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The Role of Rituals in the Management of the Dialectical Tension of “Old” and “New” in Blended Families

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In this study we examined how members of step- or blended families interact and develop their families by examining their successful and unsuccessful ritual enactments. Blended families provide a fertile context in which to study ritual adaptiveness and the possible relationship between successful enactment of rituals and their adaptability. Data were in-depth interviews with 53 members of blended families concerning their successful and unsuccessful ritual enactments. A qualitative/interpretive analysis indicated that blended families face an ongoing dialectical opposition between the “old family” and the “new family.” Blended family rituals are important communicative practices that enable blended family members to embrace their new family while still valuing what was important in the old family environment. The adaptive nature of rituals demonstrated the process of adjusting to the loss of the old family and to living in the new, blended family. Rituals that were successfully enacted were characterized by an ability to pay homage to both old and new families.

Although step- or blended families were once considered to be “alternative” or “nontraditional,” researchers now estimate that up to 35% of all U.S. children will be part of a blended family before they reach adulthood (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Glick, 1989). As of 1987, there were 4.3 million blended families with custody of minor children (Glick, 1989) and in 1991, nearly 10 million children under the age of 18 lived in blended families (Furukawa, 1994). The blended family is represented by multiple forms that defy simple definition; however, these are families in which “at least one of the adults has a child or children from a previous relationship,” (Ganong & Coleman, 1994, p. 8).¹ For example,

Ganong and Coleman (1994) summarized research on the complexity of blended families, noting that scholars have proposed up to fifteen blended family types. Much of the research literature on blended families has compared them to "traditional, nuclear families," finding that blended families are deficient in that they are structured and enacted differently than first-married families (e.g., Borrine, Handal, Brown, & Searight, 1991; Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Previous work also provides some understanding of structural differences between blended families and other family types, as well as some of the developmental processes of blended family formation (e.g., McGoldrick & Carter, 1989; Papernow, 1993). Others have contributed insights into the dynamics of spousal and parent/stepparent-child relationships and interaction (e.g., Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Fine, 1992; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Preston, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1990; Voydanoff, Fine, & Donnelley, 1994).²

The boundaries of a blended family are often ambiguous and in flux (Whitsett & Land, 1992a, 1992b), and the fluidity of family boundaries makes it difficult to determine who constitutes "the family" at any point in time. In fact, a study by Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (in press) revealed that stepparents and stepchildren cited changes in family and household composition to be the turning point that occurred most often as the blended family developed. Whitsett and Land (1992b) emphasized that the blended family is often strained by "loosening its boundaries to meet the needs of its members, while simultaneously tightening boundaries to maintain its own integrity" (p. 80). Once blended families have formed, both children and parents in these families face considerable changes and challenges as they adjust to these new relationships, roles, and communication patterns (see Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, in press; Duberman, 1975; Esses & Campbell, 1984; Fine, 1986; Ganong & Coleman, 1986, 1994; Kelley, 1992; Whitsett & Land, 1992a, 1992b).

Many stepparents encounter considerable stress in their new roles as they face negative cultural connotations of the stepparent role, ambiguous role definitions, and the concurrent myth of instant love in the new family, all while experiencing considerable adjustments and communicative challenges with stepchildren and extended family members (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Dainton, 1993; Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993; Skeen, Robinson, & Flake-Hobson, 1984). Adult partners in a new blended family find themselves enacting a parental role, some for the first time, simultaneously balancing the changes from their previous family or living situation, their expectations for the new blended family, their relationship with their new spouse or partner, and an extended network of family and friends (Gold, Bubenzer, & West 1993; Whitsett & Land, 1992b). Satisfaction of stepparents is affected by both the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Ambert, 1986; Gold, Bubenzer, & West, 1993; Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993) and the amount and quality of contact with former partner(s) (Weston & Macklin, 1990). The complexity and stressful nature of the adjustment to blended family living also makes marriage or cohabitation in a blended family fragile, and many second marriages also end in divorce (Coleman & Ganong, 1990).

Stepchildren face tensions and strains as well. They experience "more than one reference family in which they 'grew up,'" (Bumpass, 1984, p. 922) and, for them, this is more than simply adding the experience of growing up in multiple residences. Children's satisfaction with, and relationships formed in, the new family are dependent on such issues as

the presence of siblings from their original family, step-siblings, and birth of new half-siblings (Bumpass, 1984), the quality of the new marital relationship of their parents and stepparents (Brand & Clingempeel, 1987), and the amount and quality of contact and interaction with parents not residing with the blended family (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986).

As blended family members seek to make adjustments to the new family, researchers caution against trying to model blended families after first-marriage ones (Kelley, 1992; McGoldrick & Carter, 1982; Schweibel, Fine, & Renner, 1991). Successful blended families are those that develop structures, roles, norms, and interaction styles that are appropriate for each individual family situation. According to Kelley (1992), the following characteristics seem to be especially important to healthy functioning in blended families: flexibility in dealing with problematic issues, patience to let the new family develop, clear hierarchies and family boundaries, and flexibility in family members' roles, as these roles might be different than those enacted in their "original" families. In a similar vein, Visher and Visher (1990) summarized six characteristics of successful blended families: they have grieved their loss of the old family; the remarried couple is unified; family members have realistic expectations; family members have good relationships with one another; productive rituals are enacted; and family members have cooperative relationships with the households involved in the blended family. Using these different characteristics of successful blended families as a starting place, we chose to focus our inquiry on blended family rituals as a way to understand how blended families develop, adapt, and communicate.

