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## A review of the literature on stepfamilies: An investigation of past and current trends

Christy L. Johnson  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## **A review of the literature on stepfamilies: An investigation of past and current trends**

### **Abstract**

Stepfamilies are an increasing reality in our society. As recently as 1976, it was estimated that as few as 10% of all U.S. children under 18 lived in stepparent households (Nelson & Nelson, 1982). In 1986 approximately 50% of first marriages were ending in divorce, and 65% of divorced women and 70% of divorced men were remarrying (Glick & Lin, 1986). It is clear that stepfamilies have changed from being an alternative family form to becoming a predominant family form (Duberman, 1975; Glick, 1991; Visher & Visher, 1988,1990) and is the fastest growing form of family in the United States today (Glick & Lin, 1986).

**A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON STEPFAMILIES: AN  
INVESTIGATION OF PAST AND CURRENT TRENDS**

**A Research Paper  
Presented to  
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of the Requirements for the Degree  
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**by  
Christy L. Johnson  
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Audrey L. Smith

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Thaddeus Rozecki

March 29, 1995  
Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_  
Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

3.29.95  
Date Received

\_\_\_\_\_  
Head, Department of Educational Administration and  
Counseling

Stepfamilies are an increasing reality in our society. As recently as 1976, it was estimated that as few as 10% of all U.S. children under 18 lived in stepparent households (Nelson & Nelson, 1982). In 1986 approximately 50% of first marriages were ending in divorce, and 65% of divorced women and 70% of divorced men were remarrying (Glick & Lin, 1986). It is clear that stepfamilies have changed from being an alternative family form to becoming a predominant family form (Duberman, 1975; Glick, 1991; Visher & Visher, 1988,1990) and is the fastest growing form of family in the United States today (Glick & Lin, 1986).

Although Census Bureau data are not available regarding the exact number of stepfamilies in the United States, even the most conservative estimates indicate that stepfamilies make up a sizable minority of the population. Using the most recent data from the 1987 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), demographer Paul C. Glick estimated that 35% of all adults in the United States were in step situations either as stepparents or as adult stepchildren, and that 20% of children under the age of 19 were stepchildren or half-siblings. In the same survey Glick (1991) estimated that 33% of the entire U.S. population was in a step situation.

In addition to the number of remarried families, many couples with children from previous relationships are living together and experiencing the same challenges facing those who have legally remarried (Glick, 1991). Under these circumstances it would not be unreasonable to expect that more than half of all Americans alive today have been, are now, or will eventually be in one or more stepfamily situations (Glick, 1991).

A review of the literature on stepfamilies indicates that there is a discrepancy between the types of families that make up society and the types represented in the

family research literature. Stepfamilies are the fastest growing family form, yet nuclear families continue to be the dominant focus of family research. A decade review, from 1979 to 1990, of three major marriage and family journals revealed only ten articles which addressed stepfamilies and their accompanying issues from a theoretical, clinical, or research perspective (Darden & Zimmerman, 1992). These researchers concluded that out of a total of 1,061 family research articles, the 10 dealing with stepfamilies constituted only .09 percent.

Within the available research on stepfamilies, family researchers have come to different conclusions about the healthfulness of stepfamily life. The majority of studies report that stepfamilies have more problems than do intact nuclear families (Bray, 1988; Bray & Berger, 1993; Russell, 1984; Wallerstein, 1985; White & Booth, 1985).

Surveys of literature on stepfamilies indicate that the deficit comparison model has formed the basis of most of the stepfamily research (Coleman & Ganong, 1985; Ganong & Coleman, 1986; Kelly, 1992; Orleans, Palisi, & Caddell, 1989; Robinson, 1984; & Zeppa & Norem, 1993). The underlying premise of the deficit model is that variations from the intact biological family are dysfunctional and inadequate (Coleman, Marshall, & Ganong, 1986; Ganong & Coleman 1986, 1989; Zeppa & Norem, 1993). When the deficit model is used, stepfamilies are compared with biologically based families on several variables, and differences between nuclear families and stepfamilies, are often considered as indicators of poor functioning on the part of stepfamilies (Kelley, 1992).

