UNDERSTANDING BLENDED FAMILY STABILITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Marion Frances Travers

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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ABSTRACT

Most remarriages and blended families dissolve within 1-5 years, and last an average of 3.05 years. The factors that contribute to their dissolution have been defined well in the literature; however, specific protective factors that lead to blended family stability have not. In this study, 'blended family stability' refers to individual participants who have remained in their blended family for more than five years and reported more positive than negative factors. This study sought to define the nuclear family and the blended family, and highlight the vast differences across blended families by (1) examining the challenges experienced in remarriage and blended families, and (2) identifying strategies to improve familial stability. This study also explored unpreparedness, transitions, parenting, co-parenting, stepparenting, communication, relationship building, rituals and traditions, boundaries, counseling, and spirituality. Families who engage in counseling or explore educational avenues to understand their blended family better increase their likelihood of achieving family stability significantly. This study's research methodology was epistemological, which allowed for a greater understanding of individuals' lived experiences through in-depth interviews and precise data analysis. Family systems theory guided this study, and provided a lens through which to view and approach blended families.

Keywords: Blended family, co-parenting, parenting, protective factors, remarriage, stability, stepparenting

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family—to my mother, who never graduated from high school, but has encouraged me faithfully on my educational journey, to my sister, Teresa, who has always believed that I could do anything I set out to do, to my wonderful children, Cody, Isabella, Kalei, Leah, and Paige, who add so much joy to my life and make me proud to be your dad/bonus, and finally, to my amazing wife, who has supported me in countless ways during every step of this dissertation process. You are wonderful, and I am forever grateful for your love and encouragement. You all mean more to me than my words can ever convey. I love you!

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I am so grateful for the friend I have found in Jesus, who has been true to His Word, and has been with me on the good days and those days that have been less than good (I have had my fair share of both.) I am thankful for my relationship with Him and the love that He shows me each day. I also appreciate the community of faith and the countless Christians whom God has placed in my life over the years who have demonstrated the love of Christ and have made my path brighter.

I thank my LifeMark family, all of whom have been so patient while I have been on this journey. Your kindness and love are more than I deserve. I am so grateful to lead and work with such an amazing group of individuals who wish to provide the opportunity for individuals to heal. Being among you has brought healing to my own life.

I thank my wife, Alison, because I am sure that you did not want to think about dissertation matters for a very long time after you received your doctorate, yet you were willing to help me by reading my writings countless times. Thank you!

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Finally, Dr. Aubrey Statti, I thank you for your support, insight, and assistance while I have been on this path.

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List of Abbreviations

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)

Family Systems Theory (FST)

International Review Board (IRB)

"Relational Family Therapy" (RFT)

Shared Parenting (SP)

Spirituality in Clinical Training Scale (SCTS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Understanding Blended Family Stability

Families are complex units, and blended families remarkably so. Blended families form when one or both individuals have children from previous relationships. Blending denotes harmony; however, these family types often experience untold difficulties before a healthy family emerges (Marsolini, 2000). Many challenges that exist within blended families have been identified in the literature; however, blended family stability has not received sufficient investigation (Dainton, 2019; Kumar, 2017; Papernow, 2018). Blended families confront obstacles unique to them, and these families and those seeking to support them will benefit from gaining insights into factors that foster stability.

Background

Blended families are an ever-increasing family type (Higginbotham et al., 2010; Kumar, 2017; Saint-Jacques et al., 2016). Zeleznikow and Zeleznikow (2015) reported that more than 40% of U.S. adults have at least one step-relative in their families, and Kumar (2017) predicted that blended family structures will soon surpass those of first marriage nuclear families. Although these families are common, the individuals in them face the broken family stigma (Kumar, 2017). The stigma of a previous broken family, a family unit that is fractured by separation or divorce, and other extreme pressures, leave these families vulnerable to the potential of further failed relationships (Coleman, 2018; Kumar, 2017).

The changing dynamic of marriage and partnership has altered the way the concept of family is viewed and understood profoundly (Sweeney, 2010). A nuclear family—a social unit comprised of a mother, father, and their dependents—is considered a benchmark family, or the traditional family structure (Buchanan & McConnell, 2017). Conversely, a blended family is

deemed to be deviant from the nuclear family structure (Ganong & Coleman, 2018). A blended family forms when individuals join in a relationship and one or both have children from previous relationships. One notable difference is that, unlike an original family in which traditions, beliefs, roles, and communication styles are often shared, members of a blended family bring their previous experiences to their new environment, which does not have the same shared history. The differences can be vast, and require significant adjustments in thoughts and behavior (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Braithwaite et al., 2009).

Uncertainty with respect to the actions necessary to stabilize the family can disrupt the family unit (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Braithwaite et al., 2009). This disturbance may span multiple households (Anderson & Greene, 2013). Such problems likely contribute to the short duration of most remarriages. Remarriages and blended families frequently come to an end within 1-5 years, and last an average of 3.05 years (Ganong, & Coleman, 2018; Saint-Jacques et al., 2016). The negative factors that lead to the dissolution of the marriage and family are often known; however, contributing factors that lead to family stability are not (Dainton, 2019; Kumar, 2017; Papernow, 2018), and a lack of knowledge of factors that contribute to stability threatens blended family resiliency (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Kumar, 2017).

Position in Relation to Self

As a clinician who works with families and an individual in a blended family, I brought understanding of the blended family structure to this study. Blending a family requires intentionality in all aspects of the relationship, both within and outside my home. For example, my focus as a member of a blended couple must be greater than just my wife and our collective children. It must also include family members who do not live in the home, but are still important. It has not always been easy; however, the knowledge that I have gained while

blending a family and continue to obtain has been helpful to me personally and to my work with other families.

Sweeny (2010) indicated a continued need for additional information about remarriages and stepfamilies, as there is still so much unknown about fostering stability. This additional information is evident in the lived experiences of many families like mine. The lived experience is a personal account of people who are willing to share their stories related to, in this case, blended family experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hearing these lived experiences, and recording and retelling the stories, contributed to the research. The openness about their experiences that I have found in blended families helped minimize my feelings of being in this complex family structure alone (Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015).

Before I entered a blended family situation myself, I wished to heal from my former marriage. I remained single for approximately three years, and allowed that healing to occur; I was not seeking actively to change my situation. I met my future wife while preparing for an African mission trip. We had similar interests, including a mutual interest in one another. Both of us had arrived at this point after spending several years not engaging in a romantic relationship and dedicating our time to our children, our healing, and God. Life was about to change, and we explored what was available to help us in the unfamiliar journey of blending a family. We engaged in traditional premarital Christian counseling, and were also fortunate to find and participate in a faith-based class designed for stepfamilies. This preparatory class was beneficial; however, I knew from my experience as a clinician that more was needed to create stability. We married and brought our families under one roof in 2017, going from two families of three to one of six. Our family experience has been a joy and an active learning experience since that time.

I came to this research with a Christian worldview, and believe that God will provide a way through every challenge. This confidence instills hope that, despite the complications in blending families, emerging answers will contribute to the body of research. I look forward to contributing to this ongoing discovery of factors that lead to blended family stability. I acknowledge that my strong Christian background and my own experiences in a blended family has led to biases that had to be bracketed to minimize their effect on my research findings. Bracketing is the process in which the researcher detaches from his/her experience with the phenomenon to enter the research open to new perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Careful attention was given to ensure that the participants' voices were paramount.

Problem Statement

The difficulties that blended families face are defined clearly in the literature, but factors that contribute to blended family stability have not been studied thoroughly (Dainton, 2019; Kumar, 2017; Papernow, 2018). Remarriages and blended families face unique challenges but are met with standard solutions. The impediments these family units face are specific to them; however, the strategies proposed to help are often derived from methods used to support a traditional family structure (Dupuis, 2010; Ganong & Coleman, 2018). The lack of discovery of factors that promote stability threatens blended family resiliency (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Kumar, 2017).

Purpose Statement

This phenomenological study was designed to describe the lived experiences of married individuals in blended couples and factors that contribute to their family stability. Blended couples comprise two individuals in which one or both members have been married or in a previous committed romantic relationship and have children from that former relationship

(Papernow, 2018). In this study, 'blended family stability' refers to individual participants who have remained in their blended family, been married for more than five years, and reported more positive than negative factors. This study of blended family stability increases understanding for those seeking to blend families, those who are engaged currently in a blended family unit, and practitioners who work with members of these family structures.

Significance of the Study

Blended families face many challenges, and there is much to gain from examining the individual experiences of those who form these prevalent family units. Sweeny (2010) proposed that research conducted to acquire information about blended families should attend to the following:

(a) Data and study design—because of the limited nature of data on stepfamilies and remarriages

(b) Greater attention to selectivity—who enters what type of families?

(c) More attention to remarriage—a great deal of research has focused on children in the stepfamilies and not on the blended couple

(d) Diverse stepfamily structures and experiences—a deeper look at the way stepfamilies respond within their specific structure

(e) Reconsidering incomplete institutionalization?—moving away from seeing stepfamilies as incomplete institutions (pp. 677-679)

Each consideration merits significant investigation on its own. This study acknowledges the lack of inquiry concerning blended stability. Pylyser et al. (2018) used meta-ethnography to review 20 qualitative studies on stepfamilies. One of the most profound findings in their research was that blended families experience "… a dialectical tension between wanting to be what they know

as a 'normal' family and feeling differences in their family structure" (p. 504). Noblit and Hare (1988) developed meta-ethnography, an advanced method of synthesizing qualitative data. Despite the acknowledged limitations of Pylser et al.'s (2018) study that synthesized information by translating studies into one another to provide a more robust interpretation, blended families and those seeking to support them may benefit from the suggestion to view the blended family as a unit. Regarding the family in this manner does not devalue the importance of everyone who comprises the blended family unit. In fact, it allows each member to share his/her "…experiences, expectation, and rituals from previous family structures to each other so that each family member is able to sufficiently honor the past" (Pylyser et al., 2018, pp. 506-507).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do individuals in blended couples describe blended family stability?

2. What do individuals in blended couples perceive are positive factors that contribute to their family stability?

3. What do individuals in blended couples perceive are negative factors that challenge family stability?

4. What supports, services, and assistance do individuals in blended couples consider significant contributors to their ongoing stability?

Definitions

1. *Blended couples*—a union of two individuals in which one or both members have been married or in a previous committed romantic relationship and have a child or children from a previous relationship (Papernow, 2018).

2. *Blended families*—a family structure comprised of two adults in a romantic relationship with a child or children from a previous relationship, also referred to as stepfamilies (Kumar, 2017).

3. *Blended family stability*—repartnered couples and their children who remain together for more than five years and report more positive than negative factors (Zartler & Grillenberger, 2017).

4. *Blended family resiliency*— wellness that stepfamilies develop and sustain through ongoing adjustments and adaptations despite some of the challenges faced (Brown & Robinson, 2012).

5. *Boundaries*—margins created within the family that allow for clarity and structure (Brown & Robinson, 2012).

6. *Bracketing*—the process in which the researcher detaches from his/her experience with the phenomenon to conduct the research open to new perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

7. *Broken Family*—a family unit that is fractured by separation or divorce (Ganong & Coleman, 2018).

8. *Co-parenting*—a collaborative parenting approach despite the dissolved parental relationship (Papernow, 2018).

9. *First marriage nuclear family*—a couple engage in marriage for the first time, and children enter their family unit by birth or adoption (Ganong et al., 2019).

10. *Non-residential parent*—a biological parent who does not live in the same home as his/her child (Papernow, 2018).

11. *Remarriage*—a marriage in which one or both individuals have been married previously (Dainton, 2019).

12. *Repartnering*—a relationship after a previous partnership has ended (Anderson & Greene, 2013).

13. *Rituals and Traditions*—maintaining old family activities and histories, while creating new ones as a new family unit emerges (Greef & Du Toit, 2009).

14. *Shared Parenting*—a concept practitioners promote for separated biological parents to engage actively in all aspects of their children's lives (Braver & Lamb, 2018).

15. *Stepfamilies*—an increasingly common family type in which children are a part of a family through means of a repartnered relationship that the child's parent enters, also referred to as blended families (Higginbotham et al., 2010).

16. *Transitions*—a child or children's movement between two parental households (Cartwright, 2010).

Summary

The changing dynamic of marriage and partnership has influenced the way the family is regarded dramatically (Sweeney, 2010). Blended family units are growing in number and are predicted to outpace nuclear families; largely however, these family units are not understood well (Kumar, 2017), and this absence of knowledge undermines family resiliency (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Kumar, 2017). This study sought to define nuclear and blended families, highlight the vast differences across blended families, and establish an understanding of which factors contribute to, and detract from, blended family stability (Dainton, 2019; Kumar, 2017; Papernow, 2018).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Families are complex units, and blended families remarkably so. Blending symbolizes harmony or fitting together; however, blended families often experience much fragmentation before they achieve such a fusion (Marsolini, 2000). Blended family stability has not received sufficient investigation and poses a significant gap in the research that must be addressed (Dainton, 2019; Kumar, 2017; Papernow, 2018). Blended families confront obstacles unique to them, and these families and those seeking to support them will benefit from gaining insights on factors that foster stability.

Remarriages and blended families face unique challenges, including a lack of norms and attachment history, limited preparation, open boundaries, and differing loyalties (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Miran-Khan, 2017). The nature of the impediments to stability these family units face are specific to them; however, the strategies proposed to help are derived often from methods used to support a traditional family structure (Dupuis, 2010; Ganong & Coleman, 2018). Because of the growing number of blended families, this old paradigm is surprising. Hence, the lack of discovery of factors that contribute to stability continues to jeopardize blended family resiliency (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Kumar, 2017).

This phenomenological study described blended couples' experiences with family stability. A literature review was conducted using various databases and indices to identify research published primarily within the last ten years, and yielded approximately 120 research articles. This qualitative study's relevant material focused on the blended family experience, and thus excluded studies without that primary focus. The studies included those in and outside the United States and were identified using the following keywords: family; blended families;

blended family stability; stepfamilies; parent-child relationships; remarriage; repartnering; co-parenting; parenting, and protective factors. The participants in this study were individuals who have remained in their blended family for more than five years and reported more positive than negative factors. These individuals were asked to share their perceived positive and negative factors that contributed to, or detract from, family stability. Describing blended family stability provides insights to those seeking to blend families, those who are currently engaged in a blended family unit, and practitioners who work with members of these family structures.

This study's research methodology was epistemological, which allowed a greater understanding of the participants' lived experiences to be obtained through in-depth interviews and precise data analysis. Knowledge is acquired via the "subjective experiences of people" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). Hearing directly from, and being close to, individuals who have the lived experience of blending families was crucial for this study.

Theoretical Framework

Blended families have been viewed often through the lens of first marriage nuclear families (Ganong & Coleman, 2018), which has adverse effects on blended couples and the entire blended family unit. Nuclear families exist when the first subsystem begins with a couple who marry for the first time, and then children enter the family by birth or adoption (Ganong et al., 2019). Conversely, blended families are a structure comprised of two adults in a romantic relationship with a child or children from a previous relationship (Kumar, 2017). Thus, the differences in family makeup and structure necessitate a more thorough understanding of the blended family unit.

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory guided this study and provided a lens through which to view and approach blended families. Bowen (1978) developed the theory and was a pioneer in treating the entire family as a unit. Family systems include the parental, sibling, and parent-child subsystems, in addition to the family system overall. Bowen's view of the family was "… not merely as the sum total of the actions of all the individual members but rather the interactions of all family members operation as a unit of interrelated parts" (Balswick & Balswick, 2014 p. 22). Bowen suggested that family members influence each other and that families grow and experience change (Bowen, 1978). He also posited that individuals within a family system will have open or closed boundaries. An open system allows for input and output from the surrounding environment (Balswick & Balswick, 2014). Conversely, a closed system limits such input or output. Bowen indicated that his theory applied to all family types with no exclusions (Dyer, 2021).

