LONG-TERM IMPACT OF GROWING UP IN A BLENDED FAMILY: EMOTIONAL AND

ATTACHMENT ISSUES

by

Sarah L. Sloan

School Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education: Community Care and Counseling

School of Behavioral Sciences

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that three out of four people who go through a divorce may marry again, and more than half of all marriages today are at least the second marriage for one partner. Recent studies estimate that 65% of remarriages involve children from a prior marriage creating a blended family or stepfamily during their lifetime. This study explored the lived experience of individuals raised in a blended family or stepfamily and what, if any, was the impact on their development and adult attachments. It also explored why adults often report adjusting to communication styles, abandonment, self-esteem, and individual behavior issues as a result of being raised in a blended family or stepfamily. A phenomenological study, i.e., a study of lived experience, provided an in-depth description of the participants' emotional struggles, adult attachment issues, feelings of abandonment, and development between successful or failed relationships. The research design enabled the researcher to effectively address the problem, i.e., the impact of growing up in a blended family and transitioning into adulthood. The findings indicated that as children from blended or stepfamilies grow up and transition into adulthood, relational issues, attachment styles, and traumatic challenges follow them into their adult relationships, yielding social and interpersonal effects.

Keywords: adult attachment, biological parent, blended family, innate attachment, nuclear family, phenomenological study, stepparent, remarriage

Dedication

First and foremost, I give God all the glory for the anointing of the Holy Spirit, my helper, who put this desire and passion in my heart even before I thought about pursuing a doctoral degree. Secondly, I dedicate this work to my loving stepfather, Alfred E. Bailey, who validated me as a young lady with respect and dignity. He called me his daughter and held me in high esteem, letting me know that I could achieve anything. I cherish our walks and conversations about life, and I didn't realize it at 10 years of age, but it all makes sense, the drive of never settling for less and believing that I can achieve far beyond what I could see.

Thirdly, I dedicate this work to my late stepbrother, Alfred E. Baily Jr.; his words of encouragement and determination ring in my ears. Our blended family experience profoundly and innately affected him, who joined our family at four years of age. As I watched my baby brother evolve, he never stopped yearning for his biological mother leading him down a path of destruction, trying to eliminate the pain of emptiness. An overdose of drugs ended his life at age 56. Watching him grow up brought me to ponder these questions. Is there an innate attachment to the biological parent? Is there a difference between male and female attachment, i.e., daughter and father, son, and mother?

Lastly, I dedicate this project to my loving brother Harry, AKA (Bucky), who has always been there for me. He is extraordinary, my best cheerleader, despite any path I have chosen to take. He never stopped believing in me. My recent battle with cancer spoke volumes of a brother's love when the days were dark.

Lord, thank you for my brother.

Acknowledgments

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List of Abbreviations

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Institution Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS)

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)

Nationwide Pew Research Center (NPEW)

National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Secular society's views of blended families have broken down. This study explored how growing up in a blended family may profoundly affect one's mental and emotional state with respect to forming and maintaining healthy relationships. Families continue to remain blindsided as they go from single to marriage, marriage to divorced, and divorced to remarriage, bringing along their children (Deal, 2012). Although the remarriage rate has declined since 1990, two in five recently married couples have married before (Livingston, 2014). This phenomenological qualitative study examined the experiences, challenges, and constructs of emerging adults from a blended family environment into society, highlighting the diversity in their experiences (Heerwagen & Milevsky, 2013; Saint et al., 2011). Because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the questionnaires, surveys, and interviews captured the impact of growing up in a blended family remotely (Gould et al., 2013). The background, history, problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions strove to frame this study's environment.

Background

Family life is changing, and studies show a decline in two-parent households in the United States as divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation continue to rise (Vanorman & Scommegna, 2016). Divorce and remarriage are transforming the lives of American children in astonishing ways (Kumar, 2017). For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 50% of the nation's 60 million children under 13 live with a biological parent and that parent's current partner. Over 50% of U.S. families are remarried or recoupled; 66% of those remarried or living together may break up when children are involved (Pew Research Center, 2015).

According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), divorce is the leading cause of childhood depression (Crosnoe et al., 2014). The most recent data indicates that 16% of children live in what the U.S. Census Bureau terms *blended families*, households with a stepparent, stepsibling, or half-sibling (Pew Research Center, 2015). Although most blended families involve remarriage, not all remarriages yield blended families (Livingston, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2015). For example, remarriages involving spouses with no children from prior relationships would not create blended families (Pew Research Center, 2015). Moreover, families that began as stepfamilies may no longer identify if the stepparents adopt their stepchildren (Amato, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2015). Additionally, many families are blended but may not include formally married parents captured in this measure (Pew Research Center, 2015).

In terms of structure and complexity, blended families are heterogeneous (Brown et al., 2015; Turunen, 2014). According to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), 63% of women in remarriages are from blended families. Half of these remarriages involve stepchildren who live with the remarried couple (Pew Research Center, 2015). Blended families are often categorized into typologies that reflect the diversity of the family structure that may affect relationships (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Vanassche et al., 2015; Van der Pas & Tilburg, 2010).

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United States' divorce rate dropped to 3.2 per 1,000 individuals in the population, decreasing by 18% between 2008 and 2016 (Pew Research Center, 2015). In 2008, U.S. researchers Brown et al. (2015) determined that 12.3% of children lived in complex families, i.e., blended families that include step or half-siblings. During that time, the marriage rate also declined, indicating that both marriage and divorce are out of reach for certain segments of the populati5n (Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Blended families may be formed early in a child's life and become a part of their childhood experience through adulthood (Kalmin, 2013). Blended families enter life together with little awareness of what to expect, and they differ in terms of residential and custodial status (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2015). Each child in the family is typically connected to two parents and their respective households, resulting in blended families connected to multiple homes (Vanorman & Scommegna, 2015). Despite the prevalence of blended family systems, little research exists from the adult perspective on growing up within a blended family and its impact on dealing with unique challenges, i.e., role clarity, visitation, relationships between child and stepsiblings, and grief and loss after a divorce (Kumar, 2017).

Historical Data

Blended families usually form because of a divorce or spousal death. Although death is still a factor, most modern blended families result from separation and divorce (Turunen, 2014). By 1990, 50% of children in the U.S. could expect to spend their entire childhood in an intact family, i.e., living with both of their biological parents in the same household (Pew Research Center, 2015). By 2020, less than half of children in the U.S. would live with their biological mother and father throughout childhood (Amato, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2015). Based on the current literature and clinical experience, pre-blended family counseling is a framework approach that brings family members together before remarriage or cohabitation (Pew Research Center, 2015).

In 2011, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2015) indicated that 42% of both male and female adult participants verified having at least one step relative. Three in 10 had stepsiblings or half-siblings, 18% had a living stepparent, and 13% had at least one stepchild (Jensen et al., 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015). Having a stepfamily is not something most

people anticipate or plan for, which is reflected in the survey findings. When asked whether their family life has turned out about as they expected or if it is different from expected, a 54% majority of those who have at least one step relative say things have turned out differently than they expected. The data compares with only 41% of those who have no step-relatives. Professional marriage and family therapists, clinical social workers, and mental health counselors play a vital role in handling families' experiences as they go through a divorce and remarriage, raising their children into adults (Kumar, 2017; Scott et al., 2013).

According to Morin (2015), the psychological impact of divorce may affect children physically, emotionally, and financially. A child affected by divorce at an early age may show effects later in life and may make sudden transitions to adulthood, such as leaving home or raising children early.

Social Context

Historically, there have always been stepfamilies, but until the early 1970s, they remained largely unnoticed by social scientists (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). According to recent interest research, stepfamilies have been common throughout history, and they have not been studied until recently. Until past the midpoint of the twentieth century, remarriage was considered the solution to a social problem. Because stepfamilies are structurally diverse and much more complex than nuclear families, researchers and clinicians have created considerable challenges (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). They face unique challenges that differ from those in traditional or nuclear families, which have the benefit of a family support system involving two married individuals (one male, one female) providing care and stability for their biological offspring (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Theoretical Concepts

Without a doubt, family development is a part of life; it is where the children grow and get form identities, despite the historical uniqueness of the nuclear family unit. Psychologists strive to understand and explain how and why people change and what causes those changes as they grow throughout their lifespan (L. T. Russell et al., 2016). When two people go through a separation and or a divorce, each person within that family is uniquely affected (Shafer et al., 2017). This impact includes the extended family—all the relationships created through the marriage. However, children are often the most affected (Amato, 2010; Shafer et al., 2017). They may become confused and frustrated as a result of not understanding what is happening, and some may often express those feelings of stress and depression later in life (Shafer et al., 2017).

Research indicates that suppressed feelings may manifest throughout adulthood relationships, and when those suppressed emotions are triggered, the outcome may be positive or negative, warranting some intervention from professionals (Demo & Buehler, 2013; Shafer et al., 2017). The current study was a phenomenological examination of the nature of blended family relationships as the children emerge into adulthood (Heerwagen, 2013; Lang et al., 2013). The qualitative approach addressed the gaps, omissions, and discrepancies in the existing body of knowledge on children raised in a blended family or stepfamily homes.

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Situation to Self

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This qualitative study is significant to me because I can identify as a blended family member. My experience was incredibly positive; however, my family life structure affected how I inadvertently made decisions relative to my emotions, finances, and relationships after growing up within a blended family. This experience profoundly and inherently affected my stepbrother,

who joined our family at four years of age. Watching him grow up brought me to ponder these questions. Is there an innate attachment to the biological parent versus the stepparent? Is there a difference in male versus female attachment, i.e., daughter and father, son, and mother? These questions relate to most adult attachment styles in early development because parental bonding is powerful, according to authors Winston and Chicot (2016). The influential role of loving nurture in children's emotional, social, and cognitive development is powerful; therefore, parenting is critically important.

This qualitative study will help readers understand the power of attachment and how it can lead to a life of struggles and despair. Under the best circumstances, recent research says children often suffer emotional scars that last a lifetime and have trouble with their intimate relationships as adults (Amato, 2010; Isaac, 2015; McLeod, 2019). Because a child in a loving blended family inherits what is required to build self-esteem, the pain of abandonment can live within the subconscious for years if professional help is not an option. Psychologist John Bowlby strongly argued from an evolutionary perspective that attachment represents an innate biological system, describing how the infant's early social experience stimulates the brain's growth and may have an enduring influence on forming stable relationships with others (Bowlby, 1969; Schwartz, 2015).

According to Willis and Limb (2017), the dynamics of biological parent and child relationships are significantly affected by a parent's remarriage. Boundaries between parents and children adjust, but family traditions and rituals change when a new stepparent comes into the picture, changing preexisting family dynamics (Papenow, 2013; Willis & Limb, 2017). Very early relationships with parents or caregivers lay the foundations for attachment styles. They

may influence how we relate to others during our lives, modified by our relationships and the events we experience.

Problem Statement

Current studies on blended families do not speak to the diversity and need for awareness of multicultural issues; therefore, ongoing research must clarify how various family processes manifest in how blended families affect adult development (Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015). Blended and stepfamily formation is accompanied by an adjustment for all family members and often results in children experiencing emotional, academic, and behavioral challenges (Amato, 2010). The population under investigation may have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) growth, depression, and anxiety due to separation from a biological parent, resulting in an identified trauma-related condition (Isaac, 2015). Historically, blended families or stepfamilies have usually occurred because of a spousal death (Kumar, 2017). Although this is still a factor, most modern blended families result from separation and divorce, leaving unique challenges that differ significantly from those encountered by nuclear or intact families (Pew Research Center, 2015; Turunen, 2014).

Research studies estimated that up to one-third of American children would reside in a stepfamily home before age 18 (Papenow, 2013). The limited amount of research that has been conducted on blended families indicates that little investment has been made into the well-being of stepchildren, decreasing their chances for success in life (Henretta et al., 2014). The symptoms from nuclear family issues are well documented (McLeod, 2019); however, there is little recorded data on the experience of growing up in a blended family and the unique challenges and attachment issues that follow them into adulthood (Blyaert et al., 2016; Ganong et al., 2011).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to capture the lived experiences of growing up in a blended family, specifically from the adult perspective, as well as the overall characteristics, mannerism, emotional bonds, attachment issues, and everyday interactions that carry over into family relationships (Zeleznikow, 2015). This study sought to explore (a) the lived experience of seven to 10 adults ages 18 to 40, (b) emotional attachment issues that may have arrived after growing up within a blended family, and (c) the correlation between early childhood development and emotions/behavior after growing up in a blended family.

Case studies, survival strategies, and family workshops are now being done to understand the diversity and complex relationships in blended families and stepfamilies (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013; Zeleznikow, 2015). The theory guiding this study addresses adult experiences after growing up within a blended family or stepfamily. Current studies address blended family development, communication strategies, and the examination of blended families through the lens of system theories, which provides therapists with a way to view and facilitate growth in blended families (Dupuis, 2010). However, few studies have examined the family processes in blended or stepfamilies that impact adult development after the lived experiences with extraordinary emotional, attachment, abandonment, and traumatic challenges (Blyaert et al., 2016).

Significance of the Study

How does child upbringing affect family stability in blended family households (Cartwright, 2013)? This study addresses the gap in the existing body of knowledge, growing up within a blended family, and transitioning into adulthood. Recent studies suggest that 60-70% of

marriages involving children from previous marriages fail (Pew Research Center, 2015). This

is twice the percentage of overall marriages ending in divorce, which sits around 40-50% (Pew

Research Center, 2015). This study also showed how secure attachment is theorized to result

from a responsive caregiver that allows the child to develop a sense of security. However, the

same caregiver can create a sense of insecurity or a lack of consistent love and affection

experienced in their childhood (Schwartz, 2015). Today, parents are raising their children

against a backdrop of increasingly diverse and, for many, constantly evolving family forms (Pew

Research Center, 2015; Schwartz, 2015). Not only has the diversity in family living

arrangements increased since the early 1960s but so has the fluidity of the family (Pew Research

Center, 2015).

According to the Pew Research Center (2015), family life is changing, and the once two-

parent households are declining in the U.S. as divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation continue to

rise. For example, one study found that about three in 10 children younger than 6 had

experienced a significant change in their family or household structure over three years in the

form of separation, marriage, cohabitation, parental divorce, or death (Pew Research Center,

2015). These changes demonstrate that there is no longer one dominant family form; the nuclear

family is no longer the norm.

Research Questions

This phenomenological study explored the central phenomenon of the lived experiences

of participants who have grown up in or were currently in a blended family. This qualitative

study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: How did growing up in a blended family impact an individual's transition into

adulthood?

RQ2: How did the emotional bonds and attachment styles affect an individual's relationships after growing up in a blended family?

RQ3: What significant experience from growing up in a blended family had the most impact on intrapersonal development?

Definitions of Terms

To better understand the key constructs of this study, the following terms are highlighted for further discussion.

1. *Adult Attachment* – Attachment is an emotional bond with another person, i.e., parent, friend, or romantic relationship (Jensen et al., 2015).

2. *Biological Parent* – The father or mother whose deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) a child carries is usually called the child's biological parent (Brown et al., 2015; June & Black, 2011).

3. *Blended Family* – A family unit consisting of one or more children raised by a remarried biological parent and a stepparent (Dupuis, 2010).

4. *Innate Attachment* – An inborn need to attach to a caregiver or a single attachment figure. Attachment is an innate human survival mechanism (Jensen et al., 2015).

5. *Nuclear family* – Also called the elementary family, in sociology and anthropology, a group of people united by parenthood ties consists of a pair of adults and their socially recognized children. Many strategies exist to help families based on nuclear family systems (Dupuis, 2010; L. T. Russell et al., 2016).

6. *Phenomenological Study* – An approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The approach's

fundamental goal is to describe the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013).

7. *Stepparent* – A stepparent is the spouse of someone's parent and not their biological or adoptive parent (Kalmin, 2013; Speer et al., 2014).

8. *Remarriage* – A marriage after a previous marital union has ended through a divorce or death (Amato & Kane, 2011).

Summary

In summary, the term *blended family* is often used to describe stepfamilies, although it is a broader term that also encompasses families that include one or more children born or adopted in the current union (Gibson, 2013; Turunen, 2014). Statistics indicate that more than 40% of U.S. adults have at least one step relative in their family. As adults marry, divorce, and remarry, families' dynamics may grow from nuclear to reunifying. In the United States, nearly 65% of remarriages form stepfamilies and almost 60% of unmarried couples have at least one child from a previous relationship. Further, roughly one-third of all children under 18 will live in a stepfamily household (Pew Research Center, 2015). As a result, researchers' attention has turned to the dynamics, processes, and outcomes associated with children's and adults' stepfamily life. Research has highlighted the implications of various types of attachment experiences on children and how they cognitively represent themselves and others in relationships (Jensen et al., 2015).

Relentless research has been conducted on providing support for divorced parents and their children; however, less emphasis has been placed on keeping newly blended families intact (Zeleznikow, 2015). Merging two families means joining different parenting styles, discipline, lifestyle, and other issues that may be a source of frustration for children (Vanorman &

Scommegna, 2015). The current study used data from semi-structured interviews with young

adults to explore how growing up in a blended family has influenced their family relationships

(Papenow, 2017).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Current research on blended families does not speak to the diversity of the family structure that affects relationships and the need for awareness; therefore, ongoing research must clarify how various family processes and interactions manifest in blended families and affect development and well-being (Blyaert et al., 2016; Kumar, 2017; L. T. Russell et al., 2016). The results from current research reiterate that family counselors need to assess their existing assumptions and beliefs about blended families' challenges (Brown et al., 2015). One million American children experience divorce every year. Of those who get divorced, 75% will remarry, and 65% will bring children from a previous union (Pew Research Center, 2015). The National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) shows that children from divorced families have the deepest feelings of fear, anger, and rejection during childhood and are three times as likely to receive professional help than children in nuclear families (Brown et al., 2015; National Center for Health Statistics, 2014).

Recent studies do not show the relevant information, facts, or experience necessary to recognize and resolve blended families' unique problems, leaving scarred memories and new challenges; however, researchers continue to gather data for the commonality of interest (Cartwright, 2010; Coleman et al., 2015). This study examined growing up within a blended family through the family life cycle structure, development, history, challenges, attachment theories, and the concepts in which both partners have children from past relationships, married, or cohabitating (Cherry & Gans, 2019; Coleman et al., 2015; Newman & Newman, 2012). The findings may reflect what relational issues and attachment challenges children from blended

families bring into their adult lives (Coleman et al., 2015; Morin, 2015). The following sections are targeted discussions focusing on specific aspects of living in a blended family.

Family Life Cycle

Studies conducted at the Healthwise Medical Institute on the Family Life Cycle Stages give an in-depth overview of familial developmental phases, both emotional and intellectual (Newman & Newman, 2012). Each phase includes challenges in family life that allow one to build or gain new skills as he/she grows (Newman & Newman, 2012; Messinger, 2014). However, not everyone passes through these stages smoothly (Messinger, 2014). Situations such as divorce or the death of a loved one may influence how well a person passes through the stages, especially if one is very young (McLeod, 2019). The goal of the life cycle is to create a new blended family with children from both partners; divorced parents should seek counseling about remarriage complexities (Messinger, 2014; Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2016).

