

Stepparents Perception of the Factors Affecting the Quality of the Stepparent– Stepchild Relationship

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ABSTRACT The study investigated the contributions of parenting style, communication, relationship with non-residential kin, loyalty conflict and spousal marital relationship to the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship. It made use of simple random sampling in selecting 400 stepparents from ten local government areas in Cross River State. The study sample responded to two valid and reliable instruments. The results indicated that the five independent variables, when taken together, were effective in predicting the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship. Each of the variables (with the exception of parenting style) contributed significantly to the prediction of the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship. On the basis of these findings, it is suggested that intervention programmes centre on relationship enhancement, communication skills and conflict resolution would benefit the stepparent and stepchild relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Stepfamilies, the new emerging family structure, have been classified as a high risk setting with more pathological behaviours and higher rates of child sexual abuse than among first families (Ihinger – Tallman, 1988). Traditionally, remarriages and stepfamilies were formed primarily as a result of the death of a spouse; today the formation results primarily from divorce. These “remarried”, “reconstituted”, “binuclear”, “blended”, and “stepparent” families constitute significant non-traditional marital and family arrangements that present unique circumstances and relationships. Stepfamilies may include a stepfather, mother, and her children; a stepmother, father and his children; or a mother and father joining two sets of children.

Stepfamily researchers agreed that the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship is an important determination of overall stepfamily happiness. However, because many stepparent and stepchild relationships do not have the solid foundation created by early childhood bonding experiences, stepparent and stepchild bond may be particularly vulnerable to family stress (Preece, 2004). A positive relationship between the stepparents and stepchildren can lead to positive outcomes both for the children and for the family. However, the relationship can be influenced by a number of factors that cannot be controlled.

Several factors could be at work when it comes

to talking about the quality of relationship in Stepparents-Stepchild family. One of these factors is parenting style. Parenting style describes multidimensional processes involved in raising children who should become useful members of the society (Akinboye, 2000). Though raising children can be one of the most joyful, enchanting and rewarding aspects of family life, it has in-built hardships, frustrations and conflicts. This is why parenting is often described as a combination of tough times, and tender moments. Parenting could be more stressful than adjusting to marriage itself.

Without biological link, it can be extremely difficult to tolerate, let alone like a stepchild who is being particularly troublesome and coping with recalcitrant teenagers can be a nightmare (De’ Ath, 1993). Stepparents may feel that they are out on a limb at times, excluded from the biological link that their partners have with the children and because of this, unable to play a full parent role. However, a great many stepparents do have warm and loving relationship with their stepchildren and a strong commitment to them.

Perhaps, the greatest source of stress in stepparenting results from the fact that the step-roles are not clearly defined (Atwood, 1990). The roles of the stepparent become the measure of the stepfamily’s development. The degree to which all members accept and provide a meaningful role for him/her determines how well established the family’s roles and rules would be

by the immediate family members, other relatives and outsiders.

The stepparent is a new comer and many times an intruder or interloper to an established family system (Atwood, 1990; De'Ath, 1993). There is usually an attempt by an existing system to expel a foreign body. Initially because the stepparent is an intruder, there may be an attempt, either overtly or covertly to expel him or her. This discomfort and upheaval may be the result of children not knowing what to expect from the stepparent, since the role of the stepparent is ambiguous and often ill-defined.

A study by Goodman – Lezin (1985) revealed that residential stepmothers do better if they adopt a less active disciplinary role than their husbands, while working toward establishing a more positive relationship with their stepchildren. This is not to suggest that “anything goes” or that total disengagement is the best approach to parenting by stepmothers. The fact remains that when fathers assume more responsibilities in limit-setting behaviours, the stepmother reports more marital satisfaction. Importantly, it is also known that when fathers and stepmothers agree about childbearing issues and behaviours, stepmothers feel better about their marriages (Skopin, 1989). This good feeling can and often is reflected in a more positive relationships with stepchildren.

