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NATIONAL MEETING DATES

September 20-24, 2010

Annual Session and Exhibits, Portland, Maine

September 26-30, 2011

Annual Session and Exhibits, Albuquerque,
New Mexico

September 24-28, 2012

Annual Session and Exhibits, Columbus, Ohio

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Difficulties Experienced Among Newly Remarried Elderly Couples

Brian Higginbotham, Katie Henderson Reck, and Nancy Brooks

There is limited research on relationships and later-life transitions. This study assesses remarriage difficulties experienced by elderly remarried couples. The study sample was comprised of 192 couples with at least one spouse over the age of 60, and the union was not a first marriage for either individual. The areas of greatest difficulty for both husbands and wives were: couple expectations, organizing and participating in stepfamily events, reacting to children's emotions, and trust with stepchildren. Husbands and wives had relatively similar ratings of perceived difficulty for the majority of the 52 topics covered. Implications for practice, research, and using validated measurement tools are discussed.

Introduction

The elderly population is one of the most rapidly growing segments within the United States with approximately 12.1% of the population over the age of 65 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). It is unclear how many of these individuals will undergo a marital transition in any given year, but census data indicate approximately 15% of men, and 17% of women over the age of 60 have been, or are currently remarried (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). As the “baby boomers” age, this cohort is expected to experience divorce, widowhood, cohabitation, and remarriage more than any other generation (Ganong, Coleman, McDaniel, & Killian, 1998; Lambert, n.d.). It is assumed that these late-life relational transitions introduce new challenges to satisfying relationships, specifically due to the concurrent expectations of and interactions with ex-partners, adult children, and adult stepchildren (Gabe & Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Although the Census Bureau (2006) estimates the number of remarriages, published statistical figures underestimate the presence of stepfamilies among the remarried elderly. The *Encyclopedia of Marriage and the Family* (Levinson, 1995) defines a stepfamily as consisting of at least one minor child living with a biological parent and their spouse, or with a stepparent who is not the child's biological parent. The same definition is used to determine the number of stepfamilies by the Census Bureau (Kreider, 2005). According to this definition, elderly couples who remarry and have children under the age of 18, who are living in the same household, are counted; however, families who create adult stepfamilies, with children who are over the age of 18 and/or children not living in the household, are not counted. Therefore,

the exact number of stepfamilies including the elderly is likely much higher than current government estimates of remarriage (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008).

As people age they may face specific challenges such as the loss of a spouse, divorce, reduced finances, health issues, and dealing with adult children (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Lambert, n.d.). Existing empirical work with stepfamilies rarely controls for age, which questions the possibility of irrelevance for elderly cohorts who aren't raising young (step)children. Yet, there is ample theoretical rationale for why elderly couples who remarry may still face unique difficulties. Difficulties associated with the creation of any relationship are often tied to the symbolic meaning held by the individuals involved.

Symbolic interaction theory assumes that how one defines a situation helps to explain the associated problems and what actions and solutions should be undertaken (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). In the case of elderly remarried couples, the couple may see remarriage as “seizing the day” or insuring companionship (Gabe & Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

Adult children, on the other hand, may see the remarriage as a threat to their inheritance or an act of disrespect to their deceased parent's memory. Consequently, remarriage may create unanticipated tension, conflict, and difficulties for elderly remarried couples. Not only do they have to deal with the expectations and challenges of being a new spouse, they must also deal with the challenges arising from being a parent and/or stepparent to adult children.

In a previous study, 26 mid-life couples were administered the QCS to determine difficulties within their stepfamilies (Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent,

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& Blais, 2004). The mean age for men was 41 years and the mean age for women was 38 years. The study highlighted the importance of communication skills for men and women. However, they also found a significant relationship between the presence of children from a previous union and the difficulties experienced by the male spouse. These previous findings assisted in understanding stepfamily difficulties, but it is still unknown what specific difficulties elderly couples with stepchildren not living in the home, would report. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature.

Purpose

Research on elderly populations has increased over the past decade but large gaps in the literature still persist. There is limited research on the additional challenges elderly populations encounter when remarrying. This study seeks to document specific difficulties experienced by elderly couples who have recently remarried. Research is needed to inform and improve the work of educators teaching skill building programs to this growing population.