Rituals in Blended Families

Scholars have been turning to rituals with increasing frequency as a way to study communication in family life (e.g., Altman, Brown, Staples, & Werner, 1992; Braithwaite, 1995; Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Bruess & Pearson, 1997; Cheal, 1988; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Fiese, 1992; Troll, 1988; Werner, Altman, Brown, & Ginat, 1993; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Fiese (1992) explained that practices become rituals due to the "meaning or symbolic significance associated with patterned interactions" (p. 159). Rituals are communicative events that, in Goffman's (1967) terms, pay homage to an object that is sacred. Thus, the rituals of our relational lives serve to pay homage to dyadic, family, and group relationships. Wolin and Bennett (1984) argued that rituals have the power both to perpetuate and to transform a family, and Fiese (1992) maintained that rituals provide a sense of family identity and provide "a bridge between generations" (p. 151). Families accomplish their "emotional business" in the enactment of their rituals (Bossard & Boll, 1950), and rituals can help maintain and perpetuate a family's system of shared beliefs and identity (Reiss, 1981). Additionally, family scholars have identified rituals as a way that families maintain their health, in spite of difficult circumstances (Bright, 1990; Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1990; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Bright (1990) asserted that rituals assist families in "resolving conflicts and resentments, negotiating relational boundaries, and developing new shared meanings about their ongoing life together" (p. 24).

Much of the existing scholarship on family rituals has been cast within Wolin and Bennett's (1984) typology of three family ritual forms: the celebration, a ritual enacted around shared cultural holidays or special events, such as Hanukkah or Christmas; the tradition,

a ritual that is tied to a family's unique calendar, such as members' birthdays or anniversaries; and patterned interactions, which are routinized practices in day-to-day life which hold special meaning for family members, such as children's bedtime routines or family talk around the dinner table. Roberts (1988) modified Wolin and Bennett's (1984) typology to differentiate rituals of the life cycle, such as weddings, graduations, and funerals, from everyday activities and traditions. For example, Altman and colleagues (Altman, Brown, Staples, & Werner, 1992; Altman & Ginat, 1996; Werner, Altman, Brown, & Ginat, 1993) focused on traditions and family celebrations among fundamentalist Mormon polygynists, and Halloween and Christmas celebrations of suburban neighborhood families. Braithwaite (1995) studied ritualized communication carried out in the traditions of "coed" wedding and baby showers; Bruess and Pearson (1997) studied rituals of adult marriage and friendship; and Braithwaite and Baxter (1995) studied the tradition of couples' renewed marital vows. Within the "traditional" family form, the enactment of these types of rituals seems relatively uncomplicated. In the context of a blended family, however, the complexity of the possibilities for creating, altering, or abandoning rituals abound. Unfortunately, little empirical attention has been directed toward understanding rituals in blended families.

Existing research has also highlighted the stability of family rituals rather than how they are adapted and changed. While rituals can contribute to family stability, at the same time there is a need for flexibility in ritual enactment in order for them to retain their relevance to the family (Visher & Visher, 1990). Johnson (1988) pointed out that rituals become especially important to families during times of conflict and change. It is through rituals that family members mark time and reflect change and growth in the family. Murrey (1990) contended that rituals allow us to "reflect on the past, create the future, and become complete . . ." (p. 242). Along this line, Wolin and Bennett (1984) observed, "The ability to adapt and modify ritual observance—ranging from the important holidays celebrated to the rules for routine family dinnertime—applies to both the type of rituals as well as their level of practice" (p. 416). Adaptability would seem particularly important as families become blended, as they face the challenges of coming together and becoming a family (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, in press; Kelley, 1992).

The purpose of this present study was to understand how members of blended families interact and develop their families through an examination of their ritual enactments. Blended families provide a fertile context in which to study ritual adaptiveness, and we sought to understand the possible relationship between successful enactment of rituals and the process of adapting them to the needs of the new family.

Method

The overall design of the study was in the qualitative/interpretive tradition (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Katz, 1983). The goal of interpretive work is the identification of recurring patterns of behaviors and meanings. Members of blended families participated in a semi-structured, focused, in-depth interview that targeted the perceptions and experiences of participants (McCracken, 1988; Spradley, 1979). From a qualitative/interpretive perspective, researchers do not stop collecting data when a certain sample size is achieved but rather when recurring patterns are identified (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Huberman &

Miles, 1994; Katz, 1983). Although the findings presented in this report are limited to the particular sample of persons we interviewed, we attempted, within the constraints of a convenience sample, to seek a diversity of perspectives and types of blended family situations.

Participants

We chose to interview stepparents and stepchildren who were 18 or older at the time of the interview (most stepchildren were minors when the blended family began). In addition, we limited ourselves to interviewing members of blended families which began no less than two years and no more than ten years before the interview took place. We wanted to include members from families that had sufficient time to develop, but not ones begun so long ago as to make recall problematic for participants, especially stepchildren. While we would have liked to interview multiple members from the same family, this became logistically complex, as many of our interviewees lived away at school and we did not have access to other blended family members.

We sought participants through several means, including announcements of the study in classes and offices at both a small Southwestern university and a large Midwestern university, and using a procedure of snowballing referrals from early informants. A research team conducted interviews with 53 informants: 20 stepparents (5 residential parents from the old family and 15 stepparents) and 33 stepchildren. Of the 53 participants interviewed, 40 were female and 13 were male. At the time of the interview, the mean age of females was approximately 27 years and the mean age of males was approximately 31 years. All of the participants came from different families.

Interviews focused on the first 48 months of the family's history and the length of these family experiences varied. We chose the 48 month period because existing research suggested that blended families "make or break" by the fourth year (Furstenberg, 1987; Mills, 1984; Papernow, 1993; Visher & Visher, 1978, 1979). The mean length of the families (from self-identified beginning to the time of the interview) was 62 months (5 years and 2 months), ($SD = 20$ months). Unlike much of the previous research, we asked the participants to define for themselves the date the family began, rather than arbitrarily establishing cohabitation or the marriage of the two adults as the beginning point. When given the opportunity, many of the participants indicated that their family started prior to the date of marriage. When we analyzed demographic data to describe the family types represented, we found these families to be very complex, with almost endless combinations of children, adults, and other family and nonfamily members living together. Additionally, many of the families were in a constant state of flux, with children and others moving in and out of the households, and many of the children had their time divided between living in different households. In general, we would describe five of the families as simple stepfather families (a mother with children remarried), three were simple stepmother families (a father with children remarried), 44 were complex families (both adults brought children with them from previous relationships), and one was a *de facto* family unit (a female with children formed a long-term partnership with a male). Thirteen percent of the couples also had biological children together.

