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Boundary Ambiguity, Contact Consistency and Role Confusion
in Complex Stepfamily Households

Aida Mirshak

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Sociology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
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Aida Mirshak, 1993



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ABSTRACT

Boundary Ambiguity, Contact Consistency and Role Confusion in Complex Stepfamily Households

Aida Mirshak

This study explores the difficulties which arise in complex stepfamilies, where both partners have children from previous marriages. Problems of family integration which create discord among family members include boundary ambiguity, contact consistency and role confusion. Boundary ambiguity refers to the uncertainty surrounding family membership which develops because of the extended network of family members acquired in the previous marriage(s) and the present one. Contact consistency relates to the consistency/inconsistency of patterns of contact between stepfamily members and the non-residential children or stepchildren. Role confusion applies primarily to the lack of clarity in respect to the roles and responsibilities of stepparents vis-à-vis their stepchildren.

The sample in this study consists of eight remarried/cohabiting couples, with children from previous marriages. The sixteen men and women participants were interviewed separately in their homes. Their perceptions were examined in an attempt to verify whether or not these issues are indeed part of the common and recurring problems they face as parents and stepparents. The findings indicate that the most serious and recurring problems for members of this sample involve their children and stepchildren. Out of the three concepts examined in this research, role confusion represents the most crucial and difficult one, followed by

contact consistency, whereas boundary ambiguity seems to be the least problematic of the three.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the family has been the focus of countless studies within the realm of the social sciences. Several reasons account for this scrutiny, some of which revolve around the many transformations that take place within this vital primary group. The increase of divorce and remarriage, increased openness regarding sexual orientation, and acceptance of cohabitation over the last three decades have changed the family from a static, uniform institution to a multi-dimensional one with different types and forms.

Canadian vital statistics covering the years 1967 through 1972 disclosed a 205% surge in the divorce rate. In 1981, a study by "Canadian family trends" reported that 67,909 Canadians got married for the second time, 82% of whom had been divorced (Messinger, 1984: 217-219). In the United States, it is estimated that approximately 1.5 million people will remarry each year (Glick, 1980). One out of five marriages is estimated to be a remarriage for one or both spouses, which represents a large group of remarried families in the United States (Ganong & Coleman, 1989: 28). Close to 60% of these men and women will have custody of at least one child, and 20% will have non-residential (non-custodial) children (Weingarten, 1980).

Until recently, the nuclear family was considered to be the "normal family" and "ideal type model" by family sociologists and policy makers alike (Bernardes, 1986: 828). Definitions of the nuclear family model in

sociological literature and in the social sciences portray the family unit as comprised of a father (breadwinner), a mother (homemaker), and two or three children. But this portrayal of the family as a relatively uniform institution lacks accuracy and validity as it does not take into account the many forms of "family diversity" (Bernardes, 1986: 592). Because the nuclear model was traditionally held to be the only "normal" one, so-called social problems such as divorce, single parenthood and remarriages, which have increased significantly over the last two or three decades, were considered pathological and as "deviations from the normal pattern" (Bernardes, 1987: 682). This is a clear case of 'cultural lag' in the theory and empiricism of sociology which remains saddled with its patriarchal past.

Divorced women and men who have children from previous marriages and who opt to remarry are part of a relatively new social phenomenon: The "stepfamily". In the past remarriage followed the death of a spouse. Today, however, the great majority of remarriages take place following divorce; consequently, remarriages are acquiring a new significance because they are becoming an increasingly predominant family form. The new "remarried family system" is a complicated one because of the increased likelihood of differences in backgrounds, value systems and lifestyles of the people concerned: the remarried couples, their children and stepchildren.

Statistics suggest that 35% of all children born in the 1980s will live in a single parent household for approximately five years before their eighteenth birthday (Glick, 1984; Norton & Glick, 1986). Estimates suggest also that most of these children can expect to live in single

parent households twice because of the tendency of redivorce by the custodial parent. Consequently, both adults and children will have to go through the process several times of redefining their family membership, and re-establishing the roles and rules by which to live several times (Pasley & Tallman, 1989: 51). Moreover, these new family units are not necessarily stable and harmonious. In the United States, remarriages are at a higher risk of dissolution than first marriages, with an estimated divorce rate of 55% (Furstenberg, 1984: 31), whereas Canadian statistics point to a slightly lower rate of 50% (Messinger, 1984: 111). In either case the divorce rate is alarming. Why are the chances for success for stepfamilies so grim, and why does the adjustment to remarriage seem so difficult to achieve? These questions will be answered in the course of this study.

The family is one of the principal primary groups in our society. A primary group is distinctive because of its numerous, ongoing, intimate face-to-face interaction which is characterized by polar attributes: feelings of love, closeness and affinity alongside elements of competition, hostility, dislike and rivalry. Family members experience these entangled feelings on a regular basis. Through the process of socialization and continued affiliation and interrelationship, individual family members are usually able to resolve their major differences.

One of the characteristic differences between "first" families and stepfamilies is the lack, in the latter, of a common and shared history. A common family history is a slow and cumulative process which begins with courtship. Once married, the couple usually has time to adapt to one another and to their married life before children are born.

The first basic problem which stepfamily members face is the complexity of relationships. Couples who remarry following divorce instantly acquire families made up of individuals they know little about. That is often the case whenever the wife or husband, who is also a biological parent acquires the responsibility of caring for and looking after the other partner's children. This complexity exists also for the children, who suddenly find themselves living with or dealing with stepsiblings on a regular basis.

The purpose of this research is to explore the most common problems and difficulties which afflict the stepfamily and threaten its stability: boundary ambiguity, boundary clarity or contact consistency and role confusion. Special attention will be given to the issues which are directly related to family membership, the presence of children and/or stepchildren in the stepfamily household on a full-time and part-time basis, and the interaction between stepparents and stepchildren. The specific focus of this research will be elaborated upon in chapter 2.

Chapter Two

REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

The aims in this chapter are to examine the general problems of stepfamilies and the reasons why remarriage is considered a source of stress, and to focus on the more specific problems that are directly related to this research. The literature dealing with the family and stepfamily is vast and varied. For purposes of this study, however, the selection in this chapter is limited to the literature that has been judged to be most relevant. All stepfamily specialists whose research is used in this chapter agree about the crucial importance of finding viable solutions to the problems which afflict stepfamilies. Some of the serious problems revolve around the absence of societal guidelines and social norms with respect to stepfamily life which poses a significant problem for stepfamilies. Other problems include the difficulty in managing steprelationships, the difficulty for stepfamily members of working constructively on the process of adaptation and the fear over the alarming rate of dissolution of this family type.

The following section considers the general problems and difficulties which become manifest in remarried families, and which are unlike those in nuclear families.

Remarriage as a Stressor

Unlike a first marriage, remarriage involves the remarrying couple and their children. Starting a stepfamily is a crucial transition, not

only for the parent, stepparent and children, but also for the ex-spouse and the grandparents. Sager (1983) and Ahrons (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987) suggest that the kinship system which surfaces in remarriage is a confusing one, because it is made up of a wide network of people created through the divorce and remarriage: blood ties, in-laws, former in-laws and steprelationships.

According to family stress theorists, remarriage is regarded as a "stressor event" and is conceptualized as a normative transition because it changes the family boundary of the existing family group, the single parent household, by adding one or more new family members. It is also conceptualized as a normal part of a family's life cycle (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989: 325). Remarriage brings about additional stress when, as in any family, one or several members of the immediate and/or extended family disapprove of the couple's decision to remarry. Moreover, remarriage brings about particular stresses and pressures as it changes the condition and structure of the family group by assigning new roles and responsibilities to the incoming stepparent and induces a revision to the old rules and roles which were in effect up to that point in time. Messinger's book on remarriage (1984) explores the general problems which confront newly formed stepfamilies. The author discusses the disequilibrium that usually marks the beginning of stepfamily life, as well as the rights, responsibilities and the authority of stepparents vis-à-vis their stepchildren.

Importance of Parent-Child Bonds

One of the major distinctions between stepfamilies and intact nuclear families is the fact that, in the former, "parent-child bonds predate the new couple's relationship" (Visher & Visher, 1983: 137). Consequently, in contrast to the new couple relationship which has not yet had the required time to grow, the parent-child relationship appears to be very strong, strengthened and sustained by a shared history and the linkages which started with the children's birth. This may be unsettling for the stepparent who is only beginning the process of developing a meaningful relationship with the partner's children and/or who may not yet be accepted by the stepchildren as their parent's new spouse/mate. The article by Emily and John Visher on stepparenting (1983) accentuates the major sources of stress and tensions that distinguish stepfamilies from biological families. Unlike first marriages which begin with a honeymoon, remarried couples start their communal lives with the full responsibility of a ready-made family, including their residential and/or their non-residential children and stepchildren (Visher & Visher, 1983).

Membership in Dual Households

While most children live with the custodial parent on a full-time basis, they often commute between their household and that of their other biological parent. If there is a sense of harmony and/or agreement between the ex-spouses, the children go back and forth with relative ease. If, on the other hand, there are unresolved issues or a breakdown in communication between the biological parents, the children find

themselves caught in the middle of the ongoing battle, making it difficult for them to have a sense of belonging to the new family of one or both parents.

Linked to the fact that children are members of two households is the pain of accepting that one parent lives elsewhere. Even if the parent has died, his/her influence and presence continues to be felt by the surviving children. After both parents have gone on with their own lives, children continue to mourn the break-up of their parents' divorce for a long time. It is often difficult for the children to accept the new stepparent, who, to them, is occupying the legitimate place of the other parent. Because of loyalty to the other parent, children may consciously or unconsciously create and cause serious problems and conflicts between the remarried parent and the stepparent (Messinger, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1983).

Loyalty conflicts are serious problems which afflict grown-ups and children alike. Stepparents may feel disloyal towards their natural children as they attempt to get closer to their stepchildren. Children on the other hand, may continue to reject their stepparent out of fear of being disloyal to the other non-custodial parent. They may also feel threatened and may fear losing the love of the custodial parent because they must share the latter with their stepparent and stepsiblings.

Realistic versus Unrealistic Expectations

One of the most common and misleading presumptions most remarried couples make is to assume that all members of their family will automatically love, respect and appreciate one another, and that everything

will work out. Worried about negative stereotypes and eager to undertake their difficult but challenging roles, stepmothers often plunge into the roles of "super women" and "super moms" in an attempt to shed the image of the "wicked stepmother". This deception can only lead to frustration, disappointment and guilt because it is based on unrealistic expectations. "Instant love" (Visher & Visher, 1983; Messinger, 1984) is impossible to achieve because the numerous relationships found in most stepfamilies require adjustment and take time to develop. Furthermore, unrealistic expectations often compel remarried couples to feel and behave in a certain manner in the hope of attaining "instant" harmony and family integration. When the anticipated results are not achieved, feelings of guilt and frustration develop, which in turn lead to conflicts and arguments among stepfamily members. Sociologist Frank Furstenberg maintains that such problems are directly related to the absence of norms, "there are no rules, no stereotypes for these people to draw on in this new social arrangement" (Messinger, 1984: 152). Margaret Crosbie-Burnett (1989) attributes remarried couples' expectations of "instant love" to their strong desire to become "reconstituted". Most stepfamilies continue to adopt society's model of the intact nuclear family as the "real" family.

The expectation is ingrained in the language. "Reconstituted" means recreating the original and real form. This is a set-up for disappointment, anger, frustration, and guilt because a stepfamily household embedded in an extended stepfamily network does not function like an autonomous intact nuclear family. Stepfamilies need to let go of the myth of "reconstitution" and take pride in becoming a well-functioning stepfamily.

(Crosbie-Burnett, 1989: 327)

Absence of Social Norms

While working on a model for stepfamily development, David Mills (1984) found that the model of the intact nuclear family is often adopted and used as a guide by stepfamily members, who are familiar with it because of their past experiences as nuclear family members. Remarried couples resort to those roles because of their eagerness to be accepted and to appear "normal" to those who are unfamiliar with their family situation. Mills found that this practice usually leads to problematic cycles of interaction which prevent family members from achieving their goal of adaptation and integration.

Such problems may be due to the absence of social norms pertaining to stepfamily life. Studies and research on stepfamilies have shown that the lack of societal guidelines and/or lack of institutionalization (Cherlin, 1978) are partly responsible for many problems that afflict stepfamilies (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989; Pasley, 1987).

Andrew Cherlin's "Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution" (1978) is an article that examines the reasons for the high divorce rate in the United States. The absence of standard solutions, coupled with the incomplete institutionalization of the remarried family, remain the main factors that threaten the stability of the stepfamily. When addressing the core problems of remarried families, Cherlin comments on "the lack of institutionalized social regulation of remarried life" by stating: "Our society, oriented toward first marriages, provides little guidance on problems peculiar to remarriages, especially remarriages after divorce" (Cherlin, 1978: 643). To support his argument, Cherlin examines

two pivotal institutions in our society: language and law. Drawing on an article written by Gerth and Mills (1953) he writes:

Language is necessary to the operations of institutions.
For the symbols used in institutions coordinate the
roles that compose them, and justify the enactment of
these roles by the members of the institution.
(Cherlin, 1978:643)

Cherlin draws the attention of the reader to the lack of adequate English terms to represent and/or symbolize remarriage after divorce. The term "stepparent" was originally devised to designate the person who replaced a dead parent, whereas in actuality, people continue to use it in reference to the biological parent's spouse due to the absence of a more adequate term.

