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The Blended Family Life Cycle

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ABSTRACT

Blended families face unique challenges that differ greatly from those encountered by nuclear families. Societal stereotypes that view blended families as abnormal, taking nuclear family functioning as the prototype for all family units, create a lack of role clarity for each of the members involved. Although many strategies exist with which to help families, many are based on nuclear family systems and thus are inapplicable to blended families. The creation of a blended family life cycle specific to blended family systems could help members of a blended family create a successful family unit as they work with a counselor.

KEYWORDS

Biological parent; blended family; blended family life cycle (BFLC); counselors; family life cycle (FLC); guidelines; stepchild; stepparent

Blended family systems are on the rise in Western societies as divorce and remarriages continue to increase. According to Statistics Canada, 12% of families are blended, comprising both simple and complex family systems (Statistics Canada, 2016). In the United States, this percentage is even greater, with 40% of adults having a family member who is not biologically related to them (Zelevnikow & Zelevnikow, 2015). As a result, blended family systems account for a large share of family units (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). In particular, blended families are defined as a family system in which a new couple partnership is formed, either through remarriage or cohabitation, that includes children from previous relationships (Gonzales, 2009). This trend usually results from either the death of a parent or divorce (Riness & Sailor, 2015).

Historically, blended families have usually occurred as a result of spousal death. Although this is still a factor, most modern blended families result from separation (Turunen, 2014). By societal standards, these families are seen as being inadequate establishments compared to nuclear family systems (Dupuis, 2010). Blended family systems face special difficulties attendant on trying to create a shared household of unrelated family members: developing a relationship with a new partner outside of a parental role, dealing with external factors such as ex-spouses, and handling child-related issues (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). Despite the presence of many resources and much literature to help build cohesion in family therapy, some unique challenges of blended families are not readily accounted for by existing

models. For example, although the family life cycle (FLC; Gerson, 1995) does not account for diverse families of many kinds (Candib, 1989), it remains valuable in family therapy—yet it does not account for the exceptional life stages of blended families.

Despite the prevalence of blended family systems, little research has explored role expectations for members of such families or how such families work and the exceptional challenges facing them (Blyaert, Van Parys, De Mol, & Buysse, 2016). Positive relationships among members of a blended family early on can be a critical factor in the longevity and durability of the unit (Kellas et al., 2014). A heightened awareness of the components of a blended family can help its members understand and communicate with each other (Purswell & Dillman, 2013).

The rules and boundaries used in nuclear family settings are counterproductive in blended family systems (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). A blended family will have a different structure than a nuclear family, but the lack of guidelines for such a structure can make sustaining a strong unit difficult. A *blended family life cycle (BFLC)* guideline designed specifically for blended families would be valuable for not only members of a blended family, but also counselors. This article highlights aspects of blended family systems, exploring negative stereotypes associated with these family dynamics, distinctive challenges for each individual involved, the effects on children, the importance of a strong couple relationship, the traditional FLC, the lack of guidelines for use with blended family systems, and it proposes an FLC unique for blended families and indicates directions for future research.

Blended families and societal expectations

Societal expectations often keep blended families from incorporating FLC guidelines intended for nuclear families, diminishing the family unit's cohesion. Although blended family systems are becoming progressively more common (Gonzales, 2009) and one day might outnumber nuclear families, negative connotations still surround the blended family structure.

Representations of loving blended families who work well together are few. Rather, popular movies depict wicked stepmothers who wish to harm their stepchildren (Whiting, Smith, Barnett, & Grafsky, 2007). Blended families are thought incomplete and are portrayed as undesirable (Blyaert et al., 2016). What is more, formation of a new union with children from past relationships brings new responsibilities, and the unique challenges of forming a blended family can be exacerbated by unrealistic goals, negative stereotypes about stepparents, feelings associated with the dissolution of the first family, use of labels that reflect societal expectations, and the complicated relationship dynamics that arise when children do not live in the primary residence (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Issues arise in all family units, but those in

blended family systems reinforce negative stereotypes, myths, and societal expectations—including negative designations of members of the family (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). The persistence of these negative societal beliefs about blended families makes maintaining a strong family unit difficult indeed, something exacerbated by a notable lack of guidelines for doing so.

