

Becoming a family

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The family is still considered by sociologists as the nuclear component of any society regardless of cultural norms, traditions and beliefs. In the United States, the average American family has undergone dramatic changes in terms of its function and structures. Of these changes, the most apparent is the fact that most average American families are now what many considered as blended families.

Blended families are considered to be extremely complex in terms of its structure and as such, the interpersonal relationship between the members of these blended families becomes complex as well. It is for this reason that numerous research studies have been conducted with regards to the adaptation and interpersonal relationships that occur between family members. This paper would provide a summary of the findings of one particular research study conducted with regards to the relationship among members of blended families.

The paper would also provide a critical evaluation on the findings that have been presented by the researchers in the article provided by comparing this with four other journal articles on the topic. Summary of Article The journal article selected for the critical evaluation to be conducted in this paper is a study conducted by Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup and Turman entitled “Becoming a Family”: Developmental Processes Represented in Blended Family Discourse.

In this article, the researchers found the need to investigate and develop a deeper understanding on the different processes that occur within blended families in order to become a solid, nuclear family. Sociologists have long recognized as the foundation of any society. The need was brought about by

statistics showing an increase in the number of blended families now present within modern-day American societies (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukuip & Turman 2000). The study conducted by the researchers involved a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies centering on a process-focus approach.

A total of 980 members of blended families were interviewed by the researchers, with the questionnaire based on the findings of previous research studies conducted on the subject matter. Based on the data gathered by the researchers, they had determined that the major issues blended families had to cope with in order to become a strong nuclear family are the management of boundaries between members of the family, solidarity and adaptation to the concept of being a blended family.

The researchers determined that although the negotiation processes that occurred among members of blended families differs there remains some common factors which, in turn, help determine whether or not the blended family would be able to adapt or otherwise (Braithwaite et al 2000). According to the analysis of the data gathered by the researchers with regards to the methods of negotiation that occurs within blended families, they determined that those that have experienced what they considered to be constructive trajectories are more able to adapt to the situation a lot better, regardless of the issues at hand.

In the case of overcoming the issue with regards to boundary management, the researchers determined that successful blended families are those that through the proper use of interpersonalcommunicationskills, the members of the blended family are more able to have a smooth transition for the new

members of the family to become incorporated in the blended family. On the other hand, the lack of such negotiating skills can result for the addressing of boundary management to become stagnant within the first four years of being a blended family or even cause friction and turmoil to arise.

The same holds true with regards to addressing the issues of solidarity and adaptation among blended families. Based on this, the researchers concluded that manner on how interpersonal relationship and communication occurs between members of the blended family is a key factor in determining the success – or lack thereof – in the solidifying of the blended family (Braithwaite et al 2000). Critical Evaluation

In order to provide an ample critical evaluation with regards to the article summarized, the concept of “blended families” must first be determined. According to Shalay and Brownlee (2007), blended families are those families that occur as a result of a remarriage made on the part of the parents. In many cases, sociologists define blended families as those separated families that have been united with each other by marriage. In the United States, blended families have now become a common part of society.

In a country, where almost half of the marriages end in divorce, it has been estimated that 79% of divorced men and 75% divorced women would remarry, with 60% of this population having children from the previously dissolved marriage (Darden & Zimmerman 1992). While the commonly used terminology in society to refer to the parent-child relationship and sibling relationship resulting from the remarriage process as step families, sociologists prefer to use the term blended families to recognize the merging of these two families into one solid unit (Shalay & Brownlee 2007).

The focus of the article “ Becoming a Family”: Developmental Processes Represented in Blended Family Discourse is centered on the understanding of the different pathways that blended families undergo as they slowly merge and become one solid family unit. During this process, the researchers have determined that the main issues faced by blended families are boundary management, solidarity and adaptation.

Through the initial literature review conducted by the researchers for the study, they have determined that stage-based models initially used by sociologists have been extremely limited primarily due to its oversimplification of the stages presented and the assumption that blended families must attain a specific objective in order to reach the next level. The complexity of the structure of blended families have led the researchers to adopt a process approach to understand the different patterns and processes that blended families undergo in their quest in becoming a solid family unit (Braithwaite et al 2000).

These conclusions were also found by Wood in her book entitled Relational Communication: Continuity and Change in Personal Relationships. In her chapter which looks into the development of intimacy in interpersonal relationships, Wood (2000) stipulated that earlier models depicting stages within interpersonal relationships, such as that experienced in blended families, have been initially misinterpreted as a stage or a state where in fact, the development of intimacy is an ongoing process.

By viewing the development of intimacy in interpersonal relationships, one can assume that the moment the stage is completed, those involved in the interpersonal relationship would be able to progress to the next stage and

would no longer experience the conflicts and issues that have already been addressed in the previous stage. In reality, interpersonal relationships is an ongoing process depicted by the solving and resolving conflicts and issues throughout the length of the relationship, making the process approach more applicable in the understanding of blended families.