Method

The Questionnaire used in this study, Assess the Difficulties of Couples in Stepfamilies (QCS), is the only known instruments to identify potential problems experienced by couples in stepfamilies (Beaudry, Parent, Saint-Jacques, Guay, & Boisvert, 2001). The QCS is made up of four subscales: difficulties associated with the social and family dimension; difficulties associated with the role of spouse; difficulties associated with the role of parent; and difficulties associated with the role of stepparent. In the latter two subscales, the QCS questions concerning (step)children are not age specific and can be answered by individuals with adult or minor children. Individuals without (step)children skip these questions.

Participants were selected from marriage licenses in a western state. Surveys were mailed to 4,886 remarried couples, and 1,086 were completed and returned by wives and 943 by husbands. Of those returned, 192 couples with complete datasets were marriages with at least one spouse over the age of 60. Ages of grooms ranged from 48 to 94 (mean = 68.8; median = 67.0; SD = 7.9) and brides 29 to 90 (mean = 61.3; median = 61.0; SD = 10.3). The number of marriages ranged from 1 to 7. Income ranged from less than \$10,000 to over \$100,000 (median = \$50,001-\$60,000). The majority of respondents were Caucasian (groom = 96.0%; wife = 95.7%). Years of education ranged from 8 years to 17 years (groom mean = 14.3; wife mean = 13.7). Seventy-seven percent of men and 72% of women reported having children from a

previous relationship. Six percent of couples had minor children (< age 18) and 9% had adult children (> age 18) living in their home.

Findings

Table 1 presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and ranking of the 52 questions in the QCS for both husband and wife participants. The t-values identify several significant gender difference. Mean scores of difficulties for both husbands and wives were relatively low for this newlywed sample. In general, women reported greater levels of difficulty than men on each of the four subscales. Wives reported higher levels of difficulty on 38 of the 52 items, nine of which were statistically significant. Husbands reported higher levels of difficulty on 13 of the 52 items, with one being statistically significant.

The areas of greatest difficulty for both husbands and wives included: couple expectations (Q2 and Q3); organizing family events with an enlarged family (Q16); participating in family events in the context of a stepfamily (Q19); reacting to children's emotions (Q24); and trust with stepchildren (Q38). The areas of least difficulty for both husbands and wives were: giving time to new spouse (Q4); mourning the previous relationship (Q5); ensuring the stepparent is viewed as a legitimate representative in the children's school and medical environment (Q11 and Q12); reconciling religious values (Q20); respecting the positive feelings children have for their biological father or mother (Q25); dealing with spouses criticism about the way children are raised (Q33); and disciplining spouse's children (Q39).

In light of the age demographics of the study sample, *childrearing*-related difficulties were not frequently reported. Few of the elderly remarried couples had children living at home and it is likely that those with nonresidential children did not have the need or opportunity to engage in many of the experiences captured in the parenting and stepparenting subscale (i.e., disciplining). However, despite the fact that over 90% of the sample did not have residential children, several of the *parenting*-related issues were still areas of difficulty (i.e., reacting to children's emotions and gaining stepchildren's trust).

For many of the items, difficulties reported by husbands and wives had relatively similar ratings (i.e., finances). However, there was a number of areas that had large differences. The largest were in ratings for difficulties within the social and family dimensions subscale was working together to resolve problems as a couple (Q1) ranked 1st for husbands and 6th for wives. In the role of spouse subscale, the greatest difference was having access to resources or people capable of understanding

their experiences as a stepfamily member (Q15) ranked 9th for husbands and 5th for wives. For the difficulties as a parent in a stepfamily subscale, explaining family reconstitution to children (Q23) ranked 2nd for husbands and 9th for women. Finally in the difficulties as a stepparent subscale, clearly understanding spouse's expectations with regard to the role of stepparent had the largest difference among husbands and wives (Q36) ranked 3rd for husbands and 12th for wives.

Summary and Implications for Extension

This study calls attention to a growing demographic phenomenon of remarriage difficulties in later life, presents some answers, and raises additional questions for future research and practice. Women reported significantly higher levels on nine of the 52 survey items, while husbands reported significantly higher levels of difficulty on only one. The finding of few significant differences is consistent with previous research, which identified more gender similarities than differences in difficulties experienced by remarried couples (Beaudry et al., 2001). The implication of this finding is that recruitment efforts and programmatic content for elderly stepfamilies need not be necessarily gender specific.

