I'm raising, and my second wife when we got married her baby was, was three months old. I raised her until she's a young adult now.” He stated all the children were close when they were younger and around him more. Once they developed into young adults and carved out their own lives: “They kind of pulled apart because they used to come see me almost every other weekend or sometime every weekend, but now they're feeling their way

through life so I kind of give them their space, but it's good." Raymond loved all his children and although they are grown and have their own lives to live, he wished they would visit him more and have the relationship they had when they were younger.

Todd established a great relationship with his stepchildren early. He felt being a pastor helped him as a stepfather because he was used to counseling people through challenging situations. He had a good relationship with his stepchildren:

I think my role gives them the freedom to come here, either one of them, to come to me and if I can give them sound instructions, they'll come back tomorrow, I'll figure it out you know, give me time to think. I think that, that fathers for a man, should always be ready for everything. Answer all questions open-minded, you know, they can walk away levelheaded instead of walking away with questions on their mind you know.

Todd reflected on how it was when all the children spent time together at the beginning of their relationship. He expected chaos, but they instantly bonded and he realized everything was going to work out. They have been a cohesive unit since then.

Russell expressed having different relationships with different children stating, "some of my children, our relationship is strained, some non-existent, and others very close and loving." According to Russell, being a stepdad has not presented any issues. His stepchildren are grown and living on their own. His wife was able to provide him with insight about transitioning into a blended family because she was a product of a blended family. The knowledge he obtained from his wife helped him manage his role as a stepdad. He said his role "brings another mentor, protector, and caring and loving person to the step kids." He worked to assure his stepchildren that he was, "someone that is easy for the step kids to talk to and a husband that will protect their

mother's heart and soul with the love that they need to keep my step kids from worrying about their mom."

Tyler went into the second marriage with two stepchildren. He and his wife agreed on some rules before marrying. One was presenting a united front. No matter the decisions or challenges, they faced them together:

We both met our children early on in our relationship and trust was quickly established in respecting how we both raised our children and the similarities in our approach as parents. We had an agreement that we would have a united front in how we communicated and disciplined our children, and that united front remained in place during our entire relationship.

His stepchildren always called him and still called him, "Dad." He was always involved in their lives. As they grew into adults, Tyler explained that their relationship became strained from the choices they made:

Our relationship is strained because of the lifestyle choices they've made as adults. I'm currently raising my stepdaughter's daughter along with my third wife. My second wife and I divorced in 2012, and she unfortunately passed away in 2020, thus the reason we're raising our granddaughter is because the mother is in no position to raise or take care of the child.

Tyler has since remarried, and his wife had a great relationship with his children. His wife is helping him raise his step granddaughter.

The participants were dedicated to being stepfathers and husbands. Their willingness to be present and supportive through the challenges of balancing their availability with other commitments exemplified their dedication. The participants gained insight through the

multifaceted nature of being stepfathers and understood how their relationships with significant family members of their stepchildren could affect the relationships they were building.

***Theme Three: Being Available at All Times***

The participants explained their experiences of balancing time and energy to be available to their stepchildren and the strategies they employed to ensure it. The narratives provide insight into the complexities of being a stepfather and the significance of their continuous presence in the lives of stepchildren. The stepfathers perceived that their role required constant availability to their stepchildren. They recognized the importance of being emotionally supportive and physically present, understanding that their stepchildren needed a reliable figure. Most of the stepfathers acknowledged that their role involved not only being a partner to their wives but also stepping into a parenting role for their stepchildren. John is the only stepfather who feels his role is to be there when issues arise to help his wife resolve those issues rather than being in the role of a parent because their biological dad was around.

The participants highlighted emotional availability in building strong relationships with their stepchildren. They recognized the value of being attentive, understanding, and compassionate when their stepchildren expressed their feelings and concerns. They emphasized the importance of guidance and support and being a source of stability during challenging times. The stepfathers shared examples of nurturing emotional bonds with their stepchildren, such as showing empathy and validating their stepchildren's experiences.

Drew understood that he had to correct the relationship with his stepchildren's biological father to provide emotional support and stability. He knew seeing the conflict with their biological dad would cause them distress and that they would have difficulty coping. Reflecting on the relationship, Drew said: "We had some words, you know, a time or two. But at the same

time, I knew better. And all I did was, you know, be the bigger person and say, well, you know, you know, hopefully, you know, you'll understand in time. I was okay. You know, I just didn't want no problems. I didn't want no troubles." At the same time, Drew understood,

The kids kind of, you know, needed to see, you know, getting along. And that's what I was more after, you know, as opposed to, you know, fussing with this guy and telling him what I would do to him or, you know, him doing something to me and that kind of thing. They didn't need to see that. So, I was more in tune to helping them, you know, be comforted.

Charlie also understood the importance of being involved in his stepchildren's lives and making the situation as cohesive as possible. He continues to be involved in their lives. He taught them how to drive, thrive, and become successful adults. He wanted them to be the best people they could as they traveled through the teen years to adulthood. The youngest, a boy, was the most challenging. He acknowledged that it would take time and understanding to help him work through his feelings about the "transition getting married, you know, a new male figure in his life." He admitted to not being a disciplinarian and said that some of the issues with co-parenting stemmed from his in-law's views on how things should be done.

Although his stepchildren were older, John felt they still need guidance and mentoring and was willing to be involved, mainly from a distance, but wanted to avoid fallback: "I never wanted to have anything kind of fall back on me and saying you told us to do this or you told us to do that." His involvement was entailed listening to his wife, weighing in only on her. By being an "extra set of ears," he felt that he could offer a different opinion from his wife and her ex-husband especially if his stepchildren were experiencing what his biological children dealt with that he helped them through. He acknowledged that his stepchildren were who they were because

of their upbringing and what they went through with their parents' divorce. He was there for them and wanted the best for them.

Raymond had a good relationship with his stepchildren. He was heavily involved in their lives and offered guidance and support. He said that he treated his stepchildren like his own.

My children that are, that are not my step kids, is to protect my kids, to help them grow, to offer a mentor, be there for them. Um, so my role as a stepfather is to do everything that I can to prime their environment so that way they can be successful.

In the same manner, when he referenced taking his children to Greece for a vacation and exploration of other cultures, he included his stepchildren. He also discussed spending additional time with his stepson because he understood that he was in the protective mode of his mom when they first married. In valuing their children, all the parents, step and biological, formed a cooperative, inclusive relationship for the benefit of the stepchildren, "because it's not me just being in my wife's life, it's me being in the kid's life, his parent's life as well."

Brett's multiple experiences being a stepfather provided him with insight and personal growth with parenting. He developed patience over time which lent him a greater degree of understanding with the children. During challenges with his stepchildren, he was patient and did what he could for his family. He alluded to the fact that he had some disappointment in his children growing up because they were spending less time with him and each other. He delightfully enjoyed the time that he spent with them. A primary challenge was with his stepson who was fourteen years old when he married his mother, sharing: "I came into his life when he was 14 and so he was, he was a teenager, so I never really tried to overstep with him, but he's still, he's learning life." Even with the challenges with his stepson, the biggest challenges were with his biological children, and he regrets the situations they experienced.



