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LATINO STEPCOUPLES' EXPERIENCES TWO YEARS AFTER STEPFAMILY
EDUCATION AND A NARRATIVE STUDY REGARDING CHANGES IN A
LATINO STEPFAMILY TWO YEARS AFTER STEPFAMILY EDUCATION

by

Sheryl Ann Goodey

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
of

DOCTOR OF PHILSOPHY

in

Human Development and Family Studies

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2019

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ABSTRACT

Latino Stepouples' Experiences Two Years after Stepfamily Education and a Narrative Study Regarding Changes in a Latino Stepfamily Two Years after Stepfamily Education

by

Sheryl Ann Goodey, Doctorate of Philosophy

Utah State University, 2019

Major Professor: Dr. David Schramm
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There has been an increase in the number of Latino stepfamilies in the United States. Stepfamily education provides skills to address the unique challenges of stepfamilies. Prior research has highlighted the benefits of stepfamily education among stepcouples, including Latino stepcouples, following course completion through one year following participating in stepfamily education. Through qualitative research, this dissertation provides two studies to explore Latino stepcouples' experiences two years after taking a stepfamily education course. The first study examined 13 stepcouples' perspectives of how the couple, parent/child, and family relationships were influenced by concepts from the course and family experiences that could be attributed to participating. Using Bogdan and Biklen's analysis methods, the lasting benefits of stepfamily education two years after completing the course included, (1) positive couple relationship changes, (2) positive parenting changes, (3) positive family changes, and (4) positive stepparent/stepchild relationship changes. This study gives insight to the lasting effects of stepfamily education two years after participation. The

second study is a narrative developed from six separate interviews to show the longitudinal history of one Latino stepcouple that participated in stepfamily education and their subsequent experiences over a two-year period. Some participants choose to participate in relationship education after issues arise. Contrastingly, this stepcouple chose to participate in stepfamily education prior to their stepchildren residing in their home. The benefits of stepfamily education over the two-year period include improvements in: (1) communication, (2) financial management, (3) empathy, and (4) stepparenting. This study gives insight to the decision of one Latino stepcouple's decision to participate before issues arose and how they implemented their knowledge received through stepfamily education when their stepchildren moved in with them. Overall, this dissertation contributes a better understanding of the lasting benefits of stepfamily education within a sample of Latino stepcouples two years after participation.

(152 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Latino Stepouples' Experiences Two Years After Stepfamily Education and A Narrative Study Regarding Changes in a Latino Stepfamily Two Years After Stepfamily Education

by

Sheryl Ann Goodey, Doctorate of Philosophy

There are two studies in this dissertation. Both are about couples in a stepfamily who attended stepfamily education called, *Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey*. The first study explored how 13 Latino stepcouples felt the concepts they learned in stepfamily education influenced their couple relationship, parenting, and their family. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 43. They were interviewed two years after participating in the course. They talked about positive changes that happened in their couple relationship, parenting relationship, and their family as a result of participating in stepfamily education. It was also found that the course helped them to improve their stepparent/stepchild relationship. The second study examined how one Latino stepcouples' journey unfolded after participation, and the subsequent experiences that occurred when their stepchildren moved in with them. They were interviewed right after the course was completed, one year later, and two years later. Their story is told from when the couple met, having two biological children, and then moving five stepchildren into their home. They explained how the concepts they learned helped their stepfamily. Future studies on Latino stepfamilies and the strengths and weaknesses of these studies are discussed.

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Sheryl Ann Goodey

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

With the growing number of stepfamilies, there has also been an increase in Latino stepfamilies (Lamidi & Cruz, 2014). Latinos in remarriages and in cohabiting relationships (Lamidi & Cruz, 2014; Manning, Brown, & Payne, 2014) and the prevalence of children in these couple relationships presents unique challenges for Latino stepfamilies (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). Stepfamily education (SE) has been tailored to address the unique challenges of stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Scholars have also explored ways to adapt SE so it is culturally appropriate for Latino stepfamilies (e.g., Reck, Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Davis, 2012; Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, & Higginbotham, 2009). This research is limited, however, and little has been done beyond assessing the influence of SE on stepfamily dynamics one year following completion of stepfamily programming. Follow-up studies could provide insight into the possible influence of SE on stepfamily development 2 years or more after completion (Whitton, Nicholson, & Markman, 2008). To extend the literature and explore the potential lasting influence of SE, this dissertation focused on (1) the perspectives of 13 Latino stepcouples 2 years after SE and (2) one particular Latino stepcouple's experiences over 2 years to explore what concepts were useful and what family experiences, if any, could be attributed to participating in an SE program entitled *Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey* (Adler-Baeder, 2007).

Stepfamilies

Stepfamilies are prevalent in the United States and are formed when couples remarry or cohabit, and there is at least one child from a previous relationship (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). In the United States it is estimated that between 40% and 50% of Americans will divorce during their lifetime (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013), and the majority choose to repartner or remarry (Aughinbaugh, Robles, & Sun, 2013). Consequently, almost half of marriages in the United States are remarriages for one or both partners (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013), and the United States has the highest remarriage rate in the world (Ganong et al., 2011).

Recent research indicates remarriage rates are down, compared to prior decades, and cohabitation as an alternative to remarriage is increasing (Ganong et al., 2011). Stepfamilies formed by cohabiting parents add to the task of calculating the number of children that reside in stepfamilies. Given that stepfamilies can result from remarriage or cohabitation, the percentage of children in the United States who will live in a stepfamily sometime in their life is estimated to be as high as 30% (Parker, 2011; Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Kreider (2007) estimates that 17% of children under the age of 18 live in a stepfamily, while Parker (2011) suggests that over 40% of Americans have a close step-relative consisting of a stepparent, stepsibling, or stepchild. These statistics further illustrate the growing number of stepfamilies and stepfamily relationships.

Stepcouples often encounter unique challenges tied to stepfamily dynamics, in addition to general relationship challenges (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). These range from difficult relationships with prior spouses/partners to communication and conflict management within the couple relationship (Visher & Visher, 1985). Stepouples

also face the challenge of making time for one another since (step)parenting can be time-consuming (Visher & Visher, 2013). There are also negative stigmas that accompany this family structure and boundary ambiguity is common in the newly formed relationships (Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990; Visher, Visher & Pasley, 2003). The lack of sociocultural support and positive opinions led Cherlin (1978) to describe stepfamilies as an incomplete institution. These various challenges make the stepcouple more vulnerable to dissolution compared to first marriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

Beyond the challenges associated with the stepcouple relationship, the stepparent-stepchild relationship can add further relationship strain (Bray & Kelly, 1998). Parent-child relationships in the stepfamily can be problematic, but the stepparent/stepchild relationship can be even more challenging. The sudden newness of the relationship between a stepparent and stepchild is often associated with negativity and unrealistic expectations (Visher & Visher, 2013). Papernow (2013) found that a permissive parenting style could be more effective during the initial stepfamily formation with stepchildren, in hopes of slowly moving to an authoritative parenting style. The stepparent can begin the new relationship as a friend while the biological parent continues as an authoritative parent, allowing the stepparent/stepchild relationship to develop slowly. Some of these challenges may affect Latino stepfamilies, in addition to cultural values that influence and complicate the stepfamily dynamics (Lamidi & Cruz, 2014).