Procedures

Research teams were formed at the universities of the first and second authors. Student interviewers participated in training sessions to learn the interview protocol until the principal investigators and the interviewers themselves felt they were ready to collect data. All interviews were conducted by these students or one of the primary researchers. In-depth interviews, conducted in a single session, lasted between 90 and 150 minutes. Participants initially completed an interview segment about their blended family turning points. They diagrammed their own blended family's development, creating a graph of the individual turning points by approximate date and indicating the level of "feeling like a family" for each turning point, over the first four years of their blended family experience. This functioned to recount the history and experience of the informant's blended family. Second, participants engaged in an in-depth interview about their blended family rituals. All these data were used to examine the family experiences for this present study, although the analysis focused primarily on the ritual portion of the interview and the turning points data were analyzed separately (see Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, in press).

Based on previous experience doing research on rituals, we decided to have participants talk about rituals by having them reflect on the more familiar terms of "routines and traditions." Interviewers told participants that "family routines or traditions could be something like birthday celebrations, a nightly ritual of telling jokes at the dinner table, visiting a gravesite, or a regular family griping session." Interviewers told participants that they would be discussing three family routines or traditions:

The first one is a family routine or tradition from your "original" family that you miss most; one that ended when you became a blended family. The second routine or tradition I will ask you to talk about is a routine or tradition that started in the original family and was carried over to the blended family. The third routine or tradition I will ask you to talk about is a routine or tradition that started new in the blended family.

After participants identified the three rituals they would discuss, interviewers asked them a series of questions about each of the three rituals. Questions asked them to describe the ritual in detail, how it was enacted in the family, how and why it changed in the blended family, and what the ritual accomplished for individuals and the family collectively.

The interview audiotapes were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 980 single-spaced pages of text-based data for analysis. The researchers initially read each transcript holistically to gain a sense of each informant's perspective before beginning the analysis. Next, a qualitative content analysis was performed, using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this inductive process, data were organized into five supercategories for analysis purposes: (1) rituals that ceased when the family became blended, (2) rituals that were imported unchanged into the blended family, (3) rituals that were imported into the blended family and adapted, (4) rituals that were started in the blended family, and (5) new or imported rituals that were begun in the blended family but then failed and ended. The development of analytic themes within each of these supercategories was an emergent process that continued as the data analysis proceeded. As we analyzed

these results, we chose to frame our findings within a general dialectical perspective because it provided a good fit with these data. At the conclusion of the analysis, the transcripts were read again and the researchers checked the analysis in order to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the categories, following the rival-explanation procedure described by Miles and Huberman (1994), making sure that there were not more plausible alternate explanations.

Results

Through their ritual practices, stepparents and stepchildren reinforced the idea that their blended families were not created in a vacuum but were a result of different family experiences that members brought to the blended family. As we followed our inductive data analysis process, it became clear that a central feature of informants' discussions of their blended family rituals was the contradictory interplay of members' old family and the new, blended family. We saw that rituals enacted in the blended family environment are important communicative practices that enabled blended family members to embrace their new family while still valuing what was important in the old family environment. Although family members were influenced by their old family experiences, successfully enacted rituals in the blended family also paid homage to the new, developing family. Thus, we chose to frame our findings in a dialectical perspective and focused on this dialectic of "old/new" to understand the role rituals played in the transition to the blended family and how rituals helped families manage the interplay of the old and new families (Baxter, 1988, 1993; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Montgomery, 1993; Werner & Baxter, 1994).

Rituals That Ceased in the Blended Family

Participants were first asked to talk about old family rituals that were not brought successfully into the new family or ones that changed so much that they were no longer recognizable or meaningful to them. These unsuccessful rituals were practices family members found neither possible nor appropriate to import into the context of the blended family. While these rituals honored the old family in some way, they were unable to speak meaningfully to the new family and thus were not allowed into the new family system, as the following examples demonstrate.

Some rituals failed to be imported to the new family because they were successfully celebrated by the old family but could not be enacted or were inappropriate to enact in the new family. For example, one stepmother recalled how she, her first husband, and their children used to regularly visit old family friends, explaining that the ritual had ceased when she remarried: "Mainly because the friends that we had were *family* friends, and they were no longer actually *family* friends when my first husband was gone" (24:183–185).³ This woman perceived that their friends would not accept or fit into the new family, so the rituals ceased when the old family ceased to exist. In another case, one stepdaughter described a ritual that was celebrated in the old family but could not be successfully enacted in the new one and thus had ended. She called it "The Picnic" and explained that her mother instituted it after her husband had died and before she remarried. In the ritual, she and her children would set up a picnic on a red blanket in the living room and eat pizza:

Well, I remember that my mom and I would cuddle up and we'd sit and we'd talk and the food would be on the tray . . . I think it brought us closer together. I remember just sitting on the blanket and laughing. And it made my brother and I feel special I think it just gave me a sense of feeling like a family, you know, and I'm sure my mom wanted to do that more than the average person, because with not having a father. [Interviewer asks what happened to the ritual when her mother remarried a man with four children] I don't remember it ever happening again. . . . Probably because they [stepsiblings] were older, it probably would have ruined the whole idea. They probably wouldn't have gotten into it and it probably just escaped my mom's mind, plus my stepfather didn't like pizza too. (38:574–635).

In this situation, the stepdaughter perceived that the ages and preferences of members of the new family were inconsistent with the enactment of the living room picnic ritual and the needs of the old family in enacting it, and, therefore, the ritual ceased.

