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Development of the Husband-Wife Relationship Within a Stepfamily

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DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUSBAND-WIFE RELATIONSHIP
WITHIN A STEPFAMILY

by

Thomas A. Genovese

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of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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VITA

The author, Thomas Anthony Genovese, is the son of Thomas Genovese and Antonina (Alfano) Genovese. He was born on March 17, 1940.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

According to the United States National Center for Health Statistics, in 1981, nearly one-half of all marriages were remarriages for at least one of the partners (White & Booth, 1985). Many of these remarried families include children from previous marriages, and these families with stepchildren represent 17.4% of the families with children under the age of 17 (Glick, 1989). It is expected that this pattern will continue into the 1990's and that remarriage and stepfamilies will remain a concern of researchers and clinicians (Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989).

Empirical research indicates that the levels of marital satisfaction for remarried couples is comparable to first married couples. The research uses survey techniques which examine the subjective opinions of the remarried spouse or their partner (Albrecht, Bake & Goodman, 1983; Clingempeel & Brand, 1985; Demaris, 1984; Fine, Donnelly & Voydanoff, 1986; Knaub, Hanna & Stinnet, 1984; White & Booth, 1985). In addition, second marriages appear to have only slightly higher divorce rates than first marriages (Albrecht et al., 1983; Mc Goldrick & Carter, 1988; Walker et al., 1977). This supports the idea that remarried and first married couples have similar levels of marital satisfaction.

However, the literature clearly suggests that these "special" families have some unique problems. These problems are a result of the families complexity and that they do not fit current definitions of families. One indication of these problems is that stepfamilies have been coming to counseling in increasing numbers (Visher 1985). This has caused many clinicians to believe there is a need for greater understanding and development of treatment techniques for this population (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Dahl, Cowgill & Asmundsson, 1987; Klienman, Rosenberg & Whiteside, 1979; Mc Goldrick & Carter, 1988; Sager, 1987; Visher, 1985).

Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley (1987) describe some remarried couples' differing opinions concerning satisfaction with remarriage and their multiple problems. The authors suggested that the problems associated with remarriage may be independent of marital satisfaction, that many of the surveyed couples may have already solved the problems of remarriage, and that the dissatisfied couples may have divorced quickly and, therefore, would not have been included in the surveys.

Fine et al. (1986) after finding similar levels of marital satisfaction between first married and remarried couples with children, speculated that perhaps the problems of bringing up stepchildren have been overestimated and the problems of bringing up natural children have been underestimated.

The difference in research results and clinical observa-

tions of remarriage satisfaction may be an artifact of the methods used to collect information. None of the studies controlled for factors which are important to first marriage satisfaction such as household division of labor, relationships with children or relationships with others outside the family (Guisinger, Cowan & Schuldberg, 1989). In addition, the empirical data collected concerning marital satisfaction also, did not control for the amount of time remarried couples were married or the presence of stepchildren. These surveys, as suggested by Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley (1987), may have been completed after the dissatisfied couples divorced, after the couples adjusted to the presence of stepchildren or the remarried couple may never have had stepchildren. It is not until specific segments of the data are examined that a substantially different picture concerning remarriage satisfaction may emerge from the research.

When the empirical literature controls for the presence of stepchildren and length of time of the remarriage, there appears to be empirical support for the view that remarriage and formation of a stepfamily is a life transition which occurs with some distress and tension for those involved. McCarthy's (1978) reanalysis of the 1973 National Survey of Family Growth indicates there is a substantially higher probability of divorce during the first two or three years of marriage when there are stepchildren present compared to either first marriages or remarriages without stepchildren.

During the same two or three year period the probability of divorce for remarried couples without stepchildren is very close to first marriages. Mc Carthy's study was confirmed in 1985 by White & Booth. Three years after remarriage the authors reported that couples with stepchildren when compared to remarried couples without stepchildren had a significantly higher divorce rate. Additional results of the study indicated remarried couples with stepchildren had significantly lower marital happiness and were significantly more likely to say if they had to do it all over again they would not do it at all than remarried couples without stepchildren.

It has become apparent from the literature that many couples who are remarried after divorce are unprepared for the difficulties of integrating children from previous marriages into a family unit (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985; Ellis, 1984; Knaub, Hanna & Stinnett, 1988; Messinger, Walker, Stanley & Freeman, 1978; Walker & Messinger, 1979). There usually are no helpful models from the remarried couples' previous life, and society offers no model of how a remarried (step) family should function.

Purpose of the Study

The literature clearly indicates the early years of a remarriage which includes formation of a stepfamily involves high levels of distress. The view taken for this thesis is that the stresses on the remarried couple primarily are the

result of the difficulties involved in stepfamily formation and are not the result of individual pathology. Furthermore, the problems faced by remarried couples with stepchildren are exacerbated by their lack of understanding of stepfamily dynamics and the lack of stepfamily developmental models in society. This thesis will bring together the relevant literature which identifies the problems involved with stepfamily formation and how these problems effect the development of the marital relationship.

The purpose of this thesis is to review the preexisting literature to:

1. Establish a theoretical basis for understanding the husband-wife relationship in stepfamilies. Family systems theory from a structural perspective will be used.

2. Identify the problems in stepfamily formation which interfere or inhibit the development of the relationship between the husband and wife.

3. Identify the extent to which the findings in the literature concerning stress on the husband-wife relationship is supported by empirical research.

4. Summarize the literature concerning the use of prevention programs to help remarried couples in stepfamilies.

Procedure

All material for this review has been developed through library research. The author had Psychological Abstracts,

Sociological Abstracts, and Social Science Citations electronically searched for the 1984-1989 period. This has been deemed sufficient to develop information concerning the husband-wife relationship in remarriage. However, frequently quoted references published before the search cutoff have also been included as has other material necessary to complete reviews of specific topics.

Limitations of the Study

This review will focus principally on the problems created by the formation of a stepfamily in the development of the husband-wife relationship in a remarriage after divorce. Families formed by remarriage after death are excluded, because they are not as likely to have stepchildren as families formed by remarriage after divorce because of the age of the remarriage partners. In 1978, the median age of a remarried widower was about 60 compared to 36 for a divorced remarried man and the average age for widows was 53 compared to 30 for divorced remarried women (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987).

Complications to couple bonding in remarriage involving emotional distress caused by a previous marriage or emotional problems of either spouse are important issues but beyond the scope of this review. The effect natural children of the remarried couple have on the remarriage will also not be included.

Characteristics of Remarriage

The difference between first marriages and remarriages is the previous marriage of one of the spouses. However, the remarriage itself is not the principle cause of tensions of the remarried couple. The presence of stepchildren appear to be a specific situation that heightens marital tensions and difficulties. The following are some of the characteristic ways remarriages with children are different than first marriages. This does not represent a complete list and the list is taken primarily from Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley (1985).

1. In first marriage families, there usually is a period of time where the couple is alone and has time to learn to act as a unit. When a child is born, the couple assumes the role of parents and learns the complexities of parenthood as their children grow. This is in sharp contrast to stepfamilies where there is no time and privacy for the remarried couple to assume and learn the double role of parent and spouse.

2. In first marriage families the roles of father, mother, husband, wife, daughter, sister, etc. are well defined by society. The roles of stepparent and stepchild are undefined. A stepparent may know what being a parent means to him or her but the stepparent's approach to being a stepparent may not agree with the role his new spouse or stepchild anticipated for the stepparent.

3. When there is a remarriage and children are involved, the roles and interactions of all members are changed im-

mediately without the gradual process that occurs with the birth of a child in a first marriage. The remarried couple may be committed to the marriage while the stepparent has not developed a relationship with the stepchild.

4. There may be differences in the needs of the family life cycle and the life cycles of the individuals involved. The new family will need to become cohesive while an adolescent stepchild has a need to express independence.

5. There is a need to strengthen the intimacy bond between the remarried couple. The presence of children may make this difficult because the relationship between the natural parent and child predates the remarriage and is stronger than the marital relationship (Mc Goldrick & Carter, 1988).

6. Stepfamilies can have difficulty forming cohesive boundaries because people outside the family such as the natural parent of the stepchild can influence the functioning of the family.

7. There may be loyalty conflicts because of past family experience. The stepparent may have feelings of guilt toward natural children living away from them and stepchildren may feel they are betraying their natural parent who is the same sex as the stepparent if they form a friendly relationship with the step parent.

8. The children may belong in two households and travel back and forth between them. There may be differences in

family customs and certainly a disruption when the "family" member who lives away from the household comes to visit.

9. Children may not want to be part of the family, and while all children may attempt to manipulate their parents to their advantage, stepchildren may purposely try to disrupt the marriage.

In addition to the factors listed above, the remarried couple has to deal with the same developmental tasks of a first married couple. There is a need for commitment to the marital system and a need for realignment of relationships and issues that were previously defined individually or by the family of origin. New decisions regarding relationships to family of origin, family traditions, divisions of household tasks, how and where to eat, sleep, talk, work, spend money and adjust to friends and siblings must be made (Bader & Sinclair, 1983; Mc Goldrick, 1988). To Lewis (1986), the initial tasks in a marriage are deciding whether or not the marriage will be the primary human connection, and deciding power issues such as who makes decision concerning specific issues and how close or separate the couple will be from each other. These marital issues are multiplied within the stepfamily (Ahorn & Rodgers, 1987).

Terms and Definitions

Stepfamilies are referred to by many different terms in the literature. The terms used are blended family, reconsti-

tuted family, remarried (rem) family, second chance family or reconstructed family. For this report, these terms will be used interchangeably to refer to a family where one or more of the spouses was previously married and a biologically natural child from the previous marriage lives with the family. Similarly, there are many terms used in the literature for intact families or couples in their first marriage. The terms found in the literature are intact family, first married family, nuclear family, biological family, and nondivorced family. Where an article cited in this report uses one of the terms given above in a significantly different way than defined, that definition will be given.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The remainder of the thesis will be organized as follows: chapter two will contain the family systems view of the step-family; chapter three will contain a review of the stresses on the husband-wife relationship; chapter four will discuss prevention and solutions to stepfamily problems; and chapter five will present a summary, conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER II

FAMILY SYSTEMS AND THE STEPFAMILY

Chapter I indicated that the early years of remarriage with children can be unusually stressful for the remarried couple. During the first years of marriage, remarried couples with stepchildren rated their marriages as less satisfactory and had significantly higher divorce rates than first married couples or remarried couples without children (Mc Carthy, 1978; White & Booth, 1985). These remarried couples appear to be unprepared for the stresses of adjusting to a new marriage while attempting to form a stepfamily (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985; Ellis, 1984; Knaub, Hanna & Stinnett, 1988; Walker & Messinger, 1979).