Latino Stepfamilies

To better understand Latino stepfamilies, one must first have an understanding of what constitutes a Latino and the increasing Latino population. Falicov (2013) defined a

Latino as a Spanish-speaking immigrant or a direct descendent of an immigrant to the United States from a Latin American country. While there are a variety of characteristics and differences within the larger cohort of Latinos, the use of the Spanish language and some of their important values unite this group (Falicov, 2013). Latinos in the United States mostly originate from Mexico (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). With 17% of the U.S. population self-identifying as Latino, it is also a growing ethnic group (Colby & Ortman, 2015). This growth may be attributed to the higher rate of immigration in addition to a higher birthrate among Latinos compared to other ethnic groups (Knight, Roosa, & Umaña-Taylor, 2009). From 2000 to 2010, the Latino population grew by an estimated 43% (Passel, Cohn & Lopez, 2011).

Marriage rates have held relatively steady and divorce rates have increased among Latinos in the United States. Bramlett and Mosher (2002) estimate that 77% of Latino women were predicted to marry by the age of 30. Latinos continue to have higher rates of marriage compared to other ethnic minorities, and they are just as likely to marry as non-Hispanic Whites (Ellison, Wolfinger, & Ramos-Wada, 2012). While research suggests the divorce rate is increasing due to acculturation (Bulanda & Brown, 2007), the divorce rates within the Latino community are comparable to those of non-Hispanic Whites. Approximately 42% of Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites divorce within the first 15 years of marriage (Amato, 2010; Parker, 2011). Statistics indicate that there are variations in divorce rates between Latino groups as Mexican Americans are less likely to divorce compared to Puerto Ricans and Cubans (Amato, 2010). Although, Mexican Americans born in the United States are more likely to divorce than those born in Mexico (Sweeney & Phillips, 2004).

It is difficult to precisely calculate the number of Latino stepfamilies in the United States, although, an examination of the remarriage and cohabitation rates is helpful. Foreign-born Latino men report the highest remarriage rate in the United States of 5.8% (Lamidi & Cruz, 2013). Whereas Latino women, both native-born and foreign-born, have the highest remarriage rate among women, about 30 per 1,000 (Lamidi & Cruz, 2013). The cohabitation rate among Latinos has increased over the past 27 years (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Manning, 2013). Manning, Brown, and Payne (2014) reported that from 1996 to 2009, the largest increase in family complexity was among Latinos. Given the trends in remarriage and cohabitation, it is likely that there are a large number of Latino stepfamilies residing in the United States.

Latino Values

To better understand how Latino stepfamilies perceive how stepfamily education influenced their family 2 years after completion of the course, it is beneficial to consider Latino values such as religion, machismo, and familialism, which improves understanding of stepfamily dynamics. Acculturation is also addressed since it helps to explain the extent to which these values are expressed.

Religion. The Latino family values, attitudes, and traditions are often influenced by enduring religious beliefs (Espin, 1994; Skogrand et al., 2009). Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda (2003) reported that 94% of Latinos identify as having a religious affiliation. Catholicism is the predominant religion, even when individuals practice another faith (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). Many Latino families believe that marriage and family are sacred (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010). This long-standing belief also reflects the lifetime commitment required of marriage in

the Latino culture (Flores, Tschann, Marin, & Pantoja, 2004). This belief system is consistent with research findings indicating relationship quality and commitment can be partially explained by the couple's religiosity level (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010). As divorce has been discouraged, the strong, enduring influence of religion could affect the Latino stepfamily in that remarried couples may be uncertain how religious leaders will view their choices (Skogrand et al., 2009). In sum, there is some evidence suggesting religion may affect stepcouple relationships within the Latino population.

Machismo. A Latino man's role in the family as a provider, protector, and seeming to hold the majority of power is referred to as *machismo* (Orospeza & Gorman, 2000). This term describes the culturally relevant behaviors of a Latino man that is passed down through generations. Valdez, Baron, and Ponce (1987) added the concepts of chivalry and courage to the definition of *machismo*. Some describe a gender schema when trying to define *machismo* (Casas, Wagenheim, Banchero & Mendoza-Romero, 1995). Santiago-Rivera and colleagues (2002) described Latino couples as traditional, with the father being the breadwinner and disciplinarian and the mother caring for the house and children. Within this influence is the view that Latino fathers take on a traditional role as the head of the family (Galanti, 2003). This concept could affect the dynamics of stepfamily development for Latino stepfamilies.

Familialism. Familialism, sometimes referred to as familism, is the overarching value of the family and the commitment to one's family within the Latino culture (Lopez, Melendez, & Rice, 2000; Schwartz, 2007). The importance of marriage is stressed and affects the family over time (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). A willingness to sacrifice the individual's needs for the sake of the family is based on a collectivist view, meaning the

family as a whole is more important than the individual in the family (Falicov, 1998). In fact, for some, parenthood may be considered more important than the couple relationship (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2009). Familialism may greatly influence the Latino stepfamily as they strive to represent themselves as any other Latino family (Reck, Skogrand, Higginbotham, & Davis, 2013). They often choose to disassociate with the estranged parent and begin what seems to mirror a first marriage (Coltrane, Gutierrez, & Parke, 2008). Compared to the dominant culture, Latino children may be encouraged to refer to their stepparent as “mom” or “dad” (Reck et al., 2013). Through this reorganization, even the child may be unaware of their position within the stepfamily (Coltrane, et al., 2008). The term “stepfamily,” used by SE facilitators or others, does not have an equivalent word in Spanish, and may even denote a negative connotation (Reck et al., 2012). Reck and colleagues explained that participants may feel that this term refers to a family that is not natural or normal, and therefore, not sacred. Familialism may play a considerable role in stepfamily development.