Although it is desperately needed, blended families have few resources to which to turn, for available resources are written in an unhelpful manner judgmental of their situations (Gonzales, 2009). Negative stereotypes can place the individuals in blended families—especially stepparents—in a difficult position, lacking understanding of what their role entails and resources with which to clarify their position. In addition, the legal system does not grant stepparents any parental authority over their stepchildren (Dupuis, 2010). If blended families separate, stepchildren might not have protection from the losses incurred, creating further negative implications, such as economic loss or loss of emotional support (Coleman, Ganong, Russell, & Frye-Cox, 2015). Although blended family systems differ greatly from nuclear family systems, the traditional family unit is continuously used as a “dominant cultural norm ... in society” (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007, p. 19). This situation is problematic considering the rise of the blended family in society. Unacknowledged, the unique challenges that blended families face can lead to negative emotions and even dissolution.

Unwarranted expectations that blended families will work like nuclear family systems can lead to negative emotions such as frustration and anger (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). The stigma surrounding blended families must be dissolved to decrease dissolution rates and help blended families survive. Better support for blended families can occur “through research, exploration, and education ... myths can be challenged, stereotypes can be altered, and positive shifts in society’s perceptions ... will become a very probable outcome” (Riness & Sailor, 2015, p. 177). Creating an FLC for blended families can heighten awareness of the distinct needs of these families. Understanding the dynamics of each member of the family and his or her experiences within the blended family will highlight the unique challenges each role presents.

Adults in the blended family

All individuals within a blended family system have differing challenges and experiences that influence other family members. The many triangular relations within the blended family unit influence each other: “the relationship between the husband, wife, and ex-spouse; among the husband, wife, and stepchild; among the child, nonresidential parent, and stepparent; and among the residential parent, biological child, and stepchild” (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016, p. 113). Because lack of clarity within each role creates distinct challenges, guidelines for addressing these issues are essential. The following information provides insight

into the challenges that face biological parents and stepparents, with special attention to stepparents' and ex-spouses' roles.

Biological parents

Blended family systems have widely divergent dynamics and can include the involvement of many parental figures. Biological parents might feel caught in a middle position between their spouse's and children's conflicting demands (Dupuis, 2010). Because the biological parent and child relationship predates the new partnership and thus acts as a sanctuary, changing existing parent-child dynamics can be difficult when a new spouse and his or her children join a household (Dupuis, 2010). When Cartwright and Gibson (2013) studied biological parents' coparenting relationships and their effects on shared biological children, participants primarily experienced negative emotions, such as frustration or hopelessness. Findings suggested that interacting with ex-spouses elicited these emotions, with considerable conflict surrounding child custody, finances, reliability, working together, and attitudes toward the new partnership. These circumstances also created conflict over how to manage the ex-spouse, even leading to thoughts of ending the new relationship. However, viewing the ex-spouse as a common enemy united couples (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Moreover, unresolved emotional ties to the former partner created insecurity for the coparent when the former spouse repartnered. This type of scenario created more conflict or interrupted prior arrangements regarding the child (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). The resulting stress and conflict saw stepparents struggling to find their place in the family unit.

Stepparents

Stepparents might also play the role of biological parents, but the experience of playing both roles is a study in contrasts. A stepparent introduced to a preexisting parent-child system might feel excluded and confused about the role he or she plays for the stepchild (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Boundaries must establish whether the stepparent is a disciplinarian for the child, acts chiefly as a friend, and contributes financially—and whether the child even responds to and accepts the stepparent. The relationship between the stepparent and stepchild is a very crucial aspect of the blended family, influencing the total dynamics of the family unit (Dupuis, 2010). Although this relationship is often perceived as a negative one by society, stepfamily development is not always a negative experience (Kellas et al., 2014).

Stepparents are not always readily accepted as parental figures by stepchildren. Coleman et al. (2015) found that stepchildren classified stepparents as "(1) claimed, (2) disclaimed, or (3) unclaimed" (p. 778). Claimed stepparents were regarded as a family member, and the relationship could continue even

after dissolution of the relationship. Disclaimed and unclaimed stepparents were never looked on as family members to begin with (Coleman et al., 2015). Stepparents might also encounter stress in dealing with ex-spouses, which could create difficulties within the couple's relationship (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). They might also be jealous of all internal and external family members (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016).

