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Relationship Issues in LDS Blended Families

Janet S. Scharman

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In recent years the topic of blended families has received growing attention in general fields of marriage and family study and research. However, incidence of this phenomenon in LDS culture in the United States remains virtually unaddressed. One possible explanation for this is that blended families often look very similar to first-marriage families. Some may therefore assume that there are no unique issues to address. My position is that indeed blended families are, in important ways, similar to intact families. But they are also significantly different in many aspects and may experience complications not present in a first-marriage family. Moreover, forces within LDS culture may strongly impact the remarriage experience.

There are a number of names given to describe this family type: blended, step, remarriage, bi-nuclear, or reconstituted families. However, none of these are perfectly satisfactory to all individuals. Some terms and expressions, such as “broken families,” render obviously negative connotations. In this paper, I will use the term “blended family.” A blended family is one in which at least one of the partners has one or more children from a previous relationship and there is continued contact with the children.

Not only has it been difficult to come up with terms which are acceptable to everyone, but legal ambiguities further confuse what the blended family relationship really is. A 12-year-old Utah boy presents a tragically clear example of this. His parents divorced
when he was an infant. Shortly after, his father moved to another state and remarried. His mother quickly remarried also. Over the years the boy had infrequent contact with his biological father and never knew his father's wife. His biological mother died and his father exercised his legal right to claim custody. I worked with this young boy to help him adjust to his impending move to live with his biological father, but the challenges did not end there. I also interviewed the stepfather. With tears in his eyes he said, “For 12 years I looked like this boy’s father; I acted like his father; and I loved him like his father. But now that his mother is dead, I have no legal relationship to him.”

When talking about blended families, it is almost always necessary to discuss divorce because one or both partners in second marriages are divorced. The divorce rate in the United States has remained fairly stable since 1980 at about 50% (Glick, 1989), although some predict that two-thirds of couples who marry for the first time in the 1980s can expect to divorce (Jenkins, 1990). Over the years, divorce statistics for LDS church members have typically been reported at approximately 20% below the national average. More recently, however, statistics indicate that the divorce rate for LDS church members (temple married and non-temple married) is between 40% to 50%, very close to the national rate (Jenkins, 1990).

No statistics are available about the rate of LDS blended families. In this study, it is assumed that they are similar to the national average. With more than 40% of all marriages being remarriages for one or both partners, the United States has the highest remarriage rate in the world (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). Approximately 1300 blended families with children under the age of 18 are formed every day (Eckler, 1988). Recent statistics (Ahlburg, 1992) suggest that one in three Americans is currently a member of a blended family. It is projected that by the year 2000 those numbers will increase to one in two.

These figures are important to understand for a number of reasons. First, the first-marriage family is the model used in most church auxiliary lessons, church media presentations, and talks given over the pulpit. But large numbers of members of the church
do not fit the first-marriage model. Rarely is reference given to other family types. When done, the comments often seem afterthoughts or token comments. To ignore reference to other family types tends to devalue them, or worse, suggests that they are unmentionable. Second, blended families often look like first-marriage families, and so their special challenges and dilemmas may go unrecognized. Third, helpful guidance and support may not be given if the need is not acknowledged.

**Challenges of Blended Families**

**Loss**

In most blended families there have been important losses for everyone, often because of death or divorce. Wallerstein and Berlin (1980) suggest that divorce may be the more difficult tragedy for the child to deal with psychologically. Death and the loss it represents is final; there is no chance that the individual will return. In that way death allows family members to put some closure to the family relationship as it previously existed. In contrast, in a divorce situation many children believe that there is always a chance, however slim it might be, that their two parents may some day get back together again. This is particularly true if the divorce was preceded by a series of separations. The children have recurring hopes that perhaps the problems can be repaired. On the other hand, death has a definite date and a clear cause regardless of how drawn out or how unexpected it may have been. Divorce is less clear, making it more difficult for children to acknowledge the finality of the act. With death there is usually some identifiable external cause such as a disease or an accident. In a divorce, children often assume the responsibility. For example, many children will feel, “If only I hadn’t misbehaved so often, this may not have happened.”

