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Turning Points in the Development of Blended Families

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Abstract

A modified retrospective interview technique (RIT) was employed with members of 53 blended families to determine the types of turning points they reported experiencing and the developmental trajectories of their respective blended family's first 4 years. Findings revealed 15 primary types of turning points, of which "Changes in Household Configuration," "Conflict," "Holidays/Special Events," "Quality Time," and "Family Crisis" were the most frequent. A cluster analysis revealed five basic trajectories of development for the first 48 months of family development: Accelerated, Prolonged, Stagnating, Declining, and High-Amplitude Turbulent. The trajectories differed in the overall positive-to-negative valence ratio, the frequency of conflict related events, the average amplitude of change in feeling like a family, and the current reported level of feeling like a family.

Keywords: blended family development, developmental pathways, stepfamily, turning points

The blended family, or stepfamily, is a pervasive social unit in the American social landscape. According to Glick (1989), about one-third of Americans are now members of a blended family, including an estimated 10 million children under the age of 18 (Furukawa, 1994). If current divorce and remarriage rates continue, approximately 35 percent of American children will be part of a blended family before they turn 18 years old (Glick, 1989). Despite the prevalence of this family form, research on the blended family is relatively recent, largely concentrated in the past two decades. The bulk of this research activity reflects what Ganong and Coleman (1994) describe as a "deficit-comparison approach," in which the ideology of the nuclear family constitutes the dominant theoretical framework against which the blended family is found deficient and problematic. Only limited work has taken the blended family on its own terms (e.g., Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990). Fur-

thermore, research on the blended family provides only limited insight into matters of process (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). The current study considers blended families on their own terms, examining the major turning points that are retrospectively viewed by blended family members as important in the early development of their respective families and the basic developmental trajectories in which these turning points are embedded. Throughout the article, we use the term "blended family" to highlight our emphasis on the process of integration or reorganization that characterizes the development of this family form, in contrast to more pejorative labels such as "stepfamily," "reconstituted family," "reconstructed family," or "second chance family" (Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990; Preston, 1984).

Some scholarship has addressed the processes of development that characterize the formation of a blended family (McGoldrick & Carter, 1989; Papernow, 1993; Ransom, Schlesinger, & Derdeyn, 1979; Rodgers & Conrad, 1986; Whiteside, 1982). For the most part, however, this work is prescriptive and not descriptive in nature, proposing what blended family members could or should do to become successful from the researcher's point of view (Coleman & Ganong, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Coming from a clinical tradition, these models have not been subject to careful scientific study (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Based on his clinical work, Mills (1984), for example, argued that developing blended families should avoid modeling themselves after a nuclear family model, especially efforts to duplicate the parent-child bond in the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Visher and Visher (1978) have also posited a clinically based model of psychological and behavioral tasks (e.g., establishing new family rituals and traditions) that must be accomplished in the formation of a new identity as a blended family. McGoldrick and Carter's model (1989), based on an earlier clinical model by Ransom and colleagues (1979), posited a series of prerequisite emotional tasks that must be resolved before a blended family can develop successfully. For example, adults must resolve any residual attachment to their former spouse. The majority of these tasks is concentrated in the period prior to remarriage. Others have similarly focused prescriptively on the divorce-courtship-remarriage period (e.g., Rodgers & Conrad, 1986; Whiteside, 1982).

Perhaps the most detailed model of blended family development is Papernow's (1993) stage model of blended family development. Based on interviews with clinical and non-clinical blended family members, Papernow advanced seven stages of development: (i) the fantasy stage, in which members hold unrealistic, idealized expectations; (ii) the immersion stage, in which members are confronted with the daily challenges of blended family life and expectations are shattered; (iii) the awareness stage, in which family members attempt to make psychological sense of their confusion; (iv) the mobilization stage, a highly conflictual stage in which feelings are expressed and initial efforts at negotiation and resolution are attempted; (v) the action stage, in which members establish new agreements, thereby putting in place a solid base upon which to build; (vi) the contact stage, in which positive emotional bonds form between and among various members; and (vii) the resolution stage, which finds a solid and stable family unit in place. According to Papernow, unsuccessful blended families do not get beyond stage four in their development. Despite the caveat that "stages of stepfamily development do not happen neatly and precisely," Papernow (1993, p. 17) nonetheless posits the stepfamily cycle model as a framework that

holds relevance for all blended families as they “make sense out of the challenges of remarried family life.”

Although Papernow's (1993) seven-stage model reflects the opinions and experiences of blended family members, rather than the exclusive perspective of the clinician, it is still quite prescriptive in nature. Prescriptive models of development hold obvious value for blended families that are experiencing difficulty, but they do not inform us descriptively about the developmental processes from the insider perspective of the blended family members themselves.

In general, stage-based models of close relationship development have been subject to substantial criticism (for reviews, see Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Cate & Lloyd, 1992); these criticisms appear relevant to blended family stage models, such as that proposed by Papernow (1993). First, such models presume that a single sequence of stages captures the experience of all developing relationships and deemphasize the possibility of multiple developmental trajectories. Second, such models are predicated on an underlying assumption of linear progress. Developing relationships are presumed to advance sequentially and progressively from less closeness-attachment-bonding to more. Alternatively, relationship development may have more up-and-down movement to it and thus may better be described in nonlinear ways. Third, stage-based models present relationship development as a series of sequential “plateaus” that somehow are punctuated by transitions from one stage/plateau to another. Unexplained in such models are the forces or factors that move a relationship from one stage/plateau to another. Further, a stage-plateau model emphasizes the long periods of stability while a relationship is in a given stage/plateau, deemphasizing the times of change. Relationship development may be characterized by greater fluctuation and turbulence than what is presumed in stage-based models. Fourth, stages often have overlapping characteristics that result in fuzzy boundaries between one stage and another; therefore, the “stage” may be a less fruitful unit of analysis because of its conceptual murkiness. Perhaps not surprisingly, at least in the context of dyadic relationship development, stage-based models have not fared well empirically (Cate & Lloyd, 1992).

