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## **Stepmothers' Preparation for Remarriage: Influence on Spouse and Stepchildren Relations\***

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### **Abstract**

*Role theory suggests that preparation for one's role contributes to clearer guidelines and less ambiguity about role performance, which in turn contribute to unity and stability of family life (Cherlin, 1978). The purpose of this study was to examine if stepmothers preparation for remarriage (observation, reading, educational programs, or talking to their spouses) influenced their relationships with stepchildren and spouses. The results indicate that stepmothers who prepare for remarriage are more involved with their stepchildren, have higher levels of communication with the children's fathers regarding child rearing issues, and have positive relationships with their stepchildren.*

### **Introduction**

Although marriage is seldom approached with the expectation that a divorce will also occur in the near future, for 50% of couples in the United States that is indeed the case. In 1997 there were approximately 2.38 million marriages and 1.16 million

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divorces (NCHS, 1998). Current estimates suggest that 75% of women and 80% of men will usually remarry or cohabitate within 5 years following a divorce (Cherlin, 1992). In the initial stages of remarriage, the probability of again divorcing is higher if stepchildren are involved than if the remarried couple was childless (Clark and Wilson, 1994; Booth and Edwards, 1992). The implication is that the presence of children from former relationships creates additional stress for newly remarried couples.

According to the "incomplete institutionalization" hypothesis (Booth and Edwards, 1992; Cherlin, 1978), remarriages without children are guided by the same social norms as first marriages, whereas remarriages with stepchildren lack the social regulations, norms, and rituals that structure family interactions. Stepparents, particularly stepmothers, may experience difficulty in becoming involved with their stepchildren (Santrock and Sitterle, 1987; Thomson, McLanahan, and Curtin, 1992), developing affectionate relationships with them (Ganong and Coleman, 1994; Pruett, Calsyn, and Jensen, 1993), coming to agreement with their spouses on how the children should be reared (Keshet, 1990), or knowing what role they are to play (Fast and Cain, 1966; Pasley, Dollahite, and Ihinger-Tallman, 1993; Quick, McKenry, and Newman, 1994).

While concurring with Cherlin's (1978) concept of remarriage as an "incomplete institution," some researches argue

that the characteristics of remarriers, including the skills they bring with them for dealing with everyday problems, are what accounts for their divorce proneness (Furstenberg Jr. and Spanier, 1984; Pasley, Koch and Ihinger-Tallman, 1993) rather than the mere presence of children. For example, MacDonald and Demaris (1995) found that couples in remarriages with stepchildren do not necessarily have more marital conflict than do couples in first marriages, but they may not handle conflict as well. When couples are aware of the issues involved and communicate regarding possible solutions, they are better able to develop mutually suitable relations among stepfamily members (Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley, 1987; Quick, McKenry, and Newman, 1994; Skopin, Newman, and McKenry, 1993).

However, few couples seek out information about stepfamily living prior to their remarriage. In particular, Ganong and Coleman (1989) found that children and finances, two issues deemed particularly relevant by stepfamily professionals were not seriously discussed. To determine how individuals prepared for their stepparenting role, Ganong and Coleman surveyed 100 men and 105 women living in simple and complex stepfamilies. They found that the primary preparation method was cohabitation (59%) followed by counseling (men 25%, women 38%). Although more than half of the sample sought advice about remarriage from written materials, only two percent of the men and eight percent of

the women reported attending a support group with other stepparents, and only one woman attended an educational stepparenting/remarriage program.

Stepparenting programs such as *Strengthening Your Stepfamily* (Einstein and Albert, 1986), *Stepfamilies Stepping Ahead* (Stepfamily Association of America, 1989) and *Learning to Step Together* (Currier, 1982) focus on topics such as: the myths and unrealistic expectations about stepfamilies; stepfamily developmental stages and tasks, guidelines for parenting your spouse's children, and strengthening the remarried couple's relationship. Those who have attended educational programs for remarried couples report positive changes of moving from feeling overwhelmed, discouraged, and immobile, to feeling hopeful about managing problematic issues within the family (Mandell and Birenzweig, 1990 ). Bibliotherapy can also be used to help stepfamily members verbalize their thoughts and feelings and learn new ways to cope with problems (Pardeck, 1993). According to Gladding (1992), the benefits of literature in counseling include clients making discoveries about themselves, experiencing therapeutic relief and resolution to problems, a recognition that others experience similar issues, and taking constructive approaches to solving the problematic issues in their life.