In addition to the normal developmental tasks of first married couples, the remarried couple also must attempt to integrate themselves and their children from previous marriages into a family unit. This permits the couple little time to solidify their marital relationship. In the new stepfamily relationship, there usually is confusion concerning the roles of the family members, potential intrusions on the family from the outside, guilt caused by conflicting loyalties between new family relationships and past family relationships and perhaps a stepfamily member who attempts to break up the marriage. These factors can make solidification of the marital relationship and integration of the joined individuals

To improve understanding of the stressors, it is important to provide a theoretical base for their cause. For this study, the structural family systems view will be used as a theoretical base. This chapter will present general systems theory, structural family systems theory and an application of structural family systems theory to stepfamilies.

General Systems Theory

General systems theory was developed from diverse fields such as biology, sociology, and mathematics. As applied to humans, systems theory has become the basis for family therapy (Minuchin, 1985) and as a theory dominates the field (Foley, 1986). Interest in systems theory emerged among family therapists because other theories could not explain the occurrence or reoccurrence of certain symptoms. Some of these unexplained problems were the sequential appearance of symptomatic children within the same family, a slowing or regression of patients treatment when they returned to their families and alterations of schizophrenic language and behavior when these patients were interviewed with their families. Systems theory was attractive to family therapists because it studied the family as an organized whole (Minuchin, 1985) and recognized the importance of the interrelationships between individuals and their social contexts (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988).

It is not the author's intention to completely outline the general systems theory but to present specific parts of the theory which will assist in understanding structural family systems and how that theory can be applied to step-families. The underlying information for this discussion of systems theory is from Becvar and Becvar (1988) and Constantine (1986). For those who are interested, a detailed discussion of systems theory applied to families can be found in Constantine (1986).

Systems Definition and Organization

"A system is a bounded set of interrelated elements exhibiting coherent behavior as a unit (Constantine 1986, p. 50)." The boundary of a system defines its membership and permits identification of the systems parts and differentiates the system's parts from the external environment. Systems may be physical such as automobile engines or biological such as trees or people. The elements of a system are related in some particular unifying way and exist in a constant exchange with the surrounding environment. The activity of exchange and the surrounding environment are the context of the system.

A family is a system and its context would include among other factors its ethnicity, geographical setting, social class and the system of all other families to which it is related. For an individual, his or her family and all of the previously mentioned would be part of the context. The

individuals, parts or elements which makeup the system are referred to as subsystems.

Causality

A systems theorist does not ask why something occurs and does not seek explanations of behavior or events in their antecedents. Systems theory challenges traditional scientific methods by looking at wholes without attempting to explain them out of their context or by reducing the whole to its simplest parts (Minuchin, 1985). To a systems theorist, the cycle of interaction is the basic element of understanding. The concept of circular causality encompasses the reciprocal nature of the interactive cycle. Minuchin (1985, p. 290) gives an example of circular causality:

It is an epistemological error to state that an over-protective mother is creating anxieties in her child. Rather, mother and child have created a pattern in which (starting anywhere) the child's fears trigger concerned behavior in the mother, which exacerbates the child's fears, which escalates the mother's concern and so forth. This mutual relationship would be the subject of inquiry and interventions. Historical considerations are used by systems theorists to increase understanding about the context of the problem but are not used to locate cause.

Boundaries

The boundaries of a system separate the system from its

environment and differentiates one system from another. Boundaries may be tangible such as a house or fence or intangible such as shared experiences, family rituals, a definition of membership or the rules of the group. The rules or norms of a system represent the values of the system and the permitted and characteristic relationship patterns within the system. In human systems, the rules or norms of the system may not be consciously recognized by the systems members. Shorter (1975) in Walker and Messinger (1979, p. 188) gives the following example of a nuclear family boundary,

What distinguishes the nuclear family from other patterns of social life...is a special sense of solidarity that separates the domestic unit from the surrounding community. Its members feel they have more in common with one another than with anyone else on the outside. They enjoy a privileged emotional climate they must protect from outside intrusions through privacy and isolation.

Structure and Process

The interrelations between elements in a system and the environment are structure and process. Structure is a system's relatively enduring relational patterns. In a family, structure can be defined as the family's characteristic patterns of interaction that have developed over time to meet the needs of the members and the family (Montgomery & Fewer, 1988). This would include relationships such as

parent-child and husband-wife. Structure is subjective depending on the vantage point of the observer. The relationship patterns in a family may look very different to a family therapist than they look to a child in the family.

Process refers to the more transient or changeable aspects of relationships within the system. These are discrete time limited behaviors. An argument between spouses on a given morning is process. However, if arguments occur frequently they represent a structural aspect of the spouse relationship rather than process. Structure is process which has developed into an enduring pattern in a relationship.

Feedback

Feedback is the link between structure and process. Through feedback, information about past behavior is returned to the system. Feedback is the way the individuals or groups in the system know about the acceptability of their behavior. Systems tend to want to maintain their patterns of interaction and resist change. The system attempts to maintain homeostasis which is a state where all elements of the system are in balance and not attempting to change. However, changes in the environment and the development of the individuals in the systems requires the system to make changes to accommodate the demands of its members and the environment. The feedback process provides the mechanism which makes accommodation and change possible. When a rule or norm is breached, positive

feedback communicates acceptance of the change by the system. On the other hand, negative feedback communicates that the change is opposed and the stability of the system is to be maintained. The ability of feedback to change a system depends on the relative openness of the system. A system is open when new information can enter the system.

Structural Family Systems Theory

The structural family model is most frequently associated with Salvador Minuchin, and Minuchin (1974) is the source for this section of the thesis. A family is formed through marriage which causes the couple to separate from some of their former relationships and activities. The time and effort necessary to build the couple relationship is made at the expense of these other relationships and activities. The major functions of the family are the protection of the individuals, both socially and psychologically, and to adjust to and transmit its cultural context.

The underlying belief in Minuchin's model is that the parts of a family and the family itself can be best understood by studying the relations that exist between the members of the family. Family functioning is described in terms of the social organization of the family. The theory, therefore, focuses on the patterns of interaction within the family. These patterns of interaction give the observer clues to the basic structure of the family system.

Family structure is defined by Minuchin (1974, p. 51) as "the invisible set of functional demands that organizes the ways in which family members interact." Family structure can only be seen in movement and is formed by the repeated relational patterns within the family which underpin the family system. These patterns are the family's preferred ways of doing things, and they are maintained as long as possible. However, the normal family must change over time to meet the needs of its members and maintain its continuity. These changes do not occur without stress and difficulty.

Change is brought about through a constant adjustment of the family member's position in relation to each other. For example, as children grow older, they are permitted to become more independent of the family system. Dysfunctional patterns of relationships occur when there are rigid responses to the needs of family subsystems or the demands of the environment. The boundaries of the family system must be firm but flexible enough to allow realignments when circumstances change.

Transactional Styles

At their extremes transactional styles are either enmeshed or disengaged. In an enmeshed system, the subsystems (parent and child for example) act as if they are the same. At the other extreme, disengaged systems act as if the others do not exist. A mother and her small child might be highly enmeshed which gives a heightened sense of belonging. This

would present no problem for the child until the child reaches the age when more autonomy is needed for his or her development. Enmeshment discourages autonomy, exploration and mastery of problems. The enmeshed family responds with speed and intensity to any threat or change to the accustomed. On the other hand, the disengaged family permits a wide range of variation among its members but also gives a reduced sense of loyalty and belonging. Members may not be able to request support when support is needed and, in the extreme, disengaged subsystems do not respond when a response is appropriate.

Subsystems

The family carries out its functions by grouping into subsystems which may include one or two or more family members. The subsystem may be formed by member interest, sex, family function, etc. The levels of authority and function must be clear for a family to function properly. Minuchin would not be concerned that a parental subsystem contained an adult and a parental child so long as lines of authority and responsibility were clear. Two of the subsystems defined by Minuchin (1974), the spouse subsystem and the parental subsystem are significant to this thesis and are described below.

The spouse subsystem is formed when two adults of the opposite sex join together to form a family. To be successful, they must learn to accommodate and to be complimentary

to each other. Accommodation is the ability to compromise without feeling undue loss and being complimentary involves assuming noncompeting roles. The couple must develop patterns of interactions that support each other's functioning in many areas, and they must yield part of their separateness. "The spouse subsystem must achieve a boundary that protects it from interference by the demands and needs of other systems (Minuchin, 1974, p. 57)," particularly the children. The spouse subsystem should provide emotional support for both members and be a refuge from external stress.

The parental subsystem is responsible for the executive functions of socializing the children. The adults must achieve their parenting role without giving up the mutual support of the spouse subsystem. The children must have access to the adults while being excluded from the spouse functions. Parenting requires authority and cannot be carried out unless parents have the power to control and restrict the children. However, the parenting process involves conflict because children cannot grow and become individuals without attacking and rejecting their parents.

Stepfamilies

From a family systems perspective, remarriage involves an expansion of the boundary of the single parent family to include the stepparent. A remarriage causes immediate pressure to adjust the boundaries of the single-parent family

to include the new spouse (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). During this transitional period, boundaries become disorganized and vague, and there is a period of stress which can interfere with the development of the spouse subsystem. Since clear, flexible boundaries are necessary for a well functioning family, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the development of the spouse subsystem, the parental subsystem and the stepfamily system.

The Spouse Subsystem

In terms of Minuchin's theory, the spouse subsystem develops at the expense of previous relationships and the couple should be mutually supportive and provide a haven from external stress for each other. However, it can be difficult to form the spouse subsystem in remarriages with children because the relationship which appears to suffer is the one between the biological parent and his or her children. This transition can be burdensome because society does not provide norms to guide the natural parent through the emotions which can flow from the changes remarriage causes in the natural parent-child relationship.

These changes are particularly sensitive, because the relationship between the biological parent and child initially is stronger than the relationship of the remarried couple (Mc Goldrick & Carter, 1988). In the single parent family, the biological parent-child relationship can become enmeshed

because of shared difficulties (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahorns, 1985). The development of closed boundaries may help relieve feelings of loss and pain and reassure the family that what is left of the nuclear family is intact (Walker & Messinger, 1979). This strong parent-child relationship will not change quickly, and while attempting to form a spouse subsystem, the biological parent may be more protective and relate more intimately to his or her children than to the new spouse. This can cause the new spouse to become jealous, resentful, confused, rejected, neglected and abandoned (Keshet, 1988a; Papernow, 1984). These feelings can seriously disrupt the development of the trust necessary to build closeness in the marriage. The biological parent may not be able to respond to the stepparent's distress in a way that will strengthen their affection because of conflicting loyalties to the child and the new marital partner (Keshet, 1988a).

