

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this project is to determine how children feel about their experiences in a stepfamily and also to compare data collected, to find similarities and differences in the opinions of children presently in stepfamilies and adult children of stepfamilies. Participants must be, or have been, children raised in a stepfamily union.

The oral interview process was selected for this project, because it facilitated researcher - participant rapport and allowed the participant to ask questions of the researcher before, during and after the process had begun. It also allowed the interview time line to be extended, if this was deemed desirable by the interviewer and/or the participant.

In the rapport building session (prior to the interview), the information/consent form (Appendix A) was reviewed. Participants had the opportunity at this time, to ask questions about any/all aspects of the project, and were specifically told that volunteers would not be identified in the publication and that they were free to end the interview session at any time if they chose to do so.

The interview outline included the following questions (Appendix C):

1. Please describe who you are now (age, profession and background information) and at what age you were when you entered a stepfamily. Names were not required.

2. How would you describe your stepfamily?
3. When you became part of this family, what were your expectations? Your hopes?
4. How did this experience meet your expectations?
5. What actually happened?
6. If you were beginning a stepfamily, coming from your own childhood experience, what would you change? Improve? Do more effectively?

To allow the interview to be conducted in a more relaxed conversational style, questions were not always given in the order stated. Instead, a more indirect open-ended style of questioning, following this outline, was used.

SUBJECTS AND SETTING:

This project took place in three urban centres on Vancouver Island and utilized a sample of 6 children and 4 adults who were now living, or had previously lived, in a step family environment. Age ranges were:

- Children – 12 to 16 years of age (all had parent permission)
- Adults – 30 to 46 years of age.

Males and females were equally represented in both categories.

All subjects were Caucasian and came from a variety of socioeconomic levels. Family backgrounds included remarriages, repartnering situations and multi-repartnering

that followed:

- The death of a biological or foster parent
- Separation after a de facto relationship
- Divorce.

Six participants had experienced family change by the age of six. The remaining four had experienced family change from age seven to adolescence. Two of the four adult volunteers were now stepparents themselves. A third was in a stepfamily situation (due to the presence of her daughter from a former relationship).

DATA COLLECTION:

Initial Contact:

After final approval for the project had been received, the researcher solicited volunteers from among personal acquaintances, through school personnel, and by displaying posters about the project that invited participation.

Possible subjects were then contacted, either in person or via the telephone, and asked if they would like to volunteer. Children under the age of 14 were first approached by first asking for the parent(s) permission to interview the child. Children from 14 to 16 were personally contacted and asked to advise their parent(s) that they wished to volunteer for the project. Parents, of the older group, were then telephoned by the researcher to confirm permission. In one case, the parent was sent the information by facsimile, so that he could pre-read the outline, before giving consent. In all cases permission was granted.

Once parent permission was secured, each child was asked, or as in the case of those over 14 years of age, re-consulted, to ensure that s/he wanted to participate. All said yes.

As all interviews were to be conducted by the researcher, time and location of the sessions were also pre-set during this initial contact period. Care was taken to minimize inconvenience to the volunteers.

INTERVIEW PROCESS:

Preparation:

To ensure that a comfort level was attained before the interview began, the researcher decided to use a format that consisted of two parts:

1. A rapport-building session of approximately 15 minutes duration
2. An interview session utilizing the format presented in the project description/consent form (Appendix A) and the open-ended questions listed in the question outline (Appendix C).

Final location for interviews were chosen for their proximity to volunteers' homes, privacy and access to an electrical outlet for taping. In one situation, circumstances required that the interview be completed by telephone.

The researcher traveled to each designated location at least one half-hour prior to the scheduled appointment time. Upon arrival, she ensured that appropriate seating was available, i.e., that chairs faced each other, and that, if at all possible, a table was

available to allow for proper placement of equipment, and for the reading and signing of project outline/consent documents. Following this, she would plug in the tape recorder, check out the tapes, and then proceed to the entrance area to personally greet the volunteer subject.

Rapport-Building Session:

During the initial contact, all participants had been told (oral presentation) the purpose, rationale and the expected content of the interview conversation (what you expected, what actually happened and changes you would make as a stepparent). To review this information and as an initial step in the rapport-building session, each participant was given a copy of the project outline/consent form (Appendix A) to read.