There were many examples like these, in which a ritual was enacted in the single-parent family but was not carried into the blended family. Another stepdaughter described a ritual of making dinner for her mother and how the two of them had good talks during this time. She recalled, "It gave me my mom as a friend. If we didn't have our talks, I would have this sense of loss and a loss of closeness." After her mother remarried, the ritual ceased:

I no longer did the cooking. When I got home they were there. . . . That was taken away from me we would still talk but Lou [stepfather] was there. It wasn't just me and her, it was the three of us. I probably couldn't speak as freely as before. I had to hold back a little. (43:318–338)

Another stepson recalled missing a nightly ritual they had before his mother remarried: "It was a time for me to be with my family. It was quality time and precious. . . . It achieved family closeness." When asked why the ritual did not come into the blended family, he replied: "You can obviously do things together, but you come back to the *new* family. It just wouldn't fit in right" (50:511–518). All of these rituals honored the old but not the new family. It is important to note that several children greatly regretted the end of rituals they had carried out with their single parent. While remarried parents rarely reported that they missed the old rituals, many of the children reported a sense of loss when this special time with their parent was gone.

In other cases, it was the new spouse who prevented an old-family ritual from being imported, either because he or she could not participate in the ritual or because she or he did not want to do so. For example, one stepdaughter recounted this story to us:

In my original family, every Saturday night we used to go to the same restaurant It's my mom's favorite restaurant. . . . We'd have the same table, same waiter, every Saturday night. . . . When my father got married again, we started to do it. We went to the [same restaurant] for a while, until one day I blurted out, "This

is my mom's favorite restaurant!" And my stepmom said, "Well, we're not going to come here anymore. Let's not go here anymore, let's try something new." So we started going to this new restaurant. I don't even remember the name of it . . . I didn't like it very much. It just wasn't the same. It was awful. (9:470-481).

There were several instances where rituals ceased because the new spouse and/or family was from a different religious background than the members of the original family. From the reports in the interviews, this affected only the enactment of holiday rituals and weekly "going to church" rituals. For example, one stepmother described trying to enact the old Christmas ritual of going to Christmas Mass: "We tried it one time and they went to our Catholic church . . . I got into an argument with his daughters and they didn't understand it and they were kind of belittling it, and so we won't try that again" (19:327-329).

In other cases, the family configuration prevented the ritual from coming into the new family. Most often this entailed the absence of the nonresidential parent. For example, one woman recalled ending weekend trips to the beach: "It accomplished quality time with my dad that I don't have now . . . it was something special between my dad, my mom, and I . . . They were the times, probably, the times I felt most like a family" (6:215). In this situation, the respondent could not import the beach ritual into the new family as her father's presence was essential to carrying out this particular ritual.

Finally, other old-family rituals failed to be imported successfully because they were inconsistent with the lifestyle or resources of the new family. For example, one woman talked about how she missed the vacation ritual of boating, which she did with her former husband. The ritual ceased because "we couldn't afford one and, for one thing, my [second] husband doesn't like water and he doesn't like boating" (5:276-279). Another mother described ending the ritual of window shopping with her daughter which started when she was a single mother and ended upon her remarriage. She explained that she ended it because her new husband "hates to shop" (29:491-601). In all these cases, the old rituals failed as they did not honor both the old and new families simultaneously.

Rituals Imported Unchanged to the Blended Family

Participants next discussed old family rituals that were successfully imported unchanged into the blended family. A central feature of these successfully imported rituals was that they celebrated both the old and new families. What these imported, unaltered rituals had in common was that the blended family was able to enact the old family rituals without changing them, and were still able to balance the dialectic of the old and new to the satisfaction of blended family members. One reason a ritual could be imported unchanged was that it was one that had been enacted in both families before they were blended. In one example, a stepmother found that she and her new husband had very similar Christmas rituals, so it was easy to import that into their blended family and pay homage to both the new and old family traditions: "He had always done Christmas stockings for his kids. I did too. It was perfect and we are still making and filling them and their mother didn't do it for them. They [the children] knew we thought of them" (3:340-344).

Old rituals could also be imported unchanged when there was an expectation that the ritual would remain and the new blended family members seemed to consent. In other

words, participation was expected as an obligation of blended family membership. This was most likely to occur when a blended family member came alone into the new family situation, for example a spouse without children coming into a family with children. For example, a stepdaughter described how their extended family gathering rituals (e.g., holidays, birthdays, Super Bowl) stayed the same when her stepmother entered the picture. She described that the family gathering ritual accomplished "Family connection. Yeah, [it] strengthens the bonds between family members." When asked if the ritual changed when they became a blended family, she replied, "No, she was, it didn't change at all. She was expected to go. I mean, once you become part of the family it is expected that you go" (12:361-366). Part of creating the new, blended family was, in this instance, an acceptance of the rituals of the old family. While the rituals stayed the same, in some instances their meaning to family members did change.

Members of new families sometimes participated in old family rituals to please those members of the old family, thus creating a harmonious blended family situation. A stepfather talked about participating in his new wife's family ritual: "Her family, on New Year's Eve, they've got to eat pork and sauerkraut, and the sauerkraut's raw. I can't stand it. I hate it! But I do it." He went on to explain why he participated: "Once again, it gives a feeling of togetherness, bonding. Any time your whole family's together and interacting, no matter where they are, it creates bonding" (26:372-459).

By and large, rituals imported into the new family focused on participation by all members of the blended family. However, there were a few examples of rituals discussed by informants that were imported unchanged but were enacted by only a subset of the family members. The reason these rituals could continue is that their enactment was sanctioned or accepted by both old and new family members because they were important to these family members, and they perceived that these rituals smoothed the way for members as they adjusted to blended family life. In one example, a mother and son continued their ritual of a weekly talk after the mother remarried. She described this ritual that "started in the original family and it's now in the blended family. . . . We would sit down about once a week and talk over feelings and plans and schoolwork and just have a heart-to-heart. . . . We shared a lot of communications." When asked whether the stepfather participated, she replied that he didn't: "I think a couple of times he, he sort of tried and, um, we almost felt like he was intruding. So, I don't know how to say this nicely, but it was sort of like our time together." When asked the benefit of this ritual to the family, and especially to her son, she explained, "Just knowing where the two of us stood, if he needed any help, emotional support, anything educational-wise, you know. It let us have a feeling for where we were" (7:327-357). In this case, the ritual continued on in the blended family because of the cooperation of the stepfather. He seemed to see the benefit of this old ritual carrying over into the blended family and so he did not force his way into the ritual and thus legitimated its continuation as a dyadic event.