Acculturation. Traditional Latino values may be influenced by acculturation—the interaction of accommodation of one’s traditional culture and the assimilation of the new culture (Zhou, 1997). This transition may affect the degree to which stepfamily relationships are influenced (Skogrand et al., 2009). One example of the effects of acculturation is how the concept of familialism is slowly changing. As immigration to the United States has occurred, the collectivistic focus on the family gives way to a more individualistic focus within many Latino families. These changes include an increase in divorce rates and cohabitation and a decrease in marriage rates that point to a convergence with non-Hispanic Whites (Landale & Oropesa, 2007). For example, the

marriage rate in 1960 within Latino populations in the United States was 72% compared to only 47% in 2010 (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011). Ethnic enclaves exist in various parts of the United States where large number of Latinos reside and work (Weaver, Umana-Taylor, Hans, & Malia, 2001). Individuals are able to speak Spanish to conduct business and associate with others in their neighborhood. The process of adaptation may be lower for individuals who immigrate into ethnic enclaves (Adames & Chavez-Duenas, 2016). With an understanding of the cultural values that can influence Latino stepfamilies, in addition to the unique challenges of stepfamily development, SE may promise to facilitate skills to increase the chance of success in these families.

Stepfamily Education

With the multiple and diverse challenges of stepfamilies, there is a need to provide skills and resources to aid in the successful development of stepfamily relationships (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). A wide variety of relationship education programs have shown to be favorable in the improvement of relationship quality (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). Marriage and relationship education can improve couple relationship quality, whether married, remarried, or cohabiting (Hawkins, et al., 2008). Research has suggested that the education designed for couples in their first marriage compared to those who repartner or remarry with children needs to be different—with remarriage education addressing topics and challenges that are specific to remarried couples (Halford, Markman, Kling, and Stanley, 2003; Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008; Whitton, Nicholson, & Markman, 2008). As noted previously, stepfamilies have unique challenges compared to first families that

affect the couple relationship, which necessitates a relationship education program tailored to their unique needs.

Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) reviewed the stepfamily literature and a variety of stepfamily curricula to determine what concepts should be incorporated into a stepfamily relationship education program. These concepts include the need to validate stepfamily experiences and the lack of support from extended family and friends, financial strategies, and the time needed for stepfamily development. Other concepts include skills to facilitate the negotiation of family members' roles and overall family rules, the importance of couple relationship development, and skills to promote stepparent-stepchild relationships (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The curriculum associated with this dissertation is entitled, *Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey*, which covers multiple research-based content areas and utilizes a family systems approach to implementation (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey (Smart Steps) is a stepfamily relationship education program that provides resources to couples and children with step relations (Adler-Baeder, 2007). Using a family systems approach, the entire stepfamily is taught skills that have been found to be useful in successful stepfamilies including empathy, conflict resolution, and stepfamily development (Adler-Baeder, 2007). Members of the stepfamily are taught age-appropriate relationship skills by simultaneously educating the couple and the children for a total of 12 hours of instruction, often taught across six weeks.

A number of evaluation studies have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of the *Smart Steps* program (e.g. Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010).

Higginbotham and Adler-Baeder (2008) surveyed 200 adults in a stepfamily who participated in *Smart Steps*, and they reported an increase in relationship stability and commitment from pre- to post- and 1 month after completion of the course. There were also increases in their abilities to recognize stepfamily myths, communicate about financial issues, identify sources of conflict, and identify family strengths (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). A qualitative study was conducted with 20 stepcouples from the previous study, one year after participating in *Smart Steps* (Skogrand, Dansie, Higginbotham, Davis, & Barrios-Bell, 2011) and overall, couples described an improvement in the couple relationship in 19 of the 20 couples interviewed. This sample was comprised of both Latino and European American individuals. In a different sample, improvements were also found in married stepcouples, as well as unmarried stepcouples, who completed this program (Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010). Other findings with *Smart Steps* participant research include the positive benefits of a group-formatted program (Skogrand, Torres, & Higginbotham, 2010) and the perceived benefits for child participation (Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2009). Rather than complete further analysis of the effectiveness of *Smart Steps*, this study examined what Latino stepcouples who participated in this SE course remembered about the course 2 years later and how the couple, parent/child, and family relationships were influenced by the concepts they learned.

Stepfamily Education within Latino Populations

Considering the needs of Latino stepfamilies, scholars have found a need to adapt relationship education curricula to this particular population (Skogrand et al., 2009).

When cultural values are incorporated into a relationship education program for Latinos,

participants may be more likely to benefit from it (Skogrand, et al., 2009). Understanding the influences of cultural values on the Latino culture and then making needed facilitation adjustments allows Latino stepfamilies to learn skills that are beneficial in successful stepfamilies without interfering with fundamental cultural values (Skogrand et al., 2009). Qualitative research with facilitators who taught *Smart Steps* to Latinos has suggested effective strategies and possible best practices in teaching Latinos SE. After interviewing 14 stepfamily education facilitators, Reck and colleagues (2012) concluded that Latino participants benefitted from more class discussion and culturally appropriate modifications to the curriculum. To increase participation, facilitators found that encouraging sharing and class discussion promoted a learning environment for the Latino stepfamilies. The group discussions seemed to assist in bonding among participants and helped them apply the material to their own lives. Teaching the curriculum within a cultural context and by recognizing the salience of the parent-child relationship also promoted learning. The modifications described by the facilitators included adaptations of the activities and modifications to the wording in the curriculum in ways that were more consistent with Latino values. This was accomplished through facilitator flexibility and an understanding of the Latino culture. Many Latino stepfamilies have participated in *Smart Steps* with these cultural modifications, and various studies were completed to assess the benefits.

Skogrand, Mendez, and Higginbotham (2014) found that Latina women ($n = 13$) reported improvements in parent-child, couple, and family relationships on the post-interview because of the information they received from their SE classes. This qualitative study found increases in communication skills and learning how to implement impartial

treatment to both biological children and stepchildren to improve the participants' parenting skills. An improved perception of parent-child closeness emanated from this modification in parenting. The increase in communication skills also positively affected the couple relationship and, ultimately, the family relationships. In addition, the relationships within the family were improved through family activities, which were part of the curriculum and resulted in a change in attitudes of the members of the family.

Reck, Skogrand, Higginbotham, and Davis (2013) completed a qualitative study with 14 Latino men right after they completed *Smart Steps*. There were four major findings regarding the experiences of Latino men who participated in SE. These included: an understanding of how the men had been recruited and their decisions to participate, improvements seen in family relationships after the intervention, the salience of the family, and normalization of the stepfamilies through participation. Word of mouth was the most prevalent form of recruitment, and the Latino men reported that they attended mostly to gain stepparenting skills and conflict resolution skills specific to stepfamily relationships. Improvements seen in their family relationships included communication skills, parenting skills, and couple relationship skills. Findings confirmed that the family is very important within the Latino culture and extended family is often included in their definition of family. The participants indicated that including the entire stepfamily in the relationship education process was an important benefit of the course. This allowed for family unity and a chance to strengthen family relationships. Meeting with other stepfamilies allowed for normalizing the experience of being in a stepfamily and as a result, provided a support to the Latino men.