The Parental Subsystem

According to Minuchin (1974), it is important that parenting functions not interfere with the mutual support essential to the spouse subsystem. This is particularly difficult to avoid in remarriage with children, because an important criteria for the perspective spouse is the ability to parent or get along with the perspective stepchildren (Roberts & Price, 1987). It is not likely that a parent would marry someone who they believed would not have a good rela-

tionship with their children in the stepfamily. There is evidence that positive interaction with stepchildren is associated with higher marital satisfaction (Ahrons & Wallish, 1987; Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Hobart & Brown, 1987) appreciation given to stepparents by their wives (Hobart, 1987) and family satisfaction (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984).

However, the roles stepparents and stepchildren should fulfill is an important area of uncertainty in stepfamily formation. Walker & Messinger (1979) from Banton (1965) define roles as clusters of rights and obligations between individuals and the expected behavior associated with those roles. The roles of stepparent and stepchild are achieved over time through trial and error (Walker & Messinger, 1979), and how the roles are achieved can have an important influence on the development of the spouse subsystem.

The Family System

To Minuchin (1974), formation of a clear family boundary is essential to the success of the family. Forming a clear stepfamily boundary is difficult because stepfamilies are essentially two families joined at the spouse relationship (Becvar & Becvar, 1988), and there are natural parents inside and outside the new family. These remarried families begin family life without the boundary maintaining conditions found in nuclear families. Examples of these conditions are a common household for natural parents and children and a common

locus of parental authority and economic subsistence. Stepfamilies also start without the shared rituals, symbols and experiences that serve to produce the psychic identification of the family (Walker & Messinger, 1979).

Finally, the stepchild may not want to be in the stepfamily and may see the remarriage as a loss in terms of the need to share the time and affection of the natural parent with the stepparent and a potential loyalty conflict between his or her feelings for the nonresidential parent and the stepparent. The child may also lose prestige because of the remarriage. As part of the single parent family, the child may have had a prestigious position, such as being the parental child or even confidant to the single parent, which must be relinquished at the time of remarriage (Schulman, 1981). These losses might be felt more strongly than any potential benefits which might evolve from having a second adult in the family. Consequently the stepchild may resist expanding his or her concept of family to include the stepparent and even attempt to break up the marriage (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987).

Summary

At its usual starting point, the stepfamily can present the remarried couple with a number of situations which could be seen as indications of potential pathology in structural family systems theory. These stressors on the newly married

couple are that the biological parent-child relationship in the stepfamily can interfere with formation of the spouse subsystem, there can be confusion concerning the role of the stepparent in the parental subsystem, there are people outside the family who can influence family functioning and potential members of the family may resist family formation. These are difficult situations faced by remarried couples with children. What is known from the literature concerning how the remarried couples relationship is influenced will be the content of the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

STRESSES OF THE REMARRIED COUPLE

Remarriage which involves children involves an attempt to combine one single parent family with either an individual or another single parent family. After the remarriage, a period of disorganization occurs where the boundaries and relationships within the single parent family become vague and then realign to accommodate the newcomers. It takes a number of years to complete this transition; estimates of the time vary - 18 months to 3 years (Mc Goldrick & Carter, 1988), 3 to 5 years (Dahl et al., 1987), and 4 to 7 years (Papernow, 1984). The complexity and emotion involved in forming a stepfamily have caused this transition to be characterized as one of the most difficult for a family to negotiate (Mc Goldrick & Carter, 1988).

During this period, the remarried couple must simultaneously strengthen the marital bond, form the parental subsystem and develop some level of family identity. To form the spouse subsystem, the couple must develop supportive, complimentary patterns of interaction, and these patterns of interaction should protect the spouses from the needs and demands of other systems and provide a refuge from external stress (Minuchin, 1974). There are potential conflicts between the spouse and parental subsystems. Minuchin (1974) warned that it is important for the parental subsystem to

develop in a way that does not interfere with the mutual support of the spouse subsystem.

This is inherently difficult, because the presence of children can cause conflicts and tensions at all levels of the family system. Children demand the time and loyalty of the natural parent; this can conflict with the intimacy needs of the newly married couple (Keshet, 1988a, 1988b; Papernow, 1984). The stepchildren may, also, resist the formation of the stepfamily and actively try to breakup the new remarriage (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987). There could be conflict about differences concerning the role of the stepparent and stepchild in the family (Keshet, 1988b), and there are natural parents of the stepchildren living outside the home who can influence the events in the home (Becvar & Becvar, 1988).

This chapter will review the literature concerning formation of a remarried family with children, and how the stresses involved in this process can interfere with the formation of the couple relationship. The following sections will be included in the chapter: the spouse subsystem, which will include information concerning the interactions of the spouses; the parent subsystem, which will include information concerning the spouses; parenting styles and how they relate to stress within the family and family system which will contain information concerning family cohesion and boundary problems, and a summary. It should be recognized that the spouse subsystem, the parental subsystem and family system are

interrelated, and therefore, assignment of information to the sections of this chapter is somewhat arbitrary.

Spouse Subsystem

The adults in the spouse subsystem must learn to compromise, develop complimentary roles, and be supportive of each other (Minuchin, 1974). To do this, the spouses need an understanding of how their mates think about important family issues. In recent years, there have been two studies which indicated that lack of congruence in the remarried couple's ideas about the stepfamily was associated with lower marital satisfaction. Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman & Coleman, (1984) surveyed 359 remarried couples by mail concerning the couple's agreement on family issues. The happily married couples were in concordance concerning whether they agreed or disagreed about family issues. Spouses who were not happily married were more often not aware of their spouses' opinions concerning family issues or agreed they did not agree about specific family issues.

Discrepant views of spouses were also associated with lower marital satisfaction in a study of 62 remarried couples (Guisinger et al., 1989). Marital satisfaction was lower when the wives perceived that the division of household tasks and child care was unequal, and their husbands did not believe the division of these tasks was unequal. In the same study, wives were less satisfied with their remarriages when there was a

discrepancy (either positive or negative) concerning the wives' and husbands' view of the stepchildren.

Reasons For Remarriage

While many of the motivations to marry are probably the same for remarried and first married couples, the presence of children influences the selection of a spouse.

Roberts and Price (1987) interviewed 16 couples where the wives were remarried and custodial parents, and the husbands were married for the first time. Parenting ability was an important reason for selecting a new husband; during courtship, the husband's parenting ability was judged by including the children on dates. Single men were, also, selected as husbands because the women did not want husbands who were preoccupied with a former family. The husbands, on the other hand, selected their wives expecting to gain emotional and financial security through the marriage and were attracted to the women because they were perceived as having direction and goals in life.

In a study of 30 remarried couples with children, good parenting was the most frequently given reason for selecting a mate. During these remarriages the couples achieved a pattern of mutually caring for the children, although major decisions were left to the biological parent (Dahl et al., 1987).

Two clinical examples given by Schulman (1981), had less satisfactory outcomes. A father's primary motivation to remarry was to find a parent for his young children. Once married, he abruptly turned the child care over to the wife who then felt devalued and angry because of the covert nature of her husband's motivations. The next example involved a childless woman who married wanting her husband's adolescent child to be hers to care for and love. The adolescent's behavior alternated between demanding attention and wanting to be left out of family events; this confused and disappointed the stepmother.

Fantasies and Unrealistic Expectations

Unrealistic expectations and beliefs appear to be a major source of disappointment and anger for couples in stepfamilies. These beliefs are deeply held and grow from notions of what a family is supposed to be (Visher & Visher, 1985). The danger is that lack of realism about the stepfamily situation will make it difficult to recognize and resolve issues between the newly remarried couple (Papernow, 1987). A number of authors have expressed views, based on their clinical experiences, about these beliefs and fantasies.

Papernow (1987, p.632) writes of fantasy as the invisible burden of the remarriage.

Remarried couples are impacted...by the particular wishes and yearnings generated by their unique history: the wish

that the members of the new family will love each other in the way that members of biological families do; the conviction that this new spouse will be a better mother or father to these children than the ex-spouse; the wish that the new family will heal the hurts of the previous divorce or death; the fantasy that the adult couples' caring for each other will be experienced between stepparents and their stepchildren; and that the children from a previous marriage will be eagerly involved in the new family.

Even though many of these fantasies may be dismissed intellectually, the desire for the new family to heal the wounds of the broken family is powerful and not easily dismissed. Fear of a second failure may prevent family members from acknowledging and articulating their problems with stepfamily living.

One or both of the spouses may see the remarriage as a chance to become a legitimate family again, as a second chance to make a good marriage, an opportunity to get help with child rearing or as a way to raise his or her standard of living (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). This author also points out that some stepparents see themselves as rescuers of the single parent and his or her children and, therefore, entitled to appreciation. Other stepparents see themselves as gaining a spouse but have no intention of parenting the stepchildren. This may conflict with the bioparents expectation of gaining a helpmate with parenting.

Stanton (1986) and Visher and Visher (1985) identify the myths that the stepfamily is a nuclear family and that there will be instant love between the stepparent and stepchild as having a major negative effect on the stepfamily. The expectation by the stepparent that he or she will love the stepchild can cause guilt and suppression of genuine feelings when the stepparent realizes he or she does not love the stepchild. Also, attempting to rush intimacy with the stepchild or trying too hard will cause the stepparent to feel unappreciated and to become angry and resentful when his or her efforts are rejected by the stepchildren. There may be genuine love and attachment in stepfamilies, but it will take time to achieve.

The expectation and desire that the stepfamily will be similar to the ideal nuclear family which is tight-knit and cohesive also causes disappointment. This expectation rests on the belief that the nuclear family is normal and somehow the stepfamily is not. However, the expectation is unrealistic because it fails to take into consideration the structural characteristics of a stepfamily and the potential influence of former spouses and noncustodial parents (Visher & Visher, 1985).

Ignoring the differences between step and biological families can spawn two problematic cycles that tend to persist once they begin (Mills, 1984). The first cycle involves attempting to shift parental limit setting functions to a

stepfather. The stepfather tries to discipline the child and may or may not have consulted the biological parent. Typically, the mother does not support the stepfather in his efforts or does so without conviction. The children knowing the biological parent does not agree do not change their behavior which leaves the stepfather frustrated and angry. The second cycle involves attempting to shift many of the parental functions and home making to a stepmother. In this cycle, the children miss their relationship with their father and withdraw from the stepmother. The stepmother typically tries harder and the children then withdraw further leaving the stepmother frustrated.