The “turning point” offers a conceptual alternative to the “stage,” one that is free from the criticisms mounted against stage-based models of relationship development. Originally conceived by Bolton (1961), a “turning point” refers to a transformative event that alters a relationship in some important way, either positively or negatively. Put simply, turning points are the sites of developmental change in relationships. Considerable research has been conducted on developmental turning points within the context of romantic and premarital pairs (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993; Cate, Huston, & Nesselroade, 1986; Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981; Surra, 1985, 1987; Surra & Hughes, 1997). Taken collectively, this body of work has emphasized a variety of topics related to turning points, including the types of events that constitute turning points, the valence of various event types, the attributed causes of turning point change, the sequenced patterning of turning points, and the correlation of turning points with such outcome indicators as relational commitment and satisfaction.

In general terms, four broad categories of turning point events can be identified in romantic relationships (Surra & Huston, 1987): (i) intrapersonal/normative, those turning

points in which “the self, the partner, or the relationships is evaluated against some ideal or normative standard” (p. 104), (ii) dyadic, those turning points centered in interaction between the two romantic partners, (iii) social network, those turning points involving in some way third parties from the members’ social networks, and (iv) circumstantial, those turning points located in forces external to the parties and their relationship over which little control is exerted. Although the particular turning points of blended family development may be different from those found to characterize the growth of romantic dyads, the turning point offers a useful conceptual alternative to the family stage model as a lens by which to gain insight into family members’ perceptions of their development.

The sequencing of turning points into trajectories, or pathways, of relationship development also has received scholarly attention. In the context of courtship, four basic trajectories have been identified (Cate et al., 1986; Surra, 1985): (i) an accelerated type in which a pair moves quickly and smoothly to marital commitment; (ii) an accelerated-arrested type, in which a pair moves quickly to a high level of commitment and then loses momentum; (iii) an intermediate type, characterized by a somewhat turbulent and slow ascent to high commitment levels; and (iv) a prolonged type, in which courtship pairs progress in a relatively turbulent and slow manner toward commitment. Of course, the several trajectories of courtship development may differ significantly in form from the developmental paths that might characterize blended families.

Research questions

RQ1: What are the primary types of events that are perceived as turning points in the first 48 months of blended family development?

Our primary research question simply seeks a profile of the phenomena that members of blended families retrospectively perceive to have been turning points in the development of their family. What are the reported transformative events that quantitatively and qualitatively changed blended family members’ sense of their blended family? We have selected the early developmental period of the first 48 months based on existing research that suggests blended families “make or break” by the 4th year (Furstenberg, 1987; Mills, 1984; Papernow, 1993; Visher & Visher, 1978, 1979). However, unlike much prior research, we do not start our developmental calendar with the date of remarriage. We agree with Ganong and Coleman (1994) that the date of remarriage is unnecessarily restrictive for two reasons. First, some de facto blended families never involve a legal marriage of the adults. Second, many remarried spouses have lived together first, thus affording family members any number of bonding opportunities prior to the date of remarriage. Further, some blended families may experience bonding events that precede cohabitation.

The blended family research is suggestive of several candidates for reported turning point types. If the prescriptive models of development are valid, then the several emotional and psychological tasks that need to be accomplished by blended families may be perceived as positive turning points when successfully achieved. Relatedly, failure to accomplish a given developmental task may surface as a reported negative turning point in a recalled developmental history. Thus, such tasks as “working through the disappointment

of unmet expectations," "working through relationships with the nonresidential parent," "working through children's reaction to parental remarriage," "constructing the stepparent-stepchild relationship," "developing a solid marital couple bond," "establishing new family traditions," and so on may be implicated in the perceived turning points of development for blended families (McGoldrick & Carter, 1989; Papernow, 1993; Schwebel, Fine, & Renner, 1991; Visser & Visser, 1990). However, such tasks, at least as they have been articulated in extant work, tend to be presented in a highly abstract manner in which the researcher viewpoint is emphasized. Our interest in turning points is closer to the ground (Geertz, 1973) in that we seek to profile events that are more specific and concrete. For example, precisely what reported events transpire in such tasks as "constructing the stepparent-stepchild relationship" or "developing a solid marital couple bond"? Our approach also privileges the perspective of blended family members instead of that of the researcher. We seek to understand the insiders' perspective regarding the hows and whys of developmental change in blended families.

RQ2: What are the primary trajectories of development for blended families?

The second research question shifts our attention from description of turning point event types to the issues of turning point amplitude and sequencing. Just as the romantic relationship development research suggests that couples take different paths toward commitment, we suspect that blended families also take different paths in forming their sense of family identity. Some blended families may be reported to accelerate quickly toward family bonding, whereas others may report progressing more slowly and gradually. Still other blended families may have relatively high degrees of turbulence in their development, that is, up-and-down fluctuation from turning point to turning point. Papernow (1993) loosely differentiated four developmental types that imply multiple pathways of development varying in their rate of bonding: "fast families," which move quickly through all seven stages of the stepfamily cycle in 4 years; "average families," which are intermediate in their rate of progress; "slower-paced families," which are slower than the intermediate families; and "stuck families," which apparently fail to progress in any meaningful way. To date, however, no empirical test has been made of these or alternative trajectories, or pathways, of development from the insiders' point of view.

RQ3: Does current level of reported family bonding correlate with the trajectory of blended family development?

The third, and final, research question examines whether the multiple trajectories explored in the second research question differ in their outcome, as measured by current reported sense of family identity. If, in fact, the fate of a blended family is more or less "sealed" in the first 4 years, as Papernow (1993) and others have suggested, then one might reasonably expect a retrospective snapshot of early family development to correlate with current sentiment toward the blended family on the part of family members.

Methods

Participants

We sought voluntary participants through several means, including announcements of the study in university classes and offices in the USA at both a small Southwestern university and a large Midwestern university, and snowballing referrals from early respondents. We interviewed one member from each of 53 blended families: five residential parents (i.e., parents whose biological or adoptive children lived with them as part of a blended family unit), 15 stepparents (i.e., husbands and wives whose spouses brought their biological or adoptive children to live with them in a blended family unit) and 33 stepchildren. At the time of the interview, the mean age of the interviewed (step)parents was 41 years, and the mean age of the interviewed stepchildren was 20 years. Although our interview focused only on the first 48 months of blended family history, our respondents were from blended families of varying lengths ($M = 62$ months; $SD = 20$ months), calibrated from the self-identified point of origin for the blended family until the time of the interview. The blended families in our sample were quite complex, with almost endless combinations of adults, children, and other family and non-family members living together. Additionally, several of the families were in constant flux, with children and others moving in and out of the residence of the blended family household and some children spending equal amounts of times in two households. In general terms, however, five of the families were simple stepfather families (a mother who brought her children into the remarriage), three were simple stepmother families (a father who brought his children into the remarriage), 44 were complex families (both adults brought prior children with them to the remarriage) and one was a de facto family unit (a woman with children formed a long-term partnership with a man). Thirteen percent of the couples also had biological children together.