Quantitative research was completed with ethnically diverse participants ($n = 2,828$) one year after a *Smart Steps* intervention (Reck, 2013). The quantitative data were gathered immediately following the intervention, 6 weeks, 6 months, and 1 year after program completion. The results of this study showed small increases in relationship quality among stepcouples immediately after attending SE. Reck noted that despite these increases related to the intervention, relationship quality decreased to nearly pre-intervention levels one year after the intervention. This trend did not vary by ethnic group.

There is only one known study that focuses on the lasting benefits of SE 2 years after completion. Skogrand and Higginbotham (2017) explored one Latino stepcouple's experiences in a narrative study 2 years post SE. Their findings included how the stepcouple used the knowledge from the course to improve how they disciplined their children, reduced couple conflict, and managed stress. Other benefits for the stepcouple seen 2 years after SE were improved money management, family unity, and commitment. This is the only known study that has examined Latino stepcouple's experiences 2 years post SE, and it differs from the present planned narrative study as the stepcouple in Skogrand and Higginbotham's (2017) study had residential stepchildren at the time of SE. In addition to exploring whether and how the *Smart Steps* program made a difference in the lives of Latino stepfamilies and whether and how it affects their couple relationships, the parenting relationships and the overall family relationships 2 years after program completion, the present study compared results to see if they are similar to Skogrand and Higginbotham's (2017) findings.

In summary, various scholars have explored the experiences of stepfamilies' post-stepfamily education through one-year follow-up surveys and interviews, one known case study has explored one stepcouple's experiences 2 years post SE, and these stepfamilies have included Latino stepfamilies. Because stepfamily relationships take time to develop, additional studies that examine stepfamilies past one-year post SE could help other stepfamilies understand the time required for successful stepfamily development (Bray & Berger, 1993). Therefore, a study of the potential sustained benefits and experiences of stepfamilies 2 years after SE would be beneficial. Two-year qualitative interview follow-ups could provide insight to the influence of SE by exploring the meaning of events, relationships, and interactions of the stepfamilies as they applied information from the stepfamily course. Since little research has been done regarding the influence of SE past one year, qualitative methods would allow the voices of the informants to be heard instead of pre-determined questions that confine their responses (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Research with Stepfamilies over Time

Research has shown that one characteristic of successful stepfamilies is having realistic expectations regarding stepfamily formation and development and understanding the time required to attain stabilization (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Papernow, 1984; Visher et al., 2003). Considering there is an increased risk of divorce in the first five years of remarriage compared to first marriages (Clarke & Wilson, 1994), qualities of well-functioning stepfamilies should be examined over time. Scholars have used a variety of approaches in describing the process of stepfamily development. Papernow (1980) determined a sequence of developmental events that occur within a thriving stepfamily

based on a phenomenological study of stepparents. This qualitative research was completed with over 100 stepfamily members to better understand the process that a typical stepfamily goes through. The main stages are described as early, middle, and later stages, and delineate the characteristics of the formation of the stepfamily, the necessary reorganization of stepfamily roles, and finally, how the stepfamily matures into its unique composition. For many stepfamilies, the timing of this development takes up to five years depending on their realistic expectations and interpersonal skills. Understanding this process can help stepfamilies normalize their experiences and provide a chronological order to success (Papernow, 1984).

Bray and Berger (1993) completed another study that examined the early years of stepfamily formation. The findings of this cross-sectional study showed that many stepcouples are more satisfied in the first 6 months of remarriage when the role of the stepfather did not include a parental role and there were no expectations to form close relationships with their stepchildren. This period included less effective communication and more problematic behaviors compared to first families. When the stepcouple had been married for at least 2 years, though, couple relationship satisfaction was higher when the stepfathers had formed a close relationship with his stepchildren. This quantitative study was completed with White, middle class adults, so one can only speculate as to whether similar developmental paths can be found within Latino stepfamilies. Bray and Berger (1993) encouraged future research to explore normative developmental paths of stepfamilies and coping strategies that increase their success.

Current Study

With an understanding of the prevalence of Latino stepfamilies, the cultural values of this population, and the influence of relationship education with Latino stepfamilies, there is a need for an additional examination of the influence of relationship education with Latino stepcouples more than 1 year post SE to better understand the potentially lasting benefits. Although research has been completed with the *Smart Steps* educational program, only one 2-year follow-up study has been conducted, and it was with one Latino couple (Skogrand & Higginbotham, 2017).

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The purpose of the study is to better understand whether and how the *Smart Steps* program influenced the lives of Latino stepfamilies and whether and how it affects their couple relationships, the parenting relationships and the overall family relationships 2 years after program completion. This was accomplished via two studies where the first examined the interviews of 13 Latino stepcouples 2 years after participating in SE. The second study presents the story of one stepcouple's experience that was unique to the group by examining their account over three time points: after the stepfamily education, 1 year later, and 2 years later.

This dissertation utilizes the multiple-paper format. There are four chapters, including: (a) Chapter 1, the Introduction, which gives a background and rationale for each study (b) Chapter 2, study 1, entitled, “Latino Stepcouples’ Experiences Two Years After Stepfamily Education,” (c) Chapter 3, study 2, entitled, “A Narrative Study Regarding Changes in a Latino Stepfamily Two Years After Stepfamily Education,” and (d) Chapter 4, the Discussion, which provides a discussion of the two studies. Chapters 2 and 3 are in APA style (6th edition), the format required by most social science journals, and includes all the sections of an article including the Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Results, Discussion, and References.