When there are children involved in the marriage, and the parents share the parenting, the children may now have a maternal home and a paternal home (Messinger, 2014). In a child's life, sudden and dramatic disruptions may be extremely stressful (McLeod, 2019). Stress that escalates to extreme levels may be detrimental to children's mental health and cognitive functioning (Evans et al., 2011; McLeod, 2019; Shonkoff & Garner, 2011). For parents, stepparents, siblings, or stepsiblings bonded by blood or love, experiences through the family life cycle may affect who they are and become adults (Newman & Newman, 2012).

Independence Stage

The stage most prevalent in this study is the independence stage, which is the most critical of the family life cycle (McGoldrick et al., 2011; Newman & Newman, 2012). During this stage, an individual develops the unique qualities and characteristics that define intimacy

(Fraley, 2018). This identity is vital to development during the young adult years, in which people establish and maintain close relationships and learn who they are outside of their families (Fraley, 2018; Olson, 2011). Current research reveals that developing an intimate relationship depends on how successful a person is at developing his/her identity earlier in life.

Family Development

A family comprises one or more parents and their children living together as a unit (Garland, 2012). Families grow and develop over time; the most obvious evidence for families' development lies in their individual development, particularly children (Anderson et al., 2010). What once was known as a family is continually changing, and everyone may characterize it differently as they encompass the relationships they share with the people in their lives (Cartwright, 2010). Studies show that although marital relationships can be the source of life's most enjoyable experiences, they can also be the most painful (M. V. Russell et al., 2013).

In the United States today, the gender roles of both men and women in marriage have changed dramatically, and the economy has played a large part in gender roles as more women enter the work field (Messinger, 2014; Pietroluongo, 2019). These changes have led to complex family compositions and a growing diversity of family forms and relationships over the life course (Messinger, 2014). The dissolution of marriage and remarriage often brings multiple sets of grandparents, stepparents, and other significant development to the equation (Messinger, 2014; Pietroluongo, 2019). A family's approach to later life challenges evolves from its earlier patterns, life experiences, and cultural worldview (Carter et al., 2015; Pietroluongo, 2019).

Prior research has established that adolescents' perception of belonging to a family is associated with a range of well-being indicators (King & Boyd, 2016; King et al., 2015). Adolescents who grow up in blended families report lower family belonging levels than

adolescents in two-biological-parent families (King & Boyd, 2016). However, little is known

regarding the factors associated with adolescents' perceptions of family belonging in

stepfamilies (King et al., 2015). Family development also focuses on the systematic and

patterned changes experienced as members move through life and the personal application one

may bring to the table (Cherry & Gans, 2019).

Biblical Perspective on Family Development

For this study, one would be remiss not to give credit to the family's creator. In the

Biblical account of creation, God makes this plain. He creates a man and a woman, unites them

as one flesh, and blesses them to multiply (*NIV*, 1984/1973, Genesis 1:27, 28; 2:23, 24). The

Psalmist declared that children are a heritage from the Lord (*NIV*, 1984/1973, Psalms 127:3).

The Bible says that if anyone does not provide for his own, especially for those in his household,

he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (*NIV*, 1984/1973, 1 Timothy 5:8). Jesus'

conception, birth, and childhood are very human stories with direct interventions from birth to

adulthood.

Development describes humans' growth; psychologists strive to understand and explain

how and why people change throughout life (Garland, 2012; Sharma, 2013). Even though many

of these changes are normal, they may still pose challenges that people sometimes need extra

assistance to manage. Marriage and family are critical structures in most societies (Cherry &

Gans, 2019). Historically, the two institutions have been intricately linked in U.S. culture, and

the connection is becoming more complex, making room for what works for its members

(Cherry & Gans, 2019; Sharma, 2013). Despite the reasons, we do not hesitate to affirm a

constant and inescapable biblical basis for family development (Cherry & Gans, 2019).

Historically, marriages have always created a family, and families are the most basic social unit upon which society is built (Sharma, 2013). Family development implications suggest that one is constantly transitioning as each member moves through life cycles (Cherry & Gans, 2019). Psychologists classify relationships as either functional or dysfunctional, although even functional relationships experience dysfunction at some point. Arguments and tension are a normal part of family life; whether with parents or siblings, it is human nature to disagree with any healthy family, nuclear, or blended. A functional relationship offers an emotionally safe environment for the people involved and respects space privacy (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017).

Blended Families

In a blended family—also called a stepfamily, reconstituted family, or a complicated family unit—one or both parents have children from a previous relationship and have combined to form a new family (Cartwright, 2013; Turunen, 2014). Blended families can also include people who did not marry but produced a child, divorced people from failed marriages, or those who were rejected and deserted by a former spouse (Gibson, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2015; Turunen, 2014). In a traditional family, the parents would be married, often after a spouse's death or divorce. Still, most blended families today may not have married, instead of serving as role models in a cohabitation relationship for the children without the marriage ceremony (King & Boyd, 2016; Köstenberger, 2010; Turunen, 2014; Vanorman & Scommegna, 2016). Although a large amount of research on blended and stepfamilies has been produced, there are still many gaps in the research on blended families (Cartwright, 2010). This section offers a general discussion of what is known about blended families from the perspective of the adult and the issues they bring with them after growing up in a blended family (Willis & Limb, 2017).

The Bible gives us the foundational institution of human society (*NIV*, 1984/1973, Genesis 2:20-25). That institution will never change even though the family structure has, and because it has, society has not adjusted to the problematic and destructive issues that come with blending (Kumar, 2017). Although the new blended family concept, once called the stepfamily, has been around for centuries, many blended families were not recognized until the two parents married and agreed to care for the children together, even if one parent was not biologically related to the children (Kellas et al., 2014). Society is much more accepting of adults in a relationship raising children jointly without legal commitment (King & Boyd, 2016). Research has been indicated that this lenient approach may cause difficulties, particularly in terms of child support, medical decisions, and other complex issues that may impact one's life as an adult (Coleman et al., 2015; Kellas et al., 2014).

The proportion of children living in blended households has increased dramatically due to high divorce rates, remarriages, single parenthood, and cohabitation (Coleman et al., 2015). Research has estimated that more than 2.3 billion households are blended, and the statistics rise daily (Pew Research Center, 2015). Usually, these families have difficulty with personal boundaries by nature, leading to a stressful life for everyone involved (Cartwright, 2010; Demo & Buehler, 2013). Some of the participants studied may have suffered from post-traumatic growth, depression, and anxiety due to separation from a biological parent, resulting in emotional abandonment and attachment issues (Isaac, 2015; Willis & Limb, 2017).

Trauma

When children go through a traumatic incident, there is a possibility that they may develop the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These symptoms include signs of thinking or talking about the event, being emotionally numb, being on high alert, and re-

experiencing the event through flashbacks, bad dreams, and intrusive thoughts (Tompkins et al., 2013). Research indicates that the single best predictor of teen suicide was parental divorce and early sexual behavior among children living in blended families (Pace et al., 2013). Traumatic events may affect the child in school, social settings, and family settings (Tompkins et al., 2013). Avoidance or emotional numbing is used as a coping skill to avoid intense feelings by avoiding people, places, and situations (Pace et al., 2013).

In most blended families, children may be handed off to the biological parent weekly due to a custody agreement. This ordeal may bring on stress, depending on the separation circumstances, and parents themselves may become stressed about handovers (McLeod, 2019). Even though children benefit from ongoing relationships and contact with both parents after a breakup, they are often unsettled when leading up to or immediately following a handover between parents, significantly affecting them into adulthood (Heerwagen & Milevsky, 2013; King et al., 2015; McLeod, 2019).

Impact of Trauma

The sudden change of environment may harm children. Early childhood trauma refers to the traumatic experiences of children aged 0-6 (McLeod, 2019). Traumatic experiences can underlie many emotional and behavioral difficulties. Young children may be affected by events threatening their safety or their parents'/caregivers' safety (Tompkins et al., 2013). Their symptoms have been well documented. Children and adolescents do not have the necessary coping skills to manage the impact of stressful or traumatic events (McLeod, 2019). As such, as many as one in three children who experience a traumatic event might exhibit PTSD (McLeod, 2019; Tompkins et al., 2013).

Studies show that behavioral difficulties emerge when the child cannot cope with the intensity of their emotions and avoidance stops working (L. Ackerman, 2019; Parekh, 2018). Behavior disorders, acting-out, academic failure, higher absenteeism and drop-out rates, expulsion, and suspension are associated with students' frustration and may also be symptoms of trauma (L. Ackerman, 2019; Parekh, 2018; McLeod, 2019). Trauma experiences can provoke physiological effects and may persist for a long time after the traumatic event, affecting the physical health and various biological processes (Parekh, 2018).

Relief From Trauma

Past studies show that children in blended families are at a higher risk of being left behind both emotionally and scholastically than children from nuclear families (Kumar, 2017; Sigel et al., 2013). They experience higher rates of stress, depression, and absenteeism, as well as low self-esteem, negative peer influences, and apathy about academic growth (Sigel et al., 2013). However, many blended families successfully overcome these difficulties, becoming healthy, supportive environments for every member (Cartwright, 2010). As the blended family becomes more prevalent, additional statistics may become available as families continue to divorce, remarry, or cohabitate (Cartwright, 2010). Studies are ongoing research this family structure and learn the best ways to help promote the health and well-being of all members of a blended family (Jensen et al., 2014; National Center for Health Statistics, 2014; Parekh, 2018).

Communication

There are levels of conflict, intimacy, communication, and overall interaction patterns between all family members, whether traditional or blended (Olson, 2011). Current studies have identified communication breakdown as the main factor leading to most divorces (Hanson et al., 2011). Living in a blended family has become more commonplace, as have significant issues

related to family members' adjustment to and day-to-day family maintenance (Kumar, 2017; Olson, 2011). Usually, blended families enter life together with little awareness of what to expect (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Spending time together as a family or in one-on-one activities, and even openly confronting issues that cause conflict, are important strength-building activities for a blended family (Kumar, 2017). One concern is the disintegration of stable, loving families in society as children become adults (Coleman et al., 2015; Gould et al., 2013).

Case studies are now better written to understand the diverse and complex relationships in blended families using communication tools to help build a secure healthy connection between family members. Healthy, well-functioning stepfamilies use various communication methods with one another, i.e., listening, addressing conflict, openly sharing personal interests, opinions, and participating in lively activities together (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013).

One of the problems commonly arising in stepfamilies is entering marriage with unresolved conflict and unhealed internal wounds (Schwartz, 2015). According to Bowlby's research and theory, if couples would wait for two years or more after a divorce to remarry, instead of piling one drastic family change onto another, the success rate would be much higher. Gottman and Gottman (2015) asserted that the way a couple argues can tell you a lot about the future of their relationship, and just 3 minutes of fighting can indicate whether the pair will flourish with time or end in ruin. Some new spouses carry memories of painful and abusive incidents (M. V. Russell et al., 2013). Often, unintentionally negative baggage comes into the marriage (Kumar, 2017; Shafer, 2014). Premarital counseling is an excellent vehicle for bringing such unresolved issues to the surface; however, the couple must deal with fears and negative memories leftover from another marriage or intimate relationship (Ehrenberg et al.,

2012; Kumar, 2017; Shafer, 2014). If the abuse was evident, they might think this will happen in the new alliance, and even a "slightly raised voice may bring terror to the abused one" (June & Black, 2011, p. 125).

Challenges

Blended families face unique challenges that differ significantly from those experienced by nuclear families (Coleman et al., 2015; Kumar, 2017). Nuclear first-marriage families begin with no children, giving the couple time to adjust and build a relationship (Kumar, 2017; Turunen, 2014). When children are born into a traditional or nuclear family, they experience a natural bonding with both parents (Turunen, 2014). Traditionally from the outset, both parents become involved with the development of the children, who have genetic characteristics of both parents and are learning behavior from both parents as well (June & Black, 2011). In today's modern family, life is complicated (Kumar, 2017). Children in blended families may separate from one of their biological parents, either most of the time or totally. Although stepfamilies may face more challenges than nuclear families from the very start, for these reasons, blended families need extra encouragement (Henretta et al., 2014).

Blended families result from broken relationships established out of loss (Henretta et al., 2014). Often, marriages begin with disappointments from the past and high expectations, leaving the children confused and anxious (Kerr, 2010; Henretta et al., 2014). As stress rises, emotional connectedness becomes more stressful than comforting, and eventually, one or more members feel overwhelmed, isolated, or out of control (Kerr, 2010). According to Kerr (2010), the family member who does the most accommodating is the most vulnerable to depression, alcoholism, affairs, or physical illness. These findings also support the core assumption of continuity in attachment theory, which vies relationships to parents as influencing close romantic

relationships in adulthood (Pascuzzo et al., 2011). Researchers in the United States found that stepparents with avoidant or anxious attachment styles contribute to lower relationship satisfaction and stability and are likely to face greater challenges in their role as stepparents than those with a secure attachment style (Jensen et al., 2015). Researchers also found that stepparents who are attached may feel more threatened by the parent's relationship with their children (Cherry & Gans, 2019).

Social stereotypes have often viewed blended families as abnormal; nuclear family functioning as the prototype for all family units creates a lack of role clarity for each blended family member. Although many strategies exist to help families, many are based on nuclear family systems and are inapplicable to blended families (Kumar, 2017). This review intends to determine how blended families across the U.S. affect all members involved mentally, physically, and emotionally (Kumar, 2017; Sigel et al., 2013).

Counseling

Studies indicate that blended families are more common in the United States than in other industrialized nations (Sweeney, 2010). In 2011, three in 10 American adults reported having a half-sibling or stepsibling; this number is higher for those younger than 30 (44% for Whites, 45% for Blacks, and 38% for Hispanics; Parker, 2011). Stepparents may face additional stresses as they initiate a new life together: stresses that traditional marriages may not face (Kumar, 2017). Most church leaders and parishioners train to conduct pre-marriage counseling; however, little research reveals blended families' outcomes (Papenow, 2017). In the scholarly discourse on family structure, conversations are rare and seldom include adult structure, which is critical to understanding the relationships and dynamics that shape a child's development (Scanner et al., 2019).

Recent research on the family structure has paid far less attention to understanding how growing up in a blended family may affect adult outcomes or how family life experiences differ depending on family composition (Papenow, 2017). Before couples can move on to subjects like intimacy, needs, respect, and love, both need to have conversations about the former spouse and their influence on their union, especially if children are involved (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2020). If no help or prevention is provided, those same couples are prone to repeat the trend. (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). In the United States, second marriages' divorce rate is over 60% compared to first marriages (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Parker, 2011). Although not all remarriages result in a blended family or stepfamily formation, research dictates a significant portion of them do (McGoldrick & Carter; Papenow, 2017; Parker, 2011).

Both professional and faith-based interventions are needed for blended families to build a good relationship with their future spouses, children, and society (Gold, 2017; Lambert & Dees, 2016). Dr. Jeannette Lofas (2016), president and founder of the Stepfamily Foundation, indicates that remarriage is the most challenging form of marriage (Gold, 2017; Lofas, 2016). The post-divorce actions of their parents emotionally or spiritually injure over 67% of children. Statistics indicate that 70% of women and 50% of men (Lofas, 2016) are still intensely angry at each other 10 years post-divorce. Children may live responsibly in families where constant attention, parental guidance, discipline, care, and support are practiced (Amato, 2010). However, in families where children are not given the same parental supervision, they often develop various lifestyle problems such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and sexual risk behaviors (Amato, 2010; Demo & Buehler, 2013).

Parents usually blame each other for their children's actions, leading to anger, resentment, separation, and divorce (Parker, 2011). These same children bring adverse effects

due to the reduced quantity and quality of children's household investments. Emotional

dependence presumably evolved to promote the cohesiveness and cooperation families require to

protect one another and encourage unity (Pascuzzo et al., 2011). As women have children later

in life, analysts have identified a link between adolescent attachment insecurity to parents and

adult anxious attachment. This attachment is where relationships with parents influence close

romantic relationships in adulthood (Pascuzzo et al., 2011). According to Bowlby (1969), this

kind of process should promote continuity in attachment patterns over the life course. However,

a person's attachment pattern may change if their relational experiences are inconsistent with

their expectations (Fraley, 2018). However, a child raised in a supportive and loving

environment integrated with healthy coping mechanisms skills will have the internal resources to

develop the skills needed to cope with life challenges and cultivate meaningful relationships

(Hayes et al., 2010).

Attachment Theory

John Bowlby (1969), the founder of attachment theory, believed that the earliest bonds

formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact throughout life (Jensen et al.,

2014). Bowlby included that children come into the world biologically programmed to form

attachments, and dependency is created. (Jensen et al., 2014; Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2015).

As children and adolescents grow up within a blended family, close emotional bonds form

between parents and children. Those bonds are often responsible for the attachments that the

children of blended families have as adults after leaving home. Attachment bonds start at a

young age as children look to those who provide support, protection, and care. Relationship

stability and satisfaction mediate the influence of attachment anxiety in many ways (Jamecke &

South, 2013). As individuals transition in and out of various family roles over time, attachment orientations may influence family roles, especially in blended families (Jensen et al., 2014).

Previous research suggests an intergenerational transmission of marital satisfaction, such that parents' marital satisfaction predicts their adult child's marital satisfaction (Jensen et al., 2014). However, when parents separate and remarry innately, the children suppress their feelings, leading to multiple intimate relationships over the years, also called attachment avoidance (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017). The mechanisms that explain this phenomenon remain unknown. Although these challenges are well established in the literature, relatively little is known about potential mediators between blended family issues and partner relationship outcomes, such as satisfaction and stability (Jensen et al., 2014; Pace et al., 2013). Throughout history, children who maintained proximity to an attachment figure were more likely to receive comfort and protection and were more likely to survive to adulthood (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017).

Background on Attachment Theory

Like Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), John Bowlby believed that childhood events significantly influence our adult lives, shaping our personality and mental health (Cherry & Gans, 2019; Schwartz, 2015). Bowlby closely observed that separated infants would frantically go to extraordinary lengths (e.g., crying, clinging) to prevent separation from their parents or reestablish proximity to a missing parent (Schwartz, 2015). These behaviors continue until the child can reestablish the physical or psychological proximity to the attachment figure. Bowlby strongly believed that young children experienced profound despair and depression throughout their lives, internalizing those feelings hidden from the consciousness that may cause problems during adulthood (Cherry & Gans, 2019).

Adult Attachment

Attachment starts early in life with caregivers; these relationships have a tremendous impact throughout the lifespan (Jensen et al., 2014). Attachment orientations might be particularly influential amid transitions to blended family life and thus be a justifiable focal point for researchers (Jensen et al., 2014; Schwartz, 2015). About 40% of adults exhibit an insecure attachment orientation (Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Adults with insecure orientations are more likely to experience romantic relationship dissolution, a common precursor to the blended family formation (Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013; Jensen et al., 2014). These conditions likely make insecurely attached adults overrepresented in blended families (Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Thus, this population should be of substantial interest to blended family scholars and the behavior system (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2014).

