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Issues in remarriage: Integration and treatment of steprelationships

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Issues in remarriage: Integration and treatment of steprelationships

Abstract

Traditionally the Nuclear family has provided the primary socializing, learning, and nurturing functions to individuals. With an increase of casual mating and divorce habits, increases in fatal accidents, suicides, parental abandonment, and women opting to stay single while bearing children, another form of family is gaining prevalence--the Stepfamily (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977). In 1979 there were 1,181,000 divorces in the U.S. (Bureau of Census, 1981). Visher and Visher (1982) report that 80% of the men and 75% of the women who divorce remarry. Each year in the United States one-half million adults become stepparents of one or more children (Visher & Visher, 1978). There are approximately 1300 stepfamilies formed daily and one out of three children will see a parent remarry (Visher & Visher, 1982). If in the United States this present trend prevails, by 1990 Stepfamilies will out-number biological families (Bustanoby, 1982).

ISSUES IN REMARRIAGE:
INTEGRATION AND TREATMENT
OF STEPRELATIONSHIPS

A Research Paper
Presented to
the Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Sandra Uthoff Murphy
December 1983

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Entitled: ISSUES IN REMARRIAGE: INTEGRATION AND
TREATMENT OF STEPRELATIONSHIPS

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for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally the Nuclear family has provided the primary socializing, learning, and nurturing functions to individuals. With an increase of casual mating and divorce habits, increases in fatal accidents, suicides, parental abandonment, and women opting to stay single while bearing children, another form of family is gaining prevalence--the Stepfamily (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977). In 1979 there were 1,181,000 divorces in the U.S. (Bureau of Census, 1981). Visher and Visher (1982) report that 80% of the men and 75% of the women who divorce remarry. Each year in the United States one-half million adults become stepparents of one or more children (Visher & Visher, 1978). There are approximately 1300 stepfamilies formed daily and one out of three children will see a parent remarry (Visher & Visher, 1982). If in the United States this present trend prevails, by 1990 Stepfamilies will out-number biological families (Bustanoby, 1982).

Until recently the topic of steprelationship has almost gone unnoticed in our society. As Ransom, Schlesinger, and Verdyn (1979) explain, many mental health clinicians need a better understanding of the dynamics and special needs of stepfamily relationships. Many clinicians are unable to step outside of the nuclear model of interaction (Freeman, Messinger, & Walker, 1978). In order to be more productive, these professionals might learn

the skills that adequately serve all members of the reconstituted family. Such skills and/or knowledge might be expected to facilitate the evolution of the Stepfamily system (Ransom, Schlesinger, & Verdyn, 1979).

Since changes in the family structure have occurred so quickly, mental health clinicians have not been able to keep pace. The first step in the process of updating clinicians regarding treatment modalities would seem to be to review the available literature.

Purpose of the Study

The intent of this study will be to review the literature in an attempt to lend more clarification regarding the dynamics of the steprelationship. Specifically, the study will examine the structure of the stepfamily, the integration process, common problems associated with stepfamilies, a child's perspective as a member of a stepfamily, a child's behavioral clues of maladjustment, the roles of grandparents, and the roles which the school system play. The author will propose guidelines therapists might use with stepcouples about to enter into a marriage. Following the guidelines might assist the therapist in delineating and preventing some difficulties to which stepcouples are particularly vulnerable. The last section is devoted to the discussion of intervention strategies which therapists might employ with stepfamilies who have sought professional assistance.

Assumptions

It is assumed that the literature, although sparse, is both representative and accurate. It is further assumed that since steprelationships are a relatively new phenomenon, there may be few published studies, and that they are not empirically based.

Limitations

The reliability and validity of this study will be dependent upon the accuracy of the available literature. A limitation of the available literature is that it is not based upon empirical data.

Definition of Terms

Nuclear Family: Refers to two adults of opposite sex living in a socially approved sexual relationship, and their own children. It is the familiar unit of mother, father, and children (Leslie, 1976).

Stepfamily: A unit comprised of two spouses and the offspring of at least one of them (the offspring being from a previous marriage or relationship) (Visher & Visher, 1978).

System: An organized whole made up of components that interact in a way distinct from their interaction with other entities and which endures over some period of time (Anderson & Carter, 1978).

System Theory: An assumption that all matter and all forms can be regarded as parts of a larger whole, and

that these parts have certain properties that can be studied (Anderson & Carter, 1978).

Suprasystem: A larger system that includes the focal system that is of concern--a whole of which the focal system is a part (Anderson & Carter, 1978).

Subsystem: A component of a system that is in itself a system. It is one kind of component (Anderson & Carter, 1978).

Boundary: The limits of the interaction of the components of a system with each other or with the environment. Boundary is usually defined by the intensity and frequency of interaction between systems and components (Anderson & Carter, 1978).

Genogram (Family Tree): A map or diagram which outlines the basic family structure, the predominant mythology, and the family's level of differentiation (French, 1977).

Sculpting: The technique of using the sculptors' (clients') selves, bodily, to construct a symbolic or metaphorical map of a living tableau of people embodying essential features of their interrelationships (Constantine, 1978).

Triangulation: A circular, continuous process of mutual affecting and reinforcing, which tends to maintain a fixed pattern. Specific transactions with people elicit and reinforce aspects of an individual's personality appropriate to the context (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

Identified Patient: A family generally identifies one member as the location of the problem. This member is viewed as the cause of the dysfunctional system (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

Scapegoat: A person or thing bearing the blame for others (Webster, 1965).

Therapist: A person trained to deal primarily with the emotionally disturbed persons and their families. The person employs any psychological technique to treat emotional disorders or maladjustments (Stone & Shertzer, 1972).

Counselor: A person trained to help another understand him/herself and his/her environment and to make voluntary changes in behavior. (Counseling is closely related to therapy but the individual who receives counseling is not emotionally ill (Stone & Shertzer, 1972)).

Note: The terms Identified Patient and Scapegoat will be used interchangeably in this paper, as well as the terms Therapist and Counselor.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the available literature on stepfamilies in an attempt to lend more clarification regarding the dynamics of steprelationships, and to provide therapists with suggestions for intervention strategies and prevention guidelines which may assist the stepfamily with the integration process. Chapter 2 will review the current literature providing information about the definition of the stepfamily and its structure, the common problems associated with stepfamilies, a child's perspective as a member of a stepfamily, the issues and dynamics of the adult members of a stepfamily, a child's behavioral clues of maladjustment, and the roles which the grandparents and the school system play. Hopefully the end result of reading chapter 2 will be a better conceptualization of this new American family unit.