Research Questions

Although prior research has contributed to our knowledge about stepcouple experiences immediately following SE and up to 1 year post education, less is known about Latino stepcouples experiences 2 years after SE. In-depth interviewing using open-ended questions allows researchers to obtain as many details about an experience as possible (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Informants are able to answer questions and express their thoughts using their own frame of reference by being asked open-ended questions. Therefore, qualitative research is used in this study so that the process can be better understood, rather than simple outcomes, and to allow the researcher to interpret similar experiences in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This process encourages a better understanding of the subject by allowing the individual’s voices to be heard (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Phenomenology, which explores the lived experiences of individuals’ engagement with a particular phenomenon, is the lens used for the first proposed study (Denzin,

1989). The first article explored the qualitative interviews of 13 Latino stepcouples 2 years after participating in SE by highlighting the lasting influence of SE on the couple, parent/child, and family relationships. Specifically, the researcher examined the meaning of these experiences (Husserl, 1970) through interpretations of in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2013). Van Manen (2007) explained that individuals' lived experiences could be seen through their described actions, interactions, and how they respond to different situations. The researcher then describes the "essence of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). The interpretations made by the researchers are mediated by the stepcouples' experiences to study their commonalities 2 years after SE (Van Manen, 2016). The primary research question is: When 13 Latino stepcouples participated in SE and were interviewed regarding what they remembered about the course 2 years later, how were the couple, parent/child, and family relationships influenced by the concepts that were learned, and what experiences, if any, might they have had that could be attributed to the course?

For the second article, a qualitative interview of one unique stepcouple's experience is explored. Again, qualitative methods were used to explore the story of one Latino stepfamily in order to better understand their experience. At first glance of the pre- and post-quantitative survey results from the stepcouple at SE, the uncommon story of this Latino stepfamily could not be seen or understood. Using in-depth interviews allows informants to unveil their journey in their words (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Unlike the 12 other Latino stepcouples, this stepcouple participated in SE prior to stepchildren residing in their home. In general, there are relatively few couples who attend relationship education, and even less who seek out relationship education preventatively (Doss,

Atkins, & Christensen, 2003). This provides a research opportunity to qualitatively examine how one stepcouple chose to participate preemptive to stepfamily life. The focal stepcouple in this study had two biological children when they participated in *Smart Steps*, but their stepchildren lived in another country. It has been posited that preventative relationship education can teach needed skills with current issues, but it can also benefit the participants by educating them about possible future issues and beneficial skills to help them negotiate through challenging times (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). This study considered whether this was the case for a nonresidential Latino stepfamily.

A narrative perspective is used to interpret the stepcouple's responses as they answered questions in story-form regarding their experiences over the last 2 years. This methodological approach can be used when experiences and narratives take place over time, and culture can then be better understood by examining their entire experience instead of one incident (Kuhns, 1974; Webster & Mertova, 2007). The researcher then attempts to restory their responses by describing their experiences in chronological order (Creswell, 2013). This allows their story to be told through a sequence of events in order to understand the whole experience (Elliott, 2005). Understanding this sequence of events can provide interventionists with knowledge of how one Latino stepcouple chose relationship education as a prevention tool and their experience of applying the learned skills over time. Therefore, the sequence that the stepcouple followed leading up to and after the integration of stepchildren can be a possible guide to recruiting and encouraging couples to seek SE before conflicted family relationships arise. The primary research question for this study is: What does the stepcouple remember about the course over 2

years, what concepts were useful, and what family experiences, if any, could be attributed to participating in the *Smart Steps* course?

Researcher's Role

In qualitative research, the researcher interprets the data. The interpretations cannot be separated from the researcher's background or biases (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007). The researcher's history, values, and expectations may affect the objectivity of the data analysis, and the researcher's subjectivity should also be taken into account (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Being aware of one's biases can help a researcher identify their subjective biases and their potential effects on the data, although, they cannot be eliminated (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). The researcher has addressed potential biases for this study below.

Because of her life experiences, the researcher recognizes that assumptions, expectations, and values regarding remarriage, stepchildren, and stepfamily dynamics may have an effect on her interpretation of the data. The researcher is remarried with five biological children and five stepchildren. She divorced after 18 years of marriage and has been in a remarriage for 9 years. With her husband and six of their children, they attended a 6-week *Smart Steps* course (SE) after 2 years of remarriage. An understanding of the curriculum may have an effect on her interpretation of the interviews. The researcher has been the stepfamily program coordinator for Utah State University's Extension program for 4 years. She did not interact with any of the participants in this study. During the data analysis, the researcher was aware of biases that might affect interpretation and reflexivity. When concerns arose regarding possible bias, the researcher conferred with the research assistant to verify the interpretation was consistent

with how the research assistant also interpreted the data. Ultimately, the researcher considers her personal background, experiences, and biases to be beneficial for the study. The researcher believes that her personal knowledge of the complexities associated with remarriage, stepfamily dynamics, and SE participation gave her a greater understanding of the experiences and feelings that the participants described.

The second coder that participated in the qualitative analysis, a research assistant, grew up in a traditional family with no dissolutions among her immediate family. The research assistant has only a few extended family members that have been divorced and has never been directly involved in a divorce situation. The research assistant has been married for almost 3 years and has two children. However, she learned about divorce in her undergraduate studies, as well as when she worked as a case manager at a local mental health clinic. Because of the lack of experience in her personal life and only experiencing divorce situations that were primarily associated with drug abuse, the research assistant recognizes that she may have biases regarding divorce, remarriage, and the challenges that stepfamilies experience.

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CHAPTER 2
LATINO STEPCOUPLES' EXPERIENCES
TWO YEARS AFTER STEPFAMILY EDUCATION

Introduction

A stepfamily is formed when one or both partners marry or cohabit and have at least one child from a previous relationship (Kang, Ganong, Russell, & Coleman, 2016). A parent in a stepfamily may be parenting their own biological child, assist their partner with their biological child, or even substitute for an absent biological parent. Given the growing number of Latinos in the United States and those couples divorcing and remarrying, there is a need for stepfamily education (SE) that meets their cultural needs (Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, & Higginbotham, 2009). This article focused on the influence of SE on Latino couple relationships, the parent/child relationships, and the family relationships as a result of attending SE by exploring follow-up interviews 2 years after attending a SE course.

Literature Review

The formation of stepfamilies can be found in all populations within the United States (Lamidi & Cruz, 2014), however, because of the growing percentage of Latinos in the United States and the number of divorces and remarriages in the Latino population, Latino stepfamilies have become a focus for some family social scientists. With 17.4% of the U.S. population identifying as Latino, this demographic group constitutes a sizeable portion of the American population (Colby & Ortman, 2015). From 2000 to 2010, the Latino population grew by 43% (Passel, Cohn & Lopez, 2011). This growth trend

indicates the numbers are likely to increase in coming years. The U.S. Census Bureau in 2012 showed that native-born Latina women had the highest rate of divorce among all ethnic groups (Stykes, Gibbs, & Payne, 2014). In addition, foreign-born Latino men and native-born Latina women also have the highest rate of remarriage in the United States among all ethnic groups (Lamidi & Cruz, 2014). Research also suggests that the divorce rate with the Latino population is increasing due to issues related to acculturation (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). Because of the growing numbers of Latinos in this country and the high divorce and remarriage rates, Latino stepfamilies have become an important focus for social scientists.