Creating an understanding of how a blended family system differs from a nuclear family system could help stepparents transition into their new role and give them some realistic expectations to help them prepare for the challenges ahead (Riness & Sailor, 2015). Collaborating with a spouse to establish definitive roles can help minimize conflict and frustration and create cohesion within the family as a whole (Riness & Sailor, 2015). However, although stepparents might face similar obstacles, stepmothers and stepfathers can experience their roles very differently.

Stepmothers

The role of the stepmother can be a particularly bewildering one, for society expects more of mothers than it does of fathers (Riness & Sailor, 2015). The few studies comparing stepmother relationships with those of stepfathers have noted how societal myths portray stepmothers as harsh figures in the family unit (Whiting et al., 2007). Societal perceptions depict blended families to be created from death of a parent, as the arrival of a stepmother into a system can only be accepted as a form of completing a nuclear family system, rather than being an addition or competition against the biological mother (Hagman, 2013). This situation can cause challenges for a stepmother entering the family, especially when the biological mother still lives. Other challenges for stepmothers include ill-defined role expectations, spousal expectations, conflict with the biological mother, and feelings of not being backed up by the spouse (Whiting et al., 2007). These challenges can leave a stepmother "feeling isolated, unsupported, and ill prepared; acting as the primary parent or rule enforcer; feeling frustrated; and feeling rewarded" (Riness & Sailor, 2015, p. 176). Although most of these feelings are negative ones, some positive associations can also be formed. A feeling of reward results when a stepmother can coconstruct her role and meaning with her stepchild and feels that she is supported by her partner as a valued member of the family (Gallardo & Mellon-Gallardo, 2007). However, stepmothers report that most conflicts arose in their relationships with their stepchildren, with whom they did not feel as connected as a biological mother does with her offspring (Whiting et al., 2007).

Stepmothers also felt as if they were blamed for issues within the blended family, were underprioritized, and were ignored even in decision making that directly affected them, and they had mixed emotions about their partners and stepchildren (Craig, Harvey-Knowles, & Johnson, 2012). They reported

feeling that their partner was unsupportive, which contributed to the perceptions of their irrelevance and fears that the partner was choosing the children first—yet also to feelings of remorse and anger about wanting the spouse but not the children (Craig et al., 2012). Although there is overlap in the experiences of stepparents of both sexes, these challenges are unique to stepmothers.

Stepfathers

Despite some shared characteristics of being a stepparent, a stepfather's experience might well differ greatly from a stepmother's experience. In a study conducted by Blyaert et al. (2016), stepfathers reported fairly positive perceptions of their experience within the blended family. Many stepfathers felt included in the blended family, accepted and loved by their stepchildren, had a constructive relationship with the biological father, and were happy with their position. However, those who were biological fathers shared a different bond with their own children than with their stepchildren. The lack of a shared history or of an experience of the child's early developmental years, or perhaps of blood ties, could be the cause.

Their role bore some similarity to that of stepmothers, with no legal parameters in place to define a clear role for stepfathers and a lack of role models for this position (even places such as Belgium, which require stepfathers but not stepmothers to financially support their stepchildren, do not legally recognize them as parental figures; Blyaert et al., 2016). Taking on all the responsibilities of being a father but receiving none of the power or influence that comes with being a biological father can present a challenge. Blyaert et al. (2016) reported generally positive perceptions of the stepfather-stepchild relationship, but Hilton, Harris, and Rice (2015) found that stepfathers were twice as likely to abuse a stepchild as were biological fathers. The unique challenges of a blended family, and the added stress of such aspects as dealing with an ex-partner or custody battles, might account for this increased risk (Hilton et al., 2015).