Todd established a good relationship with his children early-on. He and his wife evaluated their children to see if they would work well together, and they did. They left their children alone while they went for ice cream. The children had fun together, got along well, and continued to do so. He said, "After that, it was just straight-up love." Todd said they did not use the word "step." He considered his stepchildren as his own and he was always there for them. He was level-headed and offered good fatherly advice.

Russell, like all the stepfathers, wanted the best for all the children. He faced challenges with all the children, some more than others. He established a good relationship with his stepchildren and was there for them to mentor, protect, and guide them. His stepchildren were grown and living their lives as adults, but if they needed him, he was there for them. He described his role, as "available if needed for advice and as a guardian."

Tyler also established a good relationship with his stepchildren early-on. They called him Dad from the beginning. At the time of this study, they were experiencing challenges because of decisions they made as adults, but if they needed him, he was there for them. For instance, he was raising his step granddaughter. Tyler stated that he will always be there for them even if means involves bestowing hard parenting lessons. He explained, "They've always called me Dad and still do. Our relationship is strained because of the lifestyle choices they've made as adults. I'm currently raising my stepdaughter's daughter along with my third wife." Like Todd, Tyler's family did not use the word step. According to Tyler, "We didn't use the word step when talking about us as parents."

He explained their co-parenting and establishing relationships:

We both met our children early-on in our relationship, and trust was quickly established in respecting how we both raised our children and the similarities in our approach as

parents. The role is determined by the two individuals in the relationship. I've seen where other stepparents would only allow the biological parent to discipline the child or allow the other parent to have influence over how that interacted with the child in their own home. We didn't have those issues. The other parent did not govern or influence or interaction or decision-making whatsoever. All communication with the other parent was done mostly by the other parent who was biologically tied to the other parent.

The participants were aware of their responsibilities and were committed to fulfilling them. They considered consistent availability vital to their role in building and maintaining relationships with their stepchildren and wives. The stepfathers' narratives provided valuable insight into the challenges of balancing time and energy and the strategies they used to ensure a presence in their stepchildren's lives. By being available, the stepfathers created a supportive and nurturing environment, fostering positive connections with their stepchildren while maintaining a successful marriage. To further explore being a husband in a successful second marriage in a blended family, the following themes focus on the participants' perceptions of their role.

### **Themes for the Guiding Research Question**

The following themes emerged the data related to the guiding research question. Stepfathers were asked what being a husband in a second marriage meant to them. The themes that emerged were (1) loving and respecting their wives, (2) being a father figure, and (3) overcoming challenges.

#### ***Theme Four: Loving and Respecting Their Wives***

The stepfathers emphasized loving and respecting their wives in the context of blended families. This theme focuses on their understanding of the significance of their relationship with their wives and how it contributed to a harmonious and supportive blended family environment.

Their perspectives on love, respect, and the dynamics of their marital relationships that helped them define their role as a husband is explored to gain insights into the pivotal role of a strong spousal relationship in the context of blended families. The participants acknowledged the challenges of trying to balance the needs of their wives, stepchildren, and biological children and understood the complexity of navigating the relationships. They recognized that a loving and respectful relationship with their wives set the tone for positive interactions and relationships within the blended family.

Drew met his wife while he was working construction at Dollar General. She was looking for artwork and he offered, “her a card for the art that I was doing, and we hooked up and had dinner and, and began to date. And it was about a year and a half after we met when I married her.” He acknowledged their differences, “It’s, is it’s a challenge because so many different variables play sometimes, you know, and you have to do it accordingly. You know, it’s not, it’s not a cut, you know, cookie cutter, you know, thing. Yeah.” Their trips alone brought some great, you know, times, you know we, we had great success in understanding that, you know, a lot of people didn’t get that opportunity. You know, we did, you know, and so we kind of took advantage of, you know, understanding it, you know.

He admitted that they married quicker than planned after he overcame his issues with faith and remarrying with a living spouse, and they had a son, and. According to Drew, his wife did not want a man with children but, it “didn’t matter to me because I cared about her. And, you know, I grew to love her.”

Charlie had challenges with stepchildren and in-laws. He was dedicated to working through the problems to achieve a good family unit and make his wife happy whom he “met

March of um19 and we started dating probably July of that year, and then we got married the following year. We got engaged in December, and then we got married in June of 2020.”

According to Charlie, open communication, respect, and functioning as a team keep the marriage successful. He explained that they went to marriage counseling with a pastor for a couple of sessions and they talked about “the challenges of blended family and the roles.” Charlie shared,

Just being a husband, in general, is just kind of trying to provide and protect for your spouse and just being there as an encouraging person for her . . . and help her succeed in her dreams and her job and help her navigate the parenting role.

John met his wife through his wife's friends. He and his wife used to work across the street from one another and for about a year, his wife and her coworkers would eat in the restaurant he worked in. One day, his wife's coworkers told him that she was divorced. He inquired about it and that was the beginning of their relationship. He explained what happened after they met:

Over the next month or two we kind of chit chatted a little bit and I asked her, I said, “If you ever want to just go grab a pizza or go see a movie, uh, I'd love to do that,” and sure enough, over time, we decided for to go to California pizza in the South Point Mall and the rest is history. We dated for two years, year and a half to two years, and we've, we just celebrated our second-year anniversary.

Throughout their marriage, he has been available for his wife and all their children. They worked at blending their family and establishing a good rapport with his ex-wife. When his son had baseball games, they would go as a family, even dining together. Between his two marriages, he learned to be a better husband and father. He tries to

make everybody be comfortable with me being in the house as it would be if I wasn't if there, wasn't another person in the house. Um, I think my ability to cook and the fact that

I am able to do some other things does make their life a little bit easier and a little more enjoyable, and I have a good sense of humor so we do laugh a lot, but I try to, I try for the most part to keep everything on the right side.

Raymond said he met his wife “through the profession that we both happen to be in over the course of um, 20, 20 plus years.” His idea of a successful marriage was respect and growth together which made his marriage successful. Their experience of previous marriages helped them know what they liked and did not like. Dating, they became instant friends and their friendship lasted. He was actively involved in his children's lives and has worked diligently to develop and maintain a good relationship with his stepchildren. He shared credit with his wife for everything he achieved. Keeping relationships positive contributed to the marital relationship and one of the relationships was with in-laws. Raymond had a great relationship with his mother-in-law before she died. She was one of his biggest supporters and lived with them for a while. His relationship with his father-in-law was initially rocky, but they were able to work through their differences. It did not affect his marital relationship because his wife understood what was going on and its cause. He explained,

oh, no it didn't. It did not because my, my wife knew how her dad would be. Yeah, and she knew that and the only time we bumped heads is like, he doesn't drink anymore, it was when he would drink, and I will pretty much like okay. Like and when, I mean by bumping heads, it wasn't anything terribly bad it was just like, hey, I had to remind him like okay, you know what, I'm giving respect because you are my wife's um, dad you know. I'm giving respect because of the fact because you are my kids' grandfather, but at the same time, I'm not your child. You not just going to talk to me any kind of way. So, it

was basically me standing my ground as a man with him and I think from that point he respected me for it even more.