What should children call their stepparents? "Mom" and "Dad" are often inappropriate since the children have a biological mother and father already. Even if stepparents are addressed as "Mom" and "Dad", the other step-siblings may object to this usage due to reasons of insecurity or fear of losing their parent's love and affection. Nevertheless, the inadequacy of the term "stepparent" is easier to manage than the really problematic one, "stepmother". The "wicked stepmother" always has been and continues to be a prominent character in folklore and children's fairy tales. Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel and Snow White represent the most popular tales which perpetuate the negative stereotypes with which the image of the stepmother is associated.

Cherlin focuses on family laws to substantiate his claim of the lack of institutionalization of the remarried family. The law is used "as a

means of social control and an indicator of accepted patterns of behavior" (Cherlin, 1978: 644). Furthermore, family law is designed to provide family members with guidelines that clearly establish their rights and duties. A close examination of family law, however, reveals once again, that the model used in family policy is based on the traditional intact nuclear family. The idealistic assumption of the preponderance of first marriages is retained despite contrary statistical evidence. There is a scarcity of legal and societal provisions with relation to some of the problems of remarriage. The law, for example, does not define the wife's responsibilities and obligations to husbands and children from the present and former marriages. There is also a lack of clarity concerning the competing claims of current and ex-spouses for shares of the estate of a deceased spouse. More importantly, there are no legal regulations concerning incest and consanguineous marriages for remarried families.

The law, then, ignores the special problems of families of remarriages after divorce. It assumes, for the most part, that remarriages are similar to first marriages. Families of remarriages after divorce consequently often must deal with problems such as financial obligations or sexual relations without legal regulations or clear legal precedent. The law, like the language, offers incomplete institutional support to families of remarriages.

(Cherlin, 1978: 645)

The study by Margaret Crosbie-Burnett (1989) serves as a guide for intervention and a basis for policy supporting remarried families. In an attempt to examine the various solutions which are now being offered to remarried families at the various community centres, Crosbie-Burnett reports her disappointment regarding the dearth of such help. She

comments on the inadequacy of the community resources which are designed to assist stepfamilies under stress by saying:

Unfortunately, the fit between the stepfamily and the community and culture is awkward at best and is more likely to be a hardship than a resource at the present time. Cherlin's (1978) lack of institutionalization of remarriage hypothesis is supported by studies reporting not only a lack of norms for behavior for remarrieds (Goetting, 1980), but a bias against stepfamily members (Bryan, Coleman, Ganong, & Bryan, 1986). The negative connotation of the prefix "step" is ubiquitous in our culture and adds to the pressure for stepfamilies to present a public facade of an intact nuclear family. The lack of fit between characteristics of a stepfamily and the culture's definition of "family" may inhibit movement toward consolidation as a healthy stepfamily, which requires variations on traditional family roles, relationships, boundaries, and so forth.

(Crosbie-Burnett, 1989: 327)

Pile-Ups

Stepfamilies often sustain hardships and strains which family stress theory has labelled "pile-ups" (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). The term refers to a wide range of emotional, economic and work-related pressures, some of which are directly related to remarriage. For example, parents and children often establish strong emotional bonds following the parents' divorce, especially during the time of the single parent household. Children become accustomed to the emotional closeness and to the attention of their parents. Once the biological parents remarry, however, children soon realize that they are no longer the sole recipients of their parents' time and affection. In addition, biological parents often experience a sense of confusion following remarriage. They feel caught in the middle of a feuding camp as they attempt to deal with

the new set-up in order to expedite the integration of the new stepparent.

Other "pile-ups" include prior unresolved strains such as the sense of emotional loss experienced by grown-ups and children alike following the break-up of the first marriage. Children who refuse to accept their parents' divorce and who continue to long for their parents' reconciliation make it difficult for the biological parent and the stepparent to proceed with the process of adaptation.

Often remarried adults are at a loss when faced with the disturbing predicament of conflicting life cycles, created when remarriage unites individuals who are at different stages of their lives. For example, newly remarried couples often long for quiet and peaceful times alone, while the presence and/or demands of the residing children often prevent them from fulfilling these basic needs. Stress may also arise whenever the couple is at conflicting individual personal stages, as in the case of one partner with no biological children who wishes to have a child, while the other feels that two grown children from a previous marriage are enough. Adolescents may be pressured into spending more time with the rest of the family in an effort to strengthen the family identity and family bonds at a time when they are searching for their own sense of identity and may consequently feel the need to spend more time with their peers rather than their families. Such conflicts are due to the competing needs and requirements of family members at different stages in the family life cycle.

Messinger (1984) refers to these different life transitions as "multiple life cycle tracks" to describe the various individual, marital

and family life cycles. Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman reported that 100% of their sample of 784 remarried individuals highly valued "a close family and many shared times," while their findings indicated that only a few of them were able to accomplish the desired closeness (Pasley, 1987: 213).

McCubbin (1983) maintains that the process of "cogwheeling", which is the fitting together of the developmental cycles of individual family members, is one of crucial importance because it explains how the different individual developmental tasks are fused and joined with one another in the family system. Pile-ups also include "combining two family cultures, redistribution of resources, boundary ambiguity, role ambiguity, loyalty and jealousy, and children changing households" (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989: 324)

Lack of Preparation for Remarriage

Interested in the high rate of divorce for remarriages, Lawrence Ganong and Marilyn Coleman (1989) undertook a study to examine the ways remarried couples and their children prepare for remarriage. Their research is based in part on some work by Stanton in 1986, which claims that "many, if not most, of the conflicts and problems encountered by stepfamilies are due not to individual psychopathology or to inevitable interpersonal hassles, but instead are due to potentially preventable situations" (Ganong & Coleman, 1989: 28).

Ganong and Coleman's sample, was made up of 100 men and 105 women, all of whom remarried and some of whom had children from first marriages. The results indicated that the most frequently used method of

preparation for remarriage was cohabitation (59%). Very few consulted stepfamily specialists prior to remarriage to avail themselves of recommendations by stepfamily experts. Those who sought counselling from family therapists (25% of the men and 38% of the women) did so only after they remarried and when serious problems arose. Therefore, counselling was not used as a preventative measure. Consequently, those who were in therapy reported more conflicts, marital problems and stepfamily problems than those who did not receive counselling.

The study also revealed that only 2% of the men and 8% of the women joined a support group of any kind and only one woman reported attending a remarriage education program prior to remarriage. According to the authors, men and women in the sample seemed to have difficulty seeking advice on how to prevent and solve problems. Support groups were rarely utilized, especially by men who did not consider them helpful or beneficial. Men were less likely to ask for help and less likely to deem the advice helpful than women.

The infrequent use of stepfamily resources prior to and following remarriage is due to (1) a lack of awareness in our society concerning prevention of potential problems, (2) the scarcity of readily available assistance for stepfamily preparation. (For example, the authors found only a few stepfamily groups available in the communities in which data were collected and a few family professionals trained to work with remarried families), (3) the unrealistic expectations of the partners, (4) the lack of time spent discussing potential problems and concerns prior to remarriage, and (5) the tendency of remarried couples to

pretend that they are first-marriage nuclear families in order to prevent embarrassment (Coleman & Ganong, 1989: 31).

In addition to these difficulties, there are other factors which contribute to the problems and hardships of remarried couples. The review of the literature now turns directly to the specific issues undertaken in this study. The theoretical framework of this research is most closely related to studies by Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1987; 1989) who examine the causes for boundary ambiguity in remarried family life and the effects it has on marital adjustment and integration, and by Crosbie-Burnett (1989) which applies family stress theory to remarriage.

Family Context and Structural Complexity

The concept of "context" consists of one's cultural background, family style, and/or the "extent of community support available to a particular member or family group" (Pasley, 1987: 212). Pasley maintains, however, that the concept must be expanded to include "certain structural characteristics which likely influence the boundaries differentiating subsystems within the family, as well as the family as a group from other families in the external environment" (Pasley, 1987: 212). The structural complexity of a stepfamily varies according to the type of the remarried family. Complex stepfamilies are those in which both partners have children from previous marriages, some of whom are in residence. Consequently, the structural complexity of this particular family form is expected to be more pronounced than in simple remarried

families, where only one of the spouses has children from a previous marriage. Furthermore, complex types are more likely than simple types to encounter problems of ambiguity due to greater structural complexity and the increased need for boundaries to be permeable. This study deals specifically with complex stepfamilies.

Family Boundary

"The remarried family system is erected on complex foundations that are connected by ties to the past and to the present" (Messinger, 1984: 152). Remarried couples soon discover that some of the immediate challenges they face are those that revolve around "boundary maintenance", "boundary ambiguity", "boundary clarity" and "boundary permeability".

"Family boundary" derives from family systems theory and refers to "system and subsystem rules regarding participating members, in other words, who, when, and how members participate in family life" (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin, et. al., 1967 as quoted by Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989). The basic premise behind family systems theory suggests that family life is always changing and that most of the changes, such as the birth of a child, the mother of the child returning to the workforce or a grown child leaving the family home are events that are expected, predictable, and common to almost all families. Nevertheless, these changes require adjustment and adaptation by all family members.

These events are viewed as "normative life transitions" or "normative life cycle transitions" because family life and the family system change over time in normal social, psychological and physical develop-

ment, and stress is part of the overall developmental process (McCubbin & Figley, 1983: xxi).

Boundary Ambiguity

"Boundary ambiguity" refers to the doubtfulness or uncertainty among family members regarding "their perceptions about who is in or out of the family" (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1987: 206). It is defined as "a lack of clarity, a vagueness or an indefiniteness that is related to boundaries within and between families. It has been linked to increased family stress and overall family dysfunction" (Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Minuchin, 1974). According to Pauline Boss, boundaries include physical and psychological dimensions which help promote a sense of identity and differentiate the members of a group or family from one another, and from other groups or families (Boss, 1977, 1980b; Boss & Greenberg, 1984).

Boundaries are blurred when psychological presence is coupled with physical absence, as for example when a remarriage follows the death of the first husband before the completion of the mourning process. The mother continues to refer to the deceased first husband and to act as if he were still around, confusing the children and stepfather alike.

Unclear family boundaries occur in situations where the physical presence of a family member is coupled with psychological absence. Children who do not accept the remarriage of one of their biological parents may demonstrate their defiance by constantly ignoring their live-in stepparent and treating that parent as if he/she were not physically present.

Some of the literature on remarriage suggests that unclear family boundaries are more common in stepfamilies than in first marriages, (Messinger, 1976; Robinson, 1980; Walker & Messinger, 1979) due to potentially greater permeability and the need to redefine membership. Complex stepfamilies, where both partners have children from previous marriages have an extensive network of kinship affiliation due to considerable number of family members acquired through previous marriages, as well as the present one. The extended network of people associated with stepfamily members causes the family boundaries to become more permeable in order to accommodate members of the extended kin and quasi-kin network. "Quasi-kin is a term used by Bohanan, (1970) to refer to a former spouse, his/her new spouse, and former in-laws (Pasley, 1987: 223). Hence, boundary permeability refers to the openness of boundaries of the stepfamily household as a direct result of the considerable number of people who are part of this extensive kinship system.

Stepfamilies, especially complex stepfamilies, include children from previous marriages, some of whom live with the remarried couple, others live with the other biological parent elsewhere. As stepfamily members go through the process of adaptation during the first few years of their lives together, they may feel confused and doubtful about the membership of the non-residential children. These feelings may be shared by the latter partly because they reside somewhere else. Depending on each particular case, time is needed to resolve the problem of membership.

Boundary Clarity or Contact Consistency

Boundary clarity is a concept used to measure family functioning. It was first introduced by Minuchin in 1974 to refer to the "consistency of patterns of contact between family members and others" (Pasley, 1987: 209). The literature on stepfamilies uses boundary clarity to refer to the consistency and/or inconsistency of patterns of contact between stepfamily members and the non-residential children or stepchildren who live with the other biological parent (Pasley & Ihinger Tallman, 1989; Pasley, 1987). Having reviewed the definition ascribed to boundary clarity in the literature, I find that there is a conceptual problem with the terminology. The lack of clarity associated with the term may at times blur the distinction between "boundary clarity" and "boundary ambiguity". It is clear from the literature on stepfamilies that boundary clarity refers to the consistency/inconsistency of contact between stepfamily members and non-residential children. Consequently, I intend to use "contact consistency" as an alternative for "boundary clarity". Contact consistency is a suitable choice because it does not lead to conceptual confusion. It also captures the intended meaning and definition clearly.

In stepfamilies with non-residential children or stepchildren who visit and interact on an inconsistent basis, doubts may arise regarding the membership of the children living elsewhere. Several factors contribute to such confusion. Custody and visitation agreements differ according to each particular case. Some non-residential children visit the remarried family household on a regular basis, while others, teenagers for example, may be more interested in spending their time

with their friends away from their parents. Consequently, they visit on an irregular basis, which reinforces the confusion of the stepparent and the rest of the residential children regarding family membership. The geographical distance which separates the remarried parent from his/her non-residential children is also important because it restricts the possibility of maintaining an ongoing relationship between the remarried family members and the non-custodial children. Continued feuding between the ex-spouses contributes to the confusion regarding family membership because "there may not be consensus about whether these children are 'in' the family (Pasley, 1987: 210). Pasley adds, however, that "confusion is less likely when members interact on a regular basis (physical presence) and come to see one another as belonging to the existing family unit (psychological presence)" (Pasley, 1987: 210). While examining ambiguities within remarried households, Kay Pasley (1987) found that both boundary permeability and boundary clarity (which has been replaced by contact consistency in this study) were sources for the confusion surrounding family membership.