Visher and Visher (1979) proposed that, discipline works only when the person receiving the discipline cares about the reactions of and the relationship with the person meting out the discipline. These remarks touch on the question of who in the stepfamily should administer the discipline? Who should be the one to say no? Experts in stepfamilies like Taylor and Taylor (2001), Sposato (2001) and Boomer (2001), highly recommend the biological-driven parenting as practical and stepfamily specific.

One other variable that is addressed in this study is communication. Communication in the family brings decisions on certain issues, such as productive and health decisions. This is one of the important reasons why communication is crucial in the family, especially between husband and wife; parent and child. Communication is the key to any parent-child relationship and stepparents are no different in this respect.

The role tradition plays in determining effective communication has been documented. Sequerah (2002) noted that in the eastern region of the globe, tradition is the main stumbling block

to communication. Further, Sequerah (2002) explained that some families were taught to respect the elders and to follow what they say, right or wrong, without question. Respect is only shown to those family members who are older than them. This left no room for friendly conversation between family members. Children were expected to follow their parents' wishes whether they like it or not. Failure to do so often results in the son or daughter being disowned by the family. With this kind of conditions, communication is out of the question. Discontentment and frustrations are kept within the heart and often; a feeling of wanting to do something rebellious grows.

Along the same but diverse line of thought is the issue of power. Coale (1990) opined that the biggest communication difficulties among parents, stepparents and teenagers stem from confusion over who has control over what. When power issues are confused, communication is problematic. When power issues are clear, communication generally falls more easily into place. Research has been generated around the idea that stepparents and stepchildren relationships are bound to be full of conflicts because of lack of adequate and effective communication between them. More so, those involved had often stressed on the issue of improved communication (Manning and Wooten, 1987; Eades, 1996).

Another variable of concern in this study is the quality of the relationship with non-residential kin. Relationship with others can have a significant impact upon the quality of life in a new stepfamily. However, after problems with finances and children, couples in remarriages rank outside family (kin) as the third major problem they face (Bernard, 1991). One common stress in remarriage comes from the necessity for frequent contact with ex-spouse(s). Most of the problems that arise with ex-spouse have to do with children visitation, custody, and child support (Lasswell and Lassell, 1991). These keep alive issues that the divorcing couple initially considered to have been settled in court. It is not at all unusual for divorced parents to go back to court again and again for post divorce litigation over such issues. Although there many, of course, be legitimate cause to file for change of custody to seek increased or decreased support payment, or to ask for a ruling on disputed visitation rights and responsibilities. Marital therapist believe that there are usually underlying dynamics between the divorced

spouses that cause them to keep upsetting each other (Elkins, 1976).

Atwood (1990) remarked that relationships between former spouses usually are not well defined, and that couples seldom know how to respond appropriately to each other once they are divorced. Even less well defined is how the current wife should behave towards the former wife and how the current and ex-husbands should relate if at all. The "divorce chain" as Bohannon (1970) calls it, get even more complex when the ex-spouses of the remarried couple have also remarried. They form a new kind of extended kinship system, an accepted etiquette for proper social relationships in such a system is non-existent (Lasswell and Lasswell, 1991).

While there exists a good deal of information on the relationship between former spouses after divorce, such as how they interact and how that interaction affects children, there is little about how the remarriage of one or both of those parents affect the established patterns of parenting. What few studies available suggest is that remarriage negatively affect the ability of former spouses to co-parent effectively. For example studies show that remarriage reduces the interaction between former spouses around childrearing concerns (Ahrons and Wallisch, 1987; Ruffin, 1991; Seltzer, 1991), reduced the frequency of visitation between non-residential parents and children (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985; Seltzer, 1991), and reduces the parent's satisfaction with parenting (Ahrons and Wallisch, 1987; Ruffin, 1991). Research also showed that the negative effects of remarriage are especially true when only the husband is married (Ahrons and Wallisch, 1987; Seltzer, 1991).

