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Michelle Engblom-Deglmann  
*George Fox University*, [mengblom@georgefox.edu](mailto:mengblom@georgefox.edu)

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# Not Even Cold in Her Grave: How Postbereavement Remarried Couples Perceive Family Acceptance

Michelle Engblom-Deglmann<sup>a</sup> and Andrew S. Brimhall<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Marriage, Couple, and Family Counseling, George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon, USA;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Child Development and Family Relations, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA

## ABSTRACT

Following the interviews of 24 participants concerning the death of their spouse and subsequent remarriage, a pattern of unsolicited responses concerning perceived acceptance of family emerged. Through grounded theory qualitative analysis, a continuum of acceptance was developed ranging from welcoming acceptance to active disapproval. Themes that influenced the perceived level of acceptance were (a) the length of time between death and courtship; (b) the length of the courtship itself; and (c) the level of family involvement in the courtship. Findings support and enhance current literature on remarital adjustment, suggesting it is critical to not only include children, but also the extended family in which the family resides. Provisional hypotheses and clinical implications are provided to help clinicians navigate these complex family dynamics and potentially increase family support.

## KEYWORDS

Acceptance; bereavement; family support; qualitative; remarriage

As early as 1988, a main concern expressed by remarried parents has been the children's acceptance of their relationship (Gentry & Shulman, 1988). Since that time, several studies have identified family support as the most common concern reported by remarried participants (Lee, deMaris, Bavin, & Sullivan, 2001; O'Neill & Keane, 2005; Visher & Visher, 1996). Support of a relationship often varies based on the history of the relationship and how it was formed (Anderson & Greene, 2005, 2013; Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015). Given the inherent tension that exists when people combine families, an area of study with a high emphasis on family support, and how it affects relationships, is divorce and remarriage (Amato, 2013; Brimhall & Engblom-Deglmann, 2011; Lucier-Greer, Adler-Baeder, Harcourt, & Gregson, 2014). Remarried participants have a right to worry about whether or not their family, especially their children, will support their new partner because research indicates that lack of family support is a significant risk factor associated with relationship dissolution (Coleman, Ganong, Hans, Sharp, & Rothrauff, 2005; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Pasley & Garneau, 2012;

Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015); and might be a leading contributor to the fact that remarriages continue to experience a higher rate of divorce (Sweeney, 2010).

Although research clearly states that remarried relationships are often marked by difficulty and experience lower levels of support (Amato, 2000; Anderson & Greene, 2013; Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999), a majority of this research has relied on families who experience remarriage after a divorce. Significantly less research is available on people who remarry after the death of their partner (de Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003) and how families experience that transition (Bishop & Cain, 2003). Some professionals argue that family members might adapt more easily to the new partner because the deceased person is no longer physically present and therefore conflicts around time, resources, and other family dynamics are diminished (Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Moss & Moss, 2014). Opponents of this view argue that the deceased person is idealized and becomes a person who is larger than life who others cannot emulate (Brimhall & Engblom-Deglmann, 2011; Grinwald & Shabat, 1997; Marwit & Carusa, 1998; Sayre, McCollum, & Spring, 2010).

Although parallels exist, bereavement researchers caution against treating the loss associated with both divorce and death exactly the same (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Instead additional research is needed that helps empirically support any differences that might exist. For example, current literature still debates whether people receive more or less support for new relationships following the death of a spouse versus divorce (Moss & Moss, 2014; van den Hoonaard, 2010). It is also unclear what implications the perceived level of family support has on the new couple.

To understand the role of perceived support on remarried couples, a secondary data analysis was completed using transcripts from a grounded theory research study. The original study interviewed 24 participants who got remarried after one of the participants lost a partner to death. The original research question asked participants how the death of a previous spouse, either theirs or their partner's, had affected their remarriage.

The focus of the original study was to explore the impact of the death on the marital relationship, but an additional story also emerged, the perceived impact of the remarriage on family support. Without being prompted, nearly every participant discussed the perceived level of family acceptance regarding his or her decision to remarry. Because the model that emerged from the original research question focused directly on the couple relationship (see Brimhall & Engblom-Deglmann, 2011) there was not a logical place to insert the information about the perceived level of acceptance of children and family members. Although these data did not fall under the scope of the original research question, it felt incomplete to not share this story as well. These reports did not come directly from the participants' offspring or extended family, but the participants'

perceptions are still extremely important to understand. As Gottman (2011) demonstrated through his principles of positive and negative sentiment, how a person perceives an interaction often directly influences how he or she experiences that interaction, and as an extension, those relationships. Many of these participants shared, in great detail, how experiences with their family members were viewed through this perceived level of acceptance. Given the significant impact that perceptions can have on interactions and relationships, it was deemed vital to understand how these participants viewed family acceptance. Therefore, through a secondary analysis of the original data, the purpose of this article was to highlight the participants' perception of their family support and the meanings they attached to these perceptions.