The premise of the deficit comparison model has come under criticism by a group of family researchers who have found evidence that differences in satisfaction or adjustment between nuclear and stepfamilies are attributable to

factors other than family type (Duberman, 1975; Ganong & Coleman, 1986; Kelly, 1992; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagen, & Anderson, 1989; Santrock, Warshak, Lindberg, & Meadows, 1982; Zeppa & Norem, 1993). This group contends that research reports based on the deficit comparison model are erroneous. In keeping with this belief, a number of studies have focused on issues unique to stepfamily systems (Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Kelly, 1992; Knaub, Hanna, & Stinnett, 1984; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Orleans, Palisi & Caddell, 1989; Papernow, 1984, 1993; Pill, 1991; Visher & Visher 1979, 1985, 1988).

Stepfamilies are an important part of society. Research indicates that stepfamilies are increasingly influencing our culture (Duberman, 1975, Glick & Lin, 1986, 1989; Visher & Visher, 1988,1990). Like nuclear families, stepfamilies also have needs and desires. It is important that mental health professionals, including counselors, have a knowledge base of stepfamilies. It is also helpful to know that there are differing perceptions of stepfamilies in the family literature.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how the family literature has treated the subject of stepfamilies since the beginning of research on stepfamilies. The author will illustrate the deficit-comparison model, the implications of the deficit-comparison model, and outline the studies that criticize the deficit-comparison approach and focus on the unique stepfamily system.

Prior to investigating the different approaches to stepfamily research it is helpful for the reader to understand the definition and structure of stepfamilies, as well as, to have an awareness of methodological errors that occur in stepfamily research regardless of the approach.

### Definition and Structure

For the purpose of this paper stepfamily is defined as a household containing a child who is biologically related to only one of the adults (Glick, 1991; Visher & Visher, 1988). Structurally, the stepfamily systems is composed of the current spouses, absent biological parents, residential children whose birth predates the marriage, nonresidential children, present grandparents, mutual children, and ex-in-laws (Beer, 1988; Miller & Moorman, 1989; Papernow, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1988).

Stepfamily dynamics are complex. Stepfamilies begin as families in transition from former households to a new integrated stepfamily household (Whiteside, 1982; Walsh, 1991). There are several different types of stepfamilies. These include stepfather families, stepmother families, complex stepfamilies (both parents bring children into the marriage), and stepfamilies with a mutual child (Visher & Visher, 1993).

### Methodological Shortcomings

This section will report a number of possible biases in stepfamily research. According to Spanier and Furstenberg (1987), there is a lack of accurate data with which to facilitate our understanding of remarriage and stepfamily life. Visher & Visher (1988) suggest that most reports from clinicians tend to emphasize the problems in stepfamilies, probably because clinicians have contact with the families who have sought help to deal with their difficulties. On the other hand, empirical researchers who are looking at nonclinical populations tend to have a more positive view of stepfamily life. Ganong & Coleman (1986) report a similar impression to that of Visher & Visher (1988). Robinson (1984) stated that contradictory findings



might be due in large part to methodological shortcomings and contended that outcomes are frequently contingent upon the methodology chosen by researchers.

Research on stepfamilies based on non-clinical populations has generally utilized self-report survey instruments which gathered responses by only one family member (Robinson, 1984). Results of these studies regarding positive and negative factors in stepfamilies have been inconclusive. Most research on stepfamilies, with the exception of Hetherington and colleagues' longitudinal studies (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), is cross-sectional in design and examines stepfamilies at only one period after remarriage. Thus, it is unclear whether the differences found between nuclear families and stepfamilies are inherent characteristics or are due to complex dynamics associated with stepfamily formation and later transition periods (Bray, 1988, 1993; Hetherington, 1987). In addition, distinctions noted between nuclear families and stepfamilies may reflect normative differences within the two family structures rather than problems in stepfamilies.

#### Deficit-Comparison Studies

The majority of research on stepfamilies has compared stepfamilies to nuclear families using the deficit-comparison model (Coleman & Ganong, 1985; Ganong & Coleman, 1986; Kelly, 1992; Orleans, Palisi, & Caddell, 1989; Robinson, 1984; Zeppa & Norem, 1993). The deficit-comparison studies conclude that stepfamilies have more problems than do intact nuclear families (Bray, 1988; Bray & Berger, 1993; Nunn, Parish, & Worthing, 1983; Russell, 1984; Wallerstein, 1985; White & Booth, 1985).