Regardless of what they went through, he loved his wife and it was shown in the way he described her with words like friendship and how sweet she was.

Brett and his wife met through work. They were in the same department and Brett was her supervisor. When she transferred to a different department, they started dating. Brett stated, "got married shortly after that. We are probably, it was almost eight months in we got married and we've been married for, in May, it will be 10 years." Brett's prior marriage experience provided the skills he needed to be successful in his current marriage. The skills included learning "a lot about compromise and listening." Implementing those skills helped him work through issues with his wife. By working together, "she kind of knows what I'm going through, and I know what she's going through somewhat, and it helps that we can relate like that." Brett loved his wife and appreciated her. He valued the struggles they went through because "everything and we, we really have learned to be with each other because we want to be with each other."

Todd met his wife in church and instantly knew she was the one. He loved his wife dearly. He explained that during marital conflict, they sometimes broke from one another and returned to address the issue. It allowed them to think and make sense of the situation. Todd explained a conversation they had before marrying: "Well as far as far as that goes, I think that we were honest with each other first and we love God, so I mean, you know, that really is the basis of our family." Honest conversations have been a key to their success. Todd summed how he felt about her: "She is the woman that I pray to God about."

Russell stated, "My relationship with my wife is awesome. We met while I was coaching at a private school her kids were attending. We dated ten years before marrying and there was never an engagement moment." He was very much in love with his wife and appreciated her knowledge and awareness of being a blended family. She was a product of a blended family and able to give him insight into the world he was entering. He explained the love they had for one another was "created from our respect for one another, good communication, and being attentive to one another's needs." Before marriage, they did not discuss blended family roles because: "We felt that we know what our roles would be, and things would happen naturally." He felt that he was there to "[protect his] wife's heart and soul with the love that they need to keep my step kids from worrying about their mom."

Tyler had unwavering support for his second wife. It was his first experience being a stepdad and he did whatever it took to keep the family together. They met "in the military stationed in Germany where we started dating and later married in the United States. We dated for approximately 2 years before we married." They met each other's children early in their relationship and were able to bond. Through communication and agreeing about co-parenting style, they were able to present a united front. He appreciated his wife for that. It prevented the biological parents from interfering. Before marriage they discussed parenting roles:

It goes back to trust because we saw how the children got along so well and how the other stepparent interacted with them. Yes, we discussed it and my wife agreed that I would be the head of the household and that we would do whatever is in our children's best interest.

His second wife passed away in 2020. He appreciated the dedication they shared co-parenting, presenting them with a united front, and her confidence in his ability to parent her children.

There was never “extensive tension between us on key decisions that had to be made when the children acted out.” He described his relationship with his current wife as “Excellent!!! We are extremely supportive of each other. We have an excellent relationship on both sides of our families.” As previously stated, his current wife is helping raise his step-granddaughter.

Balancing the roles of husband and stepfather can be challenging. The participants understood the significance and complexity of understanding, patience, and compromise. They recognized that a loving and respectful relationship with their wives was the key to positive interactions in a blended family.

### ***Theme Five: Father Figures***

Not overstepping boundaries or trying to replace biological fathers was an issue that all the stepfathers faced when they were in the picture. They wanted to be positive role models for their stepchildren and were mindful of their decisions, interactions, and communication.

In his quest to be a good stepfather and positive role model for his stepchildren, Drew reflected on the issues he had with their biological father and what he did to create positivity for the sake of his stepchildren:

Well, the kids were very loving. I think dealing with the ex-father there, that was a challenge at first. But then we became, you know, friends, you know, and started to communicate. But everything got we'll, you know, get through it pretty good.

The issues with the biological father stemmed from his feelings for his ex-wife. In his words, “It kind of juice some scrimmages.” He knew he had to rectify the issue to maintain a good rapport with his stepchildren and keep their relationship positive. He decided to “be the bigger person and say, ‘well you know, you know, hopefully you know, you’ll understand in time.’ I was okay.



You know, I just didn't want no problems. I didn't want no troubles." He wanted his stepchildren to see them getting along,

as opposed to, you know, fussing with this guy and telling him what I would do to him or, you know, him doing something to me and that kind of thing. They didn't need to see that. So, I was more in tune to helping them, you know, be comforted. You know, that was where my heart was, you know, making sure that they were okay.

Charlie did not have a conflict with the biological father of his stepchildren. He was not in their lives. Charlie assumed all the responsibility that the role of father figure entailed. He had a fair relationship with his two older children and challenges with the youngest, a stepson. He was working through those issues and continuing to build bonds and positive relationships with all his stepchildren. He was there for the two older stepdaughters to help them navigate through their teen years and eventually do the same for his stepson. His main issues with co-parenting are:

Parenting views or philosophies like how, how you would raise children or just kind of trying to come up with a compromise like you're blending your views, I guess.

In the end, his goal as a parent was, "Just trying to be a role model. Hopefully, a father figure like because they don't have really a relationship at all with their father and so just trying to not replace that relationship but kind of step in that role."

John tried not to be overbearing and a disciplinarian to his stepchildren. He did not think that was his role. His role, he thoughtfully injected, was to be an extra set of ears. More like an outlier who could whisper advice in his wife's ear about dealing with his stepchildren's issues that grew out of irresponsibility. He felt his stepchildren, due to their parents' divorce, were not

made to be responsible and were coddled. He felt his wife would be stricter making them do age-appropriate tasks:

I kind of believe I'm an extra set of ears when an issue, or especially if they're going through, uh any of their kids are going through something, that maybe their moms never experienced before or something that my kids may have experienced at the age that they're at and how I, and how I would deal with it as a parent or what, what, what would I be thinking as a parent, um, without addressing it to their mom and dad.

He did not think he was there to be another father to his stepchildren, because their father was in their lives. He was another male figure. He met his stepchildren a couple of years before marrying their mother and began to establish a relationship with them. His biological kids had met and had a relationship with his stepchildren. He had to adjust to the new family dynamics and make it work. Even with everyone getting along, John did what he could to make the family work and be a good stepdad without directly telling his stepchildren what to do or advising them. He gave his wife advice for her to use to guide them.

Raymond had issues at the beginning of his relationship with his stepson. His stepson was young and in the protective mode of his mother. He knew then that he had to dedicate additional time to fostering a better relationship with him. In his view, there was no difference in him being a biological father or stepdad:

My role as a stepfather would be the same as my role as a father. To, to my children that are, that are not my step kids, is to protect my kids, to help them grow, to offer a mentor, be there for them. Um, so my role as a stepfather is to do everything that I can to prime their environment so that way they can be successful.

He said he wanted to show his stepchildren,

I'm there for them. I had to, in the beginning, I had to show them like, "Look, I love you, just as well as your mom, that's reason I'm here. So, when I got married to your mother, married your mother, I married you guys as well."

Based on the positive relationship he built with the biological father, he felt confident taking on the role of a father figure without worrying about crossing boundaries. They had a respectful relationship and agreed the most important component of their relationship was the children. He felt that the relationship between the adults helped him bond with his stepchildren. He described their family situation with stepparents and biological parents:

Everybody look at things, view things differently, but to me it was just a perfect blend because we knew our roles. My wife and I coming in so like even with my ex-wife and with her ex-husband it was, you know, we all just got along because we knew that we all value one thing, we value our children. So, we, yeah, we all got along. It would, never it was never a disagreement, it was never like, "Oh okay, you can't discipline my son."