## **Method**

Family dynamics following the death and remarriage of a parent are both complicated and understudied (Nickman, Silverman, & Normand, 1998; Riches & Dawson, 2000). As a result, research aimed at studying these complex situations should rely on methods designed to appropriately capture these dynamics. Consistent with grounded theory methodology, semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 couples who were in a second marriage where at least one partner experienced the death of his or her previous spouse. Inclusion criteria required that couples were not remarried for more than 6 years ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 4.7$ ), a cutoff that was used in an attempt to capture experiences that were not too far removed from the experience to recall some of the specifics surrounding the transition. Although the inclusion criterion was less than 6 years, as we approached saturation it was considered important to see if the themes were consistent for remarriages of longer lengths. As a result, a couple who had been married for 18 years was purposefully included. Adding variety to your sample is a principle consistent with grounded theory methodologies and helps ensure that researchers understand some of the variability inherent in each category (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Couples were recruited from Midwest university employees as well as through referrals from colleagues. All participants were heterosexual Whites (see Table 1).

## **Procedures**

Telephone screenings were done to ensure that each couple met the inclusion criteria. Qualified couples were invited to participate in semistructured interviews that were conducted either at their home, the local university, or a local business office. The couples were interviewed together as well as individually (for rationale, see Brimhall, Wampler, & Kimball, 2008). Each participant completed a

**Table 1.** Demographic information for participants.

Participant	Divorced (D)/ Widowed (W)	Death Expected	Young (Y)/ Adult (A) Children	Years in First Marriage	Years Between Marriages	Years of Courtship	Years in Current Marriage	Reference Children (C)/ Family (F)/ Both (B)
Albert (1 H)	W	Y	A	40	1.5	0.25	2.5	Neither
Ruth (1 W)	D	N/A	A	33.5	8	0.25	2.5	Neither
Whitey (2 H)	W	Unknown	A	43	2.5	0.83	0.5	C
Thelma (2 W)	D	N/A	A	26	3	1	0.5	C
Olaf (3 H)	W	Y	A	48	0.5	0.33	6.5	C
Marie (3 W)	W	Y	A	46.5	0.5	0.5	6.5	C
Gus (4 H)	W	Unknown	A	56	3	0.25	5	C
Betty (4 W)	Both	Y	A	17	3	0.33	5	B
Howard (5 H)	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	0.29	1.5	B
Ann (5 W)	W	Unknown	Y	28	2	0.25	1.5	B
Steve (6 H)	D	N/A	Y	27	Unknown	1.5	1	B
Cindi (6 W)	W	N	Y	12	14	1.5	1	B
Dick (7 H)	D	N/A	A	17	14	7	4	C
Tori (7 W)	W	N	A	21	13	9	4	C
Zack (8 H)	W	Y	Y	20	1.25	1	1	B
Anna (8 W)	D	N/A	Y	27	1.25	1	1	B
Bob (9 H)	D	N/A	Y	8	Unknown	3	3	B
Rachel (9 W)	W	N	Y	8	5	3	3	B
Kevin (10 H)	W	N	Y	12	6	2	0.25	B
Kristin (10 W)	N/A	N/A	Y	N/A	N/A	2	0.25	B
Mickey (11 H)	W	Y	A	30	3.5	1.5	18	B
Jan (11 W)	Both	Y	A	34	4	2	18	B
Dude (12 H)	W	Y	A	26	6	5	3	B
Elizabeth (12 W)	D	N/A	A	25	6	5	3	B

demographic questionnaire and a marital assessment for both their current and previous marriage. Each interview was conducted by one of the two authors (24 by the first author, 12 by the second author).

Each participant was informed his or her responses would remain confidential both in his or her individual interview as well as the couple interview. To maintain confidentiality, each participant created a pseudonym for himself and herself and for his or her deceased spouse. Each interview lasted between 20 minutes and an hour. Interview questions focused on the past relationship, the death of the spouse, and its impact on the current relationship.

The overall goal of the primary research question was to explore how past marriages influenced current relationships following the death of a spouse. Participants specifically addressed how they integrated the presence of the deceased spouse into their current relationship. These findings were published previously (Brimhall & Engblom-Deglmann, 2011). However, the participants also discussed in depth their own perceptions on how their family, both their children and their extended families, reacted to their decision to remarry. Although the original research question was not exploring the family dynamics around their remarriage, all couples spontaneously added information about how they felt their decision affected their children and family. Ignoring the family-centered part of their experience because it did not fit into the couple narrative seemed incomplete. As a result, a secondary analysis was completed to explore how participants perceived their family support. Some caution should be taken because these reactions are the perceptions of the participants and were not obtained from interviewing the children or families directly. Although future research should aim to include the perspective of family members, this analysis relies solely on the views of the participants and how they made meaning around their family's reactions and behaviors.