Procedures

Faculty and student research teams were formed at the universities of the first and second authors. Student interviewers participated in training sessions with the interview protocol until the principal investigators and the interviewers themselves felt they were ready to collect data.

Respondents participated in an in-depth interview that was between 90 and 150 minutes in length. They first completed a modified genogram of their family relationships and provided demographic information. Next, respondents participated in a modification of the retrospective interview technique (RIT), a frequently employed method in the study of turning points (Huston et al., 1981). Miell (1984) found that people were remarkably accurate in their recall of turning point phenomena, thus lending some validity to the technique. In general, the RIT asks a participant to identify and plot on a graph all of the turning points in the development of his or her relationship; the abscissa axis of the graph marks time in monthly intervals and the ordinate axis reflects some index of relationship commitment or closeness, most commonly in percentage points from 0 to 100 percent. At each identified turning point, the interviewer probes for elaboration about that particular point.

One basic modification of the basic RIT procedure was employed in the current study, consistent with some prior turning point research (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993). Specifically, we conceived of a turning point as a singular event rather than the entire period of time between two plotted points. For the current study, the ordinate axis consisted of a 0–100 percent estimate of “feeling like a family” (FLF). In particular, the respondent was asked to base his or her FLF judgment on both his or her own feelings and what he or she believed other blended family members felt. In an open-ended manner, we asked each respondent to elaborate on what 0 and 100 percent “feeling like a family” meant to them. Overwhelmingly, respondents used one or more of the following words in describing what “100 percent FLF” meant to them: “support,” “openness,” “comfort,” “caring,” and “sharing”; 0 percent FLF was characterized by the perceived absence of these qualities. The abscissa axis consisted of 48-monthly intervals, given our focus on the first 4 years of the family’s developmental life cycle. The starting month was self-identified by the respondent; the interviewer prompted the respondent to recall the first time that FLF was greater than 0 percent, and this served as the origin point for the abscissa axis. The respondent was then asked his or her judgment of the family’s current FLF level.

After calibrating the x - and y -axes of the graph, each respondent was asked to identify all of the turning points that he or she could recall, plotting them in chronological order. The interview protocol was adapted from Lloyd (1983). In particular, interviewers solicited information in the following way:

What we’re interested in is your perceptions of all of the important turning points in the history of your blended family’s development. By “turning point” we mean all of the important, pivotal events that were significant in bringing your blended family to where it is today. Most blended families experience both positive and negative turning points, so we’re interested not only in those events which positively transformed your blended family in some way, but also in the “darker moments,” those points of crisis or difficulty that led you to define your blended family in a less positive way. Basically we want your views on every major turning point that was involved in coming to see your blended family in new ways, both positive and negative. All blended families are different, so there aren’t any right or wrong answers here. What we are interested in are the turning points in the history of *your* blended family.

The first turning point was the event used by the respondent to calibrate the x -axis. After plotting this point on both x - and y -axes, the respondent was asked to elaborate on the turning point—*who* was involved, *what* happened, *why* it was identified as a turning point. Then the respondent was asked to identify and plot the next and all subsequent turning points, elaborating on each, in turn. After the respondent had provided an initial graphical rendering of the first 48 months of development, he or she was asked to look over the entire graph and make any additions or corrections to it. The respondent was asked to connect the points with appropriately sloped lines.

Data analysis

Data analysis was based on the graphs and the 980 single-spaced pages of interview transcriptions. A total of 566 turning points was identified ($M = 10.7$, $SD = 3.3$). The researchers inductively derived a 15-category scheme of turning event types from the insiders' accounts (see Results), using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In general terms, this qualitative method is an iterative one in which subsequent turning points are judged against prior ones for similarity or difference; each time a different turning point type is encountered, it begins a new category. One .4 percent of instances were not codable using the 15-category scheme. One of the primary investigators coded all of the data, and a second investigator independently coded a randomly selected 10 percent sample of the transcripts (with graphs) to determine reliability. Absolute coding agreement was .89, with a kappa value of .87; agreement between coders was at least .75 for all categories.

For each turning point, a change in FLF score was derived by subtracting the FLF value associated with the prior turning point from the FLF value of the given turning point. This change score was used as an indicator of the impact of a given turning point on feeling like a family.

To determine basic pathways of development, a hierarchical cluster analysis, using Ward's method, was employed on the respondents' reported month-to-month FLF values across the 48-month developmental period. A case was a given respondent's monthly FLF values. Because two cases involved lengths of less than 48 months, they were not included in the cluster analysis. Ward's method involved the calculation, for each cluster, of mean scores for all 48 FLF values. Then for each case the squared Euclidean distance to the cluster FLF means was calculated. These distances were summed for all of the cases. At each step, the two clusters that merged were those that resulted in the smallest increase in the overall sum of the squared within cluster distances.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of our analysis responsive to the first research question, a frequency distribution of the reported turning point event types for the sample as a whole, as well as supplementary information about the perceived positive or negative FLF changes associated with those types. The most frequently reported type of turning point event was "Changes in Household/Family Composition." This supertype consisted of a variety of subevents, including cohabitation of the adults, events surrounding the engagement and marriage of the adults, events associated with the birth of a child to the remarried couple, events associated with grandparent status for the remarried couple, children/stepchildren visiting the nonresident or resident parent, and children/stepchildren moving in or out of the blended family household. Of these subevents, the most frequent were children/stepchildren moving in/out of the blended family household (36.6% of all instances) and marriage-related events for the adults (29% of all instances). In approximately two-thirds of reported changes in household/family composition, the turning point was perceived to impact FLF positively. In about one-third of reported instances, concentrated in children/stepchildren moves, this turning point was perceived to impact FLF in a negative manner.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of turning point (TP) event types and their associated change in reported feeling like a family