Both men and women are likely to benefit from topics in stepfamily education programs offered by Extension (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Husbands and wives gave the highest ratings of difficulty to many of the same topics: articulating expectations, organizing and participating in events in the context of an enlarged family, reacting to children's emotions, and establishing trust with the spouse's children. Communication training, which is a hallmark of most couple and relationship education (CRE) programs, would likely be a key skill that could help address many of the difficulties identified in this survey (cf. Beaudry et al., 2004).

Despite the age of the participants in the sample, issues related to (step) children were still some of the highest rated difficulties. Like young and midlife remarried couples, elderly couples have to balance the new with the old, and often struggle to maintain relationships stemming from blood and marriage (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). For biological parents in stepfamilies, the highest rated difficulties were dealing with "my spouse and my children competing for my attention and love," and "knowing how to react when my children express emotions about our stepfamily." For the stepparent, establishing trust and "feeling I have 'my' place in the family" were the most difficult. Few traditional CRE programs address these issues because most programs have been developed for young or midlife couples getting married for the first time. This does not mean elderly remarried couples would not benefit from learning skills taught in general

CRE curricula (i.e., communication, conflict resolution). However, to meet their unique relational needs they may benefit more by attending classes designed specifically for them (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

Extension educators and specialists could help to address these needs by offering more CRE classes, and creating more resources (i.e., factsheets) that address the difficulties facing elderly populations. Recruiting remarried couples of any age to CRE is difficult, educators may want to consider: a) easily accessible on-line options to convey relevant information and/or b) incorporating relationship and stepparenting content into existing programs already attended by elderly couples. An example of one programmatic merger implicated by this study is CRE's family financial education program typically offered by Extension family and consumer sciences educators. The men and women in the study sample rated "dealing with financial problems that arise from living in a stepfamily" as the third and fourth, respectively, most difficult aspect of their role as a spouse in a remarriage. In addition to the normative financial concerns of the elderly, the questions and complexities of inheritance and asset management introduced by remarriage (e.g., Ganong et al., 1998; Higginbotham, Anderson, & Lown, 2007), present opportunities for Extension professionals to identify and/or create financial education resources to address the unique relational concerns of the adult remarried stepfamily.

Scholars, practitioners, and educators still need to conduct research and demonstration programs to better understand and meet the needs of elderly remarried couples. Relatively little is known about elders who choose to cohabit rather than remarry later in life. Research is also needed to redefine stepfamilies beyond those with children under the age of 18 living in their household. Measurement tools may need to be created or modified to more closely reflect the current issues elderly couples are facing (i.e., retirement instead of childrearing). These measurement tools should not, however, completely ignore the possibility of on-going interactions and difficulties with young and adult children.

The significant role played by grandparents, the elderly stepfamily configuration and its potential effects on subsequent generations, present opportunity for further study. Research could be designed to determine how programming on topics identified in Table 1 (i.e., relationship skill building, financial education) could be adapted for the elderly, similar to the techniques commonly used for young first-time couples. It is recommended that additional studies using validated measurement tools be undertaken with elderly population samples.

Table 1. Summary of Paired Sample T-Tests for Husband and Wife Reported Level of Difficulty