Definition and Structure

Americans have had little difficulty understanding the concept of family. For many years the nuclear family has been the basic residential family unit in the United States. It is sometimes called the basic social institution (Leslie, 1976). Times change and it seems inevitable that institutions must respond in kind. Within

the United States the family has changed, a new family system, the stepfamily, is becoming more and more prevalent. Divorce, death of a spouse, suicide, and parental abandonment are some of the factors which have led to the creation of the stepfamily as a unit in the United States. The structure and dynamics of a stepfamily are quite different from a nuclear family. The definitions and compositions of a "family unit" need to be expanded. To assist stepfamilies toward a healthy adjustment mental health clinicians as well as the general public need to gain an awareness of the differences between stepfamilies and traditional nuclear families and the special problems associated with stepfamilies.

A variety of names have been used to describe the stepfamily, most of which have negative implications. The descriptions used exemplify the difficulty these families have in integrating into society. Examples of descriptions include that of blended families, remarried or "REM" families, reconstituted, or merged families. A "blended" family has the connotation of putting intact objects into a blender to make mush, "reconstituted" conjures up thoughts of orange juice, and "merged" sounds like a corporate deal (Farmer & Prosen, 1982).

The Vishers' (1978) definition of a stepfamily is: due to the separation between mother and father as a result of divorce or death a stepfamily unit may be formed. This new unit or stepfamily is comprised of two spouses and

the offspring of at least one of them (the offspring being from a previous marriage or relationship). The adults need not be married but a commitment is necessary to be considered as a unit.

It is important for practitioners as well as for stepfamily members to realize that this new unit is different, in many aspects, from the traditional family (Visher & Visher, 1978). It will never be like the nuclear family structure or experience. Roles and boundaries are more ambiguous and complex (Visher & Visher, 1978).

Understanding systems theory may help to explain the differences in structure between the nuclear family and the stepfamily. A system, according to Webster (1965), is a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole, an assemblage of substances that is or tends to equilibrium, a group of devices or artificial objects or an organization forming a network, especially for distributing something or serving a common purpose (p. 895). Systems theory is based on the assumption that all matter and all forms can be regarded as systems and as systems have certain properties that can be studied (Anderson & Carter, 1978). In a family system (the supersystem) each individual (or subsystem) acts in a way that maintains equilibrium or stability. These actions are both consciously and unconsciously determined. Should this balance be disrupted there is

an effort by the system to regain the stable position (Visher & Visher, 1978).

"Nuclear families have this stability and cohesiveness, and with their four walls, can be considered closed systems. In a closed system, there is balance and equilibrium, nothing enters and nothing leaves" (Visher & Visher, 1978, p. 255). If one member upsets the balance, another member counteracts so as to maintain the status quo or equilibrium.

Stepfamilies are open systems. Member A may upset member B and leave before B has had a chance to react. Many times the members purposely disrupt or undermine the system. Rather than a conscious or unconscious effort to maintain the equilibrium there is a definite goal to sabotage it. The lack of control, or disequilibrium, contributes to the sense of ambiguity. This constant sensing of powerlessness or loss of control can lead to feelings of helplessness. If this attitude is displayed for a period of time, it may result in depression and/or other forms of neurotic behavior (Visher & Visher, 1978).

It should be noted that there are efforts in nuclear families to disrupt the equilibrium but the attempt is usually counterbalanced by an action of another member. Also, stepfamily members do make attempts to maintain the equilibrium, but because of the loose boundaries and roles the attempts are easily thwarted.

Common Problems Associated with Stepfamilies

Values and Experiences

According to the Vishers (1982) and the Rosenbaums (1977) different values, experiences, and expectations may be held by several of the individuals coming together to make up this new system, this new gestalt, called the stepfamily. Nuclear families have some semblance of similarity. The children are born, raised, and socialized in a certain pattern, with a set of definite rules and norms. Stepfamilies come together with two or more distinct and definite ways of being. In short, they must "amalgamate and negotiate two different sets of lifestyles, two different sets of values, into a new whole" (Barrow, 1981, p. 76).

Unrealistic Expectations and Losses

Another pitfall for stepfamilies is unrealistic expectations. Many people believe they will remarry and have a family just like the one that did not work--except that this one will work out. Stepchildren and stepcouples must realize members are coming together after many, many losses. These losses can be different in nature, origin, and degree. They may be interpersonal losses and losses of dreams (Visher & Visher, 1982). People who have been divorced have lost their idealized image of marriage as an institution.

A child may have lost his/her security and sense of identity. A child's identity tends to lie with both

natural parents. From parents, children derive a sense of who they are, what they are like, and what their relation is to the world (Capaldi & McRae, 1979).

Lack of Role Model

An individual about to enter into his/her first marriage has not grown up expecting to deal with an ex-spouse or instant children. "The stepparent has not had a role from which to pattern his/her behavior. As a child, he/she learned how to be mom or dad, not stepmom or stepdad" (Capaldi & McRae, 1979, p. 63).

Ambivalence

In addition to various members having different values and experiences, unrealistic expectations, the lack of a role model, and having experienced a loss, another difficulty is stepfamily members frequently experience ambivalence much more acutely than nuclear family members (Visher & Visher, 1982). Ambivalence is a "psychological state in which one experiences simultaneous contradictory emotions toward a person" (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977, p. 3). The approach-avoid syndrome may be analogous to ambivalence, especially concerning children. Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum (1977) report that this syndrome

comes from the unconscious of children. The real parents are imprinted on the emotional tape in the unconscious. They are (natural parents) to the child's unconscious the real and only parents. It is insignificant that the parents may have abused or neglected them, they are still the real ones. Since this is the child's view of normalcy they reject accepting a new parent. (p. 101)

The child's feelings and manifestations of these feelings are inconsistent. At times he/she may like the stepparent but this internal message of normalcy causes him/her to experience conflict which causes a reaction in an adverse manner. Stuart and Edwin (1981) report that this feeling of ambivalence may be attributed to incomplete mourning:

if a child's parents were not able to mourn and did not provide pathways for the child to mourn the former root family then it is likely that the child will remain emotionally connected to the old system and make a peripheral attachment to the REM family. If the child has not worked through his/her loss he/she resists acceptance of a stepparent.
(p. 298)

The stepparent may feel ambivalent reactions for the child as well as the child feeling ambivalent reactions for the parent. These parental reactions may be result from the child's inconsistent double messages.

Perceived Rejection

Some stepparents view their stepchild's ambivalence as a rejection of themselves and consider this a major problem (Visher & Visher, 1978). Visher and Visher (1978) also note that children who are biological offspring frequently reject their parents. This is accepted as part of growing up, and is unnoticed. In stepfamilies the same rejection can become a focal point. Rejections in stepfamilies are given a whole new interpretation, in cases in which the rejection is no longer viewed as a natural process of growth. A mother/stepmother reports:

when my own children tell me I am mean it does not bother me. I know they really love me, when my stepchildren say I am mean it really hurts

because I am not sure of my relationship with them. (Visher & Visher, 1978, pp. 76)

Appreciation and acknowledgement are not frequently given to natural parents by their biological children (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977). Due to conflicting emotions, stepchildren are even less likely to provide this to their stepparents. A stepfather says, "I did not expect appreciation from my own kids but I do think I should be appreciated by my stepson" (Visher & Visher, 1978, p. 76).