Although individualism is not an unusual concept in society, it requires balance in the context of the family, a family-systems perspective (Balswick & Balswick, 2014). These authors contended that a family-systems perspective is "… a holistic approach that understands every part of family life in terms of the family as a whole" (p. 23). Bowen is credited with developing a system of eight interrelated foundational concepts in marriage and family counseling:

1. Differentiation of self

2. Nuclear family emotional system

3. Family projection process

4. Multigenerational transmission process

5. Triangles and interlocking triangles

6. Sibling position

7. Emotional cutoff

8. Emotional process in society (Bowen, 1978).

Bowen's body of work, known most commonly as family systems theory, is also known as extended family systems therapy, transgenerational or multigenerational family therapy, or Bowenian family therapy (Tan, 2011). According to Bowen (1978) family history is of foundational importance. Bowen contended that one's emotional health must be viewed in the family context. He argued further that depending upon a family member's fusion, his/her strong emotional connection with the family unit at large, s/he will react in an emotional way to family struggles. Bowen's eight interrelated foundational concepts are essential and were explored in the blended family context. Dupuis (2010) contended that because of the blended family system's complexity, the use of a systems theory lens is crucial for "… positive growth and development of the blended family" (p. 250).

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self, considered to be the basis for enduring relationships, is a sense of balance between the intellectual and emotional self (Bridge, 2019). When differentiation of self is reached, an individual can separate or demonstrate less dependence upon family (Tan, 2011). Family resiliency is promoted when there is a simultaneous connection with family and a sense of independence. Autonomy is not sought to the exclusion of intimacy; both can be achieved (Balswick & Balswick, 2014).

Nuclear Family Emotional System

As defined previously, a nuclear family is a social unit comprised of a mother, father, and their dependents (Buchanan & McConnell, 2017). When a family has difficulty regulating thoughts and emotions within the family structure, the following may occur: emotional distance;

one spouse's dysfunction; marital conflicts, and impairment of one or more children (Alzoubi, 2016). Each of these patterns can occur independently or co-occur, depending upon the anxiety present within the family (Alzoubi, 2016).

Family Projection Process

The family projection process is parental damage inflicted on a child, which may be social, emotional, or physical in nature (Alzoubi, 2016). Family projection will lead to negative feelings and disconnection (Balswick & Balswick, 2014).

Multigenerational Transmission Process

Issues surrounding differentiation of self, triangulation, and other problems are often experienced over many generations; Bowen referred to this as a multigenerational transmission process (Tan, 2011). He posited that one's openness to the extended family may help reduce life's anxieties (Klever, 2015). Klever also suggested that this openness may enhance emotion regulation and allow family relationships to be navigated and sustained.

Triangles and Interlocking Triangles

When there is insufficient stability, triangulation may occur; an example is when a child enters a conflict between his/her parents. Triangulation is detrimental to children when it occurs, and can have enduring effects on their future relationships (Dyer, 2021). Bowen (1978) suggested that triangulation constitutes a two-against-one situation. The use of triangles within the family unit is the way Bowen stated that the family can deal with presenting and existing anxieties. As Klever and Klever (2009) noted,

> The stability of the parents' marriage, the level of differentiation of the parents, the levels of anxiety and reactivity within the triangle, and the patterns of projection in the triangle all influence the life course of the adult child and his/her family. (p. 154)

Sibling Position

Sibling position has received significant attention over the years. According to Bowen, birth order can depict specific characteristics accurately, although there is limited empirical support for such a claim (Miller et al., 2004). An example of such a characteristic might include supposing that a first-born is be more likely to be a leader than a last-born, who is more likely to be a follower.

Emotional Cutoff

Emotional cutoff refers to distancing oneself emotionally. Individuals who have experienced significant stress in their relationship may separate themselves from the family to address or eliminate the stimuli that cause such anxiety. Some also consider this a normal and natural process. Through the separation, an individual family member can gain control over his/her own emotions without coping directly with the rest of the family unit (Peleg, 2014).

Emotional Process in Society

There are many levels of social systems. Balswick and Balswick (2014) identified to the following systems: individual; sibling; parent; family; congregation; community; society, and world. The emotional process in society unfolds on the macrolevel of that in the family. A more extensive system was developed because of the "… inadequacies of a simplistic cause-and-effect model for complex social behaviors" (p. 25). Progressive and regressive times affect this societal system, and yet it must return to a "living in community" system, "a family-friendly society" (p. 338).

Family systems theory applies to the blended family's everyday life. The concentration on the way families interact and understanding what affects individual members of the family and the family as a unit are just a few of the strengths of this theory (Allen & Henderson, 2017).

However, although it has strengths, it has weaknesses as well. When applying the theory, the authors suggested that oversimplification could be an issue. An example of oversimplification is that practitioners could use birth order to make an application based upon generalizations that may cause significant problems within the blended family structure.

Family systems theory provides a window into boundaries. It suggests that if one party in the relationship holds tightly to limitations, but the other dismisses or disregards them, the relationship is at risk (Cook et al., 2017). When effective boundaries exist, the non-residential parent—a biological parent who does not live in the same home as his/her child—they can serve as a foundation for positive development of all blended family members (Dupuis, 2010; Papernow, 2018). The scholarly literature has acknowledged the complexity of the stepfamily system consistently. However, relatively little is understood about its boundaries and the way they change over time. Still, families that are intentional and do not force harmony create an environment in which closeness, communication, and connectivity can grow and foster greater satisfaction for all family members (Suanet et al., 2013).

Boundaries and Bounding

Resilience in a remarried family is fostered in part through intentional work to develop boundaries and bonding exercises. Boundaries are margins created within the family that allow for clarity and structure, and establishing and using vital protective factors is a significant step in promoting resiliency (Brown & Robinson, 2012). Young adults who grew up with their nuclear family feel that boundaries should be in place to protect the family structure. Families with a strong religious background tend to depend upon boundaries to protect their family structure. Boundaries and their perceptions vary greatly depending upon gender and background (Cook et al., 2017).

The original family benefits from starting anew; blending families do not have that advantage (Braithwaite et al., 2009). Therefore, when combining families, it is crucial to maintain some of the old familiar rituals and traditions while new ones are established as the new family unit emerges. Intentional family time, routines, and traditions are vital protective factors for family stability (Greef & Du Toit, 2009). Pylyser (2018) revealed that shared family activities and opportunities for daily family "talks" promote healthy relationships between stepchildren and stepparents. If blended families can identify these and other protective factors and employ them, their ability to weather adversity and create a solid family foundation is much more likely. One factor that may provide significant insight is faith. According to Greef and Du Toit (2009), 58% of 38 stepfamilies comprised of one parent and one child completed seven questionnaires and cited their faith and participation in spiritual and religious activities as a significant factor in their ability to maintain a strong stepfamily.

A stepfamily differs from a nuclear family, and it can be challenging for those in a new type of family to relinquish the old model (Dupuis, 2010). In addition, many family members surrounding this newly-blended unit may see the union as illegitimate and may strengthen that position. Hence, rituals are crucial for family stability and help usher in a unique individual and family identity. It is essential to avoid embracing the new while discarding the old and, but instead, combine the two intentionally. All members of the newly-formed family need to see that their former and new family structures are valid without establishing unnecessary oppositional behaviors (Braithwaite et al., 2009).

Children who are part of a blended family may experience greater difficulty than their parents when merging households; merely living in the same home does not create connectivity or family. This obstacle indicates a strong need for parents to keep communication lines open

and allow their children to express their difficulties (Braithwaite et al., 2009). Paying close attention to children's needs and behaviors will allow parents to create a structure to mitigate adverse outcomes. Activity alone cannot produce closeness with children in a stepfamily; closeness is established through trust and stability over time (Zartler & Grillenberger, 2017).

Incorporating old and new rituals must be an ongoing process. Allowance for adjustment for all family members is necessary for family stability, and a lack of attention to this matter will affect individual and overall family identity adversely (Braithwaite et al., 2009).

Differences Between Nuclear and Blended Families

According to structural functionalism, a way of viewing complex systems, the nuclear family is a benchmark family (Buchanan & McConnell, 2017), and blended families are considered deviant from the nuclear family structure (Ganong & Coleman, 2018). A blended family differs from a nuclear family in significant ways. One of the most noteworthy is that unlike that of an original family in which traditions, beliefs, roles, and communication styles are often shared, members of a blended family bring their previous experiences to a new environment that does not have the same shared history. The differences are notable, and many blended families have difficulty making the adjustments required (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Braithwaite et al., 2009). As a result, the relationships across multiple households may be disrupted (Anderson & Greene, 2013).

More than 40% of U.S. adults have at least one step-relative in their families, partly because many members of failed relationships have repartnered and are having or bringing children into the new relationship (Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015). Gonzales (2009) argued that the percentage of those who have a step-relationship is likely closer to 50%. Stepfamilies are an increasing family type that occurs when children are a part of a family because of a

repartnered relationship that their parents enter that is more fragile than first unions (Higginbotham et al., 2010; Saint-Jacques et al., 2016). This fragility cannot be ignored, yet the literature lacks clarity on factors that can stabilize these sensitive family structures. While nuclear families have a shared history, stepfamilies or blended families exist with different pasts, and the process of combining the previous with the present can be overwhelming (Braithwaite et al., 2009).

Ganong et al. (2019) reviewed online surveys from 291 heterosexual remarried couples with respect to their (1) marital quality, (2) marital confidence, (3) stepparent-stepchild relationship quality, and (4) stepfamily functioning. The findings supported a family systems approach in which special care is given to both the marital union and the stepparent-stepchild's relationship quality. Miran-Khan (2017) supported this clarifying approach, and stated, "… having a process to think about stepfamilies as initially just a relationship subsystem [while] other attachments develop is one way to lessen the relationship-eroding angst of two families trying to cohabit" (p. 16). However, destabilization should be expected when the family joins. As such, the nuclear family approach must be left to the nuclear family, while the blended family is allowed to find a way to structure the new family unit that works for them. Dupuis (2010), Jensen et al. (2014), and Sweeny (2010) discussed the difficulty of navigating the new relationships among various other factors. Ganong et al. (2019), suggested that high-quality marital and stepparent-stepchild relationships affect confidence in family functioning and the future of the blended family positively.

The individuals who comprise blended families cope with the stigma associated with a broken family (Kumar, 2017) and other pressures that leave many families vulnerable to the potential of further failed relationships (Coleman, 2018; Kumar, 2017). Therefore, it should be

noted that blended families who have navigated the joining process well and continue to have successful relationships may have information that could help others on a similar course (Kumar, 2017). Hence, this information about relationship success should be collected and shared.

Unique Challenges Blended Families Face

Unpreparedness

Repartnering is likely after a former relationship ends. Although repartnering is an expected next step, the excitement of a new relationship can obscure the adjustment issues the children who have also entered this newly-formed family experience. Significant challenges may emerge when identifying roles, embracing and negotiating new relationships, and functioning in an environment that exhibits limited stability (Anderson & Greene, 2013). If one fails to consider these critical issues, they may repartner without success.

Limited research has examined the way repartnering adults prepare themselves or their children when they enter a new union (Cartwright, 2010). The author found that among varied stepfamily types, only one in five repartnered couples indicated that the children's wellbeing was a significant reason for repartnering. Instead, most pointed to their own need for connection as a reason to begin a new relationship. Often, step-couples move forward with repartnering with limited information and leave their children not knowing what to expect in their newly blended family (Cartwright, 2010). A lack of planning when individuals begin to blend into a new family may create tension between the parenting roles and the romantic relationship (Nuru & Wang, 2014), thereby depleting emotional and physical capacity, undermining the family structure, and leading to greater instability (Anderson & Greene, 2013).

Transitions

Transitions between households can be one of the more challenging issues that newly-formed families must confront. Transitions are defined as a child's movement between two parental households (Cartwright, 2010). According to the author, transitions should be made methodically so that the children involved are allowed adequate time to adapt to their new environment and adjust to the new members of their family. Children who are experiencing transitions seek stability and predictability (Braithwaite et al., 2009). Hence, social roles and responsibilities within the family context must be identified and clarified so stepfamilies can succeed (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Suanet et al., 2013). Consideration should be given to the children's living arrangements to ascertain their relationship to others in the home and not just their relationship to biological parents. This type of analysis can yield a clear picture of family intricacy and make accessible information that can promote children's wellbeing (Brown et al., 2015).

Like navigating transitions, defining family can also produce complexities for blended family members. When they describe who is a part of the family, children will generally include all members in the current household and those from their former household. This is not true of a significant number of adults, who have a tendency to define family as those who make up their current household, and exclude others (Castrén & Widmer, 2015). Although differing definitions have emerged, the perspective that children have about the family should not be diminished, but encouraged instead (Braithwaite et al., 2009).

Some newly-formed blended couples consider their romantic relationship the priority, and expect that their children will adapt to their new family structure (Cartwright, 2010). Still others place their attention on the children and relegate the adult relationship to a less important status. Stress can build in a marital relationship during the transitioning process when there is a

hyper-focus on the children and their adjustment needs rather than the marital relationship. Thus, careful attention must be given to the needs of each member of the blended family. Individuals in the family need to feel safe, including the stepparent, and in a family with high conflict with the ex-spouse, the stepparent may often be overlooked. Ensuring that appropriate boundaries are established with the ex-spouse creates protection for the new marital relationship to grow and provides space for the blended family to mature (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013).

Parenting: Biological vs. Stepparenting

Repartnering imposes significant stress on those in the role of stepparent. Fifty-six percent of respondents to an online questionnaire that included 68 women and 31 men professed doubt in their ability to carry out this new stepparenting role successfully (Cartwright, 2010). Children in stepfamilies enter this new stage of life with many misgivings, pondering what role this new individual in their life will play. Children have reported that they have a strong aversion to any discipline from this new stepparent (Ganong et al., 2011). Previous research, including 20 synthesized qualitative studies, indicated that a biological parent should be the one to provide discipline within the blended family structure (Pylyser et al., 2018), particularly if no natural bond has been established between the stepchild and stepparent (Ganong et al., 2011). However, according to Pylyser et al. (2018), family practices related to discipline may change over time, but should not be considered before a trusting relationship is established. The authors suggested three interdependent family tasks required to establish a trusting relationship: (1) honoring the past; (2) marking the present, and (3) investing in the future.

A closer examination of which factors build or hinder step-relationships is warranted (Ganong et al., 2011). These authors indicated that some children are involved in family situations in which their non-residential parent frowns upon their desire to accept stepfamily

relationships, which elicits a great deal of anxiety in the children and may cause loyalty conflicts. They stated that when there is no conflict between the non-residential parent and the stepparent, children have a more positive view of the latter. Whenever possible, both biological parents should make significant decisions for their child and then garner support from the stepparent with whom they are repartnered. The stepparent may not always be in complete agreement; however, unity is preferred to provide stability for the family unit (Respond et al., 2019). Biology is a powerful unifying force for a parent and child but can serve as a threat to a stepparent. When there are significant conflicts between a stepparent and stepchild, the biological parent may fear triangulation (Saint-Jacques et al., 2016).

When stepfathers enter the family, the discipline should be left to the biological mother, as it increases the likelihood that his stepchildren will accept him (Reid & Golub, 2018). In addition, after proper adjustment, if the children perceive that their stepfather has a positive relationship with their mother, there is an increased likelihood of the children's life satisfaction (Lardier et al., 2017). Reid and Golub (2018) conducted in-depth interviews with 15 Black cohabiting stepfathers. They found that some Black men adopt the role of fatherhood within the stepfamily without negating the biological father's role. The Black men in the study felt that fatherhood was an important role, took it very seriously within the stepfamily, and often experienced a positive outcome.

A stepmother can bring organization to the family, and when her role is clear, all members of the family benefit (Zaharychuk, 2017). In their work on stepmothers' lived experiences, Riness and Sailor (2015) found that they reported feeling isolated, not well supported, and unprepared for the task of blending a family. Conversely, some referred to the experience of step motherhood as rewarding. To help solidify these stepfamilies, therapists and

other practitioners must highlight specific supports, coping strategies, and interventions, and suggest clearly-defined roles for each member in the family unit.

Co-Parenting with Other Biological Parents

Parents in high-conflict relationships that have ended can still provide high-quality co-parenting that will help the children adjust to their new blended family situation (Mahrer et al., 2018). Shared parenting (SP) after parental separation is a concept that clinicians have promoted widely, as they have cited the benefit for parents and children when both parents remain engaged in all aspects of their children's lives. SP occurs when both parents focus on their children and involve themselves in their development completely despite the dissolved romantic relationship (Braver & Lamb, 2018). According to the authors, biological parents should have shared custody and spend a minimum of 35% of their time with their child. Their recommendation is based upon an expert panel discussion at an international conference on SP in 2017. SP is believed to produce the best results for all involved; its future will be strong, and the adoption of new policies and consistent positive literature will expedite that reality.

