

Queer Stepfamilies and Diverse Pathways in Former Partner Interactions

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National Council on Family Relations
San Diego, CA 2018

Queer Stepfamilies

Post-Separation Vulnerabilities

- ▶ May be delegitimized by former partners/families through homophobic and/or belittling remarks (Titlestad & Pooley, 2014; Moore, 2016)
- ▶ Often have less legal standing, especially when the non-biological parent (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017)
- ▶ Parental rights enforced unevenly (Chauveron, Alavarez, & van Eeden-Moorefield, 2016)

Queer Stepfamilies

Successfully Negotiating New Stepfamily Life

- ▶ Are often able to create strong new families (van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2012)
- ▶ Are often child focused and create new rituals (Lynch, 2000)
- ▶ Positive communication with Parental and Stepparent/Former Partner dyads promote greater interfamily resilience (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004; Petren, Ferraro, Davis., & Pasley, 2017)

Family Systems Theory

- ▶ Recognizes the importance of interacting systems to family life (Cox & Paley, 1997)
 - ▶ Stepcouple
 - ▶ Former Partners/New-Former Partners
 - ▶ Parent-Child
 - ▶ Stepparent-Stepchild
- ▶ What occurs in each subsystem impacts all other subsystems and the larger system (Cox & Paley, 1997)
 - ▶ System spillover
 - ▶ Open/Closed Boundaries
 - ▶ Neither inherently good or bad, but can indicate family functioning (Nichols & Schwartz, 2014)
- ▶ Boundaries must be renegotiated in stepfamily formation (Jenkins, 2013)

Research Questions

- 1) *How do members of queer stepfamilies interact?*
- 2) *How do queer stepfamily members' interactions serve to negotiate boundaries with their former partners and families?*

Participants

- ▶ 6 queer stepfamilies ($N= 22$)
 - ▶ Relationship length: $M=12.67$ years; range= 19 years
 - ▶ Recruited from LGBT organizations in a Midwestern state
 - ▶ All > 5 years, which is considered the standard for successful family formation (Bray, 2008)
- ▶ Parents ($n= 12$)
 - ▶ Gender: 4 male; 8 female
 - ▶ Race: Black= 1; Hispanic= 2; White= 10
 - ▶ Age: $M= 45$ years; range= 22 years
- ▶ Children ($n= 10$):
 - ▶ Gender: Male= 5; Female= 5
 - ▶ Race: Asian= 1; Black= 1; Hispanic=2; White= 6
 - ▶ Age: $M= 16$ years; range= 10 years

Analysis (Charmaz, 2006)

- ▶ Grounded theory methodology
- ▶ Line-by-line open coding of the family as a whole to identify interaction patterns
- ▶ Constant comparison between each family
- ▶ Focused coding of the relationship of each family member with former partner(s)
- ▶ Created family maps to examine larger patterns
 - ▶ Applied interactional codes into processes
 - ▶ Observed boundary types formed through these processes
 - ▶ Clustered based on process

Findings: Interaction Types

Beneficial to Interfamily Wellbeing

- ▶ Getting Along for the Children
- ▶ Keeping a Normal Schedule
- ▶ Former Partner Encourages Stepfamily Interaction
- ▶ Using the Legal System to Formalize New Family Boundaries

Findings: Interaction Types

Hindering Stepfamily Wellbeing

- ▶ Talking Behind the Stepcouple's Back (General)
- ▶ Making Homophobic Remarks
- ▶ Creating a Negative Environment for the Child
- ▶ Perpetuating Control & Interference
- ▶ Interacting through a Heteronormative Legal System

Findings: New Boundary Formation

Predominately Open Boundaries

- ▶ All lesbian couples
- ▶ All partners with children had primary custody
 - ▶ Had no interactions with the custody system
- ▶ Still had many interactions with their former partners
 - ▶ All negative interactions
 - ▶ Kept open through parental dyadic spillover into relationship with their child

Findings: New Boundary Formation

Predominately Open Boundaries

“My [ex-husband] would take Joshua [my son] and then he was always bad mouthing me to Joshua, and Joshua would come back and he would bad mouth Joshua....so we had to kind of teach Joshua, like when he would come back he would shut down and we had to reprogram him.” -Stephanie (mother)

“[My aunt was] waiting for me to tell her that I didn't like my mom, like expecting me to say, ‘she's bad, she's awful, I hate [my stepmom]’ ... And I was just so pissed, and, you know, that was like the only time I felt like I was getting the whole, ‘they're gay' thing.”- Amanda (daughter)

Findings: New Boundary Formation

Struggling to Negotiate New Boundaries

- ▶ One lesbian-headed, one gay male-headed
- ▶ Most complex relationships
- ▶ Working towards more solid boundaries
 - ▶ Both beneficial & hindering interactions
 - ▶ Former partner(s) often interacted with them through a heteronormative legal system to maintain control

Findings: New Boundary Formation

Struggling to Negotiate New Boundaries

“[My ex] made me come to their house... I had to go into my old house and be there and it was like I couldn't get away from that relationship...When [my sons] were all young I would put them to bed and hold them and in one way it was nice, but in another way it was very controlling...it was like I was still in that relationship.”- Janice (mother)

Findings: New Boundary Formation

Established More Solidified Boundaries

- ▶ One lesbian-headed, one gay male-headed
- ▶ Still interacted with former partner/family
- ▶ Had become an individual family with little spillover
 - ▶ Both beneficial & hindering interactions
 - ▶ Actively negotiated mutually beneficial schedule
 - ▶ Stepfamily system used formal legalization (e.g., name changes) to set boundaries with former family members

Findings: New Boundary Formation

Established More Solidified Boundaries

“We did have that time [to ourselves]. We didn’t have to worry about going out tonight and that sort of thing...**We could schedule our weekends...and we really looked forward to our time with [my stepson].**” -Gabe (stepfather)

“[We] had to battle their birth mother at the time, which never really showed up in the court, until one day when she finally did show up. **We had a mediator and that might have been the saving grace, because she’s a heterosexual and what has she done for them?**” -Ana Maria (mother)

Discussion

- ▶ Stepfamilies are constantly undergoing change (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011); this study captured the processes through which they did so at different points in time
- ▶ Although open boundaries in our participants were characterized by negative interactions, open boundaries are not always negative; practitioners should work to create healthy relationships between former partners (Nichols & Schwartz, 2014)
- ▶ The most salient forms of relationship boundary negotiation were through interactions with children and court systems
 - ▶ Stepfamilies were formed in the context of a heteronormative culture (Jenkins, 2013; Moore, 2016)
 - ▶ Legal rights to children are often precarious in queer stepfamily relationships (Chauveron et al., 2016), which may especially hinder the creation of solid boundaries

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