Turning point event types	Overall frequency	% of total TPs	% of respondents reporting at least one instance	% of total TPs reported with positive FLF change	% of total TPs reported with negative FLF change
1. Changes in household/ family composition	145	25.7	94.3	65.5 (<i>M</i> = 27.4; <i>SD</i> = 23.3)	34.5 (<i>M</i> = -15.7; <i>SD</i> = 17.9)
2. Conflict or disagreement	83	14.7	71.7	4.8 (<i>M</i> = 20.0; <i>SD</i> = 20.0)	95.2 (<i>M</i> = -33.2; <i>SD</i> = 25.0)
3. Holidays or special celebrations	79	14.0	66.6	67.1 (<i>M</i> = 20.1; <i>SD</i> = 18.1)	32.9 (<i>M</i> = -9.2; <i>SD</i> = 11.9)
4. Quality time	72	12.7	64.2	100.0 (<i>M</i> = 18.1; <i>SD</i> = 16.2)	0.0
5. Family crisis	50	8.9	54.7	72.0 (<i>M</i> = 24.9; <i>SD</i> = 19.4)	28.0 (<i>M</i> = -10.4; <i>SD</i> = 16.6)
6. Reconciliation/ problem-solving	29	5.1	41.5	75.9 (<i>M</i> = 27.0; <i>SD</i> = 22.9)	24.1 (<i>M</i> = -1.4; <i>SD</i> = 3.8)
7. Relocation or geographical move for household	25	4.4	39.6	68.0 (<i>M</i> = 21.5; <i>SD</i> = 13.6)	32.0 (<i>M</i> = -29.4; <i>SD</i> = 26.6)
8. Prosocial actions	22	3.9	32.1	100.0 (<i>M</i> = 19.9; <i>SD</i> = 23.6)	0.0
9. Unmet expectations or disappointment	17	3.0	22.6	11.8 (<i>M</i> = 7.5; <i>SD</i> = 3.5)	88.2 (<i>M</i> = -21.4; <i>SD</i> = 21.3)
10. Social network related	13	2.3	17.0	76.9 (<i>M</i> = 23.8; <i>SD</i> = 21.8)	23.1 (<i>M</i> = -41.6; <i>SD</i> = 48.5)
11. Change in employment for adults	10	1.8	9.4	60.0 (<i>M</i> = 20.0; <i>SD</i> = 12.6)	40.0 (<i>M</i> = -37.5; <i>SD</i> = 16.6)
12. Life changes for ex-spouse/ nonresidential parent	8	1.4	13.2	50.0 (<i>M</i> = 18.7; <i>SD</i> = 14.3)	50.0 (<i>M</i> = -10.0; <i>SD</i> = 10.0)
13. Negative intrapsychic change	4	.7	3.8	0.0	100.0 (<i>M</i> = -34.8; <i>SD</i> = 23.7)
14. Breakup/divorce of remarriage	4	.7	7.5	0.0	100.0 (<i>M</i> = -7.5; <i>SD</i> = 5.0)
15. Positive intrapsychic change	2	.4	1.9	100.0	0.0 (<i>M</i> = 25.0; <i>SD</i> = 35.4)

The second most frequent event type was "Conflict or Disagreement." Overall, about 95 percent of all reported instances of this turning point type were regarded as negative in their effect on feeling like a family. A total of 31 percent of the conflicts were reported to be between stepparents and stepchildren. An additional 27 percent of the conflict events were reported to be between the married adult spouses.

Relatedly, 5.1 percent of all turning points were "Reconciliation or Problem-Solving" events. Such reconciliation events are predicated on prior conflict and disagreement; in framing events as reconciliation, respondents simply elected to situate the significance of the event in a positive outcome. About three-fourths of the time, reconciliation/problem-solving events were reported to have a positive impact on feeling like a family. Thus, whether through the direct reference of "Conflict or Disagreement" or the indirect reference of "Reconciliation/Problem-Solving," conflict-related events were very salient in our respondents' recollected developmental histories.

"Holidays and Special Events" were the third most frequently reported event type. Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday celebrations were particularly important to our respondents, but such special events as birthdays and graduations also held significance. Holidays and special events were reported to impact FLF in a positive manner approximately two-thirds of the time.

"Quality Time" emerged as the fourth most frequently reported event type. This supertype involved high-quality time spent between participants, including such phenomena as private time away from others, family vacations, non-problem-oriented relationship talks, participation in leisure activities together, and so forth. Although the majority of "Quality Time" events were reported to involve all family members, a significant percentage of events in this category were recollected experiences between stepparent and stepchild (30% of all instances). Not surprisingly, given the positive nature of this turning point event type, respondents reported that Quality Time had a positive impact on FLF in 100 percent of reported instances.

"Family Crisis" events were the fifth most frequently reported event type. Typically involving illnesses, deaths, accidents, or major financial disasters, these events were positive in their effect on FLF in 72 percent of all reported instances; in these instances, blended family members reported that they were brought closer together by the crisis, whether the effect was short- or long-lived.

Other turning points were dispersed among remaining event types. "Relocation or Geographical Move" involved a change in the location of the blended family household, either to a different house in the same area or to a different city or state. Relocation was a positive step for the blended family in about two-thirds of these instances, helping to forge a new identity as a family unit. In the remaining instances, however, relocation was resented and problematic especially as family members were uprooted from schools, neighborhoods, and for stepchildren, access to the nonresident parent.

"Prosocial Actions" referenced gift-giving, friendly gestures, or acts of kindness on the part of some family member(s). A total of 68 percent of the events in this category were reported to take place between stepparents and stepchildren. Such actions stood out from the ordinary in some way that affected positively the sense of familiness. For example, one

respondent told us that her stepparent had contributed her monthly child support payment in the name of her nonresidential parent for a period of time, keeping secret that the nonresidential parent had reneged on this financial responsibility. To our respondent, this gesture represented an extraordinary act of kindness and generosity that transformed the blended family's sense of unity.

"Unmet Expectations or Disappointment" were psychologically oriented events precipitated by the (in)actions of some family member(s) that were not manifested in conflict or other behavioral action. In large measure, disappointment resulted from unrealistic expectations about blended family life (i.e., "the Brady Bunch syndrome"). A total of 47 percent of these unmet expectation events were reported to involve stepparents and stepchildren. An additional 29 percent of unmet expectations were reported to involve marital partners. Not surprisingly, such events were negatively valenced in 88 percent of all reported instances.