### ***Data analysis***

The secondary analysis included open, axial, and selective coding (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The primary and secondary researchers conducted a preliminary analysis of each interview. This analysis involved reading every transcript ( $n = 36$ ; 24 individual and 12 couple) and highlighting any important words or phrases (in vivo codes) from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). After the initial analyses, and receiving participant feedback (see next) axial and selective coding were used to establish the central and other related categories.

### **Research credibility**

#### ***Participant feedback***

Each participant ( $n = 24$ ) independently reviewed a copy of the initial analyses that he or she received via mail or e-mail (based on personal preference). Participants added additional information or corrected any inconsistencies in follow-up phone interviews. Feedback was received from 18 participants and, according to their reports, the analyses were consistent with their perceptions of family support, both from their children and their families. When the final model was established, the results were sent to eight couples ( $n = 16$ ) who reported that this model accurately captured their experiences. Data from both levels of participant feedback were integrated into the final analyses.

### **Internal/external auditor**

An internal and external auditing process was also conducted to help confirm that the categories and themes were consistent with the results presented by the participants (Charmaz, 2006). The internal auditing consisted of regular meetings between authors to discuss the emerging data. Also, each author provided an in-depth coding of the interviews he or she conducted and a secondary coding for the interviews conducted by the other author. The external auditor reviewed all of the research materials for two couples and reported that she felt the analyses accurately captured the participants' experiences.

### **Results**

These results can be categorized into an overarching central category (acceptance) with several related categories that help describe how participants perceived the level of family acceptance. It is important to remind readers that these are the perceptions of the remarried participants and not those of their actual children and family. Although they shared stories that described their family's reactions it is still based on their perception of the event and does not capture the experience of the actual family member. Therefore caution should be used when interpreting these findings. Future research including interviews with the children and extended family would be beneficial in strengthening these results. Based on these categories, the following theoretical model was developed (see Figure 1).

#### **Perceived level of acceptance: The central category**

The central category was the perceived level of acceptance of their remarriage by the participants' children and families. According to grounded theory, the central category should encompass the core of the research, be consistently represented by the participants, and relate to each aspect of the research (Charmaz, 2006). When discussing their remarriage, most couples reported that the most difficult aspect of their remarriage was



**Figure 1.** Level of perceived acceptance of remarried participants.

the acceptance, or lack thereof, by their children and other family members. One participant (Zach) stated, "I think the biggest stumbling block in remarriage is kids accepting the other person." Kevin reported, "Biggest concern? My kids. Absolutely, no question, hands down." Yet another participant (Jan) stated, "The hardest thing for [him] to get into this relationship? Probably his kids."

Although all participants discussed the worry they felt about getting remarried, it appears that the perceived level of family acceptance represents a continuum that ranges from welcoming acceptance to active disapproval. All participants fell somewhere within this continuum, but two couples in particular clearly illustrated the differences between each experience. The following sections highlight these couples to help compare these differences.

### ***Welcoming acceptance***

This end of the spectrum represents children and families who expressed acceptance of the remarriage and welcomed the new partner. This type of acceptance is highlighted in Kevin's story of how his children accepted Kristin. It is important to note that Kevin and Kristin represent the endpoint of the spectrum in this data set, not necessarily the theoretical endpoint. Kevin and Kristin married after Kevin's first wife unexpectedly passed away after 12 years of marriage. Kristin had never been married. At the time of the interview, the two had been married for approximately 4 months and dated for 2 years before getting married. Kevin said his adolescent children "opened their hearts to her and accepted her. . . . When I proposed, the kids helped me pick out the ring and were in on the proposal. It was the four of us at the table." Kristin stated that as soon as they became engaged, Kevin's son "started calling me stepmom." Kevin added that his children enjoyed having her around and would not discuss their day until Kristin came home. Other participants described welcoming acceptance, albeit to a lesser extent. Howard reported, "I was very comfortable with her family . . . they welcomed me right off, it was really good that way." Marie stated that her children "always treated Olaf like he had been there all the time . . . I think they have accepted you very well." Cyndi discussed how her daughter, who was getting married, asked that Steve, "be in a tux . . . she asked that he be included." In addition, Cyndi reported, "When we do things they ask, 'Where is Steve? Is Steve coming?'" These words describe family members who, from the participants' perspective, made an active effort to help the new partner feel included.