Priority of Natural Parent/Child Relationship

The imbalance between the biological parent-child and the husband-wife relationship goes to the heart of the difficulty of forming a stepfamily according to Papernow (1987). In well functioning families, the couple relationship is supposed to be a sanctuary for each of the members (Minuchin, 1974). However, in the new stepfamily there is greater familiarity between the biological parent-child subsystem than there is between the spouses. This familiarity makes it easier for the biological parent and child to turn to each other for nurturing early in the remarriage. In the beginning, the new couple subsystem must initially compete with the parent-child subsystem as a place for emotional

nourishment. The stepcouple begins their married life being pulled apart by the stronger biological parent-child subsystem with both the new spouse and the stepchild competing for the attention and time of the biological parent (Papernow, 1987).

The children are also experienced in a fundamentally different way by the spouses.

The biological parent feels pulled, engaged, needed. The stepparent, on the other hand, usually feels rejected, ignored, and treated with hostility by the same child. The biological parent feels nourished by, anxious about, and easily mobilized to do for the same children that the stepparent feels jealous of, competitive with, and much more exhausted by (Papernow, 1987, p. 635).

The biological parent is the key to the stepparent's acceptance in the family. "She or he models consideration or unconcern for the stepparent's needs and feelings and supports or sabotages the assertions of the stepparent (Crosbie-Burnett and Ahrons, 1985, p. 132)." The children will look to their natural parent to determine whether they must treat the stepparent as part of the family.

Why would a biological parent not promote complete inclusion of the new stepparent into the family group? First, giving another adult equal status in the family means sharing leadership power. Although the biological parent may welcome sharing family responsibilities, giving up the accompanying leadership rights is more

difficult. Second, a biological parent can feel jealous of a growing friendship between stepparent and stepchild; this is more likely if the parent-child relationship has been stormy (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985, p. 132).

This imbalance is further complicated, because one adult will be the insider or member of the family and the other the outsider trying to enter the family (Papernow, 1987). Insiders usually are the biological parent and his or her child. The outsiders could be a stepparent without children in the new home or a stepparent with children from a previous family that moves into the other family's home. Insiders might not only be more familiar with the physical territory but also might communicate in ways that make it difficult for the outsider to join in the conversation. Under these conditions it will be difficult to complete the couple bond.

Financial Resources

The distribution of financial resources was frequently reported as a common cause of problems and distress (Albrecht, Bahr & Goodman, 1983; Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985; Dahl et al., 1987; Knaub, Hanna Stinnett, 1984; Messinger & Walker, 1977). "For a couple there is often great discomfort about the balances and imbalances of financial responsibilities each brings to the marriage- debts, alimony, financial responsibilities for children.... These imbalances can breed resentment (Bradt & Bradt, 1986, p.

279)." The stepfamily may, also, not be financially independent because of the need for an ex-spouse's child support payments (Kheshet, 1988b).

Most frequently the "money" problems are centered around contact with former spouses rather than the presence of financial resources. Noncustodial parents may use support payments to attempt to control their children or punish their ex-spouses. On the other hand, a spouse in a remarried family may resent the support payments made by his or her mate to a former spouse or children who are not part of the household. This could be particularly true if support payments are paid out of the remarried family when expected payments from non-custodial parents are not received into the family (Lown & Dolan, 1988).

Fishman (1983) interviewed 16 remarried families concerning stepfamily finances. The author found two approaches to finances which she labeled common pot and two pot. Common pot families pooled all of their resources to pay family expenses. Six of eight common pot families had former spouses who did not contribute to the support of the natural children living in the common pot families. Since these families did not have to deal with parents outside the family, they had much of the privacy of nuclear families and sometimes acted as if the other parent figure did not exist.

In two pot families, resources were distributed according to biological identity and then according to need. In

these families, the outliving parents contributed to the support of their children and each parent within the family contributed a portion of the common expenses and supported his or her biological children. In the two pot families, the spouses had the tendency to remain self supporting and were not entirely trusting of each other. This can be particularly true when anger and hostility from the past marriage remain. In these families, "financial commitment to a new wife or husband comes slowly: and still more slowly, if at all, comes financial commitment to stepchildren (Fishman, 1983, p. 363)." However, jealousies can abound when differences in standards of living exist because of differences in sources of support (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985).

Parental Subsystem

According to Minuchin (1974), this subsystem is responsible for socializing the children of the family. To work properly, the parents must have the power to control and restrict the children, and the parenting role must be achieved without sacrificing the mutual support of the spouse subsystem. Since the introduction of the stepparent into the family can disrupt the stepchild's life in terms of status in the family and the amount of time and affection that is available from the natural parent, the stepparent's parenting style has an important effect on the relationship with the child.

Parenting Styles

Hetherington (1987, 1989) compared responses from samples of 144 and 188 couples and children in remarried mother-stepfather families, nondivorced families and mother custody families over a six year period. The children were 4 years old at the time of the first interview and 10 years old at the time of the last interview. Stepfathers used four parenting styles which are similar to those used in non-divorced families. When using the permissive parenting style, parents were highly involved but exercise relatively low control and monitoring of their children. There is little conflict involved with this parenting style. Disengaged parents had little involvement with their children in terms of monitoring, warmth, control and maturity demands. These parents wanted to minimize the effect parenting had on fulfillment of their own needs. When the children were demanding, the disengaged parents became very hostile. Authoritarian parents exercised a great deal of control through the use of coercion and punitiveness. They lacked warmth and were involved in a relatively high level of conflict with their children. The authoritative parents were warm and involved with their children but exerted a high level of control without a great deal of conflict with their children. This parenting style is associated with social competence and few behavior problems in children.

Authoritative parenting was particularly important for

divorced and remarried custodial parents when guiding their children through the marital transitions. Authoritative parenting was, also, the most frequently used parenting style for mothers in nondivorced families and stepfamilies. Stepfathers used the disengaged parenting style most frequently and were much less likely to be authoritative than nondivorced family fathers. Stepfather's disengaged style predominated regardless of the sex of the stepchild. However, over 2 years, there was a slight increase in authoritative parenting for stepsons, while during the same period of time, authoritative behavior with stepdaughters decreased, and the disengaged stepparenting style doubled.

Positive parenting was found to relate to marital satisfaction in nondivorced families, while in stepfamilies, it was "related to increased family conflict and behavior problems, especially in stepdaughters (Hetherington, 1989, p. 8)." Mothers and stepfathers viewed the stepsons as extremely difficult initially, but their behavior was perceived to improve over time and stepson's exhibited greater warmth and involvement with the stepfather. This was not true of stepdaughters. The longer the stepfather was married, compared to nondivorced fathers, the more likely he was to target a stepdaughter rather than a stepson with aversive responses. The stepdaughters thought their stepfathers were hostile and punitive concerning matters of discipline. "Furthermore, it is notable that positive behaviors of

stepfathers toward stepdaughters did not correlate with the girl's acceptance of their stepfathers in the early stages of remarriage. No matter how hard stepfathers tried, their stepdaughters rejected them (Hetherington, 1989, p. 7)."

Schulman (1981) observed that compared to stepmothers there are fewer cultural demands for stepfathers to assume an active parenting role. This is reflected in the behavior of stepparents; stepmothers will actively seek a place in the stepfamily, while stepfathers have more of a tendency to withdraw and remain a perennial outsider. In this type of family, the biological mother rarely delegated authority to the stepfather causing the relationship between the stepfather and stepchild to remain underdeveloped.

Disciplining Stepchildren

The spouses agreement or lack of agreement concerning the stepparent's role in disciplining the children can have an impact on the power structure within the family. The couple begin their relationship with the children as unequal parental partners. It takes time for the stepparent to achieve his role with the children (Walker & Messinger, 1979). If the natural mother rescues the children when the stepfather attempts to discipline the children, or if she rescues the stepfather from particularly obnoxious behavior of the children, the stepfather will be defeated in his attempts to control the children. He may become frustrated and angry or

will withdraw from his role as a stepfather (Lewis, 1985).

Roberts and Price's (1987) study of 16 remarried mothers and first married fathers indicated that disciplining of the children was a source of conflict in the early part of the marriage. The wives perceived their husbands as being more concerned with the outer consequences of their children's behavior rather than the development of inner character and moral values; wives viewed their husbands parenting as being rigid and role defined.

Apparently, the husbands entered the mother-child subsystem and confronted it by attempting to establish order and structure. The husbands may have perceived a need for order, because single mothers are less firm when disciplining children than mothers from nuclear families or stepparent families (Keshet, 1988b). The husbands were under pressure to conform to fit the patterns established in the home and believed they were expected to exert strong leadership and to discipline the children. When the wives perpetuated their own leadership role instead of supporting their husbands, the men became confused and responded in a rigid, role defined manner.

This difference in parenting perspective is referred to by Keshet (1988b) as rules oriented versus response oriented. The rules oriented approach stresses fulfilling obligations according to the rules. On the other hand, response oriented parents stress maintaining the relationship even if the rules

are broken.

It is common for a stepparent to be rules oriented while the natural parent is response oriented in a remarried couple. This occurs because the natural parent has a stake in maintaining emotional closeness with his or her child plus the ability to evaluate the child's behavior with a perspective of many years. Under these circumstances, the enforcement of a particular rule at any time may not be important. The stepfather does not have an intimate relationship with the stepchild and must rely on rules to make his life predictable. Put in another way, the natural parent knows the child loves him or her. However, the stepparent is not sure the stepchild likes him or her, and looks for signs of acceptance or rejection in all of the stepchild's behavior. Under these conditions, the more critical the stepfather, the more likely the natural parent will protect his or her child; this causes the stepparent to feel unsupported, rejected and angry.

Stepchild's Place of Residence

Whether the stepchild lives away or with the remarried couple can have an effect on their relationship. Guisinger et al. (1989) interviewed 62 stepfamilies and found that when husbands' children visit, the stepmother is more likely than the father to prepare meals, cleanup after the children, do their laundry, etc. Dissatisfaction with this situation became stronger over time as did the stepmother's pessimism

about being a stepparent. In relation to their husband's opinion, the wives initially saw their stepchildren as presenting fewer problems. However, over time the wives saw their husbands' children as presenting more problems than did their husbands.