| Subscale and Questions | Husband Mean (Std. Dev.) | Wife Mean (Std. Dev.) | Husband Rank | Wife Rank | t | |
|--|--|--------------------------|--------------|-----------|----------|--|
| <u>Difficulties with Social and Family Dimensions</u> | | | | | | |
| Q1 Working together to resolve our problems as a couple | 1.60 (.778) | 1.38 (.784) | 1 | 6 | -1.164 | |
| Q2 Accepting a different kind of life as a couple than I had imagined | 1.40 (.736) | 1.50 (.979) | 3 | 2 | -1.434 | |
| Q3 Clearly explaining to my spouse my expectations, needs and limits with regards to our relationship as a couple | 1.41 (.759) | 1.57 (.907) | 2 | 1 | -2.415** | |
| Q4 Giving time to my spouse | 1.28 (.678) | 1.31 (.758) | 7 | 9 | -0.355 | |
| Q5 Mourning my previous marital relationship | 1.26 (.679) | 1.34 (.815) | 9 | 7 | -0.945 | |
| Q6 Devoting time to our life as a couple | 1.30 (.792) | 1.32 (.805) | 6 | 8 | -0.253 | |
| Q7 Having friends in common | 1.39 (.764) | 1.47 (.845) | 4 | 5 | -1.118 | |
| Q8 Accepting the presence of a former spouse in my life as a couple | 1.27 (.741) | 1.48 (.967) | 8 | 4 | -2.027** | |
| Q9 Being recognized as a couple by each of our families of origin | 1.39 (.907) | 1.49 (.999) | 5 | 3 | -1.018 | |
| <u>Difficulties with the Role of Spouse</u> | | | | | | |
| Q10 Having to function in society as a stepfamily | 1.23 (.594) | 1.27 (.764) | 5 | 8 | -.41 | |
| Q11 Ensuring the stepparent (me or my spouse) is viewed as a legitimate representative in the children's school environment | 1.11 (.538) | 1.00 (.000) | 12 | 13 | 1.626 | |
| Q12 Ensuring the stepparent (me or my spouse) is viewed as a legitimate representative in the children's medical environment | 1.09 (.526) | 1.02 (.125) | 13 | 12 | 1.217 | |
| Q13 Dealing with legal problems that arise from living in a stepfamily | 1.13 (.522) | 1.08 (.315) | 11 | 10 | 1.157 | |
| Q14 Dealing with the financial problems that arise from living in a stepfamily | 1.15 (.725) | 1.29 (.683) | 9 | 5 | -1.698* | |
| Q15 Having access to resources or people who are capable of understanding the difficulties I am experiencing as a member of a stepfamily | 1.49 (.608) | 1.60 (.851) | 1 | 1 | -0.965 | |
| Q16 Organizing family events in the context of an enlarged family (former and new family, grandparents, etc.) | 1.18 (.632) | 1.26 (.725) | 8 | 9 | -1.306 | |
| Q17 Sharing spaces in the house with different members of the family | 1.26 (.785) | 1.29 (.919) | 4 | 7 | -0.365 | |
| Q18 Dealing with prejudices regarding stepfamilies | 1.37 (.891) | 1.43 (.984) | 2 | 2 | -0.672 | |
| Q19 Participating in family events in the context of a stepfamily | 1.13 (.539) | 1.07 (.466) | 10 | 11 | 2.293** | |
| Q20 Reconciling my religious values with my life in a stepfamily | 1.18 (.490) | 1.29 (.694) | 6 | 6 | -1.519 | |
| Q21 Showing affection to my spouse in front of the children | 1.18 (.604) | 1.35 (.799) | 7 | 3 | -2.398** | |
| Q22 Managing money in the context of a stepfamily | <u>Difficulties as a Parent in a Stepfamily</u> | | | | | |
| Q23 Explaining family reconstitution to my children | 1.31 (.841) | 1.21 (.771) | 2 | 9 | 1.062 | |
| Q24 Knowing how to react when my children express emotions about our stepfamily (sadness, anger, etc.) | 1.44 (.929) | 1.40 (.890) | 1 | 2 | 0.444 | |
| Q25 Respecting the positive feelings that my children have for their father or mother | 1.11 (.538) | 1.16 (.672) | 11 | 10 | -0.772 | |
| Q26 Dealing with the negative feelings my children have for their father or mother | 1.27 (.103) | 1.29 (.710) | 4 | 3 | -0.159 | |
| Q27 Reconciling the way my spouse and I feel about raising children | 1.12 (.458) | 1.22 (.744) | 10 | 8 | -1.23 | |
| Q28 Dealing with my spouse and my children competing for my attention and love | 1.25 (.795) | 1.48 (1.033) | 5 | 1 | -1.843* | |
| Q29 Supporting my spouse when he or she deals with my children | 1.10 (.569) | 1.26 (.835) | 12 | 6 | -1.743* | |
| Q30 Understanding what my spouse expects of me as a parent | 1.12 (.569) | 1.16 (.649) | 9 | 11 | -0.629 | |
| Q31 Dealing with the presence of my children's father or mother in my current family life | 1.30 (1.011) | 1.26 (.836) | 3 | 5 | 0.244 | |
| Q32 Dealing with the fact my spouse criticizes the way I act with my children | 1.16 | 1.24 | 7 | 7 | -0.869 | |