## **Role Theory**

According to role theory, the structure of social systems is made up of interactional systems. When interactions are repeated and are considered significant, they develop into shared expectations, or norms (Bates and Harvey, 1975; Lindzey and Aronson, 1985; Nye, 1976). These norms specify what members of a group ought to do and are expected to do under given circumstances (Gelles and Levine, 1995). Social norms provide family members with clear guidelines for expected role performance, which, in turn, contribute to the unity and stability of everyday family life (Cherlin, 1978).

In addition to the benefit of clear expectations for role performance, institutionalized roles offer opportunities to learn how to play those roles. Anticipatory socialization is the act of preparing oneself for the role. Preparation may be noninteractive, such as reading about the role or eavesdropping on those who are performing it, or interactive, such as talking with others who are performing the role (Heiss, 1981). When individuals experience a number of socialization processes, including imitation or modeling, direct instruction, and identification with socialization agents (Lindzey and Aronson, 1985), they are more aware of what is expected of them and feel more secure about making and playing their roles.

Cherlin (1978,1980) suggests that differential in divorce rates

between first marriages and remarriages is because the established norms of nuclear families provide them with guidelines leading to fewer decisions, fewer disagreements, and correspondingly increased family unity. Because of the incomplete institutionalization of the stepfamily, they lack these same social guidelines and are left to resolve difficult issues more or less on their own, leading to increased levels of stress, conflict and confusion among family members (Cherlin, 1978; Ganong and Coleman, 1994).

Stepmothers, experiencing ambiguity in regard to their role with stepchildren feel frustrated, depressed, and concerned about trying to enact a role that is largely undefined, has few guidelines, and for which they have not been trained (Draughon, 1975; Quick, McKenry, and Newman, 1994; Whitsett and Land, 1992). Because there are fewer of them, stepmothers have fewer models to compare themselves with when negotiating their role (Clingempeel, Brand, and Ievoli, 1984) and they may not know other stepmothers in whom they can confide or ask for advice. There is a hesitancy to ask those who are not stepmothers for fear of being seen as inept or, worse yet, wicked. (Ganong and Coleman, 1994). In addition, couples in remarriages tend to have less interaction with their parents and in-laws and they are less likely to utilize these family members for support when they experience problems in their marriage (Booth and Edwards, 1992).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine if stepmothers' preparation for the stepmothering role is related to their involvement and relationship with stepchildren and their perception of agreement with the stepchildren's fathers on issues regarding childrearing. In light of the previous discussion, it is hypothesized that anticipatory socialization: (H1) is positively related to involvement with stepchildren, and (H2) positively related to an affectionate relationship with stepchildren, and (H3) negatively related to disagreements with spouses on childrearing issues.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

The sample consisted of women in remarried families, living in a Midwestern community, who indicated on marriage license applications (dating from January, 1991 through April, 1996) that either they or their intended spouse had been previously married. From the initial group of 2,847 subjects, 80 percent of the women (N=2,227) were randomly selected to be contacted by mail. Addresses were located for 1,360 of the women using a printed telephone directory and a CD-ROM telephone directory. A questionnaire and a follow-up postcard were mailed to these individuals. Of the 1,360 addresses obtained, 344 questionnaires

were returned as undeliverable due to an insufficient address, no forwarding address, or no one living at the address at the time. Twenty six percent (n=260) of the 1016 individuals who received the survey returned it, but 106 of the returned surveys could not be analyzed because they did not meet the criteria (i.e. remarriage without children) producing a useable sample of 154 stepmothers.

Of the 154 returned questionnaires, 96% were Caucasian, ranging in age from 22 to 67 years ( $M=39$ ). The majority was well educated, either having attended college (27.3%) or having a college degree (34.7%). Most of the women were in their first remarriage (40.9%), although 32.5 % stated that this was their first marriage, and 23% indicated that they had experienced from two to four remarriages. About 4% were currently separated or seeking a divorce.