Mary Whiteside's work on "Family Rituals as a Key to Kinship Connections in Remarried Families" (1984) addresses the confusion that surrounds family boundary and family membership. Her starting point is the assumption that the kinship system found in a stepfamily is a complex and confusing one. She maintains that the first basic wish of a new remarried family is to be "normal", which is difficult because of the absence of societal guidelines. Her study is based on the work of Wolin and Bennett (1984) who examined the ritual process in nuclear

families and who consider ritual practices to be a key area for the creation and maintenance of family cohesion.

A symbolic form of communication that owing to the satisfaction that family members experience through its repetition, is acted out in a systematic fashion over time. Through their special meaning and their repetitive nature, rituals contribute significantly to the establishment and preservation of a family's collective sense of itself, which we have termed the "family identity".
(Whiteside, 1989: 34)

Family rituals are categorized into three areas: everyday patterned interaction, family traditions, and family celebrations (Whiteside, 1989: 34). These categories involve three different levels of family membership. The first category is comprised of the remarried family. The second category involves the binuclear family, which represents the households of both biological parents. The third area includes the extended families of both biological parents, which is referred to as the "remarried family suprasystem" (Whiteside, 1989: 35). In addition to grandparents and step-grandparents, it includes in-laws, ex-in-laws, and aunts and uncles.

The stepfamily is the smallest subgroup. This is where patterns emerge around habits and routines, rules and regulations, discipline and the shuttling of children between the two biological households. This is also where idiosyncrasies and clashes come to the surface as stepfamily members struggle to come up with a singular family identity despite the dissimilar backgrounds and family cultures.

The second level of "family traditions" involves the binuclear family. Together, the ex-spouses negotiate and discuss their plans for

summer vacations, birthday arrangements and visits to and from extended family members. Unlike nuclear family celebrations, stepfamily celebrations often include only a subgroup of the family, usually because of the children's schedules. "This introduces into the warmth of the celebration the additional theme of loss" (Whiteside, 1989: 35). Negotiations between the two biological parents and both binuclear families are important because it is through dialogue that complications can be resolved. Decisions such as who is to be included or excluded, while planning a certain event warrant co-operation and coordination by the binuclear family. For example, an occasion such as a child's birthday can be a well orchestrated celebration that includes the child's biological parents, their spouses, as well as other close members of the extended families. If that is not possible, two celebrations can be planned, as long as the final decision is respected and supported by all. Unfortunately, feuding parents often use occasions and events which involve the children to express their anger and bitterness towards one another.

The manner in which the households conduct the celebration of special family events illustrates clearly the nature of the boundaries between households and the effectiveness of the adults' problem-solving styles.
(Whiteside, 1989: 35)

Whiteside adopts a concept first used by Sager et al., in 1983 to refer to the third category of ritual performances: "the remarried family suprasystem" (Whiteside, 1989: 35). This level involves the broadest kinship network. It includes grandparents, in-laws, former in-laws, step-in-laws, as well as other members of the extended families.

The events that unite these people are usually celebrations or rites of passage such as a child's wedding, Bar Mitzvah, graduation or someone's funeral. Once again, negotiation and coordination are important parts of the preparation of the event because some of the people in this group may have avoided one another up to that point. The awkwardness of the situation is often accompanied by tension and nervousness for all those involved, especially in the absence of social guidelines. Yet, if the celebration is successful, the feelings of uncertainty are often followed by a sense of pleasure and satisfaction because of the fact that family members performed their new and different roles well.

In sum, for the remarried family, each area of ritual performance provides opportunities for changing definitions of family identity. Everyday patterned interactions define the shape of the stepfamily's "immediate" family. Through the evolution of traditions stepfamilies handle the tasks of normalizing households with varying membership and of clarifying relationships between households. Traditions reflect the binuclear family identity as well as the relationships with each spouse's family of origin. Family celebrations involve the broadest kinship network and require a definition of family which transcends the differences stemming from both the divorce and the remarriage.

(Whiteside, 1989: 36)

Role Confusion

Studies on stepfamily life have shown that problems involving the partner(s)' children are some of the most complex and perplexing issue for remarried couples (Ganong & Coleman, 1989; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987; Messinger, 1984; Albrecht, Bahr & Goodman, 1983; Visher & Visher, 1982; Cherlin, 1978). Role confusion with relation to the stepparent role ambiguity (Giles-Sims, 1984) is a particularly complicated one,

especially in the area of discipline. Problems manifest themselves because of the uncertainty associated with the tasks and roles of stepfamily members. Unlike first families where a parent/child relationship is clearly spelled out, the relationship between a stepparent and his/her stepchildren is ambiguous.

Conflicts within the remarried couple over the ways to bring up children and the amount and type of discipline used by the stepparent are among the most serious sources of stress for stepfamilies. What is a stepparent? Is he/she a replacement for, or an addition to, the non-residing biological parent? The role of the stepchild is also ambiguous in relation to his/her stepparent(s). Children do not know how to relate to a stepparent, especially if their other non-residing parent maintains an active part of their lives. Nevertheless, studies have shown that the relationship between the stepparent and stepchild is a crucial and key factor in stepfamily happiness (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984) and stepchild adjustment (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson & Zill, 1983). Margaret Crosbie-Burnett (1989) acknowledges the serious problems associated with role confusion or role ambiguity, but maintains that the lack of role prescriptions provides stepfamilies with the opportunity to create various roles which best meet the unique needs of each individual stepfamily member. This is not easy to achieve, however, particularly at the beginning of stepfamily life when the remarried couple has not yet had the opportunity to experiment with and try out various possibilities in family routines and decision making.

According to family stress research, the following factors promote family cohesion: Common interests and values, agreement on role struc-

ture, affection, feelings of unity, collective as opposed to personal goals, and economic interdependence (Olson & McCubbin, 1982). Particular difficulties are posed in new stepfamilies, however, because remarried adults with children from previous marriages bring to the new relationship different family cultures, different family history and considerable emotional baggage. It is therefore unrealistic to expect feelings of unity and cohesion at the outset, especially if the new family members are at different or opposing stages of life cycles.

Family stress research has identified factors which promote and advance the process of integration: "open communication, shared power and flexibility in the authority and status structure, and successful experience coping with past stress" (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989: 327). Open and frequent communication provides stepfamily members with the opportunity to express themselves on issues that concern them and also to listen to the other members' views and opinions. Regular dialogue also contributes to family cohesion and integration because it promotes closeness and generates common and collective interests.

Adaptation

According to family stress theory, the following adjustments are particularly difficult for stepfamilies to achieve: (1) Balance between individual and family, for example, the stepparent who lives in the stepfamily household but who does not feel integrated in the daily life, (2) balance between stepfamily and other households in the extended stepfamily network, where there is continued disagreement and fights between the divorced parents, (3) and balance between family and

community because "the culture still defines stepfamilies as outside of the norm" (Coleman & Ganong, 1987). This happens whenever the family unit turns to the community (laws, schools, schools, etc.), only to find lack of understanding and discrimination.

Crosbie-Burnett (1989) maintains that the evaluation and assessment of these three adjustments is vital to understanding the family's attempts to cope and deal with the stressors and challenges they face. The response of adult members in remarried households when faced with stressor events usually falls under two categories: "Bonadaptation or maladaptation" (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). "Bonadaptation occurs through these reciprocal relationships when the demand of one unit is met by the capabilities of another. When this happens, balance is achieved. Maladaptation occurs when a demand-capability imbalance exists" (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989: 330).

Bonadaptation is the result of the integration of the new members into the family unit and the adaptation of all family members to the newly introduced changes. Old roles, rules and patterns of behaviour are replaced by new ones that fit the new reality of the remarried household. Bonadaptation is characterized by a new family identity once family members have relinquished their urge to be reconstituted and accepted the reality of their family type.

Maladaptation, on the other hand, represents the chaos that transpires as a result of the inability to accept and/or to adapt to the changes after the stepfamily household has been set up. It is characterized by ongoing conflicts, discord, tension and failure to move forward. Maladaptation is often followed by separation and divorce. It is

possible for the remarried couple to experience bonadaptation, while the children and stepchildren suffer from maladaptation.

Patricia Papernow produced a developmental framework that describes and explains the several stages in the life span of the stepfamily. Seven different stages of stepparent development were revealed: (1) fantasy, (2) assimilation, (3) awareness, (4) mobilization, (5) action, (6) contact and (7) resolution.

In the three early stages the family continues to be divided along biological lines as it was prior to the arrival of the stepparent. While the first stage "fantasy" gives way to a more realistic view soon after the stepfamily is set up, Papernow maintains that it is a universal one that stepfamilies experience. It is typified by fantasies of stepparents adoring their stepchildren and being accepted by them along with plans for healing a broken family.

The second stage "assimilation" is characterized by feelings of confusion and alienation of the stepparent as a result of his/her inability to be part of the intimate parent-child unit. The stepparent is regarded as the outsider by the stepchildren and a threat to the unity established during the single parent family stage.

The third stage is called "awareness" because this is when stepparents begin to understand and identify the sources of their confusion. For example, stepparents are now able to acknowledge that their feelings of inadequacy and/or resentment are directly related to being rejected by their stepchildren. It is at that stage that stepparents develop the ability to articulate their awareness of what they perceive to be going wrong.

The next stage "mobilization" is when remarried/cohabiting couples begin the process of airing the serious differences between them. In many stepfamilies the beginning of this stage is marked by intense conflict and disagreement as remarried couples argue over the problematic issues for the first time. Fights appear to be trivial; in reality, however, they are serious points of contention over the way the biological subsystem has operated so far, and the negotiations over the new family structure. Papernow's research indicates that stepparents often start these fights as they are the excluded and dissatisfied members of the new family unit. "In this sense stepparents may often act as change agents to begin the crucial process of loosening the boundaries around the biological subsystem" (Papernow, 1984: 359).

"Action" marks the beginning of a new phase as couples begin to collaborate and work together to solve their differences. These changes include firmer family boundaries, new stepfamily rituals and new clearly defined differences between the stepfamily unit and the ex-spouse(s)' family.

"Contact" is marked by an increased intimacy between the stepparent and the stepchildren that no longer necessitates the intervention of the biological parent. The contribution and the special attributes of the stepparent are acknowledged by the rest of the stepfamily system. The final stage "resolution" is characterized by ease and calmness, although issues of inclusion and exclusion recur periodically as the biological ties remain stronger than the steprelationships.

All of the described changes take place gradually over time, and some may overlap with others. The average time required for the comple-

tion of every stage varies according to individual cases, but usually it is anywhere between one and three years.

Statement of the Problem

A glaring problem in the research on remarriages is the omission of complex stepfamilies, which are remarried families in which both spouses have children from previous marriages. In addition to biological children from previous marriages, some complex types include common children. Most of the literature on stepfamilies deals with simple types, where only one spouse has children from a previous marriage. Some studies examine the general problems of the various types of remarried families, but research has not as yet been specifically applied to complex types. Consequently, statistics specifically on complex stepfamilies are not available despite the fact that it is becoming an increasingly prevalent family form.

This exploratory study deals exclusively with complex stepfamilies. It focuses on a selection of the most difficult and recurring problems and issues which derive from the structural complexity of this particular type of remarried family.

My intention is to capture the parents/stepparents' thoughts and opinions on how these problems develop, how difficult and confusing it is to cope with them, and how they hinder and impede the development of family unity. Consequently, this study will deal with the perceptions and lived experiences of the remarried couples. It will not explore the children's perceptions.

The analytical framework of this study is based on these three concepts: Boundary ambiguity, contact consistency and role confusion. They were selected because they represent the areas and facets of stepfamily life which give rise to the most serious and persistent problems. The complications which develop as a result produce confusion and uncertainty because of their ambiguous nature, and because these problems are not accompanied by societal guidelines which can enable the remarried couples to cope with and solve these pressing issues.

Boundary ambiguity refers to the confusion and uncertainty surrounding family membership. In a complex stepfamily household, the uncertainty is due to the large number of people associated with the family members. This includes a wide network of people created through the divorce and remarriage. As remarried couples strive to form a new family identity that fits the reality of their family type, it is sometimes difficult for them to separate or differentiate between those who were part of their previous family, as for example, ex-in-laws, and those who are part of their new family. Questions dealing with boundary ambiguity will center on the respondents' ideas of (1) what a family is, (2) whom they consider to be members of their immediate family, and (3) whom they consider to be members of their extended family.

Contact consistency is a concept used to measure family functioning. In a stepfamily household, the concept refers to the consistency or inconsistency of patterns of contact between family members and the non-residential children of one or both spouses who live with the other biological parent elsewhere. In this study, patterns of contact will be assessed by examining the degree of participation of the non-residential

children in the regular, daily lives and activities of the stepfamily household. For example, I will focus on the frequency and consistency of the non-residential children's visits to the stepfamily household, as well as the regularity or patterns of phone calls between them and their non-custodial parents. I will also examine whether the non-residential children take part in the ritual activities and family traditions (birthday, holiday celebrations and summer holidays) with the other members of the remarried family.