The stepparents may feel these expectations of acceptance or approval because they do not have to care for their stepchildren, whereas with their own children they feel a deep personal sense of responsibility (Visher & Visher, 1978).

The Vishers note that acceptance and recognition are sought throughout the step relationship, but especially in the beginning when the new unit is formed. Many times, if the stepparent or stepchild does not obtain the solicited response, he or she will give up or turn against the relationship. Should this happen it can be the beginning of a very painful, destructive, and vicious cycle of existence.

Old (negative) Behavioral Patterns

In addition to the common difficulties previously mentioned, a very unproductive common problem is that of bringing old destructive ways of behaving into the new family unit. As a result of the divorce within their previous family, they may have experienced conflict,

pain and confusion. In order to cope with these emotions they developed adjustment or coping mechanisms (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977). Individuals of a nuclear family also develop mechanisms to cope but the family system is consistent and stable in its inconsistent coping mechanisms. The members are the same, the reactions and actions are the same so the mechanisms are appropriate. In a stepfamily the members utilize the same coping mechanisms which they used in their previous family without realizing the new unit is a new and different system. Their adjustment mechanisms may be inappropriate for the new system. Rather than assisting with coping, their adjustment mechanisms may set up barriers.

Discipline

Discipline is another area of great concern and difficulty for stepfamilies. Jesse Bernard (1956) reports that, "measures that one might apply without selfconsciousness to ones own children may produce deep conflict when applied to the children of a spouse. The stepparent may experience this conflict more acutely than either the biological parent or the child himself" (p. 243).

McClenanan (1978) studied sixty-six individuals who attended four weeks of discussion classes for stepparent couples. The members in this group ranked their difficulties as follows:

- 1a. Discipline of stepchildren
- b. Being viewed by stepchildren as the bad guy

- 2a. Problems with former spouses
- b. Poor marital communications
- 3a. General problems with stepchildren. (p. 76)

A study by Messinger (1976) indicated that the biggest problem in remarriage was problems with children. A close second was financial problems.

Schlesinger (1975) found three problem areas frequently mentioned by parents in remarriage, "1. Disciplining children, 2. Adjusting to the habits and personalities, 3. Gaining acceptance of the children" (p. 72).

There seems to be a consensus that discipline is a central concern for many stepparents. The couple may have different methods of disciplining, different criteria for what is permissible and what is not permissible. The stepparent may feel uncomfortable playing the "bad guy" with kids that are not naturally his or hers. If the stepparent is the mother, she may already feel like the "wicked stepmom" and the added responsibility of disciplining may intensify this negative image, both to herself and to the stepchildren. The natural parent may resent someone else disciplining his/her children. In some cases the natural parent may give up ownership of this responsibility and expect the stepparent to take sole responsibility. If this is the stepparent's first marriage and he/she has never had children, disciplining may seem like an insurmountable duty. The inexperienced stepparent may feel helpless and out of control. In fact, a family

which Visher and Visher (1982) pinpointed as most likely to have adjustment difficulties had the following characteristics:

1. A stepparent who has never had children, a single person marries someone with children e.g. a stepmother with no natural children.
2. The father has custody of the children.
3. The father is passive in regard to his children.
4. The stepmother needs order.
5. The children are teenagers.

Visher and Visher (1982) also indicated that stepfamilies who are vertically split vs. those with a horizontal division have less chance of survival as a healthy family unit. In the vertical split dad has "his" kids and mom has her child(ren). Mom and dad do not agree about discipline, values, morals, and so forth. Dad's kids have a close relationship with him, even closer than what mom has, and they agree with his life philosophy. Mom and child(ren) on the other hand, have their own subsystem within the larger supersystem. In essence, mom and dad are split against each other. This produces, at best, a no-win situation. The children are likely to play the parents against each other.

The horizontal division, according to Visher and Visher (1982), is the desired split. In this representational split mom and dad stand together in regard to discipline, values, etc. The marital relationship is strong, there is a bond. The couple sets the stage upon which they are first and foremost, and the children are secondary characters.

Money

An area that can be very sensitive and cause stress is that of money. There never seems to be enough. Child support could be coming in and/or going out at the same time. Resentment is experienced if a spouse feels he/she is working to supplement a payment to his/her spouse's ex-spouse or family. These payments tend to remind the present spouse of the former marriage.

Some fathers without custody of their children fear that if they do not comply with ex-wives' requests for money, they will not be able to see their children. "This type of father may spend a lot of money for Christmas on his children, with little left over for the stepchildren" (Kompara, 1980, p. 72).

Spouses may perceive these payments or extra payments to ex-spouses as meaning a feeling of less affection for their children. Many translate money into love. A stepchild may compare how much the "real" son or daughter received compared to them. Also, the children may resent the parent who left because the family income was decreased, and their unit is unable to live according to their previous lifestyle and standards (Visher & Visher, 1982).

Legal Rights

Another significant factor is the ambiguity of legal rights and responsibilities. Farmer and Prosen (1982) report: "The law in regard to the stepparent is not

formally acknowledged by any statute, therefore there is no legal relationship between stepparents and stepchildren. The stepparents have no custody rights and if taken to court may lose contact with his/her stepchild permanently" (p. 394).

Signing teenagers' driving permits, authorizing emergency medical treatments and signing for medical procedures are responsibilities the stepparent cannot assume. Society's denial of the legal relationship between the child and stepparent only reinforces the idea that they are invisible, a message the stepparent has already received from the stepchild (Visher & Visher, 1982).

The common difficulties mentioned in the preceding sections are generalizations. Not all stepfamilies will experience all of the problems and some may not experience any of them. Stepfamilies may not feel so alone if they realize other steprelationships have experienced the same difficulties, and may have overcome them. Stepchildren also experience feelings that may be quite different or at least more intense than children from intact nuclear families. The next section will cover the feelings and issues that children may experience as a result of becoming a member of a stepfamily.

A Child's Perspective

Children from stepfamilies have different experiences than do children from nuclear families, or at least they have more intense feelings regarding the same

issues (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 1977). Children from broken homes are experiencing a loss, a change, and uncertainty which can be very stressful. The child's mourning for a lost parent may be incomplete, and when the surviving or custodial parent marries, the child may view the union as another parental loss. The remarriage will no doubt mean a sharing of their parent with the new parent and possibly with other children. Because of the perceived "loss" the sibling rivalry may be more powerful than experienced by that of natural siblings, and much more conflict ridden. These rivalries between stepchild and stepchild, and stepchild and stepparent are, at least in part, the result of the vying for attention from the biological parent.

The original position of the child entering into a new family with stepsiblings can enhance or negate his/her adjustment into the new system. Stuart and Edwin (1981) report that if the child "is accustomed to being the responsible eldest child and acquires an older stepsibling he may no longer be relied on for leadership or comfort. The displacement will affect his self esteem and sense of belonging" (p. 300).

