

Young Women Recall Their Positive Relationships with Their Mothers and Stepmothers

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Introduction

While the divorce rate has remained consistent at 50 per cent of first marriages, and has even declined slightly since the early 1980's, about one half of all marriages in the United States are composed of partners in which one or both persons have been married before to other partners (Bumpass, Riley & Sweet, 1995). As a consequence, many children experience the transition from a nuclear family household, to single parent household to stepfamily household. It is estimated that one-third of all children will live in a remarried or cohabiting stepfamily household before the age of eighteen (Berger, 1995; Bumpass et al., 1995).

After a marital dissolution, mothers tend to retain custody of the children (Clarke-Stewart & Bailey, 1989; Buchanon, Maccoby & Dornbush, 1996). When a father remarries, many children visit, or spend significant periods of time with their fathers and the more than 11 million women who are "part-time" or "nonresidential" stepmothers in the United States (Nielson, 1999).

Statement of the Research Problem

This study examined the factors which are associated with positive relationships between daughter/divorced mother and stepdaughter/stepmother in the same divorced-remarried family system in order to add to the literature concerning strengths in such families. Secondly, this study sought to determine whether there are any characteristics which are unique to a positive stepmother/stepdaughter relationship when compared with the divorced mother/daughter relationship.

Research Background

A growing body of research indicates that children of divorce and children in stepfamilies are at somewhat greater risk for academic, behavioral and emotional problems than children in nuclear families (Bray, 1988; Dawson, 1991; Garnefski & Diekstra, 1997; Hetherington, 1992). Girls in stepfamilies, particularly girls who have stepmothers, are said to have distinct adjustment problems that girls in nuclear families

do not experience (Hoffman & Johnson, 1998; Needle, Suh & Doherty, 1990; Suh, Schutz & Johansson, 1996).

Hetherington, Bridges and Insabella (1998) reported that the risk for negative outcomes in children's adjustment resulting from divorce and remarriage may be mediated by resources that engender resiliency. A good relationship with an adult, be it a parent, teacher or friend, is considered an external resource that promotes resiliency in children at risk (Wolchik, Tein, Sandler & Doyle, 2002; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002). One such resource is a positive relationship between a child and her custodial parent. (Cartwright & Seymour, 2003; Kurdek, 1987; Kurtz, 1995; Shaw & Emery, 1987; Stolberg, Camplear, Currier & Wells, 1987). Another potential resource may be a good relationship between a girl and her nonresidential stepmother.

Three frames informed this study: (1) The Strengths Perspective; (2) Attachment Theory; and, (3) Family Systems Theory. The Strengths Perspective posits that the exclusive use of a pathology or deficit frame in research and practice theory influences social workers' negative perceptions and expectations of clients, while knowledge of positive coping creates positive expectations which positively influence practice (Goldstein, 1992). Also known as therapeutic optimism, such positive expectancies are known to be associated with favorable outcomes in the helping relationship and with clients' reports of improvement (Bruckner, 1979; Frank, 1968; Goldstein, 1966; Martin & Sterne, 1975; Weisz, Houts & Straight, 1970).

Attachment is a major concept informing mother/daughter studies (Yoo, 2004). Bowlby defined attachment as "...strong affectional bonds to significant others" (1969, p. 99). The normative and healthy forms of mother/daughter attachment are presented in the literature. Strong bonds develop between mothers and daughters, which continue throughout the life cycle (Stiver, 1991). In contrast, divorced mother/child attachment in the clinical literature is represented as unhealthy as it is equated with mutual over-dependence between the divorced mother and her children (Arditti, 1999; Weiss, 1979). In the stepfamily literature, stepmother/stepdaughter attachment has not been investigated, possibly because it is assumed not to be a variable in these relationships.

Family Systems Theory or the "systemic perspective" (Beaver & Beaver, 2003) was the third major perspective informing this study. Family Systems Theory is a broad term which encompasses many schools of family theory (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). For purposes of this study, concepts from Structural Family Theory, Role Theory and the Communication Boundary Management Perspective were utilized.