Stepfamily Challenges

Like most couple relationships, the stepcouple may be confronted with general couple relationship challenges, including communication, managing conflict, and trust (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). However, stepcouples may also experience additional challenges that first marriages do not face including finances shared across households, role ambiguity, and biological parent/child relationships that have a longer history than the couple relationship (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Gold, 2009; Visher & Visher, 1985). Many stepcouples are formed after a divorce, which may result in a relationship with a prior spouse that is contentious (Cherlin, 2009; Strow & Strow, 2006). Stepcouples often struggle with making the couple relationship a priority especially since stepparenting takes so much time (Visher & Visher, 2013). These unique challenges make the stepcouple more vulnerable to dissolution compared to first marriages (Whitton, Stanley, Markman, & Johnson, 2013).

Parent/child functioning within a stepfamily is often complicated and requires patience, flexibility, and understanding when a stepparent and/or stepchild is added to the family, which often spills over and influences the success of the vulnerable stepfamily (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This unique parent/child dyad is characterized as more negative and conflicted with an unrealistic assumption that the stepparent and child will experience an instant love (Visher & Visher, 2013). The complicated task of stepparenting is underscored with the need for flexibility in parenting styles and discipline. Research has shown that among the best practices for stepparenting is a permissive parenting style, allowing the biological parent to continue in an authoritative parenting style and transition to an authoritative parenting style over time (Papernow, 2013). In this way, the stepparent does not appear to be an overnight authority figure in the child's life, but first allows a friendship to develop, as there is little to no relationship history between the stepparent and stepchild (Visher & Visher, 2013). Hetherington and Kelly (2002) noted that the stepparent/stepchild relationship might be considered the cornerstone to the success of stepfamilies. This relationship has a shorter history than the biological parent/child relationship and has an overwhelming amount of role ambiguity as the stepparent attempts to care for someone else's child(ren) (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011).

Family functioning within a stepfamily can be attributed to the combination of couple functioning and parent/child functioning. There is a need for couple agreement on parenting roles to decrease couple conflict (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Visher & Visher, 1996). The relationship between the stepparent and the stepchild ultimately affects the stepcouple relationship quality (Bray & Kelly, 1998, Crosbie-Burnett, 1984). Decision-

making processes and consensus within the couple relationship regarding stepchildren has been found to be the strongest predictors of marital adjustment (Palisi, Orleans, Caddell, & Korn, 1991). This overall family functioning takes time to achieve.

Latino Stepfamilies

There are unique relationships within Latino stepfamilies compared to stepfamilies in the dominant culture that are relevant to providing SE. As explained earlier, research has shown that the best practices for stepparenting is a permissive parenting style, with an authoritative biological parent (Papernow, 2013). Contrastingly, it has been shown that many Latino stepparents have differing opinions regarding best stepparenting practices (Skogrand et al., 2009). Reck, Higginbotham, Skogrand, and Davis (2012) explained that it is common for the Latino biological estranged parent to not have contact with the children after the relationship dissolves. This allows the stepparent to take on an authoritative role from the beginning of the stepfamily formation. Due to a cultural stigma against divorce, children may be unaware of their position or title as a “stepchild” within the stepfamily (Reck, Skogrand, Higginbotham, & Davis, 2013).

The Latino stepcouple may not recognize the non-residential father (Reck et al., 2013). This can be seen through the non-equivocal word for “stepfamily” in the Spanish language. The English word, stepfamily, often has a negative connotation in the Latino community and *familia ensamblada* is often used, but this expression is translated as a family being assembled as in a factory (Reck et al., 2012). *Reconstruidas* is another possible translation, meaning reconstituted families (Reck et al., 2012). Reconstitute conveys reforming something to its original state and could explain the discrepancy in stepparenting styles in Latino stepfamilies compared to the dominant culture that

recognizes the differences in stepfamilies compared to nuclear families (Reck et al., 2012).

The family members in a Latino stepfamily typically do not describe or label one another as stepfather, stepmother, or stepchildren; rather they accept the parents and children as their family (Reck et al., 2013). This also means they do not distinguish between siblings and stepsiblings. Reck and colleagues (2013) explained, “The negative stigma that is present within the Latino culture hinders the idea of a stepfamily being a real family,” (p. 240).

Family traditions and values within the Latino culture are often highly influenced by religion (Espin, 1994; Skogrand et al., 2009), which also influences Latino stepfamilies. Catholicism has been a major influence in many Latinos and their families’ lives for many generations (Perl, Greely, & Gray, 2006). Many contemporary Latino families still hold this value as most consider marriage and the family to be sacred (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010). Religion and spiritual foundations have been found to be a strength in couple relationships as marriage is considered a lifetime commitment for many within the Latino culture (Flores, Tschann, VanOss Marin, & Pantoja, 2004). This would be consistent with research that shows religiosity is linked to relationship commitment (Ellison et al., 2010; Wolfinger, Wilcox, & Hernandez, 2010).

Family behaviors within the Latino culture are also known to be shaped by the commitment to family, which is referred to as familialism (Lopez, Melendez, & Rice, 2000; Schwartz, 2007) and affects Latino stepfamily relationships. This intergenerational value includes a more positive outlook on marriage and the importance of marriage and family devotion (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). It provides a social support by emphasizing

and including extended family, whom members of Latino families spend considerable time. It stresses a view where families are the center of the Latino value system and emphasizes loyalty, material and emotional ties to the family (Vega, 1995).

Latino Stepfamily Education

As the number of Latino stepfamilies has increased, so have the relationship education programs and evaluation research, which has revealed effective strategies for relationship education (Skogrand et al., 2009). A growing number of studies have been conducted with Latino stepfamilies and the results have provided much-needed information related to understanding and helping Latino stepfamilies. From qualitative research with facilitators who have taught Latino stepfamilies, scholars have learned helpful tips, such as encouraging class discussion and sharing stepfamily experiences, which appear to provide a positive learning environment for Latino stepfamilies (Reck et al., 2012). The group discussions helped participants apply the material to their own lives. Learning was promoted by teaching the curriculum in ways that were consistent with cultural practices and by recognizing the salience of the parent/child relationship.