### Early Studies

The earliest studies of stepfamilies were written in the 1920's and focused on the psychology of stepfamilies (Duberman, 1975). Studies done in the 1930's were primarily written to illustrate the difficult role of the stepmother. Fortes (1933) attempted to link delinquency with various kinds of abnormal family patterns, including stepfamilies. Heilpern (1943) addressed the psychological problems of stepchildren. Bowerman and Irish (cited in Duberman, 1975), in their study of over two thousand stepchildren, found that there was a greater amount of stress and ambivalence, and lower or less cohesiveness in stepfamilies than in primary families. There was very little research on stepfamilies throughout the 50's and early 60's.

These early empirical findings tended to support the notion that life in remarried families was "more problematic" than life in nuclear families (Zeppa & Norem, 1993). While stepfamily research is not entirely problem focused, the majority of the early stepfamily research compared stepfamilies to nuclear families (Ganong & Coleman, 1986; Robinson, 1984). Studies of nuclear and single-parent families dominated the family literature despite the fact that there were approximately six million stepchildren in the United States in 1948 (Barnard, 1956). These studies addressed issues within the intact and single-parent family structure without regard to stepfamilies.

Following Fast and Cain's (1966) groundbreaking article, attention to stepfamily issues increased slowly over the next two decades (Bohannon, 1983; Papernow, 1984). Fast and Cain (1966) studied stepparents' role-related difficulties in developing stable patterns of feeling, thinking, and acting towards their

stepchildren. They concluded that stepfamilies were especially vulnerable to malfunctioning because of the poorly articulated role definition of stepparents.

In their concluding comments, Fast and Cain (1966), argued against focusing on the problems of stepfamilies. They acknowledged that it would be tempting for professionals to view stepfamilies in terms of pathology since the health-illness model is predominantly used by professions dealing with interpersonal disturbances. However, they warned professionals that viewing the stepfamily in terms of their pathology is a tactical error. They state, "If our analysis is generally correct, attempts to reproduce the nuclear family in the step situation are doomed to failure in any case" (p.490).

Cherlin (1978) proposing a similar view to that of Fast & Cain (1966), argued that higher divorce rates for second marriages were due to the "incomplete institutionalization" of remarriage in this society. This hypothesis stated that families formed following remarriage were not completely institutionalized by cultural norms. That is, there were few societal guidelines for helping stepfamilies solve problems and few social norms regarding stepfamily roles and relationships.

Cherlin (1978) proposed that problems faced by stepfamilies were intrinsically different than those faced by nuclear families. He believed that it was inappropriate to use nuclear family norms in finding solutions to unique stepfamily problems. Despite the warnings against fitting stepfamilies into the nuclear family mold (Fast & Cain, 1966; Cherlin, 1978), the majority of stepfamily research continued to compare stepfamilies to nuclear families and focused on the problems of stepfamilies.

Although most family researchers agreed that stepfamilies differed in their structure and organization, research continued to compare stepfamilies to nuclear

families. The family literature suggest that stepfamilies differ from nuclear families in the areas of structural differences, parent-child relationships, and number of stressors. Studies also specifically compared stepfather and stepmother families to nuclear families. Researchers using this comparison approach cited differences from the nuclear family norm as problematic. The following is a sample of some of the deficit comparison studies.

### Stepfamily Structure

Researchers who empirically examined family structure differences in child well-being (i.e., adjustment and the quality of parent-child relationships) have typically found that children in stepfamilies have more problems (e.g. behavioral problems, social competence, and substance abuse) than children from first-marriage families (Bray, 1988; Dawson, 1991; Fine, Kurdek, & Hennigen, 1991; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Peterson & Zill, 1986). However, Needle, Su, & Doherty (1990), in their study of divorce, remarriage, and substance abuse, found negative effects for girls only.