For previously divorced adults, the loss may be of their dream of a successful marriage. There is the loss of a marriage partner and of the structure, status, and stability that marriage often provides. When the marriage relationship ends, self-esteem may slip and courage to face the future alone also may quickly disappear. Often
there are significant financial losses, forcing individuals to make radical changes in the way they live.

One of the most difficult losses comes to the noncustodial parent who loses daily contact with his or her children (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). Upon remarriage, he or she often takes on the responsibility of the new spouse’s children. Not uncommonly, this daily interaction with stepchildren intensifies the pain of losing contact with their own children.

People not previously married who choose divorced or widowed partners may become stepparents before ever having been biological parents. They give up expectations and hopes for a different kind of marriage, which did not involve dealing with stepchildren and a former spouse. They face the loss of privacy and intimacy they had imagined would be part of their newlywed bliss. Immediately after saying “I do” they face an instant family, which may be different from their “dream” family. According to Hobart (1988), no matter how hard each try, it is unlikely that either the stepparent or the stepchild will ever achieve the kind of priority or love that the natural parent or child achieves.

Children of divorce often experience a great deal of loss as they see their own lives dramatically changed while typically feeling they are powerless to affect the decision. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) noted in their longitudinal study that only 1 in 10 children experienced relief when their parents divorced. Most wish their parents would stay together. Even if both parents have remarried, some children still have reconciliation fantasies even years afterward. Frequently, children lose daily contact with one parent. If they have to move, they lose contact with the familiar, stable aspects of their lives such as school, teachers, schoolmates, and neighborhood friends.

Although dealing with losses may carry with it a negative connotation, Visher and Visher (1982) suggested that great benefit may actually be afforded members of stepfamilies who have had to resolve numerous difficulties. Dealing with the loss of the original family and the transition into a second “blended” family can better equip people to cope with the changes and losses that occur
throughout life. Family members may better understand that interpersonal relationships require hard work and that emotional closeness is important and possible. Other personal strengths also may result such as increased ability to problem solve, negotiate, cope effectively, and respond flexibly (Coleman & Ganong, 1985).

**Unrealistic Expectations**

One of the most common challenges of blended families centers around the expectations of family members as they begin their relationship together. Lewis (1985) and Coleman and Ganong (1985) studied common beliefs held by many stepfamilies that interfere with their healthy functioning. One of the most common is that the woman must be the “glue” that holds the family together. Paris (1985) suggested that women may be most vulnerable to the myth that in a successful family everyone loves everyone else, and it is the mother’s responsibility to see that this happens. Unrealistic expectations can create misery in the stepfamily by allowing members to feel disappointed, inadequate, and even extremely discouraged.

In contrast to the adult perspective, children initially may have little desire to love or be loved by steprelatives. It is unrealistic to expect a child to accept as a parent an adult who is a relative stranger (Stuart & Jacobson, 1985). Cassell (1981) suggested that stepparents who define their role with their stepchildren as that of friend are usually the most satisfied and successful. This does not mean they have to be a constant buddy, but it does suggest extending support and empathy to a child as he or she grapples with complex feelings. Friendship is minimally threatening and allows the children time to get to know and respect the adult. In addition, Eckler (1988) stated that even though it may be hard, for many it is best to teach the child to love or to respect his or her natural parent, even if that parent has totally abandoned or rejected the child.

A surprise for many blended families is that sometimes when warm and loving steprelationships are established, children may experience loyalty conflicts (Visher and Visher, 1982). Bernstein (1988) studied the issue regarding the exclusivity of the parent
relationship. Society dictates that while it is acceptable to have more than one child, sibling, or grandparent, on the other hand, children, at least from their perspective, should have only one father and one mother. Increased caring for a stepparent, for example, may suggest to a child that he/she is abandoning or rejecting the biological parent.

Instant love and adjustment is not a realistic expectation for blended families (Paris, 1985). Integration takes time and depends on the age of the stepchildren and the length of time they have spent in the stepfamily household. Those who feel pressured to love another person immediately may miss the opportunity to relax and to determine if they really do like one another. Stern’s (1978) research indicates that it takes stepfathers at least one-and-one-half to two years to be accepted into a family, even with very young children. Eckler (1988) suggests that the process of working through obstacles and developing a loving relationship for middle-aged children typically takes from 3 to 5 years, and Papernow (1984) found that when older children are involved, a satisfactory integration process may require 5 to 6 years.