The attachment behavior system (Bowlby, 1980) serves as an essential concept of attachment theory, providing a conceptual linkage between human development models and modern views on emotion regulation and personality (Cherry & Gans, 2019). Although Bowlby focused primarily on understanding the infant-caregiver relationship nature, he believed that attachment characterized human experience from the cradle to the grave (Jensen et al., 2014; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Bowlby's theory identifies four patterns of attachment—(a) secure, (b) anxious-resistant, (c) avoidant, and (d) disorganized—all of which affect the outcome of a child's life (Simpson & Rholes, 2017; Wright, 2020). Bretherton (1992) believed that there are individual differences in the way children appraise the accessibility of the attachment figure and how they regulate their attachment behavior in response to threats, even in adulthood (Jensen et al., 2014; Schwartz, 2015; Simpson & Rholes, 2017).

Secure Attachment

A secure attachment is the best possible foundation for healthy physical, emotional, intellectual, and social development. A securely attached baby is curious and outgoing, freely able to explore his or her environment. Studies have shown that securely attached children are more empathetic during later childhood stages. These children are also described as less disruptive, less aggressive, and more mature than children with ambivalent or avoidant attachment styles (Cherry & Gans, 2019). A secure emotional attachment may strengthen a person's ability to create a robust social network and build a stable and positive bond and relationship with his/her partner (Shi, 2010). However, with a divorce or death in a child's life, this secure attachment can swiftly turn into an insecure attachment (Cherry & Gans, 2019).

Anxious-Resistant

A person can be described as having an anxious attachment style when they have difficulty feeling secure in relationships. As young children, they may cling to caregivers or become inconsolable when a caregiver leaves the family (Shi, 2010). Naturally, this happens when parents divorce and remarry, or one parent dies (Jensen et al., 2014; Shi, 2010).

Avoidant Attachment

Avoidant attachment may develop as early as infancy (Shi, 2010). If children become aware that the parent or caregiver may reject them, over some time, they adapt (Cherry & Gans, 2019; Shi, 2010). Studies show that children with avoidant attachment stop seeking connection or expressing emotion when their inner needs for connection and physical closeness are unmet (Cherry & Gans, 2019; Pietroluongo, 2019). At times, parents may feel overwhelmed or anxious when confronted with a child's emotional needs and close themselves off emotionally, or they

may completely ignore the child's emotional needs and distance themselves from the child when they seek affection or comfort (Jensen et al., 2014; Pace et al., 2013; Shi, 2010).

As children and adults with an avoidant attachment style grow and develop, they may appear outwardly independent. They also struggle to connect with others who attempt to bond with them (Shi, 2010). Avoidantly attached adults often struggle to verbalize when they have emotional needs (Cherry & Gans, 2019; Shi, 2010). Another characteristic of an avoidant attachment is that one may be quick to find others' faults (Shi, 2010). Even though attachment issues can resonate in adulthood, there is no formal diagnosis for attachment disorder. For some, these may be lingering symptoms that went undiagnosed in their childhood (Cherry & Gans, 2019).

Disorganized Attachment

Some but not all members of the psychology community recognize disorganized attachment as another form of attachment. Today, psychology calls it "the forgotten attachment style" (Wright, 2020). Like avoidant attachment, disorganized attachment represents another way in which children's relationships with caregivers can manifest as relationship challenges later in adulthood. Disorganized attachment, identified as the most intense of the four attachment styles, develops when a child experiences trauma, abuse, or chaos in the home. As a result, the child will begin to fear their caregivers, having no secure base to turn to for consistent emotional safety, support, and comfort (Wright, 2020).

People with a disorganized attachment style often oscillate between the basic human need for belonging and their drive for survival, experiencing lots of anxiety in relationships. They often need closeness and fear rejection by their partners, just like those with anxious attachment

(Wright, 2020). Because of their history of trauma, people with a disorganized attachment style will likely find forming relationships complicated and often experience trust issues.

Implications of the Blended Impact

The idea that romantic relationships may be attachment relationships has profoundly influenced modern research on intimacy (Pascuzzo et al., 2011; Schwartz, 2015). One would hope that most adults are secure in their relationships, feel confident that their partners may be there for them when needed, and are open to depending on others and having others rely on them (Pascuzzo et al., 2011). Depending on the experiences they encountered after growing up in a blended family, some insecure adults may become anxious-resistant, worrying that others may not love them completely, and become frustrated or angered easily when their attachment needs go unmet. Others may become avoidant and appear not to care about close relationships. Instead, they may prefer not to depend upon other people or have others be too reliant on them (Schwartz, 2015; Shi, 2010). The factors that make an attachment relationship desirable for infants, i.e., responsiveness and availability, are the same factors adults find desirable in romantic partners. In short, individual differences in attachment should influence relational and personal functioning in adulthood in the same way they do in childhood.

Step Siblings

Studies show that siblings raised in blended families do not differ significantly from siblings in traditional family types (Heerwagen & Milevsky, 2013). In blended families, individuals form first co-residential unions at younger ages, more so than their two-parent biological families. Heerwagen and Milevsky (2013) found that sibling relationship quality is not associated with the rate of early union formation; however, poor sibling quality increases the likelihood of cohabitation, and good sibling relationship quality increases the likelihood of

marriage. Their findings show that the diversity in experiences of growing up changes in the

relationship due to time and transition. Based on previous research and studies, a secure child

tends to believe that others will be there for him or her, bringing this belief into his/her adult life.

Once children have developed such expectations, they may seek out relational

experiences consistent with those expectations and perceive others by those beliefs (Heerwagen

& Milevsky, 2013). Fraley (2018) reported that a person's attachment pattern might change if

his/her relational experiences are inconsistent with his/her expectations (Jensen et al., 2014).

Earlier research on adult attachment involved studying the association between individual

differences in adult attachment and how people think about their relationships. And their

memories of their relationships with their biological parents and stepparents. Assuming that

adult relationships are attachment relationships, secure children may grow up to be safe in their

romantic relationships (Fraley, 2018). Moreover, people who are confident in their relationships

with their parents are more likely to establish secure connections with new partners (Fraley,

2018; Jensen et al., 2014).

Studies also indicate that securely attached adults tend to be more satisfied in their

relationships than insecurely attached adults (Jensen et al., 2014). A large portion of adult

attachment research has been devoted to uncovering the behavioral and psychological

mechanisms that promote particular behaviors in adults (Cherry & Gans, 2019; Fraley, 2018).

There are many questions that current and future research on attachment needs to address

(Cherry & Gans, 2019). Although it is clear why attachment behavior may perform an essential

evolutionary function in infancy, it is not clear whether attachment serves a vital evolutionary

role among adults (Jensen et al., 2014). The future researcher may be necessary to determine

whether an adult relationship has attachment-related functions. Studies show that many

researchers still do not have a strong understanding of the specific factors that may change a person's attachment style (Cherry & Gans, 2019; Jensen et al., 2014).

Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework regarding blended families allows therapists to view and facilitate growth in the blended family system. This study was conducted to examine the challenges of growing up within a blended family. Today, researchers and clinicians have gained a greater understanding of the family dynamics that lead to separation and divorce (Kumar, 2017). The likelihood that children whose parents have separated may become members of a blended family has increased considerably in recent decades (Saint-Jacques et al., 2018). Studies show that the issue of transitioning between family units has been largely ignored. Addressing a family's psychological needs and their family unit's responses are incredibly essential to foster growth and trust in a family (Cartwright, 2010; Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). One of the primary interests of blended family researchers has been the demographic shifts the U.S. has experienced as divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation are rising (Pew Research Center, 2015; Schlomer et al., 2011).

Research indicates that blended families may differ from nuclear families despite social changes. Blended families tend to have more conflict, are more likely to experience crises, and are slower to recover from family situations (Cartwright, 2013; Schlomer et al., 2011). This study may encourage researchers to follow and document the impact of a family transition on children's adjustment and the attachment theory adjustments made after growing up within a blended family, and how attachment theory normalizes adult attachment needs (Cartwright, 2013; Coleman et al., 2015). As remarriage continues to rise in society and the family matures into specific roles, the challenges may be confusing (Gold, 2017).

There is little reason to expect any reversal in these trends; therefore, research on the subject has adopted many different theoretical perspectives (Papenow, 2017). The current study utilizes Papernow's (2017) argument that blended family members are often in various stages that are different from one another. Therefore, remarriage patterns are of substantive interest to policymakers and scholars alike (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). With the prevalence of blended families within the American culture and the higher risk of dissolution within higher-order marriages, therapists need to understand the difficulties that such families face (Dupuis, 2010). Scholars have indicated that one gap in the remarriage literature to date concerns the timing of remarriage among diverse groups (Dupuis, 2010; James & Shafer, 2012).

The study findings suggest that divorced individuals remarry quicker than individuals whose first marriages ended in spousal death. This relationship is moderated by gender and parity, often suggesting that demographic and life course factors may impede or encourage post-marital union formation (James & Shafer, 2012). Given the variance in the circumstances under which divorce and spousal death occur and concomitant differences in the social, emotional, and economic support each transition requires, this is a significant oversight (Dupuis, 2010; James & Shafer, 2012). Despite the growth of the blended family within society, the incomplete institution concept is still highly regarded within the remarriage literature (Dupuis, 2010). Using attachment theory as one of the organizing theoretical frameworks helps to conceptualize and explain the challenges experienced by family systems (James & Shafer, 2012).

The interpersonal experience and familial dynamics of blended families, couples, attachment theory, and intergenerational trauma provide a unique lens to understand better the stressors and challenges among blended families (Blyaert et al., 2016). The blended family has often been referred to as an incomplete institution (L. T. Russell et al., 2016). Despite

considerable interest in the blended family, there are still significant gaps in current knowledge and ability to provide adequate information for blended families (Cartwright, 2013). These challenges and tasks have implications for stepfamilies' internal organization and dynamics (L. T. Russell et al., 2016).

Together, family systems theorists and family framework support can build on the expectation that structurally diverse families' functions and challenges may shape youth's experiences within blended families, thereby affecting their development (Dupuis, 2010; Heerwagen, 2013; Lang et al., 2013). Further, those challenges and tasks may result in youth living in different family structures benefiting from some family management practices but not others (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2018). Although blended family systems are becoming progressively more frequent and may one day outnumber nuclear families, negative connotations still surround the blended family structure (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2018; Papenow, 2017). As divorce rates continue to rise, the displacement of children due to no fault of their own will continue to grow to create a society of dysfunctional adults (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2018).

Related Literature

Because of this research's exploratory nature, the methodology used a phenomenological qualitative approach (Heerwagen, 2013; Saint et al., 2011). This study focused on how individuals growing up in a blended family make meaning of their life experiences (Pietroluongo, 2019). Data were collected for this study through interviews, questionnaires, and surveys. More specifically, participants were young adults ages 18-40 who lived and grew up in a blended family (Heerwagen & Milevsky, 2013). The related literature and studies indicate that what was once called stepfamily are now blending (Kumar, 2017). Emerging perspectives, such as focusing on the number of family transitions rather than divorce as a single event, are

promising (Speer et al., 2013). Gaps remain in the research literature, and the review concludes with suggestions for new studies.

The research provides excellent resources for this research on blended families that demonstrate the integrating system of the family complexity in studies of children's well-being (Brown et al., 2015). According to Livingston (2014), the U.S. government does not explicitly collect data on blended families; however, 40% of new marriages in 2013 included at least one partner who had been married before. The divorce rate for second marriages exceeds 60% and is nearly 70% for third-time marriages. Research shows that 63% of women under 45 are in blended families (Pew Research Center, 2015). Although these statistics provide some insight into blended families, they may not accurately describe all these families that account for post-traumatic growth, depression, and anxiety due to separation from a biological parent, resulting in an identified trauma-related condition (Isaac, 2015). Research indicates that child upbringing is the building block of family stability and society itself. Proper guidance helps a child grow, develop, and respond positively to life; however, parents have neglected this fundamental responsibility, thereby exposing their children to danger and difficulty in their future (Dupuis, 2010; Kreider, 2014).

Divorce is a traumatic experience for any adult, but a child experiencing a divorce may feel especially traumatized. Broken children mimic broken adults throughout society. Restoring the importance of marriage to society and children's welfare will require politicians and civic leaders to make this one of their most important goals, i.e., supporting happy children who can achieve their potential for social well-being (McKay, 2020). Even though children benefit from ongoing relationships and contact with both parents after a breakup, they are often unsettled when leading up to or immediately following a handover between parents (Isaac, 2015; Parekh,

2018). A broad range of issues can develop with children and teens of divorce, and up to 50%

may develop anxiety issues before age 14. Divorce, abandonment, anxiety, and depression may

influence children in life-altering ways that can also affect mental health (Parekh, 2018).

The research on same-sex relationships has informed policy debates and legal decisions

that significantly affect American families. However, the data and methods available to scholars

studying same-sex relationships are limited (Regnerus, 2012). Many other researchers have

replicated these findings, demonstrating this model's efficacy in treating children and

adolescents who have experienced traumatic stress (McKay, 2020). The adjustment may take

time; a therapist can provide parent support for behavior management and provide additional

recommendations to help build the blended family bond (Saint et al., 2011). Statistics indicate

that between 40-50% (Pew Research Center, 2015) of married couples in the United States get a

divorce, and couples often cite multiple reasons rather than one problem (Gold, 2017; Parekh,

2018).

One main reason is the feeling of abandonment (Parekh, 2018), which often stems from

childhood loss related to a traumatic event of losing a parent through death or divorce, causing

anxiety (McLeod, 2019; Tompkins et al., 2013). For example, coming into a blended family or

stepfamily may cause sadness, emptiness, or depression (Crosnoe et al., 2014). Ongoing

research may clarify how various family processes manifest in how blended families affect adult

development (Dupuis, 2010; Turunen, 2014). Despite the prevalence of blended family systems,

little research has explored role expectations for family members or how such families work and

the unique challenges they face (Blyaert et al., 2016).

The lack of prior research on growing up in a blended family could be a significant

obstacle that could make data collection rather challenging in time and location. Involved

blended families often are not captured by researchers who consider only the child's relationship with adults in the household (Cartwright, 2013; Fomby et al., 2016). The diverse and complex nature of blended families also has led some scholars to question whether families can adequately define in terms of a household (Cartwright, 2013). Many researchers now endorse an extra-residential approach that includes children's ties with half-and stepsiblings living in other families (Schwartz, 2015). However, existing data often do not have this contextual information. In a study comparing parentage of children in four countries (Australia, United States, Norway, and Sweden), investigators found that in the United States, 32.8% of women had children with two or more fathers compared with 19.5% in Norway, 16.3% in Sweden, and 15.6% in Australia (Le Bourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2015). Mothers who already had two or more children by their first child's father were less likely to have more children in a subsequent relationship. In contrast, those who were young when they had their first child were most likely to have children with different partners (Thomson et al., 2014).

Child upbringing is the building block of family stability and a stable society. Proper guidance helps a child to grow, develop, and respond positively to life. However, studies suggest that 60-70% percent of marriages involving children from previous marriages fail (Pew Research Center, 2015). This is twice the percentage of overall marriages ending in divorce, which sits around 30 or 35% (Pew Research Center, 2015). According to the Pew Research Center (2015), the U.S. government does not collect data on stepfamilies. Although some organizations and groups attempt to collect data, their methods are often limited (Dupuis, 2010). Even though these statistics provide some insight into blended families' intricate nature, they may not accurately describe all stepfamilies (Kreider, 2014; Dupuis, 2010). Studies have found that blended families are hard on a marriage; about 50% of first marriages, 67% of second

marriages, and 73% of third marriages end in divorce (Banschick, 2012). When both spouses have children from a previous marriage, the divorce rate is 70% (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, couples who actively prepare for step-parenting have better odds of making it work.

Therefore, premarital counseling for blended families is vitally important for the couple and essential for the children. Those parents also have better outcomes for all involved in the unfortunate event of a second divorce (Banschick, 2012; Ehrenberg et al., 2012). This cycle often continues as those same children grow up after living in a blended family, often bringing those same patterns into their various relationships filled with difficulties, disconnection, confusion, conflict, and pain. Change can be stressful and chaotic, especially for the children; therefore, premarital counseling is essential for maintaining the transition (Ehrenberg et al., 2012).

A significant concern is that it remains unclear how child upbringing is affecting family stability in blended households. This study addresses the gap in the existing body of knowledge on child upbringing and family stability in blended homes focusing on adult attachment.

Summary

The term blended family is used to describe stepfamilies. However, it is a broader term that also encompasses families in which one or both partners in the household have children from other unions (Brown et al., 2015; Gibson, 2013; Turunen, 2014). Much is known about blended families; the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know. The Pew Research Center (2015) indicated that 42% of 2,700 adults polled had at least one step relative. Three in 10 have stepsiblings or half-siblings, 18% have a living stepparent, and 13% have at least one stepchild. In the United States, nearly 65% of remarriages form stepfamilies, and almost 60% of unmarried couples have at least one child from a previous relationship. Blended families may be

formed early in a child's life and be a part of their childhood experience throughout adulthood (Kalmin, 2013).

Further, roughly one-third of all children under 18 may live in a blended family household (Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015). Results show that researchers have turned their attention to the dynamics, processes, and outcomes associated with children and adults living a blended family life. Research has highlighted the implications that various types of attachment experiences have on children and how they come to represent themselves and others cognitively in the context of relationships (Jensen et al., 2015). People are biologically driven to form attachments with others, but forming attachments is influenced by learning experiences, expectations, and beliefs about their relationships (Jensen et al., 2014; Livingston, 2014). Ample research has been conducted regarding providing support for divorced parents and their children; however, there has also been a lesser focus on keeping newly blended families intact (Jensen et al., 2014; Zeleznikow, 2015).

Previous studies show that stepchildren fare worse than children living in a traditional family home, which may be assumed to be unsupported and circumstantial (Coleman et al., 2015). Merging two families means joining different parenting styles, discipline, lifestyles, and other factors that may be frustrating for children (Livingston, 2014). It is essential to ensure consistency in the new family. The short-term effect of blended families means adjusting from a single-parent home to a stepparent home with a significant impact by following new rules, sharing space, and simple adjustment. It could take years for blended families to form the emotional bonds taken for granted in the nuclear family; however, it may happen with time, patience, and grace. A blended family's long-term effects could carry over into adults' lives (McGoldrick & Garcia-Preto, 2011).

The transition often happens from middle childhood to adolescence; parental divorce and remarriage could cause conflict and other negative interactions in nuclear families. Therefore, it is likely that many children who experience new familial circumstances respond to these difficulties with a range of emotions, including behavioral problems within and outside the home environment. Most people have some degree of difficulty adjusting to life-altering situations. However, children have more difficulty adjusting to these situations due to their immaturity, vulnerability, and lack of participation or control. When children cannot control their lives, malicious behavior is often replaced with frustration, manifesting as emotional problems, e.g., defiance, aggression, anger, depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety. In today's modern family, life is complicated. Parents have careers to maintain, homes to manage, and various other adult responsibilities. Professional intervention is an absolute need for blended families to build a good relationship with their future spouse, children, and society, serving to minimize feelings of unfairness and frustration for both children and the couple.