Several studies described stepfamilies as less cohesive, lacking clear role expectations, and more stressful than nuclear families (Anderson & White, 1986; Bray, 1988; Garbarino, Sebes, & Schellenbach, 1984). Further research on structural differences between nuclear families and stepfamilies suggests that changes in family structure require a change in family processes (i.e. parenting behaviors), which, in turn, affects children's development (Amato & Keith, 1991; Fine, Kurdek, & Hennigen, 1992; Grych & Fincham, 1990).

### Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships

The stepparent-stepchild relationship has been compared to the parent-child relationship in nuclear families. Schwebel, Fine & Renner (1991) studied

perceptions of the stepparent role and concluded that the stepparent role is probably the most at risk for being ambiguous and stressful. With respect to the quality of parent-child relationships, several studies have found that relationships between stepparents and stepchildren are less positively perceived than are those between biological parents and children in first marriage families (Furstenberg, 1987; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987; and Sauer & Fine, 1988).

Parent-child relationships, particularly those most notable between stepfathers and stepchildren, are characterized as more detached, negative, and conflictual than parent-child relationships in nuclear families (Hetherington, 1987; Perkins & Kahan, 1979; Santrock, Warshak, Lindberg & Meadows, 1982). Boys appeared to respond more favorably than girls to having a stepfather in the household (Santrock, Sitterle, & Warshak, 1988). Visher and Visher (1990) hypothesized that boys may respond more favorably to a stepfather in the house because they have gained an important male figure, whereas girls feel like they have to share their mother with her new partner.

On the basis of a study on parental perceptions, Thomson, McLanahan, and Curtin (1992), concluded that stepparents provided less warmth and nurturing to their children than did biological parents. Citing studies that indicate a greater incidence of psychological and physical abuse Daly & Wilson, and Lightcap, Kurland, & Burgess (cited in Zeppa & Norem, 1993), implied that stepparents would tend to be more neglectful and/or abusive because their perceived relatedness to their stepchildren would be relatively low when compared with that of biological parents.

### Stress in Stepfamilies

Several studies noted that stepfamilies experienced more stress than nuclear families (Anderson & White, 1986; Bray, 1988; Garbarino et al., 1984; Martin & Walters, 1982; Pasley & Ingher-Tallman, 1982; and Ransom, Schlesinger, & Derdeyn, 1979). In their study of stress in second families, Pasley & Ingher-Tallman (1982), stated that the process of stepfamily development is largely one of merging multiple family cultures and identities. Therefore, it logically follows that the stress process in these families is more complex than in nuclear families. Stress theorists Martin and Walters (1982) studied familial correlates of selected types of child abuse and neglect. They reasoned that if excessive stress in families leads to abuse and there was more stress in families where step relationships occur, then abuse was more likely to occur in these families. Ransom et al. (1979), following their study of the formation of stepfamilies, suggested that a major source of stressors in stepfamilies arises out of the need to restructure and clarify roles. They believe that role clarification creates stress because there is initially no concerns on the roles and expectations of stepparents and stepchildren.

### Stepfather Studies

Stepfather families are stepfamilies in which the man is the stepparent. Research on stepfather families indicated that stepfathers tended to be more authoritarian and traditional in their views about family and child-rearing than were natural fathers (Bohanan & Yahres, 1979; Perkins & Kahan, 1979). These researchers suggest that one reason that stepfathers express such authoritarian views may be that the family system needs more authority (Beer, 1988). Studies indicate that stepfather families tend to have less stress than other types of

stepfamilies (Clingempeel, Ievoli, & Brand, 1984; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1979).

In two studies of stepfathers, Perkins and Woodruff (cited in Keshet, 1990), participants were asked to describe their current family and their ideal family. In both studies, the differences between the ideal and current families were greater for stepfathers than for biological fathers. Consistent with earlier findings (Hetherington, 1987; Perkins & Kahan, 1979; Santrock et al., 1982), Amato (1987) and Thomson et al. (1992) found that stepfathers reported behaving less positively toward their children than did biological fathers in stepmother families.

#### Stepmother Studies

Families in which the woman is the stepparent are called stepmother families. The stepfamily literature has suggested that roles and relationships are more difficult and stressful in stepmother families (Bray, 1988; Clingempeel et al., 1984; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagen, & Anderson, 1989; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987; Visher & Visher, 1988; White & Booth, 1985). Bray and Berger (1993), in their research project on developmental issues in stepfamilies, reported similar findings. They concluded that mother-child interactions in stepfamilies were mediated by less cohesion, poorer communication, and problems with family roles.