The conversation that followed was designed to answer any questions that might arise from reading the outline, set a friendly tone for the upcoming interview, and to build a trust environment in which personal information could be shared.

The Interview:

Once a comfort level had been established, the researcher turned on the tape recorder and began the interview session. The procedure was as follows:

1. Each participant was asked to describe her/himself as a person. This description could include age, profession (school level for the children), background, personality traits, favorite activities, and/or likes and dislikes. No specific content was stated.
2. The volunteer was encouraged to recall the family environment as it was before her/his parents had split, and discuss what memories, if any, s/he had of the non-custodial (or joint custodial) parent. The researcher implied that she was particularly interested in whether or not the volunteer was aware that the parents were experiencing difficulties in their relationship.
3. The researcher guided the remainder of the session by utilizing information supplied by the volunteer or by using indirect questioning related to the outline (Appendix C) below.

How would you describe your stepfamily?

When you became part of this family, what were your expectations? Your hopes?

How did this experience meet your expectations?

What actually happened?

If you were beginning a stepfamily, coming from your own childhood experience, what would you change? Improve? Do more effectively?

Answer length was determined by the volunteer's wish to divulge information and was extended (when necessary for clarity) through indirect questioning methods and gentle probing techniques.

4. When all the questions had been queried successfully, the researcher revisited the area of recommended changes and gave the volunteer one last opportunity to suggest things that might make a stepfamily relationship a more successful and satisfying environment for a child in their growing up years.

5. Before ending the interview, the researcher asked the volunteer if s/he wished to discuss any aspect of the interview; if s/he had additional questions to ask about the process and if not, if s/he was comfortable with closing the interview.

6. The volunteer was thanked for her/his participation in the project and given the opportunity to, once more, question the researcher about the study and/or express any concerns that had been generated through the process.

All expressed satisfaction with the interview and none felt the need to access additional support. Approximately half stated that they had not discussed their issues with anyone prior to the interview, and were glad they had had the opportunity to do so

7. After the interview was complete, the researcher rewound the tape and labeled it with the gender, developmental level and symbol used to signify that specific candidate, e.g., female child D#1.

Four interviews were finished within the original 1 ¼ hour time frame. Six sessions required an extended time frame to allow the participant to fully respond to all the questions.

DATA ANALYSIS:

As soon as possible after each interview, a verbatim transcript was produced from the tape recording and the taped version of the interview was erased.. The hard copy of this transcript was then stored in a locked cabinet, accessible only to the researcher, until the data could be analyzed.

Content of participant responses were analyzed to identify awareness of parental unhappiness, expectations of changes in parent relationships and/or family make-up, explicitly expressed experiences during step-family involvement and recommendations for positive change in stepfamily relationships. These responses were then compared over developmental levels to determine if adult children of stepfamilies and children currently in stepfamily environments, had similar experiences.

Analysis of data followed a systematic progression of steps. These were:

1. Labeling of interview tapes to signify gender, developmental level and number of selection (i.e., D#1 to D#10) to ensure the confidentiality of the participants
2. Verbatim transcription of the interview tapes
3. Perusal of the transcriptions to document the replies generated for each area and question under study

4. Compiling of a matrix using a 4 x 10 column format for comparative study of responses
5. Analysis of answers by rater:
 - (a) by total group
 - (b) by gender
 - (c) by developmental level (child – adult).
6. Additional findings and family patterns were also noted.

Discussion of summary contents and rater analysis of results followed.

QUESTIONS:

The purpose of this study was to determine how children feel about their experiences in a stepfamily and also to compare data collected to find the similarities and differences in opinions of children presently in stepfamilies and adult children of stepfamilies.

Information collected through the open-ended questioning format related to:

1. Background information
 - (a) Please describe who you are now (age, profession and background information) and at what age you were when you entered a stepfamily.
 - (b) How would you describe your stepfamily?

2. Expectations

(a) When you became part of this family, what were your expectations? Your hopes?

(c) How did this experience meet your expectations?

3. Actual Experiences

(a) What actually happened?

4. Recommended Changes

(a) If you were beginning a stepfamily, coming from your own childhood experience, what would you change? Improve? Do more effectively?