Ambert (1986) conducted 109 interviews with stepmothers to investigate the effect of stepchild's residence on marital happiness. Although there was a certain amount of ambivalence about stepparenting, the results indicated that stepparenting is a more positive experience with live-in stepchildren. When the stepchildren visited, the stepmother, not the children's father, acquired extra work. This was perceived as a burden because the stepmothers did not benefit emotionally from the visits. The stepmothers also felt left out of the parent-child interaction and had some concern that their husbands might renew emotional bonds with their ex-wives when they were coparenting.

Age and Birth Order of Stepchildren

The age and birth order of the children does have an effect on the level of conflict within the remarried family. Knaub and Hanna (1984) interviewed 44 children aged 10 to 24 years living in stepfamilies and found that the older children were more likely than the younger children to report significant conflict with their parents in the home. They were also more likely to say that they wished their natural parents

would remarry.

Hetherington is quoted by Fishman (1989, p. 45) as follows:

The worst time for remarriage, she says, is when children are between 9 and 15 years old. 'When children are younger, when you have a warm involved stepfather the kids gradually accept him and benefit from his presence. When 17- and 18-year-olds have a stepfather come into the family, it relieves them of some of their concern that their mom is going to be lonely when they leave home or that they're going to be economically responsible for her.

But kids in the 9-to-15 age group are struggling with their own independence, and here comes this outsider, interfering. And they are struggling with their own awakening sexuality, and they don't want to think of their mother as a sexual being. It's very difficult not to recognize that when she remarries.' Kids view normal signs of affection as lascivious encounters, Hetherington says: 'When the poor father comes home and busses his wife gently on the cheek, the kids say, 'They're always huggin' and kissin' and it's disgusting!

First borns...are more likely than last borns to develop problems in the early phase of remarriage because of the difficulties they experience in losing the status they enjoyed in the single parent family prior to the

remarriage. Last borns from a first marriage are more likely to experience problems in the remarriage after the birth of a half-sibling as they lose the status of being the youngest child (Lewis, 1985, p. 18).

Family Cohesion and Boundary Ambiguity

Formation of a clear family boundary is considered to be essential to the successful function of the family (Minuchin, 1974). The boundary defines who is in the family and how they participate in the family. The boundary may be physical such as a common home or emotional such as a feeling of intimacy (Walker & Messinger, 1979). "Through the family boundary, the family establishes and maintains its identity and insulates itself from undue interference from external pressures (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987, p. 54)."

Formation of a family boundary may be difficult for the remarried couple, because there are parents and children inside and outside the family domain. Ex-spouses may use visitation of the children to exert influence on the stepfamily. There may be disagreements concerning visiting rights, missed or late pickups of children and emergencies that cause the outliving children to unexpectedly arrive at the stepfamily home. This may cause pressure to make the family boundary more open or permeable than the remarried couple may wish (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987; Messinger & Walker, 1979).

Boundary Permeability

Boundary permeability caused by visitation of children from a spouse's previous marriage can reduce the couples autonomy and control over their family life. "Plans must always include consideration of whether or not the residential children and/or any visiting children will be included in household activities (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985, p. 127)."

Coordinating visits can be particularly difficult when there is hostility between the divorced parents. The custodial parent may find that leaving the children with the noncustodial parent is threatening and attempt to make the occasion unpleasant by not giving the children permission to have fun or by giving negative instructions such as not to let the other kids boss you around or that woman touch you. This animosity often is caused by fear of more loss of relationship with the child because they prefer the other household (Visher & Visher, 1989).

This fear of loss is frequently manifested by the visiting child's parent in the lack of willingness to express anger for fear the disagreement will not be settled by the end of visitation. Resentment of the visiting child or anger at the stepfather can occur if the visiting child appears to get privileges residential children do not get or the stepparent ignores his new family and to favor his visiting child. The stepparent will feel torn between his visiting children and

the loyalty to individuals in his stepfamily household.

Boundary Ambiguity

Boundary ambiguity is a concept concerning uncertainty about who is a member of the family and the roles everyone has in the family (Thinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987). It is proposed that a high degree of boundary ambiguity in a family may cause family dysfunction, because a family that does not know who is in the family system cannot rearrange and replace the functions of the person who may be physically absent but psychologically present (Boss & Greenberg, 1984). Even though Boss and Greenberg have not applied their work to stepfamilies, Visher & Visher (1989) endorsed the paper as a valuable description of a source of stress for stepfamilies. Unfortunately the authors do not explore this concept in any depth, so it is not possible to know how uncertainty concerning who is in or out of the family effect family happiness or the relationship in the spouse subsystem.

There are three studies which use the concept of boundary ambiguity as a theoretical base. Pasley (1987) used data from interviews of 272 couples conducted in 1980. Each adult was asked to identify the members of the family, and when there was disagreement between the spouses concerning whether a child was a member or not, an ambiguous situation existed. Pasley found that residential location was the most important factor determining boundary ambiguity. Most often it was the

husband's child living away from the home who was forgotten by many of the wives and some of the fathers.

Furstenberg (1987) used information collected in a national sample of over 1,747 households in 1976 and updated in 1981 to gain insight concerning family functioning in stepfamilies and nuclear families. There was a question concerning family membership, and the author found a large amount of disagreement between parents and children concerning stepfamily membership.

Whereas only 1% of the biological parents failed to mention their children, 15% of those with stepchildren in the household failed to list them as family members. Similarly, just 7% of the children excluded a biological mother, and 9% a father, compared to 31% of those with a resident stepmother or stepfather (Furstenberg, 1987, p. 50).

Furthermore, these opinions did not change over time. Consequently a certain amount of boundary ambiguity may be a permanent part of stepfamily life. Despite this, most parents and children were positive about their relationships and quality of life in stepfamilies.

Pasley and Ihinger-Talman (1989) used information from 175 interviews completed in 1980. Boundary ambiguity was determined in the same manner as in Pasley (1987). The authors found no difference in marital adjustment and integration for remarried wives and husbands with high and

low boundary ambiguity scores and concluded that adult stepfamily members are not negatively influenced by boundary ambiguity.

Cohesion

Cohesion is a sense of unity in family life and is characterized by family members who feel close to each other and are proud to be a member of their family (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987). There have been a number of studies of stepfamily cohesion which indicate stepfamilies are less cohesive than first married families.

Peek, Bell, Waldren & Sorell (1988) interviewed 106 first married couples and 108 remarried couples with one or more children living at home. The authors found there are lower levels of cohesion in stepfamilies than in first married families. Despite these lower levels of cohesion, the remarried couples reported the same levels of affection toward each other as first married couples. Stepfamilies were also found to have less flexibility and openness and fewer interaction skills such as problem solving, communication, affective responsiveness and affective involvement which are all linked to cohesiveness.

Pink and Wampler (1985) studied 28 stepfather families and 28 first marriage families with children ages 12 to 18 years living at home. The two groups held the same beliefs about how an ideal family should act. However, when asked to

rate their family, stepfamily members rated themselves lower than intact families on adaptability, cohesiveness and the willingness of the male resident parent figure to unconditionally accept the adolescent child. Years of remarriage did not correlate with improvements in the stepfamily's opinion of their adaptability, cohesiveness or unconditional acceptance of the adolescent child by the male resident parent figure.

Amato (1987) interviewed 172 primary school children and 170 adolescents living in stepfather families, intact families and single parent families. The children's perceived family cohesion was lower in stepfamilies and single parent families than in intact families. These differences in family cohesion did not seem to affect the level of marital conflict. Children reported about the same levels of marital conflict in stepfamilies as in intact families.

Anderson and White (1987) interviewed 63 family triads consisting of a mother, father and one child 11 to 17 years of age. These families were divided into functional nuclear families, dysfunctional nuclear families, functional stepfamilies, and dysfunctional stepfamilies. As expected, the dysfunctional nuclear families had low levels of marital adjustment. However, the level of marital adjustment in functional and dysfunctional stepfamilies was as high or higher than the functional nuclear families. The dysfunctional stepfamilies are described by the author as a family system with outsiders, because "the marital system exists separately

from the rest of the family unit, with the stepfather seemingly excluded from the biological parent child subsystem (Anderson & White, 1987, p. 416)." The authors suggest that spouses can have good marital adjustment in stepfamilies even though there is family dysfunction.

Summary

In Minuchin's (1974) theory, clear and flexible boundaries are the key to healthy family and subsystem functioning. The lines of authority and function must be clear and the family must adapt to protect its members sense of belonging when change occurs. All transitions, of which remarriage is one, cause stress in the family system during the period of reorganization. The problem for the remarried couple is that the lines of authority and function in the family are not clear.

A major difficulty appears to be that the natural parent has difficulty changing his or her primary loyalty from the child to the new spouse (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985), and that there is an imbalance between the bioparent-child and husband-wife relationship (Papernow, 1987). This imbalance is caused by the enmeshed relationship which developed in the single-parent family (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985). In an enmeshed relationship, the members become extremely sensitive to each others needs, and "the threshold for activation of counter deviation mechanisms becomes inappropriately low

(Minuchin, 1974, p. 130)." The boundaries between the members of the enmeshed subsystem become blurred and the members begin to act as if they are one. This would cause the natural parent to be exceptionally sensitive to the distress caused the child by the introduction of the stepparent into the family and to resist full inclusion of the new spouse into the family (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985). The need to comfort the child and the extremely familiar relationship between the natural parent-child subsystem might also cause the natural parent to be more intimate with the child than with the new spouse (Keshet, 1988a). The remarriage would begin with the new spouse competing with the stepchild for the time and affection of his or her mate (Papernow, 1987) rather than strengthening the spouse bond by developing an accommodating, complimentary relationship.

Another major problem area appears to be the stepparent's attempt to enter the parental subsystem. This subsystem has the responsibility for guiding and nurturing the children. Ignoring the differences between stepfamily and nuclear families exacerbates the difficulties of the remarried couple. Stepmothers tend to be dissatisfied when they are expected to assume all of the parental responsibility for their husband's children, particularly when they are visiting children (Ambert, 1986; Guisinger et al., 1989) and are resisted by the stepchildren (Lewis, 1985). Stepfathers who attempt to assume the traditional limit setting role of a father may be under-

mined by their wives and resisted by the stepchildren (Mills, 1984; Roberts & Price, 1987).