Ex-spouses

In any blended family system, the ex-spouse can be expected to exert an enduring effect. Dupuis (2010) noted that a parenting arrangement between the biological partners that allows ex-spouses to have some influence on the new blended family system can undermine a stepparent's role, affecting every aspect of the blended family—especially the couple's relationship—and thus creating conflict. The shared history between biological parents, which allows them to know each other well, can diminish a former partner's self-worth (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016). Parents who repartner tend to perceive their ex-spouse as jealous of control or the affections of the biological child, creating

feelings of animosity (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016). Also, the addition of a stepparent can increase hostility in coparental relationships, for the new stepparent's addition to the family requires modifications and alterations to fit the new family dynamic (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013), particularly when introducing new children. The relationship dynamics of all adults involved can influence the development of children.

Effects on children

Children who live in blended families are at greater risk of disadvantage than are children in nuclear families. Children are in blended family systems because they have lost a biological parent, whether through death or separation (Purswell & Dillman, 2013). Feelings of loss are common for children who enter a blended family system as they compare their new family to their first family when it was stable (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). When roles and boundaries are poorly defined early in the new family system as children try to establish their new roles, stepchildren could exhibit behavioral issues (Purswell & Dillman, 2013; Shalay & Brownlee, 2007), feeling, like stepparents, unclear about their role while yearning to fit in and be an important member (Purswell & Dillman, 2013). If cohesion within the family does not occur, negative consequences could ensue, with such children having a greater probability of engaging in criminal behavior, heightening stress in the couple relationship, and decreasing the cohesiveness of the family unit (Apel & Kaukinen, 2008). A BFLC guideline should address the unique challenges that children experience in their relationship with their parents and their potential stepsiblings or half-siblings.

Relationship with parents

Children who enter a blended family have access to only one of their biological parents at a time even as they must accommodate the entrance of a stepparent. Biological parents, who enter into blended family systems on their own terms, often fail to incorporate their children into the new unit, which can appear unknown and unfamiliar (Kellas et al., 2014). The quality of a child's relationship with the biological parent significantly influences the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Jensen & Howard, 2015). Hatred between biological parents and stepparents who are involved in a child's life can stunt development and create a negative perception of the blended family, stymieing attempts to create a cohesively blended family unit (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). However, children who have positive relationships with their biological parents tend to view their stepparents positively as well (Jensen & Howard, 2015).

The stepparent–stepchild relationship is essential to the blended family and can make the journey a peaceful or a bumpy ride, yet it is subjective, with “factors at the individual, subsystem, and systems levels ... [influencing] how stepchildren perceive their relationship with their stepparent” (Jensen & Howard, 2015, p. 146). Stepchildren might also be reticent to create a positive relationship with the new stepparent, feeling as though they are betraying the biological parent, who is not part of their unit (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Researchers have also indicated that a residential biological father who introduces a stepmother to his children could be perceived by the children as threatening their already established family unit (Whiting et al., 2007), thereby increasing chances of conflict and heightening the ill feeling that a stepchild might communicate to a stepparent, with loyalties tending to remain within biological bloodlines. However, when the residential biological mother introduces a stepfather to her children it does not affect the relationship with their nonresidential biological father or how close they feel to their biological mother (King, 2009).

Although children might be dealing with loss and feeling conflicted in their relationships with parents, they can experience some benefits even during separation. Halligan, Chang, and Knox (2014) studied undergraduates’ experiences when having faced the divorce of their biological parents as a child. Positive outcomes for the child included becoming compassionate as a person (65.63%), becoming open to differing perspectives (63.16%), and being happy about individual time spent with the mother (57.71%; Halligan et al., 2014). As many as 25% of respondents had faced great difficulties as a result of the divorce, but that did not affect their desire to someday marry, and it had increased their motivation to do whatever was necessary to stay married (Halligan et al., 2014).

Furthermore, well-formed blended families that feature a residential and a nonresidential parent can cause stepchildren to feel allegiances to their residential stepparent and other blended family members that can supersede allegiances to their nonresidential biological parent (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). A positive relationship with a stepparent can benefit a child, increasing access to financial and emotional supports and acting as a protective factor for children who are dealing with the repercussions of separation from their biological family.

Although blended families are formed because of the dissolution of a prior relationship, blended families themselves can also face dissolution, causing the children to feel another loss in their lives if relationships with nonbiological members are severed with the relationship. For this reason, maintaining close ties to past stepparents can act as a protective factor during another divorce, for because the stepparent has no legally recognized protective role in the child’s life, any benefits provided continue only on a voluntary basis (Coleman et al., 2015). Biological coparents and stepparents alike should

recognize the feelings of all children involved, helping them deal with their emotions (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006).