Knowing what to expect can be very helpful in dealing with the time required for the integration process. During this period, family members may experience much pain and anxiety, but it can be comforting to know that does not necessarily mean dysfunction or signal long-term problems.

Complexity of Relationships

Wood and Poole (1983) suggested that there are important structural features that distinguish blended families from first-marriage families. For example, a remarriage for most couples represents a fresh start, a second chance, a new beginning full of hope and enthusiasm. For children, however, the remarriage of a parent often signals an ending to their dream of having their parents work through problems and somehow reunite. The establishment of a new family unit can trigger feelings of sadness and loss. Thus, children and adults may begin their lives together as a blended family experiencing very different emotions and viewing their future in significantly different ways.
Defining the family unit often produces different results for different family members. For the parental partners, it is the couple and each set of children they have from a former marriage. For children, family relationships become much more complex as children may have a biological parent, stepparent, and stepsiblings living in another household. This often means they are members of two households moving back and forth. New family relationships may extend beyond to stepgrandparents, step-aunts and uncles, etc. Even the relationships within one household can be difficult as children experience jealousy, feelings of mixed loyalty, and adjustment to new norms. Events which typically are happy occasions for first-marriage families such as baptisms, mission farewells, and weddings can become awkward and uncomfortable for blended families. Individuals who under other circumstances may not associate with each other are drawn together because of a common interest in the children. Family members are often forced to learn new coping strategies to deal with the many stresses of blended family life.

**Couple Relationship**

In stepfamilies the parent/child relationship predates the couple bond. This can impact the couple in many significant ways, particularly when children work as distractors. Extensive research (Lutz, 1983; Amato and Ochiltree, 1987; Steinberg, 1987; Skeen, Covi, and Robinson, 1985) suggests that children often have difficulty dealing with the transitions required with divorce and remarriage. Not uncommonly, children are unhappy about the parent’s choice to remarry and may actively try to create some distance between the new couple. Problematic behavior may also be a way of testing limits or rules, and it sometimes represents an expression of anger, jealousy, or insecurity. Some children learn that acting out behavior often brings biological parents together as the adults work on solutions and options, a reward children may feel outweighs the negative consequences. As might be expected, it is not unusual for biological parents to feel caught between their children and their new spouse.

Many couples report a more satisfying marital relationship the second time around because of learning from previous mistakes,
improved communication skills, and choosing a more suitable partner. Even so, remarriages have a 50% greater probability of producing a divorce than first marriages (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). While children tend to be a unifying force in first marriages, the presence of stepchildren can be a destabilizing influence within remarriages and a major contributor to the greater rate of divorce. A nationwide study of 1,673 married individuals interviewed in 1980 and again in 1983 (White & Booth, 1985) indicated that there was a higher divorce rate among remarriages, but the higher rate was limited to families where there was at least one child in the household. The best predictor of remarriage success, these researchers say, may be the stepparent/stepchild relationship, not the couple relationship.

Visher and Visher (1990) indicated that in the midst of these obvious challenges, a strong couple relationship is a key element to the success of a blended family. Being willing to lock the door to have a private conversation or planning evenings alone together or weekends away from the children may not be luxuries but rather necessities in building the “couple strength” required in stepfamilies (Einstein and Albert, 1986). Einstein and Albert (1986) further suggested that a happy, cooperative couple presents a healthy model for children as well as provides a stable environment where good relationships between everyone can grow.

Successful Adjustment
Remarriage unquestionably presents families with many complexities and challenges. In spite of the difficulties, many families are able to successfully deal with the challenges, and they seem to have the following four common characteristics: (1) losses of all kinds have been mourned, (2) expectations are realistic, (3) satisfactory steprelationships are formed, and (4) the remarriage couple is unified.

LDS Specific Issues
All of the previous information refers to general blended family issues. The remainder of this paper deals with issues specific to LDS blended families and comes from a qualitative study conducted with 11 regular church attending LDS couples and their blended
families who live primarily in the Salt Lake City, Utah, area. This study is reported in greater detail in *Qualitative Study of Relationship Issues in Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Blended Families* (Scharman, 1992).