In this study role confusion will apply primarily to the lack of clarity associated with the stepparent's role vis-à-vis his/her stepchildren. Couples in complex stepfamilies have a dual role: that of being a biological parent and a stepparent simultaneously. I will assess the confusion associated with the stepparent's role by comparing it to the strains and difficulties that accompany the role of a natural, biological parent. The investigation will focus on the stepparent's role and input in the following areas: general issues of concern, disciplinary problems, as well as those related to behavior and attitude, the general difficulties inherent in the stepparent's role and the positive aspects of being a stepparent.

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY

The examination of the difficulties which arise in complex stepfamilies requires the participation of remarried/cohabiting couples whose family types fit the description. A representative sample is an important element in the process of understanding the different ways used by remarried/cohabiting adults as they attempt to cope with these intricate problems. Finding and convincing remarried adults in complex households to take part in the study was a difficult task. Several attempts were made to get in touch with qualifying individuals. All methods failed with the exception of the appropriate "snowball technique", which will be described in detail in the next segment.

Sample Recruitment

Several attempts were made in order to recruit qualifying participants. Aside from several churches, the Y.M.C.A and the Y.W.H.A., several associations such as "On your own again", "New Beginning" and "The Association for Single Parents" were contacted in an effort to get in touch with men and women willing to take part in this study. None of these efforts netted any results. The "snowball technique" proved to be the most effective method for selection for subjects. When the first couple was contacted by telephone, they were given a brief description of the study. Once they were interviewed, they were asked for the names

of friends or acquaintances who live in complex stepfamily settings. The method was repeated at the end of each interview. The first couple interviewed were part of the biggest "snowball" because they led to four other couples, three of whom agreed to take part in this study. The next biggest "snowball" resulted in two couples who agreed to be interviewed. The remaining two couples did not know one another. Their names were given to me by friends and acquaintances following my request. All in all, twelve couples were contacted; eight agreed to participate, three declined citing personal reasons, and one couple had already separated by the time the phone call was made.

Since this is a study on complex stepfamilies, where each partner has at least one child from a previous marriage or relationship, only those couples who fitted this criterion were asked to participate. To be legally married was not a criterion for inclusion; what was required, however, was that the couples in this study live together on a full-time basis with at least one child from a previous marriage.

Characteristics of the Sample

Eight couples (16 individuals) participated in this study. The sample was made up of seven anglophone (English speaking) couples and one francophone (French speaking) couple. Consequently, seven interviews were conducted in English and one in French. The ages of the respondents varied between 35 and 54; the average age for women was 41 and for men 46. Only three couples were legally married, while the other five lived in cohabiting households.

The ages of the children varied between 11 months and 26 years. With the exception of the eldest who lives in another province, a twenty year old who lives on his own, and another 16 year old who is attending a boarding school in Europe, all others live with their custodial parent.

All the women in the sample had custody of their biological children. All the men, on the other hand, were non-custodial parents to the children from their first marriages, who lived elsewhere with their mothers. Two of the three remarried couples had a common child (a common child is one born to the remarried couple). Common children lived in the stepfamily household along with their step-siblings. The number of years of marriage/cohabitation ranged between two months to thirteen years.

Procedure

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Couples were interviewed separately in their homes; interviews lasted approximately one hour to one and a half hours. The first few minutes of the interview were spent explaining and outlining briefly the nature of and the reasons for the research. We then proceeded with the interviews, with each couple deciding which one to be interviewed first.

Definition of Concepts

The interview guide is structured around the following assumption: Confusion regarding family membership and contact consistency and role confusion contribute to boundary ambiguity.

Boundary ambiguity refers to the doubtfulness or uncertainty among family members regarding their perceptions about who is and who is not part of the family unit. The confusion is linked to the wide network of relations, past and present, associated with the various members of the remarried family.

Contact consistency refers to the consistency/inconsistency of patterns of contact between family members and others. In a stepfamily setting, the concept refers to the uncertainty regarding the family membership of the non-residential children and/or stepchildren.

Role confusion refers to the doubtfulness and lack of clarity associated with the tasks and roles of the steprelationships: stepparents and stepchildren.

Operationalization

Boundary Ambiguity

Two questions were used to define family membership: (1) Who are the people that you consider as part of your immediate family? and (2) who are the people that you consider as part of your extended family? These questions were preceded by another related one: What do you consider a family to be? The purpose of these questions was to assess the congruence or incongruence within each remarried/cohabiting couple. Couples who mentioned the same individuals as members of their immediate and extended family were expected to encounter little or minimum problems related to family boundary. By contrast, those who indicate different individuals whom they consider to be members of their immediate and of

their extended family were expected to experience considerable conflicts due to problems of boundary ambiguity.

Contact consistency

Several questions were used to assess "contact consistency". Respondents were asked to name the family and holiday celebrations they observed, and whether these celebrations were spent with their non-residential children or stepchildren. Because recent research findings have indicated that uncertainty regarding family membership occurs in cases that involve non-residential children in stepfamily households, the assumption made here is that uncertainty is less likely to occur if members of the remarried family interacted with the non-residential children on a regular basis. Regular interaction is likely to result in intimacy and amity, as a result of which, both parties would come to see one another as belonging to the existing stepfamily household.

Non-custodial parents were asked about the frequency and consistency with which they saw their non-residential children, as well as the frequency and consistency of their telephone conversations with their non-residential children. The assumption here is that the more regular the visits and phone calls between remarried/cohabiting couples and their non-residential children and stepchildren, the lesser the uncertainty regarding their family membership.

Role Confusion

Several indicators were used to assess the existence of role confusion. Respondents were asked whether or not they, along with their partners had established a set of rules and regulations that their children/stepchildren were expected to follow. They were asked whether these guidelines and/or rules applied to both children and stepchildren, whether or not any action was taken when the children and/or stepchildren disobeyed specific rules or guidelines, and whether or not the action taken was the same for both children and stepchildren. The assumption is that the more often remarried couples apply the same rules to their children and stepchildren, the lesser the role confusion. Also, the more often the same disciplinary action is enforced whenever children and stepchildren disobey specific house rules, the lesser the likelihood for role confusion.

The men and women in the sample were also asked about their parental involvement in the lives and activities of their children and stepchildren. Each respondent was given a set of statements revolving around the children/stepchildren's activities and concerns, and was asked to respond by indicating whether the respondent or his/her partner was more involved in each particular activity or whether their involvement was equal. These activities included running errands, recreational and social activities, discussing problems and celebrating significant events with the children and stepchildren. The statements were adapted from a study by Ahrons and Wallich in Remarriage and Stepparenting (1987) and were included in order to assess the couples' congruence or

lack of congruence with respect to their involvement in the above-stated areas. The assumption once again was that the higher the involvement by the participants in their children and stepchildren's activities, the lesser the boundary ambiguity.

Aside from questions dealing with family membership, contact consistency and role confusion, the remaining ones dealt with general issues of concern with reference to the children and stepchildren, and the respondents' perceptions of the difficulties and pleasures found in the "dual role", of biological parent and stepparent. These questions were designed to provide additional and valuable information regarding their experiences, and to reveal the particular challenges they face.

Problem of Design

The interview guide was designed to capture the remarried/cohabiting couples' opinions and thoughts regarding the difficulties associated with boundary ambiguity, contact consistency and role confusion. One of the problems which became apparent during the course of the interviews was directly related to the stigma associated with the word "step". There were seven questions in which the prefix "step" was included, which caused mixed reactions among the 16 participants. Six of the 16 participants, two couples and two women objected to the use of "step" at different points of the interview. Three women commented on the negative connotation associated with "stepmother" and "stepchildren" saying that it sounded "evil", and one male participant objected to the use of

"stepfamilies", saying "it's an awful name, it has this awful connotation". The remaining couple who are cohabiting but are not legally married dissociated themselves from the prefix "step" by saying that not only did they dislike the word but that they did not consider themselves as stepparents, but rather "boyfriend/girlfriend" in the eyes of their partners' children.

Those who objected to the use of the prefix "step" did so repeatedly during the course of the interview. The remaining subjects talked at length about the various facets of their lives within their stepfamily households without displaying discomfort or displeasure with either "stepparent", "stepchildren" or "stepfamily".

Chapter Four

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Findings and analysis will be treated together because of the qualitative nature of the study and because of the size of the sample. The interview guide was designed to examine the participants' perceptions in reference to boundary ambiguity, contact consistency and role confusion. In this chapter I will analyze their responses and will present their views by including some of their answers as an illustration of the intricate problems they face as parents and stepparents in complex stepfamily households. (Every quote will be followed by a code to enable the readers to follow and compare the responses. Couples were given numbers 1 through 8. "M" stands for male and "F" stands for female).

One of the main goals of this study was to verify whether or not the issues cited in the literature were considered to be problematic by the men and women in this sample. Each concept was measured by several questions intended to compare respondents' answers, as well as assess the extent of the complications which develop as a result in each case. The analysis of the data is organized according to the gravity of the problems as viewed by the participants.

Gender Differences

One of the main observations which unfolded had to do with gender differences. Remarried/cohabiting couples experience certain aspects of stepfamily life differently despite the fact that they live together in the same household. While all respondents had dual roles of biological parent and stepparent, the men and women interviewed carried out their roles differently. In this sample the women were in each case the custodial parent of their children from previous marriages, whereas the men were the non-custodial parents of their biological children from previous marriages. Consequently, except for the common children in the case of two different couples, the residential children were biological offspring of the women. This meant that the male participants were more familiar and more involved with the daily events of their stepchildren, with whom they lived, than with those of their biological children, who visited occasionally. The women, on the other hand, were less involved with their stepchildren who lived elsewhere, than with their residential children. The respondents' differences pertaining to the degree or extent of involvement with their biological children and stepchildren brought about divergent problems for the men and women in this study.

Role Confusion

One area that proved to be disturbing and problematic to both sexes is role confusion. Most of the men and women in the sample discussed the ambivalence which surround their status within the family unit. They seemed to have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities

vis-à-vis their biological children and partners. Their relationships with their partners' children on the other hand proved to be ambiguous. The lack of clarity pertaining to how stepparents and stepchildren relate to one another, and who exactly they are in each others' lives, gave rise to other complications which clouded their overall standing within the family unit.

Respondents' Perceptions of the Difficulties in the Stepparent Role **Acceptance/Non-Acceptance**

Despite the fact that respondents talked at length about a wide range of issues, certain themes developed. The issue of "acceptance/non-acceptance" was cited most often and proved to be the most disturbing one to men and women alike. Twelve of the sixteen respondents stated that they experienced a problem of acceptance with their stepchildren at one point or another. Seven respondents, four men and three women, stated that they had been unable to develop a warm and loving relationship with their partners' children. Among those respondents, two men and two women maintained that they had been unsuccessful in developing any kind of relationship with their stepchildren. All seven were dismayed and saddened by this reality because they felt that they had tried hard to form some kind of bond but had been rebuffed repeatedly. Some expressed their regret over the estrangement and continued to work towards finding means and ways to establish some sort of amiable relationship. Others were deeply hurt by the children's attitude and behavior; they had given up hope by the time the interviews were

conducted. They accepted the status quo somewhat reluctantly and stopped trying to get closer to the children.

The issue of "acceptance/non-acceptance" is complicated because it is tied to other elements. Some respondents attributed the problem to "loyalty conflicts" or the children's fear of being disloyal towards their other biological parent. Others traced the reasons to the latter's refusal to accept their parents' divorce. Three men felt that the ages of the children were a factor. They believed that had the children been younger at the time the respondents moved into the stepfamily household, the issue of not accepting the stepparent would have been easier to manage. The problem of not accepting the stepparent, however, occurred in cases that involved younger children as well. Jealousy of the stepparent and resentment about having to share the parent's love and attention were also cited. Two participants acknowledged that acceptance was a two-way street and that accepting their stepchildren was just as important as being accepted by them. The following citations represent a few examples of what some respondents said with regard to not being accepted by their stepchildren.

There is a bit of friction, they're very devoted to their father. There were a few occasions where they felt that this is their home and not mine or vice versa, which led to more friction. It took us a while to establish a common ground, but we tend to share an antagonistic role most of the time.
(1M)

The biggest difficulty is being accepted. Here I am trying to be a father or a father figure and their father is very much in evidence. Acceptance is a two way thing. It cannot be a case of me simply sitting and

saying accept me. I realize I have to work and do whatever I have to to be a father and that means to go to functions and taking interest and stuff like that. But it's basically how to handle (stepson) and getting him to respond, getting him motivated and being more cooperative.

(2M)

We did not establish any kind of a relationship other than the fact that their father and I live together, unfortunately. He probably didn't discuss this with you because he's their father, but they're not the easiest children to warm up to...I'm the maid. That's really pretty much how I feel, like the person who makes breakfast and lunch and I get zero back. There's no interaction, there's no feedback. I could be a piece of furniture and it's so discouraging.

(3F)

The Difficulty of Establishing Rapport with the Stepchildren

Some respondents discussed the difficulties they encountered in trying to form a bond or closeness with their stepchildren. They believed that a harmonious relationship with the latter was a key factor to a successful stepfamily life. Respondents longed for a loving relationship with their stepchildren in an attempt to reconcile the main differences between them. They expressed their frustration resulting from their continuous unsuccessful attempts of establishing a rapport with their partners' children. They spoke of the unlimited patience and determination required to handle the steady resistance and stubbornness of the children. They also failed to understand the children's lasting inflexibility. One respondent expressed disappointment because of the absence of closeness.