The blended family subsystem may be vulnerable in part because of its open boundaries (Dupuis, 2010). Open boundaries exist when there are external pressures that affect the family. These pressures should not be ignored; nonetheless, certain outside relationships must be fostered. The author recommended that therapists and other practitioners who work with blended families should promote a cooperative relationship with the non-residential biological parent, as this can provide stability for all blended family members. Lardier et al. (2017) asserted that high-quality relationships between children and their biological parents and stepparents often translate into future life satisfaction. Closeness with the stepparent can provide greater cohesion within the stepfamily, and thereby increase the family unit's longevity (Jenson et al., 2017). According to

Dupuis (2010) stepparents who create a warm environment for their stepchildren reduce potential conflicts. Jenson et al. (2017) demonstrated that blended families can indeed lead to stress for both adults and children; however, quality relationships in the stepfamily can help mitigate considerable pressure. Closeness between a biological parent and stepparent can be a significant protective factor against stress or anxiety.

Families that Blend in Later Years

Divorce rates are declining overall, but remain high nonetheless and have risen among those over age 50 (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Divorce is not an event; it is a long-term process that has lasting effects on children and parents. Minimizing the effect on all involved is crucial and can be accomplished by identifying potential practical interventions and coping skills (Zaharychuk, 2017). These learned interventions are paramount, as individuals who end relationships will likely engage in a new one. Families that blend later in life do not escape the difficulties that younger families face. Stepparenting can be challenging regardless of the age of entry (Kirby, 2011). Misconceptions can occur when couples believe that they will have no difficulty blending families because there are no children in the home. When a couple is middle-aged or older, their children are often a part of their repartnering process (de Jong et al., 2013). These misunderstandings underscore the high prevalence and complexity of later-life stepfamilies and indicate the urgency of additional research on this topic (Lin et al., 2018). The experience of a child of any age should be considered when repartnering occurs; however, little research has addressed adult stepchildren (Lardier et al., 2017).

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Creating a Stable Blended Family

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Exploring Strategies that Create Stability

Understanding the positive factors that foster blended families' stability will provide the insight necessary to promote their resiliency. Strategies that create stability that are supported in the literature include preparing to blend the family, communication, building relationships between stepparents and stepchildren, spirituality, and counseling strategies to support blended families.

Preparing to Blend the Family

Often, those who proceed into successful new relationships after divorce do so with an appreciation of themselves and their competencies (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). Self-awareness is essential to form a healthy stepfamily; the way a stepfamily begins is critical and may predict the way it will proceed (Kellas et al., 2014). Premarital counseling for those who are entering a blended family situation may lead to the preparation needed to smooth some of the many difficulties that lie ahead (Riness & Sailor, 2015). This awareness can provide families opportunities to prepare planned responses when complications arise. Loyalties can change and create significant dissension (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Attachments, obligations, and priorities are all factors that can produce previously unseen issues (Kellas et al., 2014).

Whenever possible and age-appropriate, children should be involved in preparing to join families. In a study of 80 college students that included 28 men and 52 women aged 18-30, Kellas et al. (2014) found that 77% of the respondents reported that they belonged to a stepfamily. The study found that when children are included in the family's development, they have more positive feelings about their stepfamily. Conversely, if they feel left out or confused by the new family development, they can feel excluded from the blended family. The authors reported that throughout their data, there was a clear sense that stepchildren desired to be

involved in forming the stepfamily. Children often view that their biological parent's remarriage solidified their new stepfamily (Nuru & Wang, 2014).

When factors such as substance or other types of abuse are present in the early development of the stepfamily, it can affect the family's trajectory (Kellas et al., 2014). Dainton (2019) noted that individuals involved in remarriages and blended families have less satisfactory experiences than those in first marriages. Individuals in remarriages engage in more unhealthy behaviors and are more prone to divorce. Consequently, careful attention must be placed on the repartnered couple's marital interaction and not just the stepfamily's formation. Pre-blended family counseling may yield significant benefits to these new families. Although outcome measures are essential, the full effect of such counseling may not be measurable by established scientific standards. In that case, the best likely assessment measure would be anecdotal, qualitative accounts from families that have participated in pre-blended family counseling (Gonzales, 2009). The development of resources to aid blended families must be specific to stepfamilies' realities and challenges (Dupuis, 2010). These resources and other factors that contribute to stepfamilies' resilience require ongoing investigation and discovery (Ganong & Coleman, 2018). Greef and Du Toit (2009) performed a cross-sectional survey to identify and describe blended family resilience factors. The individuals selected for this survey were from 38 families and completed a self-report questionnaire. Respondents were a remarried parent or a child who was part of a blended family. They identified the following resilience-associated factors: (1) supportive family relationships; (2) affirming and supportive communication; (3) a sense of control over outcomes in life; (4) activities and routines that help the family spend time together; (5) a strong marriage relationship; (6) support from family and friends; (7) redefining stressful events and acquiring social support, and (8) spirituality and religion.

When stepparents learn strategies before they blend their families, they can avoid future issues that destabilize them. It may be necessary to slow the process to blend well so that careful attention can be given to each family member and the role that s/he plays in the family. Activities such as engaging in workshops with other stepfamilies or soon-to-be blended families can provide insights and normalize the unique struggle these family structures experience (Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015). Stepfamilies take time to blend, but with respect and intentionality as foundational principles, they can succeed (Brown & Robinson, 2012; Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015).

Communication

Cartwright (2010) investigated the preparation processes of repartnering adults and found that two-thirds of repartnered couples have short courtships and begin to live together within one year. This brief timeline may not be favorable to all family members and makes the need for open communication essential. Communication must occur about potential challenges ahead; however, it should be noted that many choose to avoid such dialogue to escape momentary relationship issues. Avoiding necessary communication may also be evident among children, as they report that they have no clear understanding of why the relationship between their biological parents ended and why this new relationship is beginning. Mirecki et al.'s (2013) original research included 128 individuals, 64 each from first and second marriages, with an equal number of men and women in each group. The authors indicated that these communication issues do not have to derail the relationship. In second marriages, there can be a marked increase in constructive communication between the repartnered couple attributable to not wanting to engage in petty disagreements. Improved communication may also be expected if the couple has learned from trials in their first marriage and applied new strategies to their second marriage.

Further, the authors used secondary analysis of data from a larger study and found that identifying triggers from a previous marriage helps counselors discuss challenges with remarried couples. Triggers differ for each individual, and open dialogue about these events is essential. Clarifying triggers can help couples avoid unnecessary conflicts. Continued research is necessary to improve blended couple relationships and identify appropriate therapeutic interventions they can employ.

Coleman et al. (2015) revealed that step-relationships can be complex for children, as they are not the ones who are typically asking their parents to repartner. Adopting appropriate narratives and developing communication strategies help solidify the blended family bond Should this union dissolve eventually, it can be years before a child will trust the connection again. In cases in which stepparents remain involved in their stepchildren's lives, the children can benefit greatly from the additional support of a caring adult. According to the authors, when a relationship dissolves, biological parents should not ignore their children, but rather keep communication lines open to explore the loss they have experienced. Being mindful of children's feelings and supporting their current needs can help alleviate psychological distress.

Greef and Du Toit (2009) reported that 86% of 34 families who participated in their family adaptation study conveyed that open communication fostered resilience in their family relationships, and 68% also credited marriage stability as a factor in building resiliency. When the marriage is unstable, and members of a blended couple do not receive adequate emotional support from their partner, they have an increased chance of depression, which can lead to even greater family instability (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012).

Building Relationships Between Stepparents and Stepchildren

Positive, emotionally close relationships between stepparents and stepchildren are important for relational and family wellbeing, as are close couple subsystems (Ganong et al., 2019; Gould et al, 2013; Metts et al, 2017). Ganong et al. (2019) showed that stepparent/stepchild relationships may be related more closely to overall blended family functioning than remarriage quality. Open communication increases the likelihood of satisfaction with relationships within the blended family (Gould et al., 2013; Metts et al., 2017). This open communication should not be relegated to the adult figures in the home; all members of the blended family should be welcome participants (Gould et al., 2013). When parents ask their children and stepchildren questions, the authors recommended that they do so in an open-ended fashion to prevent inhibition. Children and parents involved in blended families often have varied accounts about events and experiences within the stepfamily. A blended family that is open and engages in two-way communication between adults and children increases its ability to function successfully. Families that blend and have a biological parent within that blend who pays attention to the needs of the biological children alone, and only has expectations of the stepchildren, have significantly poorer outcomes than those who choose to create balance within the blended family (Jenson et al. 2014).

Balance in the home can be the catalyst for family members to achieve satisfaction. Metts et al. (2017) explored the emotional and communicative profiles of 152 young adults (66% female and 34% male). The authors indicated that one way to gauge stepfamily satisfaction is through a stepchild's comfort in disclosing to the stepparent. The freedom to share information can serve as an additional emotional outlet for the stepchild and help reduce stress and anxiety. When support is provided in an empathetic manner, the stepchild may view the relationship as

more of a friendship than that with an additional parent. Emotional and communicative factors produce greater stepfamily satisfaction.

Counseling Support

Stepfamilies can be healthy, happy families, but clinicians who work with them must recognize the challenges they face (Papernow, 2018). The author reported that 42% of Americans have a close step-relationship. Based upon more than four decades of research and practice, she stated that it is best to work with the repartnered couple and then include other family members when such a time is indicated. Further, he asserted that becoming a stepfamily is not an event; it is an ongoing time investment. When working with the repartnered couple and reflecting on a previous failed romantic relationship, counselors must guide individuals to choose appropriate humorous sources to sustain good emotional regulation, as such levity can promote resilience in the new relationship (Frisby et al., 2016).

Stepfamilies who are receiving counseling support may benefit from a robust approach to the marital bond and the stepparent-stepchild relationship's quality (Ganong et al., 2019). Although there are no guarantees that pre-blended family counseling will keep a family together once they blend officially, it does increase the likelihood of stability (Gonzalez, 2009). Education and insight into what may occur can facilitate meaningful discussion and create the opportunity for prepared responses to situations rather than reactions that can cause significant damage to the blending process. In addition, children in a blended family unit need specialized attention. They require support, as their current and future quality of life depends upon this consideration (Kumar, 2017). The challenges of having insufficient aid are simply too great a risk.

Spirituality

Engagement in positive religious coping can promote a greater propensity to change and an openness to the consideration of new possibilities (Krumrei et al., 2011). In their longitudinal spiritual stress and coping model, the authors reported that of 89 respondents, 51% identified religion as a significant coping resource. Participants in the study included prayer, worship, meditation, and other private spiritual rituals as elements of their religious practices. Positive forms of religious coping can help people adjust to whatever new reality they are experiencing, even that of a difficult divorce (Simonic & Klobucar, 2017). Individuals who reported a personal relationship with God expressed feelings of safety, security, and support. Self-image and self-worth were affected positively when a person indicated that s/he had a relationship with God. Hence, therapists should be aware of available religious resources for those who may choose to implement them in their lives, as these resources can improve emotional regulation significantly.

Divorce can increase depression in individuals who participate in organized religion; however, they can buffer the effect by employing collaborative coping, benevolent reappraisal, and seeking comfort from God. Practitioners who are familiar with these techniques can help individuals use them to mitigate the stressors associated with divorce and loss (Webb et al., 2010).

Counseling Strategies to Support Blended Families

Remarried couples counseled as though they are in first-time marriages can ignore significant differences in the two types of relationships (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013). Divorce changes all relationships in the family system, and parents find the need to help their children navigate a road that they themselves may not have travelled previously. Therapists who work with these families can help the parents find confidence that they can co-parent and develop the skills necessary to travel this new path (Ramisch et al., 2009). To provide adequate

assistance to the blended family, therapists are encouraged to use more than such traditional techniques as neutrality, curiosity, and not knowing. It is also vital to process with colleagues and seek supervision (Rober, 2011).

Higginbotham et al. (2010) revealed that when repartnered couples engaged in counseling or sought education about blending their families, they acquired excellent coping strategies, communication skills, and engagement techniques and gained empathy for all involved in the family. Hence, counselors are advised to engage with the entire family whenever possible, as it can benefit the children and parents alike. Further, Krumrei et al. (2011) indicated that counselors can cultivate an environment in which the exploration of faith and religious coping can occur, which provides an opportunity for the couple to adjust to their new life situation.

When seeking to assist families who are not a nuclear family, Kumar (2017) recommended that practitioners use techniques that consider the blended family's complexity. Children who are part of blended families require specific support, the lack of which may produce unwanted behavioral issues within the blended home. In the author's blended family life cycle work, he suggested the need for a "… blended family system guideline that highlights transition stages common to all blended families in a sequence of events designed to help foster their success" (p. 121). The sequence he suggested is as follows: (1) separation, divorce, or death; (2) establishment of parenting agreements; (3) repartnering; (4) preblended family counseling to solidify the couple relationship; (5) defining expectations and roles for the new stepparent; (6) having the stepparent meet the ex-spouse if appropriate; (7) having the children and stepparent meet; (8) making any necessary changes to parenting agreements to accommodate the new blended family system; (9) meeting with the children to define boundaries and roles; (10) cohabitation or marriage, and (11) preparation for the possible entrance of a new child. He

emphasized that these are not comprehensive, but provide direction for the blended family unit and foreshadow what they might experience.

Miran-Khan (2017) has nearly 40 years of combined clinical and research experience and asserted that families who approach bringing the family under one roof naively and expect a happy family to emerge ultimately ignore issues of identity and belonging. In addition, the author claimed that stepfamilies are complex and counselors need to approach them systematically to ensure that appropriate boundaries are established for all members. Counselors who clarify roles and promote the benefits of mutual support can facilitate a stepfamily's ability to cohabitate well (Miran-Khan, 2017; Sharpiro & Stewart, 2012). Barriers to such support require future exploration (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012).

Carlson et al. (2010) claimed that clinicians consider spirituality a critical aspect of their own lives, yet they assign spirituality a different level of importance in therapy. The Spirituality in Clinical Training Scale (SCTS) assesses the level of spirituality found in family therapy training, and reveals the differences found. First, training programs vary in their integration of spirituality. This discrepancy is thought to be attributable primarily to the program's secular or religious nature. Whatever SCTS can ascertain, self-exploration of spirituality is encouraged so that therapists may feel comfortable integrating spirituality into their practice.

Summary

The number of families that dissolve their remarriages and blended families after a short time remains high, and this brevity may be attributable directly to the complexity of the blended family experience; such families encounter unprecedented challenges noted in the literature (Saint-Jacques et al., 2016; Ganong & Coleman, 2018). However, research has identified several factors that can reduce the number of separations (Papernow, 2018; Dainton, 2019). Generally,

the approaches applied to these family units are techniques designed for the nuclear family

(Kumar, 2017). This is inappropriate and thus, specific strategies must be identified to ensure

that blended families can also establish appropriate protective factors to sustain their unique

family structure.

   This study described blended couples' experiences with family. The collection and

analysis of this critical information can help individuals who are engulfed by the pressures of

their blended family gain the necessary skills to surmount the adversity.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This qualitative phenomenological study describes individuals in blended couples' experiences with family stability. The research provides a more definitive understanding of the blended couple and insights into specific factors that contribute to blended family stability. The findings will help those who seek to engage in a blended family, those currently in a blended family, and the practitioners who work with them enhance family stability.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do individuals in blended couples describe blended family stability?

2. What do individuals in blended couples perceive are positive factors that contribute to their family stability?

3. What do individuals in blended couples perceive are negative factors that challenge their family stability?

4. What supports, services, and assistance do individuals in blended couples consider significant contributors to their ongoing stability?

Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach was used, as it allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the shared context for individuals based upon shared experiences or phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is about discovery; therefore, the researcher must operate from a fresh perspective rather than from personal bias (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2017). To address personal bias, one must "… bracket and question all of their assumptions," a strategy known as epoché (Heppner et al., 2017, p. 389). Through data collection, the researcher can reveal the essence of the shared experience. To understand individuals' experiences and the way they interpret them, phenomenological researchers must

focus on making meaning. This methodology requires a thorough description of the way the participants experience the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative researchers strive to clarify their purpose to ensure that their objective is not obscured during the research process (Cypress, 2018). This type of research provided the ability to explore the lived experiences of several individuals who are part of a blended family unit and uncover commonalities that exist (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological research is credited largely to Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician who focused on phenomenological philosophy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Heppner et al., 2017). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), there are common features in all phenomenological studies: (1) An emphasis on a phenomenon to be explored; (2) exploration of the phenomenon with a group of individuals who have all experienced it; (3) a philosophical discussion about the basic ideas involved in conducting a phenomenological study; (4) a researcher who brackets him/herself out of the study; (5) data collection procedures; (6) data analysis; (7) ending the study with a descriptive passage that discussed the essence of the individual's experience (pp. 76-77).