**Methodology**

**Rationale**

The bulk of the blended family research cited above is both quantitative in nature and used the first-marriage family as a model for comparison. The focus at the onset of many of these studies has been to examine and to quantify the deficits that blended families experience, and it is not clear that they have dealt with all or even most of the relevant aspects of blended family life. Because no research was found dealing specifically with the LDS subgroup, it has been unclear how membership in the LDS Church additionally impacts remarriage.

Qualitative methods of research offer the advantage of allowing issues and patterns to emerge as the research progresses without *a priori* expectations or necessary comparisons to other models which may, in fact, not be comparable. Therefore, qualitative research—specifically the model of naturalistic inquiry explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985)—seemed particularly appropriate for exploring LDS blended family issues.

**Participant Sampling**

Eleven couples (22 individuals) from the Salt Lake City, Utah, area were referred to the researcher by a “gatekeeper,” a knowledgeable individual familiar with qualitative research. Participants ranged in age from 33 to 49 years. Length of current marriage ranged from as short as 2 years to 13 years. All individuals participated in at least one temple marriage, currently held a church calling, and viewed themselves as active members of the LDS church. Nearly half of the individuals held prominent church positions in their wards. One of the males interviewed was in a bishopric and previously served as a stake president; two were elders’ quorum presidents; one was a scoutmaster, and one was in a young men’s presidency. One of the women was in a stake young women’s presidency, two were in ward young women’s presidencies,
and one was in a relief society presidency. Education level for both males and females ranged from some college experience to doctoral degrees.

Procedure and Data Analysis

The format of a given interview was not specifically predetermined but emerged as information was collected. To begin, one couple was interviewed together for approximately one hour following a general but flexible format. Several broad questions served as general stimuli to the discussion. The information derived from this initial couple interview established a basis for later interviews. Additional couples were interviewed, one at a time, to add more data and to discover gaps. Sample size was not designated beforehand but was determined when couples began repeating previously given information. The eleven hour-long interviews were transcribed from audiotapes, analyzed for content, and examined for themes using the “Constant Comparative Method” as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This method is a process in which information is collected and analyzed simultaneously. Data derived from one interview were compared with data collected from previous interviews. Through this process, categories or groupings of topics gradually evolved. In this study, no new information was generated after ten interviews suggesting that redundancy had been reached. Essentially all information provided in the tenth interview fit into categories already established from the previous nine interviews. That is, the list of questions was refined by the on-going process. With each new interview, questions were altered and new ones added to reflect issues articulated in later couple interviews. An eleventh interview was conducted to verify completeness. Moreover, follow-up interviews with the initial couples interviewed were conducted to validate that later findings were also common experiences for the initial interviewees.

Results and Discussion

Supports

Because all participants were active and participating members of the LDS church, it was not surprising that all of the couples talked about the strength and support they feel because of their
church membership. Their comments easily fit into three main areas: (1) Church teachings provide a focus for family life; (2) the Church organization provides a structure for carrying on the activities of family life; and, (3) the Church provides strength in dealing with the stressors of blended family life.

**Focus**

All participants talked of the value they place on their LDS membership. The church places strong emphasis on the importance of marriage and family, and this focus was viewed as helpful by many of the families, particularly when things were not going well. Typical comments of participants included the following:

- Because of the sacredness of the temple covenants, we put our family and marriage first, no matter what happens.

- I think church membership is a big help because that’s where our priorities are. I think it’s a big help with dealing with the children. It’s just a little better perspective of where we came from and where we’re going.

One woman said that her religious background helped her to stay in a difficult situation, even when she did not feel like remaining.

- I don’t think I could have pulled this off without the gospel. It’s really tough, you know. Kids have different habits and different ways of life, and you all come together and you try to work something out. There are times when I want to pull my hair out. There are times when I want to scream. And there are times when I want to walk away. But because of my gospel upbringing, I know that it’s worth it to go back in and tough it out and work through the problem and try to love these kids that maybe I don’t love right now.

**Structure**

The church organization and programs also provide a structure in which the blended family can function. Parents talked about the complexity of stepfamily life and the many different directions family members often find themselves going. Having a common plan to follow felt like a benefit to several of the families.