## ***Active disapproval***

On the other end of the continuum is active disapproval. Several participants discussed how their children and extended family expressed active disapproval for either the new spouse or the remarriage. In these cases, families' reactions to the new spouse or the remarriage were exhibited both verbally and through their actions.

Zach and Anna's experience captures this end of the spectrum. Zach and Anna married after his spouse passed away. However, unlike the case of Kevin and Kristin, the death of Zach's wife was expected, as she passed away from cervical cancer after 20 years of marriage. Anna was married previously and had divorced after 27 years. Zach and Anna had been married, at the time of the interview, for 1 year. Despite many similarities between the two couples, Zach's adolescent children actively disapproved of the remarriage in a variety of ways, including disrespect. Zach reported his children "were really close to [their deceased mother] ... it's hard for them to accept somebody else into their life ... they disrespect her. They don't answer her when she talks to them." In addition, Zach reported that pictures of him and Anna "will sometimes be gone. There will be pictures ... out on the table and then all of the sudden they will be gone and [we will] find them in a drawer." Anna also reported that the children will "turn our pictures backwards ... or lay it flat." When asked about their interpretation of this behavior, Anna responded, "Just a little way to make an expression ... [they] want it the old way."

Active disapproval also included physical and emotional distance. Thelma and Whitey, married for less than 1 year, reported that Whitey's adult daughter was "not taking it well" and had distanced herself from the new couple. According to Thelma, "She has not called her dad for 2 months and she only lives a few blocks away." When asked to describe what meaning Thelma attached to this behavior, she responded, "She was very close to her mother, and I think she is having a hard time."

Pictures of the deceased family member and general family pictures were commonly perceived as a way of expressing active disapproval. Kevin, despite his children's level of acceptance, described how, "[a picture of his deceased wife] is still hanging in my parent's house ... and it kind of bothers me. It is like 'Mom, she is gone. You have to let her go.' I have literally looked my mom in the face and said, 'Mom, you have to let her go.'" Another participant, Betty, felt her new husband's family outwardly struggled with their relationship. She said, "[Gus's] oldest girl and her husband and children came and she brought an album and she called [Gus] over to the table to look at this album ... it was all about Gus and [his deceased spouse] and I looked for a little while ... and tried to ignore it, which was hard, but I knew she did it to try and push me out."

When describing experiences of disapproval, participants mentioned two subcategories that seemed to be consistent across experiences: (a) family members feeling like it was too soon, and (b) a desire to keep things as they were. Each message is briefly discussed.

### ***This is too soon***

A common message reported by the participants was their fear that their family members thought the remarriage was too soon. In many cases this was not a judgment of the new spouse, but an expressed displeasure with the timing. Often, the couple themselves knew it was a rapid transition. Ann reported that she and Howard would have married sooner but waited to allow the idea to sink in. She said, "I worried about [our children]. [We] would have got married right away, but we waited a few months just to let it soak into my kids and stuff ... it was so soon." Even though they decided to wait (4 months), they reported that their children still expressed concern that the remarriage was too soon. Ann reported, "When we went and told [the children] that we were going to get married, they were just kind of like, 'Well, it's kind of soon' ... [my son] just sat there and he looked at me and said, 'What? I have to think about this ...'" Ann also reported that her mother asked her to "please make sure it's okay with the boys, because they've been through a lot." Mickey and Jan described how Mickey's son said, "Mom isn't even cold in her grave and you are out messing around with another woman."

### ***Want things to stay the same***

Another message commonly perceived was a desire that things would stay the same and everyone could pretend life had not changed. Betty, in discussing Gus's children, stated, "[The children] wanted it to stay the way it was, [they] didn't want him to get married at all." Ruth reported, "Our children had to work through some things ... the kids wanted to keep everything as it was." For some participants these objections were openly expressed, whereas others reported seeing nonverbal attempts to maintain a sense of normalcy. Ann said, "I think my middle son likes to ignore it. He [doesn't] want to talk about it, actually none of us really talk about it ... my sons and I really haven't talked about that." The meaning provided by Anna in reference to her stepchildren removing pictures from the home was, "Just a little way to make an expression ... [they] want it the old way."

### ***Categories influencing acceptance***

Through their stories, participants described three categories that seemed to influence the level of perceived acceptance. It appears these decisions affected, from their perspective, where their family members fell on the

continuum between active disapproval and welcoming acceptance. These are (a) the length of time between relationships, (b) the amount of time since the death, and (c) the level of involvement in the courtship. This section addresses the variation among participants on each of these categories and its impact on the perceived level of acceptance, again using the two couples to illustrate each end of the spectrum.