Siblings

Forming blended families can be complex, for children who are joined together might be at developmental stages not aligned with their ages (Kellas et al., 2014). A blended family system can produce various sibling formations through acquisition of a stepsibling or half-sibling or changes in dynamics with full biological siblings. A stepsibling relationship is formed when one person who has children repartners with another person who has a child or children from a previous relationship; such relationships are often less caring than those that exist between biological siblings (Planitz & Feeney, 2009). A half-sibling relationship is formed when a new child is born to a repartnered couple, at least one of whom had children outside the couple's relationship. Introduction of a half-sibling can alter the already challenging dynamics of the blended family unit for better or for worse: With the birth of a half-sibling, more resources will be needed to care for the child, increasing the costs of supporting the family unit and lessening the time that parents spend with older children (Turunen, 2014). Moreover, because a half-sibling is biologically related to both parents in a blended family system, the treatment of various children could differ, with more favor directed toward the biological child, putting an older half-sibling at a disadvantage (Turunen, 2014).

Full biological siblings who come from the same mother and father might also experience the separation of a family together. Siblings can act as mutual supports when dealing with loss or could compete for resources from their parents (Purswell & Dillman, 2013). Gatins, Kinlaw, and Dunlap (2014) examined the varying perspectives of children raised with full biological siblings and children who acquired half-siblings after separation. Their findings suggested that children who acquired half-siblings saw separation as having a positive or neutral effect, whereas those who had full siblings perceived separation as having a harmful effect. Having a half-sibling appeared to lead to better adjustment for those dealing with the loss of their biological parents—perhaps because biological parents felt threatened by a stepparent relationship, motivating them to work harder at maintaining relationships, or because the presence of more parental figures made more time available for older half-siblings (Gatins et al., 2014).

Differing sibling relationships within a blended family can affect educational results. Turunen (2014) compared the educational outcomes of Swedish children in differing sibling relationships. Their research indicated that children in a nuclear family setting who had both biological parents had the highest grades; children whose parents were separated and who had no half-siblings scored the second highest; children whose parents were

separated and who had half-siblings achieved the third highest; and children who experienced the birth of a half-sibling on both their maternal and paternal sides had the lowest grades.

Clearly, sibling variations profoundly influence all children in a blended family unit. However, certain protective factors can come from parents. For example, the mother's having achieved a higher level of education increases the chances for good grades among children from separated households (Turunen, 2014). The strength of the couple relationship can also mitigate negative effects.

The couple relationship within the blended family

The quality of the repartnered relationship is primary to the family unit's survival, for a strong relationship can protect against dissolution. However, the couple relationship in a blended family is often deprioritized. The varying challenges attendant on formation of a blended family can strain the couple's relationship (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013).

In a first-time family, a shared bloodline and history connects everyone, but in a blended family, members share less history (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Raising children requires incredible selflessness, but the love and attachment a parent feels for his or her biological child can make such selflessness pleasurable (Gerson, 1995). In a blended family, however, step-parents might not develop similar bonds with their stepchild in the absence of biological connections (Gerson, 1995). This situation can strain the couple relationship when parental relationships with a child differ in their quality, reflecting contrasting perceptions. The couple relationship in a first-time family allows for time before children are introduced into the system (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016), as biological parents can begin preparing for drastic life changes as soon as pregnancy commences (Gerson, 1995). In a blended family, nurturing the couple relationship can be difficult thanks to lack of privacy or time (Gerson, 1995).

The ex-spouse can strongly affect the couple relationship by creating stress, whether through legal struggles, difficulties scheduling child care, reluctance to discuss or negotiate certain matters, and unwillingness to work with the stepparent when required (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). These matters can distress the couple as they try to establish their relationship, setting a constant blockade and preventing formation of a truly blended family and bringing feelings of helplessness at the unfairness of demands (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). Feelings of rivalry might also occur between the ex-spouse and stepparent (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007) that can exacerbate conflict if the stepparent does not feel supported by his or her partner. If a couple views the ex-spouse as an enemy, it can help them feel united (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007).