As a stepfather, he offered leadership and unconditional love.

Brett described his role as a stepfather as, "Not trying to overstep or replace, but really just filling the void when I see it there or something is lacking." He viewed his stepchildren as his own and treated them the same. He missed his biological children not being around as much and felt the same about his stepchildren. He did not explain how discipline was managed, but he did say that there were some challenges with his stepson and that, "he was 14 and so he was, he was teenager, so I never really tried to overstep with him, but he's still, he's learning life." He had a good relationship with his stepchildren and did not have any challenges that could not be overcome.

Todd had a good relationship with his stepchildren and was a positive father figure and role model. The biological father had passed away. Essentially, he was the only father his stepchildren had. In his household, they did not use the word step. They are parents and children. He was there for his stepchildren for advice or anything else. In the role of their stepfather, he gives his stepchildren,

the freedom to come here, either one of them, to come to me, and I can give them sound instructions, they'll come back tomorrow, I'll figure it out you know, give me time to think. I think that, that fathers, for a man, should always be ready for everything. Answer all questions open-minded, you know, they can get can walk away levelheaded instead of walking away with questions on their mind you know.

His wife could talk to his daughter the way a woman should, and he could talk to his stepson the way a man should, in front of one another.

Russell said he had more issues with some of his children than others, including stepchildren. He did not specify any issues with his stepchildren. Based on the following statement, the challenges were with his biological children "Me being a stepdad was never a strain, not at all. I think it has changed my kids to the extent, to the point they became distant but not all of them." He did not have a relationship with his stepchildren's biological father: "Me and the biological father do not have a relationship at all. I do not feel the need that we have a relationship and the step kids, and everyone involved understands that." For Russell, a stepdad is in another parent that is there to love, protect, mentor, and care for them.

Tyler established a bond and good relationship with his stepchildren from the beginning. Their biological fathers were in their lives, but he did not have any restrictions in his role. If he needed to discipline his stepchildren he did because his wife at the time trusted him, and they

agreed to be a united front. He exhibited patience and understanding with his stepchildren and understood that they would always be a part of his life. The issues they had were from the choices his stepchildren made as adults. Some were devastating to the point that his stepdaughter was not able to raise her child. Tyler and his current wife were. During their marriage, Tyler had no interaction with the biological father:

I had very little to no interaction with the two biological fathers. Communication was solely done by my wife. My wife did have interaction and communication with my ex-wife, and it was cordial and respectful for the most part with one or two emotional interactions.

Tyler remained the supportive, loving stepfather he always was.

Many of the stepfathers had interaction and communication with the biological fathers. In their role as stepfather and husband, they tried to maintain respectful and civil relationships with for the sake of their stepchildren. By prioritizing the interests of their stepchildren, they could be positive role models and father figures without overstepping recognized boundaries.

### ***Theme Six: Overcoming Challenges***

Blended families are unique and complex. They come with challenges different from traditional family units because of the lack of bond by blood and different biological parents raising their children in one household. It takes strength, understanding, patience, and love to overcome forces that can pull a blended family apart. The participants endured various challenges and obstacles to keep their families together.

Drew faced challenges with his in-laws, the biological father, and his demons with marrying while having a living ex-wife. He considered remarrying adultery if the former wife was alive:

Well, at first, you know, I was dealing with some I guess some faith aspects, you know, with being married again when I didn't know, you know, that it was okay, you know, I guess I just didn't feel like, you know, it was the right thing to do by faith. But then I talked to some people who had some counseling and they assured me that, you know, you know, you're not doing anything. Anyone else, you know, as you know, you have to step out and do it.

After receiving and accepting advice, he moved forward with the remarriage and created a blended family which meant he had to form relationships with significant people in his new wife's life. He did not have a good relationship with his in-laws because they were not acceptable at first. He described how his in-laws treated him or thought of the marriage:

Everyone was kind of, you know, being at our new on-scene and they were used to the other guy. It was, it took some time getting used to, they, they weren't as accepting, you know, as you know, I thought they should have been. But I mean, as my wife said before, you know, you know, I moved on, you know, and you know, don't have to, but I moved on. So, you know, and so we took it, you know that way, you know, we just kept it moving.

In the same way he overcame issues with his stepchildren's biological father, he had to accept and move past how his in-laws felt for the sake of his marriage and family. By overcoming the issues, he showed his family how much he loved and cared for them:

You have to work in your marriage in order for it to work. It don't stop, you know, just because you think you've got it, you know, smoothed out. Challenges come every day, you know, so you have to go at it each time, you know, figure it out. That's what it's all about. You have to work. Work at it.

Charlie had to overcome issues with his stepson and in-laws. His stepson was more challenging than his stepdaughters because he was young, and it was understandable that he would have issues with a new male father figure in his life. Charlie is committed to working through the issues for the sake of their relationship. Charlie also had issues with his In-laws. His in-laws were very invested in their grandchildren's lives and would not relinquish their reign. He explained:

It's challenging because you know, they've been around their children, their grandchildren, and quote, parented them, you know, before I was in the picture. So, we kind of butt heads here and there. And challenges as far as our ideas of things, uh, they're just totally involved in the children because of the role they've played over the years.

Charlie was working through the challenges that could cause harm to the relationships with his wife and stepchildren. He loved them and wanted the best for them.

John had to overcome challenges with his stepchildren, his wife, and his stepson's biological father. His wife was soft on her children, and he saw that as a sign of weakness. He discussed his wife coddling her children and making them irresponsible. He used the example of his stepsons cleaning their room and putting away their dishes. He felt his wife was treating them like that because of the divorce:

I'll give you a good example, is cleaning up around the house [chuckle] and if they're my kids I'm going to be like this and we're going to get it taken care of, um, with her kids because of how they were grown up and how their perception of how the house was asked to be kept or needed to be kept. I wasn't there and I didn't have an influence on that, so for me to take the tone of this needs to get done, this needs to get done, that thing is very difficult, because it's not the norm of how they were raised. So, my frustration

now lends to her in the fact that this is not acceptable. You need to go handle this as opposed to me just taking the initiative myself, because I never want that blowback of “You’re not my father, you’re not going to tell me what to do.” But she’s always their mother and I think over the two years that we’re married they have seen a little of me come out in her, um, in that influence but it’s never come from me to them, only because it’s not my place you know what I mean.

He added that his stepchildren were grown and needed to move past the victim role:

Crying victim does not help you moving forward and who you need to be in life, but as long as you’re the mother and you believe that that’s who’s holding your child back, and that’s why you have to coddle you’re not helping, you’re hurting the situation, so at some point address it, discuss it, and get over it, and let’s move forward from it.

Regarding the biological father, John explained,

I don’t want to talk bad about Darren in front of his kids, nor would I want anyone talking bad about me in front of my, um kids, but I think over time, because my wife really hid a lot of things from their father, hid a lot of things about their father to them because she never wanted their opinion of their father to be because of what she said about their, their, their, father. But, I know, I know him for what he is and know him for what he’s done in the past or what she’s told me he’s done in the past. So, I keep my relationship with him pretty much on a shallow level. I don’t have any personal malice toward um him, whatever failed in their marriage between him and my wife is between them.