Even though the U.S. government does not collect data on step or blended families, some organizations and groups attempt to collect data, even with limited methods (Pew Research Center, 2015). Although these statistics provide insight into blended families' intricate nature, they may not describe all blended families accurately. America still leads the world in teenage births (June & Black, 2011); therefore, blended families may be the composition of most families in the future. As children transition from blended family relationships into adulthood, there is a possibility that they may experience attachment issues. Positive interpersonal experiences play an important role in all family relationships (R. A. Ackerman et al., 2011). The implications for future research opportunities include multicultural issues within blended families and stepmothers' relationships with their stepchildren.

The exact prevalence of blended families is unclear because they are not accurately accounted for by the U.S. Census Bureau (Pew Research Center, 2015). The most recent census only included blended families, where the children resided most of the time. Therefore, the poll did not account for all the blended families, married or cohabitating, in which the parents had less than 50% custody of their children (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). Finally, when a church and its people misunderstand the relationship between grace and restoration, blended families can become marginalized or driven into obscurity. Once alienated, the family recedes from public church life and attempts to navigate the complex issues of family formation after remarriage, leaving the children without critical support. They often grow up displaying learned behaviors that have manifested if the experience was not fruitful (Pace et al., 2013).

As families grow, change is inevitable; when they are not moving, they are not growing. Given all this change within individuals, as well as the chronic reconstituting of and changes within the family and in society, family stability may be undermined. Families need to achieve balance; they can do this by attaining steadiness and knowledge from family meaning, communication, flexibility, and cohesiveness. The concept of family meanings refers to a family's ability to identify the worldview when discovering solutions or managing challenges in their lives. The communication process describes the way that a family talks openly, expressing feelings toward each other. When an event occurs, flexibility refers to how the family can vary from their patterns, and cohesiveness refers to how the family is emotionally connected and depends on each other (Pace et al., 2013).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to investigate the research problem identified, i.e., the long-term impact of being raised in a blended family or stepfamily. Over the years, the effect may encompass emotional and attachment issues. Chapter Three answers two main questions: (a) how was the data generated or collected? And (b) how was it analyzed? This section also describes the actions taken and the rationale for applying the procedures used to identify, process, and analyze information applied to understanding the problem, allowing the reader to evaluate the study critically. The qualitative research study stresses the socially constructed nature of one's reality and the situational constraints that shape the inquiry of answers to questions that show a significant correlation between the dynamics and the long-term impact of living in a blended family or stepfamily. The selection consisted of seven to 10 participants, ages 18-40, who grew up in a blended family or stepfamily from the following demographic variables (i.e.), gender, age, ethnicity, excluding any socioeconomic status or group membership.

Design

This research explored the essence and detailed experiences of growing up in a blended family or stepfamily. The onset of COVID-19 restricted this study strictly to exploratory research. Even though exploratory does not have a standard process, the information gathered is beneficial; therefore, it helps lay the foundation for future research, giving researchers more insight into the problem (Aspers & Corte, 2019). This exploratory research was unstructured, interactive, unrestricted, and open-ended in nature and did not require pre-research to support prior research (Cartwright, 2010; Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015). The interviews occurred virtually via Zoom virtual video and audio conferencing. The methodology used was primarily

phenomenological qualitative, based on real-world observations and situations as they unfolded naturally (Chan et al., 2013). Through qualitative research, phenomenology brings an added dimension to studying human experiences, gaining insights into one's motivations and actions (Lala & Kinsella, 2011; Neubauer et al., 2019).

Qualitative research is grounded in the social world of knowledge and seeks to make sense of lived experience (Neubauer et al., 2019; Wisdom et al., 2012). Qualitative data was collected via direct encounters with individuals through questionnaire surveys and interviews, utilizing Zoom conference calls, while practicing social distancing. The benefits of using a phenomenological qualitative study approach and design include the richness of data and more in-depth insight into the phenomenon under study (Neubauer et al., 2019). This phenomenological research study aimed to clarify the structure and essence of a person's lived experiences, focusing on the consciousness and the content around a specific phenomenon, i.e., a blended family (Heerwagen & Milevsky; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Using data from the captured interviews with adults explored how growing up in a blended family influenced family relationships and how that experience has orchestrated and directed life decisions (Martin-Uzzi et al., 2013).

Although blended family systems are becoming progressively more frequent and may one day outnumber nuclear families, negative connotations still surround the blended family structure (Kumar, 2017; Papenow, 2017). According to Patton (2015), research questions formulate what you want to understand, and interview questions ask the participants to describe their lived experiences (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The research questions that guided this study were intended to expose the overall impact, development process, emotional and adult attachment styles, abandonment, traumatic events, and relationships after living and growing up

within a blended family or stepfamily. The interview questions explored the nature of the participants' lived experiences.

Research Questions

RQ1: How did growing up in a blended family impact an individual's transition into adulthood?

RQ2: How did the emotional bonds and attachment styles affect an individual's relationships after growing up in a blended family?

RQ3: What significant experience from growing up in a blended family had the most impact on intrapersonal development?

Settings

COVID-19 is not just altering everyday life; it is also upending psychological research because of the risks involved. Therefore, this study's setting occurred remotely via Zoom virtual video and audio conferencing. The interviews practiced social distancing following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance due to COVID-19. The interview questions were semi-structured, open-ended, which provided the interviewer and interviewee opportunities to discuss or probe some of the matters in more detail (Gould et al., 2013). For example, if the interviewee had difficulty answering a question or provides only a brief response, the interviewer could use cues or prompts to encourage the interviewee to consider the question further or return to the question later during the interview (Kupritz & Cowell, 2011).

Each interviewee was briefed from the beginning that pseudonyms and confidentiality would be used to protect their identity. Letting the participants know this upfront helped them talk about their experiences and sensitive topics, for instance, rape, incest, and criminal battery. Using semi-structured or in-depth/open-ended questions is common in qualitative research. This

method typically gives the interviewer the freedom to probe or elaborate on the interviewee's

initial response and uncover deep-seated emotions, motivations, and attitudes. Instead of using

closed questions, semi-structured interviews are based on open-ended questions to keep

communication flow, which could quickly turn into unstructured or in-depth interviews

(DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018). Overall, semi-structured interviewing requires both a

relational focus and organizational structure to allow the researcher the freedom to record more

than the interviewee's verbal responses, which is often superficial. The interview process goes

beyond verbal and facial expressions (Bolderston, 2012). The nature of words used and body

language all communicate what the other party means (Bolderston, 2012; DeJonckheere &

Vaughn, 2018). The aim is to determine how people think and react to issues so that the

interview questions are framed along the thought lines that occur most naturally to respondents

(Bolderston, 2012).

Participants

The current study involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven to 10

individuals who had lived, were currently living or had grown up within a blended family or

stepfamily. The population studied included male and female adults, ages 18-40, regardless of

socioeconomic status or other group membership (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018; Heerwagen &

Milevsky, 2013). All participants were afforded confidentiality because both personal and social

conditions were discussed. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether growing up in a

blended family or stepfamily has affected their lives and how (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles,

2013). The participants were willing and open to discuss their experiences and the emotional

and adult attachment issues that may have carried over into their present family relationships

(Willis & Limb, 2017). Participants were selected by providing published information through

questionnaire surveys distributed within the two South Carolina Midlands counties, Kershaw and Sumter, via community Facebook pages. Appointments were scheduled for selected participants to interview at designated times (Wisdom et al., 2012). Once interviews were scheduled, the researcher prepared to gather rich and detailed qualitative data to understand participants' experiences, describe those experiences, and gather the meaning they make of those experiences via in-depth/open-ended questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018).

<div align="center">**Procedures**</div>

The following procedure will attempt to construct the meaning of the lived experience within a blended family or stepfamily and arrive at a more profound understanding and description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Wisdom et al., 2012). Below are the methods that will closely align with the study's objectives.

Study Implemented

The study participants included adults ages 18-40 who have lived in, were currently now living in, and/or had grown up within a blended family. The researcher developed and maintained a general interview guide approach to ensure that the same information was captured from each interviewee (Kallio et al., 2016). The qualitative research and interviews were used to understand the interviewees' perspectives on the lived experience (Creswell, 2013; Neubauer et al., 2019). It allows a degree of freedom and adaptability to obtain the qualitative data needed for data collection (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018). The focus is on the alignment between interview questions and research questions. At times, helping participants explain their experiences takes time, careful listening, and intentional follow-up (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Some may have had complex experiences that did not unravel neatly as the interview advanced; therefore, the questions, even though open-ended, had to be deliberate and necessary.

Researcher's Role

In studies involving human participants, the researcher's role is to access the participants' thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences and ensure that participants understand the risks that they choose to take as a participant in the study, because the research techniques can affect the findings (Creswell, 2013; Wisdom et al., 2012). Understanding the framework without understanding human behavior could create observation bias, making them aware that they are being observed (McCambridge et al., 2014). Doing so would validate my evaluation instrument and limit bias, i.e., the process, impact, and outcome (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010; Polit & Beck, 2012).

Asking participants to talk about intimate topics that may be personal to them could have significantly affected the setting and structure of the interviews (Mermelstein & Revenson, 2013). The questions asked were intended to provide insight into the participant's lived experiences (Wisdom et al., 2012). The study subject will be completed with the same efficiency, representing a new kind of communicational bias without any noticeable loss of quality (Teti et al., 2020).

Data Collection

Qualitative research aims to understand a specific problem, occurrence, or phenomenon by collecting and reviewing personal information and participant observations (Creswell, 2013; Neubauer et al., 2019). Researchers must study the data with limited bias or outside influence (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010; Smith & Noble, 2014). Although the COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique opportunity to explore the crisis itself, social distancing mandates a restriction on traditional face-to-face investigations for all interviews using technology (Gould et al., 2013). When transitioning research to online venues, special attention is given to ethical issues (Lobe et

al., 2020). Once the participants were selected via the questionnaire survey, the research

interview takes place via social media. The analysis may determine the percentage of

participants who have lived successful lives after growing up in a blended family or stepfamily

(Johnson et al., 2019; Lobe et al., 2020).

Because the data is subjective, particular to a given situation or person, it can be

challenging to recognize and correct researcher-induced or participant bias (Pannucci & Wilkins,

2010). Often, interviewees will structure their responses to make them seem likable, and they

may be less inclined to give an honest answer on controversial topics. A well-designed

research protocol explicitly outlining data collection and analysis will reduce bias (Pannucci &

Wilkins, 2010). Feasibility studies are often undertaken to refine protocols and procedures

(Smith & Noble, 2014). The beginning of the survey will ask for details to keep track of the

responses received. The goal was to survey a population within the South Carolina Midlands,

Kershaw, and Sumter counties, that grew up in a blended family or stepfamily. The questions

addressed perceptions of adult attachment styles, personal behavior, and ideas regarding blended

family members and their lived experiences (Shi, 2010; Wisdom et al., 2012).

Data Collection Strategies

Although various data collection methods and strategies are used in qualitative research,

the most productive method in the 21st century is through interviews (Heerwagen & Milevsky,

2013; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). First, to adhere to the CDC guidelines and the practice of

social distancing, the researcher asked the participants to complete a predefined series of

questions via questionnaire to collect individuals' information (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010).

These data were collected via social media, i.e., Facebook. Subsequent one-on-one interviews

consisted of questions relative to growing up within a blended family (Kumar, 2017). Studies

have demonstrated that allowing people to answer questionnaires anonymously yields beliefs and behaviors that researchers have assumed to be evidence of increased honesty and appropriate attitudes (Lelkes et al., 2012). Individuals interested in participating could respond by email, text, or generated virtual invitations (i.e., Evite). Once selectees were approved, each respondent received an informed consent and confidentiality document.

Second, to capture the population of interest, participants were given one week to complete the questionnaire survey reviewed daily by the researcher. Studies show that in-person may provide the highest response rate because researchers can gather information more quickly (Ponto, 2015); however, the onset of COVID-19 has changed how the approach to design. The questions administered were a combination of open-ended, yes or no, questions so that the researcher could capture not only the effects given by the participants but also leave room to probe further from the original and valuable responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018; Doodson, 2014). Answers obtained to open-ended questionnaire survey questions were analyzed using qualitative methods that involved discussions and critical analyses without using numbers and calculations (Ponto, 2015). The data gathered from these questionnaire surveys were sorted by gender, age, and culture.

Third, once the data was collected and sorted, participants were notified via email or phone calls, letting them know the study is strictly voluntary. The interview took 45 minutes to 1 hour and was completed in a video conference format, i.e., Zoom (Gould et al., 2013). After the interviewees signed a consent form, the researcher could begin the interview with a set of pre-selected questions to capture the story behind their experiences (Dupuis, 2010; Gould et al., 2013). Each participant was asked to introduce themselves, gender, age, and ethnicity at the

onset of each interview, excluding socioeconomic status or other group membership (Heerwagen & Milevsky, 2013).

The research methods were designed to gather the individuals' findings of the experiences growing up as a blended family member and how patterns of adult attachment issues may affect one's life (Dupuis, 2010; Gibson, 2013; Jensen et al., 2014).

Screening Flyer

To gather the participants needed for this study, a screening flyer with three open-ended "Yes" or "No" questions was posted on Facebook:

1. Did you grow up in a blended or stepfamily?

2. Do you live in Kershaw or Sumter County?

3. Are you between the age of 18 and 40?

If a prospective participant answered "Yes" to all three questions, they were given the option to select an embedded link that would potentially take them to the questionnaire survey form to answer seven additional questions to qualify for the interview.

Questionnaire Screening Survey

The Blended Family screening questionnaire helped determine if the participants met all of the prerequisites to participate in the research. The questionnaire consisted of seven pages; four questions are additional "Yes" or "No" questions. If someone answered "Yes" to any of the four questions, they were considered to have met all the necessary prerequisites to participate in the research. The questionnaire continued with the verbiage to consent and continue. Participants were asked to read and complete the following questions to determine if they wanted to continue:

1. Did you grow up in, or currently in, a blended or stepfamily?

- Yes

- No

2. How old are you?

- Under 18

- 18-24

- 25-40

- Over 40

3. In which of the following counties in South Carolina do you currently live?

- Kershaw

- Sumter

- Other

4. Of which category are you a member? (Mark all that apply.)

- Stepparent

- Stepsister

- Stepdaughter

- Stepbrother

- Stepson

- None

If the participant selected "Yes" to any of the questions and submitted their responses, they were

notified by the researcher to set up an interview. If they gave a "No" response to any of the

questions, they received a message stating, "Unfortunately, you do not meet the prerequisites to

participate in our 'Long-Term Impact of Growing up in a Blended Family: Emotional and

Attachment Issues' research. Thank you for your time. You may click submit or close your browser."

Interview Questions

      The following questions were posed in the individual interviews:

1. Did you grow up in a blended or stepfamily, or are you now living in one?

2. Do you feel that growing up in a blended or stepfamily has impacted your life? If so, how?

3. Were you under the age of 12 when your parents first separated, divorced, or remarried? If so, can you tell me your first thoughts?

4. Did the separation and divorce come as a shock to you? If "No," tell me why. If "Yes," elaborate on why.

5. Did you ever visit friends that lived with their biological *parents?* Tell me about a time and how it impacted you?

6. Did you grow up with stepbrother(s) and stepsister(s)? If so, was the relationship healthy?

7. Do you feel that your stepparent(s) treated you differently from their biological children? If so, please tell me in what way.

8. Did you ever attempt to run away while living with your biological parent(s) or stepparent(s) as a child?

9. Do you feel like your stepparent(s) influenced your well-being as a child and shaped who you are as an adult? If so, please elaborate.

10. Did you spend a significant amount of time with your biological father or mother?

11. Are you easily angered? If so, what makes you angry?

12. Has growing up in a blended or stepfamily affected your adult romantic relationships? If so, give me an example.

13. Do you find yourself uncomfortable when anyone gets too close?

14. After growing up in a blended or stepfamily, do you find it difficult to trust others?

15. Do you have problems showing remorse or empathy?

16. Do you have trouble controlling your emotions?

17. Do you find it difficult to trust others completely? If yes, please elaborate?

18. Do you have problems dealing with conflict?

19. Do you have problems receiving and giving love? If so, what do you think contributes to that?

20. Are you a stepparent, and do you have a healthy relationship with your stepchild/children?

Participants Interviews

Interviews provide researchers with rich and detailed qualitative data for understanding participants' experiences, how they describe those experiences, and the meaning they make of those experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). According to Patton (2015), relevant answers that are meaningful and useful in understanding the interviewee's perspective add value to the phenomenon.

Questions one through seven of the interviews were introductory questions that helped begin the interview with ease and were designed to follow up once the interview starts. These questions served to help the researcher analyze the answers before the interview begins. They were simple and non-threatening, offering the participants the opportunity to get used to thinking about the experiences that ask for narrative descriptions.

Questions eight through 14 were transition questions, moving the interview toward the key and primary questions of interest, i.e., the impact of growing up within a blended family or stepfamily with emotional issues. The transitional questions may also have helped the participants feel more comfortable with the more intrusive questions and allow the researcher to probe a little more. For example: "In your questionnaire survey, you answered 'yes' to question 11. Are you easily angered? What made you identify with that question in your experience of growing up within a blended family?" These questions invited the participants to reflect on their experiences, allowing them to share their feelings. Questions 16-20 promoted the in-depth conversational flow toward the phenomenon of interest, causing the participant to reflect on their lives while leaving room to probe in-depth about their experiences. Although the screening questionnaire sought to capture participants who grew up within a blended family or stepfamily, it also recognized patterns that prompted the researcher to probe deeper into blended family communication, behavior, attachment issues, and other factors. As the interview ends, the researcher may ask reassuring questions and provide the participant an opportunity to raise any issues not addressed. For example: "Before we conclude this interview, is there something about your experience influencing or encouraging someone." The results were then analyzed using the phenomenological method (Heerwagen & Milevsky, 2013).

Data Analysis

The researcher maintained a general interview guide approach, which ensured that the same kinds of information were gathered from each interviewee. This approach provided a better and more focused approach than a more conversational approach but still allowed a degree of freedom and adaptability in gathering data (Kallio et al., 2016). The same open-ended questions

were repeated to all interviewees so that they can be easily analyzed and compared. In

preparation for the interview, the researcher:

- Activated Zoom and sent an invitation.

- Explained the purpose of the interview.

- Addressed terms of confidentiality.

- Explained the format of the interview.

- Indicated how long the interview might take.

- Provided contact information to the interviewer.

- Allowed the interviewee to express any doubts they may have.

- Prepared a method for interviewing and recording data, e.g., via Zoom virtual video
  and audio-conferencing technology and NVivo Software.