Visher and Visher (1979) report several major concerns or issues for children in stepfamilies: "Divided loyalties, membership in two households, guilt over causing the divorce or death, identity and sexuality difficulties for adolescents" (p. 394).

The child may believe he/she somehow caused the divorce or death of their parent. Younger children are in a stage of development characterized by ego aggrandizement and volitional omnipotence. They tend to perceive the world as orbiting around them, and have feelings of being all powerful (Ausubel, 1977). This magical thinking, analogous to power, results in their assuming responsibility for the divorce. In assuming this responsibility they experience a deep sense of guilt. If children believe their behavior caused the first divorce (or death), these feelings of guilt may be magnified when the remaining parent remarries. If this guilt is internalized, it can become unbearable.

Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum (1977) report that the "guilt ridden youngster will often begin behaving in antisocial ways such as lying and stealing. They usually get caught and are punished thus relieving their original guilt" (p. 77).

Guilt is not the only feeling which may be experienced by the child; he/she may be angry or hostile. Rather than express the felt hostility by aggressively acting out his/her emotions, the child may withdraw. The perceived risk, further abandonment, may be too great to disclose these powerful emotions. If the fear is substantial, the child may choose to project the hostility toward the stepparent rather than the natural parent. If the child is very insecure and uncomfortable with conflict,

he/she will not even be able to use projection as a coping mechanism, and instead will withdraw and experience a deep depression (Visher & Visher, 1982).

Another issue of concern for stepchildren may be sexuality. McGoldrick and Carter (1980) observed that there may be sexual attraction toward a stepparent or stepsibling, or the child may have difficulty with their parents' expression of their own sexuality. The ambiguous boundaries and roles result in a lack of cohesiveness, and the "incest taboo is weakened because of the nonbiological relationship between family members" (Visher & Visher, 1978, p. 261). If the natural parent chooses a partner of the same sex, the children will have to deal not only with the separation and sexuality but with their feelings toward homosexuality.

Children can be pulled into a malicious tug of war. Custody battles and visitation rights can be very stressful. The children can become parental targets for unresolved and hostile feelings toward ex-spouses. The parents may not directly attack the child, but rather, may fight through the child. Often a parent will make condescending remarks to their child regarding their ex-spouse. The child realizes he/she is part of the other parent and often will take the criticism personally (Visher & Visher, 1982).

Whatever the age, children going back and forth between households may feel helpless and out of control.

The rules, values, etc. may be different and this can lead to confusion, frustration, and loyalty conflicts (Visher & Visher, 1982).

Rosenbaum (1977), Visher (1982) and Bustonoby (1982) indicate that the parent should give children permission to enjoy both places and all the different relationships. Adjustment of the children seems best when contact is maintained with both parents. The children need to develop a sense of security; they need to know they are loved in both households.

Children who are experiencing the various feelings described may act them out in many different ways. The following section will briefly describe the findings of various researchers in regards to behavioral clues.

Behavioral Clues of Maladjustment

Biller (1974), Herzog and Sudia (1973), Hetherington and Deur (1971), and Hethrington and Martin (1979) report that children whose families have been broken by parental death, divorce, or separation exhibit a greater degree of maladaptive behavior, particularly conduct disorders and socialized aggressive delinquency, than do youngsters from intact homes.

Capaldi and McRae (1979) state that stepchildren tend to deal with anxiety, conflict, changes and stress by using four coping mechanisms.

1. Acting out--temper tantrums.
2. Displacement--the child is angry at a parent for leaving but can not express the anger because time with them is limited so they express it towards the stepparent.
3. Withdrawal--quiet, nonverbal battle pitting self against the stepfamily and family.
4. Psychosomatic Illness--having headaches, flu, vomiting, etc. (pp. 81-82)

Kelly and Wallerstein (1977) found that children have age-related responses to divorce, separation and remarriage.

In pre-school children the stressful process evokes regressive behaviors, confusion, irritability and anxiety. They were unable to understand the complexity of the issues involved and their ramifications. Children in elementary school were found to be unable to use denial as effectively as were pre-school children. They were aware of the realities of their situations but had great trouble talking about issues that evoked intense feeling. In many of these children the stress resulted in avoidance, defensiveness and poised silence. (pp. 394-395)

Robert Allers (1981), a school psychologist in Grand Rapids, Michigan, reports that a student under this type of stress may display a number of behaviors. "They may be absentminded, inattentive, nervous, fatigued, moody, daydream, withdraw, their scholastic performance may decline, show acting out behavior, and various physical complaints that seem to have no physical base" (p. 24).

Each child, dependent upon his/her personality, learned mode of coping, environmental factors, and so forth, may act out his/her stress and anxiety in different manners. Perhaps the best clue to maladjustment

is if the observer, be it teacher, parent, or peer, observes some markable difference in the child's behavior. If there is a sudden change in his/her usual behavior or attitudinal pattern, some kind of intervention may be appropriate.

An adult's experience as a member of a stepfamily may be radically different than the past membership in a nuclear family. Outlined in the following paragraphs are the dynamics which may account for, or help explain these differences.

Adult Dynamics and Issues

One difference between most nuclear families and stepfamilies is that spouses in remarriage do not have a honeymoon, a period alone for learning and testing, for growing together and separately as individuals. They immediately inherit a ready-made family (Visher & Visher, 1982).

"Nuclear families pass through developmental stages from courting and marriage through birth and departure of children. Time is a luxury which allows for negotiating of each successive stage" (Barrows, 1981, p. 80).

In first marriages the couple has some time to experience one another, to create bonding and boundaries before children enter the picture. The marriage predates the children. Boundary establishment is important for if boundaries are blurred or roles confused, there is a

greater tendency for conflict. With stepfamilies, the possibility of conflict occurring as a result of indistinct boundaries is higher due to the lack of a relationship which predates children. The presence of children negates the possibility of the adults establishing boundaries and bonding.

Another issue may be the integration process. The new spouse often feels he/she is an outsider who has to slowly and painfully integrate him/herself into the established family system. The sad truth lies in the fact that some are never allowed to enter, they are always on the periphery, peering in.

The integration problem may be intensified if the couple, or stepparents, are entering the relationship with unrealistic expectations. If rose-colored glasses have been used, the couple probably assumes everyone will immediately and automatically love each other. When this does not happen, it can be devastating. A war may begin with the natural parent in the middle, with the stepparent and the children each wanting an ally. Marital tension builds and with time the breakdown of the system may occur. The stepparent senses the incredible odds against him/her and may opt to leave.

In addition to problems with integration and the lack of a honeymoon, the stepparents may experience loyalty conflicts. They often feel they are betraying their earlier marital bond by forming new bonds with a

new adult. Guilt is experienced as a result of their love for another person; they perhaps feel they have sought happiness and fulfillment at the expense of their children (Visher & Visher, 1978).