- Because of the church meetings and whatnot, everybody is on the same routine at least 1 day of the week.
The church is really a blessing when it comes to family home evenings, scripture reading, prayer. Those are all times we interact that maybe we wouldn’t otherwise. They have been helpful in other respects as well. I’d hate to try to do this without the gospel.

One stepfather appreciated the stability church membership offered.

Some people belong to clubs. You know, their lives center around roller skating, for example. Having that base there always gives people an anchor. We belong to the Church and that’s what the Church does for us, except that our anchor isn’t roller skating. It’s doing things like holding family home evenings and reading scriptures. It was an anchor for us when things were going rough. If nothing else, going to church on Sundays made a glue with each other when we were having real tough times. It made us associate with each other.

**Spiritual Guidance/Assistance**

One husband shared the concern he had had for a number of years that he would be able to meet a woman who would be a good match for him and with whom he would be able to share a happy married life.

I’d been praying to meet the right one, whoever she was. As a result of fasting and temple attendance, I was given a blessing of knowing what the feeling would be like when I met the right person. It was a distinct, very definitely defined revelation. I had never experienced that before, but I experienced it then and I remembered it... Shortly after I met her (his current wife) that feeling came and confirmed that we were meant for each other and that the Lord had selected her for me and me for her. That gave a great deal of strength to the marriage, knowing you have a spiritual confirmation of what you’re doing.

The word “extra” was often used in describing the help or support individuals felt because of their church membership. The following comments are from three persons:

I know Heavenly Father is recognizing our efforts and is giving us extra strength.

When you’re having problems, there’s extra support from the Church.

Extra strength, extra courage, extra everything comes from being members of this Church.

Participants said the Church provides a focus for their efforts, that the various programs provide a structure within which to build
family unity, and that comfort, guidance, and reassurance come through fasting and prayer. Numerous such positive comments were consistent with what might be expected from individuals who have chosen to continue active involvement in the Church.

**Challenges**

Given the apparent strong commitment to church membership and activity, the concerns and dilemmas expressed by these same individuals seem very significant. Six broad areas of challenges they faced as a consequence of their LDS background are summarized in the following discussion. A surprise for the researcher was that all couples interviewed, without prompting, discussed their single-life experiences prior to their current marriages. Strong feelings were associated with the experiences they related. Most of them discussed, in some detail, what it was like for them to be single in an LDS setting. It seemed difficult for individuals to separate their single adult experience from their current marriage experience. Therefore, the topic of Single Life will be included in the discussion along with five other areas which emerged during the interview process: Bad Marriages, Remarriage, Temple Sealings, Help From Ecclesiastical Leadership, and Individual Impact of Remarriage.

**LDS Single Life**

The topic of marriage is frequently and forcefully addressed by leaders of the church. In a recent church-wide fireside for adult singles, for example, Elder Marvin J. Ashton (Sheffield, 1992) stated:

> Marriageable women should not delay marriage because of career goals, educational desires, or unwillingness to change their lives. . . . To marriageable, mature men, I call them unto repentance. Do not procrastinate the day of your repentance. Believe us when we tell you there is someone for you and God will help you find her.

Clearly, marriage and family are highly encouraged. Additionally, there are numerous references from church authorities which link the concept of family and eternal life, and which strongly discourage ending a holy union. Without question, they would say that divorce should be considered only as a last resort. As previously stated, however, many LDS marriages do, in fact, end unhappily,
and those involved experience the same kinds of crises at the time of divorce as non-LDS individuals. What has not been addressed in the literature is the potentially stronger intensity of the pain LDS members may feel because of the deeper significance of what divorce often represents to them.

The LDS perspective is one of eternal family continuity. Active LDS members generally have a strong sense of a pre-existence, what their purpose in this life is, and where they are headed in an afterlife. Personal identity can be strongly tied with being part of a family, and, when the family structure is attacked, a person’s eternal identity can be threatened. To many, divorce means that the individual is off-track, deviating from the accepted plan, and no provisions are given for dealing with that in the hereafter.

Without fail, every couple interviewed for this study addressed the issue of being an LDS single adult, although no initial questions were asked to elicit responses on this topic. Every couple made a connection between their former single life and their current blended family experience.

