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A review of the literature on remarried families: Three key structural components of the remarried family phenomena

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A review of the literature on remarried families: Three key structural components of the remarried family phenomena

Abstract

It is estimated that 60% of all first marriages in the United States end in divorce (Pasley, Dollahite & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993). Worthington & Hong (1992) suggested that 75-80% of all divorced persons remarry, and that remarried families are the fastest growing type of family in the United States. One out of five marriages is a remarriage for one or both spouses (Ganong & Coleman, 1989). Visher and Visher (1982) identified a trend indicating that 45 % of families would be single-parent or remarried families by 1990. These statistics are important because they represent a significant number of the families within the United States.

**A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON REMARRIED FAMILIES: THREE
KEY STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS OF THE REMARRIED FAMILY
PHENOMENA**

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Introduction

It is estimated that 60% of all first marriages in the United States end in divorce (Pasley, Dollahite & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993). Worthington & Hong (1992) suggested that 75-80% of all divorced persons remarry, and that remarried families are the fastest growing type of family in the United States. One out of five marriages is a remarriage for one or both spouses (Ganong & Coleman, 1989). Visher and Visher (1982) identified a trend indicating that 45% of families would be single-parent or remarried families by 1990. These statistics are important because they represent a significant number of the families within the United States.

On the basis of the increasing divorce and remarriage statistics, Walsh (1992) called attention to the fact that remarried families were quickly becoming a dominant family structure within our society, signaling a significant shift away from the more familiar intact first marriage family structure. A variety of expressions describing the change in family framework paralleled the transfiguration of the nuclear family structure. Terms such as remarried family, step family, blended family, restructured family, reconstituted family, and merged family are just a few used to describe this alternative family form (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Walsh, 1992).

The remarried family has numerous unique needs and characteristics which differ significantly from those of nuclear two-parent

households, single-parent households (never married), single-parent households resulting from death, and single-parent households following a divorce. Uniquenesses of the remarried family include: a) family members bringing separate family histories, b) an existing parent-child bond from the previous marriage, c) biological parents with shared parenting responsibilities, d) children who may live amongst two separate households, and e) a stepparent and stepchild relationship with no legal connections (Visher & Visher, 1982). Each of these unique attributes adds to the complexity of the remarried family way of life.

The social and cultural expectations of biological nuclear families cannot be applied to the remarried family structure, because of incomparable differences in the structure and rules of the two family forms (Kelley, 1995). Despite their incomparability, Mills (1984) believed that most stepfamilies, as well as most practitioners, based their notions of anticipated stepfamily roles on models of biological nuclear family expectations. He stated that such inaccurate comparisons could lead to problematic cycles of family interaction and could potentially block the development of real intimacy between remarried family members.

Lewis, as cited in Visher & Visher (1979), and Fitzpatrick, Smith & Williamson (1992), concluded that insufficient knowledge of remarried family issues impede a family worker's ability to correctly recognize and respond to their issues. Since a high percentage of client contacts will

likely include individuals who are in some way connected with remarried family situations, it is essential for clinicians to develop an understanding of the current clinical and empirical remarried family literature (Pasley et al., 1993). A clear understanding of key elements of structure, roles, and processes of the remarried family is necessary in order to effectively counsel with this population. These elements are prominent themes within remarried family literature (Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Papernow, 1980 ; Visher & Visher, 1979, 1988). They provide a manner in which to organize the structural aspects of the remarried family system.

The purpose of this paper is to explore three key components of the remarried family phenomenon: a) the permeability of boundaries, b) the parent-child bond that predates the marital bond, and c) the revision of traditional gender roles.

Definitions

For the purpose of this paper, the following definitions will apply:

Remarriage- Families formed as a result of a marriage between two partners, at least one of whom has been married previously, and includes at least one child who was born to one of the partners before the remarriage (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988).

Boundaries- The written and unwritten rules which govern interactions and communication within the family unit and between this unit and outsiders (Pasley, 1987).

Permeable Boundaries- The openness of communication and interactions, or the flow of people in and out of the system (Pasley, 1987).

Boundary Ambiguity- A lack of clarity or misalignment of boundaries within a family (Pasley, 1987).

Pre-existing Parent-Child Bond- The existing biological and emotional relationship between a parent and a child prior to the parent's remarriage (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988).

"Traditional" Gender Roles- The notion that women should be the chief nurturers and housekeepers, and men should be the chief breadwinners and disciplinarians (Kelley, 1995).

"Changing" Gender Roles- A revision of the "traditional" gender roles, requiring flexibility in the manner in which they are carried out (Kelley, 1995).