Visher and Visher (1978) encourage the couple to understand that loving a new partner is not a betrayal, but rather a different kind of love relationship, than exists between child and parent. The future ability of the children to make commitments, to enter healthy relationships with appropriate boundaries and roles, depends to some extent upon their perceptions and experiences of the bonding between parent and stepparent. A good model actually enhances the possibility that the children will have positive future marital relationships. The parent's love for the new spouse should not be a hindrance but should be viewed as an asset.

Another area which can be an issue is the financial dynamics, as noted earlier. Money can produce feelings of distrust and guardedness in steprelationships. Often information is not shared regarding salaries, bank accounts, investments, or other sources of income. "The couple keeps their 'own' accounts separate, paying for their 'own' children from their 'own' accounts" (Visher & Visher, 1978, p. 79). One spouse may buy expensive gifts for one set of children, while the other spouse is unable to do the same for the remaining children. Tempers flare and insecurity mounts, as well as feelings

of rejection. This climate and these circumstances are not conducive for the stepfamily's integration.

Role of Grandparents

Grandparents and stepgrandparents can be sources of neutrality and/or support, but often times they too take sides. They may refuse to continue contact with their married children, they may encourage a parent to refuse visitation to the non-custodial parent, or they may disown the family entirely. "Inheritance issues are raised and at times several generations become estranged and bitter" (Visher & Visher, 1978, p. 79).

Grandparents, whose daughter/son has died and the spouse remarried, often feel resentment toward the new marriage partner. Loyalty to their dead child may interfere with their ability to accept the remarriage. Sometimes the dead spouse is idealized by the grandparents, their grandchildren, and at times by the remaining spouse. In relationships of this nature the new spouse "remains isolated and apart from the family and no cohesive unit materializes" (Farmer & Prosen, 1982, p. 394).

Role of the School System

Visher and Visher (1979) describe how the school system, one of the major socialization forces in our society, reinforces the conflicts and hurt feelings in stepfamilies.

For example, school and primary age children are often given only enough materials to make gifts and cards for one mother or one father; invitations to school functions, report cards, PTA notices, are sent to only one set of parents; school forms have no space allotted for the names and telephone numbers of stepparents; often graduation ceremonies specify attendance by only one set of parents, due to limited space. (p. 396)

Which parent does the child include and which does he or she exclude? All of these societal responses or lack of responses contribute to the experience of the stepfamily as being abnormal.

As demonstrated, the stepfamily has a different structure than does the traditional nuclear family and is faced with many possible problem areas. Various factors play a role in adding to the stress of steprelationships other than just the members per se of the immediate stepfamily. The school and grandparents can intensify the adjustment problems. The internal factors and players as well as external factors and players can assist or detract from this new stepfamily's development into a healthy system.

Chapter 3

PROPOSALS FOR COUNSELORS

Introduction

Stepfamilies are becoming more and more prevalent in the United States. This study was undertaken to review the available literature on Stepfamilies with the intent of clarifying the differences in structure, dynamics, and intervention strategies between the traditional nuclear family and this new unit, the Stepfamily. Chapter 3 will examine prevention guidelines and intervention strategies that can assist the counselor in his/her approach to treatment with stepfamilies.

Since steprelationships are a relatively new phenomenon, few empirically based studies have been published. As stated in chapter 1, a limitation of the review is the lack of empirical data. The available literature covered the common problems associated with stepfamilies, the school system, role of grandparents, and related issues significant to the formation and maintenance of the stepfamily. Almost totally neglected were the topics of prevention and intervention strategies applicable specifically to working with stepfamilies. Knowledge of the problems and structure is necessary and helpful in understanding the stepfamily, but perhaps the next logical question posed by practitioners as well as the stepfamily members would be, "What do we do with

this awareness?" Clinicians then might ask, "how can we assist the stepfamily toward change?"

All of the foregoing strongly suggests the need for these questions to be addressed. Because of the lack of available empirical data, information has been pulled from personal and professional experiences and observations, as well as what little literature could be found, to present suggestions for prevention guidelines and intervention strategies.

Prevention Guidelines

Counselors not only need to know about various techniques of intervention once a problem has manifested itself, but about prevention strategies as well. Our society is becoming more and more wellness oriented, focusing on prevention rather than treatment. Many agencies within communities offer programs and/or workshops in which counselors are called upon to speak. Organizations are formed by the general public, such as parents without partners, where counselors may be asked to address problems particular to that group. These workshops, programs, and organizations often desire information which is of a preventative nature. The guidelines provided in this chapter can be of assistance to the counselor who is called upon to speak to a group of people interested in working with stepfamilies, to a group of stepparents, or to those couples about to enter into a steprelationship.

Three other reasons why a counselor could benefit from knowing these guidelines would be, first, an increase in counselor effectiveness due to a broader knowledge base. Second, a counselor working with a stepfamily who is having a problem in one area would be able to explain other areas as possible pitfalls. Third, if a client has seen a counselor for divorce counseling that same client may continue to either regularly or intermittently see the same counselor in regard to a future relationship.

In view of the four reasons provided in the previous paragraphs, it can be seen that the counselor would be able to be of assistance to the public, to prospective stepcouples, and to stepfamilies if he/she had a working knowledge of prevention guidelines. Communication is extremely important in any relationship and the beginning of a relationship might be the optimal time to begin taking risks, being honest, and developing trust. Often feelings, beliefs, and experiences are de-escalated just the discussion of them. Perhaps the divorce rate of "40% for all second marriages" (Bustanoby, 1981, p. 10) could be reduced if the stepcouples learned the skill of communication.

The following guidelines present some areas for discussion which could be used by the counselor with the couple to assist them with communication. The guidelines might be used as an inventory of their feelings and their

relationship, as well as increasing their communication skills.

1. BE FLEXIBLE. There is a lot of ambiguity and confusion brought about by an increased number in the family system. If you are a person who needs to be in control, rethink your decision to remarry, or your plan for coping with constant change.

2. DISCUSS YOUR ROLES AS YOU PERCEIVE THEM. Talk about how you see yourself in relation to each other and with your future stepchildren.

3. EXPLAIN YOUR ROLES TO THE STEPCHILDREN. Delineate how you will occupy the position of stepmother or stepfather.

4. ACCEPT THE FACT THAT YOU ARE NOT PART OF YOUR FUTURE SPOUSE'S PAST. Realize that you may be jealous and resent memories and discussion of the past, which may include the children. You may at times feel left out.

5. EXPECT AND ACCEPT THAT YOUR SPOUSE WILL PROBABLY SPEND SOME TIME COMMUNICATING WITH HIS/HER EX-SPOUSE. If there are children, such issues as visitation, birthdays, finances, etc. will need to be discussed on occasion.

6. EXPECT THAT THE CHILDREN MAY BE JEALOUS OF YOUR POSITION WITH THEIR PARENT. The children may feel like they are playing second fiddle and may take it out on you.

