THE BLENDED FAMILY EXPERIENCE: BARRIERS AND BREAKTHROUGHS

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Abstract:

The dynamics of marriage and partnerships have evolved, leading to the emergence of blended families as a prominent family structure. Unlike traditional nuclear families, blended families are formed when individuals enter new relationships, bringing children from previous marriages or partnerships. This shift has given rise to unique communication challenges and complexities that distinguish blended families from their nuclear counterparts. This study delves into the development and challenges of blended families, examining communication strategies, boundary-setting, and family subsystem interactions. The study emphasizes the need for a better understanding of these family structures, focusing on communication patterns, loyalty conflicts, and boundary flexibility, and how these factors impact family growth and stability.

Keywords:

Blended Families, Boundary Setting, Stepfamilies, Family Integration, Loyalty Conflicts

Introduction

Families are intricate systems, and blended families even more so. These families are formed when one or both partners bring children from previous relationships. While the term "blended" suggests harmony, achieving a stable and healthy family dynamic can be challenging (Marsolini, 2000). Research has identified numerous challenges faced by blended families, yet there has been limited focus on understanding the factors that contribute to their long-term stability (Dainton, 2019; Kumar, 2017; Papernow, 2018). Given the unique difficulties these families encounter, both they and those supporting them can benefit from exploring what promotes their stability.

Blended families are becoming increasingly common (Higginbotham et al., 2010; Kumar, 2017; Saint-Jacques et al., 2016). According to Zeleznikow and Zeleznikow (2015), over 40% of U.S. adults have at least one step-relative, and Kumar (2017) predicted that blended families may soon outnumber first-marriage nuclear families. Despite their prevalence, individuals in blended families often face the stigma associated with broken families (Kumar, 2017). This stigma, stemming from past separations or divorces, along with additional pressures, can make these families more susceptible to relationship challenges (Coleman, 2018; Kumar, 2017).

Review of Literature

Shifts in marriage and partnership dynamics have significantly reshaped how family is perceived and understood (Sweeney, 2010). The nuclear family—consisting of a mother, father, and their children—is traditionally seen as the standard family structure (Buchanan & McConnell, 2017). In contrast, blended families are often viewed as deviations from this norm (Ganong & Coleman, 2018). These families emerge when partners enter a relationship, bringing children from previous unions. Unlike nuclear families, where traditions, beliefs, roles, and communication styles are typically shared, blended families incorporate diverse past experiences, which can lead to significant adjustments in behaviors and expectations (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Braithwaite et al., 2009).

Brubaker and Kimberly (1993) state that as American society evolves, the structure and roles of families have also changed (p. 3). However, this does not imply that the family as an institution is vanishing or declining; rather, it is adapting to reflect the complexities of personal and professional life in a postmodern society (Brubaker & Kimberly, 1993; Schwartz, 1988; Stacey, 1990). The

rising rates of divorce, remarriage, and shifts in non-marital parental relationships have led to an increase in stepfamilies or blended families as a common family structure (Olson & DeFrain, 1997). In fact, statistics indicate that one in six children under 18 is a stepchild (Stepfamily Association of America, 1998).

The growing number of blended families highlights the need for a deeper understanding of this family form. Beyond their prevalence, these families experience unique complexities—both positive and negative—that deserve scholarly attention, particularly in the field of communication. These complexities, which distinguish them from traditional nuclear families, are largely communication-based. For example, members of blended families must navigate intricate challenges such as establishing and redefining communication boundaries within different family subsystems.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach. A thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns in communication styles, boundary-setting, loyalty conflicts, and family cohesion. The study also incorporates a review of existing literature on blended families, synthesizing previous research findings to contextualize the results.

Challenges involved in Blended Family-

Researchers studying blended family development have often described the process of "becoming a family" as a sequential progression through specific stages or phases (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Papernow, 1993). One of the most detailed frameworks is Papernow's (1993) seven-stage model of blended family development.

The process begins with the fantasy stage, where family members hold unrealistic expectations about their new family dynamic. This is followed by the immersion stage, in which those expectations are disrupted by the realities of everyday life. In the awareness stage, family members begin to recognize and address their uncertainties and confusion. The mobilization stage then emerges, marked by open conflicts and efforts to resolve

differences. These negotiations lead to the action stage, where new agreements help establish a stable foundation for the family's growth. As the process continues, the contact stage sees family members forming meaningful and positive bonds. Finally, in the resolution stage, the blended family functions as a cohesive and well-adjusted unit.

Papernow (1993) suggests that blended families that struggle to adapt may not successfully reach the final three stages of this model.