The premise presented by Wood in her book can also be found in the article of Ginther and Pollak entitled Family Structure and Children's Educational Outcomes: Blended Families, Stylized Facts, and Descriptive Regressions where they looked into the difference between the performance of children coming from "intact" families and those coming from blended families. Here, Ginther and Pollack (2004) stated that in the understanding of how being a part of a blended family would influence the educational performance of a child.

Based on the initial research they conducted, they determined that many of the literature that they reviewed approach the study of blended families through what they termed as stylized facts, which are simple correlations between parents and children in terms of the relationships that they foster within a blended family. Ginther and Pollack discovered that those that have utilized the stylized fact approach would often be a result of the inconsistent parenting styles experienced by the children in the presence of both the biological parent and the stepparent.

While this may partly be responsible for any form of conflict arising within blended families and thus, making the process of becoming a family unit more difficult, the study that they have conducted have found that this is brought about by the stress continuously experienced within the relationship

between parents and children in blended families. As such, they stipulated in their study that a change in the approach to focus more on the relationship between parents and children in blended families are more important in understanding the process undertaken by blended families into becoming solid family units.

In the article “ Becoming a Family”: Developmental Processes Represented in Blended Family Discourse, the use of negotiation has been considered extremely vital in the addressing of issues commonly faced by blended families in their quest to become a solid family unit. This premise has been supported in other studies that have been conducted by other researchers. In a study conducted by Darden and Zimmerman (1992), they looked into the various issues faced by blended families in the United States over the last decade from a theoretical, clinical and research perspective.

It was their understanding that much of the previous approaches and methods utilized in the understanding of blended families in the United States have been inadequate due to the fact that they were based on previous studies conducted on “ intact” families as well as single-parent families. The researchers have determined that the primary conflict rising within blended families are rooted from the roles that each member plays. The children still regard their biological, or natural, parents to be the only ones that have authority over their growth and development as individuals.

As a result, the stepparents would often find themselves feeling excluded from their role as being a parent to these children since negotiations are commonly made between biological parents instead between the biological parent and the stepparent. The importance of such negotiation between

biological parents was comprehensively explained in a study conducted by Kathleen Rodgers and Hilary Rose. In their study, which focused on the understanding factors that contribute further in the psychological and behavioral changes observed among adolescents in blended families.

This was done through the use of the risk and resiliency framework. Because of the loss of a recognized parent from the household, the adolescent in a blended family may perceive the infrequent presence of the recognized parent to be a loss of parental support. The resiliency framework is used to measure the level of adaptation that the adolescent experiences as a result of a challenging situation, in this case, the shift from an “ intact” family to a blended family.

Based on their findings, they had determined that one method for the proper and successful adaptation of the children in blended families is through the constant negotiation between biological parents as well as between the biological parent and stepparent would be able to resolve any feelings of resistance on the part of the children, which would, in turn, lead to the progress of the blended family in terms of addressing the three issues presented by Braithwaite and her colleagues which are boundary management, solidarity and adaptation (Rodgers & Rose 2002).

The negotiation process presented in the article “ Becoming a Family”: Developmental Processes Represented in Blended Family Discourse has been used as a tool used by many family therapists during counseling sessions, particularly with blended families who are having difficulties in becoming a solid family unit. In the article, much of the conflict arise as a result of the awareness of the fact that the initial expectations that had once

been held by members of the blended family are shattered as they realize the reality of the situation that they find themselves in.

One method utilized in family counseling sessions is the use of narrative therapy. In their article *Narrative Family Therapy with Blended Families*, Shalay and Brownlee (2007), determined through the study that they have conducted that through the use of a process approach, the narrative therapy proved to be beneficial in helping blended families become solid family units since through this method, they are able to discuss not just their expectations.

The narrative therapy also allows members of the family to relate any form of disappointments that they have experienced as a result of not being able to meet their initial expectations as well as social myths that they have heard with regards to blended families and influences of previous histories in their respective lives. Through this, members of the blended family are then able to reach a compromise resulting from negotiation processes carefully assisted by the therapist in order to ensure that the blended family becomes a solid family unit.

Conclusion With more and more families now becoming blended as a result of different social factors, particularly divorce and remarriage, harmony and unity within the family has now become extremely more complicated to achieve. Although this phenomenon is common, this nevertheless brings about new conflicts that have not been observed among traditional nuclear families. This includes the rise of the issues regarding boundary management, adaptation and solidarity.

It is for this reason that the use of negotiation skills has become more important among blended families in order to eradicate any fears and inhibitions felt by the members of the blended family in order to achieve harmony and unity, thus exhibiting the same traits found among traditional families. References Baithwaite, D. O. , Olson, L. N. , Golish, T. D. , Soukup, C. & Turman, P. (2002). “ Becoming a family”: developmental processes represented in blended family discourse.

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