I sort of naively thought that what I would be able to achieve with (stepdaughter) is what my stepfather achieved with me. He was very patient, very tough and he loved me, almost from day one. I reacted very strongly against him for two or three years and he just kept the bridges open. He was just wonderful. I tried to apply the same techniques and I was hoping that there would be a good, strong emotional bond between us. It didn't happen and that's a shame because I would've liked to get to a stage where she and I felt nearly as strongly about each other as I feel about my own kids.
(4M)

Rivalry and Jealousy among Step-siblings

The third problem mentioned most frequently by both sexes was that of rivalry and jealousy among step-siblings. It was described as a serious emotional issue which surfaced frequently. Non-residential children were seen to be envious of their step-siblings for living with and seeing their fathers on a daily basis, while residential children were seen to be jealous over the privileged attention and preferential treatment which they believed the non-residential children enjoyed.

Even though problems related to rivalry and jealousy among step-siblings were raised by both sexes, women appeared to be more disturbed than the men by these difficulties. They found it difficult to cope with the recurring ill will and disaffection that seemed to govern the behaviour of both sets of children. Perhaps the women were more affected by it because they assume more responsibility for the children than men do. Furthermore, the women felt that they had an advantage over their partners they were living with their children on a daily basis. They empathized with their partners' guilt and regret for not seeing their children on a daily basis. The women understood their partners' need to

make up for their guilt by spoiling their children and by showering them with attention. The women also felt torn between the two sets of children. On the one hand they understood their own children's protests and insecurities, and on the other they were eager to make the non-residential ones feel at home. The following examples describe the participants' uncertainty and bafflement in the matter of rivalry and jealousy.

At the beginning there was jealousy all around. (Son) being jealous of (stepson) living here, (stepson) being jealous of (son) for having his father in the same city. (Stepson's) father allows him to buy anything he wants, but if I buy (son) something, (stepson) is extremely jealous and wants to know why I didn't buy him one too. I try to explain it to him and point out how his father bought it for him but what we ended up doing a lot is not telling (stepson). I don't know if that's right or not, but he doesn't get the feeling that he's excluded.
(5M)

Cet élément de rivalité entre les deux jeunes me rendait folle. Elles avaient peur de perdre leur place. Ma fille vit ici avec (conjoint) alors que sa fille ne voit pas son père tout le temps, et pourtant c'est son père biologique. Alors du point de vue jalousie, c'était incroyable. Si l'une venait s'asseoir sur mes genoux, l'autre aussi venait s'asseoir sur moi...
(6F)

Coping with Two Sets of Rules

Another cause of difficulty in the adjustment of both women and men related to the existence of two sets of rules and regulations for the children: those which applied in the stepfamily household and those used in the home of the other biological parent. This problem was mentioned

by three respondents. The difficulty revolved around the contradictory nature of the demands of the two sets of ex-spouses and the children's confusion once they were exposed to the two different sets of rules. This, in turn, often obliged the respondents to come up with alternative solutions in an attempt to ease the children's concerns and satisfy the other parent. The following two examples illustrate the point at issue.

Setting different rules that the children have to cope with and seeing the pain in the kid that's being torn between two parents. For instance, (stepson) had a much stricter cleanliness rule in his house than here. He's not ever allowed to get dirty, whereas I allow my children to get dirty. So we had a real problem when they were little, like if we took them to the beach and he came with sand in his shoes, his mother would have a heart attack. So, we wound up buying him another set of clothes that he wore when he was with us for the day, then he would change back into his regular clothes so that he would be clean when he went home.
(5F)

The important thing is to keep out of conflict with the parent who's not living at home because if there's a conflict, then you're back to the problem of two sets of rules, those that apply over there and those rules don't have to apply here. Although we now have some rapport with the other parent, there was a time when there was a lot of animosity. The problem is that the children's father and his wife are vegetarians. So, we had a discussion about it and we now work quite closely. .
(1M)

The following table illustrates the answers provided by the participants with reference to some of the important issues related to role confusion. It represents their perceptions as to the general problems associated with the role of a stepparent. The problematic issues they faced at one point or another as stepparents are listed starting with those cited most often.

TABLE 1
RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE DIFFICULTIES IN THE STEPPARENT ROLE
 (Responses to Question # 33)

DIFFICULTY	MEN	WOMEN
Not being accepted, being resented	3	2
Establishing/maintaining rapport with the children	2	3
Rivalry and jealousy among step-siblings	1	3
Coping with two different sets of rules	2	1
Dealing with the children's anger and frustration	3	0
Watching the children suffer as they feel torn between two parents	1	1
Being fair with the children and stepchildren, no favoritism	0	2
Fitting into an already existing family	2	0
Recognizing the distinct role of being a parent	1	0
Getting partner's support when disciplining stepdaughter	1	0
Having to adapt to a different schedule every second week-end	0	1
Reluctance to accept responsibility of father role	1	0
Starting off with younger children again	0	1
Giving love and affection and getting zero back	0	1
Disliking stepchildren	0	1
No difficulties	1	1

Respondents' Problems with their Stepchildren

Respondents were often at a loss due to the anger and bad temper of their stepchildren. They spoke of the children's confusion and pain resulting from being in the middle of two opposing camps and the hurt of the younger children in being used as pawns sometimes. Children handled their anger differently. Some exhibited behavioral problems. Respondents spoke of the general lack of cooperation and goodwill of their stepchildren who were expressing their anger by being objectionable. Those with a reserved and reticent nature became more introverted with time, which made it difficult for their stepparents to get through to them. Others were more demonstrative. Their fury was of a more explosive nature. One male respondent related his frequent encounters of such flare-ups.

In the past, any time (stepson) talked to his father on the phone or when he came back from a visit, there was a terrible period of anywhere from a couple of hours to a day or two where I was 'persona non grata', like stay out of my way. I knew how he was feeling. He would just be in a very bad mood and he would yell a lot. He was just as angry at his mother as at me, so he would yell at both of us. He was angry at her for being here, whereas his father was there, he was angry at the whole situation.

(5M)

Comparison of Dual Role

When respondents were asked to compare the difficulties they face as stepparents with those of being a biological parent, half of the sample, four men and four women proceeded to outline the differences between the

two roles. The rest of the participants talked about their responsibilities as biological parents. Among those who chose to point out the dissimilarities of the dual role, two men and one woman referred to the advantage of being in "total control" in the case of biological children. Two respondents brought up "the children's unconditional love" and "being accepted and appreciated" as a biological parent. The last two respondents cited the absence of "conflicting roles" in the case of a biological affiliation, and finally the "wide range of totally different issues". The following examples, given by a female and a male respondents, demonstrate their thoughts with regard to the basic differences between the two roles.

It's so much easier being a biological parent because both parents are sort of in it together. You're in control, you're making decisions on the same wavelength and you're making decisions you both have to live with and agree on. Each of us feels like we only have half a kid because half of them is in another camp. It's just easier doing things together instead of having a warring party on the other end.
(5F)

Being able to say or do wrong things and knowing that your children will be able to forgive you without any difficulty. As a stepfather, you know that you can't go beyond certain points because you know that your stepchildren won't forget and won't forgive.
(7M)

The following table illustrates the answers given by the respondents with respect to their difficulties with their stepchildren. Some of the issues listed in this table, such as the children's anger and frustration, were mentioned in table 1. Other issues of concern, such as the

different values and school-related problems, are unlike those mentioned in the first table. Table 2 represents the specific problems they continue to encounter with their partners' children on an ongoing basis.

TABLE 2
PROBLEMS RESPONDENTS HAVE WITH THEIR STEPCHILDREN

(Responses to Question # 31)

TYPE OF PROBLEM	MEN	WOMEN
Children's anger, behavioral problems, loyalty conflicts	8	2
Stepchild is a liar/sneaky, no manners, they steal things	0	5
Different values, different general outlook on life	2	2
Having no relationship, no closeness	0	3
Concern over the stepchild's poor relationship with his/her mother	0	2
Rivalry and jealousy among step-siblings	0	2
Adolescent problems	0	2
School problems and concerns	2	0
Having little control	2	0
No problems/not applicable	1	1

Respondents' Problems with their Biological Children

When the topic of discussion revolved around the biological children, gender differences resurfaced. The problematic issues that worried the men with regard to their children were different from those mentioned by the women. Men's concerns referred to worries associated with the distance between them and their non-residential children. They seemed to be concerned about the overall well-being and happiness of the children. They were saddened about not seeing them as frequently as they would have liked and they complained about the limited influence they

had over their offspring. They disagreed with the general values which governed the children's lives and wished they could instill their own values in their children. The following examples reflect the concerns of three male respondents.

The greatest difficulty is being separated from them. Missing them, trying to do your very best when you're not there, making sure that they know that you love them, and making sure that the links with the rest of the family stay open.
(4M)

In terms of (son), I feel more like an uncle rather than a parent because I don't have a say in his day to day decision making. I don't really see what goes on in his life every day. I'm mostly excluded from it. He's also not very communicative.
(5M)

(Daughter) is now 15 and for reasons she can't describe, the divorce has been hardest this year. She can't put a finger on it and some of it has to do with the continuing pressure by my ex-wife and also a very, very vast difference between my perspective, my way of raising kids and hers.
(8M)

Because seven female participants lived with their children on a daily basis, their concerns were of a different nature. Most of them brought up more than one point. Their main thoughts, however, were directed towards two main areas, worries related to the children's academic performance, and conflicts and tension between the children and their stepfathers. The only exception was one respondent whose daughter was attending a boarding school in Europe. The woman's malaise stemmed from the geographical distance which separated her from her daughter.

School concerns represented a highly significant issue for six female participants. Some worried about the children's grades and about their lack of interest in school. They were apprehensive about their children's poor attitude towards school. One woman expressed her great disappointment in her 20 year old son's decision to abandon his studies in favor of work. Others expressed pride in their children's academic performances and praised the latter for their continued hard work.

Concerns over the relationship between the children and the women's partners were mentioned by four female participants. They acknowledged the tension caused by the frequent disagreements and wished for a better rapport and rapprochement between the two parties. Two women expressed their concerns by saying the following,

I think it's difficult for (partner) because his daughter is grown up. Now all of a sudden he's living full time with two children and this is quite an adjustment for him. He gets quite impatient and it can cause problems. It's hard for all of us, but particularly hard for him. I find I get quite tense because I'm in the middle, trying to keep the peace. It's quite a problem at times. They sound off on me and he sounds off on me and I'm in the middle.
(2F)

Both children have had bad feelings towards their step-father. They take the things he says the wrong way. I often felt like a referee in the past trying to be fair. Everything had to be fair. It's really not easy.
(7F)

The following table represents the problems or issues of concern that respondents have with their biological children.

TABLE 3
PROBLEMS RESPONDENTS HAVE WITH THEIR BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN
(Responses to Question # 30)

TYPE OF PROBLEM	MEN	WOMEN
Maintaining a good relationship with son/daughter, making sure they know that they are loved and welcome	5	3
School-related problems	1	5
Concerns over children's poor relationship with their stepparent	0	4
Child's absentmindedness	2	1
Son/daughter has the same personality as my ex-spouse	1	1
Daughters never adjusted to the divorce	1	0
My limited control over his daily life	1	0
Son's poor self-esteem	0	1
Rivalry between daughter and step-siblings	0	1
Daughter's introversion	0	1
I have problems expressing my feelings	1	0
Daughter's sadness due to her broken marriage	1	0
My financial concerns	1	0
Miscellaneous: Daughter coming home unattended, son's driving, Daughter's lack of social life, daughter's weight problem	2	2

House Rules and Behavioral Guidelines for the Children and Stepchildren

The issues discussed so far dealt with the general and specific problem areas associated with the stepparent role, as well as the dual role of the participants. The following section will focus on the difficulties pertaining to the area of discipline, which according to the literature, is a major source of conflicts and disagreements among remarried/cohabiting couples. Problems related to discipline were assessed by asking respondents to name the various house rules they implemented for the children and stepchildren. They were also asked to name the behavioral guidelines which they expect their children and stepchildren to follow. The objective is to examine the participants' actions whenever their children and/or stepchildren disobey the specific rules and guidelines.

The rules designed by the respondents for their children and stepchildren are listed in table 4. The list is divided into two categories. The first one highlights the chores for which the children are responsible, and the second includes the list of behavioral guidelines which the children are expected to follow. The rules pertaining to behavioral guidelines were generally enforced by the female participants for their biological children, who are the residential children.