Family Systems Theory allows for an understanding of human behavior which includes conceptualizing on multiple levels which interact and mutually influence and are influenced by one another. These levels include the biological system, the individual psyche, the family system, the individual and family life cycles, the interpersonal system, the institutional and the societal systems impinging on the individual/family (Sager, Brown, Crohn et al., 1983). This multiple-layered perspective is in concert with social work's person-in-environment paradigm (Hepworth & Rooney, 2002).

Research questions

Q 1: How do young women characterize their positive relationships with their divorced mothers?

Q 2: How do young women characterize their positive relationships with their mothers?

Q 3: Are there any characteristics of the positive stepmother/stepdaughter relationship that are unique in comparison with positive mother/daughter relationships?

a. If yes, to (3) above, is this characteristic present in all stepmother/stepdaughter relationships?

Q 4: What contextual factors, including family dynamics, seem to be important in promoting positive mother/daughter and stepmother/daughter relationships in the same divorced/remarried family?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach and the grounded theory method. Because studies on the topic were not available in the literature, the qualitative approach was appropriate to attempt to generate knowledge of perceptions of strengths in stepmother/stepdaughter relationships.

Sample

A purposive sample of young women who self-identified as having positive relationships with their mothers and stepmothers was used. A semi-structured Interview Guide was created and tried out in a pilot stage for corrections, and/or additions. The study interviews were conducted between June 2002 and December 2003. Each participant was interviewed twice, for a total of about two hours.

Demographics

The nineteen participants were middle-class and white. They ranged in age from 19 to 25, with the mean age being 23.10 (SD=1.69) years. One participant was married, and one self-identified as partnered; the rest of the participants were single. Five of the participants were employed, the rest were undergraduate and graduate students.

Length of time in a stepfamily

The ages of the participants when their birth parents permanently separated and/or divorced ranged from 1.5 to ten years old, with the mean age of 5.52 (SD=4.43) years. The ages of the participants when their fathers married their stepmothers ranged from two years to twenty years, with the mean age of 10.21 (SD=3.59) years. Four of the fathers were divorced a second time and, one of the fathers married a third time.

Siblings

Out of the nineteen participants, fifteen had full siblings, fourteen had half siblings by their fathers' and/or mothers' remarriages and ten had stepsiblings.

Custody/Visitation

Sixteen of the participants described a custody arrangement in which their mothers had primary custody and they visited their fathers' and stepmothers' households. Four of these young women lived with their fathers and stepmothers during adolescence and young adulthood for various periods of time. Three young women described the custody as evenly divided, fifty percent of the time in each birth parent's household.

Procedures

The researcher audio-taped each interview; during the interviewing process, data reduction and analysis was also taking place. The first step in data analysis was data immersion, which refers to becoming fully knowledgeable about the content of the data (Wright, 1998, 23). This was done by listening to the tape of the interview shortly after it took place. As each interview was transcribed, it was read and reread to get a "feel" for the interviews. Initial editing of the transcripts was done to make corrections, to make clarifications of the transcription and to eliminate useless data such as chatting or tangential talk (Berg, 2001; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). During this proofreading process the researcher underlined key phrases that made some "inchoate sense" (Ryan & Bernard, p. 783.), as a preliminary to coding.

Coding continued the process of data reduction. Coding consisted of a careful line- by line reading of the transcripts to identify themes. This process is called "open coding" because the themes or categories were drawn from the literature review, from the researcher's values and prior experiences, and from the data itself. The bulk of the codes were drawn from the data itself not from pre-determined lists.

In order to insure validity of the initial coding outside coders were included early in the process. The first codebook was developed as a result of the primary researcher and two outsiders coding the same sections of two interviews. There was over 90 percent agreement in the coding between the two outsider coders and the researcher. The discrepancies found were in the use of different words and/or level of abstraction to code the same sections; these discrepancies were resolved by the researcher consulting with the two outside coders.