Equally important is the quality of relationship with grandparents and step-grandparents. Remarriage of parents may bring new grand parents and step-grandparents into the live of children creating new family structures and needs for adjustment. Where there are children, grandparents may have played an active role following parents' divorce. According to Lasswell and Lasswell (1991), they (grandparents) may not wish to give up this new closeness and may oppose any remarriage. They may not be able to accept their step-grandchildren to the point of causing conflict. They may interfere with already touchy discipline controversies in the new home.

Loyalty conflict is another independent variable investigated in the present work. Going

by Gerlach (2002), loyalty conflicts are a special kind of value conflict. They usually feel more confusing and stressful than similar conflicts. Family loyalty conflicts are very provocative, inflammatory kind of values conflict unsolved; they are a primary promoter of emotional and legal re/divorce. The basic dynamic is: one person feels hopelessly caught in the middle of two or more valued people who each demand or "deserve" being attended to "first", now. These conflicts almost always bring out the deepest personal insecurities, needs, and sensitivities in typical co-parents, minor and grown kids and kin. This makes them particularly hard to resolve. Findings by Acock and Demo (1994); and Demo and Acock (1996) provided strong support that family conflicts play a pivotal role. Adolescents are drawn into conflicts, feel caught between parents and are either pressured to take side or try to remain close to both parents and experience loyalty conflict.

Shame-based children who are terrified of being rejected and left alone according to Gerlach (2001), can ceaselessly demand their parents' primary support and attention. Others are numb, pleasant, and accommodating, believing they do not deserve and should not expect nurturing anyway. Such kids often meet new stepparents' offers of nurturing friendship with protective indifference, distrust, and even hostility, baffling everybody. Others can vibrate with neediness and clinging dependence. Any of these reactions normally create powerful loyalty conflicts in and between the kids' stepfamily's conflicts in and between the kids' stepfamily's homes. Stepkids naturally wanted to test rules and authorities in their new home family to test and re-test the new couple to see "is this family safe, or will the new couples split (and devastate me), too"? (Andersen, 2001).

The last variable that is considered in this study is spousal marital relationship. The success of stepfamilies depends on a number of factors, especially the quality of the new marriage. If the new spouses begin having difficulties with their own relationship, that will affect nearly every aspect of family life, including how the children fare (Bantam, 1999). This assertion is supported by the study of Brown-Brett (1993), which found that marital conflict was a powerful predictor in adolescent behaviour problems in stepfamilies.

Couples in stepfamilies have many conflicting forces that can weaken their relationship. For

example, the healthy development of the new marriage often suffers with the premature presence of children, as is often the case in remarriages. The demands of childrearing may distract from, if not interfered with, the development of a healthy marital relationship. For example, time for each other is short circuited by other family duties; every one may feel uneasy and trapped (Atwood, 1990).

In addition, parents often feel greater loyalties to their children because they have had a relationship with them for much longer time. It is common for each spouse to put his or her own children's interest first. It is often in an effort to compensate for the trauma children experience when there is a divorce or death. But when the children's interests are first, the spouses' children are found somewhere down the list, and this according to Harley (2001) and Sposata (2001) is a formula for marital disaster. A study by Coberly (1995) indicated that husbands in remarriage homes where their own children are present most time tend to have higher marital adjustment. This includes both simple blended (when only one partner has children) and complex blended (where both partners have children) family. While wives in simple blended families where the children are hers, reported marital adjustment than did wives in complex blended families.

However, Pasley (1993) opined that it is not the presence or absence of children per se which affects marital quality. Instead a key to marital relationship is likely the dynamics of interaction between spouses and between the parent or stepparent and child around child-related issues. A number of studies support the conclusion regarding the importance of spousal and parent-child interaction to understanding the marital relationship in stepfamilies. For example Pasley (1993) reported that the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship is a strong indicator of marital quality.