Rituals Imported into the Blended Family and Adapted

Similar to the previous category, participants discussed many rituals that were imported from the old family but in this case were modified in some way to be responsive to the needs of the new, blended family. For example, one daughter described her father's ritual

of taking the children on outings to new and exciting places. These were special trips that her father had regularly planned and taken with his children before he remarried, the focus of which was to do something they had never done before. When she was asked how the ritual had changed since her dad remarried, she reflected, "It just added Dana's [new stepmother] creativity to it. We still do exciting stuff, it has just kept it alive . . . we know when we get together we will do something fun" (45:597–599). In this case, the stepmother's efforts adapted the ritual in such a way that it could continue in the blended family.

Imported, adapted rituals were recognized as new family institutions and, in many cases, they also served as contrast points to life before the blended family. One stepmother described adapting family dinner rituals after she entered the household, making sure these dinners were more formal: "It's important to me. I always like to sit here [at the kitchen table]. I don't want to be out there watching TV. So, I guess I wanted something from my family and from Bill's [new husband] past." This woman also contrasted the enactment of this current ritual with what her husband's son experienced at his mother's house:

Home-cooked meals are important because I know William doesn't get it over at his [mother's] house and so that is important that he always remembers that about me. That is what I want him to remember and that's being part of a family and being together and not on the run always. . . . For all of us I always wanted to have that (13:257–271).

For this stepmother, importing and adapting the ritual kept continuity with her stepson's old family, but she modified it by making the ritual more formal. In this way, the ritual would also celebrate the existence and uniqueness of the new family.

Rituals were also imported and adapted to meet the needs of individual or subgroups of family members, such as the new spouse, the children, or extended family members. In the example to follow, the old ritual was adapted to the new spouse's kin. This stepmother described how she and her family altered the timing of their original Thanksgiving dinner ritual so they would be able to participate in her new husband's family-of-origin ritual as well:

His grandmother always has a brunch on Thanksgiving Day. . . . So, we've had to adjust our meal time, which hasn't been too hard. But now I have to plan my day ahead, my stuff prepared ahead, and go to their house for the Thanksgiving Day brunch. . . . Makes it a hectic day, but it's the only meal that his grandmother carries on. I can do this to accommodate her. (3:394–408)

Several interviewees stressed the importance of altering the old family ritual as a way of showing respect for the original family. Another stepmother talked about altering her Christmas ritual to be able to include her stepson, "To include William in. To make a tradition with William, the [old] tradition needed to change" (13:209–210).

Other blended families managed an old/new dialectic by adapting old rituals in ways that recognized not simply the new addition of a spouse/step-parent but the formation of

a new family institution. One stepdaughter discussed her mother's institution of big birthday parties for all blended family members. While they had celebrated birthdays in the old family, in the blended family the ritual was changed:

Actually, when they first got married, my mom made a big point to make it like that so we would feel important ourselves. . . . It was more of a big deal, because before [in the old family] it was just a party with our friends and now it's my stepfather and stepsisters. . . . Because there's more people involved . . . birthdays had to be restructured because we were a family. (2:215–256)

Another stepdaughter discussed the importance of altering old rituals to form new family institutions, as she also discussed the way her blended family celebrated members' birthdays. When asked what enacting the ritual did for the blended family, she replied, "Closeness. Feeling as though you are a real family, not thinking of yourselves as a stepfamily. When days went well, you would feel like you were a true family, and had been for a while" (43:388–390). These examples point out that altering an old ritual could provide a sense of continuity for members and also gave them a sense of "familyness."

Several participants discussed altering old family ritual as a way of showing respect for the original family. A stepmother talked about altering her Christmas ritual to be able to include her stepson: "To include William in. To make a tradition with William, the [old] tradition needed to change" (13:209–210).

Several participants discussed altering old rituals to assist the process of becoming a new blended family. One stepmother talked about importing the ritual of a family "game night." However, in the blended family, "game night" often set the stage for talking about problematic issues facing the family. She recalled, "There were some nights that we would get the game all set up or we would be playing and, right in the middle of it, they would want to talk about something that happened and we would never even go back to the game." When asked to describe what this ritual did for the family she explained, "I think it kept us together during that period. . . . I think it gave us time to talk about issues and things they were feeling and things they were hearing their dad [her ex-spouse] say" (15:277–308). For this family, playing the game was much less important than the talk it facilitated between members.

Several participants stressed that adapting old rituals into the new family was often part of the process of adjustment. One stepdaughter discussed the first year she participated in her extended family's annual Father's Day camping trip with her stepfather:

It was a little upsetting the first time Jack [stepfather] was there and I wasn't accepting him. I was still very mad that I had to be there when I thought I should be with my dad This just made me more resolved to make the point that they were not my family. "I'm not trading in dads this year" —It didn't feel like Father's Day to me. (42:367–375)

While this stepdaughter eventually became very close to her stepfather, this example emphasizes the adjustment period necessary for many families to actually feel like a family.

Overall, participants saw the adaptation of rituals as positive for them and/or for the blended family. However, while they realized that they were contributing to the efforts of building a new family, it was not unusual for many participants to miss their old family experience at the same time, especially in the early stages of the blended family. One stepson recounted his struggles the first year his new stepfather and stepsiblings were included in the old-family Christmas celebration:

His kids came right away with the first holiday and that was hard because now I wasn't getting all the gifts; now they were divided between me and those two and I had a hard time. I was jealous and I didn't think they should call my grandma "Grandma." . . . At first they stuck out as the newcomers to this process. . . . But at first when you get these two new people thrown into your rituals . . . the fact that they were there and they were part of the family now . . . you just had to say it to yourself but you didn't feel it at all (23:985–1003).