7. DISCUSS DISCIPLINE PRIOR TO THE MARRIAGE.

What are your expectations, who is going to be disciplined, and how? Define your limits.

8. AFTER MARRIAGE, DISCUSS THE RULES OF DISCIPLINE WITH THE CHILDREN. It is best to lay ground rules first; it is only fair. Children will know you are a team and they will respect you. In the beginning discipline should not be overdone.

9. DISCUSS FINANCES. Openly talk about your assets, debts, and payment schedules. Also discuss allowances if this is appropriate. Who is responsible for buying whom presents?

10. REALIZE THAT CHILDREN WILL MAKE COMPARISONS. You will be judged in relation to the natural parent. This is a natural process; do not become defensive.

11. IT IS NOT WRONG TO LOVE YOUR OWN CHILDREN MORE THAN YOUR STEPCHILDREN. Love is a process; it takes time to grow. It is natural that you cannot immediately feel for stepchildren what you feel for your own.

12. HATE AND ANGER ARE NATURAL. Our feelings are not stagnant; they fluctuate. Natural parents hate and become angry with their children at times. A stepparent is not superhuman.

13. GET TO KNOW THE STEPCHILDREN PRIOR TO THE MARRIAGE. Perhaps this may change your decision to marry. If you absolutely dislike kids it is best to know

before you tie the knot. It will give the kids and yourself time to adjust to one another.

14. DEVELOP GOOD LISTENING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS. This is an important ingredient in first marriages as well. With second marriages, because of the ambiguity, the increase in number, and general chaos, it is best to tune up these skills.

15. DEMAND RESPECT AND OBEDIENCE. Letting children walk all over you is a big mistake. Even if they dislike you, they must learn you are a person in your own right who is deserving of respect. It is scary for a child to be more powerful than his/her parent or stepparent. Children in fact, feel more comfortable with limits and discipline.

16. DON'T FEEL GUILTY. Do not accept a guilt trip from your kids regarding your remarriage or your choice of partner, or if your kids are not living with you but your stepchildren are, or if you take trips alone without the children. Guilt is a very non-productive, neurotic defense mechanism.

17. TAKE A HONEYMOON ALONE IF POSSIBLE. You are a couple first. As a couple you need time alone. Frequent vacations or weekends alone might be therapeutic.

18. REALIZE RELATIONSHIPS TAKE TIME. Rosenbaum (1977) states that two years is the usual time necessary for an adjustment.

Often prevention is overlooked or it is attempted but is only partially successful. Despite whatever attempts are made, treatment after the fact, after a problem has surfaced becomes necessary. For many there is no treatment, the stepfamilies flounder along and sooner or later the relationship fails. The next section examines intervention strategies for counselors working with steprelationships in which a problem has surfaced and treatment is sought.

Intervention Strategies

Regardless of the preventive measures taken and the good intentions of the family, some stepfamilies will end up seeking therapy. Since the traditional nuclear family and the stepfamily have different experiences, dynamics, and structures, it would also seem logical that there would be some differences in intervention strategies. To be effective, the clinician needs to know what techniques to employ with a particular clientele. Factors such as the readiness of the family, their resources, and at what point in time therapy is sought, also determine the degree of success. The following paragraphs examine methods of intervention. The controllable factors in therapy are the knowledge and expertise of the counselor, as well as the methods utilized.

In order to be an effective interventionist, the counselor might do well to understand the developmental

stages of a stepfamily since some of the strategies employed are connected with a particular stage. The following section presents a diagram and a brief explanation of the developmental stages of a stepfamily. Issues that arise in the initial interview will be discussed after developmental stages. The last section will outline Systems Approach, the theoretical base, as well as techniques and methods contained within this approach.

Developmental Stages

The traditional nuclear family has four developmental stages (Visher, 1982). They are as follows: (1) Marriage, (2) Birth of Children, (3) Individuation of Family Members, and (4) Integration of Loss. When a counselor sees a particular client, he/she may take into consideration the client's phase of life. Perhaps a client has just had his/her youngest son or daughter leave home to go to college, in which case the counselor would probably report the client was in stage four, Integration of Loss. Throughout the therapy the counselor, depending upon other situational and symptomatic factors, would probably incorporate methods of treatment related to the "empty nest syndrome" (Sheely, 1974). When a counselor is seeing a stepfamily member or whole family, the same principle is in effect. The stage of development may make a difference in terms of the type of technique, or method of treatment.

The developmental stages of a stepfamily are more complex than the stages of the traditional nuclear family. The following is a visual diagram of the six stages, including four subcategories and eight steps of mourning, of the stepfamily:

1. Marriage
2. Birth of Children
3. Divorce
 - A. Recovery from Loss; entering into new relationships
 1. Eight stages of Mourning
 - a. Denial
 - b. Grief
 - c. Panic
 - d. Righteous Questioning
 - e. Anger
 - f. Melancoly
 - g. Gradual Return to Normalcy
 - h. Acceptance of Loss
 - B. Conceptualization and Planning of New Marriage or Relationships
 - C. Reconstitution of the Family
 - D. Integration and Acceptance of the Steprelationship
4. Individuation of Family Members
5. Departure of Children
6. Integration of Loss

The first two stages are the same as the traditional family, beginning with Marriage and the Birth of the Children (Visher, 1982). For the stepfamily the third stage would be Divorce rather than Individuation of Family Members. Derdyn, Ranson, and Schlesinger (1979) break this phase down into four subcategories by first

using the category Recovery from Loss. Both partners will have to successfully resolve their feelings of loss before they can make a healthy commitment to another relationship. Rosenbaum (1977) indicates that a complete recovery from the loss is possible only if the partners and children experience feelings, much as a person mourning the death of a loved one. There are eight steps involved in this process. The first is Denial of the reality of the situation. The child or ex-spouse may have such intense feelings surrounding the divorce that the only way for them to keep their sanity is to employ the defense mechanism of denial. With denial the person refuses to acknowledge a feeling or experience into their awareness (Shaffer & Shoben, 1956).

The next stage the person may experience is Grief. Once their egos are strong enough to allow the reality to filter in, they may feel a sense of mourning. The person would benefit most by allowing these feelings to surface, to give in to the sadness, and to allow the tears to fall (Visher, 1982). If these emotions are suppressed, they will no doubt surface in another area or time within a person's life. These suppressed feelings could take many forms, such as depression, guilt, psychosomatic illnesses, or any of the other maladjustive behaviors (Shaffer & Shoben, 1956). If guilt were the chosen defense mechanism, the adult or child might be so consumed that a severe depression is experienced (Visher,

1982). The child may even attempt to unconsciously punish him/herself to relieve their conscience.

The third step of mourning, after grief and denial, is that of Panic. Either adult or child(ren) may wonder what the future holds. The past may have been unpleasant, the relationship may have been unhealthy, but it provided a sense of security. The future is an unknown, with lots of uncertainties.