The description of the phenomenon is essential in phenomenology, as it avoids the need to explain it, and allows the participants who have undergone the phenomenon to reveal their own experiences. Understanding the goal of a pure description requires bracketing or reduction, a process in which biases are kept out of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When researchers abstain from imposing their bias, and they "… examine a phenomenon from all possible angles," a genuine "… understanding of the essence of the lived experiences" is revealed (Heppner et al., 2017 p. 391). Understanding the lived experiences also requires the researcher to understand the intentionality of consciousness. This indicates that consciousness is "… always directed toward

an object," and "… the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual" (Creswell & Poth, 2018 p. 76).

Two factors in research were considered: (1) bracketing and (2) data analysis of transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the phenomenon to be explored was blended family stability. Adults from blended family units that had been together for at least five years were selected for in-depth interviews about their lived experiences. These individuals responded to flyers that were placed in three different churches located in the Eastern part of the United States. Each participant was thoroughly screened to ensure they were eligible to volunteer for the study. I was aware of potential biases and keep record of those biases in a notebook and bracketed them to avoid influencing the findings. The data were collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews and compared to those of others who had similar experiences to identify themes during the individual interviews conducted. The data were carefully analyzed, and the interview transcripts reviewed to identify statements that provided insight into the way blended family stability is experienced. Those statements were then highlighted. After a thorough review of each transcript, irrelevant information was eliminated to generate preliminary meaning units. These meaning units were then synthesized into situated narratives. Thereafter, a general description was written to explain the way these individuals experienced the phenomenon.

The phenomenological approach often necessitates such in-depth interviews to understand the participants' lived experiences. When an interviewer who is open to hearing about the way individuals have navigated a specific phenomenon asks them open-ended questions in an environment of their choosing, it is possible to gather more information that provides a foundation for more credible research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research conducted will benefit those currently in blended families, those entering the blended family structure, practitioners working with blended families, and various other stakeholders (Heppner et al., 2017). Although interviews alone cannot guarantee sufficient information, I employed strategies to ensure the phenomenon was understood adequately. Observation, field notes, follow-up questions, and an allowance for the discrepancy were just some of the ways employed to understand the phenomenon better. Researchers must pay close attention to treating their interview participants with care given to cultural, relational, and existing ethics (Heppner et al., 2017). After a thorough review of the data, careful attention was given to interpretation to remain grounded in the data (Heppner et al., 2017).

Study Population

First, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) and then obtained research approval from the Liberty University International Review Board (IRB). Thereafter, I selected appropriate sites in consultation with the participants to ensure both parties' safety and security given the pandemic.

The sampling method for this qualitative study was judgment sampling. According to Provost (2012), this is an appropriate approach for complex systems such as the blended family structure. This approach allowed me to employ my professional judgment. In addition, snowball sampling was used, in which the researcher receives referrals from individuals who know others who may fit the criteria of the research being conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I selected 11individual members from blended couples who met the study criteria that they had been married for at least five years and were able and willing to share their lived experiences (Heppner et al., 2017). Data saturation may occur before ten interviews, or more than fifteen may be required if saturation has not been achieved. Data saturation occurs when a researcher has

arrived at a point in the data collection where no new and significant information is forthcoming (Guest et al., 2006). The authors suggested that data saturation can be achieved in no fewer than 12 interviews, although there is no clear rule. Heppner et al. (2017) noted that a phenomenological study does not require a specific number of participants; however, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested one could do in-depth interviews with as few as three to four up to ten to fifteen individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon (pp. 78,161). In this study, 11 individuals were selected to gain sufficient information on blended family stability.

The participants were solicited through three churches located in the eastern part of the United States, where I have a prior relationship. The location was narrowed further based upon my proximity to the selected area of interest. I contacted the organizations chosen and informed them of the study's nature and purpose and asked for permission to conduct the study with their adherents. After approval from three among them, flyers were posted and individuals indicated their interest by responding to an email address or number provided on the flyer. I informed individual participants of the nature of the study upon their contact. Further, I assured them that their participation and identity would be confidential and asked whether they would be willing to participate by describing their lived experiences, a criterion for phenomenological study (Heppner et al., 2017). Face-to-face meetings occurred at locations that the participant selected that provided privacy to avoid distraction, and was a location the participant described as comfortable. In cases in which the participant required a virtual meeting, Zoom was used. Zoom is a program that allows videoconferencing that affords the same opportunity to remove distractions and protect privacy.

Data Collection

Data on individuals of blended couples were collected through11 face-to-face, in-depth interviews, the primary method of obtaining information in qualitative counseling research (Heppner et al., 2017), as they have proven to be an effective method to achieve understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The essence of "everyday lived experiences" can be captured best through the lens of the one who lives that experience (Heppner et al., 2017, p. 389). Their relation of their story related to the phenomenon being studied provides a thick description (Røseth et al., 2013). Interview questions were stated in a way that optimized clarity and understanding.

The interviews were approximately one hour in length. The format was semi-structured to allow the interviewees to express their feelings and beliefs regarding their lived experiences with the researcher's protocol. Open-ended questions were posed to allow non-directional data to be collected that described the phenomenon of blended family stability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This format allowed the respondents to provide as much or as little information as they chose.

In addition, I also asked clarifying questions (Heppner et al., 2017). Clarifying questions were useful when I required additional information based upon a particular response. I was the only interviewer to ensure validity. The interviews were recorded with each participant's prior permission, and then transcribed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Before and during the interview process, significant attention was given to building rapport, which increased the likelihood of collecting reliable data. Building rapport is not automatic; making an individual feel comfortable during an interview and fostering rapport is a learned practice. The pace and style of the interview and proper understanding of the study can lay the groundwork for building rapport. An interviewer's demeanor and kindness in conducting the interview also help establish rapport (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Qualitative research questions are open-ended by design (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as they allow researchers to gather more information. Each participant was asked the following initial interview questions:

- Please describe your marriage and blended family

- Tell me about your regular routines/traditions as a member of a blended couple

- Tell me about a time when there was conflict or potential for conflict in your blended family and the way that situation was addressed

- What factors do you believe have contributed to your blended couple/family stability?

- Describe the factors that you feel have threatened your family's stability

- What specific activities would you identify as factors that have contributed to your family's stability?

- Please describe any supports that you feel have contributed to your blended couple/family's stability

- Please describe any intentional supports that you employed that you feel detracted from your blended couple/family's stability

- What services or other assistance can you identify that have contributed to your family stability or lack thereof?

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your family?

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research begins with data collection. Data analysis can present challenges for qualitative researchers as they collect, process, represent, and interpret the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, ethical considerations can create further challenges, as careful attention must be given to ensure that all participants are protected from any harm or

disclosure of any of their personal information. The authors indicated that data analysis in qualitative research involves the following:

> … preparing and organizing the data for analysis; then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes; and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion. (p. 183)

They suggested further that research has a general contour that is represented by the data analysis spiral, which includes managing and organizing the data, reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, and representing and visualizing the data (pp. 185-197).

I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software (CAQDAS), to help me store, organize, and code the qualitative data. Software programs like NVivo are used often in qualitative research, but I performed the preliminary work in analyzing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview transcripts were stored safely in a password protected NVivo account on a password protected laptop.

I employed Husserl's concept of epoché, or bracketing, to eliminate my bias and suspend judgment to focus on the lived experiences of the participants of the phenomena under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, 2012). Understanding bracketing and its import before conducting research helps the researcher avoid unnecessary challenges (Tufford & Newman, 2012). When the researcher avoids imposing his/her personal history and experience on the research, a deeper connection with the work can be achieved. Bracketing is not intended to be a formula; each researcher must decide on an appropriate process for the work s/he performs. The authors suggested writing memos as a reminder of one's thoughts about the process to ensure

bias is noted. They also recommend interviewing others outside the research to understand the process and journey, as well as journaling, which exposes intentions and assumptions.

Hence, I considered my own understanding of the phenomenon, but bracketed it off as clarity emerged from the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Special attention was given to creating statements and turning those statements into meaningful units. Finally, a description of what occurred and the way it was experienced was written to convey the lived experiences the participants' shared.

Delimitation

The delimitation imposed for the study was that the participants were members of a blended family structure that had been partnered for more than five years. Individuals were chosen to participate because they passed that threshold, and preference was given to those who have been together for a decade or longer. The insights provided offered valuable information about positive factors that promoted blended family stability.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research depends upon the participants' review of the findings. Heppner et al. (2017) stated that sufficient data must be gathered, reviewed, and interpreted adequately to ensure trustworthiness. The researcher must listen to the subjects thoroughly and allow their voices to be heard while keeping his/her own biases in check. The authors emphasized further that the participants should have an opportunity to review and respond to the findings. This process allows for corrections and makes the findings more credible. Further, a professional colleague who has conducted research and understands the subject matter reviewed the data collected and coding to add to the study's credibility.

I disclosed the study's purpose to the participants fully in writing, including any risk involved. Clear, appropriate, and precise language was used during the interviews. No information was withheld from the participants, and they reviewed their transcripts thoroughly. Finally, the report findings were conveyed as honestly and openly as possible (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

This phenomenological study described the members of blended couples' experiences with family stability. An interview sample of 11 individuals was recruited based upon their blended couple status. After the study, the results revealed a more definitive understanding of the blended couple and provided insights into specific factors that contribute to blended couple/family stability. This understanding of blended couples/families will help those seeking to engage in a blended family, those currently in a blended family, and the practitioners who work with them enhance family stability.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to portray the lived experiences of 11 married individuals in blended couples with the themes and the general narratives that summarize what they perceive has or has not contributed to their family stability. Describing blended family stability will increase our understanding for those seeking to blend families, those who are in a blended family unit currently, and practitioners who work with members of these family structures. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do individuals in blended couples describe blended family stability?

2. What do individuals in blended couples perceive are positive factors that contribute to their family stability?

3. What do individuals in blended couples perceive are negative factors that challenge their family stability?

4. What supports, services, and assistance do individuals in blended couples consider significant contributors to their ongoing stability?

The 11 participants in this study range in age from 33 to 71 years old. All have been married at least five years, with the maximum years married reported as 31. Only four of the individuals reported that they were married fewer than 10 years, while the other seven participants have passed that threshold, and four interviewees have enjoyed more than 20 years as a member of a blended couple. This chapter describes their perceived understanding of the positive and negative factors that have contributed to, or detracted from, their blended family stability. In addition, supports, services, and assistance that these individuals deem significant to their ongoing stability are reported.

Participants

Participants in this study comprised 11 individuals who volunteered to share their lived

experiences of being a married individual in a blended couple and their perceptions of their own

blended family stability. The participants provided the following demographic information: (1)

age; (2) gender; (3) race; (4) number of years married in their blended family, and (5) number of

children in the blended family. Individual portraits of participants are listed in Appendix J. The

participants are listed in the order of their interviews. The descriptions comprise the essence of

the information that was collected during the interview process.

Table 1 displays the demographic information and pseudonyms assigned to each of the

participants.

Table 1

Demographic Survey of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Years married in blended family	Number of children in the blended family
Kevin	55	M	W	21	5
Anne	52	F	W	10	2
Rose	71	F	W	27	8
Pat	48	F	W	9	5
Joy	43	F	W	5	6
Barbara	66	F	W	31	3
Troy	33	M	NA	8	4
Jess	47	F	W	5	5
Carlos	63	M	AA	27	4
Hope	59	F	W	12	5
Dawn	50	F	W	18	4

Note: AA = Black or African American; NA = Native American; W = White

Results

The qualitative data were stored, transcribed, organized, and analyzed according to the

step-by-step process outlined in Chapter Three. After the interviews were conducted, recorded,

and transcribed, special attention was given to reviewing each transcript, then taking a closer look at each individual statement, and turning those statements into meaning units to capture the essence of the lived experience of married individuals who have been a part of a blended family for at least five years (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My understanding of the phenomenon was considered, but bracketed off as clarity surfaced from the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Themes

The 11 individuals interviewed discussed the stability that their families enjoyed through themes that emerged from a combination of the interview questions explored in this study. As described in Chapter Three, adults from blended family units that had been together for at least five years were selected for in-depth interviews about their lived experiences. Interviews were conducted virtually. Zoom Video Communications, Inc. virtual meeting platform afforded this researcher the opportunity to remove distractions and protect the privacy of all participants. Invitation to meet in other secure locations was also offered to participants; however, due to conducting this study during a pandemic, participants choose to stay in environments where they were both familiar and comfortable by participating virtually. Potential biases were noted and bracketed to avoid influencing the findings. Memoing was done to ensure that this extremely important step was given careful consideration. The data were collected and compared to those of others who had similar experiences to identify themes during the individual interviews conducted. Data were analyzed, and the interview transcripts reviewed to identify statements that provided insight into the way blended family stability is experienced. Once those statements were identified they were highlighted. After a thorough review of each transcript, irrelevant information was eliminated to generate preliminary meaning units. These meaning units were

then synthesized into situated narratives. Thereafter, a general description was written to explain the way these individuals experienced the phenomenon. Themes found to contribute to family stability included routines, family rituals, verbal communication, spirituality, and shared values. Although differing descriptors were used, stability was credited to one or several of those themes as an aid to blended family stability.

Positive Factors Contributing to Family Stability

Positive factors contributing to family stability became clear as participants shared that stability was established through routines, family rituals, verbal communication, spirituality, and shared values. Table 2 displays themes of positive factors contributing to family stability by participant response.

Table 2

Positive factors contributing to family stability

Theme	Kevin	Anne	Rose	Pat	Joy	Barbara	Troy	Jess	Carolos	Hope	Dawn
Routines (11/11)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family Rituals (10/11)	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Verbal Communication (7/11)	X	X			X	X	X	X		X	
Spirituality (7/11)		X	X	X	X			X	X		X
Shared Values (7/11)	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	

Routines. All of the 11 participants indicated that routines were essential in establishing blended family stability. Routines identified in this research consisted of bedtime practices, homework schedules, eating meals together, and spending recreational time together.

"We would read together as a family in the evenings, and then I would always get the guitar out and sing the younger kids up the stairs." (Kevin)

"We always try to eat as a family at least three times a week at the dinner table." (Joy)

"We always had dinner together, and it hard when the kids were working, and even if they couldn't be at the table with us for that meal, I would make sure that their dinner was hot for them when they came in from work and we would still sit down with them and talk." (Barbara)

"Now, the big thing was meals, making sure that meals were shared together. The kids got use to this is when we have meals, this is when we have bedtime, and this is when we have homework." (Dawn)

"We always ate as a family." (Carlos)

Family Rituals. Ten of the 11 participants interviewed noted that family rituals were a positive factor that contributed to their family stability. The rituals cited, including apple picking, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve, Christmas, Easter, birthday celebrations, family vacations, church attendance and activities, and other family get togethers, involved both those members within the blended family household, as well as included others outside the blended family unit sometimes.

"Our church was very important. We went to church; we did church activities." (Carlos)

"We do a silly string thing on Easter instead of an Easter egg hunt. It's ridiculous but it was just a fun thing to do, and we are still holding this event 12 years later." (Hope)

"We tried to make sure each one of the kids knew how important they were. But we also made sure they understood the importance of that family time also." (Dawn)

Verbal Communication. Seven of the 11 participants mentioned that communication was a positive factor that contributed to their family stability. Each reported that they were intentional about having open communication and spoke about specific planned engagements

with their family members. They revealed that time dedicated to communication promoted bonding and trust.

"Communication is big; keep no secrets, whether they're small or large, no secrets, just be an open book. You have to really not just speak to one another, but you have to learn to listen." (Jess)

"I'm more the one keeping in touch with the kids and the grandkids, via text and videos and video chats and things like that." (Anne)

"Communication was always open." (Troy)

"The mealtime was very important, that gave everybody a chance to sit there and talk." (Dawn)

Spirituality. Seven of 11 respondents stated the importance of spirituality to their blended family's stability. They disclosed further that they relied on God through prayer, worship, and other spiritual practices. They claimed that intentional spiritual practices afforded them strength and direction to fulfill God's plan for their lives and those of their blended family.