Most stepchildren seemed to find these changes in rituals more difficult than stepparents or at least they were more willing to discuss with the interviewer their adjustment challenges. While some found the adjustment to the blended family a difficult one and missed the enactment of the ritual in the old family, others found the transition relatively easy and enjoyed the ritual enactment more.

New Rituals Started in the Blended Family

Participants discussed many rituals that were started anew in the blended family. While many rituals started in the new family, those that were regarded as most successful highlighted the interplay of both the old and new families. Those rituals started in the blended family were important as they created opportunities to gather together the members of both the old and new families. At times, pragmatic concerns influenced the creation and enactment of these rituals, for example, when the family had to be able to accommodate a large number of participants in order to be inclusive of members of both old and new families. In one case, a very large blended family started making Mexican food on Thanksgiving because it was less expensive than traditional Thanksgiving fare, and this was the only way they could afford to have everyone participate together. Additionally, they decided to forego the sit-down meal from their old family experiences and began to leave the food out all day as an informal buffet. This allowed members of the different strands of the blended family to participate in the ritual as they came in and out at various times from their other familial obligations (1:272–310). While having greater numbers of people to enact the ritual was often more complex, participants often highlighted the advantages of bringing the old and new families together. One stepdaughter contrasted her Christmas celebration before and after her mother remarried:

Before my mom got remarried it was mom, brother and I . . . It never seemed like Christmas, not even at church. You would sit in church and see family after family. . . . So, that year, that first Christmas [as a blended family], my stepfather's daughters came to the house and we were there and it was more like

Christmas. . . . It was like what you would see in the movies. . . . To me, it's how Christmas is supposed to be, . . . but when it was just my mom and brother and I, I felt something lacking. (2:259–306)

In this instance, bringing together members of both old and new families and creating their own Christmas ritual in the blended family gave Christmas new meaning for this informant. Enactment of these new family rituals signaled the successful coming together of old and new family members.

Part of the success of these new rituals was that they paid homage to the old and new families by the act of bringing *all* members of the blended family together in the activity. One participant stressed how the new ritual of bringing all blended family members together for dinner “accomplished that extra little bond for us as a family because we lived such separate lives” (32:926–927). Another stepdaughter talked about a “going out for pizza and movies” ritual that her stepfather started in the blended family. She said she valued this ritual as it “made me feel really goodquality time with my parents. . . . it kept us all together” (6:305–352).

Often blended families started new rituals with the purpose of creating something distinctive and unique from the experiences of the old and new members coming together. For example, one stepmother recalled how they started making all their own Christmas decorations every year in the blended family: “The first Christmas we got out all our Christmas decorations . . . what he had and what I had and we went ‘yuck!’ You know, we need to do something different here.” After she described all the different decorations they made together each year she reflected:

It's a time of camaraderie and it's a time of teamwork and we find ourselves reminiscing about previous holidays and Christmases and holidays that we've had together. And when we finished we're always amazed, “Gosh we made this and it looks good!” You know, everyone has made a contribution to it. (30:744–809)

In this instance, this new ritual highlighted bringing old and new family members together, building on their own past experiences and efforts, and this ritual allowed them to create something of value for the family members.

Some new rituals also functioned to encourage relationships between subgroups in the old and new families, thus creating a bond for the whole family. This was seen most often in relationships created between stepparents and stepchildren. A stepson recalled how his stepfather started a ritual of watching the Super Bowl game with himself and his brother, “[It] made me appreciate the game more. It was good to know how he felt about different things. It was like a father-son relationship, so it was nice” (53:538–541). A stepdaughter described how she and her stepfather were also drawn closer by a sports-watching tradition they started together: “It gave us something in common and we could talk about sports. It gave us a link. We both understood things, so we could eventually talk about other things more freely. . . . Before we were hesitant. It removed that hesitance.” She went on to talk about the greater significance of this ritual, “I almost started thinking of him as

my dad." (43:442–475). In these examples, the ritual celebrated old and new families coming together and it was positive both for the subgroups and the blended family as a whole.

Often blended family members read great significance into the enactment of these new rituals. Several participants explained that the ritual communicated that members of the old family were valued by the new family member(s). This seemed especially important to stepchildren in their relationship with their new stepparents, as the next example highlights. One stepdaughter described how her stepfather made it a point to go shopping and personally choose Christmas gifts for each of his stepchildren. She recalled, "My previous stepdad just gave my mom money and wasn't really concerned with what she did with it or what she bought us." These personalized gifts from her stepfather led her to conclude:

I think it was out of genuine concern so that we would know that he considered us just like his children. . . . He's really proud of it and he gets just as excited as we do, so it seemed really important to him It feels like I'm his daughter. . . . I'm not his stepdaughter, but just the same as his son. (35:716–807)

Clearly, this stepdaughter attached great significance to this ritual and what her stepfather's behavior meant to her. In this example, the child of the new family perceived her relationship with her stepfather as equal to his relationship with his biological child.

Interestingly, many family members seemed to recognize the importance of these shared experiences that brought old and new family members together, even if the enactment of the rituals was not always positive. One participant discussed the institution of whole family vacations planned by her stepfather. She described: "We usually hated each other on trips. We could have fun at times." Yet, she was positive about the value of this ritual: "Well, we had shared experiences. When you share experiences with people, even when they're kind of negative ones, you're still like kind of coming from the same place and it brings you together" (34:1017–1040). Again, the significance of enacting the ritual was bringing the old and new families together. Enjoyment of the ritual was less important than the fact that they participated in the ritual together.