The step in recovery, Righteous Questioning, follows panic. The question of, Why me God? arises frequently. All involved may wonder why they are chosen to go through this experience; were they being punished for some action of theirs in the past?

After this questioning, feelings of anger may arise. As with feelings of grief, it is better to express the anger than to gunnysac it. If it is bottled up, it may surface in a disguised form; perhaps depression will result, or even violent behavior (if severe enough) (Visher, 1982). In either case, both are nonproductive and self-destructive adjustment behaviors.

Feelings of sadness or a sense of Melancholy is the next step of mourning which may be experienced after anger. During this step, memories surface, both of the good times and of the bad times. It is the beginning of saying goodbye to that period of time and that relationship, a last glance at what was, before moving on to what may be.

Gradually there is a return to Normalcy, during which interests are rekindled in things and people. The person has focused on him/herself long enough and is getting ready to center his/her attention on something or someone else besides "self".

The last of the eight steps of mourning is the total Acceptance of the Loss as a Life Experience. The person fully understands and accepts that a part of him/her self has been lost that will never be regained, that he/she gave to another something which will never be returned.

According to Derdyn, Ranson, and Schlesinger (1979), after moving through the various steps of mourning, the individual can move beyond Divorce and go on the Conceptualization and Planning for a New Healthy Relationship or Marriage, then the Reconstitution of the Family, and finally the Integration and Acceptance of the Steprelationship. If a person has not completed the eight steps of mourning, the acceptance and integration of the steprelationship is probably superficial (Visher, 1982). The feelings of anger and sadness which were not expressed may come forth months later and be disruptive to the integration process of the stepfamily.

After the Integration and Acceptance of the Steprelationship, the stepfamily developmental stages parallel those of the nuclear family. According to Visher (1982), the next stage is the Individuation of

Family Members, then the Departure of the Children, followed by the Integration of the Loss.

All of the developmental stages mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs must be experienced at some point in time to facilitate a healthy adjustment. If an individual is fixated or has skipped a particular stage, he/she will not be able to move through and resolve successive stages. With an understanding of the developmental stages of a stepfamily and of some of the consequences should these stages be bypassed, the counselor has a better sense of the direction he/she may need to go with the stepfamily.

The initial interview is an appropriate time in which the counselor can begin to assess the dynamics of the family, as well as the time when the family will be assessing the counselor. The following section discusses some of the issues and dynamics present in the initial interview.

The Initial Interview

The first visit with a family should not be taken lightly by the counselor (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). The family system, like a juvenile relating to an adult, will "test" the therapist. The question posed is "who is the strongest?" The family, just like the child, does this out of insecurity. They need and want discipline, for with it they feel safe. It is a challenge which the therapist must win (Bowen, 1960). With feelings of

security, the family can begin to trust the counselor. They will believe the counselor is in control and can handle their problems. Belief and trust in the counselor may lower the stepfamily's resistance. Like individuals, families have ambivalent feelings about change. It is usually easier to remain the same, continue the status quo, no matter how unproductive or neurotic the behavior (Satir, 1967). The counselor must have patience as well as control, realizing that ambivalence is present, and that change is a slow process that is painful, and is accomplished over time.

The counselor needs to remember that trust is not only an issue between him/herself and the family, but between family members as well. The initial interview may not be the time to allow or expect the family members to honestly vent in an uncontrollable fashion (Visher, 1982). Many times families enter therapy only after they have reached a crisis and feelings may be volatile. Asking or allowing them to vent upon their anger may only increase the distance between them and produce irreparable damage. As therapy progresses and the family members learn they can trust one another with their feelings, then open and honest communication is essential to therapeutic progress.

In addition to the counselor being aware of the power play and the trust issues, he/she would want to begin assessing family and individual functioning

(Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Questions which the counselor may be wanting to ask him/herself are: Is the presenting difficulty a family problem? Does the family blame the problems on one family member and relinquish any responsibility in the illness or behavior of that family member? Are all the members in the same developmental stage or is there a variation? Are the members superficially accepting the integration of the steprelationship? Have all the members mourned their previous loss? The answers to these questions will provide some insight for the therapist in his/her formulation of a treatment plan or goal.

Knowledge and utilization of Systems Theory can also provide the counselor in his/her formulation of a treatment plan. With a theoretical base, the counselor will be provided with some direction to go once some of the answers to the questions posed in the foregoing paragraphs have been answered.

Systems Approach

Theoretical Base. In chapter 2 systems theory was defined; therefore, this section will present only a brief review. In the past, practitioners isolated a particular patient as the problem (Guerin, 1976). Treatment was focused entirely upon that member of the family with the belief that if his/her behavior would change, everyone else would be fine. This isolated family member has been labelled as the "identified patient or scapegoat" (Bowen,

1960). Just as the word scapegoat implies, one member takes the blame for the family dysfunction. Contemporary therapists are now realizing that all members of the family contribute to the system's malfunctioning or well being. Anderson and Carter (1975) report that the family is a system, that it is an organized whole made up of components that interact in a way distinct from family members' interaction with other entities, and which endures over some period of time. The assumption is that all the components within the whole interact with each other, and that there cannot be a whole unless each component contributes to the existence of the whole. Plainly put, all members play a role and contribute to the malfunctioning or breakdown of the family unit. The counselor is to assess the role or contribution of each of the family members.

The questions in the initial interview which were discussed in the foregoing section could assist the counselor with this assessment. There are techniques and tools which can be utilized after the initial interview which can provide some clarity for the counselor into the way the family moves or functions, and their roles.

Techniques and Methods. One technique which may assist the counselor in gathering concrete information about the family members and their functioning, is with the use of a genogram. According to Geurin and Pendagast

(1976), the genogram presents a structural diagram of a family's three-generational relationship system. Symbols are used in a genogram to illustrate the relationships. The symbols, together with factual data, are used to show the relationships and positions for each family member. Names, ages, dates of marriages, deaths, divorces, births, the family's physical location, frequency and type of contact, type of relationship (either open or closed) are the contents or factual data contained in the genogram. These facts will help the counselor to form a picture of the family characteristics (Guerin & Pendagast, 1976).

Another technique which may be used to assist the counselor in gaining an understanding of the individual family members' perceptions of their roles and relationships is that of "sculpting." This technique involves a process whereby a person arranges people who represent his/her family in a tableau that shows their emotional relationship to each other (Carter & Orfanidis, 1979). In sculpting, each individual is asked to arrange the family members in relation to themselves. How they design their various family members' facial expressions, gestures, postures, and distances are all keys to the individual's relationship with the other family members. Through this method it can become clear how each individual is emotionally caught in the family system, and his/her characteristic patterns for trying to cope

with his/her position (Carter & Orfanidis, 1976). Upon completion of this task, the family members can be asked how they would like things to be. Sculpting can be done early in therapy and then again prior to discharge, as these portraits may change as therapy progresses, reflecting changes in perceptions of individual members regarding the family functioning, and/or the individual's comfort level.