For most participants, the topic of single life came up as they talked about their efforts to be active in the LDS church, while not being able to fit into the ideal of the happy first-marriage couple. Even though a blended family in many ways does not meet all the expectations symbolized by the church, it much more resembles the ideal than does a single-parent family or an adult member living alone. Perhaps having experienced both single life and marriage sensitized them to the challenges. One woman said,

It was really difficult to be single and be LDS. I felt like I didn’t fit anywhere. I was too old to be a single person anymore, and even though I had lots of really great friends in my ward, I just didn’t fit in. I wasn’t a couple any more. Everything in the Church was just so family-oriented.

One of the men shared similar sentiments:

There wasn’t any place for me any more. People didn’t know what to do with me even though they tried to be nice. I think they were uncomfortable involving me in their couple activities. . . I wanted to
scream in their faces: Hey, I'm the same guy I was before. I just happened to get divorced.

Participants talked of feeling lonely and isolated, believing that others perceived them as being strange, and feeling that ward members negatively evaluated them. One woman said,

The support system of the Church is just that, it's a support system. If it falls apart, you still are expected to be big enough and strong enough to be able to pack your own load anyway... When that support system isn't there, you've got to go it alone. I felt alone a lot in those situations.

Others related these painful feelings:

Single people [in the Church] experience the worst kind of isolation. I know the feeling because I was there. You're an outcast. You don't fit.

You become an unmentionable in society, in the Mormon society. You become expunged from the normal flow of Mormon life.

As soon as I was separated from my ex-wife, everybody wanted to know if I was sleeping with another woman. But nobody wanted to know if I was going to church, if I paid my tithing, if I was lonely and needed a friend. They were only interested in knowing if I was being immoral.

Not all of the negative feelings associated with being single came from other ward members or from external sources. Several participants talked of personal feelings of guilt. The following are two examples:

It is a struggle to be divorced and to have failed—because that's what it represents. That is the key word for me. Divorce is failure. If I look at my life, I realize that I have had a lot of successes. But I sure have this big failure, and it's right here in front of me every day.

You're taught all your life in the church that you're going to have this great marriage if you can just get to the temple. If you can just make it to the temple and get married there, then everything will be okay. Then, if the marriage goes bad, the implication is there's something wrong with you.
President David O. McKay's aphorism—"No other success can compensate for failure in the home" (1964, n.p.)—was frequently mentioned in connection with their feelings of failure in the face of divorce.

**Bad Marriages**

Some individuals talked about staying in personally destructive marriages too long because of not wanting to admit to failure in their homes and marriages; others wanted to avoid the stigma of divorce. The decision to divorce apparently was neither easy nor lightly made for any of the participants who initiated the process. The following are representative comments:

1. I kept thinking of the teachings. Life is just a split microsecond compared to eternity, and I thought I can endure anything. Of course, I tried. The pressure is there—you stay in your marriage no matter what. Then you wither up and you die.

2. I knew immediately that my first marriage wasn't going to last. But it was my temple marriage and I hung on far too long in that situation. It was a bad thing, but maybe I stayed in that bad marriage longer than was appropriate because of guilt, because of failing in that ideal.

**Remarriage**

Twenty-five percent of the participants in this study remarried within a year of the time of becoming single. The national average is 2.5 years. None explicitly stated that remarriage was a means for escaping an unhappy single life. However, some made statements suggesting a longing to recapture their "eternal family identity," such as this comment from one of the men:

1. I felt out of it, kind of disoriented... During Family Home Evening, we used to sing the song "Families Can be Together Forever." That's what I want—a family that can be together forever.

Others said they learned from past mistakes and wanted a loving relationship.

1. I learned so much from the mistakes I made the first time. I thought that if I had a second chance I could be a really good partner. I wanted that chance of experiencing a good family life. I wanted to be a good mother and a good wife. When I met this man, I knew that we could make it work.
**Temple Sealing**

Possibly one of the most confusing issues with which active LDS blended families must deal centers around temple sealings. While couples can receive a cancellation of sealing and subsequently enjoy an eternal marriage to another mate, no provisions are given for cancellation of children’s sealings. Regardless of the marital status, children remain sealed to both parents. There are no formal explanations given of how eternal family relationships will be for divorced and remarried families, and this leaves many feeling uneasy and discouraged, as is shown by these comments:

I don’t know how to explain the idea that families can be together forever. I love to have the fantasy that we—this new family—is the family that will always be together. We love each other, we’re trying very hard to be good parents. But I’m afraid it’s just a fantasy because my ex-husband wants the very same thing. The children are sealed to him and they’re sealed to me. You tell me how it makes sense.