New Rituals That Failed

In contrast to the successful rituals discussed above, when a new ritual did not celebrate both the old and new families, it failed. It is important to point out that there were many fewer examples of new rituals that failed to be sustained than those that succeeded. Rituals failed primarily when they were imposed from the old or new family without other members' input or consent and members felt forced to participate. In one example, a stepmother started the ritual of family prayers at the dinner table and before bedtime. As the stepdaughter reflected, "I never believed in it and she always made us say it. . . . I'm not a religious person, so I felt kind of offense to it." She reported that she and her brother would be punished for not participating, "we would get grounded, get the stereo wires cut." When asked what the prayer ritual accomplished for the family she quickly replied, "Nothing" and indicated that she stopped saying prayers as she got older (11:285–314). In this case, when enacting the ritual forced the values of new family member(s) without taking into account the values of the old family members, the ritual failed. In addition, rituals that

failed to speak to the old-new dialectic also died out when family members perceived that the rules for participation were imposed differentially. In the previous example, the step-daughter reported that not all family members were punished for failing to participate in the family prayer ritual. When the rules for participation did not apply to old and new family members alike, then the ritual lost its value.

In other cases, a ritual failed when its enactment increased the amount of conflict between old and new family members, thus jeopardizing the interplay of the old/new dialectic. A stepson described how his mother tried instituting family meetings to talk about family problems. He perceived that the ritual failed because the new family would "gang up on him." He explained, "It gave us a squared circle to wrestle in for one hour every Sunday and get nothing resolved. . . . it made me feel even more alienated as opposed to the whole goal of being together as a family" (29:1272-1281). Thus, when new rituals contributed to increased conflict between members of old and new families, these rituals ceased.

Discussion

Examining successful and unsuccessful ritual enactments highlights the contribution of rituals to the process blended families go through to become a family. In contrast to "original" families, blended families do not start "new." Blended family members bring with them beliefs, norms, roles, and communication patterns developed in previous family structures. Dialectical theory is especially useful in illuminating that the challenge facing blended family members is not to extinguish the old family but rather to selectively embrace certain aspects of its features so that both old and new family structures and communicative practices may be legitimated (Baxter, 1988, 1993; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Montgomery, 1993; Werner & Baxter, 1994). This challenge is a formidable one because old and new families are often perceived to form an oppositional, antagonistic relation; family members may perceive that the new family delegitimizes the old family, just as they may perceive that the old family delegitimizes the new, blended family. While some see the creation of a blended family as a "death and burial of the first family" (Dimmock, 1993, p. 4), most scholars recognize that, for all members of blended families, there is an ongoing influence of both the old and new (blended) families. Members of blended families face a continuing need to deal with issues coming from both family situations. They do not want to give up all aspects of the old family, yet, in many cases, they need to deal with the fact that the old family can be a threat to the new one (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990) and adjusting to the new family can be difficult for members of the old family.

Although many contradictory tensions may exist in the blended family, the research points to a basic contradiction between old and new family structures. The blended family consists of two families that are simultaneously united yet opposed. Family members construct a new family reality with the addition of new step-relations, yet important features of the old family continue in at least some members' hearts, minds, and actions. The old competes with, or opposes, the new in complex ways, presenting a variety of old habits and sentiments that can challenge the new family's development. Reciprocally, the presence of the new family can easily be perceived as devaluing the memory of the old family,

feelings which are especially strong for stepchildren. Rituals become especially important in times of change in the family (Johnson, 1988) and this study emphasized the usefulness of rituals in studying how these families develop and communicate.

Relationship parties can manage the interplay of opposing tendencies or needs in any of several ways according to dialectical theorists (Baxter, 1988). However, a number of dialectically oriented scholars have argued that rituals are one meaningful and important way in which relational members may simultaneously address both poles of a given contradiction (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 1988; Werner, Altman, Brown, & Ginat, 1993). When family members pay homage to dyadic or family relationships through their ritual enactments, they also have the potential to fulfill competing tendencies inherent in relationships. As Roberts (1988) explained:

Ritual can hold both sides of a contradiction at the same time. We all live with the ultimate paradoxes of life/death, connection/distance, ideal/real, good/evil. Ritual can incorporate both sides of contradiction so that they can be managed simultaneously. For instance, a wedding ceremony has within it both loss and mourning and joy and celebration. (p. 16)

Roberts' work points to rituals being multilayered and multivocal in meaning, and it is this symbolic density that allows family members to manage opposing needs or necessities. While rituals must undergo adaptation as family circumstances change, data from the present study highlighted the manner in which rituals play a role in the management of dialectical tensions in the old and the new families. The ability to adapt family rituals in such a way as to speak to both the old and the new simultaneously would seem particularly important in stabilizing blended families during the first few years of the new family's existence, as members are challenged to work on becoming and being a family, often experiencing inevitable tensions between the old family and the new (Fine, 1986; Ganong & Coleman 1986, 1994; Kelley, 1992; Montgomery & Fewer, 1988; Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

The findings also contribute more generally to the work in family rituals. Despite Wolin and Bennett's (1984) plea that ritual change and adaptiveness be examined, most research in family rituals has provided a static view of specific ritual forms. Although our data were collected at one point in time, we queried participants, in part, on how their family rituals had changed from their old family to their new family structure over a four-year period. In examining which rituals were successfully and unsuccessfully "imported" into the blended family environment, we gain some insight into at least one feature important to ritual adaptation: To be adaptive, rituals must be responsive to emergent dialectical exigencies that face the family system.

Future research could usefully "track" rituals to study further the adaptation process. "Imported" rituals are not simply adapted once and then stay the same in the blended family structure; in fact, our data indicated that some rituals were temporarily enacted in the blended family, and others kept on changing as the family developed. Nor do new rituals that form in the blended family stay stable. Recollections of the old family change with the passage of time and changing needs of blended family members, and the new

family faces changing circumstances as family members grow and change. Thus, ritual adaptation is a dynamic process and should be studied as such in future work.