He said the biological father had been married and divorced twice and, “maybe there was some common denominators in that marriage that were in the first marriage, and you know I just hope



he, he can learn from it.” Their relationship was surface level and they have never gotten into verbal disagreement. He said the biological father did not have a father figure and his children did not have a relationship with his mother. He did not directly say what the biological father had done, but there seemed to be distrust.

Raymond had challenges with his father-in-law that he had to resolve to continue moving forward with the success of his family. The challenges he had with his stepson stemmed from the new male figure in his life and being protective of his mother. Raymond knew spending more time with him would help because he understood what his stepson was reacting to. The conflict he had with his father-in-law was more severe and required more intervention. Raymond's father-in-law disrespected him at the beginning of his marriage and the disrespectful behavior was exacerbated with alcohol:

Now with her dad, um, in the beginning we bumped heads. Um, personality-wise we bump heads but at the same time, he told me numerous of times, he said I really respect the fact that you stepped in and not just took care of my daughter, but you were willing to take care of the children that my daughter had before we before you guys got, you know, you know, before you guys got married and I respect him. Like I respect him and just the fact that I think part of our personalities just doesn't mesh. I'm the type of person, still stuff that I'm growing on, if you say something to me, if you do something to me, sometimes it's hard for me to just let it go. I can still, I can still have respect for you, but I just learn how to keep you at a distance not because I put you there, you put yourself there.

He said that his relationship with his father-in-law did not negatively affect his marriage because his wife

knew how her dad would be. Yeah, and she knew that and the only time we bumped heads is like, he doesn't drink anymore, it was when he would drink and I will pretty much like okay. Like and when, I mean by bumping heads, it wasn't anything terribly bad it was just like, hey, I had to remind him like, "Okay, you know what, I'm giving respect because you are my wife's, um, dad you know. I'm giving respect because of the fact, because you are my kids' grandfather, but at the same time, I'm not your child. You not just going to talk to me any kind of way." So, it was basically me standing my ground as a man with him and I think from that point he respected me for it even more.

Raymond was able to overcome his challenges and increase his family's stability by forming a cohesive blended family unit.

Brett's challenges stemmed from his biological children, stepson, and marital issues. He had considerable regret and guilt about his biological children because of the relationships he had with their mothers and the way those relationships ended. It created separation with his oldest son, and he felt that his youngest child had behavior issues because he was not in the house:

My wife's oldest son, he's been through a lot of trauma, so there's this hesitation there. I came into his life when he was 14 and so he was, he was a teenager, so I never really tried to overstep with him, but he's still, he's learning life.

He talked about how all his children visited more when they were younger but were not as close when they got older and had their own lives. He was satisfied with them coming over now and again. His oldest biological son did not visit him as he hoped he would. Brett and his wife had issues early-on, especially financially, but were able to work through them. He said, "Me and my wife we struggled, Lord knows, financially we, we feel, you know, being with each other, there's trauma that was there and we worked through everything."

Todd did not mention any challenges in marital relationships. His stepchildren's biological father and his in-laws had passed away. He never met his in-laws. His relationship with his wife was good. When they had issues they took a break from one another, thought about it, and came back to resolve it. He was there to guide, mentor, and advise his biological and stepchildren.

Russell stated he did not have a relationship with his stepchildren's biological father, and everyone knew why. He did not say what the problem was, but the answer led one to believe there was conflict or bad feelings between them. His challenges stemmed from his biological children that did not react well to him forming a blended family. He had a great relationship with his in-laws, his wife, and his stepchildren.

Tyler had issues with his stepchildren but did not have a relationship with the biological fathers. His ex-wife, now deceased, did the communicating with them. His main challenges came from his stepdaughter who made poor choices as an adult and consequently, he was raising her daughter. Tyler shared an incident that occurred with his stepdaughter:

The most stressful time for us as parents was when my stepdaughter accused her mother and I of abusing her. We were stationed in Japan and those accusations from a teenager was taken very seriously and had the potential to threaten/end my Army career. All the allegations were unsubstantiated, and my wife and I made a collective decision to remove her from the house and send to her father stationed in the United States. My ex-wife never wavered in that decision, and it did not cause any issues between us and our marriage.

No matter what happened, he was there for his stepchildren like he was there for his children.

When conflict occurs in blended families, the adults need to be calm, patient, and tolerant to deal with issues and come to a resolution. The participants described being able to face challenges, work out issues, and maintain healthy relationships with their wives and stepchildren as key factors for their success in their role as husband.

### **Summary**

This chapter explored the role of remarried husbands in a blended family as stepfathers. The stepfathers focused on being supportive of their blended families and establishing good relationships with their stepchildren. The data produced six themes: (1) supportive husband, (2) building and maintaining relationships with stepchildren, (3) being available at all times, (4) loving and respecting their wives, (5) father figures, and (6) overcoming challenges. The participants were frank and honest about the challenges and successes forming blended families. They were able to contribute positivity and value to their families and learned that they could love their non-biological children. They learned that the connection went beyond biology; it was about the ability to love, care, mentor, guide, protect, and support who they considered family and were committed to. Chapter Five addressed the research findings, limitations of the study, and implications for future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

### Overview

This phenomenological study aimed to comprehensively understand the unique perspective of remarried men as stepfathers within the context of second marriages in blended families. Blended families have unique family dynamics. They lack the closeness experienced in traditional, nuclear families which can pose distinct relationship problems. Strained stepfather-stepchild relationships have been observed to affect the spousal and parental subsystems (Dupuis, 2010). Stepfathers need to form bonds and positive relationships with their stepchildren, as it is crucial to strengthening the marital relationship. This study engaged eight participants who shared their experiences of transitioning into blended families, remarriage, and their challenges and successes as husbands and stepfathers. The data revealed common themes summarized and presented in this dissertation. Furthermore, a comprehensive discussion of findings, exploration of implications, acknowledgment of limitations, and recommendations for further research are provided.

### Summary of Findings

The summary of findings was derived from the answers to the research questions that guided this study.

### Central Research Question

The participants were asked to describe their role as a remarried husband in a successful marriage in a blended family. The three themes that emerged from this question were (a) being a supportive husband, (b) building and maintaining relationships with their stepchildren, and (c) being always available. The participants expressed supportive actions related to co-parenting, financial support, and being understanding. For example, Charlie understood he needed to

overcome challenges with his stepson to build a good relationship with all his stepchildren to “get them to adulthood and be successful, navigate the teenage years.” Whereas Raymond expressed how he felt about the relationship with his wife when he said that when he achieved something, they both achieved it, “I’m like no, congratulations to the two of us, we both did this.”

In building and maintaining relationships with their stepchildren, the participants understood that a positive and healthy relationship with their stepchildren enhanced their marital relationship. For example, Drew knew he needed to reconcile the conflict with the biological father for the sake of his stepchildren:

And that’s what I was more after, you know, as opposed to, you know, fussing with this guy and telling him what I would do to him or, you know, him doing something to me and that kind of thing. They didn’t need to see that. So, I was more in tune to helping them, you know, be comforted. You know, that was where my heart was, you know, making sure that they were okay.