"We are just walking out God's calling, knowing that we are where we are, where we're supposed to be, totally believing that God ordained our relationship, our marriage and everything we do." (Anne)

"You never know what's going to happen and you don't know how long it's going to last; you just have to trust that God has a plan." (Rose)

"First and foremost, both of us having a relationship with the Lord, without it, it's hard to get past the deep bitterness." (Pat)

"It's faith and it's prayer, I would say it's just a blend of everybody getting along and just trying to stay at peace with one another." (Joy)

"You have to put God first and support each other." (Barbara)

"I give credit to God because He taught me His Word." (Carlos)

Shared Values. Seven of the 11 participants indicated that shared values contributed to their blended family stability. Some of the values highlighted were determination, acceptance, responsiveness, understanding, resilience, trust, and love. Everyone who discussed this theme implied that having shared values offered structure to build stability within their family unit.

"We both do a pretty good job of trying to show the other kids that there's interest in what their family looks like." (Hope)

"You have to be on the same page… you have to have the same language… we have each other's back." (Barbara)

"When sudden changes come in, it kind of throws a wrench into things and the routines set up, we are determined to move forward in love." (Troy)

"Not everybody's going to think the way you think or do what you would do and to just kind of try and understand where people are coming from." (Anne)

"Treating the family like a family…God had purpose to this blended mess." (Kevin)

"You have to be selfless; you can't be selfish… be strong in love." (Jess)

Noteworthy Stabilizing Factors Cited by a Few Participants. Two of the 11 participants cited specific investment in the marriage relationship related to factors that contribute to family stability. Two of the 11 participants also stated that counseling support was a positive factor that contributed to their family stability. These two stabilizing factors were noted as significant for the families that employed these practices.

Negative Factors Challenging Family Stability

Participants shared that problematic relationships with nonbiological child(ren), problematic relationship with the other biological parent (outside the home), problematic relationship with the spouse in the blended family, and problematic relationships with biological child(ren) are negative factors that challenged their blended family stability. Intentional supports and other assistance employed to create stability, which resulted in challenges to family stability, were also explored. Participants shared how some of these proposed supports challenged their blended family's stability. Finally, there were four noteworthy themes loaded on by a few participants shared which challenged or threated family stability for only one participant each.

Table 3 displays themes of negative factors challenging family stability by participant response.

Table 3 *Negative factors challenging family stability*

Theme	Kevin	Anne	Rose	Pat	Joy	Barbara	Troy	Jess	Carolos	Hope	Dawn
Intentional supports and other assistance employed (8/11)	X	X	X	X		X	X		X		X
Problematic Relationships with other biological parent (6/11)		X		X	X	X			X		X
Problematic Relationship with spouse in blended family (6/11)	X	X					X	X		X	X
Problematic Relationship with nonbiological child(ren) (4/11)	X		X	X		X					

Intentional Supports and Other Assistance Employed that Challenged Blended Family Stability. Eight of the 11 participants described intentional supports and other assistance initiated that created a challenge to their blended family stability. The following were cited: discipline; family labels; books/other materials on marriage and blended families; family supports outside the home; counseling; co-parenting support; church/parachurch ministries, and family courts/social services.

Three participants indicated that the family court system was involved in their blended families, but deemed that it was unhelpful to their children and their blended families. Two participants shared that the books and other materials on marriage and blended families, family supports outside of the home, and co-parenting support did not provide the assistance they had anticipated. Several of the respondents suggested that they had a higher level of expectancy with respect to church, counseling, and parachurch ministries, and were let down. One participant shared that his belief is that some churches and parachurch ministries just don't know how to be a "… fit to the way that our family is structured." (Troy)

Problematic Relationship with Other Biological Parent (Outside the Home). Six of the 11 participants referred to negative factors related to the relationship with the other biological parent. The participants mentioned the following such factors: the lack of, or poor communication, boundary issues, lack of flexibility, and difficulties with co-parenting.

"We were going out of our way to maneuver around times… and it just felt like a used and abused almost kind of thing or being taken advantage of constantly." (Pat)

"The girls' mother would try to throw wedges between he and his daughters and told them lies." (Joy)

Problematic Relationship with Spouse in Blended Family. Of the 11 participants interviewed, six cited a relationship issue with their spouse. The issues described were communication problems, conflict avoidance, lack of trust in the spouse when parenting biological and nonbiological children together, lack of flexibility, biological relationship, and fairness.

"Correction early on was a cause for difficulty because we did not only correct along bloodlines. It could be perceived as having been too harsh or having gone too far with the correction or whatever, and that cause[d] some real difficulty for us within the first, I'm going to say, five years." (Kevin)

"I guess, perfectionism or wanting things a certain way got in the way, I think because I had been single for so long and I just had my routine and everything in its place." (Anne)

"My husband never wanted his children to feel like they had to come to our home and that was very annoying to me because I felt like if we have plans, it's not just the three children from his previous marriage, but I had a child from a previous marriage too, and to have to completely change plans was not only unfair to my husband and me, but also to my child." (Dawn)

Problematic Relationship with Nonbiological Child(ren). Four of the 11 participants reported negative factors related to a nonbiological child. The respondents mentioned negative behaviors in the home, disciplinary and loyalty issues, and unmet expectations as reasons for relationship troubles.

"Bloodlines can create some real challenges." (Kevin)

"Even if they may not be the family you would choose, but they're the family you have, and they need you and you need them." (Rose)

"It was like we were living with a demon in our house. He stole money from my other children, and he made statements to his father like, "I can't wait until you and mom get back together." (Barbara)

Noteworthy Negative Factors Cited by a Few Participants. Two of the 11 participants reported negative factors associated with biological children. One of the participants discussed her son's drug use, which caused many problems in the home. This drug use led she and her husband to remove her son from the home to protect the rest of the family. Another discussed a custody issue with her daughter who could not care adequately for her children, which resulted in obtaining custody and raising her grandchildren. She claimed that her daughter knew the best situation for them was to be with her and her husband.

Three of the 11 participants shared information in the interviews about negative factors that affected their blended family stability that were unique to their individual family unit, meaning there was only one response for each of these factors. The outliers include raising grandchildren, immigration issues, and extended family members who exhibited jealousy toward the creation of the blended family. Despite consistencies the themes identified throughout Chapter 4 demonstrated, the outlier circumstances identified were specific to an individual blended family unit.

Supports, Services, and Assistance Significant to Ongoing Blended Family Stability

Supports, services, and assistance that were significant to stability within the blended family are represented in Table 4.

Table 4 *Supports, Services, and/or Assistance*

Theme	Kevin	Anne	Rose	Pat	Joy	Barbara	Troy	Jess	Carolos	Hope	Dawn
Family and/or siblings support and/or embraced the marriage (9/11)	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Parents (mine or my spouses) support and/or embraced the marriage (8/11)	X	X		X		X	X	X	X		X
Church family, church mentors, faith community (7/11)	X		X		X	X			X	X	X
Friends support and/or embraced the marriage (4/11)		X		X	X						X
Counseling (marriage and/or blended family) (4/11)			X	X		X					X
School supports (for children) including after school, clubs, extra-curricular activities (3/11)			X			X	X				
Pastor/pastoral support (3/11)						X				X	X

The response recorded most frequently was family and/or sibling support, with nine of 11 respondents making this claim. Secondarily, eight of 11 participants mentioned parental support

separately by stating that early parental support from their mother or father was a significant factor in the stability of their marriage and family. Thirdly, seven of the 11 persons interviewed touted their church family and/or faith community as a substantial factor in their ongoing blended family stability. Fourthly, four of 11 interviewees claimed that their friends' support contributed to their ongoing family stability. In addition, four of 11 stated that counseling was instrumental in their marriage and family stability, and three of 11 credited school supports as a stabilizing factor for their family. In addition, three of the 11 participants stated that pastoral support contributed significantly to their family stability, while two of the 11 indicated that God was the reason for the stability they enjoyed. The following stabilizing factors were outliers, mentioned by just one of the 11 respondents: youth group; online support group; spouse; books on blended families; marriage workshops; financial support, and premarital counseling.

Summary

This chapter presented the research findings that portrayed the lived experiences of married individuals in blended couples and described their perceived understanding of positive and negative influences that have contributed to, or detracted from, their blended family stability. Further, supports, services, and assistance that these individuals deemed significant to their ongoing stability were summarized.

This transcendental phenomenology comprised 11 individuals who volunteered to share the essence of their blended family stability. Participants ranged in age from 33 to 71 and consisted of three men and eight women who have been married ranging from five to 31 years. Nine participants were White, one was African American, and one was Native American. Demographic details and face-to-face, in-depth interviews provided insights into the way individuals describe their experiences within a blended family. The individual interviews were

conducted, recorded, transcribed, and safely stored. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software (CAQDAS), was utilized to assist me in the storing and organizing this qualitative research. Husserl's concepts of epoché, or bracketing, removing the researcher's bias and choosing to suspend judgment, was employed to allow the lived experience of the participants of the phenomena being studied to be the focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, 2012). This researcher differentiated his experience from those he interviewed. However, to ensure this, special attention was given to the reviewing of transcripts multiple times, creating statements and turning those statements into meaning units (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Coding of this research was completed by this researcher through the lens of family systems theory.

Five main themes emerged from the data analysis including routines, family rituals, verbal communication, spirituality, and shared values. These themes may also be found in the traditional family structure; however, when looking at the blended family one must consider the very different infrastructure that poses challenges to the development of these all-important stabilizing factors (Papernow, 2017). Connection in the blended family structure is not automatic, in fact, loyalties often lie outside of the blended family unit, making these themes even more essential.

Routines allowed all family members to know what to expect and when. They described ordinary routines, such as family meals and activities, homework schedules, and bedtime practices and declared that these provided structure and predictability that was foundational for blended family health. Although some routines varied depending upon the age of the children in the home, the input from all participants indicated the benefits of the boundaries that routines presented. Some of participants shared the difficulty of implementing such routines, due to a lack of structure that the children would experience when they would visit their other homes. Others

shared how the lack of routines, almost resulted in the demise of their family due to the confusion that the lack of routine produced. When reviewing the transcripts, it was clear that the adoption of routines clarified expectations for all family members and fostered a more balanced environment.

Family rituals involving holiday traditions, birthday celebrations, family vacations, church attendance/activities and other family get-togethers was the second theme that emerged. Most described the need to make these times special and memorable and acknowledged the pressure of trying to make holidays "magical" to ensure that interactions could occur and memories be made, so the "feeling" of family could be "felt" or "experienced by their child(ren)." When focusing on specific holidays, many of the participants acknowledged that they had to be flexible and creative. An example of this was delaying Christmas morning by a day or having it a day earlier to accommodate the custody schedule of the children. Overcoming such potential obstacles and developing strong family rituals proved to be an important component of their blended family identity.

Verbal communication was reported as "big" or "crucial" to their family unit's development. Intentional communication and planned engagements with family was credited for the establishment of bonding and trust. A few individuals shared that they were less intentional and allowed communication to happen organically. They further acknowledged that as a result, significant issues were not addressed allowing preventable issues to manifest.

Spirituality was reported as significant to family stability by most participants. They disclosed that they relied on God through prayer, worship, and other spiritual practices. They claimed that intentional spiritual practices afforded them strength and direction to fulfill God's plan for their lives and those of their blended family. Although practices varied, most individuals

shared that they encouraged all members of the family unit to be engaged spiritually. This proved more difficult for a few of the participants due to the differing beliefs from a former spouse.

Shared values, including determination, acceptance, responsiveness, understanding, resilience, trust, and love was stated to have offered structure to build stability within the family. Most individual shared that their understanding of their blended family was insufficient at the time of joining. Participants shared that their understanding was progressive to those influences that promoted stabilization or destabilization.

When the supports, services, and assistance the individuals in a blended couple employed were examined, most individuals shared the importance of their family and/or siblings' support. Parental support was also reported to be a significant factor in their marriage and family's stability. Church family and/or faith community was substantial in their ongoing blended family stability. A few participants also referred to support from friends, counseling, school and pastors, and God.

Moreover, the participants shared that their family stability was challenged or threatened by the relationship with their nonbiological child(ren), another biological parent (outside the home), their spouse in the blended family, and their biological child(ren), as well as other factors that were outliers. Intentional supports and other assistance employed that were recognized as significant to creating stability included family and/or sibling support, parental support, church family and/or faith community, friends, counseling, school supports, pastoral support, and God. With a great deal of transparency, Kevin said, "We didn't get it all wrong because the evidence is there to me that the stability, in fact, exists."

Individuals in this study shared clearly their perceived stabilizing and destabilizing influences on this type of family unit. There were clear differences displayed within each

blended family unit. When some of the families in this study joined together as a family the children were in grade school, while other merged after the children had already left home. Some families came together with as few as two children, while others joined with eight. Previous marital status was also noted. Some participants had not been previously married, others had. All of these factors had to be considered along with many others in the data analysis to ensure a clear presentation of the findings. The researcher found the results to be insightful, yet unsurprising. Most of the individuals who had been a member of a blended family for more than 10 years appeared to be more direct and confident in their responses about their family stability. Perhaps the fact that they had more experience applying them explains this finding. The few participants who had not yet been a member of a blended family unit for 10 years provided similar responses to those who had been together longer; however, they did so with less confidence. Whatever the family ritual or tradition, whether old or new, the participants shared these practices' importance and credited them with increased family cohesion.

The phenomenon of blended family stability is complex but can be fostered through routines, family rituals, verbal communication, spirituality and shared values. Without such, families will lack the boundaries and structure required to properly develop. Additionally, identification of destabilizers and a plan to address them is essential. Finally, when engaging in such an intricate family unit, strong family and/or sibling supports, church family, and friends should be sought to be ensure blended family stability.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of individuals in blended couples and their family stability. Previous research on blended family stability is scarce. Hence, this study addressed deficiencies in the prior literature, while revealing the results of this study on blended family stability and providing information to a variety of stakeholders. This chapter presents a summary and discussion of the findings, implications, delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

This phenomenological study explores how blended couples describe blended family stability. The findings are summarized according to the primary research question and three supporting questions. As mentioned earlier, insufficient literature has addressed the way blended couples describe their family stability. Among the five themes above that emerged when participants identified positive factors that contribute to their family stability, all indicated that having routines was essential. Further, they indicated that such routines allowed all family members to know what to expect and when. They described ordinary routines, such as family meals and activities, homework schedules, and bedtime practices and declared that these provided structure and predictability that was foundational for blended family health. Although some routines varied depending upon the age of the children in the home, the input from all participants indicated the benefits of the boundaries that routines presented.

Second, although participants from newly blended family units shared the importance of routines, they acknowledged the difficulty they had experienced, specifically with holiday routines. This difficulty was attributable largely to the fact that holidays were shared with the

other biological parent. For families who had been together for a longer period, some of these initial complications allowed them to create new rituals that helped alleviate the difficulty experienced in the early years of their blend. In addition, some seasoned blended families now have adult children who can make their own decisions about family involvement. This autonomy appeared to ease the tension the couples experienced and allowed solutions to what was once a difficult situation. As stated, 10 of the 11 participants expressed that family rituals were a stabilizing factor within the blended family. All 10 who cited their importance described the need to make these times special and memorable. Most acknowledged the pressure of trying to make holidays "magical" to ensure that interactions could occur and memories be made, so the "feeling" of family could be "felt" or "experienced by their child(ren)." The researcher interpreted this to be a yearning for the children to view their family structure as "normal."

Third, seven of the participants touted verbal communication as "big" or "crucial" to their family unit's development. Each reported that they were intentional about having open communication and spoke about specific planned engagements with their family members. They revealed that time dedicated to communication promoted bonding and trust. Numerous participants shared that listening during this time provided insight that they would not otherwise have had, which reduced missteps in the blending process. Interestingly, three of the participants who had been a part of their blended family unit the longest did not mention that communication was a factor that lent stability to the family. Perhaps this can be explained as a simple oversight, or it may suggest that these veteran blended family members perceive that communication is so clearly fundamental to family stability that it did not warrant mention.