The researcher used her first codebook to code two interviews twice, each time about a month apart to check intra-coder reliability (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The code-recode agreement was over 90 percent. As the initial inter-coder and intra-coder reliability was good, the primary investigator continued to code the interviews herself, which resulted in a second codebook of over 300 codes. This codebook included a description of each code, inclusion and exclusion criteria (if necessary) and some examples of actual text for each code. At this point, one of the outside coders was given an entire interview to code, using this more detailed codebook. The agreement in coding between the outside coder and this researcher was greater than 90 per cent.

The review and coding of the thirty-eight interviews was greatly facilitated by the use of Atlas-ti (Muhr, 1997) a qualitative software package, which has search, code and retrieve functions. The criterion of "saturation" was used to determine the size of the

sample. Interviewing ended once all new data fit into the themes or categories already devised (Charmasz, 2000, 520). The themes for the last three interviewees fit into the already established categories, so the interviewing process was terminated.

Sorting is an analytic process in which data is grouped in greater themes or issues. These groupings are known as code families. Atlas-ti was very helpful in the process of grouping and regrouping codes and chunks of data to create these families, and then recreating and refining these families. Again, this facility in handling the data provided by the software package freed the researcher from practical handling of paper, to thinking about the data and themes produced. Several approaches were utilized to attempt to insure reliability and validity of the findings, including leaving a “data trail” so this study could possibly be replicated (reliability) and “triangulation”, including member checks and outsider checks (validity).

Results

1. Although the mothers played similar roles in their daughters’ lives, five styles of stepmothering were suggested by the findings, all of which worked for these participants. These styles were: (a) My Father’s Wife, (b) A Peer-Like Friend, (c) An Older Friend, (d) A Type of Kin, and (e) Like Another Mother.
2. Several factors characterized both positive mother/daughter and stepmother/stepdaughter relationships including closeness, feeling understood, receiving nurturance and social support.
3. Two characteristics were found to be unique to the stepmother/stepdaughter relationships, mentoring and self-disclosure of sexual and conventional secrets.
4. Some participants were close to their mothers, stepmothers and fathers, even when the divorced couple was acrimonious and/or the mother openly disliked the stepmother.
5. Half-siblings, stepsiblings and stepgrandparents acted as important “glue” in the stepmother/stepdaughter relationship.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Social work practice includes prevention and education as well as direct practice with client families (Hepworth & Rooney, 2002). Social workers make a significant contribution in providing preventive services and psychoeducation to non-clinical populations, as well as ameliorating problems in diverse family forms. Such family variations are considered the particular purview of social workers, who have historically helped populations who are stigmatized and/or “outliers” in the general socio-cultural mainstream (Hepworth & Rooney, 2002). Findings from this study begin to delineate some of the strengths in divorced mother and non-residential stepmother families.

Knowledge of such strengths may help alleviate taking a one dimensional, pathologizing perspective on divorced and remarried families on the part of social workers who may tend to generalize from their clinical experience to non-clinical

populations (Jones, 2003). Although sixty per cent of remarriages end in another divorce, forty per cent do not (Jones, 109). Evidence of strengths, as seen by these participants, may help to balance out the negative perspective in the literature and may help social workers conduct prevention and educational forums about diverse family life.

It is notoriously difficult to recruit remarrying couples into psychoeducational groups in the early stages of forming a stepfamily, because of the honeymoon effect (Burt & Burt, 1996). There has been some literature that documents the effectiveness of group prevention models, particularly when these take a short-term, educational and skills-based approach (Bielenberg, 1991; Stauton, 1986). Being able to delineate strengths as well as problems concerning divorced/remarried families could possibly encourage more families in early phases of transition to participate.

In addition, knowledge of strengths in diverse families may help social workers approach their clinical work with clients with a more positive outlook and less preconceptions about how a family should function. A positive outlook has been reported to produce more positive client outcomes (Goldstein, 1992).

Tolstoy said, "All happy families resemble each other; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Anna Karenina). As Berger (1995) suggested, and as the findings of the current study report, not all happy steprelations are alike. This small study has contributed to the knowledge concerning strengths in steprelations, and supports the notion of the diversity of positive, satisfying stepmother/stepdaughter functioning that is possible.

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