John resolved that he functioned best as a second set of ears and not as a father because his stepchildren’s father was still in the picture. He decided his role “would just be an additional set of ears and maybe a uh, different opinion from what they might be getting from their mom or dad.”

Participants equated availability with fulfilling their responsibilities and commitment to their families. For the success of their familial relationships, the participants had to overcome barriers and challenges within their blended family and with other significant family members.

**Guiding Research Question**

The participants were asked to describe their perspective of their role as a husband in a second marriage and what that meant to them. They saw their role as being a loving and caring husband combined with being a father figure and overcoming challenges to secure their marriage. They expressed what being a husband meant to them and how they constantly worked at fulfilling the role. The three themes that emerged from this question were (a) loving and respecting their wives, (b) father figure, and (c) overcoming challenges.

Russell stated that being a husband meant, "you get a do-over in sharing your love," and that his relationship with his wife was, "awesome." His wife gave him insight into what it meant to be a blended family because she was a product of one. He said, "I had discussions with my wife. She is from a blended family, and she has helped me be prepared to be in and navigate being in a blended family. The discussions we have had has been positive."

Brett expressed his love for his wife and stepchildren. He worked to maintain healthy relationships with both. He and his wife dated for years before marrying and had to work through challenges:

We worked through everything and we, we really have learned to be with each other because we want to be with each other. I learned a lot about compromise and listening. Umm, I'm still learning a lot, but it helps that we work together and she kind of knows what I'm going through, and I know what she's going through somewhat, and it helps that we can relate like that.

He also expressed his love for his biological and stepchildren and how he enjoys it when they visit. He noted that now that they are older, they do not visit as much.

Being a father figure can present challenges especially when relationships are difficult to establish. The relationships can be with stepchildren or outside family members that create challenges. Not all the participants had challenges with outside family members. Drew initially had challenges with his stepchildren's biological father, but he quelled that conflict for the betterment of his stepchildren and his relationship with them. Charlie had issues with his in-laws because their ideas and philosophies about parenting conflicted with his. Tyler did not have those issues. He did not have a relationship with his stepchildren's biological fathers, and he had a good relationship with his in-laws. Todd did not have living in-laws and his stepchildren's biological father passed away. John stated he had a surface-level relationship with his stepchildren's biological father and his in-laws had passed away. Raymond had challenges with his father-in-law but was able to work them out. Raymond and his stepchildren's biological father had a good relationship and respected one another. According to Raymond, there has never been a moment when the biological father inserted himself and created challenges with discipline. Brett did not have a relationship with the biological father and his in-laws had passed away. Russell did not have a relationship with the biological father and had a great relationship with his in-laws.

The role of father or father figure presented challenges, but participants were able to remain respectful, patient, and understanding to resolve conflicts for the security of their family. As fathers, the participants continued to build their relationships with their stepchildren and did what they felt was best for them.

Throughout the study, the participants described the challenges they faced with transitioning to a blended family and settling into the role of husbands and stepfathers. Although



their journeys were not easy, they did not give up. The participants stayed the course and achieved positive relationships with their wives and stepchildren to keep their family unit strong.

### **Discussion**

This discussion section examined the findings of the study and aimed to provide corroboration with previous research, offer novel perspectives, and contribute to the understanding of stepfathers' perspectives in blended families. The empirical, theoretical, and practical implications of the study are also discussed.

#### **Corroboration with Previous Research**

The findings of this study align with previous research indicating that stepfathers recognize the significance of relationships in successful marriages within blended families (McCarthy et al., 2007; Mirecki et al., 2013). The participants emphasized the importance of actively engaging in their stepchildren's lives to build stronger relationships, which subsequently enhanced their marital relationships. Blended families face unique challenges such as communication, parenting, relationship dynamics, and role redefinition. Previous studies by Jensen et al. (2013) and Zeleznikow et al. (2015) also found that appropriate handling of parenting roles, communication, and conflict resolution skills contributed to higher success rates in maintaining intact blended families.

Participants in this study who had interactions with biological fathers reported various experiences ranging from mutually respectful relationships to resolving challenges for the benefit of the stepchildren and wives. Braithwaite et al. (2001) conducted a study highlighting the complexity of issues faced by blended families, including communication boundaries, conflicts with stepchildren and biological parents, adjusting to change, and negotiating new roles. The participants demonstrated patience and resilience, understanding that prolonged conflict would

create additional challenges within their new families. Consistent with the findings of Jensen et al. (2013), appropriately managing these issues strengthened the bond between stepfathers and stepchildren.

Establishing well-defined boundaries in blended families proved instrumental in managing potential conflicts. Participants described how they managed their interactions with biological fathers and other family members. Relationships with biological fathers varied from non-existent to surface-level or respectful, with boundaries determining the level of involvement fathers had in the daily functioning of the family. For instance, one participant, Tyler, emphasized that he did not engage in direct communication with the biological father; instead, his wife managed those interactions, and they made decisions about the children without allowing the biological parents to have a say. Another participant, John, chose not to assume a fatherly role due to the presence of the biological father but aimed to provide an additional perspective to address any issues concerning his stepchildren. On the other hand, Raymond had a good relationship with the biological father, and together they successfully raised his stepson. Research by Braithwaite et al. (2001) supports the notion that blended families with flexible boundaries can navigate living arrangements and establish new relationships more effectively.

Existing literature emphasizes forming positive relationships, particularly between stepfathers and stepchildren, to ensure success in blended families. Stepchildren come from different family life cycles than the blended family (DeLongis et al., 2017), and it is essential for stepfathers to foster caring relationships with their stepchildren to minimize conflict (Ganong et al., 2019). Developing a collaborative parenting relationship with their wives assists stepfathers in forming connections with stepchildren and increases marital satisfaction (Gold, 2010).

The participants in this study shared how they established and maintain healthy relationships with their stepchildren and wives. Their actions aligned with previous research, as they responded to biological fathers charitably to minimize disagreements and conflicts. Setting boundaries is crucial in blended families due to the presence of multiple subsystems. Establishing boundaries helps determine how relationships will function within and between these subsystems (Dupuis, 2010).

Drew explained how he resolved his skirmishes with the biological father for the stepchildren:

We had some words, you know, a time or two. But at the same time, I knew better. And all I did was, you know, be the bigger person . . . the kids kind of, you know, needed to see, you know, getting along . . . making sure that they were okay.

Raymond described the relationship he formed with the biological father as a perfect blend, emphasizing that they all valued their children and maintained a harmonious relationship without disagreements or disputes over discipline. In describing his relationship with the biological father, John expressed that he did not speak ill of him and harbored no animosity, acknowledging him for who he was and focusing on maintaining a shallow but respectful relationship.

No participant encountered relationship-ending issues while forming blended families and establishing new relationships with their stepchildren and extended family members. Their ability to employ effective conflict-resolution skills and respond appropriately to challenges contributed to their capacity to build and sustain positive relationships. Collaborating with their wives and presenting a united front helped maintain family cohesion instead of letting tensions pull them apart (Kumar, 2017). Stepfathers must collaborate with their wives from the beginning

of to establish a consensus on how to manage the household, including defining roles, establishing rules, building relationships, and developing family routines (Anderson et al., 2013; Gold, 2010).