Skogrand, Mendez, and Higginbotham (2014) found that Latina women reported improvements in parenting, couple, and family relationships as a result of SE. Furthermore, improvements in communication skills and learning how to implement impartial treatment to both biological children and stepchildren were reported to improve participants' parenting skills. A reported improved feeling of parent/child closeness emanated from this modification in parenting. Communication skills also positively affected the couple relationship and, ultimately, the family relationships. In addition, the relationships within the family were improved through family activities and a change in

attitudes of the members of the family. Changes in the lives of Latino men, including improvements in family relationships, were also found in an evaluation study of a stepfamily program (Reck et al., 2013). The Latino men attended mostly to gain stepparenting skills and stepfamily conflict resolution skills. Improvements seen in their family relationships included communication skills, parenting skills, and couple relationship skills.

When a relationship intervention or an education program is tailored to the needs and circumstances of diverse families, there is a higher probability that it can increase their chance of success (Falicov, 2013; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). The National Latina/o Psychological Association explained that cultural sensitivity with an understanding of Latino values could be very beneficial in reaching this diverse population (Chavez-Korell, Delgado-Romero, & Illes, 2012). These concepts not only influence Latino individuals but also their families' success. Many of the described studies are raising awareness of the cultural issues that are evident in the Latino community (e.g. religion, familialism, dynamics of stepparent/stepchild relations). Understanding and including these relevant cultural concepts in SE curriculum and facilitation may strengthen the experiences of stepfamilies that participate in relationship education.

With an ever-increasing population of stepfamilies, there has been a call for more research examining the diversity and processes of developing and maintaining remarriage and stepfamily relationships (Sweeney, 2010). With an understanding of the prevalence of Latino stepfamilies, the cultural values of this population, and the influence of SE with Latino stepfamilies, there is a need for an additional examination of the influence of SE with Latino stepcouples over time. The Latino stepcouples that were interviewed for this

study participated in SE that was taught by Spanish-speaking facilitators who understood the culture in order to provide a better learning experience. Specifically, scholars and practitioners can benefit from an exploration of stepcouples' experiences with relationship education that is not only qualitative, but also exploring the outcomes over a longer period, as opposed to benefits immediately after education. This study examined the perceived lasting benefits of SE with Latino stepfamilies over time and explored how stepcouples applied the lessons learned that could be invaluable to families, scholars, and practitioners alike. A qualitative study was chosen to allow the informants to explain the process without being limited by predetermined responses (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

Theoretical Background and Approach

Phenomenology is the lens through which this study was carried out. This lens provides an approach to explore the experiences of individuals regarding a phenomenon and the subjective meanings of these experiences (Creswell, 2013). Through reflection, individuals present their unique lived experiences. The lived experience influences their actions, interactions with others, and how they respond to situations (Van Manen, 2007). Phenomenology is often the basis for qualitative research, which is an interpretation of reality that is useful in understanding the human experience (Creswell, 2013). Using this lens, researchers do not assume they know what people mean, but have a goal of understanding the individual's point of view through subjective thinking. Qualitative scholars in the stepfamily realm make interpretations that are mediated by the stepcouples' experience in an effort to study the essences or commonalities (Van Manen, 2016). In the present study, this framework allowed for an exploration of the stepcouple's experiences, the phenomenon, as they recalled what they learned and the perceived

benefits 2 years earlier. Stepfamily development and the influence of SE over time can be better understood as stepcouples discuss their journey. The interviews were interpreted by searching for similarities in how participants explain their interactions with their stepfamily, how they responded to challenges, and what changes have taken place over the past 2 years.

Using the transcripts of interviews previously conducted, the data were analyzed by exploring the meaning of events, relationships, and interactions of the stepfamilies as they applied information from the stepfamily course (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). This was completed by using themes derived from the words of participants obtained through the interviews as the source of understanding how they incorporated the knowledge and skills from SE and how it influenced their stepfamily relationships. Accordingly, this study utilized a qualitative approach and a phenomenological lens to answer the research question: When 13 Latino stepcouples participated in stepfamily education and were interviewed regarding what they remembered about the course 2 years later, how were the couple, parent/child, and family relationships influenced by the concepts that were learned, and what experiences, if any, might they have had that could be attributed to the course?

Method

Creswell (2013) describes qualitative research as the preferred approach to discover truth when the researcher's goal is to understand the perspectives of individuals through examinations of their dialogues of shared experiences. This methodology allows for an in-depth understanding of the individuals who were experiencing the unique challenges of living in a stepfamily and their experiences of the stepfamily course. This

research study used a subsample of a larger demonstration project that included an evaluation of the *Smart Steps* stepfamily education program (Higginbotham, n.d.). Other publications have resulted from this project (i.e., Higginbotham & Myler, 2010; Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010; Higginbotham, Tulane, & Skogrand, 2012; Reck, 2013; Reck, Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Davis, 2012; Reck, Skogrand, Higginbotham, & Davis, 2013; Skogrand, Dansie, Higginbotham, Davis, & Barrios-Bell, 2011; Skogrand & Higginbotham, 2016; Skogrand, Torres, & Higginbotham, 2010).

Program

One of the SE programs that contains research-based concepts that help stepfamilies be successful is *Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey (Smart Steps)*, developed by Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder (2007). The curriculum incorporates the subjects that enhance marital quality for individuals in stepfamilies including: nurturing the couple relationship, conflict management, empathy, and stepfamily development (Adler-Baeder, 2007). The course has been designed to simultaneously educate the couple and the children in these families in a 12-hour period over six weeks. The adults and children in the stepfamilies are separately taught relevant subjects, including: empathy, conflict management, communication, and other topics that address unique challenges and resolutions for stepfamilies. At the end of each class the adults and children assemble together to discuss the topics that have been taught and participate in a family-strengthening activity. This parallel teaching style allows the stepfamilies to be taught age-appropriate skills to help support the multiple relationships within the stepfamily. Participants for this program and the current study were recruited and identified by our partnerships in the community for increased effectiveness (Skogrand et al., 2010). This

study was part of a larger project that examined the experiences of individuals who participated in a SE program, although, it differs as it explores Latino stepcouples that participated in SE, what they remember about the course 2 years later, and how the concepts influenced their couple, parent/child, and overall family relationships. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to more fully explore their experiences, as participants responded to open-ended questions.

Participants and Procedures

This study focused on 13 couples who participated in SE and completed in-depth interviews to better understand their experiences and potentially lasting benefits. They were interviewed three separate times over a two-year period following a SE course, although, only the final interview conducted 2 years after participating in the course was analyzed. For this paper, the interviewees were selected from a total of 296 Latino participants who attended Smart Steps between 2007 and 2011, based on a convenience sample by a project staff member who did not know details or demographics regarding the individuals or their feelings about the relationship course. The initial interview was conducted with 72 Latino participants, who were selected by a project staff member who did not have any details about the participants or their experiences, shortly after the completion of the course. One year later, 48 of the previously interviewed participants were located and completed a second interview to describe their experience. Two years after the course completion, 13 couples from the 48 individuals were located and interviewed for a third and final time, and these interviews were used to explore the experiences of stepcouples and potentially lasting benefits of SE. Spanish-speaking researchers, who were trained and unknown to the participants, conducted the interviews

that lasted about 45 minutes each time. The qualitative interviews resulted in responses from Latino participants who were still in a stepcouple relationship and attended a SE program in a western state 2 years earlier.