"Social Network" events involved friends and relatives of the blended family, including grandparents, step-grandparents, and other extended (step)kin. These events were reported to affect FLF in a positive manner about three-fourths of the time. When these events were perceived to function positively, they were perceived as occasions in which the blended family and its constituent relationships were legitimated by outside friends and family members. When these events were regarded as negative, respondents reported that outsiders failed in some way to accept or legitimate the blended family, such as when relatives of a stepparent failed to accept stepchildren as part of the extended family.

"Change in employment" events involved major job related events for one or both of the adults of the blended family household, including job promotions, changes in career, returning to school, and periods of intense job related pressure. In 60 percent of reported instances, these events were positive, as when an adult received a job promotion that eased financial burdens for the blended family household. Other times, the reported effect was less favorable, such as when an adult was fired or otherwise became unemployed.

"Life Changes for the Ex-spouse/Nonresidential Parent" involved geographical relocation of the ex- or nonresident parent or changes in his or her household composition (e.g., remarriage, birth of a child). These events were equally likely to be positive or negative in their reported effect on feeling like a family. Whether positive or negative, such events were reported to affect the blended family through their effects on the children. For example, a parent who moved to a different state complicated a child's easy movement between the residences of the two parents, and this was reported to result in increased resentment and bitterness toward his blended family. In a positive vein, the remarriage of a nonresident parent facilitated the regularization of visitations by a child, which was reported to promote a more positive outlook on the part of the child toward the blended family.

"Negative Intrapsychic Changes" and "Positive Intrapsychic Changes" were psychological changes in attitude toward the blended family or some member(s) that were not provoked by any apparent external events. For example, one respondent told us that she "just decided one day" that she didn't want to be a part of the blended family arrangement.

Last, "Breakup/Divorce" refers to the separation, breakup, or divorce of the remarried couple. This event was uniformly evaluated as negative in its effect on FLF. By the time

blended families had reached this turning point, their FLF level was typically very low with little room left for further decline in FLF level.

To determine whether (step)parents (i.e., residential parents and stepparents) and stepchildren differed in the frequencies with which they reported turning-point types, a chi-square analysis was conducted for all event types whose overall reported frequency was at least 10. Overall significance was obtained [$\chi^2(10, n = 545) = 23.59; p < .01$]. Following the partitioning strategy recommended by Siegel and Castellan (1988), this significance was attributable to the turning-point type of change in employment status for the adults ($\chi^2(1, n = 545) = 10.99; p < .05$) and network related turning points ($\chi^2(1, n = 545) = 5.34; p < .05$). (Step)parents were more likely to report both events than were stepchildren. Overall, 4.2 percent of all events reported by (step)parents were changes in employment status, compared with .3 percent of all events reported by stepchildren. Overall, 4.2 percent of all events reported by (step)parents were related to the social network, compared with 1.2 percent of all events reported by stepchildren.

To determine whether (step)parents and stepchildren differed in the perceived valence they associated with the turning point types, a chi-square analysis was conducted on the distribution of those positively valenced turning points with reported frequencies of at least 10; because of small cell sizes, negatively valenced turning points were not examined. The overall chi-square was significant ($\chi^2(7, n = 319) = 14.36; p < .05$); subsequent partitioning indicated that the significance was attributable to network related turning points ($\chi^2(1, n = 319) = 5.50; p < .05$) and to relocations/geographical moves ($\chi^2(1, n = 319) = 4.01; p < .05$). Overall, 6.2 percent of positively valenced turning points reported by (step)parents were network related, compared with 1.4 percent among stepchildren. Overall, 7.1 percent of positively valenced turning points reported by (step)parents involved relocations or moves, compared with 1.8 percent among stepchildren.

In answering the second research question, the rate of change in the amalgamation coefficients for the hierarchical cluster analysis suggested a best fit with the five cluster solution (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984). Figure 1 displays the trajectory of a particular family judged to be typical of each of the five clusters. Table 2 presents summary information for each trajectory on the mean number of total turning points, the ratio of the number of positive to negative turning points, and the mean amplitude of the absolute values of turning point change in FLF. The five trajectories did not differ significantly on the total number of turning points reported in the 48-month period. Trajectories differed significantly in the ratio of the number of positive to negative turning points ($F(4, 46) = 3.37; p < .02$). LSD post-hoc comparisons indicated that the ratio for the Accelerated trajectory was significantly greater at the .05 level than the ratios for the Declining and High-Amplitude Turbulent trajectories. Trajectories also differed significantly in the mean amplitude of absolute turning point change ($F(4, 46) = 3.88; p < .01$). LSD post-hoc comparisons indicated that the mean amplitude of change for the High-Amplitude Turbulent trajectory was significantly greater at the .05 level than the amplitudes for the other trajectories.

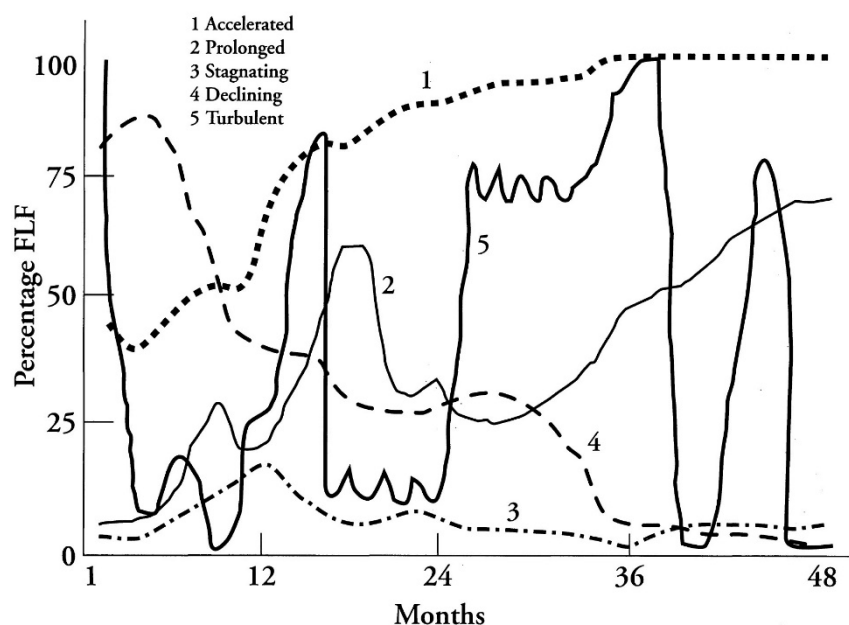


Figure 1. Representative Trajectories for Accelerated, Prolonged, Stagnating, Declining, and High-Amplitude Turbulent Types