As a result of sculpting, the therapist might observe a triangulation among family members. A triangle has been described by Bowen (1976) as follows: it is a three-person emotional configuration ". . . in constant motion with moves that operate automatically like emotional reflexes, and that are so predictable that one can precisely predict the next move in the system" (p. 392). According to Minuchin and Fishman (1981), triangulation is a circular, continuous process of mutual affecting and reinforcing, which tends to maintain a fixed pattern. An example by Bowen (1976) is that of the father-mother-child triangle, ". . . the father has the outside position, is called weak, passive, and distant--leaving the conflict between mother and child. The mother--often called aggressive, dominating, and castrating--wins over the child" (p. 76).

All families have triangles; the pertinent question is whether or not they are healthy. If the triangle or relationship is dysfunctional, it may be

appropriate for the counselor to "detriangulate". According to Carter and Orfanidis (1976), detriangling involves shifting the motion of the triangle. This changing or shifting within the relationship will create an unbalance. The equilibrium must be upset if the members' way of functioning is to change. An example of detriangling is, if a father and son reinforce and rescue each other at the expense of the stepmother, the therapist might try to create a relationship or commonality between son and mother. Projects involving the mother and son might be given as a homework assignment.

Through the use of the genogram the family members' ways of relating are observable. A triangle is one type of relationship which may manifest itself. One form of a triangle might be that of the vertical split wherein parent and child band together against the stepparent (Visher, 1982). The parents need to be a team before they are parents so that type of split will not be productive. With a strong bond there is hope of maintaining a healthy stepfamily, without it the chances are diminished. If the counselor perceives this vertical split, Visher (1982) advises that the couple should first be seen without the children. If the children perceive a breakdown, they may try and manipulate or plan one against the other. If the family is in a crisis situation,

even though a vertical split is present, it may be best to see them all together, concurrently with couple therapy.

Once the couple has formed a team, the next step in therapy is to bring about the integration of the children. An approach to assist them in this process is that of asking the family to form new traditions and memories (Visher, 1982). Rather than dwell on the past, the therapist can encourage the family to focus on the present, the here and now.

In addition to forming memories and values, another strategy to assist the stepfamily with their integration is to bring about the establishment of rules (Visher, 1982). All members will feel heard, and know they have a voice in the decision-making process. If all have a voice and all agree to the rules, there will be less deviant, undermining behavior.

When discussing the rules, the counselor needs to remember that often children in a steprelationship do not believe that their family is a unit. They still believe their family is what was the old traditional nuclear family. They resent the therapist using the term "family" so Visher (1982) suggests the counselor use the word "household." Household is a neutral term which elicits a less negative emotional response. An example of the use of the term "household" might be to ask the question, what are the rules of this household, vs. what are the rules of this family.

Often the sensitivity to verbiage, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, is a result of the child's incomplete mourning and/or acceptance of the steprelationship. The child has not emotionally moved on from past relationships. He/she has never totally worked through the anger or grief. Before they can successfully recover from loss and fully enter into a new, healthy relationship, they must mourn their previous loss. If mourning is the issue, individual therapy might be used concurrently with family therapy. If a person's self concept is very low, individual therapy is the best method, at least initially, according to Visher (1982). (Some therapists will disagree with the Vishers, and believe that it is very important for all members to be seen all the time no matter what the situation or the level of ego development.) If the person does have a fragile self-concept or ego, he/she may not be able to handle the stress of encountering the "entire" system and his/her own personal feelings as well. If it is appropriate, Visher (1982) indicates that the parent or spouse, if willing, might be included in a therapy session.

Perhaps another reason why the child has not moved beyond his/her past relationships is because he/she carries feelings of guilt. These feelings of guilt may be a result of the child's feeling a sense of responsibility for the divorce; somehow the child has

come to believe he/she directly caused the divorce. Visher (1982) suggests allowing them this feeling for it is analogous to a sense of control. The children have felt they had "power" to play a role in the divorce. Children, as well as adults, need a sense of control or mastery. During such a painful, chaotic, and ambiguous time, this guilt may give them a sense of control, their only sense of control. Should this be eliminated prematurely, they may become depressed and experience feelings of helplessness. The children might benefit from a support group with their peers who have or are experiencing similar difficulties. They may feel lonely and "different."

This chapter has provided some guidelines for prevention as well as a small, selected number of intervention strategies. These guidelines and strategies are minimal and incomplete at best, because there is little available literature providing suggestions for therapists working with stepfamilies. Some of the techniques and methods were drawn from related works, such as Family Therapy, and Systems Theory, as those who are writing in regard to stepfamilies do draw heavily from these concepts and treatment modalities. Since stepfamilies are a relatively new subject for study, hopefully with time there will be more publications, including empirical data, pertaining to treatment and prevention techniques.

Chapter 4

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study dealt with the differences between the traditional nuclear family and the stepfamily. The definition and structural differences in the stepfamily were delineated. Common problems associated with steprelationships were outlined. The roles grandparents and school systems can play in terms of the acceptance and integration of the stepfamily were explored. Dynamics and issues associated with the adult members and a child's perspective of a steprelationship were examined, as well as clues which suggest a child's maladjustment to the stepfamily. Prevention guidelines for counselors dealing with prospective stepparents were provided, which, if followed, might assist the stepparents in preventing some difficulties to which steprelationships are particularly vulnerable. Following the prevention guidelines, a section was devoted to intervention strategies which counselors might employ with stepfamilies who have sought professional assistance.

Conclusions

This review of the literature basically validated that stepfamilies are different than traditional nuclear families. Not all issues that arise in steprelationships are distinct from those of biological relationship, but

the issues and dynamics may be more intense. Ambiguity of roles and of boundaries, as well as the complexity of steprelationships resulting from the increase in the number of family members, plays a large role in the disorganization and chaotic atmosphere characteristic of most stepfamilies. Utilization of prevention guideline procedures for counselors working with stepfamilies can be less expensive emotionally and financially than treatment, this writer believes. According to the literature and in this writer's opinion, the best approach once therapy is sought is Systems Theory. Some of the better techniques drawn from this concept are sculpting, triangulation, and the use of a genogram.

Recommendations

In the last few years, there has been an increase in the amount of literature available on stepfamilies, indicating that the pattern of an American institution, the family, is changing. Unfortunately, much of the material which was found dealt only with the identification of the problems associated with steprelationships. The literature stopped short of providing empirical data in regard to the presence of these problems, as well as of offering therapeutic suggestions for counselors once therapy was sought.

On the basis of the study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. There should be more research done validating the presence of the problems in steprelationships.

2. Many more effective intervention strategies pertaining to steprelationships should be identified.

3. The concept of wellness, that is prevention guidelines, should be given more attention and importance in the literature.

4. There needs to be a documented, indepth study of the differences between the structural and developmental stages of a stepfamily and the traditional nuclear family.

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