These findings also stress that being a family does not happen simply because members reside together; it often does not always happen quickly, and there are different paths to becoming one (e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, in press). Adapting and creating family rituals demonstrates that becoming a family is an ongoing process, as was the breakup of the old family (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Overall, the rituals discussed by participants in this study were much more positive than negative for the family members, but that did not change the fact that becoming a family was a process of adjustment. While this was certainly an adjustment for the "immediate" members of the blended family household, these data highlight that rituals often involve an extensive network of family and friends as well, as participants discussed webs of influence on the blended family, for example, from grandparents and other family members of former and current spouses, noncustodial parents, and close family friends. Ganong and Coleman (1994) stressed the importance of looking at blended family development as a process and point out that most research does not take into account "extended family networks" that are important to the development of the blended family (p. 140).

In the present study, the adjustment process of becoming a blended family appeared to be more difficult or at least more salient for stepchildren than for the stepparents. This may be due to the fact that coming together is the start of a new relationship for the adult pair and is often a very happy time for them, even with all the challenges of stepparenting. Children, on the other hand, find themselves having to adjust to many significant life changes at once, such as adapting to new family members, sharing living space, moving and changing residences and schools, and changing relationships with noncustodial parents, just to name a few. Unlike the parents, most often these are involuntary choices and changes for the children. Even when children eventually were satisfied with the blended family situation, becoming a blended family was most often mourned as a loss of the old family. We saw this represented most graphically in the rituals children had with their single parents which disappeared in the blended family. While the single parent, often their mother, had a new partner and family situation to concentrate on, the children often missed some of the rituals they had enacted together previously. Often these were very simple rituals involving extended periods of time and talk between children and their parents. Montgomery and Fewer (1988) argued that changes in family relationships will also change the family's interaction patterns. They emphasized that change in the family is inevitable and can be either functional or dysfunctional, thus bringing out the importance of balancing the need for change and the need for stability. Montgomery and Fewer (1988) stressed that, "Stability is functional when the system's patterns are doing what they were intended to do and when the continuity of values and behavior within the system promotes predictability and a sense of identity among the members" (p. 131). From our findings, we would caution parents to be especially cognizant of the changes their children are going through as the family becomes blended. Parents would be well-advised to pay attention to some of the routines and traditions they have with their children before the family becomes blended and see how they can still meet the needs those rituals fulfilled for their children. In addition, researchers need to pay greater attention to the perspective

of stepchildren (e.g., Amato, 1987), and to look beyond dyadic relationships only (e.g., stepparent-stepchild), paying greater attention to the complex web of relationships in the family system as a whole.

It was also clear from the interviews that rituals are important and deeply felt by family members. Participants were able to recall and describe rituals in rich detail and the enactment of rituals reflected the development of the blended family and the relationships they had with others in the family, especially the parent-child and stepparent-child relationships. In addition, enactment of rituals, or lack thereof, reflected issues of identity for these family members. For example, many stepchildren looked at stepparents' participation or nonparticipation in rituals as a sign of whether they were not seen and treated as "real" children and "real" parents to one another. Stepparents were also aware of how they were viewing and treating "their own" children versus their stepchildren. Wood (1995) stressed that "families powerfully shape personal identity. . . . Families cultivate identity by directly defining members. . . . Direct messages about identity, especially consistent ones, form cornerstones of selfhood" (pp. 84–85). Clearly we have just scratched the surface of identity issues facing members of blended families and this needs attention by researchers.

The developmental life cycle of the blended family may contain a critical window of opportunity or necessity during which the old family can be, or must be, integrated into the new family existence. We did not explore the timing of ritual imports and the formation of new family rituals. However, some rituals may be ill-timed and fail because the blended family is not positioned to accept the old family through the adaptation of old family rituals. Further, a blended family's formation may be helped or hindered in developmentally specific ways, contingent on its ability to legitimate the old family through its ritual practices. Finally, we suspect that this process goes on beyond the four-year time frame we studied. More research is needed to look at these issues.

Researchers should look to overcome some of the limitations of our research method. We were only able to interview one member from each blended family and recognize good reasons to try and interview multiple family members to obtain their perspectives on communication, rituals, and blended family development. In addition, researchers need to keep the time frame of the data collection in mind. In this case, we designed this study to try and collect data as close to the blended family developmental years as possible to assist with recall. However, some researchers are beginning to interview adult stepchildren to see how they look back at their childhood experiences and make sense of what happened to them (Coleman & Ganong, 1998). This tells us that there are multiple ways to study the experiences of blended family members.

The productive enactment of rituals was one of six characteristics of the successful blended family identified by Visher and Visher (1990). This study has begun to shed insight into what constitutes a "productive enactment." Based on our findings, a productive ritual enactment is one that pays homage to both the old family and the new family, regardless of whether the ritual is imported from the old family or originated in the blended family.

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Notes

1. As communication scholars, we were very sensitive to the different labels applied to stepfamilies. Along with other scholars we recognized the emotional loading of the term “stepfamily” (Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990; Preston, 1984), and yet we found “remarried” family (e.g., Ganong & Coleman 1994) to be inadequate as well. “Remarried” family assumes all the couples heading stepfamilies are married (which was not always the case in our data) and, more importantly, it looks at the family from the perspective of the parents’ marital status alone. Therefore, we adopted the term “blended” family (Arliss, 1993; Preston, 1984) as more neutral and reflective of the perspective of both parents and children. While we were able to alleviate some of the negative bias from the family name, we could not seem to find a suitable alternative to the term “stepparents” or “stepchildren,” therefore, along with other scholars, we adopted these designations.
2. Similar to the problems with the terms to describe family names described above, we also struggled with how to refer to the “original” or “old” family and the “new” blended family. Most scholars refer to the “old” family as the “original,” “biological,” “natural,” or “nuclear” family or “family of origin” (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Yet again, we recognized both the emotional loading and the inaccuracy of those labels. For example, members may come to blended families from single parent families or from other blended families, which do not fit the traditional label “nuclear.” So we used the term “old” family to refer to the family(ies) from which members of the blended family come and used the terms blended or “new” families to refer to the present family configurations in which members live.
3. Transcripts are referenced by interview number and line number. Hence 1:352–359, refers to interviewee #1 and line numbers 352–359. Any names or other potential identifiers used in the report have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

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