Boundary Permeability

One factor that continuously influences the structure of the remarried family is the permeability of its boundaries (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1989; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Papernow, 1980; Pasley, 1987; Visher & Visher, 1979, 1980). All families are governed by the rules or boundaries they develop, as defined above. Boundaries, therefore, impinge upon a primary task of every family, which is the integration of its members in a way that ensures each individual's needs, as well as those of the family unit, are met.

The process of adjustment and integration of family members is affected by the degree of boundary permeability present within the specific family system (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1989). Families characterized by very rigid boundaries allow little freedom for members to receive new information, entertain differences of opinion or behavior, or to change the amount of, the nature of, or contact with, the outside. Families characterized as having permeable boundaries allow members great openness to new information, behaviors and opinions, as well as openness to outside persons and influences. Families at either end of the spectrum between highly rigid and highly permeable boundaries are at risk of serious dysfunctionality among their members (Lewis, Beavers, Gossett, & Phillips 1976).

Remarried families have been found to have a difficult time in designating boundaries (Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1979, 1988), even though the literature has indicated that boundary permeability is a prominent component within a remarried family structure. For instance, Pasley (1987) found that unclear boundaries and the need for permeability are more common in remarriages than in first family marriages.

There is general agreement in the research that boundaries cannot exist as they did in first family marriages (Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Pasley, 1987; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989; Visher &

Visher, 1979, 1988). Numerous reasons exist for the presence of permeable boundaries within remarried families. Some reasons include: connections with a former spouse, visitations with children, connections with extended family members, and relationships with friends from the first marriage (Kelley, 1995). The remarried family system must generally allow the children to move both in and out of the new family system (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988), a fact which makes permeable boundaries necessary. Also, numerous writers discussed the fact that remarried families must contend with both physical and psychological boundary issues. These families must learn to negotiate issues of time, space, frequency of visitations, and security within the family relationships (Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Pasley, 1987; Visher & Visher, 1979, 1988). In short, the remarried family must develop a sense of wholeness while allowing the family structure to expand and contract its boundaries as needed (Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Pasley, 1987; Visher & Visher, 1979, 1988).

Pasley's (1987) investigation of boundary issues within remarried families, specifically in the area of boundary ambiguity, was one of the few empirical studies found in the review of the literature. Her research was frequently cited by other researchers. Her investigation included a sample taken from a larger project and included 587 couples who applied for marriage license applications in Spokane County, Washington. She looked

at factors that influenced family boundaries and that were most frequently identified in the remarried family literature. These factors included; family context (ie., background, family style, community involvement), time or stage (ie., the point in the family life cycle at which the divorce took place), and the length of transition between marriages.

Pasley (1987) found that remarried families who had ambiguous boundaries consisted of couples who neither shared the same perceptions regarding psychological family membership nor reported the same children physically residing inside and outside of the home. She additionally found that remarriages with common children only were almost uniformly unambiguous. In contrast, she discovered that remarriages consisting of husband, wife, and the husband's children were high in boundary ambiguity. She attributed this element to the fact that in most cases the husband's children do not live in the remarried household and, therefore, the wife excludes them from her family definition. Pasley's study suggested that demographic characteristics (ie., income level, socioeconomic status, length of marriage, prior marital experience, manner in which the prior marriage terminated, number of children in the household, and presence or absence of adolescents in the household) do not distinguish couples in terms of the likelihood of boundary ambiguity.

Pasley's (1987) study resulted in the following conclusions. Both physical and psychological indicators are a part of the remarried life.

Remarried couples with only common children have little basis for ambiguous boundaries, while those families with common children by the husband's former marriage are likely to have perceptual problems with regarding whether those children are in or out of the family. It is likely that the lack of contact, or an inconsistent pattern of contact, between a father and his nonresidential children influences perceptions of the child as not being a member of the family. Pasley recognized a need in the literature for additional investigation regarding the adjustment and integration experiences of stepmother families, with the wife's children.

The remarried family must continually manage the structural element of boundary permeability. Boundaries remain both elaborate and complex in nature, but lack of clarity and consistency often results in confusion surrounding boundary maintenance issues. Difficulties and differences around boundary issues can potentially occur at any time. Negotiation and flexibility are essential when dealing with boundary maintenance issues including: custody, special occasions, holidays, rights, and traditions (Kelley, 1995; Visher & Visher, 1988). Walsh (1992) suggested that amiable relations between the remarried family and the non-custodial parent resulted in less emotionality around the exit and entry issue as children moved back and forth between their parents' homes.

The literature reviewed in this section indicated the importance of boundary permeability within remarried families. The potential for

boundary ambiguity, as a result of boundary permeability strains, is an issue for these families, and it is one that may become evident within a counseling environment.