TABLE 4

LIST OF HOUSE RULES AND BEHAVIORAL GUIDELINES IMPLEMENTED FOR THE
CHILDREN/STEPCHILDREN AS REPORTED BY THE PARTICIPANTS
(Responses to Question # 26)

HOUSE RULES RELATED TO CHORES	MEN	WOMEN
Keep room reasonably tidy	4	3
Help out in the kitchen	2	2
Homework rules	1	3
Eat dinner together as a family	1	2
Keep bathroom clean	1	2
Set table before dinner	1	1
Bedtime rules	1	1
Feed cats, change litter box	1	1
Help with vacuuming	1	1
Help shovel	1	1
Tidy up game room	1	1
Not to throw belongings down at entrance	2	0
Limited T.V. watching	0	2
BEHAVIORAL GUIDELINES	MEN	WOMEN
Let us know where he/she is at all times	2	2
Respect your parents and all elders	0	2
Let us know which routes they're taking	0	1
Not allowed on bus alone	0	1
No lying, no belittling	0	1
Curfew rules	0	1
No phone calls after 10 P.M.	0	1
Not allowed to hit one another	0	1
No drinking and driving	0	1
Get off call waiting when call is for us	0	1
Stepdaughter not allowed to sleep in daughter's bed	1	0

Respondents' Action when their Stepchildren and Children Disobey Rules

Couples argued over the disciplinary measures taken whenever the children disobeyed the various house rules and regulations and/or whenever the children displayed behavioral problems. Even though most respondents stated that they had established a set of rules and regulations that their children were expected to follow, those rules were aimed primarily at the residential children. Those who visited infrequently or on week-ends were not really expected to abide by the same guidelines as consistently as their step-siblings. Consequently, couples did not and could not apply the same rules to their children and stepchildren.

The ages of the residential children varied between 11 months and 19 years. Most of the rules applied to the younger children who spent a great deal of time at home with their parents. Parents had to develop a different set of guidelines for the older ones, who were beginning to spend more time away from the family unit. When discussing their older children, parents talked about sanctions or the removal of privileges rather than rules and regulations. Hence, households with children of different ages often had different sets of rules, those for the younger children and the frequently updated rules for older children.

One of the assumptions made prior to the interviews was that the more often the same disciplinary action was enforced whenever children and/or stepchildren disobeyed specific house rules, the lesser the likelihood for problems of boundary ambiguity. The findings, however, revealed frequent disagreements among couples regarding the course of

action to be taken. Participants expressed their anger and frustration which resulted from conflicts and clashes over the children. Some parents, especially the women, felt protective of their children and they often considered the involvement of their partners as an intrusion, as overstepping their boundaries. Women also talked about their children's resentment toward their stepfathers for interfering and for demanding changes in the rules and sanctions established prior to their arrival. Some of the arguments stemmed from disagreement over the methods and procedures for dealing with the problem at hand. Respondents acknowledged that disagreements over the children and over the corrective or disciplinary action with relation to their respective children brought about considerable tension and friction. The pressure was sometimes so great that when they were asked what they did whenever their stepchildren stepped out of line, three participants, (1 man and 2 women) said that they often opted to ignore the offense in order not to create new problems. One participant resolved the dilemma by letting the biological parent handle the problem. Others insisted on taking a more active role, by getting more involved with the children. The direct involvement of stepparents with their stepchildren in matters related to discipline and the general observance of house rules often led to discord and conflicts. The clashes between stepparents and stepchildren often drew in the biological parents who were asked to take a stand. The following examples describe the action taken by two male respondents following an argument with their stepchildren.

(Mate) had some trouble understanding when I would start disciplining (stepdaughter). She was very defensive of her daughter and it took me a while to say "look, if she's being obnoxious, objectionable and being impolite, I mean she's hurting me, I'm a human being, I have to tell her". It took (mate) a while to accept that. She realizes that it's for her daughter's own good if I occasionally explode and say "that's just impolite what you just said or did". She also realizes that I'm restraining myself a great deal and that I hold myself back just to keep the conflict level down.
(4M)

(Stepson) doesn't do what he's asked and he likes to argue about it. So when he disobeys there's an immediate reaction, very often an argument and a bit of shouting. I feel that he needs a father, he needs someone to draw a firm line and he's reaching a point where he's becoming quite big physically. He's quick and he can argue and shout and he's quite forceful with his mother and I don't like that, so I tend to step in and lay on the heavy words to get some response.
(2M)

The next two tables represent the course of action participants engage in whenever their children and/or stepchildren disobey house rules. It is important to note that men often resort to shouting and yelling whenever their children/stepchildren disregard the rules, whereas women report that they only do so with their biological children. The same thing applies to "the occasional smack on the butt". Only one woman acknowledged this type of action with her biological child, compared to five men who do so with both sets of children. The tables also demonstrate that women are more likely than men to talk over the current problem with the children.

TABLE 5

ACTION TAKEN BY RESPONDENTS WHEN THEIR STEPCHILDREN DISOBEY RULES

(Responses to Question # 29)

ACTION	MEN	WOMEN
Insist, repeat demands	5	3
Punishment, removal of privileges	3	1
Shouting, yelling and fighting	4	0
I don't discipline them, I do nothing	1	2
Give them a smack on the butt	2	0
Let partner handle the problem	1	0
I get annoyed	1	1
Not applicable (stepdaughter is 26)	0	1

TABLE 6

ACTION TAKEN BY RESPONDENTS WHEN THEIR BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN DISOBEY RULES

(Responses to Question # 28)

ACTION	MEN	WOMEN
Punishment, removal of privileges	2	6
Shouting, yelling and fighting	4	3
Insist and repeat demands	3	2
Occasional smack on the butt	3	1
Talk with him/her about it	0	2
Not applicable	2	0
I sometimes end up doing it myself	1	0

Positive Aspects of Stepparent Role

One of the final questions in the interview guide required the participants to name the positive aspects of being stepparents. This is an important question, meant to examine the possibility of identifying satisfying and gratifying elements among steprelations. All participants answered this question with the exception of one man who claimed not to understand it. Seven respondents, three men and four women drew a parallel between their children and stepchildren. The women stated that having stepchildren was the next best thing to having biological ones without having to go through the initial pain of giving birth. One woman stated that the most positive aspect about her relationship with her partner's daughters centered around the common interests that she shares with them, as opposed to her limited interest in her sons' attraction to sports. One man whose biological daughter is 26 years old said that living with two teenagers was "a rejuvenating experience" and that he enjoyed being involved with their school assignments and kept up to date with their social life. Another man said that he made no distinction between his children and stepchildren and that his wishes and aspirations of success and happiness pertained to both sets of children. Two men spoke of the ability to influence somebody else's life without having the full responsibility and "without having the father or mother role".

But some respondents offered very different observations. Two women stated that they had not experienced any positive aspects, just negative ones. Both spoke of their disappointment and hurt after having tried

repeatedly over the years to form a loving and close relationship with their stepchildren. They expressed their resentment and bitterness over the children's rejection of them and unwillingness to accept them as their fathers' mates. Others viewed their liaison with their stepchildren as a challenging opportunity to form a close and meaningful alliance with their partners' children.

It's a big growth experience for me. I mean it constantly forces you to evaluate what you're doing and why you're doing it, change your tactics, change your thinking, look at becoming a better listener, understanding the dynamics of the situation much better. I am constantly looking for areas of common interests. I think it's absolutely challenging to avoid the relationship just dissolving into hate. The point is the probability, the possibility for a better relationship later on is worth fighting for now and to do that, I have to keep the bridges open and that's a good growth experience.
(4M)

Contact Consistency

Contact consistency is a concept used to assess family functioning between stepfamily members and non-residential children/stepchildren. It refers to the consistency or inconsistency of patterns of contact between those who reside in the stepfamily household and the children or stepchildren who reside with the other biological parent elsewhere. In this study, some questions dealing with contact consistency focused on the patterns of participation of the non-residential children in the regular and ordinary life of the stepfamily household. Respondents were asked about the frequency and consistency with which they visited with

the non-residential children. Other questions inquired into the presence and participation of the non-residential children in special occasions, such as family and holiday celebrations. Respondents were also asked about the frequency and consistency of their telephone conversations with their non-residential children.

There were major differences between male and female participants with regard to contact consistency. All male respondents complained about their limited involvement with regard to the daily lives and events of their non-custodial children. They expressed their anger and frustration over some of the decisions taken by their ex-wives pertaining to the values and ideals instilled in their children, the daily rules that govern the young people's lives and their incapacity to do much about it.

Most fathers deplored the fact that they were living with their stepchildren, while their biological children lived elsewhere. They felt guilty and somehow responsible for not seeing their children and for not being involved with them as they were with their stepchildren. Consequently, when their biological children misbehaved or acted in a way that required corrective measures during their visits, some of the fathers tended to overlook the infraction as a way to alleviate their guilt, much to the dismay of their wives/mates and their stepchildren.

Male and Female Respondents with Non-Residential Children

Among the sixteen respondents, ten (8 men and 2 women) have non-residential children. Contrary to the 8 men who are the non-custodial parents to their children from their first marriages, the two female respondents are the custodial parents. One woman has a twenty year old son living on his own, the second has a sixteen-year-old daughter attending a boarding school in Europe. Some of the non-residential children live in the same city as their non-custodial parents, while others live in different provinces and in different countries.

The following table illustrates the various geographical differences between the respondents and their non-residential children.

TABLE 7

MALE AND FEMALE RESPONDENTS WITH NON-RESIDENTIAL CHILDREN

	MEN	WOMEN
Parents whose non-residential children are living in Montreal	5	1
Parents whose non-residential children are living in another city within Canada	2	0
Parents whose non residential children are living in another country	2	1

Frequency and Consistency of Visits with Non-Residential Children

The frequency with which the male respondents visit with their non-residential children depends on the visitation agreements between the

ex-spouses, as well as the geographical location of the city in which the children live. Four men with non-residential children under the age of eighteen get together every second week-end, as stipulated in the custody agreements. Children who live in another city or country, however, are less accessible to their non-custodial parents. Such is the case for two men in the sample who have little choice but to see their children less frequently. One of the two women with a non-residential child sees visits with her son every second week-end. The other sees her daughter once a year only, due to the geographical distance between them.

The following table illustrates the frequency and consistency with which respondents maintain contact with their non-residential children through periodical visits.

TABLE 8

**FREQUENCY AND CONSISTENCY OF VISITS WITH NON-RESIDENTIAL CHILDREN
AS REPORTED BY THE RESPONDENTS**

(Responses to Question # 15)

FREQUENCY	MEN	WOMEN
Once a week	1	0
Every second week-end	4	1
Four times a year	1	0
Twice a year	2	0
Once a year	1	1

Frequency of Telephone Calls with Non-Residential Children

Telephone conversations with non-residential children represent a different method through which parents and children keep in touch. Five of the 8 male respondents live in the same city as their non-residential children. Although five male respondents live in the same city as their non-residential children, the regularity of the telephone calls exchanged between them and their children varies. Two fathers call their children "at least once a day, usually after school". Both men stated that they need to maintain this frequency in order to alleviate their anxiety concerning their children. It reassures them and helps them keep in touch with the daily life of their children. Two others call their children once a week, while the fifth man telephones his children twice a week. The frequency of telephone conversations between non-residential children residing in different provinces and/or countries and their fathers also varies. One man calls his children once a week, another, twice a week, and the third man calls his daughter once every ten days.

The following table illustrates the frequency and patterns of telephone calls between the male and female respondents and their non-residential children.

TABLE 9
FREQUENCY OF TELEPHONE CALLS WITH NON-RESIDENTIAL CHILDREN
AS REPORTED BY THE RESPONDENTS

(Responses to Question # 18)

FREQUENCY	MEN	WOMEN
Every day	2	0
Once a week	3	1
Twice a week	2	0
Every ten days	1	0
Once a month	0	1

Family Celebrations in Stepfamily Households

The literature refers to the ritual process that accompanies family and holiday celebrations as "a key to kinship connections in remarried families" (Whiteside, 1984). Some celebrations are viewed as important occasions by remarried/cohabiting couples, especially if they include the presence and participation of the non-residential children. When asked about the various family celebrations observed in their households, all participants agreed that birthdays represent the most important occasions. To ensure the presence of the non-residential children who are usually absent from the stepfamily households during the week, birthday celebrations are frequently held on the week-end preceding or following the actual birthday. Parents with children residing in a different province or country talked about a different type of ritual they adhere to every year: a present, accompanied by a birthday card is sent to the child residing far away. Parents also call

their non-residential children to wish them a happy birthday. Respondents also stated that celebrating mother's day and father's day with the non-residential children depends on whether or not these events happen to fall on the week-end during which the children are visiting. Consequently, the two occasions had a lesser symbolic significance and were not mentioned by some respondents. The following table lists the family celebrations and the frequency with which they are observed by the participants.

TABLE 10
FAMILY CELEBRATIONS IN STEPFAMILY HOUSEHOLDS AS REPORTED
BY THE RESPONDENTS

(Responses to Question # 11)

EVENT	MEN	WOMEN
Birthdays	8	8
Mother's day	5	4
Father's day	5	4
Wedding anniversary	1	2
Parents' wedding anniversary	1	1

Holiday Celebrations with Non Residential and Residential Children

Other than family celebrations, traditional holidays are regarded as important family gatherings by the respondents. Get-togethers with the non-residential children tend to be easily arranged since both grown-ups and children are usually given time off of work and school. Furthermore,

arrangements with the other biological parent are normally made in advance, which ensures that each parent is given the opportunity to spend time with his/her children. Christmas and Passover represent the two most important holidays for members of the sample; they were consistently mentioned before any other celebration. They were also the first and most frequently cited. Aside from the presence of the non residential children and the residential ones, observing these two holidays often involves members of the extended families of both remarried/cohabiting couples. Although other religious holidays are celebrated, they were considered less important and were consequently mentioned less frequently by some participants. For example, the presence of the non-residential children during the Easter or the Jewish New Year celebrations was not considered to be as crucial as during Christmas or Passover by most respondents.