Money, frequently cited as the biggest source of stress in family life, is often and even more challenging matter for members of the stepfamilies. Husbands and wives often have differing attitudes and beliefs about family finances. In a remarriage however, each partner contributes not only his or her own beliefs about money to the new relationship, but also past financial experiences and established habits of spending and saving money. It can be a major challenge for remarried spouses to merge their ideas into a

system that is acceptable to both parents (Coleman and Ganong, 1989). It is the opinion of Burgayne and Morison, (1997) that, if partners insist upon retaining the methods of handling money and making financial decisions that they used in other relationships, they may experience friction with their new spouses. Tension is especially likely if financial problems were a contributing factor in a previous divorce.

In addition, changes in income or expenses in the family will likely affect the financial situations of the households in which former spouses or non-residential children live. For example, additional money for the children's dental care may be requested by the custodian parent at the same time the non-custodian parent incurs the expense of repairing his roof. The cost of the dental care, combined with the roof bill may present a real financial challenge to the non-custodian parent (Lowen and Dolan 1988). However, research has shown that families with a higher income function better as stepfamilies (Engel, 1998). This makes sense as having more money helps eliminate a significant source of tension in the stepfamily. It can also reduce friction between households, because there is more money available for the support of children and former spouses. However, when households have limited financial resources, the potentials for tension and conflict increases.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of present study was to investigate the contributions of parenting style; communication; quality of relationship with non-residential kin; loyalty conflict and spousal marital relationship to the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship.

Research Questions

The following two research questions were investigated in the study:

- (1) What is the joint effect of all the factors (parenting style, communication, relationship with non-residential kin, loyalty conflict and spousal marital relationship) on the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship?
- (2) What is the separate effect of all the independent variable (parenting style, communication, quality of relationship with non-residential kin, loyalty conflict and

spousal marital relationship) on the dependent variable (quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship).

METHOD

Design

The study adopted survey research design using the ex-post-facto type. The researchers were interested in knowing the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable without necessarily manipulating the independent variables.

Participants

The population of this study comprised of all stepfamilies in Cross River State, Nigeria. Simple random sampling was used to select 400 stepfamilies. The participants were made up of 186 stepfathers and 241 stepmothers. Their ages ranged between 20 and 58 years. The mean and standard deviation of the sample's age were 32.6 years and 3.69 years respectively.

Instrument

Two instruments were utilised in this study.

Stepparent and Stepchild Relationship Quality Questionnaire (SPSCRQ²): The SPSCRQ² developed by the researchers was used to assess the quality of relationship that the stepparent and stepchild maintain, based on self-report responses to 16 items. Participants responded by indicating their agreement to each of the 16 items (for example tolerance level, Interpersonal communication) using a six point scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 6 (excellent).

The SPSCRQ² has demonstrated high internal consistency with Rulon split halves of 0.98.

Stepparent and Stepchild Relationship Questionnaire (SPSCRQ): The SPSCRQ (Stepparent specific) also developed by the researchers has two sections-A and B. Section A seeks demographic information from respondents. Whereas, section B has five subsections -A, B, C, D and E. Subsection A has 19 items that assess parenting style; B has 15 items that assess communication style; C has 18 items that assess relationship with non-residential kin; D has 14 items that assess loyalty conflict; and E has 15 items that assess spousal relationship. Partici-

pants (stepparents) responded by indicating their level of agreeableness to each of the item statements using a four-point scale ranging from (1 – strongly disagree to 4 – strongly agree). The subsections of the scale have also demonstrated a high internal consistency with Rulon split halves of 0.75, 0.82, 0.79, 0.76 and 0.90 respectively.

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered to the participants by the researchers. The instruments were collected immediately after completion. The exercise lasted for two weeks. The nature of the study as well as the number of items contained in each of these questionnaires accounted for the delay in the completion and collection of the questionnaires.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed with Pearson Product Movement Correlation and Multiple regression. Multiple regression was used to find out the combined and relative contributions of the five independent variables (parenting style, communication, quality of relationship with non-residential kin, loyalty conflict and spousal marital relationship) to the prediction of the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship.