Fourth, seven of the participants revealed that their spirituality was critical to their family's successful blending, and several reported that God brought their families together. They

disclosed further that they relied on God through prayer, worship, and other spiritual practices. They claimed that intentional spiritual practices afforded them strength and direction to fulfill God's plan for their lives and those of their blended family. Although they expressed some commonalities related to spirituality, they also described differences in the frequency and duration of these faith practices. Each who shared about spirituality articulated that his/her faith provided the strength and focus needed to endure such a challenging undertaking as making two families one.

Fifth, seven cited shared values as positive factors that contributed to their blended family stability. Those included determination, acceptance, responsiveness, understanding, resilience, trust, and love. Everyone who discussed this theme implied that having shared values offered structure to build stability within their family unit. The four individuals who did not load on this theme does not imply that these participants and their family members had no shared values, but simply that they did not disclose them. Perhaps if the interview questions had been phrased another way or if they were asked about shared values directly, the findings would reveal something different.

The negative factors that challenge family stability were identified as intentional supports that were attempted but failed a problematic relationship with the other biological parent, with the spouse in the blended family, or with the nonbiological and/or biological child(ren). First, eight participants indicated that they had employed perceived supports, but were disappointed with the results. The following were cited as examples: discipline; family labels; books/other materials on marriage and blended families; family supports outside the home; counseling; co-parenting support; church/parachurch ministries, and family courts/social services. There are a variety of explanations for these attempted supports that ended by challenging family stability.

Some of the participants acknowledged that they wanted to be a "ready-made family" and forced

the process through some of these otherwise positive supports. When family members rejected

them, the intended support was often cited as being problematic. Further, what would be

classified as regular nuclear family supports, such as discipline and labels, can be adopted

prematurely in the blended family structure. Several of the participants revealed that this was the

case for them. Further, many believed that the courts would be a trusted support to their family;

however, they felt that they did not support their family's needs.

Second, relationship struggles also emerged as a threat to blended family stability. Six

participants referred to their problematic relationship with the other biological parent. The lack

of, or poor communication with, the other biological parent, boundary issues, lack of flexibility,

and difficulties with co-parenting were cited as contributing factors to this relationship.

Similarly, six participants reported a relational issue with their spouse. The problems noted were

communication difficulties, conflict avoidance, lack of trust in the spouse when parenting

biological and nonbiological children together, lack of flexibility, biological relationship, and

fairness. Reportedly, these issues caused major dissension within the family unit and increased

the fragility of an already vulnerable unit. In addition, relationship struggles were not limited to

former and current spouses but also to nonbiological and biological children. Four participants

indicated an issue with the nonbiological child(ren), while two disclosed an issue with their

biological child(ren). Problematic relationships are not new to blended family units. Several

participants indicated that acknowledging the difficulties that existed and continuing to work

through them diligently contributed to the increased stability that their blended family enjoyed.

When the supports, services, and assistance the individuals in a blended couple employed

were examined, nine of the individuals interviewed shared the importance of their family and/or

siblings' support. Parental support was also reported to be a significant factor in their marriage and family's stability. Seven shared that their church family and/or faith community was a substantial factor in their ongoing blended family stability. Four or fewer participants also referred to support from friends, counseling, school and pastors, and God. Each of the participants who loaded on this theme made it clear that having these relationships in place was crucial to their family unit's survival. Several mentioned times when they believed that their family was on the verge of dissolving, but a significant relationship with one or many of these members outside of the home provided the necessary encouragement and support to continue.

Discussion

The goal of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of married individuals in blended couples and factors that contributed to their family stability. This study confirmed many of the findings in the literature and added to our understanding of this family structure. The complexity of blended families necessitated a lens through which this family unit can be viewed, and Bowen's (1978) family systems theory provided just such a lens. Many previous studies have incorporated his framework, as he declared that it was appropriate for all family types (Dyer, 2021). Dupris (2010) explained that because of the complex nature of the blended family system, Bowen's theory is a lens necessary to view this family type and stated that its application is crucial for these families' growth. Blended family difficulties are not new in the literature; however, our understanding of the concept of blended family stability reveals significant gaps that this study attempted to fill. In contrast to previous studies, the participants in this study were asked specifically to share factors that fostered, rather than threatened, their family stability. The findings of this study supported

some of the previous research on blended families, and also provided clarity about factors that

stabilize blended families. A theoretical and empirical discussion of this study follows.

Blended families have been viewed too often through the nuclear family lens, which adds

to the misunderstanding of this fragile family structure (Ganong & Coleman, 2018). Family

systems theory provides an approach to understand this complex unit more appropriately and

fully because it is able to address the entire family unit, including the parental, sibling, and

parent-child subsystems. He contended further that family members influence each other and

experience ongoing growth and change accordingly. Operating from a family systems

perspective posits that a family must be viewed as the entire family unit, not simply its individual

members (Balswick & Balswick, 2014). Bowen's (1978) theory has eight interrelated concepts:

differentiation of self; nuclear family emotional system; family projection process;

multigenerational transmission process; triangles and interlocking triangles; sibling position;

emotional cutoff, and emotional process in society.

The literature supports the use of a family systems approach when addressing with

blended families (Balswick & Balswick, 2014; Brown & Robinson, 2012; Cook et al., 2017;

Dupuis, 2010; Dyer, 2021; Papernow, 2018). The theory allows families to be defined by the

margins or boundaries they employ (Brown & Robinson, 2012; Cook et al., 2017). The converse

of this, no boundaries, can prove problematic. Boundaries allow a family to see themselves as a

distinct unit (Cook et al., 2017). The interviews with all of the participants validated this

understanding of family systems theory.

Although the participants were not asked about their understanding of the theory, per se,

the concepts emerged quickly when they shared information about their family unit. Each

indicated the importance of regular routines, while most shared the importance of family rituals

or traditions. Most of the participants interviewed deemed that these two factors are important to their family's stability. These intended boundaries were developed and learned within the context of family (Cook et al., 2017).

In addition, the participants claimed that they were intentional about having open communication, and expressed its importance in bonding and providing structure in the home. The healthy communication the individuals in this research cited revealed its significant importance to family resiliency. When unhealthy communication patterns were discussed, the participants' indicated that conflicts emerged that allowed the relationships to become caught in triangulation patterns. Difficulty communicating and ongoing conflict led to emotional distancing. Several individuals spoke of emotional cutoff that occurred in their blended family for a significant period. Several shared that they had relationship difficulties with the other biological parent or their current spouse. When there is conflict in the family system, it can be challenging to regulate thoughts and emotions, which can cause significant issues within the family, and can lead to disconnection (Alzoubi, 2016).

Although they had different stories, all of the participants' lived experiences related to family systems theory, and confirmed its appropriateness as a framework to view and understand these families. All of the participants conveyed this through their understanding of the themes identified, and various other protective factors. Their acknowledgment of the difficulties they experienced when such measures were not in place also confirmed the benefits of using Bowen's (1978) theory. The theory provided context for this study and will allow future researchers to understand complex family units like the blended family better.

An original family that often shares traditions, beliefs, roles, and communication styles can be juxtaposed with members of a blended family who carry their previous experiences to a

new environment without that common past (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Braithwaite et al., 2009). The difference illustrated between these family structures contributes to our further understanding. Research on blended families and their stability has been scarce; however, some research has studied the blended family structure and issues their members experienced. Many of these studies provide understanding of the difficulties present within this family type and explain their reported short duration as a unit. That said, they often fail to increase our understanding of factors that enhance or stabilize this family system. Thus, I sought to expand that understanding and fill the gaps related to blended family stability.

The results of a significant amount of the literature on blended family stability reviewed is consistent with this study's findings (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Braithwaite et al, 2009; Brown & Robinson, 2012; Cartwright, 2010; Coleman, 2018; Cook et al., 2017; Dupuis, 2010; Ganong et al., 2019; Greef & Du Toit, 2009; Jenson et al., 2017; Kellas et al., 2014; Krumrei et al., 2011; Kumar, 2017; Miran-Khan, 2017; Mirecki et al., 2013; Riness & Sailor, 2015; Saint-Jacques et al., 2016; Suanet et al., 2013; Pylyser et al., 2018; Zarlter & Grillenberger, 2017; Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015). One such study is a cross-sectional survey Greef and Du Toit (2009) conducted that described blended family resilience factors. The resilience or stabilizing factors they found are consistent with the themes identified in this research as well as others.

Most of the participants indicated that when they first blended their family with their partner's family, they were ignorant of the importance of considering potential stabilizing factors. They described further the emphasis they placed on relationship satisfaction and on trying to create harmony in the home. They conveyed that harmony was more of a "wishing" that such peace would occur rather than having a clear sense of intentional behaviors to accomplish that desired state. This study, as well as the previous literature reviewed, revealed that resilience

in a blended family does not occur by wishing, but through deliberate efforts to set boundaries and provide opportunities to create them (Brown & Robinson, 2012). Further, care and attention to the marital union and the stepparent-stepchild's relationship quality must be intentional (Ganong et al., 2019). Such a focus paves the way for open communication that can improve all familial relationships, including those with the stepchildren and stepparents (Pylyser, 2018).

Although they did not always have previous knowledge of, or the intention to employ, factors that provide stability for the family unit, all of the individuals in this study were able to identify clearly the perceived factors described above that were responsible for their family stability. It should be noted that all of the participants acknowledged that they employed stabilizing factors gradually rather than instantaneously. Greef and Du Toit (2009) indicated that if families can employ the foundational factors found within this study well, their families are more likely to achieve resilience.

All of the participants discussed developing routines as a foundational measure that contributed to their family's success. These included bedtime routines, homework, meals as a family, spending time together, and various other activities. Such routines provide clarity and structure for these family types, as confirmed in the literature (Braithwaite et al., 2009; Brown & Robinson, 2012; Cook et al., 2017; Greef & Du Toit, 2009). Providing simple and clear routines establishes predictability and stability and promotes blended family success (Braithwaite et al., 2009; Anderson & Greene, 2013; Suanet et al., 2013).

Ten participants also credited family rituals as a significant factor in family stability. Although these differed depending upon the participant, each agreed that they were significant. Braithwaite et al. (2009) also confirmed this and claimed that such rituals are essential for family identity and stability. Traditions were of specific importance in this study. Existing research has

maintained that although blending old and new traditions may be complex, doing so is vital for blended family stability (Braithwaite et al., 2009).

A significant number of the participants indicated that open and intentional communication was essential to foster blended family stability. Families that have been blended longer and those who have been married for only a little more than five years, agreed that making time for their family to talk was imperative in developing a strong family unit. Setting aside time to communicate was accomplished often by developing new family activities that promoted such talks. In addition, using existing routines allowed such discussions to be initiated. Communication has been considered in the existing literature, and as in this study, has stated that open and intentional communication is necessary to promote bonding among family members, as well as ensure that all members are heard, as it helps alleviate potential psychological distress (Coleman et al., 2015; Gould et al., 2013; Greef & Du Toit, 2009; Metts et al., 2017; Pylyser, 2018). Several of the participants shared that although some communication was difficult to navigate, opening the lines of communication allowed all members of the family to be heard and express themselves, which fostered all members' security. Braithwaite et al. (2009) insisted that allowing family members to convey their struggles leads to improved relationship satisfaction.

Spirituality proved important for the majority of those who participated in this study. They stated that having a foundation of faith in Christ was significant to their strength as a family unit. Greef and Du Toit (2009) also claimed that engaging in faith and religious activities led to stronger blended families. Cook et al. (2017) indicated that those who have a religious foundation tend to set boundaries that provide protection for their family unit. Krumrei et al. (2011) showed that those who engage in prayer, worship, meditation, and other spiritual practices are more flexible in the face of changes because of these religious coping strategies.

Similarly, Simonic and Klobucar (2017) declared that applying such strategies improves emotional regulation. Changes are always present within the blended family unit, and some of the participants declared that without their faith in God, they would not have endured in their blended family.

The participants claimed that such shared values as determination, acceptance, responsiveness, understanding, resilience, trust, and love were critical to ensure a stable blended family structure. The participants indicated that such shared values allowed them to establish a collaborative approach to "doing family." Although the previous literature has referred to shared values, this study expanded their importance as a significant protective factor in blended family security and stability.

Participants who disclosed that they have neutral or positive relationships with those members inside and outside of the blended family expressed enhanced family stability. These relationships included those with the other biological parent, the spouse in the blended family, and the nonbiological and biological child(ren). This is consistent with Ganong et al.'s (2019) finding and conveys that a family systems approach leads to greater relational enjoyment. Dupuis (2010) declared that the relationships that exist outside of the home must not be ignored, but fostered to enhance stability for all members of the blended family.

The participants attributed strong family and/or sibling, parental, and church family/faith community support as relationships that enhanced stability in their family unit. These supports have been noted in the literature as well. Supportive family relationships were cited as the most significant resilience-associated factor in Greef and Du Toit's (2009) cross-sectional survey, while family and friends' support was also included.

Blended families confront issues that range from a lack of norms to differing loyalties, and experience as well a lack of attachment history, limited preparation, and open boundaries (Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Miran-Khan, 2017). The promotion of factors that contribute to stability also enhance blended family resiliency (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Kumar, 2017). This study found that practicing spirituality was more important to the respondents than indicated in the previous literature. A significant number of them asserted that spirituality was indispensable to their family's stability, and several declared that God merged their families. Others stated that intentional spiritual practices bolstered their blended family unit. In addition, the participants insisted that having shared values provided the structure that allowed family cohesion and growth. As mentioned previously, shared values extended the research, as previous studies have not credited it widely as a substantial protective factor.

Implications

The goal of this study was to describe the lived experiences of married individuals in blended couples and factors that contributed to their family stability. The research addressed the gaps that existed in the previous literature by revealing specific stabilizing factors the participants described. Analysis of the data identified five themes in these positive factors. Additional themes were revealed in supports, services, and assistance that these families believed contributed to their ongoing stability. Negative factors that challenged family stability were also identified. A considerable portion of the literature reviewed is consistent with the findings in this study. However, unlike most studies conducted on blended families, which have examined factors that destabilize the blended family unit, this study focused primarily on positive factors that lead to blended family stability. Those factors will be covered within the theoretical, empirical, and practical implication sections below.

Theoretical Implications

Bowen's (1978) family systems theory offered a methodology and lens that can explicate the complexity of the blended family unit. Bowen indicated that the family, regardless of its makeup, should be treated as a complete unit. This unit includes parental, sibling, and parent-child subsystems. Bowen's theory and its interrelated concepts provide a clear structure that allows such a complex family system to be analyzed and understood. As mentioned previously, the literature supports the use of a family systems method strongly when addressing blended families (Balswick & Balswick, 2014; Brown & Robinson, 2012; Cook et al., 2017; Dupuis, 2010; Dyer, 2021; Papernow, 2018). All participants in this research confirmed through their lived experiences that family systems theory is an appropriate framework to both view and understand the blended family. This confirmation was conveyed through their understanding of the themes identified, and various other protective factors. Further, acknowledgment of difficulties without such measures in place also added credence to the benefit of Bowen's work. Future researchers should consider using family systems theory to shed light on complex family units such as the blended family. Although this researcher supports the use of family systems theory, it should be noted that some families may require additional supports for individual family members. Thus, it may also be useful to suggest a spiritual approach that looks at the individual as God designed them, and then the way they are designed to function in the family unit and in the community at large (Tan, 2011). Providing a spiritual framework would likely unveil significant findings.

Empirical Implications

There has been abundant research on blended families; however, it has been deficient in investigating factors that contribute to blended family stability. Although few studies have been

conducted on stabilizing factors, the previous literature supports many of the findings in this study. The participants in this study revealed that routines, family rituals, verbal communication, spirituality, and shared values were all significant to their family's stability. They also reported that having neutral or positive relationships with members inside and outside of the blended family led to family stability. Finally, they conveyed that strong support from family and/or siblings, parents, and/or church family/faith community, encouraged stability in their family unit.

This study revealed that spirituality or spiritual practices were more significant to respondents than indicated in the previous literature. This study's empirical findings inform those seeking to blend families, those who are currently engaged in a blended family unit, and practitioners working with members of these family structures. The implications of the findings expressed will be relevant to all of those identified above, as well as future researchers.