Visher and Visher (1988) and Papernow (1994) emphasize that one of the most significant challenges for blended families is setting clear and appropriate boundaries between different family subsystems. Within these families, alliances may form, leading to distinctions between in-group and out-group members (Fine, 1995; Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993). Loyalty conflicts are especially common, such as a child feeling torn between their custodial and noncustodial parents (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Visher & Visher, 1993) or a noncustodial parent feeling displaced by a stepparent (Visher & Visher, 1993). In fact, Cissna, Cox, and Bochner (1990) found that half of the couples they studied identified loyalty conflicts as a key issue in the family restructuring process.

Blended family boundaries also differ in their permeability, meaning the extent to which they are flexible or rigid (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Kelley, 1992; Visher & Visher, 1988, 1993). The adaptability of these boundaries plays a crucial role in both family structure and interpersonal relationships. However, greater flexibility is not always preferable. Researchers suggest that boundaries should be both open and firm—permeable enough to maintain connections with extended family and non-biological relatives, yet strong enough to protect and nurture developing relationships within the blended family (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988; Papernow, 1994).

Blended families also encounter difficulties in developing a sense of unity and closeness. The lack of a shared family history, the disruption

of previous parent-child bonds, geographical distance from a noncustodial parent, the introduction of new siblings, and the absence of a clear legal relationship with stepparents can all contribute to this challenge (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). Children may experience feelings of loss regarding their parents' previous marriage, their contact with a noncustodial parent, and the dissolution of their original family structure (Bray & Harvey, 1995; Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Additionally, pressure to accept new family members as "family" can intensify grief and resentment over these losses (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). These challenges can affect all family members and subsystems, potentially leading to jealousy and resentment between stepsiblings as they navigate their new roles within the household (Bray & Hetherington, 1988, 1993). These tensions can place biological parents and stepparents in difficult positions as they attempt to foster a sense of unity in the family (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994).

Due to these difficulties in establishing solidarity, some researchers argue that blended families tend to be less emotionally close than intact families (Anderson & White, 1986; Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Fine, Voydanoff, & Donnelly, 1993). This is especially evident in stepparent-stepchild relationships (Bray & Hetherington, 1993; Whitsett & Land, 1992). Studies have found that biological parents in blended families generally feel a stronger bond with their own children than with their stepchildren (Fine, Voydanoff, & Donnelly, 1993; Kurdek & Fine, 1991). Such differences in attachment have been linked to lower emotional well-being in children from blended families (Fine, Voydanoff, & Donnelly, 1993; White, 1994a, 1994b). However, scholars caution that the gap between stepfamilies and traditional families may not be as significant as previously believed. Additionally, children from families that have undergone multiple divorces may face greater risks than those raised in stable blended families (Coleman, 1994).

Because of the uncertainty surrounding their new roles, many members of blended families may try to replicate the traditional family dynamics or the roles they previously held in their original family. This often leads to what Visher and Visher (1988) describe as the "myth of instant love"—the expectation that the new family will immediately function like a nuclear family. Stepparents, in particular, may anticipate forming an instant bond with their stepchildren, and when this does not happen, they may experience guilt and frustration (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Hines, 1997). Research by Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) found that unmet or unrealistic expectations were among the most common turning points in blended family development. This was especially evident in families classified as declining, stagnating, or experiencing extreme fluctuations.

In conclusion, scholars have worked to define the process of blended family development and the unique challenges these families face, including boundary-setting, loyalty conflicts, establishing solidarity, and adapting to change. Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson's (1999) study advanced this understanding by adopting a process-oriented approach and identifying five distinct developmental trajectories of blended families. However, there remains a gap in understanding how these challenges unfold within each of these trajectories. Therefore, this study aimed to explore these issues in greater depth by examining how participants narratively constructed the experience of blended family development within these five pathways.

Nuclear Family Emotional System

As previously defined, a nuclear family consists of a mother, father, and their dependents (Buchanan & McConnell, 2017). When a family struggles to regulate emotions and thoughts, issues such as emotional distance, dysfunction in one spouse, marital conflicts, and impairments in one or more children can arise (Alzoubi, 2016). These patterns may occur individually or together, depending on the level of anxiety within the family (Alzoubi, 2016).

Family Projection Process

The family projection process refers to the harm parents may cause to their children, which can be social, emotional, or physical (Alzoubi, 2016). This process often leads to negative emotions and a sense of disconnection (Balswick & Balswick, 2014).