The purpose of these strategies was to gain a greater understanding of participants' lived

experiences growing up in a blended family (Gould et al., 2013; Kumar, 2017), specifically from

the adult perspective and how growing up in a blended family or stepfamily has affected one's

life and relationships (Kumar, 2017). The research used a phenomenological qualitative

approach (Coleman et al., 2015; Heerwagen, 2013) to organize and analyze the data collected

through questionnaires/surveys and interviews. A copy of the results is placed in an appendix for

later retrieval. NVivo was used to conduct the subsequent analysis based on the data gathered

from questionnaires and interviews. The data gained may give insight into the phenomenon

explored, identifying recurring and significant patterns to provide an illuminating description of

a phenomenon data analysis.

Trustworthiness

In terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the results (Elo et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017). If the same effects are achieved using the same techniques under the same circumstances, the measurement is considered reliable (Doodson, 2014; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018). According to the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, to be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative research must demonstrate thorough data analysis; disclosing the methods with enough detail enables the reader to determine whether the process is credible (Doodson, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017).

The initial survey questions will ask for details to keep track of the types of responses received and note limitations if there is a particular age or gender gap. The goal was to survey stepchildren, half-siblings, stepparents, and spouses of stepparents who have grown up in blended families and are now adults dealing with communication, personal behavior, and ideas regarding adult attachment and social issues. Because qualitative researchers do not use instruments with established metrics regarding validity and reliability, it is pertinent to address how qualitative researchers demonstrate how the research study's findings are credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable (Elo et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017).

Credibility

Credibility establishes whether the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants' original data and correct interpretation of the participants' actual views (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility refers to the researcher linking the study's findings with reality and the extent to which the experiences are believable and appropriate.

Dependability

The dependability of a research study refers to whether the findings are consistent, indicating that other researchers could repeat this research and the results would be compatible (Nowell et al., 2017). Dependability refers to data stability over time under different conditions (Elo et al., 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). If a person wanted to replicate this study, they should have enough information from the description of the methodology.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to how the research findings are supported by the data collected to establish whether the researcher was biased during the study (Polit & Beck, 2012). The results are based on participants' responses and not any potential bias or personal motivations of the researcher. This qualitative research may be confirmable because participants will have in-depth knowledge and experience of the phenomenon studied (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability refers to how the research can be generalized to other contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Polit & Beck, 2012). Transferability assures that the research can be duplicated in similar situations and phenomena (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018). The reader notes the specific details of the research situation and methods and compares them to a similar situation that may be more familiar.

Ethical Considerations

Applying appropriate ethical principles for human subjects' protection is vital in all research studies (Goodwin et al., 2019). In qualitative research, ethical considerations have a particular resonance due to the in-depth nature, process, and principles that support the

research (Goodwin et al., 2019; Neubauer et al., 2019). This study's ethical considerations

relate to voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality (Lelkes et al., 2012).

Voluntary participation means that the participants are free to withdraw at any time without

penalty or explanation (Goodwin et al., 2019). Informed consent means that the person

participating is fully informed about the research conducted. The participants were informed

of the study's purpose and any potential adverse effects of their participation. To assure the

participant of privacy, the participant will sign an informed consent form documenting that no

identifying information will be made available to or accessed by anyone but the research

investigator (Goodwin et al., 2019). Each participant is guaranteed anonymity, mutual

respect, and fairness.

Summary

This qualitative study explored potential emotional and attachment issues related to

growing up within a blended family or stepfamily (Kumar, 2017; Turunen, 2014). Research

indicates that blended families are vastly different from nuclear families (Kumar, 2017). When

members of a blended family attempt to structure their family following the pattern of a nuclear

family, they may experience culture shock (Dupuis, 2010; Strong & Cohen, 2014). Moreover,

studies on blended families have indicated that the diversity and need for awareness must clarify

how individual adults growing up in blended families can subconsciously cause attachment

issues affecting life development (Austin & Sutton, 2015; Cherry & Gans, 2019; Shi, 2010;

Willis & Limb, 2017).

When using data from semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and surveys, adults

ranging from 18-40 years of age were asked to discuss how growing up in a blended family has

affected or influenced their family and attachment relationships and how that experience has

been a vehicle for change (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018; Papenow, 2017). The design,

questions, setting, participants, procedures, the researcher's role, and the methodology section's

data collection will allow the reader to evaluate the study. The study's overall trustworthiness

through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability speak to its integrity

(Amankwaa, 2014). These techniques are used to identify, select, process, and analyze the data

collected.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the collected data and analysis regarding lived experiences related to being a part of a blended family or stepfamily. The findings are generated explicitly from qualitative phenomenological research, a process that explores and investigates a situation or experience to understand a lived phenomenon and its impact. This chapter begins with a short analysis and summary of each participant's interview. Interviews with seven participants were conducted, recorded, and transcribed to describe their subjective lived experiences and views. The results of the coding process are categorized and assigned to their respective themes or keywords. This study examined three main research questions that attempted to expose the overall impact, development process, emotional and adult attachment styles after living and growing up within a blended family or stepfamily. NVivo is the software program used to analyze the interview text and audio data, capturing the broad feel for the themes within the data. Appendix F shows the frequency of the themes that appeared throughout the interviews.

Participants

This study included seven participants who were residents of two counties in South Carolina. The participants were between the ages of 18-40 and have lived, were currently living, or had grown up within a blended family or stepfamily. Participants' names were changed in the narratives to protect the confidentiality and follow standard qualitative research guidelines (Creswell, 2013). To recruit the participants, a flyer was posted on Facebook that read, "Attention Sumter & Kershaw County – Research Participants needed – Share your experience and life impact of growing up in a Blended Family." If the participants answered yes to the study

criteria, a screening survey via an embedded link to determine the prerequisites to participate

was made available, followed by a consent form. The recruitment flyer is found in Appendix A

of this study. Table 1 presents information about the interview participants. The following

sections present the pseudonyms and individual descriptions of each participant who took part in

the interviews via Zoom and a synopsis of their lived experiences.

Table 1

Interview Format Data

Participant	Date	Minutes	County	Age	Category
Braveheart	16-Apr-2021	35:21	Sumter	25-40	Stepson/parent/brother
Queen	16-Apr-2021	22:06	Sumter	18-25	Stepdaughter
Nutbush	17-Apr-2021	14:02	Sumter	25-40	Stepson/brother
Olivia	19-Apr-2021	20:57	Kershaw	25-40	Stepdaughter/sister
Trudy	19-Apr-2021	21:37	Kershaw	25-40	Stepsister/brother
Foster	20-Apr-2021	17:41	Sumter	25-40	Stepson/brother
Kenneth	21-Apr-2021	12:04	Kershaw	25-40	Stepbrother/sister

Braveheart

Braveheart was a distinguished young man between the ages of 25-40 from Sumter

County. He grew up in a blended family as a stepson and stepbrother and was currently a

stepparent, raising a stepson. Braveheart's biological mother and father divorced when he was 5.

He described his first thoughts when they separated as "turning on and off a light switch," and he

really could not comprehend it all at 5. After two years, his mother remarried and, there was

another man in his life, whom he grew to call "Daddy;" for him, that experience was traumatic.

The sudden loss of Braveheart's father caused a silent insecure feeling for a period, and it

affected how he formed meaningful connections with others. Braveheart believes that he was

affected mentally by the trauma of the separation, especially when visiting his friends when they

had both parents present. He elaborated, "Why does he have his mom and dad? Everything is

normal, and I don't feel normal." He lamented, "You have no summer stories to tell or family trips to talk about."

Braveheart would visit his father in the spring and summertime; however, he felt he was visiting another family when he did so. He has four stepsisters and two half-sisters, and even though they had healthy relationships, the desire that lingered in his heart consistently was, "Why can't I have my entire family throughout the year?" Braveheart elaborated on how growing up in a blended family affected him romantically and never envisioned himself in the same situation with a stepfamily. During the interview, Braveheart said in a low voice, "When I envisioned myself being married with kids years ago, it's not the book or story I would have written for myself." As he said this, he first looked down and then up, as if he wanted me to understand what he was saying without feeling guilty for expressing his thoughts in a more serious way. He concluded by stating,

> At times, I imagine my life differently, that is, marrying someone with no children, and both of us having children together…. But then I love my family…. Even now, there are times when I question myself; however, it does not stop me from pursuing my dreams and setting examples as a man for my sons.

Queen

Queen is a soft-spoken and shy young lady who is between the ages of 18-25 and lives in Sumter County. She is a single mom raising two young boys who grew up in a blended family on both sides. Queen was around 4 years of age when her biological parents separated and divorced. When asked the first interview question—"Do you feel that growing up in a blended family has impacted your life? If so, how?" —She answered with resistance, and I watched her face as she pondered the question; instead of being relaxed, her body language began to expose

the trauma that the question triggered. Finally, she said with a raised voice, "Yes! It was negative with my father and positive with my mother." When I asked her if she remembered her first thoughts when they separated, she began to cry, and I immediately stopped and asked her if she wanted to go on. She replied yes, but she needed a minute to gather herself. The impact for Queen was confusion and anger; she knew something was different, but she could not articulate it, so she began to act out, according to the stories her mother would tell her. After years of transition between her mother and father, it seemed as if her father had a more stable atmosphere. When Queen's mother allowed her to live with her father, she described it as dark, yet, she didn't reveal how she felt to tell her mother because she wanted to stay with her father and believed the relationship would change with her stepmom.

Queen exhibited what Bowlby and Ainsworth (as cited in Bretherton, 1992) deemed as an avoidant and disorganized attachment style. Studies show that children with these styles stop expressing emotion when their inner needs for connection and physical closeness are unmet (Wright, 2020). They find it challenging to let their partners in and face difficulty forming lasting relationships with others (Pietroluongo, 2019; Wright, 2020). I asked Queen if she felt that her stepmother treated her differently from their biological children. She responded hastily, "Yes!" I asked her to elaborate, and she began with, "I can imagine how Cinderella felt…. I was a live-in maid, as I called it back then."

I asked Queen how growing up in a blended family affected her adult romantic relationships and how she felt about trust. Queen described her previous relationships as emotionless. She recalled that her friends would describe her as having no feelings and a "do not care" attitude. She said it was hard for her to let people in, and anytime anyone got close, she would let them go. For Queen, her environment was toxic; thus, she handled distress (such as

separation, hostility, and avoidance) with less fear later in life. Queen acknowledged that this lived experience has followed her into adulthood and profoundly affects her thoughts, feelings, behavior, family relationships, and especially romantic relationships.

Nutbush

The third participant, Nutbush, a young man between the ages of 24 and 40 residing in Sumter County, grew up as a stepson and stepbrother with a reasonably stable life. His mother, to whom he was extremely attached, had him in her teenage years, and his stepfather came into his life at the age of 2. Nutbush felt a sense of emotional dependence on his mother at an early age, experiencing jealousy when his stepfather first came on the scene. After all, his mother was all he knew, and he still deems himself as "a mama's boy." As time progressed, his mother bore two more sons, and Nutbush felt that his stepfather treated him differently from his biological sons.

Nutbush said there were times when he thought about running away, but the only place he would have gone was to his grandmother's house. I asked him why he thought about running away, and he described not feeling loved at times, stating, "I think maybe this was just me feeling that my younger siblings were being treated a little bit differently than me." Nutbush and his biological father met when Nutbush was in his 30s; many unanswered questions were buried deep inside him. As he spent time with his biological father, feelings of abandonment surfaced. He found out that he had other stepsiblings and that his biological father had been incarcerated, explaining why he had not been a part of his life for so long. However, Nutbush described the scene as looking at his reflection in a mirror; he was the spitting image of his biological father.

Nutbush did not report having trust issues; however, trust did affect his romantic relationships, and over the years, it has gotten better. He says that he loves hard and is not afraid to love; however, that needs to be reciprocated as part of his love language.

Olivia

Olivia, a young lady between the ages of 25-40 from Kershaw County, grew up as the middle child in a blended family. She is now cohabitating with her boyfriend, and together, they have four children: three who reside with them, and the last of whom live with them every other week. Her boyfriend has full custody of one child and shared custody with the mother of the other child. Olivia described her situation as stressful at times, especially when her boyfriend's daughter comes every other week. She cannot call them her stepchildren, but she takes responsibility as their caregiver. Olivia explained that she wanted to keep it "real" and talk about how she grew up, instead of focusing on her situation now.

Olivia stated that she was 8 years old when her mother and father separated and later divorced; she remembered how abusive her father was and was relieved when he left them. Olivia described how the yelling and screaming still haunt her as an adult, stating, "It's like a trigger when I hear voices raised, and it brings back hurtful memories, and certain sounds and smells cause me to relive my mother's anguish." She said, "My life was forever changed" by the violence and abuse. Olivia could not speak for her sister or brother, but she alluded to them being "messed up."

At the time of the divorce, her eldest sister was 14, her brother was 4, and her baby sister was a newborn. Olivia described her baby brother as taking it the hardest. Every day, he would sit by the door, waiting for their father to come into the house. She said, "He didn't remember the abuse to our mother, the way that my sister and I did." Olivia described how they struggled

at first, but then, a nice man began to date her mother, and after 2 years, they got married, and things got better; Olivia's mother has maintained that relationship for 20 years. Her new stepfather had one daughter, but she did not live with them, although she would come over every other weekend due to the custody agreement. Olivia described her as a sweetheart, and to this day, they have maintained a healthy relationship. As the interview progressed, Olivia revealed that her older sister was, in fact, her stepsister and that she moved with her biological father after their mother remarried. Olivia feels that her stepfather influenced the decision she made in her life. She said, "He was good to me." She told a story about how she and her mother were in a severe car accident and how her stepfather stepped up to care for her as if she was his biological daughter.

After a few years, Olivia's biological father began coming to visit, wanting to spend time with her. Olivia said she was curious, and her mother told her that it would be up to her. Her father never remarried; he had a few girlfriends but no stable life. He would take her around them, but Olivia described it as "uncomfortable." I asked Olivia if she found it challenging to show remorse, trust people, or let them get close to her. She replied, "a little…sometimes…I believe it's a defense mechanism." She finds it hard to get close to others, and holds everything inside until something triggers her to remember her trauma.

Trudy

Trudy, a 25-40-year-old woman, from Kershaw County, grew up in a blended family with stepsisters and stepbrothers. She was hesitant about participating in the interview initially because she was my first participant recruit, and at first she declined the offer to participate. After two days, Trudy emailed me and asked if it was too late to reconsider. We conversed by phone for a few minutes as to why she was hesitant, and she replied, "I've never talked about it

or the feelings that I relive daily…. Even though my biological father was never in my life and now deceased, it still hurts." At the age of 2, her mother and father divorced, after which she would see her father periodically, but never anything consistent. She described how she would fantasize about him picking her up on the weekends, taking her shopping, and spending quality time with her. Trudy added that when she did see him, she was happy, then sad because she knew that it would be a long time before he would surface again.

Around age 9, her biological father remarried, and he began to pick her up on the weekends and take her to his home with a new wife and children. Her mother explained to her that this was by court order because she was now receiving child support. When I asked Trudy how that made her feel, she replied, "Now I know how my friends at school felt…. They would talk about how they would go between their parents that split up. I now understand." Trudy remembered when her mother announced that she was having a baby and how that made her feel. She said,

> It makes me feel bad, especially when I was almost to the point of accepting my dad's
> situation; my mom announced that she was pregnant. It made me feel bad because I saw
> both parents, and especially I want it to be like Daddy's girl, and I didn't get to have that.

She went on to say, "when I would see my friends play with their dad, I felt a longing for that, and I couldn't get it." Trudy said she felt sad constantly, and even though her stepfather loved her and showed her, it was hard for her to return the affection. She wanted to feel love from the one person who could not deliver it: her biological father. Trudy admitted that it was hard for her to Trust males because of her biological father, and she realizes that.

Her next course of action after this interview is to get into counseling. She described her son as a security blanket, and she knows that one day he would grow up and leave. She

commented softly, "That is not normal…. I don't want him to be a mama's boy and no good for a nice young lady that he will someday meet."

Foster

Foster, a 25-40-year-old from Sumter County, was my most challenging participant; he was very curious about my intent. Foster's very first question to me was, "What is your interest in the subject?" He wanted to know what I would do with my degree once I received it. Answering his question reminded me of how important this study is to the community. Foster admitted that he struggled with some emotional issues, but overall, his experience growing up in a blended family was a good one. Foster's mother married his stepfather when he was still a toddler, around 2 or 3. His mother was a stay home mother, and she bore two other children with his stepfather. He was not around during the week because he drove an 18-wheeler to provide for his family. When I asked Foster, "Do you feel like your stepfather influenced your well-being as a child and shape you into being the adult that you are now?" Foster's entire demeanor lit up. He responded, "Yes, yes. He taught me how to use my hands when he came in off the road, he spent time with me, I was the oldest, so I got his youthful years, and for that, I am grateful."

Foster met his biological father around age 9, and he wanted to get to know him, but their interactions were intermittent. He shared that he would wait for hours for his biological father to show up and was always disappointed. That experience was very emotional for him; after each missed visit, he would internalize it for days, taking out his anger on his younger siblings. Foster also admitted that he has problems controlling his emotions and that he has trust issues; he would get into fights at school to express himself. Foster said that people do not understand you when you have trust issues. He said, "You assume betrayal…you are overly protective…[and

sometimes] you feel lonely and don't trust." Foster also revealed that he carried a secret that his mother told him as he got older, but he did not want me to document it; this partially accounts for his trust issues. Foster believed that his emotional struggles stemmed from the abandonment he felt from his biological father; therefore, he harbored anger in his heart to protect himself.

Kenneth

My seventh participant was Kenneth, a soft-spoken, smart young man between the age of 25-40, a resident of Kershaw County who grew up in a stepfamily. Kenneth was around the age of 14 when his parents divorced, a thriving teenager, and even though they parted ways, Kenneth said that nothing changed for him; he saw his father every day. Although he did not see it coming, he said humorously, "Growing up, sometimes, some people, they outgrow each other." Kenneth's father remarried, and his stepmother had children; therefore, he had stepbrothers and stepsisters. The relationship was extremely healthy, and until this day, it remains healthy. His stepmother showed no favoritism to any of the children. Kenneth said to me, "I had a good life."

The interview with Kenneth went very quickly, and because both his biological parents and stepparents helped shape his life well, there seemed to be no emotional variances. Even though Kenneth shared his story and lived experience as a teenager of his parent's divorce and separation, he exhibited a secure attachment style. His caregivers were responsive and available to him as a child, making him feel safe and secure. In Kenneth's case, his father was always readily available, and he had both his mother and stepmother backing and supporting him.

<center>**Results**</center>

This research used several data collection methods to determine if participants met the required criteria for participation. The recruitment method included an online flyer via Facebook, followed by an online questionnaire. If participants met the criteria for participation,

the researcher scheduled individual interviews. After the interviews, the lived stories were

transcribed and interpreted for trustworthiness, transferability, and confirmability. The data were

analyzed, and codes were assigned. From the assigned codes, key themes became apparent.

Theme Development

The key themes that emerged were adult emotional impact, adult attachment styles,

abandonment issues, and traumatic experiences. A table with the frequency of codes and themes

is presented in Appendix F. The codes were organized around the research questions regarding

the long-term impact of growing up in a blended family and emotional and attachment issues.