The four parenting styles used by parents in first married families do not offer a satisfactory model for stepparents (Hetherington, 1987, 1989). Mills (1984) warned that the selection of a traditional parent role for a stepparent should be done with caution, and attempts to parent in the traditional manner may end with stepparent withdrawing in frustration and anger (Hetherington, 1987, 1989; Keshet, 1988a; Lewis, 1985; Mills, 1984). The problem appears to be that parenting requires authority and power (Minuchin, 1974) and the ability to nurture the child. Initially the stepparent has no power in the relationship and can be looked upon by the stepchild as an intruder who is competing with the child for the affection and time of his mother. This will make affection between the stepparent and stepchild impossible.

Issues such as unrealistic expectations and fantasies about the remarriage do not fit neatly into Minuchin's (1974) theory which is primarily concerned with family structure and the interactions between subsystems of the family. However, if the fantasies and expectations remained concealed and unresolved, Minuchin's (1974) major concern would be the effect this had on family relationships. For example, did a stepmother who was attempting to makeup past losses to a stepchild take out her frustrations on her husband or did a

stepfather who expected the love of his stepchild express his frustrations by attempting to join with his wife against the child. The literature was not explicit concerning how the unrealistic expectations effected interactions within the family from a system's point of view.

The stepfamily does not appear to fit Minuchin's (1974) requirement of having clear boundaries to insure its success. Intrusions from outsiders appear to be a normal part of stepfamily life. The articles reviewed indicated in every case that stepfamilies are less cohesive, have more boundary ambiguity and boundary permeability than nuclear families. The studies reviewed also agreed that despite the additional family stresses caused by the lack of firm boundaries, the relationship of the remarried couple did not appear to be effected negatively (Amato, 1987; Anderson & White; 1987; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989; Peek, Bell, Waldron & Sorell, 1988) or was effected less frequently than by problems with stepchildren (Mills, 1984, 1988).

The next chapter will review the solutions contained in the literature for reducing the effects of these problems and what has been published concerning marital enrichment or prevention programs for remarried couples with stepchildren.

CHAPTER IV

REDUCING STRESS ON THE REMARRIED COUPLE

The difficulties outlined in the previous chapter are intensified, because there are few norms to guide the remarried couple in developing the role of stepparent or stepchild, and remarried couples are not prepared for the tasks involved with stepfamily formation and do not know how to develop the step-relationship (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985; Ellis, 1984; Knaub, Hanna & Stinnett, 1988; Walker & Messinger, 1979).

There are many factors that make the stepfamily transition long and complex. The dynamics in a single parent family fosters an enmeshed relationship between parent and child (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985) which makes it difficult to expand the family boundary to include new members. An overlap of the parental and spouse subsystems occurs because the stepspouse is, to a large degree, selected because of his or her perceived parenting ability (Dahl et al., 1987; Preston, 1984; Roberts & Price, 1987). This is supported by the fact that higher marital satisfaction is associated with positive interaction with the stepchild (Ahrons & Wallish, 1987; Brand & Clingempeel, 1987; Dahl et al., 1987; Hobart & Brown, 1987). The couple can also easily become so busy dealing with problems related to the children that they neglect development of the spouse subsystem (Einstein & Albert, 1986; Lewis, 1985;

Schulman, 1981).

It is important that remarried couples develop behaviors and attitudes which clarify and strengthen their roles as spouses and parents to compensate for the lack of clear boundaries and lines of authority in stepfamilies. To be helpful, these behaviors and attitudes should reduce the natural parent's anxiety and guilt concerning the stepchild, minimize the stepchild's loyalty conflicts and losses from the remarriage, foster the development of a positive relationship between the stepparent and child and permit the remarried couple time and emotional space to develop their relationship as husband and wife.

Since many remarried couples do not understand the stepfamily situation, providing information and education can help these couples see their problems as expected events rather than crises (Lewis, 1985; Visher, 1985; Wagner, 1984). In this respect, negative consequences of the problems involved in stepfamily formation are potentially preventable (Stanton, 1986). There have been a number of prevention programs reported in the literature which offer education and emotional support to remarried couples. These programs are designed to help avoid dysfunction in stepfamilies.

This chapter will review the literature concerning the solutions offered for improving the spousal relationship by improving the stepparent-child relationship, relieving the child's anger and loyalty conflicts and strengthening the

spouse subsystem. The literature concerning preventive interventions as a technique for helping remarried couples will also be summarized.

The Step Relationship

The myth of instant love is an important barrier to forming a satisfactory relationship between the stepparent and child, because when love does not develop the stepparent first feels guilty and then angry when he or she is rejected by the stepchild (Einstein & Albert, 1986; Lewis, 1985; Stanton, 1986). To avoid this guilt and anger, the stepparent should try to develop a relationship with mutual courtesy but not expect the stepchild's love, especially at first (Dahl et al., 1987). Einstein and Albert (1986) suggest that the stepparent give him or herself permission not to love the stepchild. It is also important to accept that the child will retain allegiance to the original family or have a dual attachment to the stepfamily and the original family (Preston, 1984).

Mills (1984) stressed the importance of the couple assuming conscious executive control of the family. This tends to tighten the boundary around the parental unit and helps weaken the existing biological parent-child bond. The parents need to decide on long-term goals of the family structure and the role of the stepparent. This decision should be based on needs of all family members and there may

be different stepparent roles for each child. The stepparent can be a friend, aunt or uncle, big brother or sister, coach, counselor or even "biological" parent to the stepchild (Mills, 1984). Other possible roles are mentor, role model for specific skills, or confidant, which can be especially important for teenagers (Einstein & Albert, 1986). Regardless of what role is selected, it is important the needs of both the stepparent and stepchild be satisfied (Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985).

A stepparent role that is similar to a natural parent's role, however, will take a considerable amount of time to develop. Factors favoring this role choice are a young child who lives with the stepfamily most of the time; a stepparent who wants the experience of being a parent to a specific child; a willing child and the support and complete agreement of the biological parent. If the child is an adolescent or resides in another household, achieving a parental role is generally not possible (Mills, 1984). If a parental role is selected, it is important that the stepparent be another parent and not try to replace the same sex biological parent, so the child does not have "...the burden of needing to choose, or feel that a parent must be given up if a stepparent is accepted (Pill, 1981, p. 163)."

Einstein and Albert (1986) see the role of friend as resulting in the most satisfactory stepparent-child relationship. Stepchildren already have two parents and attempting

to replace one of the existing parents may only cause resentment or confusion. As a friend, the stepparent can provide additional caring and concern without attempting to replace the same sex natural parent. The relationship should be more like the relationship established when making a new friend and should be built on common interests and sharing between the stepparent and child.

Limit setting

Disciplining and interacting with the children is reported to be a significant problem early in the remarriage (Knaub, Hanna & Stinnett, 1984; Nadler, 1983; Roberts & Price, 1987; Webber, Sharpley & Rowley, 1988). Initially, the biological parent should be entirely in charge of setting and enforcing limits for that parent's child (Lewis, 1985; Mills, 1984). When both parents are present, the stepparent should address requests for limits to the biological parent. When the biological parent is gone, the stepparent should act like a baby sitter and set limits in the name of the biological parent. If there is a disagreement, the biological parent must decide, because "...the stepchildren will not obey any rules the biological parent does not agree to (Mills, 1984, p. 369)."

Bonding

The children will be slow to form a bond with the stepparent, because their level of trust is low from the

divorce. They also may cling to their biological parent to avoid developing closeness with the stepparent (Einstein & Albert, 1986). In a biological family, the first year with the infant is characterized by nurturing without limit setting. It is important to artificially recreate a period of nurturing without limit setting in the stepfamily. The stepparent must resist the temptation to set developmentally appropriate limits while nurturing the child in a developmentally appropriate way (Mills, 1984). Most stepparents try to hard to win approval of their stepchildren and forget that it takes time to develop a relationship (Bradt & Bradt, 1986; Dinkmeyer, Mc Kay & Mc Kay, 1987; Mills, 1984).

The stepparent can improve his or her relationship by having time alone with the child away from the stepfamily. How the children fit the stepparent into their lives depends on many things: the age of the child, the child's interest, whether the stepparent has children and the child's relationship with the natural parent (Einstein & Albert, 1986).

Consideration of the Child's Needs

"Feelings of abandonment, loss of security, resentment over the divorce, rivalry for affection, fears of being disloyal to a natural parent are ... some of the major causes of stepchildren's hostility toward their stepparents (Nadler, 1983, p. 106)." Cooperation between the children's natural parents can reduce the children's fear of losing contact with

the nonresidential parent and reduce the children's loyalty conflicts (Visher & Visher, 1989). On the other hand, having one parent speak negatively about the other natural parent is extremely stressful for the stepchildren (Lutz, 1983).

Attempting to have a child call a stepparent mom or dad can also create loyalty conflicts.

The terms mom and dad describe biological relationships and have strong emotional connotations; forcing children to use these words in reference to stepparents creates discomfort. Very young children might eagerly call step-parents Mommy or Daddy; older children may prefer to use first names. Some children use different parental names for stepparents, such as Pop or Mama Jane....The final word about naming and introductions rests with how comfortable children are with the names; stepparents should feel content with them, too (Einstein & Albert, 1986, p. 88).

In successfully remarried families, the stepparents were almost always called by their first names except by younger children who sometimes use a mother or father variation (Dahl et al., 1987).

The lives and roles of the children have been altered by the remarriage, and it is important the parents be sensitive to losses the children have experienced. The children should be given an opportunity to discuss their feelings about the remarriage (Brand and Clingempeel, 1987; Crosbie-Burnett &

Ahrons, 1985; Einstein & Albert, 1986; Pill, 1981; Stanton, 1986) and must be allowed to grieve their losses (Einstein & Albert, 1986). The child's existing roles in the single parent family should be respected to avoid diminishing the child's self-esteem, and the child's contributions should be reinforced and encouraged.

When choosing housing, a new residence is preferred, but if the family lives in either spouse's original home, consideration should be given to extensive redecorating so the new residents feel as if they belong (Dahl et al., 1987). It is a definite advantage to live in a new home, because the old home of one spouse, in many ways, is like the family that lived in the home. The rules and rituals for who uses what space when and for what purpose have already been established (Preston, 1984) without consideration of the new family members.

A fresh beginning can spare stepfamily 'space wars' while giving everyone a head start on building a positive family atmosphere. Yet sometimes a neutral move is simply not possible. Including children in decisions that affect their space can help ease their resentment and increase their sense of belonging (Einstein & Albert, 1986, p. 20).

The remarried spouses interviewed by Dahl et al. (1987) told their children about the decision to remarry before anyone else. The children often included their children in

the planning of the wedding and frequently participated in the ceremony.