How does the idea of eternal family work? There is no effort to explain that in the context of a blended family. So we form the best answers we can because the kids want to know. Every time they sing “Families Are Forever,” every time the issue comes up—Who are we going to be with? How does that work?—it’s a problem that others would not have to deal with. The whole concept of families being sealed together is a very tough issue.

I think being an LDS-blended family is more confusing for children, particularly when both parents have been previously married in the temple. The children are really getting some strange messages. A mother and father they’ve loved and a principle they’ve been taught, and they can’t figure out what’s going on. I mean, we go to church with our children, and our ex-spouses go to church with them, too, and I think it’s really hard for the children to understand. If families can be together forever, then why isn’t mine? And how come my parents are these good people going to church, but they didn’t stay together?

Related to this is the issue of husband and wife sealings. Women can be sealed to only one man, while men may be sealed to more than one woman. Since temple marriages are not automatically canceled at the time of a civil divorce, it is not unusual for an LDS woman to be legally married to a man who has a temple
sealing to his former wife. This often happens because it is the wife who must initiate a cancellation of sealing and follow through until it is completed. Generally, the feeling shared is one of insecurity, as noted in the following examples:

I have in this marriage finally found the man of my dreams. I am just so totally happy with him. But he has another wife that he is married to forever. It crosses my mind every second of every day.

My husband is still sealed to his first wife. I try not to think about this much, but sometimes it creeps into my mind and I can’t get rid of it. Wonder if she [first wife] lives this great life and in the end decides she really wants to be married to him in the eternities. Then I just get second place. . . I hate those thoughts. . . I wish I knew how it will all work out.

Since the rationale behind the procedures has not been clearly explained, confusion and frustration often result. Although identical procedures are not consistently followed, there are some very clear guidelines. The woman typically must apply for the cancellation only when she is ready to remarry in the temple. As part of the application a justification must be given why the first-marriage divorce took place, what measures were taken to keep the marriage together, and why it seems impossible that there is any future hope for its success. A letter of agreement from the former husband is requested to accompany the application, regardless of his current church standing. The guidelines strongly suggest a minimum one year waiting period for women from the date of divorce to the remarriage date. Until recently, a divorced male who chose to remarry had only to obtain a temple recommend; no waiting period was required. A lack of understanding about the procedures sometimes led to difficult feelings such as those expressed by one woman:

Sealings are a strange thing. I'm trying to go through a cancellation of sealing right now and I don't like the way it's done. I think that it's unfair that the women have to do it and the men don't have to do it. That's why it's taken us so long because I have such negative feelings about it. Men don't have to be interviewed, don't have to write the letters, don't have to dredge up all the past.
Help From Ecclesiastical Leadership

Many participants expressed an interest in the church organization and leadership helping them to understand and deal with their specific dilemmas. Often, however, they were hesitant to do so because of the negative feedback they received. One man shared this experience:

The regional representative made a statement in stake conference that about made me fall off my chair because he was talking about those of us who he hoped would be forgiven because we'd gotten divorces. Of course, we want to cherish marriage and we want to feel like you're going to stay in there, but there can be a tendency to go overboard... he didn't realize that for a lot there was no choice.

Another man talked about how he felt when he approached his ward leaders. Whether real or imagined, he was left with some uncomfortable perceptions.

Never in a million years would I have thought that I could be one of those divorced people, one of those who couldn't make his marriage work. It was hard enough for me to realize that I had personally failed, I had blown this temple marriage ideal... What made it even worse was when the church also treated me like I had blown it.

Several suggestions were offered by participants which they thought would benefit blended families, such as the following:

We need to take our church authorities and give them some counseling on how to counsel and how to get people help with professionals when they need it. It's not their fault if they don't know what's going on here. I'm not sure you can really understand it unless you've been through this remarriage stuff yourself.