Pre-existing Parent-Child Bond

A second factor that impacts the structure of a remarried family is the pre-existing parent-child bond (Hetherington, 1987; Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Visher & Visher, 1979), a connection which impacts various relationships within and outside of the remarried family system. In addition to Hetherington (1987), Kelley (1995); McGoldrick & Carter (1988); and Visher & Visher (1979); reported that the parent-child bond influenced family stability, and that it had the potential to impact the entire remarried family structure for several years or in some cases perhaps permanently.

Kelly (1995) believed that the management of the parent-child relationship which predates the remarriage is a central and often problematic issue. The parent-child relationship includes a shared history with similar values and represents a host of unresolved emotions symbolizing past attachments to the ex-spouse and parent along unresolved relationship issues (Hetherington, 1987; Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Visher & Visher, 1979).

The parent making a commitment to a new relationship often feels as if he/she is betraying his/her children from a previous marriage (Visher &

Visher, 1979). Likewise, children may also view the remarriage of a parent as a betrayal to the parent-child relationship and to the child's other biological parent (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988). In addition, a child may feel a sense of displacement when a parent remarries because he/she was the parent's confidant after the divorce (Kelley, 1995). Feelings of jealousy and rivalry are often impossible to avoid (Kelley, 1995; Visher & Visher, 1979). In short, the parent-child bond represents a built-in alliance and coalition that does not have an overriding loyalty to the larger family unit (Kelley, 1995).

Hetherington's (1987) longitudinal study examined family functioning and parent-child relations over a six year period following a divorce. Information was collected two months, one year, two years and six years following divorces using interviews, tests, and home observations. Her investigation included both mother custody families and mother custody remarried families.

Hetherington (1987) concluded that the remarried relationship, along with various types of support from spouses, affected the parenting behavior and adjustment of the parent-child relationship. Conversely, Hetherington found that marital satisfaction was related to the amount of family conflict and behavior problems, especially with daughters. She concluded that disengaged parenting was a common type of parenting with stepfathers and stepdaughters, and this increased over time. She discovered

that boys gradually adapted more fully to the stepparent relationship than did girls. Hetherington noted that stepfathers typically established a warm and supportive relationship with stepsons and gradually moved into an authoritative role, whereas they had difficulty in gaining acceptance from stepdaughters by being both warm and supportive.

Remarriage involves a major transition requiring that both parent and child adapt. The remarried family research suggested several obstacles or issues that encompassed the parent-child bond and also offered suggestions that could help to ease the transformation of this pre-existing parent-child bond.

The following issues and obstacles are among the most frequently found in the review of the literature. According to Kelley (1995), and Visher & Visher (1979), personal and physical space are important issues because it is essential that family members not be pressured to feel too close too soon. Walsh (1992) suggested that family members must not feel obligated to instantly love one another. Developing an awareness that love among family members does not occur instantaneously may be a primary task early on in the life of a remarried family. Negotiation is also an essential component when dealing with the existing coalitions and alliances. Developing new family traditions may assist in helping the differences disappear. It is essential for the couple to develop a strong marital relationship without the child feeling replaced (Kelley, 1995; Visher &

Visher, 1979). The pre-existing cohesion between the parent and child produces a tendency for the stepparent to compete for his/her spouse's relationship (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988). There are continued issues regarding the balance of time, and the fairness of relationships (Visher & Visher, 1979). These issues of time and fairness can become entangled and complicated, and infringe upon the functioning of the family for several years into the new marriage (Hetherington, 1987).

The literature has identified the parent-child bond as one of the major structural difficulties experienced within a remarried family system. However, this bond can also be helpful. Visher & Visher (1979) identified that a strong parent-child bond could assist in protecting the child from the losses that occurred as a result of the divorce. They also believed that the bond provided a child with a positive model for future relationships including a potential future marital relationship.

Revision of Gender Roles

Revised gender roles is a third structural component that exists within remarried families. As was true for boundary permeability and the parent-child bond the literature reflected a need for flexibility with regard to gender roles in order to ease the transition into the remarried way of life (Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1988). The environment within the remarried family structure discussed in regard to permeability of boundaries is such that flexibility is also needed in

determining gender roles and expectations appropriate to meet the needs of the particular remarried family system. The "traditional" gender roles that tend to operate within first married intact families must also experience a shift within the remarried family structure in order for effective family functioning to occur. This is a structural issue that is prevalent in the early years of remarriage, but it is also a characteristic of later remarried families (Papernow, 1980).