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for total number of turning points (TPs), the ratio of the number of positive to negative turning points, and turning-point amplitude by trajectory type

Trajectory type	<i>n</i>	Total # TPs	± Ratio	TP amplitude
1. Accelerated	16	10.69 (3.50)	3.65 (2.90)	21.12 (9.45)
2. Prolonged	14	9.86 (4.05)	3.08 (1.23)	23.69 (10.90)
3. Stagnating	7	11.00 (3.56)	2.05 (1.43)	18.13 (6.78)
4. Declining	3	9.67 (2.08)	.45 (.14)	21.29 (6.31)
5. High-Amplitude Turbulent	11	11.82 (1.89)	1.66 (.67)	34.00 (11.94)

The first trajectory, which represented 31.4 percent of the 51 analyzable cases, was labeled “Accelerated” to reflect a pattern of relatively rapid movement toward 100 percent FLF. Blended families whose development was accelerated typically entered the graph at mid-range levels of FLF and progressed with positive turning points outnumbering negative turning points at a ratio of 3.65:1. The second cluster, labeled “Prolonged,” accounted for 27.5 percent of the analyzable cases. Like the “Accelerated” trajectory type, the ‘Prolonged’ type progressed upwards in FLF, although at a slower rate than the ‘Accelerated’. Positive turning points outnumbered negative turning points at about a 3:1 ratio. The amplitude of turning points was somewhat higher for the “Prolonged” trajectory type than for the “Accelerated” type. Whereas these families in the “Accelerated” type entered their development at a mid-range level of FLF, those in the “Prolonged” type entered their development at a low level of FLF.

The third cluster type was labeled "Stagnating." As the figure suggests, blended families whose development fit this pattern were characterized by relatively low levels of initial FLF, which more or less stayed low throughout the 48-month period. Turning points in this trajectory type were characterized by the lowest amplitude value. The 13.7 percent of cases grouped in this cluster basically did not "take off"; although positive turning points outnumbered negative turning points by a 2:1 ratio, the events were ineffectual in advancing FLF beyond modest levels.

Only 5.9 percent of the cases fit the pattern for the fourth cluster, which we labeled "Declining." These developmental paths were characterized by a high level of FLF very early in the 48-month period, followed by a general decline over time. The "Declining" trajectory type featured the lowest positive-to-negative ratio, with negative turning points outnumbering positive turning points at close to a 2:1 ratio.

The fifth cluster, labeled "High-Amplitude Turbulent," accounted for 21.6 percent of analyzable cases. This trajectory type was characterized by a roller-coaster effect, with turning points that featured high amplitudes in change. Positive and negative turning points followed one another with rapid increases and rapid decreases in FLF levels.

Because respondents self-identified the starting points for their trajectories, it is possible that the trajectories could represent different sections of longer developmental pathways for the different clusters. To check this possibility, the five clusters were compared on the timing of the marriage event for the two adults. A one-way ANOVA was performed in which the dependent variable was the number of months from the beginning of the graph until the marriage event for the two adults. No significant difference emerged.

Table 3 presents a summary profile of the turning points that were embedded in each of the five trajectory types. Because of small cell sizes, a chi-square test comparing the five trajectories could be performed only on the five most frequently reported turning point event types. Overall significance was obtained ($\chi^2(16, n = 414) = 26.78; p < .05$). Follow-up partitioning tests indicated that the significance was largely attributable to the relatively low proportion of conflict events in the Accelerated trajectory ($\chi^2(1, n = 414) = 6.96; p < .05$) and the relatively high proportion of conflict events in the Declining trajectory ($\chi^2(1, n = 414) = 7.86; p < .05$). Small cell sizes precluded a meaningful comparison of (step)parent and stepchild perceptions of reported trajectory type.

Table 3. Proportional breakdown of the reported turning points embedded in each developmental trajectory

Turning-point event type	Trajectory type				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Changes in household/family composition	.29	.25	.30	.21	.21
2. Conflict or disagreement	.09	.16	.17	.38	.17
3. Holidays or special celebrations	.18	.14	.08	.14	.10
4. Quality time	.13	.17	.10	—	.12
5. Family crisis	.08	.07	.10	.14	.08
6. Reconciliation/problem-solving	.06	.05	.04	—	.06
7. Relocation or geographical move for household	.03	.07	.04	.03	.05
8. Prosocial actions	.04	.06	.04	—	.02
9. Unmet expectations or disappointment	.01	.01	.08	.03	.05
10. Social network related	.04	—	.01	—	.05
11. Change in employment for adults	.02	.01	.01	—	.03
12. Life changes for ex-spouse/nonresidential parent	.02	.01	—	—	.02
13. Negative intrapsychic change	—	—	—	—	.03
14. Breakup/divorce of remarriage	—	—	.03	.07	—
15. Positive intrapsychic change	.01	—	—	—	—

The fourth, and final, research question asked about outcome differences for different developmental paths. This question was examined in a one-way ANOVA, with trajectory type serving as the independent variable, and current reported level of FLF serving as the dependent variable. A significant effect was found ($F(4, 46) = 11.26, p < .0001$). Blended families whose development in the first 48 months was Accelerated featured the highest level of current FLF ($M = 93.1; SD = 9.29$), followed by the Prolonged trajectory type ($M = 74.6; SD = 27.52$) and the High-Amplitude Turbulent trajectory ($M = 66.8; SD = 31.90$). The Declining trajectory was characterized by the lowest level of current FLF ($M = 0.00; SD = 0.00$), followed by the Stagnating trajectory ($M = 35.7; SD = 41.47$). LSD post-hoc comparisons revealed that the current level of FLF for the Declining trajectory was significantly lower than all other FLF levels at the .05 level. In addition, the FLF level for the Accelerated type was significantly higher than the levels reported for all trajectory types except the Prolonged type.