RESULTS

The present study addressed two issues. One of the issues was to know the extent of the contribution of parenting style, communication, and quality of relationship with non-residential kin, loyalty conflict and spousal marital relationship to the prediction of the stepparent and stepchild quality of relationship. The second issue of concern was to find out the variable that made the greatest significant contribution to the prediction of the stepparent and stepchild quality of relationship. The results of the data analysis that provided answers to the research questions are presented below.

The results of the data analysis indicating the mean, standard deviation and inter correlation among the variables in the study are shown on table 1.

The intercorrelation coefficient among the five independent variables revealed the following results: parenting style and relationship with non-

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables

Variables	No.	SD	Quality of relationship	Parenting style	Communication	Relationship with non-residential kin	Loyalty conflict	Spousal marital relationship	
Quality of relationship	400	62.7925	15.24995	1.000	.010	.279*	-.262*	-.459*	-.038
Parenting style	400	49.9925	28.38135	.010	1.000	.077	.179*	.111*	-.014
Communication	400	43.1275	5.63032	.279*	.077	1.000	.095	-.008	.172*
Relationship with non-residential kin	400	37.4775	6.52387	-.262*	.179*	.095	1.000	.443*	.302*
Loyalty conflict	400	30.8250	6.74783	-.459*	.111*	-.008	.443*	1.000	.329*
Spousal marital relationship	400	37.6250	4.89687	-.038	-.014	.172*	.302*	.329*	1

residential kin was positive and significant ($r = .179$); parenting style and loyalty conflict was also positive and significant ($r = .111$). Communication and spousal marital relationship was positive and significant ($r = .172$). Loyalty conflict and spousal marital relationship was positive and significant ($r = .329$). Relationship with non-residential kin and loyalty conflict was positive and significant ($r = .443$). Relationship with non-residential kin and spousal marital relationship was equally positive and significant ($r = .302$). Again result revealed significant positive relationship between communication and the quality of relationship ($r = .279$). However, results indicated a significant negative relationship between relationship with non-residential kin and the quality of relationship ($r = -.262$), and between loyalty conflict and the quality of relationship ($r = -.459$).

Going by the result presented in table 2, the five independent variables (parenting style,

communication, relationship with non-residential kin, loyalty conflict and spousal marital relationship) as a block yielded a coefficient of multiple regression (R) of .307 and a multiple correlation square of .298. This shows that 29.8% of the total variance in the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship of participants is accounted for by the combination of the five variables. The table also indicated that analysis of variance of the multiple regression data produced an F-ratio value significant at 0.05 level ($F(5, 399) = 34.952$; $P < 0.05$).

From the results in table 3, four of the five independent variables (communication, relationship with non-residential kin, loyalty conflict and spousal marital relationship) made significant individual contribution to the prediction of the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship, while (parenting style) did not. The results indicated that the following beta

Table 2: Summary of multiple regression analysis between the independent variables and the dependent variable

Multiple R	= .554	Multiple R Square	= .307
Multiple R ² (Adjusted)	= .298	Standard error estimate	= 12.77289

Source of variation	df	Sum of squares	Mean squares	F-Ratio	P
Regression	5	28511.936	5702.387	34.952	<.05
Residual	394	64279.841	163.147		
Total	399	92791.777			

Table 3: Relative Contribution of the independent variables to the prediction of the quality of the stepparent stepchild relationship

Predictor	Unstandardised coefficient		Standardised coefficient	T-Ratio	P
	B	SEB	Beta		
Parenting Style	3.463	6.852	.064	1.502	>.05
Communication	.721	.023	.266	6.198	<.05
Relationship with non-residential kin	-.316	.116	-.135	2.800	<.05
Loyalty conflict	-.989	.019	-.438	-9.052	<.05
Spousal marital relationship	.317	.143	.102	2.213	<.05

weights, which represented the relative contribution of the independent variables to the prediction, were observed. Parenting style ($\beta = .064$; $t = 1.502$; $P > 0.05$); communication ($\beta = .266$, $t = 6.198$; $P < 0.05$); relationship with non-residential kin ($\beta = .135$; $t = 2.800$; $P < 0.05$); loyalty conflict ($\beta = .438$; $t = 9.052$; $P < 0.05$) and spousal marital relationship ($\beta = .102$; $t = 2.213$; $P < 0.05$). Although, four variables made significant relative contribution to the prediction of the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship, communication was the most potent predictor.