Other suggestions included having the issue occasionally addressed in the various auxiliary lessons, creating manuals to help educate blended families and church leaders, establishing support groups, and having time-limited specialized courses (as is, for example, already done with teacher training, missionary preparation).

Individual Impact

In spite of the sometimes overwhelming challenges and frustrations experienced by these individuals, most report having learned from their experiences and believe their lives are moving in
a positive direction. While church membership may pose some difficult dilemmas, it has also been a source of support, as evidenced by this woman’s comment:

I don’t know what I would have ever done if I hadn’t been a member of the Church. It’s been my source of strength, my guiding light. With that perspective, I just know I couldn’t quit. Somehow I believed that I could make this blended family thing work.

Some participants perceive their difficulties related to divorce/death and remarriage to be strengthening. One father shared how he viewed his family’s experience as they have moved through major transitions.

My children—and I think her children—but at least my children are so much better off than they were in our first marriage. So, for all of us, even though we’ve had to go through the jolt of a divorce, I think we’re all better off. It’s hard: there’s no question. But at least for me, I’m clearer about what’s important to me. I work harder on relationships. I’m more appreciative of the good that comes my way.

Participants commented on challenges they felt because of their Church membership. The most frequently mentioned difficulty was being a single adult within the LDS setting. Couples also cited expectations about temple marriage, concerns with temple sealings, receiving ecclesiastical support, and the personal impact of the divorce/remarriage process.

Summary and Implications for LDS Therapists

1. As with all specialized groups, it is vital that therapists understand and are sensitive to issues that may be peculiar to that population. Although blended families in many respects look like and are like first-marriage families they also differ in many important ways. There is much more complexity as family decisions are impacted by former spouses and significant financial decisions are often dictated by others outside of the immediate family. In contrast to first marriages, the couple in a blended family is, at least initially, the weakest unit. Where children tend to be a unifying factor in first marriages, they are clearly the biggest challenge to marital contentment in remarriage.
2. Although families may request help with their current marriage, unresolved issues from the first family and associated losses may strongly impact current functioning and should be addressed.

3. Techniques that are often helpful in first-marriage families may be counterproductive in a blended family. For example, a healthy and productive intervention for dealing with discipline by a biological parent in a nuclear family may create more distance and ill feelings when carried out by a stepparent in a recent remarriage.

4. Couples report that their LDS Church membership provides help and support to them as they deal with the challenges of being in a blended family. But, for some, their beliefs also create dilemmas for which there are no clear-cut answers, particularly regarding the eternal family unit. Thus, dealing with the present and learning to accept ambiguity may be useful skills.

Conclusion

Remarriage and the blending of families brings with it many complexities and challenges which are common to LDS and non-LDS families alike. LDS membership appears to impact an individual's ability to cope with those challenges. In many ways the impact is positive as the Church provides spiritual strength, focus and goals, and a structure within which families can function. The LDS belief system also produces some dilemmas, as members have doctrinal questions about how their couple and family relationships fit into the larger theological scheme of things.

Final Comment

All participants in this study were willing and cooperative. For some the desire to participate seemed touched by a sense of urgency. Here are some examples. One of the men moved a bishopric meeting back one-half hour in order to accommodate my schedule and allow him to be interviewed. An elder's quorum president fit his interview in between ward visits. He talked about the interview with one of his families, and the couple requested that they also be allowed to participate. A woman participant called
after her interview and said a jogging partner and her husband
would like to be involved in this research. Towards the end of
another interview, a husband happened to mention that he was
missing his son’s ball game to be talking with me. I had been
previously unaware of the conflict and apologized. This was his
response:

Supporting my son with his games is important to me. But this is
important, too . . . It feels so good to have someone willing to address
these issues.

LDS blended families must deal with very difficult and
complicated issues, many of which they do not fully understand.
The couples in this study have been willing to take on the
challenge, and they want to do that within the framework of the
LDS Church. What they are requesting is to be accepted and
understood, to be assisted in helping and understanding themselves,
and to see structure within the Church to help that come about.

Janet S. Scharman is a licensed psychologist and is assistant director at
the Counseling and Development Center at Brigham Young University

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