Einstein and Albert (1986) offer the following guidelines for helping children adjust to a stepparent:

-Recognize the importance of the other biological parent and respect children's right and need to love that parent. Support the time they spend with their other family and invite that parent and other family members to milestone ceremonies-recitals, play-offs, graduations. At such events, focus only on the children and put aside unfinished emotional business between adults present.

-Never speak negatively of the other parent in front of the children; control any resentment you may feel.

-As a stepparent, acknowledge the strong bond between your new spouse and his or her children. So children won't feel left out avoid monopolizing your mate's time.

-Plan "alone time" with your stepchildren so you can get to know one another better. Invite them to do things with you-don't pressure them or make demands.

-Understand that family life cannot always be happy. When conflict arises, it doesn't mean that your family is failing or that your stepchildren hate you.

-Don't expect "instant love:" allow time for relationships to develop. Concentrate on learning to accept, respect, and like your stepchildren.

-Reject fairy-tale myths and unrealistic media portrayals of stepfamilies. Forgive yourself for being imperfect. Realize that you learn when you make mistakes. So does your spouse, and so do the children (Einstein & Albert, 1986, p. 90).

Spouse Relationship

The remarried couple begins their marriage with the problem of balancing the need for intimacy against the needs of the children and stepchildren. Often the couple's needs get set aside (Einstein & Albert, 1986; Lewis, 1985). It is critical to make the couple relationship a priority to assure family the family's continuation and development. This is also important for the children, because they will remain withdrawn and mistrusting until they feel the marriage relationship is solid (Einstein & Albert, 1986).

"Trips away from the children and discussions behind closed doors....(Lewis, 1985)," and time for the couple to be alone are useful for strengthening the couple relationship. To Visher (1985), this is the best way to strengthen the couples relationship. Solving stepfamily problems as a team and building a boundary that separates the couple from the rest of the family, enhances the couple's sense of connectedness (Keshet, 1988b). Another technique given to help strengthen the spouse subsystem is to "deal with disagreements at a specified, agreed upon time that does not conflict with

family or social activities (Nadler, 1983, p. 106)." This keeps disagreements and conflicts from intruding on the entire marital relationship.

On the other hand, each remarried spouse must recognize and respect the other's different relationship with other family members. Some parents desire to spend time alone with their biological children; it is important for the stepparent to honor this desire. For a childless stepparent, this could involve leaving the house when children visit. Some step-parents find doing things they like with other adults or alone is a counter measure to negative feelings they develop about the stepfamily (Keshet, 1988b).

Previously cited research indicated that lack of congruency of the couple's ideas about the stepfamily were associated with lower marital satisfaction (Guisenger et al., 1989; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman & Coleman, 1984). The ability to communicate is, therefore, important to the success of the marital relationship (Knaub, Hanna & Stinnett, 1984; Kvanli & Jennings, 1987; Papernow, 1987; Roberts & Price, 1987). It is particularly important to discuss hidden concerns about the possibility the remarriage will fail, ideas about child rearing, and the stepparents's feelings about the stepchild (Einstein & Albert, 1986). Unexamined fears breed uncertainty in a relationship (Einstein & Albert, 1986) and can only be dealt with through open communication. While discussing negative feelings may be difficult, the remarried couples

interviewed by Roberts and Price (1987) indicated that when there was open communication their problems were inconsequential.

The stepparent must also be supported in his or her efforts to enter the existing biological family and establish a relationship with the stepchild. The natural parent typically experiences the conflict of wanting to support the new spouse while at the same time indulging his or her own children at the expense of the spouse (Nadler, 1983). The natural parent must understand that continually siding with the children causes the stepparent to feel rejected, and the stepparent must understand the interactions and learn how to become included (Nadler, 1983).

Interaction with ex-spouses is a common source of conflict in early remarriage (Roberts & Price, 1987). "Child support, alimony, shared parenthood, telephone calls, school conferences, Father's Day, Mother's Day - even a child's bone structure and coloring (so like the other parent's) - all are constant reminders that you or your spouse had a love relationship with someone else (Einstein & Albert, 1986, p. 27)." This may be unpleasant to the stepparent but should be accepted.

Distant but cordial relationships with ex-spouses and their marital partners were preferred (Dahl et al., 1987). Despite this preference many couples recognized the need for continuous involvement with former spouses when children are

involved. The adults who helped children maintain relationships with noncustodial parents were pleased they had done so and said that the children benefited.

A cooperative relationship with ex-spouses for bringing up the children can be beneficial because:

The responsibility of raising children is shared among more adults; there are days when the new couple can have needed 'alone' time to work on their own relationship; the children's self-esteem is enhanced and they are easier to be with as a result; the power struggles between households are lessened. Parents and stepparents report that when they struggle over where the children will spend Thanksgiving and Christmas or who will pay the unexpected medical or dental bills, they have much less energy for planning pleasant family times and their relationships with the children suffer. If they decide to work together with the children's other household, they find that their anger and discomfort talking together gradually diminishes. Most important of all they report a lightening of the heavy negative feelings that had been controlling their thoughts and behavior (Visher & Visher, 1989, p. 65).

However, for the couples who have a less cooperative relationship with the ex-spouse, visitation should be structured by setting a specific time period agreed upon by all. This combats three stepparent complaints: it prevents the

chaos an ex-spouse can create by manipulating the visitation schedule; it decreases the stepchild's unexpected arrivals and departures and consequent interference with the household routine; and it limits infringements of the time the couple has alone together (Nadler, 1983). The couple has to learn to say no to children and former spouses on issues that interfere with their needs as a couple (Keshet, 1988b).

Prevention

Prevention programs are designed to either prevent family dysfunction, interrupt its course or prevent the long-term complications of dysfunction (Spiro, 1980 cited by Sager et al. 1983, p. 331). The rationale behind prevention programs is that it is more effective to teach the skills necessary for successful adjustment before problems develop that require remediation. There are indications that "the manner in which the early phase of the family cycle is handled may have far-reaching consequences for the psychological adjustment of both children and parents (Markman, Floyd, Stanley & Storaasli, 1988, p. 175)." This may be particularly true for step-families where there is a higher divorce rate (Mc Carthy, 1978; White & Booth, 1985) and considerably lower marital satisfaction during the first years of remarriage with stepchildren than there is with first married couples or remarried couples without children.

In 1976, Messinger interviewed 70 remarried subjects to determine how stepfamily problems were handled. Many of the participants said they were poorly prepared to deal with the problems in their remarriages. These couples thought much of the distress they experienced could have been prevented if they understood the problems involved with stepfamily formation prior to their remarriage. The authors concluded that stepfamilies could benefit from a preventive program of remarriage preparation. Messinger, Walker, Stanley and Freedman (1978) conducted a series of pilot groups with a total of 22 couples. The groups were formatted to discuss topics that concerned the members without the use of didactic material. According to the authors, the members were relieved of a sense of inadequacy in coping with the stepfamily problems and were especially helped in clarifying the roles of the remarried family. The subjective evaluation of the group program by the participants was positive.

Pill (1981) reported on two pilot educational, discussion groups of three remarried couples each. The goals of the six session program were to strengthen the couple relationship, have the participants reevaluate their expectations about their stepfamily and help identify and cope with some of the stresses inherent in stepfamilies. The groups provided the couples with the opportunity to improve their relationship by working together in a supportive atmosphere on their common family concerns. All participants agree the group experience

was beneficial.

In another study, Brady and Ambler (1982) conducted a controlled test of the effects of a four week, four session educational group. The purpose of the study was to determine if the educational program could lessen the discrepancy between the perception of current and ideal family climate and improve the stepparent's understanding of stepfamily issues. Thirty-three remarried couples were divided into an experimental group and a waiting list control group. The sessions included instruction by the group leader followed by a group discussion. The results of the study were inconclusive, because both the experiment and control groups experienced significant reductions in perceived current levels of family conflict, ideal levels of cohesion and control and an increase in recreational involvement.

Nadler (1983) conducted six session workshops for 120 participants in groups of 8 to 10 each. Each session was opened with didactic material which was followed by a discussion of that material. The goals of the group were to identify stepfamily problems, define stepparent roles, aid stepparents in acknowledging these problems, explore past antecedents to present behavior, teach communication skills and provide guidance in dealing with specific problems. About 8 of 10 participants reported improved parenting, greater understanding of stepchildren and themselves, improvement in stepchild relations and better communication when they

responded to a post-study questionnaire.

Ellis (1984) conducted two 10 week groups with a total of nine remarried couples. The primary goal of the group was to strengthen the marital dyad. The author presented a list of themes at the meetings, the members of the group and the group leaders negotiated with each other to determine which topics would be discussed. The couple dyads were strengthened by encouraging mutual support within the subsystem and by the leaders modeling the negotiating process within a dyad. All participants said their relationships improved because of the group activity.

Webber, Sharpley and Rowley (1988) conducted three educational groups of six sessions each with a total of 56 participants. The aim of this program was to educate the participants about stepfamily issues and to strengthen the couple relationship. Each session was opened with a stimulus video tape showing a stepfamily experiencing a particular problem. After the tape showing, there was a problem solving discussion which determined which interactive skills were deficient. These skills were then taught by modeling and role play. The participants discussed the relevance of the issues for their own family in small groups. Post test scores indicated improvement in family adjustment, self-esteem and problem solving. In response to an open ended question, most participants stated that their marital relationship had improved.

Summary

Recognizing that the stepfamily differs from a first marriage family appears to be the overriding theme of the solutions offered. It is not necessary for the stepchild and stepparent to love each other as would be expected between biological parents and their children (Dahl et al., 1987; Einstein & Albert, 1986). The strongest recommendation is that the stepparent-child relationship be one of cordiality and friendship (Dahl et al., 1987; Einstein & Albert, 1986; Mills, 1984). Patience is needed because the relationship takes time to develop. However, as a friend, the stepparent would recognize and respect the child's losses and would encourage the child to maintain his or her significant relationships that are outside the stepfamily boundary (Visher & Visher, 1989).

These actions should improve or maintain the child's self-esteem and make life with the child easier (Visher & Visher, 1989). This in turn will reduce the stress on the remarried couple and help them find time alone to reinforce their relationship. The remarried couple must communicate their needs and receive support from each other, and the needs of the spouse subsystem must take priority over the biological parent-child subsystem (Einstein & Albert, 1986). Time together away from the children is recommended to strengthen the spouse subsystem (Lewis, 1985; Visher, 1985).