DISCUSSION

The results revealed that with the exception of parenting style, communication, relationship with non-residential kin, loyalty conflict and spousal marital relationship are potent predictors of the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship. The magnitude of the relationship among the independent variables in predicting the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship is reflected in the values of coefficient of multiple regression (.307) and in multiple R – Squared adjusted (.298) as shown in table 2. Thus it could be said that 29.8 per cent of the total variance in the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship is accounted for by the combination of parenting style, communication, relationship with non-residential kin, loyalty conflict and spousal marital relationship. The F-ratio value of 34.952, which is significant at 0.05, further attested to the fact that the predictive capacity of the independent variables could not be attributed to chance factor.

Considering the extent to which the five independent variables contributed to the prediction of the dependent variable, it could be inferred from table 2 that communication is the best predictor of the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship. The result of the correlational analysis in table 1, show that relationship with non-residential kin and loyalty conflict have negative relationship with the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship. This means that higher relationship with non-residential kin and loyalty conflict scores are inversely correlated and higher communication scores are correlated to the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship.

This result is not surprising. Couples in remarriage rank outside family (relationship with

non-residential kin) as the third major problem they face. The findings of the present study corroborate the finding of Ahrons and Wallish (1987), Ruffin (1991) and Seltzer (1991) that remarriage reduces the interaction between former spouses around childrearing concerns. The findings of Furstenberg and Nord (1985) and Seltzer (1991) lend additional support to the present findings that remarriage reduces the frequency of visitation between non-residential parents and children. The result further corroborates the assertion of Gerlach (2002) that family loyalty conflicts are very provocative, inflammatory kind of values conflict. If not resolved they are a primary promoter of emotional and legal divorce. The present findings, strengthen the findings of Acock and Demo (1994); and Demo and Acock (1996) that family conflicts play a vital role. Adolescents are drawn into conflicts, feel caught between parents and are either pressured to take side or try to remain close to both parents and experience loyalty conflict.

The result that communication is a most potent predictor could be attributed to the importance of communication in parent-child relationship. The stepparent and stepchild relationships are bound to be full of conflicts because of lack of adequate and effective communication between them. More so, as De Matto (1999) rightly pointed out, lack of communication is related to behavioural problems in young people. Supporting the positive impact of communication in stepfamily relationships, Horkey (2002) recommend open communication as a component that can make members to be proud of belonging to a stepfamily. As indicated in table 1, communication has a positive correlation with the quality of the stepparent and stepchild relationship. And as reported by Visser and Visser (1979) that a stepparent who encourages his or her stepchild to talk about their feelings and listens to them regularly and repeatedly is viewed positively and a close relationship is likely to develop.

Implication of Findings

A number of implications have emerged from the results of the present study. A stepfamily needs to develop a coherent sense of itself including internal rules and also develop viable rules regarding relations with non-custodian

parents and other kin and with siblings living with former partners. A way of handling loyalty conflict is by providing ample opportunity, time and energy for the expression of individual concerns (e.g. weekly meetings, for the airing of personal feelings and thoughts). The spousal marital relationship requires nurturing if the stepparent and stepchild relationship is to blossom. This could be achieved by encouraging spouses to set aside weekly time along with daily quiet time to spend alone. Also, encouraging couples to maintain open communication, by keeping each other informed and involved in the daily activities of the household, could have a balming effect on stakeholders in the stepfamily.

People in helping profession particularly counselling psychologists, social workers and family therapists have crucial role to play in this regard. They can develop intervention programmes for people in this category. Such intervention should centre on relationship enhancement, communication skills and conflict resolution. With exposure to such interventions, it is hoped that stepparents and stepchildren would be able to handle their relationships better and thereby improve the quality of such relationship.

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