Table 1. (Continued) Summary of Paired Sample T-Tests for Husband and Wife Reported Level of Difficulty

| Subscale and Questions | Husband Mean (Std. Dev.) | Wife Mean (Std. Dev.) | Husband Rank | Wife Rank | t |
|---|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------|
| Elderly Remarried Couples 2 | | | | | |
| Q33 Dealing with the fact that my spouse criticizes the way my children are being raised | (.616) 1.06 | (.844) 1.07 | 13 | 13 | -0.256 |
| Q34 Dealing with the fact that my children and my spouse argue | (.408) 1.16 | (.328) 1.11 | 6 | 12 | 0.574 |
| Q35 Accepting that my family is different from that which I had imagined | (.660) 1.13 | (.416) 1.27 | 8 | 4 | -1.826* |
| Difficulties as a Stepparent | | | | | |
| Q36 Clearly understanding my spouse's expectations regarding my role as a stepparent | (.507) 1.21 | (.726) 1.14 | 3 | 12 | .942 |
| Q37 Dealing with the presence of the father or mother of my spouse's children and his or her family | (.600) 1.19 | (.535) 1.26 | 5 | 6 | -0.614 |
| Q38 Establishing a relationship of trust with my spouse's children | (.735) 1.34 | (.880) 1.61 | 1 | 1 | -1.635 |
| Q39 Disciplining my spouse's children | (.821) 1.04 | (1.121) 1.04 | 17 | 16 | 0.000 |
| Q40 Feeling I have "my" place in the family | (.202) 1.20 | (.202) 1.61 | 4 | 2 | -2.794** |
| Q41 Adapting myself to my spouse's children's schedule with regards to custody and visits | (.572) 1.06 | (1.100) 1.10 | 16 | 13 | -0.389 |
| Q42 Feeling my spouse's support when I deal with his or her children | (.433) 1.07 | (.592) 1.20 | 15 | 8 | -1.264 |
| Q43 Dealing with the negative feelings my spouse's children have for their mother or father | (.328) 1.11 | (.683) 1.17 | 11 | 11 | -0.504 |
| Q44 Making direct requests to my spouse's children without using him or her as an intermediary | (.610) 1.11 | (.643) 1.24 | 12 | 7 | -1.069 |
| Q45 Accepting that my family is different from that which I had imagined | (.458) 1.16 | (.816) 1.33 | 6 | 5 | -1.646 |
| Q46 Living with children whose values and lifestyles are different than mine | (.621) 1.22 | (.764) 1.44 | 2 | 4 | -1.502 |
| Q47 Accepting the positive feelings I have for my spouse's children | (.737) 1.10 | (1.072) 1.03 | 14 | 17 | 0.893 |
| Q48 Accepting the negative feelings I have for my spouse's children's father or mother | (.548) 1.14 | (.183) 1.20 | 8 | 10 | -0.553 |
| Q49 Knowing how to react when my spouse's children express positive feelings about me | (.606) 1.10 | (.571) 1.08 | 13 | 14 | 0.241 |
| Q50 Knowing what to do when my spouse's children express negative feelings about me | (.436) 1.15 | (.277) 1.46 | 7 | 3 | -2.145** |
| Q51 Showing affection to my spouse's children | (.656) 1.12 | (.946) 1.20 | 9 | 9 | -1.093 |
| Elderly Remarried Couples 3 | | | | | |
| Q52 Accepting the additional domestic tasks associated with my spouse's children | (.326) 1.12 | (.550) 1.08 | 10 | 15 | 0.531 |
| | (.379) | (.334) | | | |

Note. Paired sample t-values indicate significant differences between husbands and wives. * = p<.10; ** = p<.05

Through programming and research, Extension educators can be pioneers in identifying ways to positively impact the quality of life for remarried elderly individuals and their families. As Extension educators continue to serve families in communities across the country, the needs of the aging baby boomer generation will demand more attention. Among the various lifestyles entered into by this generation, remarriage among elders, which in most cases leads to the formation of adult stepfamilies, will require more consideration in curriculum development.

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