The fact that women are still expected to set the emotional tone for the family may contribute to poorer functioning in stepmother families (Visher & Visher, 1990). Walsh (1991) suggests that stepmothers tend to get into an over-responsible role for stepfamily integration, and assume it is their fault if expectations aren't met. She is also likely to perceive the hostility from her stepchildren as her own inadequacy (p.541).

The forementioned studies contributed to our understanding of stepfamily problems, but failed to offer solutions to those problems. The deficit comparison approach to stepfamily research may have contributed to the commonly perceived negative stereotypes about stepfamilies.

### Implications of The Deficit-Comparison Model

#### Negative Stereotypes

The dominant deficit comparison approaches to stepfamily research have contributed to the commonly perceived negative stereotypes of stepfamilies and stepfamily members (Coleman & Ganong, 1985; Ganong & Coleman, 1986). Family researchers agree that stepfamilies continue to be victims of negative stereotyping (Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Visher & Visher, 1988; 1993).

The word "stepfamily" usually conjures up a negative image. While the word "family" may denote "hearth" and "home", some people picture Cinderella shivering by the ashes of the fire when they think of a stepfamily (Visher & Visher, 1988). Studies have tested the image of "stepmother and stepfather" as compared to "mother and father" and have come to the conclusion that "step" appears to signify a negative image (Ganong & Coleman, 1983).

Stepfamily members often object to the negative associations and expectations associated with these "step" labels. Self-report studies indicated that stepfamily members may even try to hide their stepfamily status in an attempt to avoid the perceived problems about stepfamily life (Bradt & Bradt, 1986; Coleman & Ganong, 1985; Duberman, 1975; Visher & Visher, 1979). In an attempt to isolate factors present in healthy stepfamilies Kelly (1992) found that stepfamily members often tried to model their new family after the nuclear family.



The deficit-comparison approaches have influenced mental health professionals' perceptions about stepfamilies. Studies have concluded that counselors may attribute negative associations to stepfamilies. Bryan, Ganong, Coleman, and Bryan (1986) studied counselors' perceptions of stepparents and stepchildren. They found that inexperienced counselors viewed stepfamilies less positively than nuclear families, and saw stepparents as less potent and well-adjusted than adults they believed to be from nuclear families. Bryan et. al (1986) also found that adolescents who were evaluated by the inexperienced counselors were also seen as less potent, less active, and less well-adjusted if they were said to have been from a stepfamily.

Family therapists have also received criticism for attributing negative attitudes to stepfamilies. Morawetz (1984) states, "Perhaps family therapists are contributing to, rather than ameliorating, problems of stepfamilies by not being open to the view that couples and families may cope better if their expectations of marriage and family life include the idea of separation and divorce" (p. 572).

Negative stereotypes may affect stepfamilies in ways not overtly recognized. More than 700 college students were found to have utilized family structure as a cue to form stereotypes of a negative character (Bryan et al., 1986). In this study stepparents were more negatively stereotyped than were married or widowed parents. Stepchildren were ranked even more negatively than were stepparents, including those living with a never-married parent or a parent who divorced but never remarried. The authors state, "Though the term wicked is readily associated with stepmother and abusive has recently been linked with stepfather, it may be that the frequent use of stepchild to mean poor, neglected, and ignored has had an insidious impact on attitudes over time" (p.173).

A review of more recent stepfamily literature indicates that perceptions of stepfamilies are changing (Kelly, 1992; Keshet, 1990; Pill, 1990; Zeppa & Norem, 1992). Keshet (1990) studied how remarried people view stepfamilies. She concludes that normative beliefs about stepparenting are changing for the better. Old myths and stereotypes, such as that of the wicked stepmother, appear to be improving. There was, for example, no consensus among her sample on the statement "people still regard stepmothers negatively" (p. 202).