As a technique for helping remarried couples, the

literature indicates that preventive group programs produce favorable results. However, enthusiasm for these results must be restrained because the studies reviewed either had small samples, no control group or did not use standardized instruments to measure results. Since most of the favorable participant comments were taken at the end of the programs when enthusiasm for the program might be high, the positive results attributed to the programs might be illusory and short lived. However, it should be noted that there are indications that preventive programs have shown long-term successes with first married couples (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988), and the literature gives no reason to believe that these techniques cannot be successfully applied to remarried couples.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Findings in the Literature

It is apparent from the literature that the transition from single parent family to stepfamily is perplexing and difficult for many of the remarried couples involved. During the first years of marriage, remarried couples with stepchildren have less satisfactory marriages and significantly higher divorce rates than first married couples or remarried couples without children (Mc Carthy, 1978; White & Booth, 1985).

These couples are unprepared for the conflicts involved with forming a stepfamily. In the stepfamily, the children demand time and loyalty of the natural parent which can conflict with the intimacy needs of the newly married couple (Keshet, 1988a, 1988b; Papernow, 1984). The stepchildren may, also, resist the formation of the stepfamily and may actively try to breakup the new remarriage (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987). There can be conflict about differences concerning the role of stepparent and stepchild in the family (Keshet, 1988b), and the noncustodial parents of the stepchildren can influence the events in the home (Becvar & Becvar, 1988). These conflicts leave the couple little time to strengthen their marital relationship.

To be successful, the spouse subsystem ...must achieve a boundary that protects it from interference by the demands and needs of other systems. This is particularly true when a family has children. The adults must have a psychological territory of their own—a haven in which they can give each other emotional support (Minuchin, 1974, p. 57).

If the boundaries around the spouse subsystem are not firm and clear, the children may intrude.

Remarriage can only be viewed as an act in the self interest of the parent which only has the possibility of some future benefits for the stepchildren. The literature does not mention any immediate advantages that accrue to the stepchild because of the remarriage, and initially, the remarriage may only serve to remove any hope the child has that his or her natural parents will reconcile. The child may also fear being disloyal to the nonresidential parent, be angry because the affection and time of the residential parent must be shared with the stepparent, and have lost status and prestige because the new two adult family has less need than the single parent family for a child to fulfill adult functions.

The biological parent will be exceptionally sensitive to and protective of the child because of the enmeshed relationship that developed in the single parent family. This parent may be more protective and relate more intimately to the child than to his or her new spouse. This will cause the new spouse

to feel rejected, neglected and abandoned (Keshet, 1988a; Papernow, 1987). The remarriage begins with the new spouse competing with the stepchild for the time and affection of his or her mate (Papernow, 1987) rather than strengthening the spouse bond by developing an accommodating, complimentary relationship.

Social norms are not available to guide the development of the stepfamily relationships which leaves these families vulnerable to their own unrealistic expectations. The expectation that the stepfamily will be similar to a cohesive nuclear family and that there will be instant love between the stepparent and stepchild can have a major negative effect. There can be guilt and suppression of genuine feelings when the stepparent realizes he or she does not love the stepchild, attempting to rush intimacy with the stepchild causes the stepparent to feel unappreciated, angry and resentful when his or her efforts are rejected. Finally, believing that the stepfamily will be as emotionally close as a nuclear family ignores the reality of the nonresidential parent and the stepchild's feelings toward that parent.

It is important that remarried couples develop behaviors and attitudes which clarify and strengthen their roles as spouses and parents. For the stepparent-child relationship, the literature recommends, except under special circumstances, that the stepparent not attempt a traditional parent role. The role of friend is favored because the stepparent can

provide caring and concern without attempting to replace the same sex parent and stimulating loyalty conflicts in the stepchildren. It is also recommended the parenting functions initially remain the responsibility of the biological parent. The stepparent should enter a period of age appropriate nurturing of the stepchild without attempting to set any limits. This will give the relationship between the stepparent and child time to develop without conflicts concerning the stepparent's authority.

When writing directly about the spouse relationship, the literature recommends the subsystem be strengthened by the couple finding time alone where they can provide emotional support for each other. The need for open communication is stressed and is of particular importance when there are negative feelings about the marriage and stepchildren. The couple must become mutually supportive; the natural parent must support the stepparent's attempt to enter the family, and the stepparent must support the natural parent's desire to spend time alone with his or her child.

There are indications that knowledge concerning stepfamily formation can be particularly helpful to the stepparents (Visher, 1985), and several studies of group prevention programs provide support for this idea. There are also indications that prevention programs can have long-term beneficial effects on married couples.

Findings Concerning Research

One of the goals of this thesis was to determine the extent that information concerning stresses on the husband-wife relationship in remarriage is supported by empirical research. Empirical research involves the collection and analysis of data with appropriate statistical techniques (Campbell, 1989). Although this summary is limited to the articles included in this study and is not intended to be comprehensive, it should be pointed out that the amount of literature concerning remarriage is limited. An electronic search of Psychological Abstracts indicated there were only 203 citations concerning remarriage from 1984 through September, 1989. The articles cited would include literature reviews, case studies, qualitative research, theory based writing, etc. as well as empirical studies. The empirical, literature will be discussed in relation to its contribution to the discussion of the spouse subsystem, stepparenting, family cohesion and boundary ambiguity.

Four empirical studies were located for the discussion of the spouse subsystem. The first two Guisinger et al., (1989) and Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman & Coleman (1984) confirmed that good communication and congruence in the spouse's beliefs about the marriage and family situation is important to the success of the spouse relationship. This empirical literature supported expressions concerning the importance of communication (Albert & Einstein, 1986; Kvanli & Jennings, 1987;

Papernow, 1987; Roberts & Price, 1987).

Albrecht, Bahr & Goodman (1983) and Knaub, Hanna & Stinnett (1984) confirmed that money issues are important problems to the remarried couple. However, these studies did not define how and why the issues were important. The nonempirical literature which relied on clinical impressions and literature reviews defined the problem in terms of a relationship problem with the ex-spouse (Bradt & Bradt, 1986; Crosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985; Keshet, 1988b; Lown & Dolan, 1988).

In the section concerning stepparenting, Hetherington's (1987, 1989) longitudinal study of divorce and remarriage provided information for almost the entire section on parenting styles. Ambert (1986) and Guisinger et al. (1989) examined the relationship of the stepchild's place of residence and satisfaction of the stepmother. In both studies, stepparents experienced more satisfaction in their stepparent and spouse roles when the stepchild lived in the same household. Knaub and Hanna (1984) and Hetherington in Fishman (1989) are the empirical sources of information concerned with marital satisfaction and the stepchild's age. There is little in the nonempirical literature concerning the previously cited subjects.

There is research literature to establish that boundary ambiguity did not effect marital satisfaction in stepfamilies (Furstenberg, 1987; Pasley, 1987; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman,

1989), and that lack of family cohesion does not appear to reduce marital satisfaction when compared to first married families (Amato, 1987; Anderson & White, 1987; Peek et al., 1988; Pink & Wampler, 1985).

There is one recent article which evaluated stepfamily research. Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett (1989) indicate that clinicians and researchers have not integrated their knowledge; their literature has grown independently relying on different theoretical models, examining different sample sizes, populations, and data gathering methods. The authors cite Ganong & Coleman's (1985) agreement that there are few similarities between empirical and nonempirical studies and critical comments concerning clinician's attempts to generalize from small samples and researchers for studying narrow researchable questions that may not produce useful data.

Of the studies cited frequently here, Roberts and Price (1987) and Dahl et al. (1987) collected information from couples with indepth interviews but made no attempt to statistically analyze the responses in a critical way. Keshet (1988a, 1988b), Schulman (1981), Visher & Visher (1985), Papernow (1984, 1985), Stanton (1986), Mills (1984), and Crosbie-Burnett and Ahrons (1985) which are also cited frequently rely on clinical impressions and literature reviews for the basis of their articles. The information provided by these authors generally was not supported by empirical research but appeared to be the most meaningful information.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To many remarried couples and their children, the experience of forming a stepfamily is a painful, confusing experience. The literature is dominated by the systems approach to family therapy. However, with the exception of the prevention group programs, there are no outcome studies in the literature. It is not likely that treatment of remarried couples will generate large, controlled outcome studies. However, more reports of individual case studies would add an important dimension to the literature, particularly if the case studies focused on the sex of the stepparent, the age and sex of the stepchildren, length of remarriage, techniques used, etc.

The use of group prevention techniques with this population should receive greater exploration. The programs reported in in the literature provide support, knowledge about remarriage and include some work on communication and problem solving techniques. Since it is generally agreed that good communication is vital for these couples, additional stress should be placed on learning effective communication and problem solving techniques in prevention programs. This argument is supported by Markman et al. (1988) who report significantly lower divorce rates of couples that completed a prevention program when compared to a control group three years after completion of a prevention program. This program, focused on teaching first married couples communication and

problem solving skills.

Virtually all of the clinical writers used a systems orientation. Interactions in the family system produce properties that do not exist in the individual, and it is these properties that are the basis of family therapy (Constantine, 1986; Minuchin, 1974). However, when an individual is studied as part of a family or any other group, parts of the individual are submerged in the interactions and not available to the systems therapist (Constantine, 1986). According to Minuchin (1974), one of the advantages of using the systems approach is that the therapist could work with the system and also focus on the individual when needed. More individual focus is needed for a complete understanding of remarriage. One example of this need, is the biological parent's difficulty in resolving the loyalty conflict between his or her feelings for the new spouse and biological child. This appears to be more of an intrapsychic problem than a systems problem, and the literature offers little insight concerning the treatment of this problem.

Finally, most of the empirical literature studies the parent-child relationship or the stepfamily. There is very little research which directly studies the remarried couples' relationship. This type of study could yield important insights into the quality of the marital relationship.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. The stepfamily should be explained in terms of

theoretical approaches other than systems based theories.

2. The natural parent's difficulty in resolving conflicting feelings toward his or her spouse and children should be investigated in terms of the parents individual psychological response to the child.

3. Continued efforts should be made to prove or disprove the value of preventive techniques for remarried couples. Finding a satisfactory balance between teaching communication techniques used in traditional preventive programs for couples and providing information and support necessary to help remarried couples should be investigated.

4. Efforts should be made to determine why stepdaughters have difficulty benefitting from a relationship with a stepfather.

5. Future research should make greater efforts to separate their samples by sex of the stepparent and sex and age of the child.

6. There is a need for outcome studies to determine which interventions are effective when counseling remarried couples and families.

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the thesis is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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