The following table illustrates the various holidays celebrated by the respondents, as well as the frequency with which the holiday gatherings include the non-residential and residential children.

TABLE 11

**HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS WITH NON-RESIDENTIAL AND RESIDENTIAL CHILDREN
AS REPORTED BY THE RESPONDENTS**

(Responses to Question # 13)

HOLIDAYS	MEN			WOMEN		
	ALWAYS	SOME-TIMES	SELDOM	ALWAYS	SOME-TIMES	SELDOM
Christmas	4	0	0	3	1	0
Passover	3	1	0	4	0	0
Hanukah	1	1	1	3	0	0
Easter	2	0	2	3	1	0
New Year's	1	1	2	2	0	0
Jewish New Year	0	1	1	2	0	0
Valentine's day	0	0	7	5	1	1

Boundary Ambiguity

The issue of family membership was examined by means of 3 interview questions. Respondents were asked to define their understanding of the concept "family" by giving a general description of the family unit. They were also asked to name the people they consider to be part of their now or immediate family, followed by those they consider as part of their extended family. The purpose of the second and third question is to (1) examine the extent or degree of agreement or congruence between the remarried/cohabiting couples as to family membership, and (2) to determine the effects of their individual perceptions on their marital relationships.

Respondents did not hesitate to provide a definition of the family unit. They seemed to have a clear understanding of what a family looks like. Most respondents (5 men and 6 women) agreed that a family unit is comprised of a group of people which includes parents or adults with at least one child. Three respondents (1 man and 2 women) stated that a family unit is not limited to the people who live together in the same household, but that it includes non-residential family members such as parents, as well as brothers and sisters. The two remaining men said that having children was an option rather than a necessary condition for being considered a family.

Most respondents experienced some degree of difficulty when it was time to name their family members. They showed signs of discomfort, they hesitated and asked whether their answers should be limited to the people they live with or whether they should include others, such as non-residential children, parents and other extended family members. Many were skeptical of the question because they found it difficult, and yet they had not shown any earlier signs of difficulties when they defined the family as a unit. This question may have come as a surprise to some respondents who were not used to contemplating the issue of family membership, which may or may not have come up until that moment. Their hesitation may also be related to other issues they consider confusing and/or troubling. For example, some respondents were hurt and disturbed about not being able to develop any kind of warmth or relationship with their stepchildren. Others acknowledged disliking their partners' children. Now they were asked to name the people they con

sidered to be part of their family. Are their stepchildren to be regarded as family members?

Others hesitated because they were uncertain about family boundaries. They wanted me to determine the boundaries before answering the question. They asked questions like "what do you mean by immediate family, do you mean the people I live with or who live here? Do you mean my children, my parents?" They had no problems answering the question once they were reassured and told that they can name whoever they consider to be immediate family members. The questions pertaining to the immediate and extended family members are the only two which were treated and analyzed as a "couple construct" (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989: 46). In other words the responses given by each remarried or cohabiting couple were compared in order to determine the congruence/incongruence of their perceptions with respect to family membership. The answers are divided in three categories: four couples mentioned immediate, as well as extended family members, two couples named immediate family members only, and two couples gave combination answers, whereby one restricted his/her answer to the immediate family members, while the other included extended family members. It is important to note that while some couples agreed about the membership of some family members, none was in complete agreement.

Consequently, the answers revealed partial couple congruence. While the question was analyzed as a "couple construct" in order to determine the degree of agreement between the remarried/cohabiting adults, some of the answers given by a few respondents produced surprising results. Two

women excluded their stepchildren from their list of family members. One female participant excluded her partner and his children, saying that her partner was her friend, while his children were extended family members. One man excluded his children by stating that they already belong to another family unit, where they spend most of their time. Another man stated that his biological daughter is his only family because "she's the only unbroken tie". Only one couple was in total agreement with regard to the man's children, who were excluded from the immediate family by both adults.

Once the question concerning the membership of the immediate family was answered, respondents had no difficulty answering the following question dealing with the extended family. Most couples mentioned their parents, in-laws, brothers and sisters. Two respondents mentioned their ex-in-laws and ex-spouses. Others included their stepchildren. Like the preceding question, some couples agreed about some extended family members, but none was in complete agreement.

In the last question of the interview, respondents were asked to bring up any additional information on stepfamilies that they considered important. The purpose of the question was to illicit supplementary insights and information that might not have been covered in the interview. All participants answered the question with the exception of one woman who had nothing to add. Their long answers exemplified the various difficulties and struggles of their personal experiences. Some

respondents reiterated part of what they had discussed earlier with relation to specific issues, others talked generally.

Although participants broached different problematic areas of stepfamily life, and although most of them mentioned more than one point, certain themes became evident. All of the topics brought up for discussion involved and revolved around the children and/or stepchildren. Five men talked about the frequent problems they continued to have with their ex-wives and about the continuous concessions they had to make for the sake of their children. They worried about the well-being of their children and expressed their concern for their children over the consequences of being torn in the middle as a result of the ongoing strain and tension between them and their ex-wives. They also mentioned the difficulty of managing the blending aspect of a stepfamily, and of their frustration over the virtual impossibility of reaching an agreement or decision that is supported by their ex-spouses, children and partners.

The women, on the other hand, discussed the general difficulties associated with the issue of adaptation and integration. They described the perpetual "struggle" and "hard work" that was necessary in order to achieve a sense of harmony at home. They attributed most of the problems to complications with their children or stepchildren. Three of the women stated that the problems they continued to have with their stepchildren caused frequent arguments and tension. The rest were distraught about the friction between their children and their partners and about having the responsibility of settling the arguments between the two parties.

One woman expressed her regret for not having had any stepfamily counselling at the time of her remarriage, which, according to her would have enabled her son and stepson to deal with their anger and frustration. Another woman talked about the wide gap between unrealistic expectations and the reality of stepfamily life. She referred to the disillusion and discouragement that transpire as a result of the wide range of complications inherent in stepfamily life.

The issue of boundary ambiguity created some difficulties for the respondents, especially when they were asked to name those they consider to be family members. When the answers were compared, some revealed general agreement between remarried/cohabiting adults concerning membership. Complete or unanimous agreement, on the other hand, did not materialize. Nevertheless, the findings based on the totality of the interview questions, reveal that the serious problematic issues are related to the problems of role confusion and contact consistency. Issues related to role confusion proved to be the most difficult and most disturbing for those in this sample. Doubt and uncertainty developed as participants struggled with the ambiguous elements associated with their dual role. The difficult issues included lack of acceptance on the part of the stepchildren, rivalry and jealousy among step-siblings, coping with two sets of rules and problems related to discipline due to the anger and resentment of the children and/or stepchildren, which often resulted in behavioral problems.

Issues related to contact consistency gave rise to different types of problems to members of the sample. The men expressed their resentment regarding their limited involvement in the daily activities of their children's lives. Most were also ambivalent about their considerable involvement with their stepchildren with whom they share their lives. The women, on the other hand, longed for closeness with their stepchildren. Most found it difficult to maintain an on-going relationship with their stepchildren due to the gap or intervals between the children's visits. They felt that they had to overcome the emotional detachment that developed as a result of the time span separating each visit. Some were able to form a loving relationship with their partners' children, while others did not.

Based on the answers given to the questions dealing with boundary ambiguity, contact consistency and role confusion, the most critical issues seem to involve the children and stepchildren. Issues related to role confusion are the most serious and problematic ones because they engage and involve the couples with their children and stepchildren on a regular basis. Next in seriousness is contact consistency. Problems related to the non-residential children often give rise to conflicts and disagreements between the remarried or cohabiting adults. The difference between the types of conflicts which develop as a result of role confusion and contact consistency, however, is that the latter occur less frequently than the former because the children in question are non-residential. Consequently, the active involvement of the parents and stepparents occurs only whenever they visit with the non-residential

children. Boundary ambiguity appears to be the least problematic issue, because when compared to the difficulties associated with role confusion and contact consistency, the issue of family membership is the least relevant of the three. Problems surrounding family membership seldom come up. Furthermore, there were no indications of problematic issues between the couples despite the fact that they lacked congruence and agreement with respect to the family membership of some relatives.

Chapter Five

CONCLUSION

This research examined some of the most common and recurring problems in complex stepfamily households. To examine these problems, the concepts role confusion, contact consistency and boundary ambiguity were selected primarily because they focus on the difficult challenges and issues which derive from the structural complexity of this particular type of remarried family.

Implications for Future Research

The dearth of research on stepfamilies, especially complex ones points to the need and necessity for further investigation of these family types. Given the limitation of available studies on stepfamily life and the small size of this sample, this study is exploratory. Nevertheless, it carries certain implications for further research.

Some of the literature on stepfamilies requires theoretical and conceptual clarification, which in turn, will facilitate future research. For example, the term "boundary clarity", used in the literature with reference to the consistency or inconsistency of patterns of contact between members of the stepfamily household and non-residential children/stepchildren leads to conceptual confusion. The problem becomes more pronounced when issues related to "boundary clarity" are discussed with or compared to those associated with "boundary ambiguity". The

similarity in terminology between the two concepts tends to blur the characteristic differences between them. The lack of precision associated with "boundary clarity" required the use of a more specific term, "contact consistency", which more adequately captures the intended meaning.

It would be important in future research on complex stepfamilies to expand the methodology in order to evaluate the degree or level of seriousness of the problem areas identified in this study. Future studies need to examine problematic issues associated with stepfamily life by using focus groups characterized by structural differences. A sample made up of simple stepfamily members (where only one partner has children from a previous marriage), as well as complex stepfamily members (where both partners have children from previous marriages) would enable us to differentiate between the types and levels of problems peculiar to each family type. This would also enable us to verify whether or not problems in complex stepfamilies are more pronounced as is suggested in the literature.

In this sample participants experienced certain aspects of stepfamily life differently due to the fact that all the women were the custodial parents of their children from previous marriages, contrary to all the male participants who were not. Consequently, some of the problems experienced by this sample were attributed to gender differences. Future research is required to determine the precise influence of gender differences and the residential location of the children.

This study seems to indicate that gender was a factor because the men and women in this sample reacted and behaved differently when faced with problems. Male participants tended to become more authoritative with their stepchildren, whereas female participants assumed a more conciliatory role whenever they were faced with similar situations.

Finally, future research needs to explore the following hypotheses whose importance became evident during the course of this study. (1) The more adequate the preparation for remarriage prior to remarriage or cohabitation, the lesser the likelihood for unrealistic and unreasonable expectations following remarriage/cohabitation. (2) The more often remarried or cohabiting couples acknowledge negative feelings and the more often they discuss their fears and concerns openly, the quicker the solutions. (3) The less the adoption of the intact nuclear family model by stepfamily members, the quicker their adjustment to stepfamily life and the faster they achieve family identity. (4) The more frequent the communication and dialogue between stepparents and stepchildren, the greater the probability they will come to accept one another.

The issues that were brought up for discussion by the men and women in the sample echoed those covered in the literature. Although there was general agreement among respondents about some of the complicated aspects of their lives, there were also significant differences between men and women's perceptions.

Issues related to contact consistency represented some of the main differences between male and female participants. All male respondents

complained about their limited involvement with regards to the daily lives and events of their non-custodial children. They expressed their anger and frustration over some of the decisions taken by their ex-wives pertaining to the values and ideals instilled in their children, the daily rules that govern the young people's lives and their incapacity to do much about it. Some of the men were ambivalent about living with their stepchildren/companions' children. They found it ironic that they were more involved with them than they were with their biological children. Consequently, when their children visited the stepfamily household, remarried couples, particularly the fathers, tended to be more lenient and tolerant with regard to the manners and the general behaviour of the children and with some of the rules and regulations of the household. It follows that the other children residing with the remarried couple felt discriminated against. They resented the partial treatment toward their step-siblings and felt neglected, since most of the attention was directed towards the visitors.

Some of the men expressed their concern over the emotional well-being of their non-custodial children. They worried about the children's delayed reaction and anger over the parents' divorce. Those who were successful in maintaining an amiable relationship with their ex wives appeared to handle the problem better than the ones who were on unfriendly terms. Communication and concord between the ex-spouses, even if limited, enabled the parties concerned to deal with the children's anger and bitterness in a constructive way. In working together to help the children accept their divorce, the ex-spouses were able to offer the

latter reassurance and much needed attention, which consequently led to better adjustment on the part of the children. The women did not mention the children's adjustment as being problematic; perhaps this is due to the fact that they live with their children on a daily basis, as a result of which they were able to monitor their offsprings' reactions and feelings on a regular basis. Some women complained about the difficulty of coping with the emotional detachment with their stepchildren, which they attributed to the intervals separating the visits of their non-residential stepchildren. They also worried about the lack of harmonious relationships between the step-siblings.

Role confusion proved to be a problem all stepparents face, especially in the early years of the remarriage. Most respondents expressed their frustration over their inability to resolve the problem once and for all. Some cited the children's ages as a factor and assumed that the situation would have been easier to handle had the children been younger. Others attributed the problem to the children's fear of being disloyal to their other biological parent. Problems related to role confusion were the ones that occurred on a regular, if not daily basis. They were the ones that dealt with the often contradictory aspects of the dual role of the remarried/cohabiting adults. Respondents struggled with issues related to discipline, acceptance of stepchildren, establishing and maintaining rapport with stepchildren, rivalry and jealousy among step-siblings, and dealing with the anger and frustration of the children and stepchildren. Some answers indicated that the behavioral problems displayed by certain children and stepchildren were the result

of poor self-esteem, as well as the children's fear of being disloyal to the other biological parent.