### ***Time between death and courtship***

The first category was the duration between death and courtship. Of the four participants who were single for 2 or more years following the death of their spouse, three had children who accepted the new partner.

After the death of Kevin's wife, he waited for 4 years before courting Kristin. In this study only one other widowed participant waited longer. Kevin reported that his children "have opened their hearts and accepted her ... if I had met her 4 years earlier, forget it. There is no way they would have accepted her then." Contrarily, after the death of Zach's wife, he waited for 3 months before dating Anna. Zach reported, "It is hard for [my children] to accept somebody else into their life. It is really tough for them. They still haven't come to that and I don't know if they ever will." In this study only one other widowed participant reported less time between death and courtship than Zach. It appears that more time between transitions might lead to higher levels of acceptance. Albert explained this succinctly, saying, "The biggest thing I found was that it took time. And we have often heard the expression time heals many things and I needed that time to heal. My heart was broken, I needed the time to sort out what I needed to do."

### ***Length of courtship***

The second category was the length of time the remarried couple dated before remarrying. Short courtships seemed to be a descriptive quality of those partners who started dating sooner. Six of the 12 couples reported dating their new partner for 1 year or less. All six of those reported less than 3 years between the death of their first spouse and the courtship of their second spouse. Only one of the six dated for more than 6 months. Betty reported, "I think we kind of rushed into marriage ... we didn't go together that long." Ann, who dated her second husband for 3 months prior to marriage, reported, "We wanted to be married right away, we just knew it was right for us. We knew we were right for each other ... the only reason we waited was because of my kids, we wanted them to get a little time to adjust to the idea." All the couples who experienced their children as actively disapproving dated for 1 year or less, whereas couples who dated more than 2 years did not report active disapproval. Shorter courtships appear to provide fewer opportunities for family members to adjust to the relationship and thus could decrease acceptance.

It appears, according to the participants' reports, that family members, especially children, might prefer a longer courtship. Longer courtships, like Kevin and Kristin's, could provide the children an opportunity to adjust first to losing their parent and then to the remarriage. Despite Zach reporting that he thought it was "best to get married as soon as possible and bring these kids together to give them a good life," their reactions seemed to suggest they were not ready for that transition.

### ***Family involvement in courtship process***

The final category involved the actual courtship process and the level of family involvement. Couples appeared to either openly involve the family in the courtship process or keep their relationship secretive. One of the strongest messages of disapproval ("Mom's not even cold in her grave") came from the son of a couple where they "kept it a secret from [the children]." When asked about being secretive, Jan responded, "Mickey was probably afraid of their reaction." Four of the five couples who were open about their dating relationship had children who accepted the new marriage. Five of the six couples who kept their relationship private experienced either active disapproval or children who expressed serious concern. It appears that more involvement in the courtship process provides family members, especially children, an opportunity to become acquainted with the new spouse, thus potentially leading to higher levels of acceptance.

Kevin felt it was important to actively involve his children in the decision-making process. According to him, "The kids were in on the proposal." In contrast, Zach and Anna reported wanting to get married quickly for the children and dating "away from our kids," suggesting that unlike Kevin and Kristin, this courtship was not discussed openly and the children were not involved. This pattern is reinforced when you consider Kevin's parents, who were not as involved as his children. According to Kevin, they continued to display wedding photos in their home of Kevin and his deceased wife and did not demonstrate the same level of acceptance as his children.

### **Results in the existing literature**

The results indicate that remarried couples postbereavement perceived different levels of acceptance from their children and extended families. As previously mentioned, substantial research exists on divorce and remarriage, but very little literature exists on what specific factors contribute to the acceptance of the remarriage by the family. Dating back to an article in 1973, it was reported that widows struggle with new romantic relationships because their children are often resentful toward these new partners (Carr & Boerner, 2013; Lopata, 1973). Few empirical studies since that time have examined the dynamic of the dating relationship and subsequent marriage

and its influence on the family and children (Langlais, Anderson, & Greene, 2015). It has become increasingly apparent that studying how the new relationship affects intergenerational relations is important (Amato, 2013; Smith, 2006). Stressful family relationships can create tension in the new postbereavement marriage. Researchers have found that remarriage creates stress for widows and widowers who worry that their children and other family members disapprove of their marriage (Davidson, 2002; Moore & Stratton, 2001; van den Hoonaard, 2010). Further, research might even suggest that those who begin dating soon after a loss might experience strained relationships with their children (van den Hoonaard, 2010). In this regard, it appears that examining the family's level of acceptance is also important when remarrying after the death of a partner (Gentry & Shulman, 1988; Lee et al., 2001; O'Neill & Keane, 2005). Similarities between these data and the previous literature exist.