Based on the theoretical framework concepts and theories regarding blended families, the codes

are further organized relative to the problems of transitioning between family units that have

been largely ignored (Cartwright, 2010, 2012). It seems that in this study, blended families tend

to have more conflict, and are more likely to experience crises, and are slower to recover from

challenging situations (Cartwright, 2013; Schlomer et al., 2011). This study also highlighted the

impact of family transition on children's adjustment, the attachment adjustments made after

growing up in a blended family, and how attachment theory normalizes adult attachment needs

(Coleman et al., 2015).

Theme One: Emotional Impact

Emotional responses to being a part of a blended family can be positive or negative and

can come from within an individual or emerge in reaction to their environment. Dynamic

changes can be normal, quick responses to events; however, disproportionate, extreme,

persistent, or unstable emotional reactions could indicate an underlying disorder (Zeleznikow &

Zeleznikow, 2015). Today, most families have shifted from the original biologically bonded

mother, father, and child (McLeod, 2019). We are now a nation in which more than 50% of

families are divorced, and most go on to remarry or form cohabitation relationships (Pew

Research Center, 2015). Recent research indicates that children often suffer emotional scars that

can last a lifetime and contribute to problems with their intimate relationships as adults (Amato,

2010; Isaac, 2015; McLeod, 2019). As stress rises, emotional connectedness becomes more

challenging than comforting, and eventually, one or more members involved feel overwhelmed,

isolated, or out of control (Kerr, 2010).

As stated previously, Bowlby's findings held that manifestations of immature defense

mechanisms can repress emotional pain (Shi, 2010). When children cannot control their lives,

this emotional pain can manifest in malicious behavior, manifesting as emotional problems, e.g.,

anger, compulsiveness, defiance, aggression, depression, dissociation, post-traumatic stress, and

anxiety. The effect of separation may encompass emotional and attachment issues over the

years. The following responses from the study participants describe how growing up in a

blended family affected them emotionally.

- Braveheart

    - "It's positively impacted me…. It also affected me mentally…. Everything is

      normal, and I don't feel normal."

    - "You have no summer stories to tell or family trips to talk about."

    - "When you're in a blended family, everyone knows you are not as relaxed,

      especially if your mom's last name is [NAME]."

    - "You see reality through the lens of a child when your friend's mom, dad, sisters,

      and brothers have all the same last name."

    - "So, just the fact that just being around them and seeing their environment of their

      entire family close-knit, being together for the entire year, and me always having

to leave whether at spring or summer break, that kind of thing, really had an impact on my life."

- Queen
    - "Yes! It has negative and positive [impact]…. When I think about it, sadness floods my heart."
    - "Negatively is because it just gave me tougher skin and caused me not to trust people, and positively it just helped me out when I got older to forgive people and to get over stuff."
    - "I can imagine how Cinderella felt. I was a live-in maid, as I called it back then."
    - "The small circle of friends I had even called me that, a live-in maid…. It caused me to go inside myself. I didn't know then, but later, I was internalizing my pain."

- Nutbush
    - "You know, when I look back over my life, I would have to say yes, it impacted me in ways that I've had to work through over the years."
    - "I was very close to my mom emotionally."
    - "Sometimes, growing up as the stepson of my father with two sons with my mother, I had questions about why I act this way, knowing that the father who was in the house was not my biological father."
    - "I felt like he was a lot more attentive to my younger brothers. It felt like he was more their dad than my dad. I know he loves me with all of his heart, but it felt a little different."

- Olivia
  - "It was not easy because when my mom and my dad separated. When they were together, we had to deal with constant abuse. He was very abusive. I say we were kind of okay with him leaving because I did not like how he treated my mom."
  - "I just thought things would have worked out because he kept saying he would change after a big fight, but it never did, the yelling and screaming, I still hear it."

- Trudy
  - "I was like 2 when they separated. I didn't have my father around. My dad was absent. We didn't have much of a relationship. So when I found out my mom was having another child, I would have a sibling; I felt like I would be left out because they were their own family, and I didn't have my dad around."
  - "When I was 8, my dad came into my life…. I would ask why I only could see him on the weekends."
  - "My mom starts to explain, it's a court-ordered thing because he was placed on child support. So because of that court order, he gets me every weekend, and so I kind of felt like he has other children, and they were always around him."
  - "So I kind of felt my dad was leaving me out. I didn't understand, and I just felt unwanted'.

- Foster
  - "It didn't bother me at first" "I was still a toddler when my mom married my stepdad…. I was around the age of 3."
  - "Then the other children came…. I felt different."

- o "I do have emotional issues; however, it wasn't from my stepdad; he is a good man."

- o "Met my biological father at age 9.... I think that's when it all started."

- o "I struggled with controlling my emotions.... I would get into fights at school to express myself."

- o "Trust issues in my relationships.... I carried a secret for my mom for years, I thought I had to protect her."

- o "Today, I have problems trusting."

- Kenneth

  - o "It really didn't impact me. I mean because I still have my momma and daddy. They just didn't stay in the same household. I mean, we were different."

  - o "I still saw my daddy almost daily, and I lived with my mom. I mean, not too much changed.... To me, I thought they just outgrew each other."

  - o "I will say, seeing my homeboys, they stay in the house with their momma and their daddy."

  - o "That was different as a child."

Theme Two: Attachment Styles

The participants displayed various attachment styles, i.e., secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized. These attachment styles are established at a young age because parental or caregiver bonding is powerful (Winston & Chicot 2016). As stated previously, recent research shows that a secure attachment is the best possible foundation for healthy physical, emotional, intellectual, and social development (Cherry & Gans, 2019). Children who show distress when their caregiver leaves can compose themselves quickly when the caregiver returns are classified

as having a secure attachment. The secure attachment style in children corresponds to the secure attachment style in adults (Jensen et al., 2014).

The anxious attachment style is a type of insecure attachment style rooted in fear of abandonment and insecurity related to being underappreciated (Shi, 2010). As stated previously, young children may cling to caregivers or become inconsolable when a caregiver leaves the family; naturally, this often happens when parents divorce and remarry or one parent dies (Jensen et al., 2014; Shi, 2010). As a child matures, this behavior may carry over into their adult lifestyle, creating what Dr. Bowlby calls normative theory (Schwartz, 2015).

Avoidant attachment may develop as early as infancy; as children and adults with an avoidant attachment style grow and develop, they may appear outwardly independent, often struggling to connect with others who attempt to bond with them (Shi, 2010). Avoidant attachment can also develop in children who do not experience sensitive responses from a parent or caregiver when they are distressed. Children with an avoidant attachment may become very independent physically and emotionally (Shi, 2010; Wright, 2020). Just like avoidant attachment, disorganized represent another way in which relationships with parents or caregiver as children can pose relationship challenges later in adulthood.

Disorganized attachment is identified as the most intense of the four attachment styles. Depending on the dire circumstances in which it develops, a child may experience abuse or chaos in the home, resulting in fear of their caregivers with no secure base to turn to for consistent support, emotional safety, or comfort (Wright, 2020). Because of the history of trauma, an individual with a disorganized attachment style will likely find that forming relationships is complicated and often experience trust issues. In addition, they often conceal their emotions and suppress their past as a coping mechanism, which stands in the way of future

relationship success (Jensen et al., 2014; Wright, 2020). From the participants' responses presented subsequently, one can see how their attachment styles varied.

- Braveheart (Anxious)
  - "When I was young, I use to think, why can't I have my entire family throughout the year"?
  - "My close friends grew up with all their biological parents and siblings…. And so, it was always just thrown in my face, what I missed by not having my biological parents in the same house together."
  - "I never envisioned myself in the same situation that I grew up in…. In high school, growing up in a blended family, your friends make jokes about it, so I wanted to establish what we call a nuclear family."
  - "Even to this day, sometimes I think to myself, how did I end up in the same situation I grew up in."
- Queen (Avoidant/Disorganized)
  - "More than anything, I wanted to spend time with my biological father."
  - "I wanted to spend some of that school year with him so I can get to know him more, and I regret that." "It was a school year from hell." 'There was a big void," I didn't understand."
  - "I have problems showing any affection, I can't keep a romantic relationship, and it is hard to love for fear of hurt or someone hurting my children." "I would rather avoid relationships."

- Nutbush (Secure/Avoidant)

    o "I was very young when my stepdad came into our lives. My mom had me at a very early age." "My stepdad came into my life when I was maybe about 2."

    o "They tell the story of I did not want him to touch my mom. I did not want him around my mom because it was always my mom and me."

    o "I am a big mama's boy."

    o "Me and my biological father did not get introduced until I was about 31."

    o "I had a lot of questions.'

    o "I became angry for a while, and I didn't understand the emotions from not knowing my biological dad.'

- Olivia (Avoidant)

    o "I spend a significant amount of time with my biological father as I got older."

    o "He moved back to our town and began to pick me up and take me places, mostly in the summer, but he was always late."

    o "Even when I was with him, I would remember things, not good, but I wanted to be with him. Something in me."

    o "He didn't remarry, but some women were always around, don't know why? That was supposed to be my time, but oh well."

- Trudy (Disorganized)

    o "I thought my mom and dad were supposed to be together. When I was little, you know it's like that's how that's supposed to go."

    o "You know how kids make-believe, and they say mommy, daddy, and every baby. That's what I thought was supposed to keep happening."

- o "I didn't understand it."

- Foster (Insecure/Anxious)

  - o "He would call and say, 'Well, I may come to get you for the weekend.'… I would get ready, and get excited, expecting him any minute, and sit outside waiting, and he never shows up."

- Kenneth (Secure)

  - o "I still saw my daddy almost on a daily basis, and I live with my mom.

  - o "I mean, so too much didn't change. I'd say my parents, they played the part, well, my momma and my daddy."

  - o "My step momma played a big part too. She didn't tolerate any disrespect."

  - o "She always has respect for my mom. And my mom always tells me you got to respect her. You respect me, so respect her."

Theme 3: Abandonment Issues

Emotional abandonment is an emotional state in which people feel left behind, undesired, insecure, or discarded. Abandonment issues arise when individuals fear losing a loved one, and that fear is a form of anxiety (Willis & Limb, 2017). It often begins in childhood when a child experiences a traumatic loss (Isaac, 2015). Children who undergo this experience may start to fear losing other important people. Some continue to fear abandonment as they grow into adulthood, stemming from a fear of loneliness, a phobia, or a form of anxiety (Parekh, 2018). Early childhood experiences are the most significant contributor to developing abandonment issues when a person becomes an adult. Five out of the seven participants reported suffering from abandonment due to separation from a biological parent, resulting in trauma-related needs, i.e., anxiety, rejection, neglect, insecurity, and avoidance resulting from the trauma

(Isaac, 2015; Willis & Limb, 2017). The participants shared the following thoughts related to this theme:

- Braveheart

    o "It was like turning on and off a light switch."

    o "Sudden impact."

    o "Cried a lot, felt discarded and empty."

    o "A silent insecure feeling for a period."

    o "I felt lonely when by myself."

- Queen

    o "Dark."

    o "I was a live-in maid." "I didn't feel loved."

    o "Distress."

    o "Stayed to myself a lot."

    o "My stepmom made fun of my voice, so I felt ashamed and stop talking."

    o "I felt like Cinderella, and I kept trying to escape."

- Nutbush

    o "I always felt different growing up…. When visiting friends who live with their biological parents, you can see the similarities and the likeness of a son and a father and their siblings."

    o "And going back to my household, you can tell that I am my mom's son, but I and my stepdad did not look much alike. He is light-skinned. I am darker skinned. So, I have a lot of questions growing up."

- Olivia

  - "Uncomfortable at times."

  - "It's hard for me to trust."

  - "Certain sounds and smells bring back memories of abuse to my mom."

  - "It was like pulling teeth."

  - "I just thought things would have worked out because he kept saying he would change after a big fight, but it never did, the yelling and screaming, I still hear it."

- Trudy

  - "It's hard for me to show love, …hard to trust males."

  - "I always want to please and wind up getting hurt."

  - "I didn't have my father around…. We didn't have much of a relationship."

  - "I wanted to be Daddy's girl and sit on Daddy's lap and do that, but I didn't get those things."

  - "I thought my mom and Dad were supposed to be together. When I was little, you know it's like that's how that's supposed to go."

  - "Always felt lonely…. I was sad a lot."

  - You know how kids make-believe, and they say mommy, daddy, and every baby. That's what I thought was supposed to keep happening…. I didn't understand it."

- Foster

  - "I always felt different, but I didn't know why."

  - "I met my real father at 9."

- "I became angry and got in a lot of trouble at school."

- "I didn't know how to process my emotions."

- "Internalized feelings."

- "Harbored anger in my heart."

- "Stayed by myself at times."

Theme 4: Traumatic Experiences

The sudden change of stations or safe place may harm children. Early childhood trauma refers to the traumatic experiences of children aged 0-6 (McLeod, 2019). As previously stated, traumatic experiences can underlie many of the emotional and behavioral difficulties encountered in children (Tompkins et al., 2013). Children who have experienced complex trauma have difficulty expressing, identifying, and managing emotions and may have limited language for feeling states. They often internalize and externalize stress reactions and experience significant depression, anxiety, or anger (McLeod, 2019). Divorce in America affects children of every ethnic background, religion, and socioeconomic status. According to research, approximately 50% of all first marriages will end in divorce, with over one million children being affected per year (Kleinsorge & Covitz, 2012).

Most scholars define trauma as an uncontrollable event and, the nature of the event is beyond the scope of ordinary human experience; that is, the event is a rare occurrence (McKay, 2020). A traumatic experience can initiate strong emotions and physical reactions that can persist long after the event. When a child experiences divorce from their parents, it can have a traumatic impact on their development (McLeod, 2019). Moreover, trauma is usually unpredictable; however, the individual is forever changed due to processing the event. As many as one in three individuals who experience a traumatic event might exhibit PTSD, a mental

condition that may result in emotional and physical reactions in individuals who have either witnessed or experienced a traumatic event (McLeod, 2019; Tompkins et al., 2013). In this study, the participants gave a one-on-one interview relative to their lived experience of their traumatic event. The participants shared the following thoughts related to this theme:

- Braveheart
  - "When you're in a blended family, people know that. I'm saying just based on my experience in school, your friends, they know your last name, and they may tease you, talk trash, or belittle you because you don't have the same biological parents as they do."
  - "So certain times of growing up dealing with that became confrontational by itself."
  - "So, you learn to deal with things when folks say certain things…. Those things taught me to deal with conflict and confront my emotions head-on, and I had a lot of them."
  - "But again, growing up that way still made me the man I am today."
- Queen
  - "I felt like Cinderella, and I kept trying to escape,"
  - "Queen, get this. Queen, get that. Queen, could you wash the kids? Could you take their bath? Take them outside. Get them something to drink. Change their underwear."
  - "I wanted to change my name."

- Nutbush

  - "When visiting friends who live with their biological parents, you can see the similarities and the likeness of a son and a father and their siblings. And going back to my household, you can tell that I am my mom's son, but I and my stepdad did not look much alike. He is light-skinned. I am darker skinned."

  - "That bothered me a lot, especially at school events. I felt shame."

- Olivia

  - "Witnessed abuse from my father to my mom."

  - "Certain sounds and smells bring back memories of abuse to my mom."

  - "I still hear the screams."

- Trudy

  - "My dad was absent in my life. It was hit or miss like the times that I can remember."

  - "When I did find out my mom was having another child, I was going to have a sibling."

  - "I was 11 and was always the only child."

  - "I felt I was going to be left out because they were their own family, and I didn't have my dad around."

  - "I thought I was going to be stripped away from my mom."

- Foster

  - "Waiting for my father to pick me up, and he didn't show."

  - "I set in the window for hours, no show."

o "My mom comes and says, 'Your dad ain't coming.' I was like, 'Yes, he is.

He is coming.' I sit out for 4-5 hours until dark."

- Kenneth

o No traumatic experience.

Answering the Research Questions

The findings of this study were generated from qualitative phenomenological research

(Creswell, 2013). The process explored and investigated the lived experience of seven

participants to understand the impact of growing up in a blended family. The participants

contributed to the study with responses to an online flyer, questionnaire, consent form, and a

scheduled interview via Zoom virtual video and audio conferencing. Their interview responses

supported the development of themes, describing their adult emotional impact, adult attachment

styles, abandonment issues, and traumatic experiences. The following sections offer a synopsis

of the participants' responses from the qualitative phenomenological study.

Research Question One

How did growing up in a blended family impact an individual's transition into

adulthood? For this question, the researcher wanted to know from the participants' lived

experiences how growing up in a blended family affected their transition into adulthood. Data

from the captured interviews with the participants reflected how growing up in a blended family

affected or influenced family relationships and how that experience has orchestrated and directed

their life decisions (Martin-Uzzi et al., 2013). According to the Pew Research Center (2015), by

age four, 26% of children will have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lives.

The participants reported that they were affected emotionally, both positively and

negatively, as they transitioned to adulthood. Experiences that occur before age 18 may be

remembered as an adult (Papenow, 2013). Recent studies have shown that transitioning between family units is largely ignored. It may be difficult to see the impact of such an experience on the child's adjustment until teenage or adulthood (Cartwright, 2010).

Braveheart. Braveheart's transition into adulthood after growing up in a blended family affected him romantically because he never envisioned himself in the same repeated situation. He shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

- "At times, I imagine my life differently, that is, marrying someone with no children, and both of us having children together."

- "But then I love my family…. I met a young lady, the love of my life, been married 11 years, and she had a child that was 5 years old when I came in their lives."

- "But again, growing up that way still made me the man I am today."

- "Jesus was a stepparent, so I can be the best at it."

Queen. Queen's transition into adulthood after growing up in a blended family contributed to deep scars. Memories of living with her stepmother leave her emotionally drained. She shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

- "Negative memories...I was scared."

- "The wicked stepmom…. She just never wanted me to go anywhere, and she became extremely negative of me."

- "I felt like Cinderella, and I kept trying to escape."

Nutbush. Nutbush's transition into adulthood after growing up in a blended family made him the man he is today. He shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

- "You know, when I look back over my life, I would have to say yes, it impacted me in ways that I've had to work through over the years."

- "I know that the morals, values, and qualities my stepdad established in me made an impact, although he was not a man of many words. He is the reason why I am the way I am right now. There is one thing I know; he is a family man. And that is ingrained in me. Anything that I do in my life is all about my family."

- "If I say anything that I took from seeing my parents growing up, my dad gives my mom kisses before he leaves the house and gets back. And I transition that over to my marriage."

Olivia. Olivia's situation was cohabitation; however, her transition into adulthood after growing up in a blended family taught her stability. She shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

- "I out of all my mom's kids, I see that I am the only one that is different, and they seem to help me more because I am the one that really tries and tries to keep my little family together, but everybody else is just spaced out, and they do they own thing."

- "But they say that out of all the kids, I am the one that has the most respect, but I was taught that from my stepdad and my mom and my grandma because she was there too."