#### Research Which Focuses on The Unique Stepfamily System

##### Arguments Against Problem-Focus

Even though the majority of earlier studies, in comparing nuclear families to stepfamilies used the deficit comparison model, some early studies did not come to negative conclusions about stepfamilies. After conducting a study of marriage, Barnard (1956) cautiously concluded that stepfamily relations may in many cases be mutually supportive and healthier than the problem-filled family involved in a disruptive first marriage. Burchinal (1964) studied 1500 Iowa high school students and concluded that there were no findings to support the idea that divorce and remarriage had any long-term significant detrimental effects. Wilson, Zurcher, McAdams and Curtis (1975) conducting an exploratory analysis of stepfather and stepchildren, concluded that there were no measurable outcome differences between individuals who had experienced stepfather families as compared to other types of family arrangements. Duberman (1975), expecting to find the stereotype of the unsuccessful stepfamily, found that most members of the stepfamilies in her study consider their families to be quite successful. She found that 64% of the stepfamilies in her study rated themselves as having excellent relationships, while only 18% said they were experiencing poor relationships.

More recently, Zeppa and Norem (1993) designed a study to test the commonly accepted notion that stepfamilies, in general, experience more stressors and negative manifestations of stress than do biological families. The results did not support this commonly accepted notion. Zeppa and Norem state, "The results clearly provide a sharp challenge to the deficit comparison model that has dominated thinking regarding stepfamilies for decades and lends support to the proposition that it is the conditions rather than the nature of some stepfamilies that most distinguish them from biological families" (p. 20).

Many researchers have changed their views of stepfamilies. Some researchers who set out to test the problems of stepfamilies found that stepfamilies may not be as problematic as they once thought. In the concluding statement of an article on children's reactions to marital transitions Hetherington et al. (1989) state, "In recent years, researchers have begun to move away from the view that single parents and stepfamilies are atypical and pathogenic" (p. 303).

Reviews of stepfamily literature criticized the deficit comparison model for contributing to the negative stereotypes of stepfamilies (Coleman & Ganong, 1985; Ganong & Coleman, 1986; Kelly, 1992; Orleans, Palisi, & Caddell, 1989; Robinson, 1984; Zeppa & Norem, 1993). In a study examining the presentation of stepfamilies in marriage and family textbooks, Coleman, Lawrence, and Goodwin (1994) noted that while the deficit-family model is still present in many of the books, current textbooks do a much better job of including materials about remarriages and stepfamilies than textbooks did a decade ago. Researchers who were concerned about how the deficit-comparison approaches impacted stepfamilies, began to refocus their attention on addressing the unique concerns of stepfamilies.

Newer models for conducting research on stepfamilies have addressed the diversity and the complexity of the stepfamily system and focused more on healthy stepfamily development, rather than on the deficit comparison model (Ganong & Coleman, 1986, 1989; Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Kelly, 1992; Visher & Visher 1985, 1990, 1993; Zeppa & Norem, 1993). Goldner (1982) states, "If the first marriage is no longer the happy ending to childhood, but rather the first in a series of stages that characterize a more demanding adult life, family therapists need to recast their understanding of family structure and development with this in mind (p. 190)." With 30% of all marriages being composed of the remarriage of at least one of the adults, Glick & Lin (1986), suggested a revision of the family life cycle to indicate the prevalence of stepfamilies in society. McGoldrick and Carter (1988), in a change from their 1980 publication, included divorce and remarriage as a common stage in the family life cycle.

### Stepfamily Strengths

Only recent research has begun to focus on the strengths of stepfamilies (Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Kelly, 1992; Knaub, Hanna, & Stinett, 1984; Orleans, Palisi & Caddell, 1989). Examining families' perceptions of their strengths Knaub et al., (1984), found that while most of the families in their self-report study indicated that there were changes they would like to have been able to make, their scores were high on perceived family strength, marital satisfaction, and family adjustment. Kelly (1992), using the Self-Report Family Instrument (SFI), found that higher functioning stepfamilies were those who avoided forcing their families into the biological family model.

### Stepfamily Systems

Family theoreticians and clinicians have noted the different structures and rules necessary for stepfamilies (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Papernow, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1979, 1985, 1988), but the nature, extent, and prevalence of these differences have not been systematically tested. Because the stepfamily structure is different than that of biological families, attempts to duplicate the biologically based family can create problems (Mills, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1985). A study by Kelly (1992) suggests that stepfamilies are not necessarily problematic, but rather that they differ from biological families in ways that need to be understood.