Rushing the formation of a blended family unit does not allow the couple relationship to become established and can increase the difficulty of coping with adversity. Role uncertainty in the blended family reduces marital satisfaction, especially when both partners have children from previous relationships (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). In extreme circumstances, the couple might wish to end this new relationship (Dupuis, 2010). Greater marital satisfaction accompanies a positive transition into blended family life (Whiting et al., 2007). Because the strengths of the family system and of the couple relationship are connected, having a successful relationship in the absence of an effective blended family unit can be difficult (Dupuis, 2010). The many changes that occur in a blended family can prevent the couple from developing its relationship—and if they fail to do so, they face a greater chance of dissolution. Counseling a couple in a blended family system could help the partners understand that the challenges they face are unique and could teach them to support each other properly, thus strengthening the family unit (Gonzales, 2009). Such counseling, although it would be helpful, is not prominent in the current literature, posing a challenge to counselors who wish to help couples and other members of the blended family. Creating a BFLC that acknowledges and highlights the importance of the couple relationship could help build a strong, cohesive unit.

Counselors and blended families

Guidelines for members of a blended family and the counselors who work with them are few, leading to difficulty in identifying distinct phases, impairing counselors' ability to help blended families. Existing research into blended family situations is often conducted with a small sample size, depends heavily on archival documents, and uses common techniques in family therapy that are normally based on nuclear family dynamics (Gonzales, 2009). As a result, blended families can be ill prepared to meet expectations in the newly formed family, with few resources for support (Gonzales, 2009).

Counseling can bring blended family members into the developmental family process, facilitating the creation of a shared system of values among all members that can foster cohesion (Dupuis, 2010). A counselor's approach to narrative therapy reconstructs perceptions of the blended family unit to defy stereotypes of it as an anomalous system and to avoid moving forward in a manner that tries to adopt the roles of people in nuclear family systems (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). Counselors can also use a type of blended family counseling devised by Gonzales (2009), who proposed that all soon-to-be members of a blended family proactively address the demands that might accompany the formation of a blended family system. Some members of the blended family, especially stepparent

and stepchild, might struggle to find a role within the family unit. Incorporating these varying strategies could help counselors empathize with the ambiguity of the roles each member faces, allowing them to serve as a better support by referring to guidelines for all matters pertinent to blended families (Whiting et al., 2007). It could also help members of the blended family identify their stage of formation, thereby giving them a resource to help them know how to proceed.

Origin stories are vital to a blended family's long-term success, because they create a significant meaning of family for this unit (Kellas et al., 2014). Although various approaches can help with family issues, no current practice takes into consideration in a single unified document the unique challenges each member faces. By using guidelines, blended family members and counselors alike can be prepared to handle challenges as they arise. Preventive strategies that consider all members in their unique roles could aid the formation of a blended family in its critical early stages as well as throughout (Kellas et al., 2014). In particular, blended families should avoid proceeding with the expectations of a nuclear family (Dupuis, 2010); some specific guidelines in working with blended families could help convey how blended families differ from nuclear ones. An FLC for blended families can promote their success.

The blended family life cycle

Establishing guidelines that recognize the unique challenges that blended families face would help members of those families and their counselors address important issues while decreasing the likelihood of dissolution. Thus far, we have explored main subsystems and experiences of prominent members in the blended family systems, gaining insights into their unique challenges. Blended families vary greatly from nuclear families, which should not be the basis for blended families' behavior. However, many established family theories, including the FLC, fail to address the diverse range of family systems and thus are of limited use (Erickson, 1998). That blended families do not fit the FLC parameters, for example, perpetuates societal stereotypes, reinforcing this family system's variance from the norm: "(a) the launching of the single young adult, (b) the joining of families through marriage, (c) families with young children, (d) families with adolescents, (e) launching children and moving on, and (f) families in later life" (Gerson, 1995, p. 92). These life transitions, based on a nuclear family system, cannot properly represent the important changes that occur within a blended family, however.