### ***Timing between death and courtship***

It appears that the timing of courtship and remarriage is not only a factor in acceptance of remarried couples postbereavement, but also remarried couples postdivorce. Montgomery, Anderson, Hetherington, and Clingempeel (1992) reported, "The timing of courtship and the point at which remarriage occurs during the post-divorce coping process are likely to influence child adjustment and remarried family relationships" (p. 687). In addition, a study conducted by Riches and Dawson (2000) reported similar findings, referring to a participant's "sense of betrayal when she 'discovered' her father's new relationship 'less than 3 months afterwards'" (p. 364).

### ***Level of involvement***

Involving others in the courtship process is supported by existing research, both postdivorce and postbereavement. Research suggests that parents make decisions about what information to share with children regarding their relationships and their desire to repartner (Anderson & Greene, 2005; Anderson et al., 2004). Findings indicate that the amount of information shared is directly linked to the level of adjustment experienced by the children, suggesting it might not be the dating itself that influences acceptance, but the amount of involvement a child has with the dating partner.

Specifically, Anderson et al. (2004) found that divorced parents exposed children to their dating activities in one of three ways. The first involved transparency, in which the child was completely exposed to the new relationship beginning with the first date. This group comprised 40% of their sample. Anderson et al. suggested this approach negatively affects a child's adjustment. This study did not provide sufficient information to determine whether or not

any participants fell into this category. The second level was referred to as graded awareness, where, as the relationship got more serious, parents gradually exposed the children to the dating partner. This dynamic could conceivably help children gradually form a relationship with the dating partner. Kevin and Kristin's experience seems to fit this description. Although they did not discuss this directly, it was implied that his children were aware of the dating process, culminating in the children helping him choose the engagement ring and being involved in the proposal. This gradual pace allows the new parent's role to evolve over time as a relationship with the children develops.

Encapsulation, the final level of exposure, represents parents who hid their courtship so successfully from their children that the children did not realize they were dating. Children in this category, according to the authors, were more resistant to the relationship, and presented more challenges overall. Their responses ranged from open hostility to unresponsiveness. This description seems to accurately portray several of the participants' perceptions in this study. Olaf stated, "We did not make it a thing that was known . . . kept it as quiet as we could." Zach reported, "We were spending so much time together, away from our kids" and Mickey reported, "I never told my kids about anything." Finally, Jan stated, "His kids did not know. . . . He kept it a secret from them . . . he probably was afraid of their reaction." As Anderson et al. (2004) would predict, the children of these couples reacted with active disapproval as witnessed by Whitey's two children: (a) his son, who was angry because his mom "wasn't even cold in her grave" (hostility); and (b) his daughter, who, despite living two blocks away, had not engaged her father, or his partner, in 2 months (unresponsive).

The existing literature provides support for these findings, both in general and as they relate to the three main categories identified in this study. Although most of these concepts have been empirically tested on postdivorce remarried families, this study advances this literature in two ways. First, it expands the research to include remarriages postbereavement. Second, the sole focus of Anderson's work was on how the child adjusted to the relationship. Although gathered from the perspective of the remarried partners, this research includes stories about children (both young children living in the home and adult children living on their own) and stories about the larger extended family. These stories provide tentative support for the idea that these concepts extend past the nuclear family (or the children) and also affect members in the extended family. As such, interventions should consider including extended family members rather than focusing predominantly on the couple or members of the immediate family.

Also, the findings from this study help offer another perspective to stepfamily research that describes a developmental perspective to forming and becoming a stepfamily. According to this research, differences in family formation can often be tied to the developmental stage of the children when the divorce or

remarriage occurs. They suggest that widowhood and repartnering in later life (with postlaunching adult children) could pose different dynamics than forming a coparenting household with young children (Carr & Boerner, 2013; de Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013). As an example, young children might resist the formation of a new marriage (Brown & Manning, 2009), whereas older children could respond from a position of support and advice giving (Merz, Schuengel, & Schulze, 2008). Although using a developmental perspective is important, these data indicated that the age of the children did not seem to influence the perceived level of acceptance from the participants' experience. Participants described experiences in which children, both young and adult, engaged in disapproving and welcoming behaviors. The difference in reactions appeared to be more connected to timing and familiarity with the new partner than the age or developmental stage of the children. Given these results are qualitative, and rely on the perceptions of the participants, these results should be treated tentatively. Additional research is necessary to confirm whether or not timing and familiarity are more instrumental than developmental stages.

### ***Provisional hypotheses***

By means of a secondary analysis, this article explored how postbereavement remarried couples perceived family acceptance. From these results, three tentative hypotheses were created. These hypotheses are provisional and require additional research to confirm or disprove. Each is dependent on the others and, as such, should be viewed systemically.