## **Implications**

### **Empirical Implications**

The empirical research on stepfathers in their second marriages, particularly from the stepfather's perspective, is limited. Given the high divorce rates leading to frequent remarriages, it is important to examine the experiences and roles of stepfathers in blended families. Women tend to remarry more often than men, often bringing children into remarriage (Dupius, 2010). The lack of resources to help families manage expectations of one another complicates the situation (Kumar, 2017). Therefore, this study has significant implications for empirical research, advancing the understanding of a stepfather's role in blended families.

The participants in this study demonstrated an unwavering commitment to making their blended families work. They took steps to establish positive relationships with their stepchildren and functional relationships with their stepchildren's biological fathers which in turn, contributed to satisfying marital relationships. By focusing on communication, resolving challenges and conflicts, and staying informed about family dynamics, the participants were able to unify their blended families.

With increasing divorce rates, estimated at 50% (Dupius, 2010) and 60% (Zelesnikow et al. 2015), it is imperative to examine stepfathers' perspectives to enhance the knowledge base. The insights gained from this study may be valuable to the professional counseling community and blended families themselves. The participants' experiences varied in forming relationships with their stepchildren, which aligns with existing research indicating that positive stepfather-

stepchild relationships contribute to marital satisfaction (Anderson et al., 2013; Jensen et al., 2013). Except for one participant who took on a more distant parenting role, perceiving himself as “another set of ears” for advising, the participants actively engaged as father figures and in co-parenting activities. This aligns with a study by Blyaert et al. (2016) suggesting that some stepfathers choose a more friendship-oriented parenting approach and find satisfaction in the role, like the experience of John in this study.

The primary contribution of this study is its focus on second marriages, an area that has limited research, particularly from a stepfather's perspective. Based on the findings and existing literature, certain skills are crucial for stepfathers to promote the well-being of their blended families. These skills include effective communication, conflict resolution, and relationship building. Second marriages hold significance as they follow a failed marriage, and individuals must be cautious not to carry negative emotions from their previous relationship. However, the participants in this study did not report significant issues in that regard. Instead, they described the measures they took to work through challenges and prevent them from negatively impacting family relationships. McCarthy et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of not comparing second marriages to the first and focusing on building a strong and resilient marital bond characterized by respect, trust, and intimacy to foster a healthy functioning couple style.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study is based on FST, a theory of human behavior and uses systems thinking to describe complex family thinking (The Bowen Center, 2023). Bowen viewed the family as a natural system with predictable patterns of growth, adaptation, and change (Keller et al., 2020). FST assumes that family is emotionally connected (The Bowen Center, 2023) which is challenging for blended families.

DoS and triangulation were experienced by the participants in this study. DoS explained how the stepfathers were able to, “stay calm and clear-headed enough in the face of conflict,” (The Bowen Center, 2023). Each stepfather dealt with personal challenges that required the ability to remain calm, think rationally, and use appropriate behavior to resolve conflict. It is important for the stepfather to be able to regulate affect, observe and manage reactions (Jankowski et al., (2012), and respond to conflict with less emotion and more intellect (Bowen, 2008) to maintain good relationships in blended families.

Triangulation is prevalent when conflict arises, and the marital couple is not able to appropriately resolve it. The inability to decrease tension and anxiety causes triangulation (Willis et al., 2021). When children are triangulated into the parents' conflict, they tended to side with their biological mother over their stepfather (Shortal, 2004). David (1979) found that, “Tension in blended families can cause a series of interlocking triangles” (p.220). In this study, the stepfathers practiced good conflict-resolution skills and were willing to compromise, which helped them and their wives from pulling their children or others into their conflict. The participants were able to make carefully thought-out decisions instead of just reacting to the situation (Willis et al., 2020).

With the increase of blended families, further research can better support stepfamilies and the counseling community by providing comprehensive information. Addressing the specific needs of these families is crucial for fostering family unity. The findings indicate that stepfathers recognize the inherent complexities of the family dynamic, which require a range of interpersonal skills to maintain equilibrium and healthy relationships. Effective communication and problem-solving abilities are critical for managing challenges and contribute significantly to the development of positive relationships with stepchildren, spouses, and other family members.

Success in blended families hinges upon striking a balance between stagnation and rapid change (Jensen et al., 2013).

### **Practical Implications**

The practical implications of this research are relevant to the professional counseling community, providing insights that can be applied to support blended families and guiding family members in their interactions. The findings highlight the crucial role of stepfathers and the measures they undertake to work hard at meaningful relationships with their wives and stepchildren for the benefit of their family unit. Previous literature has emphasized the significance of positive stepfather-stepchild relationships as a fundamental factor in establishing and maintaining a cohesive blended family (Favez et al., 2015; Jensen, 2017; King, 2015). McCarthy et al. (2007) stressed the role of clinicians in assisting remarried couples navigate the challenges in second marriages and stepfamilies and facilitate their ability to overcome them and foster satisfying relationships within their new family structure.

Maintaining strong relationships within blended families requires stepfathers to effectively regulate emotions and employ conflict resolution skills, thus minimizing the likelihood of triangulation or negative dynamics. This research reinforces the existing body of literature, highlighting the distinct challenges faced by blended families in contrast to nuclear families. The absence of a shared history between stepfathers and stepchildren underscores the importance of time and effort required to build enduring relationships. Furthermore, these findings align with previous research indicating that the quality of the stepfather-stepchild relationship significantly influences overall marital satisfaction (Anderson et al., 2013; Jensen et al., 2013; Jensen et al., 2019).

The insights gained from this study can be used to inform therapeutic interventions and counseling approaches aimed at supporting blended families. By recognizing the importance of nurturing positive stepfather-stepchild relationships, clinicians can provide valuable guidance and support to remarried couples, facilitating their successful adjustment to second marriages and stepfamily dynamics.

### **Christian Worldview**

The findings and literature indicate rising divorce, remarriage, and blended families (Dupuis, 2010; Kumar, 2017; Zeleznikow et al., 2015). The formation of blended families often brings forth challenges that can lead to chaos if not addressed with grace, respect, love, and sustainable approaches. As remarried stepfathers navigate their roles in newly formed families, it is crucial for them to emulate the godly character of a loving father (1 John 3:1) and lead by example with integrity (Proverbs 20:7).

During the research, one participant mentioned his faith and the internal struggles he faced when contemplating remarriage while still having a living spouse. According to biblical teachings, such a situation is “adultery” (*English Standard Version*, 2011, Luke 16:18). After seeking guidance from trusted individuals, he decided to remarry. This decision required him to forgive himself and move forward. Remarried stepfathers need to extend grace not only to themselves in their journey of healing but also to their wives and stepchildren. By embracing forgiveness and grace, they can foster an environment of healing and restoration within the blended family.