Although some aspects of established family theories might relate to a blended family, such as a union of marriage to merge families, they are based solely on the assumption that people enter a union with no children from previous relationships involved (Gerson, 1995). Members of a blended family system might not be able to relate to these transitional phases or their order,

feeling excluded and strongly desiring to belong, emotions that might arise from external factors, such as negative cultural stereotypes (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007). When members of blended families and their counselors use models of family therapy based on nuclear family systems, that only perpetuates the exclusive nature of an inflexible system. Moreover, counselors who have little experience with blended families might also unconsciously adopt societal stereotypes about family functioning that are based on nuclear systems. Although they would aim to provide support, their lack of understanding and lack of access to guidelines might inadvertently cause further harm. Counselors who do not have extensive experience working with blended families might use guidelines such as the FLC to help identify the family's stage of life, something that would not be beneficial under the circumstances. However, few other resources are available to help counselors address issues that might arise in a blended family. Counselors should help the blended family unit realize that many of its issues arise from external systems of beliefs, a realization that would help bond the family (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007).

To provide clarity for members of the family and counselors, to combat negative societal perceptions about blended families, and to address the differing challenges that each member faces, a guideline should be in place that highlights the unique transitory life stages of a blended family's experience. A guideline could be used as a reference point to help members of blended families and counselors understand the system and identify ways of assisting a blended family.

Thus, I propose, as a beginning step, the creation of a blended family system guideline that highlights transition stages common to all blended families in a sequence of events designed to help foster their success: (a) separation, divorce, or death; (b) establishment of parenting agreements; (c) repartnering; (d) preblended family counseling to solidify the couple relationship; (e) defining of expectations and roles for the new stepparent; (f) having the stepparent meet the ex-spouse, if appropriate; (g) having the children and stepparent meet; (h) making any necessary changes to parenting agreements to accommodate the new blended family system; (i) meeting with the children to define boundaries and roles; (j) cohabitation or marriage; and (k) preparation for the possible entrance of a new child. Although these items do not represent a comprehensive guideline, it is a starting point: Every type of blended family can expect to go through these stages. Yet they differ highly from those proposed in the original FLC, for the blended family system does not operate as a nuclear family system and need not subscribe to the rules of one. Further development of the BFLC could help outline directions for blended families while helping them break societal stereotypes.

Directions for future research

Although I have provided the skeleton of an FLC dedicated to blended family systems, a better understanding must come from counselors and members of blended family systems. The traditional FLC assumes that all families will fit its parameters, but the diversity of blended family systems indicates otherwise. Thus, the BFLC should use a flowchart structure to account for families' differing needs. To achieve this objective, experts in each stage should help create guidelines designed to facilitate the success of the blended family system. What is more, the experiences of all persons in the blended family differ. The experiences of the members of each category (e.g., parent, stepparent, child, stepchild) could provide guidelines for tackling the challenges faced by members of a blended family and their counselors.

The lack of legal support for all members of a blended family diminishes cohesion in the family unit and perpetuates societal stereotypes about blended family units. Appropriate legal changes could promote inclusion of the stepparent, acting as a protective factor for stepchildren if dissolution were to occur within the blended family. Similarly, providing more educational resources could help blended families be cohesive (Dupuis, 2010). Further research would also need to be conducted to see whether various cultural groups or those that are part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community experience blended families differently. Although blended families have a high dissolution rate, many blended families persevere, and their parenting and relationship techniques could help in creating FLC guidelines for blended families.

Conclusion

Specific guidelines are needed that can help blended family systems withstand external factors. Family theories and counseling guidelines chiefly target nuclear families—merely witness the FLC. Family theories that do not account for the unique challenges found in blended family systems are at a disadvantage when trying to alleviate the stresses and difficulties that arise in blended families. Each member of a blended family has different experiences within the family unit, and ill-defined roles can lead to conflict that affects all participants.

The effects of the blended family do not stop within its microsystem but expand into the mesosystem and macrosystem. The children of blended families are the future, and without understanding or support, they could face constant challenges in later life. The BFLC presented in this article aims to offer guidelines with which counselors can understand the dynamics of the blended family unit, but these are still in their infancy. Yet, merely creating a BFLC challenges societal norms and heightens the chances of success in blended family systems. A comprehensive BFLC accounting for the challenges that face blended families can benefit not only the members of such families, but also the family counselors who work with these families.

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