Practical Implications

The practical implications for this study are far reaching and involve a variety of stakeholders, including current and future blended families, and the various practitioners who work with these family units. There is also a significant societal price for allowing these families to fail. Frequently, remarriages and blended families end within five years (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Saint-Jacques et al., 2016). The difficulties that occur in a blended family unit are too innumerable to mention (Dainton, 2019; Kumar, 2017; Papernow, 2018). The existing research has failed to reveal the factors that promote stability and focused instead on those that threaten blended family resiliency (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Kumar, 2017). However, the findings of this study provide insights into specific factors that promote blended family stability. Thus, these findings related to all stakeholders will likely enhance such stability. Special attention must be afforded to preparing to blend these family structures, as well as developing positive

communication strategies that support strong relationships both within and outside the home, and spirituality and counseling that will support the entire blended family and each of its members.

As a researcher, dealing with such a complex family structure, it was important for me to epoché, or bracket, removing bias and suspending judgment (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, 2012). This approach allowed for the individuals being interviewed to share their lived experience of the phenomena. This researcher, though having similar experiences was able to recognize bias by memoing throughout the research process. Special attention was also given to the reviewing of transcripts multiple times, creating statements and turning those statements into meaning units (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Careful attention was given so that all voices of the participants were accurately heard.

Recommendations for Therapists and Other Helping Professionals

Supporting blended families as a clinician or a helping professional comes with a tremendous amount of responsibly. Operating with a paradigm that has worked for the traditional family will fall short and likely damage the blended family unit. These families must be treated as the unique families that they are. Practitioners will benefit blended families by employing the positive factors revealed in this study that foster stability. Further, specific supports, coping strategies, interventions, and the identification of family roles will also increase their resilience (Riness & Sailor, 2015).

Recommendations for Blending Families

Those seeking to blend or those currently in a blended family structure should seek counseling from a practitioner who is trained to work with such families. Counseling support can provide families with a safe environment in which to develop the protective factors necessary for their family unit to be successful that were revealed in the themes the study identified. Finding

appropriately trained counselors can be difficult due to professional shortages of these specialized practitioners in certain geographical location; however, it is of critical importance to locate such an individual to assist in fostering blended family resiliency.

<center>**Delimitations and Limitations**</center>

The delimitations established for this study were based upon individuals who were part of a blended family structure and have been married for more than five years, and preference was given to those who had been married for more than a decade. All individuals volunteered to participate in this study. The insight provided by these individuals offered valuable information regarding positive factors that promote blended family stability. Husserl's concept of epoché, or bracketing, was employed, which eliminated the researcher's bias, and permitted the lived experiences of the participants of the phenomena to be the focal point (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, 2012). This researcher followed the recommendation of Tufford and Newman (2012), who suggested writing memos as a reminder of the thoughts one has about the process to ensure any bias was noted. Writing memos or memoing was an essential component in this researcher practices and provided the intended margins necessary to keep from influencing the findings.

Although the results of this study enhance our understanding of factors that contribute to blended family stability, there are several limitations. First, all participants volunteered to participate in the study, and thus, it was not a randomized study. This can alter findings, as individuals may want to participate in the study because they deem that they have navigated the challenge of blending their families successfully. Other individuals who have a less positive view of their current blended family may have chosen not to participate. Second, as with most qualitative research, the sample size was small, as only 11 individuals participated in the study. This limits the ability to generalize the findings. Thirdly, the participants were largely White and

reside in the Eastern United States. As a result, the findings may not be an accurate representation of those from other ethnicities or even other regions of the country. Finally, all individuals were people who identified as Christian. This limited the individuals who could provide valuable information about their repartnering and blending experiences. Further, individuals with a Christian background may choose to portray difficult situations in a positive light, thereby skewing the findings.

<p align="center">**Recommendations for Future Research**</p>

The limited research conducted on individuals in blended couples and factors that contributed to their family stability leaves many possibilities for future research. Because of the previous limitations highlighted, a replication of this study could be conducted with a more diverse group of individuals throughout different regions of the country. Such a future study could include those of different ethnic backgrounds, faith backgrounds, and individuals who never married, but joined their families. Conducting such a study would provide a more inclusive understanding of blended family issues and may identify additional needs within this type of family unit.

Further, a quantitative self-report measure on factors that contributed to blended family stability should be used. This type of research could show commonalities in specific factors that are credited for blended family stability. The findings from such a proposed study would likely suggest additional studies that would provide information helping professionals require to address the needs of the blended families that they serve adequately.

In addition, this study only attempted to interview one member of the blended couple. A more comprehensive understanding of the blended marriage and family unit could have been gained by having both individuals in the blended marriage participate in in-depth independent

interviews. Moreover, all members of the blended family unit can provide insights and share their understanding of stabilizing and non-stabilizing factors, and although it would require more effort on the researcher's part, the comprehensive nature of this type of proposed study would benefit members of these delicate family units and those attempting to serve them.

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study was designed to explore the lived experiences of individuals in blended couples and factors that contributed to their family stability. Previous research on blended families has not yielded significant findings on such stabilizing factors. Perhaps this is because blended families were viewed through the lens of first marriage nuclear families (Ganong & Coleman, 2018), which creates problems in addressing blended family units. This study adds to the literature, and will help those who seek to establish a blended family, those currently in a blended family, and practitioners who work with these families enhance their stability.

The intricacy of the blended family required a framework in which this complex family unit can be examined, and Bowen's (1978) family systems theory provided that framework. Previous studies have included his theory and asserted that it is appropriate for all family types (Dyer, 2021). Dupris (2010) also explained that the complex blended family system requires the application of Bowen's theory for any growth to occur in this type of family structure. The family systems theory allows the family to be viewed as a unit, not simply as each individual person who comprises that unit.

Blended family difficulties are not new and are apparent in the literature; however, a closer look was necessary to identify the factors that affect these families positively. Face-to-face in-depth interviews—the primary method of obtaining information in qualitative counseling

research—with individuals in blended couples were used to collect the data (Heppner et al., 2017). Data analysis was conducted by collecting, preparing, and organizing data, coding and developing themes through ongoing condensing of the codes, and then creating tables and discussions surrounding those themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The themes identified were found to contribute significantly to blended family stability. The implications of this study are wide-ranging and involve a variety of stakeholders, including current and future blended families and the various practitioners who work with these family units. Finally, it is not an overstatement to say that blended family stability has significant societal implications.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 14, 2021

Marion Travers
Jaesook Gho

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-994 Understanding Blended Family Stability: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Marion Travers, Jaesook Gho:

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 yourprotocol 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 B: Permission Letter for Churches

Insert Date

Dear _____:

As a graduate student in the Community Care and Counseling Department /School of Behavioral Science at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for my doctoral degree. The title of my research project is Understanding Blended Family Stability: A Phenomenological Study, and the purpose of my research is to describe individuals in blended, married couples experiences with family stability.

I am writing to request your permission to post flyers about my study at your church. Individuals who read the flyers, meet the study criteria, and would like to participate will be instructed to contact me.

Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule a recorded interview. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to _____.

Sincerely,

Marion Travers

Appendix C: Research Flyer

Research Participants Needed

Understanding Blended Family Stability Study

- Are you 18 years of age or older?

- Are you currently married in a blended family that has been together for at least 5 years?

If you answered **yes** to both questions, you may be eligible to participate in a blended family research study.

The purpose of this research is to describe individuals in married blended couples' experiences with family stability. Blended couples are defined as two individuals in a committed romantic relationship, and one or both members were previously married or in a different committed romantic relationship and have children from that former marriage/relationship. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an individual, recorded, face-to-face interview. It should take approximately one hour to complete the interview. Participants will also be given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential. Consent information will be provided.

The study is being conducted on the East Coast at various locations that are deemed suitable by the participant including online via Zoom if requested.

Marion Travers, a doctoral candidate in the Community Care and Counseling Department/School of Behavioral Science at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Marion Travers at _____or _____ for more information.

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

Appendix D: Email and Verbal Recruitment Letter

Dear _____:

As a graduate student in the School of Behavioral Science at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Community Care and Counseling. The purpose of my research is to describe individuals in blended couples' experiences with family stability. Blended couples are defined as two individuals in a committed romantic relationship, and one or both members were previously married or in a different committed romantic relationship and have children from that former marriage/relationship. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and currently be part of a married, blended couple, and have been part of that same relationship for five or more years. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an individual, recorded, face-to-face or virtual interview. It should take approximately one hour to complete the interview. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential. All recordings will be transcribed for data analysis purposes. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcript for accuracy prior to the researcher analyzing the transcript data.

In order to participate, please contact me at _____ or by emailing me at _____.

A consent document will be provided after the time of the initial screening if you have been found to be eligible. A consent document will also be given to you at the time of the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, please sign the consent document prior to or at the time of the scheduled interview and return it to me prior to answering any questions. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to part in the study.

Sincerely,

Marion Travers

Appendix E: Email and Verbal Recruitment Letter 2

Dear _____:

As a graduate student in the School of Behavioral Science at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Community Care and Counseling. The purpose of my research is to describe individuals' in blended couples experiences with family stability. Blended couples are defined as two individuals in a committed romantic relationship, and one or both members were previously married or in a different committed romantic relationship and have children from that former marriage/relationship. Two weeks ago, an email was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to respond if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participation is _____.

Participants, if willing, will be asked to engage in an individual, recorded, face-to-face or virtual interview. It should take approximately one hour to complete the interview. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate, please contact me at _____ or by emailing me at _____.

A consent document will be given to you after you have completed screening and been found to be eligible, and at the time of the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, please sign the consent document at the time of the scheduled interview and return it to me prior to answering any questions. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Sincerely,

Marion Travers

Appendix F: Informed Consent

CONSENT FORM

Title of the Project: Understanding Blended Family Stability: A Phenomenological Study
Principal Investigator: Marion Frances Travers, Liberty University, Community Care and Counseling/School of Behavioral Science

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to be in a research study on understanding blended family stability. This study aims to describe the lived experiences of individuals in blended married couples and factors thatcontribute to their family stability. Blended couples are defined as two individuals in a committed romantic relationship, and one or both members were previously married or in a different committed romantic relationship and have children from that former marriage/relationship. Participants must be 18 years of age or older; currently part of a married,blended couple; and in their current marriage for five or more years.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part inthis research.

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

The purpose of this study is to describe individuals in blended couples' experiences with familystability. The following research questions will guide this study:
1. How do individuals in blended couples describe blended family stability?
2. What do individuals in blended couples perceive to be positive factors contributing totheir family stability?
3. What do individuals in blended couples perceive to be negative factors challengingfamily stability?
4. What supports, services, and assistance do individuals in blended couples consider assignificant contributors to their ongoing stability?

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an individual interview lasting approximately one hour. Virtual interview options will be available via Zoom. This interview will be audio-recorded. All recordingswill be transcribed for data analysis purposes.
2. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcript for accuracyprior to the researcher analyzing the transcript data.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

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 you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any informationthat will make it possible to identify a subject. In any sort of report I might publish, I 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 records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. I will conduct the interviews (virtual or in-person) in a location where others will not easilyoverhear the conversation.

- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in futurepresentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password- locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access tothese recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affectyour current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not 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 phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will bedestroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Marion Travers. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at _____. You mayalso contact the researcher's faculty chair, 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, 1971University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or

email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

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 researcher 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 information provided above.

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 audio-record me as part of my participation in thisstudy.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Signature of Investigator   Date

Appendix G: Screening

<u>Screening Questions relevant to the study</u>

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?

2. Are you currently in a blended family in which you have been married for at least 5 years?

3. Are you willing to participate in a study that will require about a 1-hour interview?

If you answered **yes** to all of these questions you are eligible to participate in a blended family research study. I will contact you to schedule an interview and send you a consent document.

Appendix H: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview about your experience in a blended family.

Interview Questions

1. Please describe your marriage and blended family.
2. Tell me about your regular routines/traditions as a member of a blended couple.
3. Tell me about a time when there was conflict or potential for conflict in your blended family and how that situation was addressed.
4. What factors do you believe contribute to your blended couple/family stability?
5. Describe the factors that you feel have threatened your family's stability.
6. What specific activities would you identify as contributing factors to your family's stability?
7. Please describe any supports you feel contribute to your blended couple/blended family's stability.
8. Please describe any intentional supports that you employed that you feel detracted from your blended couple/blended family's stability.
9. What services or other assistance can you identify that contribute to your family stability or lack thereof?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your family?

Thank you again for your participation in this study!

Appendix I: Interview Data Summary by Research Question

Research Question 1: How do individuals in blended couples describe blended family stability?

- See interview questions surrounding research questions 2, 3, and 4

Research Question 2: What do individuals in blended couples perceive to be positive factors contributing to their family stability?

- Interview questions 2, 4, and 6 elicited responses that identified as positive factors contributing to family stability.

Positive Factor	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	Tally
Routines • Bedtime routines • Homework • Meals together/eating together • Make decisions together • Providing for the children equally • Spending time together • Movies and board games, fun time together • Communication • Visitation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	**11/11**
Traditions • Holiday Traditions • Birthday celebrations • Family vacations • Church attendance/ church activities • Get togethers/inclusive family events –	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	**10/11**

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	
with those outside blended family												
Communication	X	X			X	X	X	X		X		**7/11**
Investing in the marriage • Date night • Weekend getaways					X			X				**2/11**
Counseling support			X								X	**2/11**
Spirituality		X	X	X	X			X	X		X	**7/11**
Shared Values • Determination • Acceptance • Responsiveness • Understanding • Resilience • Trust • Love	X	X				X	X	X	X	X		**7/11**

Research Question 3: What do individuals in blended couples perceive to be negative factors challenging family stability?

- Interview questions 3, 5, 8 and in some cases interview question 9, elicited responses that identified as negative factors challenging family stability.

Negative Factor	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	Tally
Relationship with nonbiological child(ren) (Interview Q3, Interview Q5) • Negative behaviors by non-biological child • Discipline of nonbiological children • Biology/Loyalty issues • Unmet Expectations	X		X	X		X						**4/11**
Relationship with other biological parent (outside of home)		X		X	X	X			X		X	**6/11**

(Interview Q3, Interview Q5) • Co-parenting issue • Communication issues • Conflict • Boundary issues • Lack of flexibility											
Relationship with spouse in blended family (Interview Q3, Interview Q5) • Communication or lack of / failure to communicate with spouse • Conflict avoidance • Lack of trust • Lack of flexibility • Conflicting expectations • Biology	X	X					X	X		X	X	**6/11**
Relationship with biological child(ren) (Interview Q3 and Interview Q5) • Negative behaviors in home by biological child • Custody issue with grandchildren			X					X				**2/11**
Outlier Factors (Interview Q5) • Raising grandchildren • Immigration • - Other family members outside the home exhibiting jealousy of the creation of the new family	X		X		X				X			**4/11**
Intentional supports and other assistance employed that	X	X	X	X		X	X		X		X	**8/11**

| challenged blended family stability (Interview Q8 and part of Interview Q9 related to "lack thereof")
• Discipline
• family labels
• Books/other materials on marriage
• Family support outside the home
• Counseling
• Co-parenting supports
• Church/Spirituality
• Family Court System, Social Services | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Note: in all interviews, the other biological parent was a former spouse.

Research Question 4: What supports, services, and assistance do individuals in blended couples consider as significant contributors to their ongoing stability?

- Interview questions 7 and 9 elicited responses related to this research question.

Supports, services, and/or assistance (Interview Q7 & Q9)	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	Tally
• Parents (mine or my spouses) support and/or embraced the marriage	X	X		X		X	X	X	X		X	8/11
• Family and/or siblings support and/or embraced the marriage	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X	9/11
• Friends support and/or		X		X	X						X	4/11

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Total
embraced the marriage												
• Church family, church mentors, faith community	X		X		X	X			X	X	X	**7/11**
• Counseling (marriage and/or blended family)			X	X		X					X	**4/11**
• School supports (for children) including after school, clubs, boy scouts, extra-curricular activities			X			X	X					**3/11**
• Youth group			X									**1/11**
• Online support group					X							**1/11**
• God/Christ						X			X			**2/11**
• Pastor/Pastoral support						X			X	X		**3/11**
• Spouse								X				**1/11**
• Books on blended family	X											**1/11**
• Marriage enrichment, marriage workshops		X										**1/11**
• Financial support								X				**1/11**
• Premarital counseling									X			**1/11**

Appendix J: Individual Portraits

  The demographic details collected from the participants and interview transcripts are presented below in a brief overview of each participant's responses.

