The Impact of Remarriage Dissolution on Stepparent and Stepchild Relations

Background and Methods

Families today are increasingly complex. Nearly 10% of children in the United States live in a stepfamily (Sweeney, 2010), and 90% can expect to do so at some point in their lives (Bumpass & Raley, 2007). Children value and appreciate stepparents when relationships are close (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011), and warmth and supervision from stepparents has been linked to children’s positive adjustment (Fine & Kurdek, 1992). People who remarry, however, have higher divorce rates (60-70%) than those in first marriages (48%). Brandt & Mosher, 2002, suggesting that many children experience the involuntary dissolution of stepparent ties. Given the potential for stepparent-stepchild relationships to benefit children, the involuntary loss of these relationships due to divorce may be particularly damaging. Despite the large body of research on stepparent-stepchild relationships, little is known about what happens to these relationships after divorce. Although the perspectives of former stepparents have been examined (e.g., Coleman, Ganong, Russell, & Fye-Cox, 2015; Schemmnik, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengston, 2006), the perspective of former stepparents have not. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, it is necessary to explore the perspective of former stepparents regarding the impact of divorce on relationships with stepchildren.

Methods

Data collection consisted of conducting in-person interviews with former stepparents. Grounded theory procedures were used for data analysis. In accordance with grounded theory, hypotheses was not formulated in advance in order to allow theory to emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then coded. Transcripts were first coded line by line using participants’ own words to form codes, and verbatim codes were then analyzed for links and grouped into related categories and themes. This procedure gave us the data to make connections and create hypotheses.

The Impact of Divorce

Some former stepparents in our sample viewed the remarriage dissolution as irrelevant to their relationship with their former stepchildren. When the remarriage occurred some participants described how their feelings toward their stepchild did not change:

For other participants divorce had a large impact on the relationship they had with their former stepchildren. Two participants described their experience of what happened after they got a divorce:

- “It was in no way their fault when their father and I divorced. You know, they really had nothing to do with it. So why would I sever those relationships I divorced my husband, but I didn’t divorce his kids.” (Rachael)
- “Just didn’t have much contact. I didn’t have much ability to interact with them... I wasn’t doing any real activities with them.” (Nick)

Barriers to Maintaining the Relationship

Former Stepchild’s Age

A common theme we saw among participants is that their relationship with their ex spouse impacted the relationship with their former stepchildren:

- “Joey told me he had told them was that I had mental problems and that they should feel sorry for me, he was working to sabotage that relationship... that when he turns 18 I might reach out to him.” (Beth)
- “What I’ve kind of always believed is when they get older and they become adults if they want to have a relationship with me... that when he turns 18 I might reach out to him.” (Beth)

Proximity

Another common barrier we saw within the interviews was distance. This barrier is not unique to former stepchildren, rather it is seen in many other types of relationship dissolution:

- “Distance. It’s a huge barrier. She is, she has moved around a lot... She was living in San Diego... So that’s a big barrier, distance and her instability” (Sarah)

The Impact of Divorce

Some former stepparents recognized that maintaining relationships was largely their responsibility. Staying connected to former stepchildren meant consistently initiating contact and exerting efforts to remain involved:

- “...I’m still close with her. We still talk on the phone. I just felt a really close relationship with her.” (Sarah)
- “...It took probably three years of me being very persistent with her because I didn’t want to end my relationship with her” (Sarah)
- “...I loved them like they were my own children... Ross actually called me Mom for a while... they looked at me like a parental figure.” (Claire)
- “I just felt a really close relationship with her. We still talk on the phone. I still take, you know, sometimes when I go up and get the kids we go out to lunch. So I’ve always considered her to be my daughter.” (Martha)

Strained Relationship with Ex Spouse

A second barrier to maintaining relationships was the age of former stepchildren at the time of the divorce. When former stepchildren were young at the time of the divorce, relationships were less likely to continue:

- “That was when she called Allison and told Allison that apparently Allison went hysterical and just started screaming on the phone... to Matthew still gonna be my dad, is Matthew still gonna be my dad, and was hysterical and was crying...” (Matthew)
- “I had Allison and Amanda and they became my kids for the most part... my parents immediately embraced the girls... It’s their only grandchildren.” (Matthew)
- “…but when she called Allison and told Allison that apparently Allison went hysterical and just started screaming on the phone... To Matthew still gonna be my dad, is Matthew still gonna be my dad, and was hysterical and was crying...” (Matthew)

Motivations to Maintaining the Relationship

Many of our participants were motivated to continue a relationship with their former stepchild because of many factors, three particular themes arose within the interviews that are described:

Source of Stability

Some participants felt they played a key role in their former stepchildren’s lives by giving them expectations to follow. This role motivated some former stepparents to want to stay in touch with their former stepchildren:

- “…I helped them with was that it gave them some stable expectations. And part of what I think the value was for them was that it gave them some self control... So they knew what to expect.” (Chandler)
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Desire for kinship

Some participants described how they did not have children of their own, so having stepchildren made them feel like a parent. The divorce did not change this desire or feeling so many participants wanted to maintain this relationship in order to keep this feeling of kinship:

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Parental Figure

Some participants described how they took a parental role with being a stepparent and they wanted to continue this type of relationship after the divorce:

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Staying Connected

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Affects of losing the relationship

This study has shown that these relationships matter and when they end it is hard for former stepparents. Many of our participants expressed how hard it is to lose the relationship with their former stepchildren after the dissolution of their marriage. Below are examples of how relationship dissolution has affected some former stepparents:

- “I still think about them all the time. It’s really hard cause you miss them. You know, you want to talk to them, you want to see how they’re doing, how they’re growing up, and you can’t have it.” (Mary)
- “As a stepparent you can be around children for so long and then they’re just taken away from you, you know, and it’s like when you’re married to that person the expectation is you love them like they’re your own. And then it’s like the expectation when you’re divorced is now you’re just supposed to forget about them, and it doesn’t work like that. You know, these are human relationships.” (Beth)

Limitations and Further Implications

Limitations

The sample within this study was lacking diversity in race/ethnicity. All of the participants identified as Caucasian/ white. This is important because cultural context always plays a role within families and this particular study just looked at the family within one cultural context. Making our sample more diverse could give this study a larger scope into what different nontraditional families look like within different cultural settings.

Further Implications

Because some children will transition into and out of multiple steppfamilies throughout their lifetime, greater understanding of the implications of stepfamily dissolution is imperative. Increased knowledge of this phenomenon may allow us to identify conditions contributing to the wellbeing of stepchildren with parents and stepparents divorce. This research project has the capability of publication in research journals or other academic literature. Furthermore, the proposed study will likely have important implications for future research, as scholars work to develop new theories and hypotheses addressing the complexity of post-divorce relationships in nontraditional family networks.