Trudy. Trudy's transition into adulthood after growing up in a blended family caused her to have trust issues. She admitted struggling with abandonment issues all her life; even though her stepfather loved her and showed her, it was hard for her to return that affection. She shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

I thought my mom and dad were supposed to be together. When I was little, you know it's like that's how that's supposed to go. You know how kids make-believe, and they

say, mommy, daddy, and baby. That's what I thought was supposed to keep happening…. I didn't understand it.

Foster. Foster's transition into adulthood after growing up in a blended family created a stable life for him. He reported having some struggles related to his biological father's empty promises, but overall, his experience growing up in a blended family was a good one. He shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

- "My stepfather was a good man, and he taught me many things in my life."

- " I do have emotional issues; however, it wasn't from my stepdad; he is a good man."

- 'He taught me how to use my hands when he came in off the road, he spent time with me, I was the oldest, so I got his youthful years, and for that, I am grateful."

Kenneth. Kenneth's transition into adulthood after growing up in a blended family was stable. In Kenneth's case, his father was always readily available, and he had the support of both his mother and stepmother. He shared the following thought related to this research question: "I still saw my daddy almost daily, and I lived with my mom. I mean, not too much change."

Research Question Two

How did the emotional bonds and attachment styles affect an individual's relationships after growing up in a blended family? As stated previously, when children transition from blended family relationships into adulthood, there is a possibility that they may have attachment issues. According to Bowlby (1969), concerning personal development, one's capability to form attachments, both physically and emotionally, helps one feel secure and stable, giving one the ability to grow, take risks, and develop a personality. According to Bowlby, an individual who has experienced a secure attachment is likely to possess a symbolic attachment figure model as available, responsive, and helpful.

Braveheart. Braveheart would visit his father in the spring and summertime; however, he felt like he was visiting another family. He has four stepsisters and two half-sisters, and even though the relationship is a healthy one, the desire that lingered in his heart consistently was, "Why can't I have my entire family throughout the year?" He shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

- "My close friends grew up with all their biological parents and siblings."

- "And so, it was always just thrown in my face, what I missed by not having my biological parents in the same house together."

Queen. Queen's emotional bonds go deep; her trauma affected her relationships after growing up in a blended family. She shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

- "I just wanted my daddy."

- "We were once close until he married a woman; I was about 11."

- "At first, it was all good, and things fell apart."

- "I just wanted to stay with my dad for a year, and for that year of me staying with my dad for the school year, my stepmom became, I considered, verbally abusive."

- "My dad didn't see it or me…. Painful, I remember."

Nutbush. Nutbush's formed strong emotional bonds with his mother at an early age. After all, his mother was all he knew; however, he quickly gravitated to his stepfather. He shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

I know that the morals, values, and qualities my stepdad established in me made an impact, although he was not a man of many words. He is the reason why I am the way I

am right now. There is one thing I know; he is a family man. And that is ingrained in me. Anything that I do in my life is all about my family.

Olivia. Olivia's emotional bonds and attachment style stemmed from her stepdad's undying love toward her. Olivia feels that her stepdad influenced the decisions she made in her life. She told a story about how she and her mother was in a severe car accident and how he stepped up to care for her, just as if she were his biological daughter. She shared the following thoughts related to this research question: "He was good to me…called me his daughter…reassured me often.'

Trudy. Although Trudy did not spend a significant amount of time with her biological father or receive the quality time that she often fantasized about as a young girl, she shared that she will always cherish the small things and keep them in her heart. Her biological father is now deceased. She shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

- "When I would see my friends play with their dad, I felt a longing for that, and I couldn't get it."

- "I wanted to be daddy's girl and sit on daddy's lap and do that, but I didn't get those things."

- "I looked for that love in other men…. The result was three babies by different fathers."

Foster. Foster's emotional bonds and attachment style were relatively stable because of his stepfather; however, he reported having some struggles with emotional and trust issues in relationships due to his biological father's empty promises and a secret that he carried for his mother. He shared the following thoughts related to this research question:

- "My stepfather was a good man, and he taught me many things in my life."

- "I trusted him…. We formed a tight bond."

- "I was always looking for my dad to come, though."

Kenneth. Kenneth never lost his emotional and attachment bond to his father. In Kenneth's case, his father was always readily available, and he had the support of both his mother and stepmother. He shared the following thought related to this research question: "I still saw my daddy almost daily, and I live with my mom. I mean, not too much change."

Research Question Three

What significant experience from growing up in a blended family had the most impact on intrapersonal development? This research question aimed to investigate or pinpoint a significant experience that shaped each participant's life while growing up in a blended family. Although the new blended family concept, once called the stepfamily, has been around for centuries, many blended families were not recognized until the two parents married and agreed to care for the children together, even if one parent was not biologically related (Kellas et al., 2014).

Society is becoming much more accepting of adults in a relationship who raise children jointly without legal commitment (King & Boyd, 2016). Researchers have indicated that this lenient approach may cause difficulties, particularly in terms of child support, medical decisions, and other complex issues that may affect one's life as an adult (Coleman et al., 2015; Kellas et al., 2014). Living in a blended family has become more commonplace, as have significant issues related to family members' adjustment to and day-to-day maintenance. Usually, blended families enter life together with little awareness of what to expect; however, one significant experience will always stay with them as they mature into adulthood. The following sections describe the experiences that each participant pinpointed.

Braveheart. Braveheart's significant experience after growing up in a blended family speaks volumes. He shared the following:

- "I never envisioned myself in the same situation that I grew up in."

- "I wanted to meet a young lady, and she didn't have any kids because I didn't have any."

- "Even to this day, sometimes I think to myself, how did I end up in the same situation I grew up in?"

- "Yet, I met a young lady, the love of my life, been married 11 years, and she had a child that was 5 years old when I came into their lives."

Queen. Queen's significant experiences left deep scars. The memories of living with her stepmom leave her emotionally drained. She shared the following:

- "I kept trying to escape."

- "Queen, get this, Queen, get that."

Nutbush. Nutbush's shared the following significant experiences related to growing up in a blended family that he felt made him the man that he is today.

- "My stepfather and I have an amazing relationship."

- "After meeting my biological father, I understood me more."

- "It was like holding a mirror up to my face…. I found my identity."

Olivia. Even though Olivia's experience was rocky, she pinpointed the following significant experience after growing up in a blended family:

- "After a traumatic car accident, he added me to his insurance because my bone was broken, my gum. I had to go and get partials. He had me homeschooled."

- "He loved me unconditionally…. He did a whole lot."

Trudy. Even though Trudy harbored emotional feelings deep inside her, she admitted that her stepfather was good to her. She pinpointed one significant experience related to growing up in a blended family:

- "He didn't treat me differently."

- "He held me to my responsibilities in a loving way."

- "When it came to family, his family, I was at every family reunion. He always introduced me as his daughter. He never said, stepdaughter. He never said bonus child, just said daughter."

- "He didn't make me broken promises."

Foster. Foster's significant pinpoint experience after growing up in a blended family helped him grow up and face his responsibilities:

- "My stepfather...taught me how to use my hands."

- "The time he spent with me was timeless."

- "You don't understand the lesson until you actually get grown."

Kenneth. Kenneth's significant experience in growing up in a blended family was his relationship with his stepmom:

- "I trust my stepmom. I have love, and I still do today."

- "My stepmother, she loved me dearly."

- "She didn't treat me different from her biological children."

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Summary

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Seven individuals participated in the study to share their lived experiences of how their lives were affected after growing up within a blended family or stepfamily. The participants were between the age of 18-40, residents of Kershaw or Sumter County, South Carolina, and a

product of a blended family or stepfamily. Data came from interviews regarding participants'

lived experiences conducted via Zoom. The data was presented based on the patterns of meaning

that came up repeatedly, forming themes. The research study identified four themes from the

long-term impact of growing up in a blended family. The researcher used codes and themes to

answer the research questions regarding the long-term impact of growing up with a blended

family. The selected participants provided their overall reactions to the impact in their lives,

expounding passionately on their lived experiences.

Based on the study's theoretical framework, researchers and clinicians today have

acquired a greater understanding of the family dynamics that lead to separation and divorce

(Kumar, 2017). The probability that children whose parents have separated and become

members of a blended family has increased considerably in the last decades (Saint-Jacques et al.,

2018). According to Cartwright (2010, 2012), transitioning between family units is largely

ignored, and families' psychological needs and their family unit responses are incredibly

essential to foster growth and trust in a family.

Traumatic experiences followed each of the participants into adulthood. Two out of

seven are now seeking professional counseling after realizing there was a problem. When asked

how growing up in a blended family affected their adult lives, each participant had a different

story; however, their traumatic experiences that had been buried manifested innately years later.

When asked if growing up in a blended family or stepfamily affected their adult relationships,

many reported that they had issues with trust, alluding to insecure attachments. According to Shi

(2010) and Schwartz (2015), some insecure adults may become anxious-resistant or concerned

that they may be deprived of love from others when their attachment needs go unmet. Responses

to the third research question, related to pinpointing a significant experience growing up in a

blended family that had shaped their lives, varied widely. The findings indicated that growing

up in a blended family indeed had lifelong social and interpersonal effects, i.e., an in-depth

description of the emotional struggles, adult attachment issues, and the development between

successful or failed relationships. Notably, 71% of the participants' responses indicated that

growing up within a blended family affected their adulthood.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

As stated previously, the primary purpose of this study was to capture the lived experience of adults ages 18-40 regarding emotional, attachment, abandonment, and trauma-related issues after growing up within a blended family environment (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Zeleznikow, 2015). As a young child from a blended family develops into adulthood, they may have difficulty sustaining a relationship and usually remain caught up in patterns where abandonment repeats itself. The literature review identified that feelings and expressions of abandonment might signal attachment injuries in adults resulting in emotional detachment caused by separation and divorce, spilling over into heartbreak and fear (Zeleznikow, 2015).

This final chapter of the phenomenological qualitative study will discuss the experiences, challenges, and constructs of adults from a blended family environment emerging into society, highlighting the diversity in their lived experiences (Heerwagen, 2013; Saint et al., 2011). The participants were selected via a flyer and a questionnaire survey distributed on Facebook within two counties in the South Carolina Midlands, Kershaw and Sumter. This chapter summarizes the findings, highlighting implications, stating delimitations and limitations, and offering recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Seven participants consented to an interview for this study. The current study focused only on blended or stepfamilies; all participants in a family unit met the criteria. This chapter includes a discussion regarding the theoretical and empirical implications of the data and the results of the data analysis answering each research question. From the data sources, each

participant's lived experiences revealed the phenomenon studied, the impact of growing up within a blended family. The study showed positive and adverse personal reactions such as shock, fear, anxiety, disconnect, sadness, grief, and anger. The participants are adults that were currently or had grown up in a blended family or stepfamily. They were between the ages of 18-40, living in either Kershaw or Sumter County. Each participant gave a compelling story of their life growing up in a blended family.

The common themes were feelings of emotional attachment, abandonment, and trauma from childhood to adulthood. All but one participant was affected by a traumatic occurrence that stayed with them throughout their adult life, affecting their decisions and relationships. The first research question asked, "How did growing up in a blended family impact your transition into adulthood? Participants responded with both positive and negative reactions. For example, one participant said, "Oh my God, yes, it was traumatic, frightening. I felt confused, angry, and lived a troubled adolescent lifestyle from the trauma that I didn't understand; I'm seeing a counselor to this day."

According to Voices for Children in America (2012), traumatic events can have a lifetime of adverse effects on children's health and well-being. Statistics surrounding the matter clearly illustrate the magnitude of the problem. By age 4, 26% of children will have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lives. By adulthood, 70% of people have had their world disrupted by at least one traumatic episode (Pew Research Center, 2015).

These statistics on the prevalence of trauma lead to research question two, which asked, How did the emotional bonds and attachment styles affect your relationships after growing up in a blended family? For three of the participants, during the interview, they realized what emotional bonds were and how attachment styles affected them throughout their lives. They

were ashamed to ask for help; however, they knew something was plaguing them emotionally, and it affected their relationships time after time. As children and adolescents grow up within a blended family, close emotional bonds form between parents and their children. Those bonds are often responsible for the secure attachments between adults in intimate relationships after leaving home (Jensen et al., 2014). The secure attachment style in children corresponds to the secure attachment style in adults, often turning into insecure attachment styles if repeated trauma disappointments and instability travels with them from one relationship to the other, constantly creating attachment avoidance (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017; Jensen et al., 2014). All the participants acknowledged that growing up in a blended family most definitely affected them emotionally and traumatically, creating trust issues.

For all of the participants, in some capacity, their life was changed as a result of their family dynamics. This finding leads to research question three: What significant experience can you pinpoint in growing up in a blended family that has shaped you as a person? Each lived experience of individuals raised in a blended family or stepfamily provides an in-depth description of their emotional struggles, adult attachment issues, and the development of successful or failed relationships. The findings showed a significant correlation between early childhood development and emotional behavior or the ability to be happy after growing up in a blended family, shaping each of them emotionally, physically, mentally, and perhaps spiritually. The findings did indicate that growing up in a blended family posed lifelong social and interpersonal effects.

Discussion

This study examined the challenges of growing up within a blended family or stepfamily and its impact on individuals' lives and relationships. The researcher strove to link these findings

with the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The theoretical

framework shaped this study, especially the various concepts and theories behind blended

families and therapists to view and facilitate growth in the blended family system. Today's

researchers and clinicians have acquired a greater understanding of family dynamics that lead to

separation and divorce (Kumar, 2017). However, the probability that children whose parents

have separated and divorced may become members of a blended family has increased

considerably in recent decades (Saint-Jacques et al., 2018). Still, transitioning between family

units has been ignored, resulting in an array of emotional problems (Cartwright, 2010, 2012).

As we look at the theoretical implications of this study, we will begin to see resonance

with Bowlby's attachment theory. Bowlby (1969) proposed that humans develop mental

representations of relationships that help them interpret social events and form the basis for

future attachment relationships. He argued strongly from an evolutionary perspective that

attachment represents an innate biological system. A child's early social experience stimulates

the brain's growth and may have an enduring influence on forming stable relationships with

others. A sense of attachment is essential to understand how young adults successfully or

unsuccessfully navigate critical transition periods. Bowlby also believed that mental health and

behavioral problems might be attributed to early childhood attachment issues. These attachment

issues capture the lived experiences of growing up in a blended family, and the overall

characteristics, mannerisms, emotional bonds, and everyday interactions carry over into family

relationships.

Theoretical Implications

With the rapidly rising number of blended families, there exists an increased need for

research that can assist in therapeutically addressing the needs of today's complex family

structures. As the significance of the study is reviewed, we find a concern of how child

upbringing affects family stability in blended and stepfamily households; these findings also

address the gap in the existing body of knowledge related to what happens as these children grow

up and transition into adulthood (Cartwright, 2013). The theoretical literature provided the

foundation for this study. The findings show that adults with insecure attachment styles will

likely experience romantic relationship dissolution, which is common among blended families

(Jensen et al., 2014). However, factors that contribute to the emotional struggles and subsequent

dissolution of family units remain largely unexplored. The real problem is that children can be

affected by sudden life changes, both academically and emotionally, and the events threatening

their safety after a stressful life-changing event. Each participant was directly affected by a

traumatic event or a change of station or safe place, leaving them exposed to levels of

attachment-related anxiety, abandonment, and avoidance. As mentioned previously, this study's

theory addresses adult experiences after growing up within a blended family relating to family

development, communication strategies, and blended families through the lens of systems theory

(Dupuis, 2010).

Participants' attachment was affected directly by trauma history in the current study, with

participants reporting high trauma exposure. Previous literature indicates that traumatic

experiences can create barriers to healthy interpersonal functioning later in life, and researchers

have found that highly traumatized individuals are often insecurely attached to caregivers (Owen

et al., 2012). When traumatized individuals enter relationships, their suppressed emotions are

triggered, and the outcome spirals out of control, warranting professional intervention (Shafer et

al., 2017). As mentioned previously, children of divorce children can experience despair and

depression throughout their lives, internalizing those feelings hidden from consciousness (Bowlby, 1980; Cherry & Gans, 2019).

Empirical Implications

Empirical research on blended families and stepfamilies is limited, especially from the adult perspective. Because of the high divorce rate in the U.S., children are increasingly likely to spend at least part of their childhood in a blended family or stepfamily (Brown et al., 2015). Blended families can be formed early in a child's life and become a part of their experience through adulthood (Coleman et al., 2015; Kalmin, 2013). This research will compare the research findings to previous literature because gaps remain in the research literature, concluding with suggestions for new studies.

Communication

Recent studies show that communication breakdown is the main factor leading to most separations and divorces (Hanson et al., 2011). Today, living in a blended family has become more commonplace, leaving significant issues related to family members' adjustment to day-to-day life (Kumar, 2017; Olson, 2011). Whether a family is traditional or blended, there are always conflicts and challenging interaction patterns (Olson, 2011). The goal of this study was to survey participants who have grown up in blended or stepfamilies and are now adults dealing with the challenges of communication that come along with the relationships after blending (Kumar, 2017). Because of communication breakdown, adverse family experiences can potentially become traumatic events or circumstances that children may have experienced and can have lasting negative consequences into adulthood (National Center for Health Statistics, 2014; Schwartz, 2015). Each participant described various communication patterns as they told their stories of growing up in blended or stepfamilies, including loud shouting, defensiveness,

criticism, and what Gottman and Gottman (2015) called stonewalling not only in couples but families as well, especially blended ones.

According to Cartwright and Gibson (2013), a healthy blended family shares several communication skills, addresses conflict, openly shares personal interests and participates in activities together. However, the one problem that commonly arises entering marriage is unresolved conflict and unhealed internal wounds (Schwartz, 2015). This cycle often continues as those same children grow up after living in a blended family, bringing those same patterns into their various relationships filled with difficulties, disconnect, confusion, conflict, and hurt. Premarital counseling is vitally important not only for the couple but also for the children (Banschick, 2012).

Abandonment

As stated previously, the pain of abandonment can live within the sub-conscience for years. Several of the participants studied displayed rejection, insecurity, depression, fear, and anxiety due to separation from a biological parent, resulting in identified trauma-related needs, i.e., emotional, abandonment, and attachment issues. Abandonment brings with it a particular type of grief, which can fall into stages. Psychotherapist Susan Anderson (2020) delineated five stages of abandonment grief: shattering, withdrawal, internalizing, rage, and lifting (SWIRL). Each participant modeled one of these stages as they told their lived experience of growing up in a blended family or stepfamily.

Shattering

In the first stage, shattering, the family begins to break apart, devastation sets in, and one succumbs to despair, pain, and sadness. Bowlby (1969) explains this stage as severed from one's primary attachment and cut off from one's emotional lifeline.

Withdrawal

The most critical stage is when one's scarring from the pain becomes permanent (S. Anderson, 2020). Both children and adults feel the withdrawal and begin to think about that parent or loved one who left them feeling unsafe, fearful, and alone, invoking what Bowlby (1969) called abandonment syndrome or disorder.