### Measures

The participants completed questionnaires that included measures of the stepmother's preparation for the stepmother role (i.e. anticipatory socialization), perceptions of disagreement with spouse on childrearing, amount of involvement with stepchild, and affection toward stepchild. Because the relationship a stepmother may differ with each of her stepchildren, the respondent was asked to focus her responses on the youngest stepchild.

Miller's (1976) Anticipatory Role Socialization Measure was

used to operationalize the concept of preparation for the role of stepmother. The five-item scale assesses preparation through classes or educational programs, observing others in the role, reading, and discussion with one's spouse, or having previous experience in the role. Miller (1976) reported a coefficient alpha of .74 and principle-factor loadings of .47 to .56 on a single factor when the scale was used in a study of marital satisfaction. In comparison, this study found an alpha of .57. Principle components analyses produced factor loadings ranging from .55 to .80 on a single factor.

The Disagreement over Childrearing Scale subjectively measured stepmothers' perceptions of disagreement with their spouses on childrearing. The 10 items were adapted from Ahron's Disagreement Over Children Inventory, cited in Ganong and Coleman, (1989) The inventory was used to determine how much disagreement exists between the spouses regarding children in areas such as discipline, curfews, school performance, and the children's general behavior. The coefficient alpha reported by Ganong and Coleman was .78 compared to this study which was .89.

To determine the level of involvement stepmothers had with their stepchildren, Ahrons and Wallish's (1987) 14 item Involvement with Children Scale was used to ask stepmothers about the activities they engaged in with their stepchild. These activities included such items as celebrating holidays and significant events

as well as involvement in daily routines and activities. Ahrons and Wallish reported a reliability coefficient of .88 for the participants in their sample and we found a coefficient alpha of .96 for the stepmothers who rated themselves on each of the items.

Finally, the Positive Affect Relationship Scale consisted of selected items from the Family Solidarity Measures included in Bengtson's USC Longitudinal Study of Generations (1971-72, 1973). On this scale, which measured stepmothers' perceptions of liking, understanding, trust and respect, closeness, and fair treatment between the stepmother and stepchild, a coefficient alpha of .88 was found.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

Responses from 153 women were analyzed; one case was omitted from the analysis due to numerous missing values. As Table 1. indicates, the variable measures used in this study were ordinal so Spearman's rho was used to examine relationships between the variables.

**Table 1. Relationship of Anticipatory Socialization with Selected Variables**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>sig.</i>
Disagreement Over Childrearing Scale	-.206	.015
Involvement with Children Scale	.318	.000
Positive Affect Scale	.294	.000

The findings indicate that Anticipatory Socialization Scores were positively related to involvement ( $rho=.318$ ;  $p=.000$ ) and Positive Affect Scale scores ( $rho=.294$ ;  $p=.000$ ) and were negatively related to the Disagreement over Childrearing Scale scores ( $rho=-.206$ ;  $p=.015$ ). That is, a greater amount of preparation for stepmothering was associated with the stepmothers' higher degree of involvement with and greater affection toward the youngest child. Likewise, a greater amount of preparation for the role of stepmother was associated with lower levels of disagreement related to childrearing issues. Thus, our research hypotheses were accepted.

**Table 2: Post hoc analysis: Differences among preparation levels**

<i>Independent Variable Type of preparation</i>	<i>Involvement</i>	<i>Dependent Variables Positive Affect</i>	<i>Disagreement Over Childrearing</i>
Little or no preparation	2.49	3.57	1.92
Observed or talked	3.14	4.30	1.54
Attended program or read	3.21	4.40	1.43
Both types	3.45	4.55	1.59

To determine the influences of different types of preparation on stepmothers' relationships with stepchildren and spouses, stepmothers were divided into four categories: those with little or no preparation (n=54; 35.3%), those who had prepared by observing other stepfamilies or talked with their spouses (n=68; 44.4%), those who had accessed educational materials either by reading or attending programs (n=3; 2.0%), and those who had both read and attended educational programs and had also observed and talked to others (n=28; 18.3%).