Stepfamilies have different life-cycle patterns than nuclear families. Minuchin (1974) describes the differences between biological families and stepfamilies. He states "The stepfamily structure, a weak couple subsystem, a tightly bounded parent-child alliance, and potential interference in family functioning from an outsider, would signal pathology in any biological family. It is simply the starting point for normal stepfamily development" (p.13).

### Developmental Models

Developmental models were developed to assist stepfamily members through the integration process (Kleinman, Rosenberg, & Whiteside, 1979; McGoldrick & Carter, 1980; Papernow, 1984, 1993; Sager, Brown, Crohn, Engel, Rodstein & Walker, 1983; Visher & Visher, 1990). In these developmental frameworks the family systems model is used as a theoretical basis for understanding and describing family process and change in divorce and remarriage (Bray & Berger, 1993; McGoldrick & Carter, 1980; Whiteside, 1982). In a systems approach to stepfamilies members are viewed as part of an interdependent

emotional and relational system the parts of which mutually influence one another in different aspects of the system. Change within one component of the system is believed to perpetuate change in other parts of the system (Bray & Berger, 1993).

The creation of a stepfamily means that family members must negotiate many new circumstances. They must determine who are psychological members of the stepfamily, regardless of physical absence or presence, and confront expectations concerning love and emotional bonding (Pill, 1990). Tasks in the developmental models include, but are not limited to, mourning the loss of the old family, the forming a solid marital dyad between the new spouses, and establishing alliances between the stepchild and stepparent and new siblings (Kleinman et al., 1979; McGoldrick & Carter, 1980; Papernow, 1984, 1993; Sager et al., 1983; Visher & Visher, 1990).

#### Educational Approaches

Research indicates that higher-functioning stepfamilies avoid forcing their families into the biological family model (Kaplan & Hennon, 1992; Kelley, 1992; Visher & Visher, 1990). This is often accomplished through counseling and educational efforts. Psychoeducational efforts appear frequently in the current literature. A premise of these educational programs is that clarifying expectations about stepfamily life is an important step towards role competency (Ganong & Coleman, 1989; Glick, 1991; Kaplan & Hennon, 1992; Kelly, 1992; Moorman & Hernandez, 1989; Pill, 1990). With clear expectations many disagreements and disappointments can be avoided. Similar to other remarriage education programs, Kaplan and Hennon's (1992) Personal Reflections Program is designed not only to help alleviate the role strain and stress associated with stepfamily structures, but also to help improve the quality of stepfamily life for all individuals involved.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate how the family literature has treated the subject of stepfamilies since the beginning of research on stepfamilies. After review of the literature we can conclude that stepfamily research has focused on two different approaches to dealing with the subject of stepfamilies. One approach focused on the problems of stepfamilies, while the other focused on understanding the unique stepfamily system. We have gained important information about stepfamilies from both approaches. We can also conclude that normative beliefs about stepfamilies have changed over time. Stepfamilies are being understood as having some uniqueness rather than as pathological.

Since the beginning of stepfamily research in the 1920's, there has increasingly been more studies of stepfamilies, and a greater awareness of remarriage and stepfamily life on the part of mental health professionals. While problem focused research on stepfamilies still exists, research addressing the unique issues of stepfamilies is increasing. Family researchers and clinicians have also identified the need to educate stepfamily members and mental health professionals about stepfamily life.

Stepfamily research has definitely advanced, however, there is still a lack of empirical research with which to facilitate our understanding of stepfamily systems. Despite abundant references to the problems of stepfamilies, very little research has been done to identify how to reduce negative stereotypes or to help individual stepfamilies clarify their own role definitions (Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Keshet (1990) supports this position and states, "Just as widely held stereotypes can be altered, personal myths about the family are subject to change" (p. 202).

Given the lack of empirical data on stepfamilies of all types, there appears to be a need to broaden models of family relationships to include the great diversity of types of families common in the United States today. While stepfamilies are not the same as nuclear families, they represent one of a multitude of family types sharing many common concerns as well as unique issues.



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