First, postbereavement couples with longer periods of time between death and courtship will report higher levels of perceived acceptance. Specifically, a period of 2 years or more (based on this study) could be associated with a family's ability to mourn the deceased family member and welcome the new partner. Second, postbereavement couples with longer courtships will experience higher rates of perceived acceptance. It seems children and other family members value having time to grieve their loss before welcoming a new person into the family system. Finally, postbereavement couples who include others in the dating process will report higher levels of perceived acceptance. It is assumed, based on previous research (Anderson et al., 2004), that this hypothesis might follow a curvilinear relationship, and require that parents strike a balance between being totally transparent and encapsulating. Additional research is needed to determine when and how information should be shared with family members transitioning to a postbereavement remarriage.

### ***Implications for marital and family therapists***

The results from this study have the ability to inform clinical work with postbereavement couples and families as they traverse the inherent

tension present when repartnering. Postbereavement couples, it appears, face a difficult decision regarding when to make their dating public, a dilemma that is greatly enhanced by the grief literature, which suggests that ways of mourning might differ based on whether the loss was expected or unexpected (Baum, 2003; Brimhall & Engblom-Deglmann, 2011). Expected loss might lead people to mourn the loss before it actually occurs. These individuals could be further along in the grieving process and might be emotionally ready to engage in a relationship sooner than those losing someone unexpectedly. This can be seen in Zach's example, as his wife battled cervical cancer for 20 years. Although his children might not have begun the mourning process until the official death of their mom, it is possible that Zach had started coming to terms with the eventual death of his partner. Unlike Kevin, Zach lost his wife gradually and had to make both physical and emotional preparations for his inevitable loss. After experiencing a major loss, most adults instinctively look for support from other caring adults within their network (Anderson & Greene, 2013). This dilemma is enhanced by the fact that when seeking support, unique gender differences can exist, with men commonly seeking out new relationships to dispel loneliness (Baum, 2003; Davidson, 2002). Whereas some women might fear the impending responsibility of caring for another adult, and therefore avoid future relationships, others might seek a relationship for financial stability (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). As a result, the surviving partner has a myriad of emotional and physical needs that can often pull him or her into a new relationship (Anderson & Greene, 2013). This need for connection often directly opposes the needs of the children and family, which is to keep the memory of the deceased alive as long as possible and to feel a connection with their remaining parent (de Jong Gierveld & Merz, 2013; Sayre et al., 2010).

Based on these needs, children and extended family might want the surviving parent to maintain as much normalcy as possible and avoid introducing a new person into the family. This inherent tension, as the literature and results indicate, can place the surviving partner in a difficult position. Sensing these competing needs, the parent might choose to keep his or her dating relationships as secretive as possible (encapsulation), often excluding children and family. Although this decision might reduce short-term discomfort, it appears, as indicated earlier, that it might decrease family members' ability to accept the relationship in the long term, at least from the participants' perspective. Alternatively, the surviving partner can involve the family and children in the dating process, which might initially create uneasy feelings among those who feel it is too soon, but allows those involved to become acquainted with one another, thus building the foundation necessary for future acceptance (graded awareness). Clinicians need to understand this curvilinear relationship and help



families understand that if time is taken to grieve (for the parent, the children, and the extended family), the new relationship might begin in an environment less clouded by their significant loss.

However, as mentioned by several of the participants, these are not conversations these families are having. Instead they are making decisions that ultimately influence the quality of future relationships without having these important conversations (Riness & Sailor, 2015). Based on these findings, it seems that marriage and family therapists have three specific ways to intervene. First, greater emphasis should be placed on preventative services that target participants going through a marital transition. Attempts should be made to discuss these findings with people as they are going through the grieving process rather than waiting until they come into our offices experiencing relational difficulties. Intervening earlier will hopefully allow them to make informed decisions that could minimize the impact of these relational transitions.

Second, marriage and family therapists need to discuss these issues within the systemic context in which they occur. It appears that a systemic tension exists, based on competing needs, for the entire family. It seems important, therefore, that mental health professionals include the extended family in this process and intervene at a broader level, not simply with surviving spouses, their new partners, or their children. As it stands, most remarital education focuses on the couple and helping them navigate these transitions. There are some who, due to the primacy of the relationship between parent and child, might, with good intentions, focus their attention on maintaining that central relationship. Forgotten, at times, could be the realization that these children are often raised in an extended family environment that might influence them. If they are interacting with extended family members who disapprove of the relationship, it could affect their own ability to be accepting. As a result, it is important that clinicians and other professionals invite the entire system into these conversations and not focus solely on the parent-child relationship. Specifically, clinicians should recognize that grief and acceptance are both processes rather than one-time achievements. As such, the grieving and adjustment processes should be continually addressed, for all those involved, before, during, and after remarriage. Building bonds between the surviving spouse, the new spouse, and both their immediate and extended families is crucial to maintaining parenting quality (Anderson & Greene, 2013). It also encourages acceptance for the new spouse, who often feels uncertain and insecure (Brimhall & Engblom-Deglmann, 2011). Previous literature suggests it can take 5 to 7 years for a remarried family postdivorce to establish a new equilibrium (Anderson & Greene, 2013; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Because lack of family support is a consistent risk factor associated with relationship dissolution in remarried couples (Carr & Boerner, 2013; Pasley & Garneau, 2012; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004) it is