Analysis of variance was used to examine the effects the independent variable, type of preparation, had on the dependent variables of involvement with stepchildren, positive affection toward stepchildren, and spousal disagreement on childrearing. As indicated in Table 2, the means for the levels of preparation were significantly different for each of the dependent variables

(involvement,  $p=.001$ ; affection,  $p=.002$ ; spousal agreement,  $p=0.015$ ). According to the results of *post hoc* comparisons, when stepmothers have little or no preparation for remarriage, there is less positive affect between them and their stepchildren, less involvement with stepchildren, and greater spousal disagreement regarding the stepchildren. However, when stepmothers have observed or talked with other stepmothers, read educational materials, or attended educational programs the reverse appears to be true.

### **Discussion and Implications**

There is a growing body of evidence that marriage preparation courses can improve couple's conflict resolution and communication skills and decrease the likelihood of marital problems (Markman and Hahlweg, 1993). Divorce education programs have been shown to improve relationships with children and former spouses (Arbuthnot, Kramer and Gordon, 1997; Pasley and Futris, 2000), yet studies have not examined what, if any, benefits exist from attending specific remarriage preparation programs. Consistent with previous research findings that increased involvement with stepchildren is related to positive relationships with stepchildren (Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley, 1987; Santrock and Sitterlee, 1987), this study found that preparation for stepmothering is associated with increased involvement with stepchildren, higher levels of communication with the children's

fathers regarding child rearing, and improved relationships with stepchildren. Although the hypotheses of this study were accepted, it must be acknowledged that the correlations are weak. The variety of preparation styles that were analyzed may have contributed to this low correlation. Even so, it is not known what aspects of the anticipatory socialization contributed to the positive relational aspects that were found. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be conducted to determine who does or does not participate in remarriage programs, and if the programs currently offered impact the remarriage or stepparental quality of the participants compared to those who do not take advantage of these programs, and to identify the characteristics of particular programs that have been shown to strengthen stepfamily relations.

Stepfamily members, and the practitioners working with them, can benefit through understanding how preparation for the stepmother role facilitates the building of positive relations within the stepfamily. Stepmothers and their spouses needing direction or assurance about the stepmother role may need to be encouraged to participate in early preparation for remarriage. Preparation for remarriage can occur through several sources including bibliotherapy, involvement in stepfamily support groups, and educational programs that specifically address relevant stepfamily issues.

Although helping professionals recommend attending

educational programs or reading literature to prepare for remarriage, the participants in this study indicated that these were not methods they chose to use. Since this study was conducted in a rural Midwestern community in the Great Plains region, it may be that programs or educational materials were either unavailable or the individuals, living in small populated communities, where everyone knows each other, did not attend a program for fear of being negatively labeled. Another possibility is the lack of time, energy, or interest in attending educational programs that do not fit with their time schedule. In either case, the indication is that professionals, especially those in rural areas, need to look at new options for information delivery to the families they serve. One alternative is an independently used, home-based program, such as RENEW: Building Remarried Family Strengths (Duncan, 1990) which is available through the Cooperative Extension Service. Another alternative is the use of technology to access information on remarriage and stepparenting on the Internet. According to Walz (1996), the information highway "allows counselors to overcome problems of distance and time to offer opportunities for networking and interacting not otherwise available" (p.417). Typing in "stepparenting" on a search engine gives access to links offering books, videos, support groups, referrals to local counseling professionals trained to work with stepparents, and chat rooms to discuss issues in real time with other stepparents. Links <sup>2</sup> Go

(<http://www.links2go.com/>) is a directory that finds links related to topics and web sites. For example, if [www.stepfamily.org](http://www.stepfamily.org) is entered, the user obtains links to several national organizations for stepparents, including Stepfamily Association of America, Stepfamily Foundation, Stepfamily Network, and specifically for stepmothers, Stepmothers.Org and Stepmom's Retreat. Stepfamily members should be advised, however, that they should use their own best judgement when using information from Internet sites. The creators of the sites are not always professionals in the field and the information presented may not be based on quality scientific research (Elliott, 1999).

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