Discussion

This study complements existing work on the developmental life cycle of blended families by providing insights into those events that family members retrospectively perceived to transform their sense of feeling like a family. For our sample, the first 4 years of development were punctuated by 15 basic types of turning points, of which five were dominant in reported frequency: changes in household composition, conflict, the celebration of holidays and special events, quality time for family members, and family crises. Unlike the picture provided by many developmental models, blended families do not develop in a uniform way; our results point to five basic pathways of development. The five trajectories

were more or less comparable in their turbulence, differing not in the number of overall turning points but in the mix of positive to negative events, the reported amplitude of change associated with these events, and the reported current level of feeling like a family. Conflict related events were the single most important discriminator among trajectory types.

The turning point events help us to identify the specific events, moments, and experiences of blended family members that they viewed as significant in forging an identity as a new family. The most frequent turning-point type—changes in household composition—suggests that blended families are experienced as structurally dynamic. Many of the reported structural changes reflected alteration in the legal status of the family, most notably the (re)marriage of the adults. Although some of our respondents initiated their RIT grids with the (re)marriage event, more typical was a developmental history in which another starting point of family identity, often cohabitation, preceded this event. The sequencing of events surrounding the remarriage underscores Ganong and Coleman's (1994) observation that blended families often are perceived by insiders to begin prior to the formal remarriage event. This finding has implications for how researchers and professionals dealing with blended families conceptualize the early era of the life of these families. Starting analysis at the time of marriage is likely to miss salient premarital events.

Other reported structural changes reflect shifts in the membership of the blended family household. Blended families were regarded by family members as structurally fluid, with ongoing changes in household composition experienced when children visited the nonresident parent and moved in with (and moved out of) the blended family household. This fact, coupled with the complex configuration of blended family membership and households, represents a continual challenge to the development of these families and to the relationships between family members as they seek to adjust to blended family life (e.g., Duberman, 1975; Esses & Campbell, 1984; Fine, 1986; Ganong & Coleman, 1986, 1994; Kelley, 1992; Whisett & Land, 1992).

Although perceived changes in family composition can function negatively, our respondents retrospectively reported positive changes in feeling like a family in about two-thirds of their reported turning points. In general, the relatively high proportion of positive changes in household composition suggests that, for the most part, our blended family respondents adapted reasonably well to their dynamic circumstances. However, our sample may over-represent successful blended families; persons from unsuccessful blended families may have been disproportionately hesitant to participate in our study and they may experience more difficulty in coping with changing household composition.

The frequency with which conflict-related events were perceived in blended family development underscores the challenging nature of blended family life. Overwhelmingly, to our respondents, conflict was perceived as negative in its effects on feeling like a family. The frequency with which the stepparents and stepchildren were reported to engage in conflict also supports much of the research in which this relational subsystem is found to be a difficult one (e.g., Cissna et al., 1990; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). Along with conflict between stepparents and stepchildren, our data show that the marital couple was perceived to be involved in substantial conflict, as well, which is consistent with existing research in

which the marital couple has been found subject to substantial tension and stress (for a review, see Ganong & Coleman, 1994).

The celebration of holidays and special events is an opportunity for blended family members to build and sustain close emotional bonding (Visher & Visher, 1990). When that opportunity was realized in our respondents' perceptions, the effect on feeling like a family was quite positive. For our respondents, however, the celebration of holidays and special events was experienced negatively in about one-third of the reported instances. For some blended families, holidays were reported as stressful and difficult, with conflicting obligations to multiple constituencies or positive recollections of lost times from the past. Scholars have recognized the importance of rituals to family life and have studied rituals as a way to understand family identity, relationships, beliefs and emotional health (e.g., Bossard & Boll, 1950; Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 1988; Reiss, 1981; Visher & Visher, 1990; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Further research needs to examine how blended families can successfully forge new traditions and rituals of celebration.

Not surprisingly, quality time events were perceived as universally positive in their effects on feeling like a family. To outsiders, quality time may not appear to be anything special beyond living day-to-day life together. However, to insiders, quality times were special because they marked particular moments of bonding, whether achieved through watching a football game on TV or going shopping together. Meaningful togetherness seemed to be the key to our respondents' perceptions of quality time events. Although the majority of reported togetherness events involved the whole family, a significant portion took place between the stepparent and the stepchildren. These quality times allowed the stepparent-stepchild relationship to become established in its own right, which in turn was perceived to contribute to positive feelings of familyness.

Family crises often were perceived to produce positive effects on a blended family's identity as members came together in times of need. For some family members, especially some stepchildren, crises represented the first time that they recognized that other members of the "new" family truly cared about them individually.

Unmet expectations/disappointments and intrapsychic changes (both positive and negative) were relatively infrequently reported turning points for our sample. This finding is somewhat surprising given the salience of internal thoughts and feelings in existing models of blended family development. In focusing on the turning point as our unit of analysis, we may have shifted attention away from internal states to externally situated behaviors and events. Perceptions of actions and events both reflect and shape parties' internal mental states. As such, the present study contributes another dimension to existing research on blended families, providing a starting place for future research. For example, researchers may fruitfully explore the perceived communication behaviors of family members that contribute to both positively and negatively valenced intrapsychic events in blended family development.

Although residential parents, stepparents, and stepchildren occupy different positions in a blended family structure, we found relatively few perceptual differences when comparing parents (residential and step-) to stepchildren. However, two kinds of differences were identified in our sample. First, (step)parents were more likely than stepchildren to report network-related events and changes in adult employment status. Because adults are

positioned as the head of the family unit in the eyes of others, the (step)parents may have been subject to more interactions with social network members in which the legitimation of the family was at stake, thereby increasing the salience of these events for adults. Because (step) parents were more directly involved than children in employment changes, these events also may have been more salient to them. Second, (step)parents attached more positive valence to network-related events and to relocations and moves than did stepchildren. Adults and children may encounter different degrees of legitimation of their new blended family unit, with adults more likely to experience positive interaction. For example, the parents of an adult partner may affirm the new marriage and their new daughter-in-law or son-in-law, yet express more ambivalence about whether the children of that son- or daughter-in-law are their grandchildren (Schneider, 1980). (Step)parents also reported relocations and geographic moves to be more positive than did stepchildren. Whereas stepchildren may focus more on the uprooting side of relocation, with changes in schools and friends, (step)parents may focus more on the possibilities attached to a "fresh start." Future research needs to interview multiple members from the same blended family in order to understand better perceptual differences that might be related systematically to the position one occupies in the structure of the family.