Multigenerational Transmission Process

Bowen's multigenerational transmission process highlights that issues such as self-differentiation and triangulation can be passed down through generations (Tan, 2011). Bowen suggested that greater openness within the extended family could help reduce anxiety and improve emotional regulation, leading to healthier family relationships (Klever, 2015).

Triangles and Interlocking Triangles

In situations of instability, triangulation may occur, such as when a child becomes involved in a conflict between their parents. This process is harmful to children and can have lasting effects on their future relationships (Dyer, 2021). Bowen (1978) described triangulation as a two-against-one scenario. Triangles help the family manage anxieties, and the dynamics within these triangles—such as the parents' marital stability and the level of anxiety involved—can significantly impact the child's development and future family life (Klever & Klever, 2009).

Sibling Position

Sibling position, or birth order, has been a subject of considerable attention, with Bowen suggesting that birth order may influence specific characteristics. For example, a first-born may be more likely to take on a leadership role, while a last-born may be more inclined to follow (Miller et al., 2004). However, empirical support for these claims is limited.

Emotional Cutoff

Emotional cutoff refers to the act of emotionally distancing oneself from family members. Individuals who experience significant stress in their relationships may detach to cope with or eliminate the sources of anxiety. This process is often considered natural and allows individuals to manage their emotions without directly interacting with the family (Peleg, 2014).

Emotional Process in Society

Balswick and Balswick (2014) outlined multiple levels of social systems, including individual, sibling, parent, family, congregation, community, society, and the world. The emotional processes within society mirror those in the family, with larger systems developed to address the complexities of social behaviors. These systems can be affected by both progressive and regressive periods, ultimately returning to a more community-oriented, family-friendly structure (p. 338).

Conclusion:

Blended families, as an evolving family structure, are becoming an integral part of modern society, reflecting broader societal changes such as rising divorce rates, remarriage, and shifting parental dynamics. While the traditional nuclear family model has long been viewed as the societal standard, blended families present a distinct set of challenges and opportunities for growth and adaptation. This research has illuminated the complexities that define blended families, particularly focusing on the communication processes, boundary-setting strategies, and emotional dynamics that shape their development.

One of the key findings from this study is that blended families often navigate a series of stages, as outlined in Papernow's (1993) model, each stage presenting different hurdles and opportunities for family integration. From the early fantasy stage filled with unrealistic expectations, through the awareness and mobilization stages marked by conflict and adjustments, to the eventual resolution and cohesion that signifies the successful formation of a blended family, the process is complex and layered. Understanding this progression allows family members, counselors, and researchers alike to recognize where a family might be in their journey and what strategies can help them progress to the next stage.

A significant challenge for blended families lies in the negotiation of boundaries between various family subsystems. As family members come from diverse backgrounds and

previous relationships, the traditional roles and expectations that exist in a nuclear family model do not automatically apply. In this context, establishing clear yet adaptable boundaries becomes crucial. Flexible boundaries can help accommodate the diverse needs and relationships within the family while maintaining a sense of stability. However, overly rigid boundaries can limit the development of meaningful connections, while overly flexible ones can lead to confusion and instability. Striking the right balance is vital for fostering healthy family dynamics and encouraging the development of trust among family members.

Loyalty conflicts—particularly those involving children torn between biological parents or stepparents—remain a central issue in blended families. These conflicts, when unresolved, can create long-lasting emotional and relational challenges. A clear understanding of these conflicts, and the role of communication in resolving them, is key to promoting family unity. Open, empathetic, and non-judgmental communication is essential for overcoming these conflicts, helping family members express their feelings, manage expectations, and work toward mutual understanding.

Furthermore, this research highlights the importance of external support for blended families. Professional guidance, such as counseling, can play a transformative role in helping families work through the difficulties inherent in the blending process. Counselors can offer critical tools for communication, conflict resolution, and boundary management, as well as provide emotional support as family members navigate their new roles. For children and stepparents in particular, educational resources about family dynamics and the blending process can offer valuable insights and strategies for coping with the emotional challenges they may face.

In conclusion, while blended families present a departure from traditional family norms, they do not signify a breakdown of the family institution. Instead, they represent the adaptability of family structures in response to evolving societal conditions. The key to the successful functioning of blended families lies in effective communication, clear and adaptable boundary-setting, and the resolution of loyalty conflicts. By focusing on these areas, blended families can not only navigate the complexities of their structure but also foster stronger, more resilient relationships that contribute to their overall well-being and cohesion. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, particularly in relation to cultural, social, and psychological factors, to deepen our understanding of how these families can best thrive in an ever-changing social landscape.

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