In conclusion, as remarried stepfathers navigate their roles within blended families, they must embody the character of a loving father and lead with integrity. Their faith can serve as a source of guidance and strength, enabling them to extend grace and forgiveness to themselves



and family members. Seeking counseling from their pastor or other professionals in the counseling community, remarried stepfathers can find support and guidance and foster a nurturing environment within the blended family.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations of this study were set to meet objectives. Delimitations include getting the perspective of the stepfather only, second marriages only, and a small sample that allowed a decent amount of time for data collection and analysis. Blyaert et al. (2016) concluded that few studies were focused on stepfathers in blended families. Limiting the study to the stepfather's perspective only was important to provide a platform for them to describe their experiences. Minimal research was discovered specifically addressing second marriages (Doss et al., 2009; Jensen et al., 2013; McCarthy et al., 2007; Mirecki et al., 2013). Focusing on second marriages is important in examining the increasing divorce rate of second marriages and whether premarital education can help decrease divorce rates in second marriages (Doss et al., 2009) and the possibility of decreasing serial marriages (Siordia, 2014). A small sample size was chosen for convenience, and it is appropriate if data is collected through individual data like interviews (Smith, 2015).

A limitation of this study was the process by which data collection occurred. The in-person interviews were more personable and involved than the interviews that took place using a virtual platform. Although more data was collected from the face-to-face interviews, all the interviews yielded appropriate amounts of data. Additional data collection methods would have added "more detailed and complex insights" (Smith, 2015, p. 228). Other forms of data collection include but are not limited to focus groups and qualitative surveys (Smith, 2015). Further research should include a greater population of blended family members with

stepmothers, stepchildren, and single men who become stepfathers during their first marriage. The more data that can be collected from all aspects of a blended family adds increased information that can be used by clinicians who treat remarried couples in a blended family and the issues that specifically affect them (Martin-Uzzi et al., 2013).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The limited availability of resources tailored for blended families poses significant challenges for its members (Dupius, 2010; Kumar, 2017; Raley et al., 2020). To further understand the dynamics of blended families, it is crucial to conduct additional qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies. A quantitative study investigating the success rates of stepfathers in remarriages beyond their second marriage would provide valuable insights. This line of inquiry would shed light on the quality of their relationships with stepchildren and other significant family members. Most research points to remarriage being successful if stepfathers and stepchildren have good relationships.

Understanding stepfather-stepchild relationship development and how it impacts the marital relationship can provide additional data to determine differences between the number of times a stepfather is remarried and the sustainability of the blended family. Expanding the scope of the research by conducting multiple interviews would enable a more extensive range of information. By affording participants additional opportunities to delve deeper into their experiences, the study could yield profound, detailed descriptions that enhance the validity of the findings. While semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method for this study, incorporating additional approaches such as focus groups or surveys can provide participants with alternative ways to contribute further insights (Smith, 2015).

It is also essential to gather additional data on the interactions between stepfathers and stepchildren, stepfathers and biological fathers, as well as stepfathers and wives. Examining how these various relationships interplay and influence one another would contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the success or failure of blended families. By exploring the impact of these relationships on the overall family dynamics, a more nuanced perspective can be obtained, which will enhance the overall study outcomes.

### **Summary**

Blending a family can be exciting and anxiety producing at the same time. Partners bring their previous families together into a new family unit. The complexity of a blended family creates eccentric challenges not experienced by nuclear families. These challenges, which include relationship-building between family members, require good conflict-resolution skills.

Importance is placed on the stepfather's ability to differentiate. This is the ability of the stepfather to respond appropriately to the conflict to work toward a resolution. It is vital not to bring prior ways of resolving conflict from the first marriage into the current marital relationship (Hadley et al., 2019). Doing so can create issues of mistrust, anxiety, inappropriate behavior, and inability to resolve conflict in marital relationships (Faber, 2004). Staving off triangles is important in maintaining the stepfather-stepchild relationship. When conflict arises, if children are aware of the conflict, most often, the child will take the side of the biological parent. This can create poor relationships between the stepfather and stepchild (Shortal, 2004). The stepfather needs to differentiate and practice effective conflict-resolution skills, genuine respect, a good couple style, and counseling if needed (McCarthy et al., 2007).

The objective of this study was to gain insight and viewpoints from stepfathers in their second marriages and part of a blended family. The results confirmed previous research, showing

that building strong relationships, compromising, and effective conflict-resolution skills are crucial. Blended families may require resources and counseling to address the challenges that affect them.

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**APPENDIX A***Interview Questions*

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**Ice breakers:**

1. Tell me about your hobbies and things you like to do to relax.
2. Tell me about your career.
3. If you could go on your dream vacation, where would it be and why?

**The role of the stepfather in a successful second marriage:**

4. Tell me about your relationship with your wife. Where and how did you all meet? How long did you date before getting engaged?
5. Discuss your satisfaction with being a stepfather in a second marriage. What makes your marriage successful? What does a successful marriage look like?
6. What do you think your role is as a stepfather?
7. What is your relationship like with your children and/or stepchildren?
8. Before marriage, did you all discuss what it would mean to be a blended family and the role that each partner would fill? If so, how did you all make those decisions? If not, why?
9. Talk to me about the conversations you and your wife had on blended families and roles. If you did not have any discussions, why not? If you did, what were those discussions like?

**The meaning of being a husband in a second marriage:**

10. What does it mean to be a husband in a second marriage?
11. Tell me about your relationship with the biological father. How does the relationship

between your spouse with the biological father impact your marriage.

12. Tell me about your relationship with other significant in your married life like grandparents and in-laws. How have these relationships impacted your marital relationship?
13. Tell me if you have ever had a moment where you questioned your decision to remarry.
14. How does being a stepfather help or hurt a successful second marriage?
15. Describe what you believe you contribute to your family as a stepfather and husband in a second marriage.

Questions 1 and 2 are general questions to help the participant relax, feel comfortable and begin to engage in conversation (Smith et al., 2012). Building a rapport with the participant is important because it adds flexibility to the interview and helps produce richer data (Smith, 2015). Questions 3-18 are feeling and emotion questions. They are designed to provoke the more emotive or affective parts of the participant's experiences (Drudella, 2020). During the interview, probing will be done to further explore different areas based on the participants answers and conversation. When necessary, the technique of *funneling* will be used to gain specific information about a topic discussed during the interview (Smith, 2015).

**APPENDIX B****Consent**

**Title of the Project:** Stepfather's perspective of their role in a second marriage in a blended family

**Principal Investigator:** Kathy Thornton, BS, MHS, MA, 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 stepfather in a second marriage. 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 gain an understanding of how a stepfather perceives his role in a second marriage in a blended family. Understanding his perception will provide additional information on how he makes meaning of it.

**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. Participating in a semi-structure interview which could take up to an hour based on the progression of the interview.
2. The interview will be audio/video recorded based on the location of the interview (in - person or virtual).

**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 gaining increased knowledge of how stepfathers describe their role in a second marriage in a blended family. This information will not only add to society by helping change societal views on blended families, it will also provide counselors and therapists with the knowledge they need to provide better family and individual services for members of a blended family.

**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.



**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 a subject. 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.

- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. 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.

**Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or 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 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 Kathy Thornton. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] and/or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Schultz, at [email].

**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](mailto: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.*

<b>Your Consent</b>
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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/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