Several researchers have found that remarried families function more effectively if the gender roles are not as clearly defined as they were in first-family marriages (Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1988). According to Kelley, rigidly applied gender roles are no longer applicable for many families, and they are especially maladaptive within remarried families. Great difficulties are likely to occur when an attempt is made to follow "traditional" gender roles within a remarried family system. McGoldrick & Carter believe that difficulties originate from the fact that members of a remarried family are considered relative strangers to new family members. Another conflicting factor that they further identified is that frequently finances include sources of income that are not in the husband's power to generate (ie., alimony, child support, earnings from ex-spouse or current wife) (Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988).

Kelley (1995) observed that role strain increases for most families as

role definitions became less clear. She believes that role strain increases in complexity within remarried families as both parents take on more responsibilities. A remarried parent's roles can be described as stressful because in the process of the remarriage, the parents experienced both a loss and a gain in their role expectations (Kelley, 1995; Visher & Visher, 1979). Kelley identified several potential gains and losses experienced in the lives of remarried parents. These potential losses and gains include; the loss of the role of being a full-time parent and a spouse, the gain of a special parenting relationship often on a more conscious and deliberate level because of a custody loss, and the gain of a special stepparenting role with the opportunity to develop new relationships and new rules.

The literature indicates that long-standing emotional struggles with regard to roles were characteristic of remarried families, even in their later years of remarriage (Papernow, 1980). Walsh (1992) pointed out that a remarriage joins two people who have received two different types of gender role definitions. Kaplan & Hennon (1992) believe that gender roles are developed in the initial first family marriage and are carried over into the remarriage. The gender roles within a remarried family can be described as complex. Often times, there is an incongruence between how remarried parents think they should feel and act, and how they actually feel (Kelley, 1995; Whitsett & Land, 1992). Remarried parents (especially women) are at a greater risk for role strain because of the societal

expectations, and also because of their own individual expectations of a prescribed role (Kelley, 1995; Whitsett & Land, 1992). Walsh (1992) wrote that a remarried family consists of roles that may imply contradictory functions, lack specific norms, and follow inconsistent cultural expectations.

Whitsett & Land (1992) observed that high self-esteem and high self-efficacy were positively associated with lower role strain and role conflict. Kelley (1995) found that role strain could lead to decreased marital satisfaction, and that role strain decreased over time as couples were married longer. Whitsett & Land (1992) also found that role strain varied inversely with marital satisfaction.

The remarried family research offers hope and suggestions for easing the transition of gender-role expectations. Kelley (1995) reported several findings from her study of strengths in remarried families who were functioning well. According to Kelley's study, remarried couples can develop flexibility and equality by sharing tasks including supporting the family, household duties, and shared chores. She discovered that most remarried couples maintained full-time employment in jobs outside of the home, and were in positions having an equal professional status. Kelley concluded that it is essential that both parents in the remarried couple take on the nurturing and provider roles in order for the family to function effectively.

Summary

Divorce and the institution of remarriage have become common occurrences within today's society. Among the numerous ways in which remarried families are different from first-married families is with respect to their structural components. Three of these structural components include: boundary permeability, the pre-existing parent-child bond that predates the marital relationship, and a revision of "traditional" gender roles. This research paper presented a review of the clinical and empirical literature with an emphasis upon these three structural components.

The literature concludes that remarried families need more permeable boundaries in comparison to those needed by first-married intact families (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Pasley, 1987; Visher & Visher, 1979, 1988). This issue of flexibility relates to the people who must move in and out of the remarried family system. A lack of congruence in perceptions of persons in the family and outside of the family regarding membership may potentially lead to boundary ambiguity.

The literature determined that remarried family systems include a pre-existing parent-child bond (Hetherington, 1987; Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Visher & Visher, 1979). This bond symbolizes the past and present attachments from the first marriage for both the parent and the child. This parent-child bond must experience a readjustment within the remarried family structure in

order for the system to function effectively.

The literature strongly supported the concept that the remarried family system operates more productively if the gender roles are not as clearly defined as in first-family marriages (Kelley, 1995; McGoldrick & Carter, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1988). Remarried family members may experience conflict with the transition of gender roles because of the incongruence between the roles they held prior to the remarriage. Flexibility and negotiation are key components within this transitional process.

These three structural components of remarried families pose numerous implications with regard to the counseling environment. Counseling practitioners need to recognize and assist remarried family members in dealing with the numerous loss issues that are associated with the process of divorce and remarriage. The remarried family symbolizes the formation of several newly established relationships. These relationships are dramatically different from those which exist in first-marriage families. The counselor needs to maintain an awareness of the numerous transitions that the members of a remarried family may experience. There are numerous stressors that accompany these transitional processes. There is a definite need for an understanding of the remarried family developmental processes as they are unique to this family form and cannot be compared with first married families.

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