vital that these conversations be constantly addressed. This process is likely similar, if not more important, for remarried families postbereavement.

Finally, the reality of this clinical population is that couples are unlikely to enter therapy until after the difficulties have occurred and the courtship cannot easily be delayed (or they have already married). In these instances, the focus of therapy becomes confronting the repercussions of not including the family earlier. For example, during his interview, Zach said that he knew he should slow down but feared a therapist would agree with his son. He said, "My fear in bringing them to a counselor was that the counselor was going to tell them 'Yes, it is too soon for your dad to get married.'" Clinical work with these families might need to include work on repairing the relationship and changing perceptions. Family members might be angry that they were not included and new partners could feel like others view them as an outsider. These perceptions could influence how they relate to one another. Earlier mention was made of Gottman's (2011) principles of positive and negative sentiment override. A person experiencing negative sentiment override has the ability to take a neutral event and see it negatively. This might have been the case when Beth was describing her experience with Gus and his family. The children wanted to look at pictures of their mom (an appropriate activity for someone who has suffered a significant loss). However, the meaning Beth attached to this experience was that Gus's daughter "did it to try and push me out." Similarly, given the fact that Gus failed to include his children in his decision to date (encapsulation), they might have unwittingly assumed that Beth was trying to replace their mom by "sneaking off" with their dad. Each person could interpret the other's behavior through this lens and reinforce a negative interaction pattern that confirms their perception. Concentrated efforts to help all members of the system discuss their underlying fears, and the interpretations behind their perceptions, would help reinforce the relationship and help each person gain a more accurate view of the person and his or her behavior, thus helping them interpret future experiences through a more positive lens (Gottman, 2011; Johnson, 2008). It is hoped that an increased understanding would help decrease the inherent tensions that exist around these relational transitions and help each person communicate his or her needs and respond in a way that is appropriate to those needs.

### **Improving the current theory**

This research expanded on tentative theories presented by Brimhall et al. (2008) and Brimhall and Engblom-Deglmann (2011), and involved an additional analysis of results obtained from interviews of postbereaved remarried couples. These couples expressed unsolicited concerns about the level of acceptance they felt from their children and their families. A

limitation of this study is that the hypotheses and results are perceptions of the participants about their children and extended family. Interviews were not conducted with the children and families directly, and thus more research should be conducted to confirm these findings. Future studies should explore the level of acceptance experienced not only by children, but also extended family members. These studies could help clearly define the existing categories (time between death and marriage, length of courtship, and level of involvement), and might introduce categories that were not perceived by remarried participants. In addition, future studies can help professionals understand the impact of developmental stages on courtship and remarriage. Specifically, future research can help illuminate the role of age and gender and how each of these variables influences the level of acceptance exhibited by children. Finally, the sample was entirely White, with couples who were in relatively long first marriages and shorter remarriages. Research is needed that considers other ethnicities and couples who have different lengths of relationships. Finally, because this was a secondary analysis, the perception of family acceptance was not the original focus of the study. As such, the data provided were more limited than they might have been otherwise. As a result, future research is necessary that not only asks participants about their family's acceptance, but also includes family members and their perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Although these present findings are tentative, they can provide a foundation for future research and inform clinical work with families and children who experience remarriage or courtship after the death of a loved one. Participants discussed their views on how their children and family members reacted to their remarriage. Perceived level of acceptance, from their perspective, appeared to be influenced by (a) the length of time between relationships, (b) the amount of time since the death, and (c) the level of family involvement in the courtship. Findings suggest that couples should allow a sufficient amount of time to pass between the loss of their loved one and introducing the new partner. However, when they do begin dating, couples might want to include their family in that process rather than trying to protect them from that transition. Keeping the dating process secretive, although beneficial in the short term, might lead to lower levels of family acceptance in the long term. Although limitations to this model exist, it is our hope that additional research in this area will help increase family support, thus strengthening a vital aspect of relational health for both remarried couples and their families.

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