Kevin

  Kevin is a 55-year-old Caucasian male who lives in Delaware. He has been married for 21 years and reports that his marriage is "solid" and that his blended family has "blended beyond my expectations." Kevin entered his blended marriage with two biological children, while his wife had three children from a previous marriage. He discussed the significance of communicating his care and love for his non-biological children in his blended family intentionally early on and often. He shared that this came very naturally with his biological children, but he felt that it needed to become a genuine occurrence with his stepchildren.

  Kevin recalled regular holidays as a family and the creation of new traditions, one of which he talked about was baking sweet rolls every Christmas. He told of bedtime routines when he would read to the children and "sing the younger kids up the stairs." When discussing conflict or the potential for conflict in the family, Kevin indicated that disciplining the non-biological children was problematic early on and correcting them became an issue that was not addressed openly in the marriage. Kevin stated, "Sometimes there are still lingering effects of the fact that bonding didn't happen as quickly or as completely as it could have early on." Although bonding did not occur swiftly, Kevin credits God, a sense of determination, acceptance of the family as it was, and recognition of each other as a family unit as factors that contributed to his family's stability. Activities that also contributed to this stability were cited as church attendance, vacations, everyone's inclusion in events, and having fun together as a family. Kevin revealed

that his parents, other family members, and his church family were all encouraging and reassuring from the time the families were first blended, which "validated us a family."

Kevin reflected on the benefit of talking to his parents to obtain advice. He also shared that he read books and devotionals on blended families, but found that more of them were nonhelpful than useful. Kevin concluded the interview by stating that he believes his blended family was, "God's purpose for us, for our lives." He explained further, "I'm sure we did a lot of things wrong... In fact, I know many things that we did wrong because I see the pain and even sometimes the residual pain in my children, but we didn't get it all wrong because the evidence is there to me that the stability, in fact, exists."

Anne

Anne is a 52-year-old Caucasian female who has been married for 10 years and is a resident of New York. Anne had never been married before, and entered the marriage with her husband with no biological children. She reported that her husband came to the marriage with two adult children; however, she explains that he was estranged from his children at the time of their marriage. She described her marriage as "pretty typical." Through her and her husband's ongoing efforts, Anne indicated that reconnection with the adult children took place, and now regular contact occurs. She explained further that she ensures regular contact with the children and grandchildren through means of text, videos, video chats, and other contact methods. Anne indicated that many of the issues historically and at present are attributable to her husband's former spouse.

When speaking of her marriage, Anne acknowledged that the family values she and her husband share in common are a strong point in their relationship. She also claimed that her marriage is God-centered. She asserted that "God ordained our relationship, our marriage, and

everything we do." She also revealed that her desire for things to be a certain way early on threatened peace in the home.

Further, Anne reported that she believed that church attendance, applying the Scriptures to her life and marriage, acts of service toward her spouse and receiving acts of service from him, performing acts of service together for others, and vacationing together are all things that have provided stability in their blended family.

A discussion of the stability also revealed that Anne credits her parents, siblings, and friends who supported them from the beginning. She stated further that she found a marriage enrichment seminar and other marriage workshops helpful tools early in their relationship. She described her desire to incorporate a couple's devotional in their routine, which was not effective, as it was not a desired part of her husband's regular routine.

At the close of the interview, Anne stated, "Not everybody's going to think the way you think or do what you would do." She proclaimed, "Try to understand… finding the most positive" in each person.

Rose

Rose resides in New York and is a 71-year-old Caucasian female who has been married for 27 years and is the oldest participant in this study. Rose came to her blended family with four biological children and her husband also had four biological children whose custody he shared with his ex-wife at the time of the marriage. Rose reported that two of her children were adults and out of the home at the time of their union. She indicated that she and her husband have always been caring for children. She reported they currently have custody of two of her grandsons because of their parents' drug issues.

Rose described the value of regular routines and the intention to include all of the family members, including previous spouses and extended family members from both sides. She discussed holiday traditions and family birthdays and other get togethers that promoted bonding. She recalled providing transportation for her husband's ex-wife regularly, buying her a cellphone to maintain contact with the children, and providing her rides to church. She reported further that they did similar things for her ex-husband. She stated, "You're still related to these people, they're part of your life to continue on, and we did that until his ex-wife died and we still see my ex-husband when we go to some family functions."

Rose expressed the significance of counseling before they both joined their families together. She professed that their marriage is God-centered, and they were determined from the beginning to let the past be the past and consider this marriage and blended family as a new beginning. Rose indicated that raising grandchildren and many other unknowns along the way have challenged the family's stability and shared her firm belief that God would see them through. She credits attending church, being involved in church, spending time with family, and family meals as activities that promoted stability in her family.

Rose stated that her church family served as a significant support for her blended family. She also reported that youth groups, Boy Scouts of America, the school system, and counseling all contributed to her family stability. She shared that when she relied on some family members for support, she found less than favorable results in the care they gave the children. She stated further that the family courts were not helpful to her or her family when she had to deal with them with respect to her grandchildren. Rose ended our interview by sharing, "For my husband and I, we are going to do the best we can for everybody that's in our circle."

Pat

Pat is a 48-year-old Caucasian female who has been married for 9 years and is a resident of New York. Pat reported that she came into her marriage with two grown children. Her oldest biological son was not from her previous marriage, but from a prior relationship, while her daughter was from her previous marriage. She reported that her husband came into the marriage with three children and his first child had a different mother than his other two children. She described her marriage and her family as "… the best it's ever been." She stated further, "We have learned a lot and grown a lot."

Pat acknowledged that a great deal of blending has taken place in her family. Although she stated that she and her husband are empty nesters now, she recalled that at the beginning of the relationship, there were regular visitation schedules with his biological children. This led Pat to share that one of the greatest difficulty for their newly blended family was communication with the other biological parents about schedules and visitation times.

Pat indicated that the key factor in her marital stability was her relationship with the Lord and the fact that her husband also had a similar strong relationship. She also highlighted appreciating old family traditions and building new ones as a stabilizing factor in her blended family. Pat shared a strong desire to support both her biological children and her stepchildren; however, she claimed that being a stepparent, particularly "Being a stepmom is very, very difficult." She claimed as well that dealing with the other mothers, "who cannot coparent" was hard on the entire family.

She shared that holiday traditions and keeping open communication in the home were substantial activities that led to a better home and family environment. Pat claimed that her parents and her husband's parents were eager to offer their support to the blending of their

families. Other family members, friends, and seeking professional counseling also contributed a great deal to the blending.

Pat stated that she and her husband also provided counseling for their children; however, the non-residential parent did not follow through and therefore, there was no enduring benefit. Pat said that there was simply no real coparenting assistance that occurred between her husband and the non-residential parents. Although family court was involved, it was not helpful. At the close of the interview, Pat repeated "Being a stepmom is extremely difficult."

Joy

Joy is a 43-year-old Caucasian female who lives in New York. She has been married for five years and reports that she met her husband, who is from another country, on an online Christian dating website. He has three daughters and Joy stated that she has three sons from a previous marriage. She asserted that they took their relationship slowly and spent three and a half years getting to know one another and each other's children. Then, they decided that he would move here, and they would marry and join their families.

Joy cited that regular communication was essential to develop strong relationships with the six children, as the three girls were not always in the U.S. She explained that maintaining a focus on holiday traditions and other bonding events was vital. Joy reported that communication with her stepdaughter's biological mother was challenging sometimes and she said that this slowed her bonding with her stepchildren early on. This difficulty in communication, coupled with her husband's immigration issues, created real trials for their newly blended family.

When sharing her thoughts on stabilizing factors in the blended family, Joy articulated that faith in God, prayer, and having God at the center of the family have been crucial in strengthening their family. She stated later that eating together as a family, attending church, and

she and her husband having regularly scheduled date nights are activities that bolstered their marriage and blended family. Key supports that Joy identified are her family, friends, church, and an online support group, and she indicated that the support group was very beneficial for her. At the close of the interview, Joy stated, "Everybody's situation is different… put the interest of what's best for the children first, and put God first, it can work."

Barbara

Barbara is a 66-year-old Caucasian female who lives in Maryland. She has been married for 31 years and is the participant married for the longest. Barbara has two biological daughters from her first marriage, while her husband has one biological son. Barbara indicated that the early years of her marriage were difficult because of the relationship between her and her stepson. She indicated that he was young and really didn't understand what had transpired with his biological mother and his father to end their relationship. She reported that it was difficult to bond with her stepson when he manifested negative behaviors in the home consistently and talked about his dad and mom getting back together. In addition, bonding was challenging because of a lack of communication and several negative interactions with the non-residential biological parent. Although Barbara believed that she did the right thing in marrying her husband, she did not anticipate all of the difficulty that would ensue when blending the families. As did others, she proclaimed, "You have to put God first."

Despite the difficulties, Barbara said that regular birthday celebrations, holiday traditions, attending church, and eating together were some of the families' regular practices. She spoke of the need for ongoing communication and understanding as well. Creating safe bonding events at home and making time for open communication were foundational for Barbara. She said, "This is our time to come together and talk about each other's day and just to have that bonding."

Barbara indicated several supports that added to the success of her family unit, such as she and her husband's parents, church family, their pastor, and counseling. Although she found these supports helpful, she did indicate that she believed incorrectly that the church would fix everything for her family. She stated further that although counseling worked for some, it was apparent that it did not work for every family member. Barbara ended the interview by saying, "First and foremost is God" and then she asserted, "We have each other's back."

Troy

Troy is a 33-year-old American Indian who lives in Delaware and has been married for eight years. He is the youngest participant who was interviewed for this study. Troy has four children. His oldest two daughters are from a previous relationship, he has fathered two additional children with his current wife, and reported that he and his wife are expecting another baby soon. Troy stated that "there has been a lot of learning" over the eight years of their marriage. One of the things that Troy shared about their marriage and blended family was that it was built on the principle of open communication. He remembered a time when there was a failure to communicate a change that had occurred with respect to his two oldest children. He reported that he communicated with their mother, but not his wife, and that created disruption in the home. Since that time, he said, he ensures that he communicates with all parties consistently.

Troy emphasized the need for regular routines and consistency to avoid the development of undesirable problems. He declared that dinner as a family, going to the park together, and other recreational activities, "… bring in a lot of joy, bring in a lot of peace and bring a lot of relaxation." In addition to these activities, Troy revealed that he and his wife have also learned the benefit of receiving support from others. He indicated that his parents and other family members have been key in providing such assistance to his family.

As a result of employment changes, Troy and his family have relocated several times and he shared that he has been disappointed with some ministry organizations and churches' response to his blended family and their differing needs. Troy shared that these ministries, "… were not actually a fit for the way that our family was structured." Troy stated further that the school they have found, as well as aftercare, have been very helpful to him and his family. At the conclusion of the interview, Troy shared, "Enjoy the happy moments, enjoy the moments of laughter… and I've learned that my presence speaks more than anything."

Jess

Jess is a 47-year-old Caucasian female who resides in Pennsylvania. She has been married to her husband, whom she met through a friend, for five years. Although Jess stated that she was not really seeking a relationship, as she had experienced significant medical issues, and had two teenage children to raise, after she met her husband, that sentiment changed. Jess has two biological children from a former relationship and her husband has three children from his former relationship.

Jess expressed that at the outset of the relationship, she and her husband made decisions together related to the family. She declared that it was important, "… if we did for one, we did for all five." Jess shared that her belief in being submissive to God, as well as trust in the marital relationship, and open communication with no secrets were stabilizing factors for her and her family unit. She did acknowledge that this was not always easy, as the children sometimes tried to split the unity in the home; however, she asserted, "We don't let any of them come between our marriage."

Other factors that Jess shared that provided some continuity to their blended family were regular activities like going to the zoo, visiting amusement parks, having birthday parties,

watching movies together, playing board games, having meals together, communicating regularly, weekend getaways for she and her husband, and vacations for the entire family. She also added that their parents and families' support was crucial to the strength of their blended family.

Although things get in the way, Jess shared that being selfless and intentional about cultivating a strong relationship is necessary if you are going to have a strong family and marriage.

Carlos

Carlos is a 63-year-old African American male who lives in Delaware. Carlos moved to the U.S. shortly after he turned 18. He has been married for 27 years and reports that he is thankful for the acceptance that his wife has shown toward him and his children. He entered the marriage with two children from his previous marriage. His wife had never been married and had no biological children before their union. After the marriage, they had two additional children.

Carlos shared certain routines and traditions that are important to him and his wife and that he believed were of great benefit to his entire family. He indicated that eating together as a family, attending church, being involved in church functions, going on regular vacations and to amusement parks, and spending holidays together had an enormous influence on the family's bonds. He indicated that this cohesive structure was not without it challenges, as his former spouse often created disruptions in visitations and often was, "… trying to start things, you know, stir up some stuff." Although some things were challenging during the early years, Carlos said that God was what made the difference. "We put God at the center of our relationship. We made sure to offer love and attention to one another and to be involved in each other's activities."

Carlos shared that other family members tried to sow discord because of jealousy, but they were able to make it through with strong support from their parents and church family. The older children received counseling support because of the previous divorce and there were some reported benefits; however, the other biological parent removed them from counseling services. When the family court was introduced to the equation, Carlos remembered that it was not overly helpful to him or the children. He also shared that although they were involved heavily in church, he found that the church was often not equipped to handle blended family issues. He shared, "I don't think we're (the church) doing a very good job as far as supporting blended families." He said that it is important for families to "… stay connected with the children, let them know it's not their fault and regardless of what the other parent is doing, you do your part."

Hope

Hope is a 59-year-old Caucasian female who lives in Delaware. She has been married to her husband, whom she met through church, for 12 years. Hope entered the marriage with 3 children (2 sons and 1 daughter) from her prior marriage. One of her sons was entering college, one was completing his final year of high school, and her daughter was in middle school when the two families joined. Her husband entered the marriage with two adult daughters who were both married and had families of their own.

With respect to routines and traditions, Hope indicated, "We tried to, you know, weave time together so that all five kids and families could get to know each other." She shared further that this was an ongoing discovery process, as through holidays together, dinners, and other family activities, "… we would find out new things about each other."

Hope recounted that as a couple and a family, they did not do well with conflict, and in fact, avoided conflict often, which led to other communication issues as time passed. She

explained that lack of communication and an unwillingness to be flexible early on created unnecessary tension in the relationship. She indicated that her husband is a more tolerant and flexible person than she. As the marriage and family grew from the early years, Hope stated that listening, being available, and understanding promoted a strong family dynamic. She acknowledged that her belief in Christ, family, and their pastor and other church members were supports that also contributed to the family's strength.

Hope revealed that she and her husband found pastoral premarital and post-marital counseling helpful. She suggested some keys that keep a marriage and family advancing are listening to your partner, being careful in your speech, and giving grace to the other members of the family. She explained further that one has "… to consider the feelings of the other person."

Dawn

Dawn is a 50-year-old Caucasian female who lives in New York and married her husband 18 years ago. She described her marriage as "average... you have ups and downs like any marriage, we have had issues since the beginning because of trying to blend two families together with different ideas." Dawn had a son from a previous marriage and her husband had three boys from his previous marriage. She stated that there were difficulties from the beginning of the union because of the different ideas that emerged from the two sides coming together as a unit. Dawn shared that she grew up in the South and her husband grew up in New York, which she indicated could explain some of their different thought patterns. Although Hope was transparent about the difficulties that existed, she also discussed things that brought the family together, such as shared meals, bedtime and homework routines, and various holiday traditions.

Dawn revealed that a significant issue that existed was a lack of consistency with boundaries. She indicated that her husband would fail often to ensure consistency in his

children's visits to the home, which would disrupt the entire family's plans. After such a decision, conflict avoidance would ensue and there would be little to no conversation about the way the plans were derailed or the way the former spouse was making decisions, and there was no consistency fostered for the benefit of all involved. Because of parenting and boundary issues, they pursued pastoral support and counseling. Dawn believed that this helped with parenting guidelines and began to minimize the interference of her stepsons' non-residential parent.

Dawn expressed that including everyone in meals, playing together, communicating openly, and going places as a unit fostered a stronger family. She also spoke of the support that the entire family drew from their parents, family, friends, church, and their faith. Dawn stated that a big lesson from her blended family is, "Your children are all different and you can't force them all to fit into a mold."