

# Working with Stepfamilies: Coalition Government or the Brady Bunch?

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# *Understanding families: 5 themes with different emphases*

- Behavior
- Organization
- Narrative
- Emotion
- Spirituality

# *Stepfamily issues seen from 5 themes*

- Behavior--habits and reinforcement
- Organization\*
- Narrative\*
- Emotion--attachment, loss, anxiety
- Spirituality--beliefs, purpose

\* Emphases of this presentation

# *ORGANIZATION*

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- Development
  - Structure
  - Functions

# *I. Development*

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- Differences across time
  - ♦ Age, ability, health
  - ♦ Education, career, economic status
  - ♦ Relationship processes

# *Relationship processes in stepfamilies over time*

- Anticipate improvements:
  - ◆ Knowledge of self and other
  - ◆ Skills
  - ◆ Shared history
  - ◆ Investment in the new family
- Anticipate a curvilinear process (decline then improvement):
  - ◆ Isolation, relocation, loss of friends etc.
  - ◆ Shift from pair to parent

## *II. Structure*

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- Membership
- Socioeconomic status
- Systems and subsystems

# *Membership variations*

- Death vs divorced vs never married
- Number, ages, “ownness” of children
- Number of households and parents
- Number of grandparents
- Others (nannies, neighbors....)

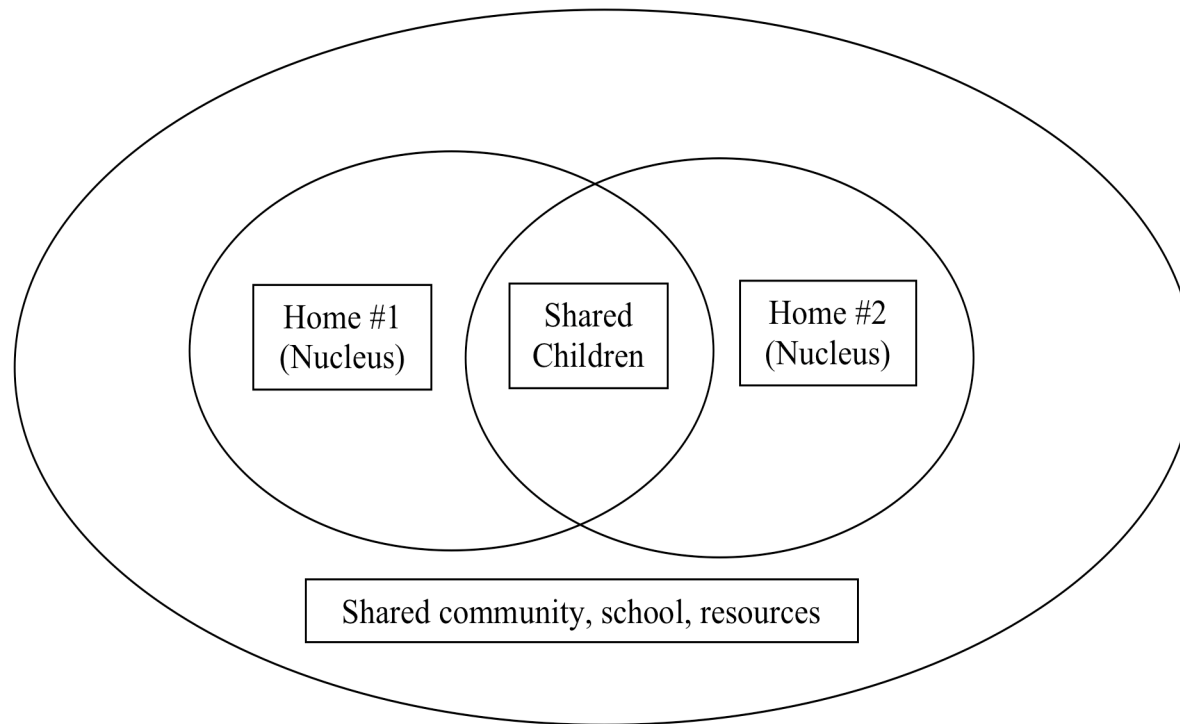
# *Socioeconomic status*

- Money is power--Power imbalance
- Money is a buffer--Options for managing stressors
- Money and class are inseparable--Meanings, routines, etc.
- Money is gendered--Step relationships tend to follow societal norms with women having lower SES than men

# *Systems and subsystems*

- The biological metaphor of systems--cells, organs, etc
- Binuclear family model (Ahrons)
- Subsystems in the stepfamily

# *Binuclear family system (adapted from C. Ahrons)*



Question: What subsystems are missing from this picture?

# *Subsystems in the stepfamily*

- ◆ Genetic similarity
- ◆ Family history
- ◆ Family paradigm
- ◆ Age, gender and sexual orientation—parents and children
- ◆ Shared interests
- ◆ Religion
- ◆ Money and social class
- ◆ Special needs (physical, learning, and emotional)

### *III. Functions*

- ◆ Survival--food, shelter, etc
- ◆ Systemic regulation
  - Communication--clear, direct, sensitive
  - Conflict management--win/win approaches
  - Management of coalitions

# *Managing coalitions--the goals*

- Reach across group boundaries to find common needs, interests, and goals
- Balance power to reduce resentment and oppositional behavior
- Improve sense of unity and sharing (both the joys and pains of family life)

# *Comparison--the process of coalition government*

- Acknowledge conflicting loyalties, needs, perceptions, ideologies
- Acknowledge struggles over limited resources
- Acknowledge differences in coalition size and power, including linkages to “external” power such as grandparents, religious communities
- Honor membership in groups and invite them to organize
- Invite groups to form coalitions for specific issues

# *NARRATIVE*

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- Group identities
- Relational identities

# *Group identities*

- Shared language/discourse
- Us vs Others (e.g. race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation)
- Positive and negative identities
- Identity stories--key events, characters, attributions, “images”

# *Relational identities*

- Available discourses (e.g. gender)
- Validation, confirmatory feedback (including confirmation of negative identity)
- Challenges from new perspectives

# *Managing identities--the goals*

- Reduce negativity, “altercasting”
- Increase validation (for parents as well as children)
- Offer new relational opportunities
- Create new meanings

# *Identity renegotiation*

- Acknowledge variations of “self” in relationships
- Recognize influence processes and power
- Develop skills for managing influence
  - ♦ Systemic processes and rules
  - ♦ Individual communication etc.

# *Action plans*

- Meet with different subgroups/coalitions to discuss their shared perceptions/interests
- Keep attention on the couple level--if the couple can't function, nothing else will work
- Create and maintain family meeting times to provide a forum for “safe” discussions
- Create and new family experiences that symbolize the new group while maintaining experiences/symbols of what has been merged into the whole