Disagreements between couples occurred as a result of the different philosophies and methods employed with respect to the selection of appropriate disciplinary measures. Conflicts continued to unfold even after the couples agreed on the types of rules and guidelines that their children and stepchildren were expected to follow. Couples soon discovered that the guidelines they set could not be implemented in an even-handed and consistent way due to the fact that some of their children lived in the stepfamily household on a full-time basis, while others visited periodically.

The problems which become manifest in stepfamilies stem from the fact that remarriage is not limited to the remarrying couples but includes the children acquired from previous marriages or relationships. When both parents remarry or cohabit with different partners, the children get two new stepparents and the remarried couple has the added responsibility of looking after the other partner's children on a full-time or part-time basis. Hence, a complex stepfamily life structure. The children's bonds with their parents predate the new couple's relationship, which really means that the bond which unites the new partners is weaker and more fragile than the biological/social bonds between parents and children. The stepparent coming into the relationship often feels excluded from these relationships because he/she is unable to share the common history that characterizes the biological affiliation.

Unlike first marriages, remarried adults do not have the opportunity to devote much of their time to their intimacy and relationship. Because of the presence of children, they have little choice but to become immersed with their demanding new roles from the very beginning. The new challenges they face are unique and unfamiliar. Remarried couples embark on their new lives charged with their respective views and perceptions shaped by their personal experiences acquired from their former families, their families of birth and their previous families prior to divorce.

Many factors contribute to the difficulties and problems which arise in stepfamilies. The literature points to a lack of adequate preparation on the part of remarried adults prior to their remarriage. Ganong and Coleman's study focused on the ways remarried adults with children prepare for remarriage. The authors draw on some of the earlier studies by Messinger in 1976 and Pill in 1981 by stating: "It has been argued that proper preparation for remarriage that includes careful consideration of potentially toxic issues can help families avoid many difficulties of stepfamily life (Ganong and Coleman, 1989: 28). Topics for discussion deemed important by stepfamily experts range from common ones such as handling finances, to issues characteristic of stepfamilies, as for example, non-residential children and possible conflicts with residential children. Other topics include previous marriages, doubts about the relationship, their partner's former spouse, ex-in-laws and the quality of marital relationship.

Ganong and Coleman's sample was made up of 100 men and 105 women. The authors' findings pointed to a lack of adequate preparation for remarriage because the only subject discussed by 56% of the couples was "children from a previous marriage". The next most-often mentioned topic, "finances" was discussed by less than 25% of the couples. The results seem to indicate that couples approach remarriage somewhat naively. Their views concerning the stepparent-stepchild relationship prior to remarriage are usually optimistic. Ganong and Coleman's study reveals that 57% of the fathers and 44% of the mothers expected their partners to have a good relationship with their children. Stepparents, on the other hand, tended to be less optimistic. Only 35% of the stepfathers and 47% of the stepmothers expected to have a good relationship with their stepchildren (Ganong & Coleman, 1989: 30).

While their responses indicate clear concerns over the stepparent-stepchild relationship, remarrying couples lack foreknowledge and experience in adequate preparation as a means to prevent potential problems. This information seems to correspond with the findings of this study. Some of the respondents acknowledged their lack of adequate preparation. Many stated that their present life was far more complicated than what they had originally anticipated prior to their remarriage/cohabitation. Two female respondents stated that the reality of stepfamily life was far from that portrayed on "the Brady bunch" and "the Cleavers", the two television programs that were popular during the 1960s' and 70s'. Another female respondent expressed her regret with regard to her failure to take part in a family therapy, which according

to her, would have been beneficial to the members of her remarried family.

Some of the men voiced similar concerns and seemed eager to find solutions to their problems. One male respondent was actively involved in counselling sessions at the time the interview was conducted. Some male and female respondents said that they started reading some of the literature dealing with stepfamily issues. Others asked me to recommend some reading material in an attempt to help them cope with the problems related to stepfamily life.

Remarried/cohabiting adults are often discouraged and disappointed when their expectations of one another and of the relationship do not materialize. Their unrealistic and unreasonable expectations at the outset of the relationship often leads them to believe that their new family unit is somehow strong enough to withstand any kind of tribulation. They believe in the myth of a happy married/family life and expect all family members to get along and to love one another, just like a nuclear family. Their failure to recognize the distinct differences between the two family types often leads to confusion, guilt and resentment. "The tension and frustration which arise out of unrealistic expectations when families try to become 'normal' by forcing themselves into the nuclear family mould are a major source of stress" (Visher & Visher, 1983: 142).

The perplexity of the remarried/cohabiting couples is compounded by their lack of acknowledgement of negative feelings due to the fear that these feelings may lead to divorce. This information applies specifi-

cally to one male respondent who kept denying the existence of any problematic issues throughout the entire interview. He seemed uncomfortable with most open-ended questions, especially the ones that dealt with his relationship with his children and stepdaughter. He also left a few questions unanswered because he claimed not to understand them despite my repeated efforts to word them differently. His continued discomfort with the subject matter and his reticence suggested that he was neither willing nor ready to acknowledge the existence of problems and of negative feelings. The literature refers to the lack of acknowledgement of negative feelings as the "avoidance hypothesis" (Ganong & Coleman, 1989: 32).

One of the major problems in stepfamily households is the ambiguity associated with the role of the stepparent vis-à-vis his/her stepchildren. Stepparents are uncertain about appropriate role behavior. They are at a loss because they are neither parents nor friends. The uncertainty is heightened whenever the other non-custodial parent is opposed to the remarriage and to the stepparent. Crosbie-Burnett (1989) points to two common maladaptive mechanisms on the part of stepparents as they attempt to deal with their predicament. Some try to love their stepchildren "instantly" in an effort to "reconstitute" a nuclear family. This usually ends up in disappointment because, again, it is based on unreasonable expectations. Other stepparents become more authoritarian and end up alienating themselves and their stepchildren. These two maladaptive mechanisms were used by members of this sample. Female respondents tended to follow the first example by attempting to accommo-

date and love their stepchildren before taking the time to become acquainted first. Some male respondents adopted the second example by becoming the disciplinarian figure in the family. Neither method seemed to be effective. The ambiguity surrounding the stepparent-stepchild role is such that it infiltrates other areas of stepfamily life. Crosbie-Burnett uses the term "social ambiguity" to refer to the lack of social guidelines.

Social ambiguity (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983a) is a chronic stress for stepfamilies as they look for models of realistic healthy stepfamily functioning in the culture and find virtually none. Our social institutions are based on nuclear families. Society's ambivalence towards stepfamilies is evidenced in the inconsistencies in law and policy and the invisibility of healthy stepfamilies, who are camouflaged as "normal" two-parent families

(Crosbie-Burnett, 1989: 329).

Still, the complex undertaking of the newly remarried couple is to develop a sense of a unified family identity despite the obvious dissimilarity in family history and cultural backgrounds of stepfamily members. Unlike the intact nuclear family which has clear boundaries because of its biological ties, the stepfamily "is not a self-contained unit" (Messinger, 1984: 230). The structure of the complex stepfamily is such that it has to have enough flexibility and permeable boundaries to suit the principal people involved, the residential and non-residential children, as well as the additional network of in-laws and other relatives and relations. At the same time the stepfamily needs to

establish some sort of boundaries before its members can start the process of adaptation and integration.

Little support is offered to remarried people because society still considers the intact original nuclear family to be the acceptable one. This is true despite the increasing prevalence of the stepfamily. The negative connotations associated with the prefix "step", especially in respect to the stepmother, the continued absence of social norms and societal guidelines pertaining to stepfamily life, and the limited resources available to remarried people represent significant factors which continue to impede the adjustment of stepfamily members. The need for stepfamily members to be "normal" and to be accepted impels them sometimes to adopt the nuclear family model and pretend that their family unit fits that model, rather than acknowledge that their situation is different from the traditional one. Cherlin's research on the lack of institutionalization of the stepfamily comes to mind when we examine the way the stepfamily is treated in popular culture. The lack of greeting cards aimed specifically at the stepfamily and/or stepfamily members is clearly conspicuous. The greeting card industry is an enormous and profitable industry. One can find greeting cards for incalculable occasions, ranging from weddings, the birth of a baby, mother's and father's day, to early retirement and get well cards. And yet greeting cards aimed at the stepfamily are not available. The unimportance attributed to the stepfamily sends a strong implicit message that the stepfamily is still not recognized as a family form.

Remarried family members should be encouraged to affirm and speak openly about their family setting, not only with relatives and other close relations, but also with professionals. Articles and periodicals about the many problems and challenges related to stepfamily issues should be made available in offices of physicians and other mental health specialists, community centres, hospitals, schools, churches, synagogues and other places of worship. Professional help offered by stepfamily specialists should be publicized and put into operation throughout local community centres.

Stepfamily members should also be encouraged to join self-help group sessions designed to examine and discuss the problem areas which are bound to occur. In the event that such therapeutic groups are lacking in small towns and communities, health specialists and other professionals should encourage remarried couples to form such associations. The opportunity to meet and deliberate about the problematic areas of stepfamily life with other remarried couples on a regular basis can be therapeutic and beneficial. Stepfamily members need to voice their concerns. They also need to listen to other remarried couples' problems and realize that the frustration, tension and confusion which they experience periodically are shared by others and are "normal".

Group discussions, professional help such as individual, couple and family therapy, and literature about stepfamily life are suggested solutions that can be beneficial because they enhance the participants' understanding of the uniqueness of their problems. Once that understanding begins, they can then work constructively on the process of adapta-

tion and integration for the goal of establishing family unity and cohesion.

APPENDIX A

DESCRIPTIVE CATEGORIES OF STEPFAMILIES

- A - Couples living with the wife's children from a previous marriage.
- B - Couples living with the wife's children from a previous marriage, plus common children.
- C - Couples living with the husband's children from a previous marriage.
- D - Couples living with the husband's children from a previous marriage, plus common children.
- E - Couples living with -- his and hers -- i.e., biological children and stepchildren from previous marriages. (*)
- F - Couples living with biological and stepchildren from previous marriages, plus common children. (*)

(*) Denotes complex stepfamily structure

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What are the names of the people who live in this household?
2. What is your relationship to each of these people?
3. How old are they?
4. Do you have any children who aren't living with you? If yes,
NAME: ----- AGE: -----
NAME: ----- AGE: -----
5. What is your occupation?
6. How long have you known (spouse/mate)?
7. How long have you been married to (spouse)?
OR how long have you and (mate) been living together?
8. What do you consider a family to be?
9. Who are the people that you consider as part of your new family?
10. Who are the people that you consider as part of your extended family?
11. Which family celebrations get celebrated in your household?
12. Do you celebrate them with your non-residential children?
13. What holidays do you celebrate in your household?
14. Do you celebrate them with your non-residential children?
15. Other than family and holiday celebrations, how often do you see (non-residential child #1)?
16. Are there specific days set aside for these visits?

Yes ---

No --

17. Who plans these visits?

18. How often do you talk with (non-residential child #1) on the phone?

19. Are there specific days/times set aside for these phone calls?

Yes ---

No ---

20. Other than family and holiday celebrations, how often do you see (non-residential child #1)?

21. Are there specific days set aside for these visits?

22. Who plans these visits?

23. How often do you talk with (non-residential child #2) on the phone?

24. Are there specific days/times set aside for these phone calls?

Yes ---

No ---

25. In your household, do you and (spouse/mate) have an established set of rules for all of the children?

26. (If yes), would you name some of those rules please?

27. Do these rules apply to: (children)

(stepchildren)

(common children)?

28. When one of your biological children disobeys a specific rule, what do you usually do?

29. When one of your stepchildren disobeys a specific rule, what do you usually do?
30. Do you have other problems with your children that are unrelated to rules?
31. Do you have other problems with your stepchildren that are unrelated to rules?
32. As parent and stepparent, which one of you is more involved with the children and stepchildren in the following activities?

	wife more	both same	husband more
.running errands for step- children, ex. shopping	-----	-----	-----
.running errands for children	-----	-----	-----
.taking stepchildren for rec- reational activities	-----	-----	-----
.taking children for recrea- tional activities	-----	-----	-----
.attending school functions or teachers' meetings with stepchildren	-----	-----	-----
.attending school functions or teachers' meetings with children	-----	-----	-----
.discussing problems with stepchildren that they might be having	-----	-----	-----
.discussing problems with children that they might be having	-----	-----	-----
.discussing stepchildren's social activities, ex: parties	-----	-----	-----

.discussing children's social activities	-----	-----	-----
.celebrating holidays with step- children	-----	-----	-----
.celebrating holidays with children	-----	-----	-----
.celebrating significant events with stepchildren, ex: graduation	-----	-----	-----
.celebrating significant events with children	-----	-----	-----

33. What are the difficulties in being a stepparent?
34. How do these difficulties differ, if at all, from being a
biological parent?
35. What are the positive aspects of being a stepparent?
36. What are the positive aspects of being a biological parent?
37. Is there anything else that you would like to add about stepfami-
lies that we have not covered?

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