Internalizing

The internalizing stage may cause a child to feel isolated and shy throughout their adolescence, impairing their ability to trust others. For adults, insecurity, self-indictment, and self-doubt plague them in adult relationships, causing anxiety, depression, codependence, or abandonment issues (S. Anderson, 2020; Bowlby, 1980).

Rage

The stage causes a person to go through spurts of anger often displayed at other family members and friends. The rage stage is the turning point of the grief process, and it is when a person begins to fight back by refusing to accept all the blame for the failed relationship. It is not uncommon to take revenge and retaliation toward one's abandoner, potentially becoming destructive (S. Anderson, 2020).

Lifting

The last stage of abandonment is called the recovery or lifting stage. As the energy in individuals spurts outward, it lifts them back into life, and one can begin to let it go so that the patterns of internal barriers are not repeated. A professional counselor can aid in this process through psychotherapy.

Attachment Disorders

Attachment is essential in human development; it allows children the security needed to explore, learns, and relate. It is vital for safety, stress regulation, adaptability, and resilience. Even though attachment issues can resonate in adulthood, there is no formal diagnosis for attachment disorder. For many, these are lingering symptoms that went undiagnosed as in their childhood (Cherry & Gans, 2019). The two symptoms of attachment disorder in adulthood are (a) a profound inability to trust another person, even a spouse or close confidant, and (b) the feeling of being in a constant state of survival or hypervigilance. The coping behaviors a person develops during childhood will most likely emerge in adulthood (Bowlby, 1980). Those same children will often struggle emotionally, socially, and behaviorally (Pritchett et al., 2013).

As children grow into adulthood, we see the link to personality disorders repeatedly when a parent's divorce is involved (Fuchshuber et al., 2019). Although the symptoms may shift, children do not grow out of attachment disorders on their own. If left untreated, these same children are likely to continue to have ongoing regulating of their emotions well into adulthood (Fuchshuber et al., 2019).

This study focused is on the trauma of having traumatic experiences at a young age, experiencing emotional abuse and neglect after growing up in a blended family or stepfamily. Detachment refers to the inability to connect with other people on an emotional level. Being emotionally detached helps one to escape from unwanted drama, anxiety, and stress. At the core, emotional detachment means someone is physically present in an interaction or relationship but is not emotionally present or involved. When emotions begin to surface, this unhealthy tendency will come to a head. People who develop emotional detachment due to a traumatic experience

can have difficulty learning how to connect with other people and permit themselves to experience their feelings fully.

Christian Worldview

As stated previously, blended families are on the rise in America. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the exact prevalence of blended families is unclear; however, the most recent data reports that 16% of children live in what the Census Bureau terms *blended families*, a household with a stepparent, stepsibling, or half-sibling (Pew Research Center, 2015). Failure to understand the unique needs of the blended family, and God's plan for meeting these needs, invites its demise. According to the Stepfamily Foundation, two out of three blended relationships will end in divorce (Lofas, 2016). Three out of the seven participants in this study referenced their faith during the interview, stating that life would be different if it weren't for "the grace of God."

As blended families become more commonplace, remarried couples can beat the odds of getting divorced for the second or third time if they knew how to overcome the unique barriers to marital intimacy in a blended family. When two families form one blended family, they come from different households with different rules, traditions, and ways of doing things. Children must be helped through the massive changes they will experience during the transition to a new, blended family life. Cooperation, patience, and communication are critical, and the children must feel accepted and secure in the love of both parent and stepparent. According to church leaders, the married couples and children who make up blended families bring the same giftedness and value to a congregation as anyone else (Straub, 2018); however, the church cannot connect to the challenges in blended families and stepfamilies.

Psychotherapeutic interventions that explicitly integrate all clients' spiritual and religious beliefs in therapy effectively reduce depression than those that do not, if not more so (Cohen et al., 2015). Most families have a religious base; children chose to accept their parents' values by recognizing the stability, significance, and proper morality function of knowing God for themselves. Morality is associated with concepts such as values, conscience, and legality. Parents and other close family members are essential because they are the primary social contacts during a person's childhood and adolescence. Studies show that the direct teaching of all religions is love, which is the basic human need for infant survival and the family's well-being.

The role of religion in the family is indispensable when it comes to building character. Through leadership, role modeling, and balance between discipline and love, parents guide their children. Frequent church attendance is related to a multitude of positive outcomes. However, attendance is an essential indicator of commitment to and salience of religious involvement (Boyatzis et al., 2006). Research also suggests that the stronger a couple's religious beliefs and the frequency of participation in spiritual practices, the more likely they will spend time together in positive, meaningful activities. The Bible tells us to "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (*New King James Bible [NKJ]*, 1982/2004, Proverbs 22:6). God is the author and finisher of family development, and he expects us to teach our children in a pleasing way to him.

Practical Implications

The practical implications from this study reveal how remarriages and blended families have received increased attention in the past decade. Based on the study's results, the prevalence of divorce and re-partnering and an interest in how unique issues in blended families and

stepfamilies affect relationships. The study aimed at determining (a) the long-term impact of growing up in a blended family and transitioning into adulthood, (b) how growing up in a blended family can affect one's mental and emotional state relative to forming and maintaining healthy relationships, and (c) how child upbringing affects emotional and attachment issues. The themes captured in the study findings are the results of the data gathered from the seven participants. The rich practical implications result from the responses to the questions given during the Zoom interviews.

The findings indicate that trauma experiences significantly impact emotional attachment, abandonment, and traumatic events in one life. Participants reporting high trauma exposure also reported high levels of attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. Previous literature indicates that traumatic experiences may create barriers to healthy interpersonal functioning later in life (Trickett et al., 2011). There is ample research to develop valuable resources explicitly geared to the needs of couples in blended or stepfamilies relationships. The current study supports these previous findings, suggesting that trauma experiences significantly affect attachment quality and spill over into adulthood. Additional studies should be conducted based on other emerging nontraditional family compositions to identify if they can be included in Bowlby's attachment theory framework.

Delimitations and Limitations

The delimitations are the boundaries or limits set to ensure that the study's aim and objectives were not impossible to achieve, which are in the researcher's hands. This study explored the lived experiences of individuals raised in blended or stepfamilies. The main emphasis of the delimitation provides an in-depth description of the emotional struggles, adult attachment and detachment issues, and the development of successful or failed relationships.

The selected participants ranged from 18-40 years of age, were living or had grown up within a blended family or stepfamily, were of any gender, and were residents of Kershaw or Sumter County, South Carolina. The main goal of the delimitations to the study was to secure the trustworthiness of the study. Delimitations were evident in the research design, participant selection, participants' years of experience, and recall bias. Confirmability may question how the research findings are supported by the data collected to establish whether the researcher was biased during the study (Polit & Beck, 2012). The results are based on participants' responses and not any potential bias or personal motivations of the researcher.

This study explored and focused on the essence and detailed experiences of growing up in a blended family or stepfamily. The methodology used for the selected design was primarily phenomenological qualitative from real-world observations and situations as they unfolded naturally (Chan et al., 2013). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic restricted this study strictly to exploratory research. As with all misunderstood populations, this distinct family form can make a stronger contribution to society as more information becomes available about the unique dynamics of blending stepfamilies.

The definition of a blended family is changing; there are so many diverse types of relationships within blended families. In the most basic sense, in a blended family, the parents have children from previous relationships. Understanding the basics of blended or stepfamilies can be essential for ensuring a family can embrace its strengths and work through its differences. Many people are unaware of unavoidable unique challenges or limitations until they start dealing with them. Those limitations encompass the development of new relationships, strong or conflicting emotions, and trust and abandonment issues.

Children

As children mature, they build social skills and emotional intelligence skills. These skills often help them lead healthy, happy lives. However, some children, adolescents, or teens adopt emotions or behave in ways that disrupt their well-being, especially after a significant change or disruption in their lives.

Trust

Trust is necessary for society to function. It can play a significant role in happiness. Without it, fear rules. Some life experiences can impact a person's ability to trust others.

Abandonment

From this study, a pattern of emotional abandonment was a common theme. Emotional abandonment often stems from childhood loss related to a traumatic event, such as losing a parent through death or divorce. These early childhood experiences can lead to fear of being abandoned by others later in life.

Grief

Grief can manifest in several ways for young children, such as a death or divorce. Grief can be a factor during the transition to a new family. A remarriage could occur too early in a child's life because the child may still be grieving the loss of their old family dynamics.

Triggers

During a traumatic event, the brain often engrains sensory stimuli into memory. A trigger is a reminder of the trauma that took place in the past. This reminder can cause a person to feel overwhelming sadness, anxiety, or panic. Even when they encounter the same stimuli in another context, they associate the trauma triggers. In most cases, a sensory trigger can cause an emotional reaction before a person realizes why they are upset.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the research, a growing population of blended families comes in many different forms. Many people are ignorant about the destructive issues of blended families, or lack relevant information, facts, or experience necessary to recognize and resolve the unique issues blended families face. Given the broad diversity of blended family types and with the various roles in which parents engage, research is sparse on the experience of growing up within blended families. Moreover, this lack of research also corresponds to the lack of psychotherapeutic interventions and programs to support parents and children in those types of blended families, each with its own unique family dynamic. The implications for additional research and findings from this study can expose a deeper understanding of how complicated blended families can be.

The underlying assumption is that the nuclear family consists of only full siblings. Even though a child lives with two biological parents who are married to one another, other siblings in the household are not biologically related to both parents' half and stepsiblings. In this case, combining family structure and sibling composition indicates that the child living with two biological, married parents and a half-or stepsibling is not living in a simple married family but a complicated family. This qualitative study provided a detailed description of the experience of growing up within a blended family or stepfamily and then the impact after transitioning into adulthood. What remains unknown is the effect of varying levels of the trauma associated with growing up within a blended family because trauma brings a unique kind of grief to human beings.

It would also be especially beneficial if future research explored the wide range of races/ethnicities underrepresented in the current research on blended families. Doing so would benefit future research programs related to breakups, abandonment recovery, the children,

enduring separation, and relationship patterns. Additionally, information regarding the experience of parents who already have biological children and then enter a blended family and have a mutual child would also provide helpful information for supporting these families through the earlier years. Unfortunately, society would believe that it all relates to the perception of the *Brady Bunch*. However, four out of 10 American children experience physically, mentally, and emotionally traumatic experiences as they grow up within blended families and stepfamilies (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019).

There are several recommendations and directions for future research from these findings. The COVID-19 pandemic restricted this study to exploratory phenomenological analysis even though grounded theory or case studies may have been used. Using grounded theory design, the researcher would collect data that involved interviews regarding participants' direct experiences and perspectives; however, it would also call for interaction with the participants grounded in the social world of knowledge and seek to make sense of lived experience (Neubauer et al., 2019; Wisdom et al., 2012). The case study method investigates individual circumstances and the exploration in diverse relationships through qualitative research. The overall objective for all the methods is to understand the complex process as they naturally occur through lived experiences.

Summary

Divorce and separation can be emotionally traumatic experiences that undermine children's feelings of safety, security, and stability. Although divorce is a common occurrence today, the means of establishing a functional binuclear family is not always evident to newly divorced or separated parents. All but one participant told a story of survival after being left behind and discarded, resulting in insecurity in areas that followed them into adulthood, often

leading them to experience low self-esteem and strained adult intimate relationships. The common themes in each participant's story were emotional impact, attachment styles, abandonment issues, and traumatic experiences that triggered shock, neglect, fear, trust, anxiety, and anger.

Each of the participants shared a similar message, i.e., the world of blended families is not for the faint of heart. However, the lived experience will either make you or break you; there is always a struggle for unresolved attention, leading to collapse in many blended families.

The study codes and themes were used to answer the research questions regarding emotional impact, attachment styles, abandonment issues, and traumatic experiences. Findings from this study revealed that unless mutual love and attachment are reciprocated, we can all become insecure and exhibit extreme behaviors, ultimately driving the other person away. It also revealed a deeper understanding of how complicated the blended family process can be, and the numerous factors needed to transition into adulthood successfully. The results speak to the complex nature of the lived experience of growing up within a blended family and the survival tactics children internalize.

The lived experiences during a child's development will often continue into adulthood. As stated earlier, as children grow up within a blended family or stepfamily, they form close emotional bonds with their caregivers. Those same bonds are often responsible for attachment between adults in intimate relationships (Jensen et al., 2014). All implications stem from the underlying psychological factors (such as insecure attachment styles, i.e., secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized) that contributed to most of the participants' relationship patterns and a lack of familial cohesiveness that went unexplored and untreated. Divorce and separation are

traumatic experiences for any adult, but experiencing divorce for a child can be especially challenging. Broken children mimic broken adults throughout society.

In conclusion, few things are more traumatic than a car accident, pounds of steel and glass bending and scraping, with no respect for the limits or boundaries of the human body inside. However, there is a path of healing that every victim of a severe accident must take. Children with divorced and separated parents have experienced a different kind of violent, traumatic collision, and every child of divorce and separation must walk a path of healing (Maxwell, 2016). It may not be the same for every child, but no one can deny that the emotional and relational bleeding needs attention, long after divorce and into adulthood. God, who instituted the family to be a foundation for the church and stable society, has come to heal through the nature and causes of trauma, the symptoms, short and long-term effects, and all the possible treatment methodologies.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

ATTENTION SUMTER & KERSHAW COUNTY!

<u>Research Participants Needed</u>

Share your experience and life impact of growing up in a

Blended Family

This study will explore the lived experiences of individuals that have grown up in a blended or stepfamily.

The purpose of my research is to investigate how growing up in a blended family has impacted, affected, or shaped your life as an adult. I am inviting eligible participants to join my study.

Mrs. Sarah Sloan, a doctoral candidate in the Community Care and Counseling/Human Studies Program at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

For more information contact:
Sarah Sloan

█████████████

All submitted information will remain confidential

Location:
- All sessions will be conducted over online Survey and Zoom or WebEx conference meeting platform.

Are you eligible?
- Did you grow up in a blended or step-family? Or do you now belong to a blended family?

- Do you live in Kershaw or Sumter County, South Carolina?

- Are you between the age of 18 & 40?

If you answered yes to the above questions please complete the <u>Blended Family Screening Survey</u> to determine if you meet all of the prerequisites to participate.

If selected, I will contact you and arrange an online interview.

Liberty University IRB - 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

Appendix B: Participants' Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of the Project: Long-Term Impact of Growing up in a Blended Family: Emotional and Attachment Issues
Principal Investigator: Sarah L. Sloan, Liberty University

Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18-40, have lived, are now living, or have grown up within a blended or stepfamily and be a resident of Sumter or Kershaw County. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask any questions before participating in this research project.

What is the study about, and why is it being done?

This study will explore the lived experiences of individuals raised in a blended family or stepfamily and what, if any, was the impact of their development into adulthood. It will attempt to provide an in-depth description of the emotional struggles and the stories between successful or failed relationships and explore why adults often report adjusting to communication styles, abandonment, self-esteem, and innate and attachment issues.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete a 45-60-minute recorded Zoom or WebEx interview.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society could include a sense of empowerment, healing, a better understanding of self, and an increase in knowledge about the study or future generations to society.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the documents. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted one-on-one online via Zoom or Web conferencing, where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Interview recordings are stored locally on the host's device, and end-to-end encryption ensures protection of the content in Zoom sessions, i.e., video, audio, and screen sharing. After three years, all digital records will be deleted.
- After completing the study, all the data contents are burned onto a secure CD and deleted from the computer. At the end of three years, the CD content is deleted and broken in half.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?
Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?
If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and not included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?
The researcher conducting this study is Sarah Sloan. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at ███████████ or ██████████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Suzie Johnson, at ████████████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent
By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researchers will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the above information.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____Signature & Date

Appendix C: Participants' Questionnaire

Blended Family Survey Questionnaire

1. Did you grow up in, or currently in, a blended or stepfamily?

   O Yes   O No

2. How old are you?

   O Under 18   O 25-40
   O 18-24   O Over 40

3. In which of the following counties in South Carolina do you currently live?

   O Kershaw   O Sumter
   O Other

4. Of which category are you a member? (Mark all that apply.)

   O Stepparent   O Stepbrother
   O Stepsister   O Stepson
   O Stepdaughter   O None

Appendix D: Participants' Interview Questions

Blended Family Interview Questions

1. Did you grow up in a blended or stepfamily, or are you now living in one?

2. Do you feel that growing up in a blended or stepfamily has impacted your life? If so, how?

3. Were you under the age of 12 when your parents first separated, divorced, or remarried? If so, can you tell me your first thoughts?

4. Did the separation and divorce come as a shock to you? If "No," tell me why. If "Yes," elaborate on why.

5. Did you ever visit friends that lived with their biological *parents?* Tell me about a time *and how it impacted you?*

6. Did you grow up with stepbrother(s) and stepsister(s)? If so, was the relationship healthy?

7. Do you feel that your stepparent(s) treated you differently from their biological children? If so, please tell me in what way.

8. Did you ever attempt to run away while living with your biological parent(s) or stepparent(s) as a child?

9. Do you feel like your stepparent(s) influenced your well-being as a child and shaped who you are as an adult? If so, please elaborate.

10. Did you spend a significant amount of time with your biological father or mother?

11. Are you easily angered? If so, what makes you angry?

12. Has growing up in a blended or stepfamily affected your adult romantic relationships? If so, give me an example.

13. Do you find yourself uncomfortable when anyone gets too close?

14. After growing up in a blended or stepfamily, do you find it difficult to trust others?

15. Do you have problems showing remorse or empathy?

16. Do you have trouble controlling your emotions?

17. Do you find it difficult to trust others completely? If yes, please elaborate?

18. Do you have problems dealing with conflict?

19. Do you have problems receiving and giving love? If so, what do you think contributes to that?

20. Are you a stepparent, and do you have a healthy relationship with your stepchild/children?

Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 13, 2021

Sarah Sloan
Suzie Johnson

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-620 LONG-TERM IMPACT OF GROWING UP IN A
BLENDED FAMILY: EMOTIONAL AND ATTACHMENT ISSUES

Dear Sarah Sloan, Suzie Johnson:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in
accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug
Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review.
This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your
approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in
which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:
101(b):

Category 2. (ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive,
diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of
public behavior (including visual or auditory recording). Any disclosure of the human subjects'
responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil
liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational
advancement, or reputation.

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under
the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your
stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research
participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the
attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any
modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of
continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification
submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether

possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix F: Frequency of Codes and Themes/NVivo Software

Frequency of Codes and Themes from Participants Interviews

Codes	Themes
Anxiety, Compulsiveness, Depression, Dissociation, Post-traumatic stress, aggression	Emotional Impact
Bonding, Affection, Life Development, Relationships, Connection, Self-esteem	Attachment Styles
Rejection, Desertion, Avoidance, codependency, rescindment, Neglect, Insecurity, impulsiveness, struggles	Abandonment Issues
Anxiety, Anger, Fear, Devastated, Distressed, Disturbed, Distraught, Grieved, Sadness	Traumatic Experiences

NVivo Software

NVivo licensed key:
NVT12-KZ000-NFA20-QD6D5-0CK6V