The blended families in our sample displayed five basic developmental trajectories or pathways in their first 48 months of development, based on month-to-month recollections of feeling like a family. The five trajectories differed significantly on the frequency of reported conflict related events. The declining trajectory featured the greatest likelihood of reported conflict events, an understandable finding given that conflict was strongly perceived as a negatively valenced turning-point event and the declining trajectory was characterized by the lowest ratio of positive-to-negative turning points. Descriptively, the declining trajectory also featured a relatively high frequency of reported separation, breakup, or divorce of the married couple. This trajectory also featured a relatively low reported frequency of the positively valenced turning points of quality time and prosocial actions. Although families characterized by decline entered their developmental trajectory with a strong sense of feeling like a family, this feeling could not be sustained. Blended families whose development was declining appeared to be caught in spiraling negativity with insufficient positively valenced experiences to arrest the deterioration in their feeling like a family.

By contrast, the accelerated trajectory, characterized by the greatest ratio of positive-to-negative events, unsurprisingly featured the lowest proportion of conflict events. Other negatively valenced events were also reported with relatively low frequency for this trajectory type, especially unmet expectations and separation, breakup, or divorce of the marital couple. The positivity of the accelerating trajectory, in contrast to the negativity of the declining trajectory, was perhaps a function, as well, of the presence of quality time, reconciliation and prosocial actions in accelerated families. Blended families whose development was accelerated appeared to move rapidly and positively toward a sense of "100 percent familiness."

The three trajectories of Stagnating, Prolonged, and High-Amplitude Turbulent were intermediate in their reported conflict events and intermediate in their ratios of positive-to-negative events. Apart from reported conflict, the Prolonged trajectory appeared quite

similar to the Accelerated trajectory in its distribution of event types. Unlike blended families in the Accelerated trajectory, however, blended families characterized by a prolonged development tended to start their developmental trajectory at a relatively lower point of felt familiness. The higher initial entry value for Accelerated families may have provided them with a bias toward attributing positivity to events more so than was the case for Prolonged families. Thus, for example, an event of the same type, such as changes in family composition, would be attributed more positive valence among Accelerated families as opposed to Prolonged families. Such a pattern would be consistent with much research in attribution in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990).

The Stagnating trajectory was intermediate in reported conflict events but higher in other negatively valenced events (e.g., unmet expectations and separation, breakup, or divorce) than the Prolonged trajectory. Like the Prolonged trajectory, the Stagnating trajectory was characterized by a relatively low initial level of feeling like a family. However, blended families caught in a stagnating pattern experienced too many negative and too few positive events to develop much sense of familiness. Further, families in the Stagnating trajectory reported the lowest amplitude of change for their turning points. Perhaps the relatively high proportion of changes in family composition prevented these families from establishing a coherent sense of their family boundaries.

The High-Amplitude Turbulent trajectory was also intermediate in reported conflict events and intermediate in its ratio of positive-to-negative events. What distinguished the High-Amplitude Turbulent trajectory were the dramatic shifts in amplitude that were reported for turning points. Positive and negative events followed upon one another in rapid succession, perhaps creating a contrast effect that resulted in such large reported amplitudes. This trajectory featured high instability. Families enmeshed in this trajectory repeatedly established reasonably high feelings of familiness that were repeatedly unraveled by negatively valenced events.

Not surprisingly, the Declining and the Stagnating trajectories were associated with the lowest levels of current feeling like a family, whereas the Accelerated trajectory was associated with the highest level followed by the Prolonged trajectory. The intermediate value associated with the Turbulent trajectory may be a sampling artifact; on the assumption that turbulent cycles continued until the time of the interview, we may have found respondents at points when their families happened by chance to be in the upswing of their up-and-down turbulence. Alternatively, blended families whose development is highly turbulent may have adapted to such a roller-coaster experience, crafting a sense of themselves as a family in spite of instability.

The Accelerated, Prolonged, and Stagnating trajectories bear some resemblance, respectively, to Papernow's (1993) "rapid," "slow," and "stuck" families. Papernow's final stages of "contact" and "resolution" feature outcomes that correspond closely to what our sample meant by "100 percent familiness": strong emotional bonds between family members in a stable system of mutual support and caring. However, blended families characterized by our Accelerated, Prolonged, and Stagnating developmental pathways did not achieve their familiness outcomes by movement through Papernow's unitary stage model. Papernow's stage-based model suggests a singular progression through stages of idealization, shattered expectations, conflict, problem-solving, and bonding. The wide array of turning-

point events reported by our sample belies a simple reduction to a small number of stages. Furthermore, in order for Papernow's stage model to have gained support, we would logically have expected a higher frequency of reported turning points that involved idealizations, shattered expectations, and problem-solving efforts. In addition, the stage-based model suggests that blended families progress from negatively valenced experiences (shattered experiences and conflict) to positively valenced ones (problem-solving and bonding); by contrast, our blended families appeared to move in and out of positive and negative turning points throughout their development. Finally, we identified two trajectories, the Declining and High-Amplitude Turbulent, that are not readily evident in Papernow's (1993) work.

Our study has several limitations. We only interviewed one member from a given blended family. Future research could usefully collect data from multiple family members in order to determine the extent and nature of agreement on recollected turning points. Our relatively small sample size did not allow us to compare completely the accounts of biological/adoptive parents, stepparents and stepchildren, nor could we usefully compare the accounts of respondents from simple versus complex blended family structures. Our respondents represented blended families whose histories were of varying length. Future research should consider whether the turning points that are recalled vary as a function of how distant they were in the past. The identification of turning points is a reconstructive enterprise in which one always identifies the past based on the present. What may seem to be a significant turning point at one time may later seem insignificant or important but in a different way.

Despite its limitations, this study supports a complex view of blended family development. The formation of blended family identity is retrospectively perceived as a fluid process of up-and-down movement, with variations organized around the ratio of positive-to-negative turning points, the amplitude of change, and the presence of conflict. Changes in feeling like a family are linked to a variety of types of reported events. These results can help scholars, therapists, and family members themselves gain insight into an intricate and often perplexing process.

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