The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of each participant's experience within the SE program and to determine whether the skills and concepts that were taught within the curriculum were useful and sustained. Trained research assistants conducted the interviews in the participants' homes, which was their preference. The questions from the two-year follow-up interview included questions such as, "What was the best part of the course for your children?" "Now, two years after taking the course, what are some of the most important things you learned?" (see Appendix D for the two-year post interview questions). Interviews were completed in Spanish, translated into English, and transcribed.

This study was based on a convenience sample of 13 Latino stepcouples, comprised of 13 men and 13 women. The participants had a mean age of 34 ($SD = 5.6$) years at the time the course began. All of the participants in this study considered themselves to be Latino/a. Although the couples for this research did not have to be married, over 50% were married ($n = 7$ couples) for an average of five years ($SD = 2$). The couples who were not married had been cohabitating with their partner for over five years, on average, at the end of the *Smart Steps* course. There was an average education of 11.9 years ($SD = 5$). These stepcouples also reported an average of three children ($SD = .67$) living in their home with an average of two other children ($SD = 1.5$) not living in the home where they resided. Lastly, the participants had an average annual income of about \$20,000 ($SD = 10,000$). All but one of the stepcouples were taught in Spanish; one

stepcouple was taught in English. All of the participants reported a religious affiliation, with over half of them being Catholic. There were no significant differences on demographic variables between the 26 individuals.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

To analyze and interpret the qualitative data, the following procedures were utilized as described by Bogdan and Biklen (2006). Two researchers immersed themselves independently in the transcripts from the interviews conducted 2 years after the course by reading them line by line at least five times. This prolonged engagement allowed the researchers to get an overall feel for the data. The purpose of using this method was to identify themes and meanings of a similar group of people who have experienced a similar event (Creswell, 2013). Meaningful statements made by the participants were identified that seemed to typify the events, relationships, and interactions of the group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). A consensus between the two researchers was reached regarding the meaningful themes that did not repeat or overlap. After the researchers gained a thorough understanding, they independently organized similar statements into themes allowing categories and meanings to emerge. Table 1 shows the coding scheme.

After themes were identified, the researchers assigned codes to the units of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). The coding was then compared across researchers to identify reliability. The analysis consisted of analytic reduction of these experiences, based on the meaningful statements, core themes, and a description of the entire experience through the participant's perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). Once codes were established, both of the researchers independently combed through the data and assigned a code to

each line of the relevant data within the transcripts. Irrelevant data was determined by comparing the statements to the research questions. Codes without agreement were reevaluated to ensure accurate reliability among the researchers. This was done through discussions of theme and coding meanings to ensure consensus. One discrepancy between the two researchers regarding a specific code required a third researcher to weigh in so that full consensus could be confirmed. An 80% agreement has been established as a minimum consensus level (Miles, Huberman, Huberman, & Huberman, 1994), although, this study used a standard of 100% where discrepancies were discussed until full consensus was determined. The participants were referred to as female or male partners in the analysis, as each of them identified as a stepcouple, but were not necessarily married.

Results

Four overarching themes emerged from stepcouples' interviews about the influence of stepfamily education 2 years after attending the course. Three of the themes reflected how certain relationship dynamics had changed over time, namely: couple relationship changes, parenting changes, and overall family changes. The fourth theme had not been found in previous literature: changes within the stepparent/stepchild relationship. Although the interview questions did not specifically ask about these changes, the themes became evident throughout the interviews as the participants responded to a variety of questions. From the Bogdan and Biklen method (2006), four themes emerged and are listed in order of prevalence in terms of participants' responses from the qualitative interviews (see Table 1). Subthemes within each primary theme further help to explain how participants talked about the major theme and are organized

using terminology used by the participants. The themes used for this study were those factors mentioned by at least 80% of the participants.

Table 1

Qualitative content analysis of relationships influenced by SE

Themes	Frequency ($n = 26$)	Subthemes
Couple Changes	26	Dealing with Past Communication More United Finances
Parenting Changes	25	Parenting Styles Discipline Communication
Family Changes	24	Inclusion Name of Group Activities
Stepparenting Changes	22	Time and Interaction Change in Thinking Changed Us

Couple Relationship Changes

The most prevalent theme that emerged, after utilizing the Bogdan and Biklen method of analysis (2006), was the changes that occurred over the past 2 years in the couple relationship. Of the 26 participant interviews, all 26 individuals talked about the changes that occurred within their couple relationship since they participated in SE. The four subthemes within the Couple Relationship Changes theme that emerged are: dealing with the past, communication, couple agreement, and finances.

Dealing with the past. Because most participants had experienced a divorce or dissolution of a committed relationship, past romantic relationships sometimes affected

their couple relationship. Men and women described how they had learned to deal with their partner's past and their past relationships. One woman said, "Sometimes the cobwebs from our past don't let us see clearly" (Female partner 10). One man said that he learned in SE, "There will always be ex partners, that there will be clashes for anything, and they taught us how to react and what to do, not to break the marriage because of them" (Male partner 3).

Participants described how learning to accept their partner's past relationships helped to increase trust between the couple:

I had a lot of walls up from my previous marriage that I had up in the time that we had the class because I couldn't trust. I was hurt by my ex and I wasn't sure that my current wife wasn't going to hurt me as well, so it was taking those walls down is what helped me throughout the course. (Male partner 1)

It helped because I have always been someone who keeps things inside and [SE] has helped me to trust my husband and to accept that he is also a friend, someone who I can also trust. We both learned together..... because before I had a partner but he didn't. ...I had an experience that was not good, and the course helped me a lot in finding myself and to trust people again. (Female partner 9)

Some participants said that understanding past relationships and putting their own couple relationships into perspective helped to decrease conflict. Participants tried to explain this change in thinking:

I think it helped us to reflect and see things from another point of view.

We do say what we think and our opinions, but in the end, we try not to get too

involved in past relationships. Because before we took the course, we would argue a lot about it. (Female partner 3)

She doesn't mention to me anymore about my former partner. Before, she would say it every day. Since the course, which was two years ago, that problem has gone away. (Male partner 6)

Participants expressed that it might be fear that affects whether or not a couple is able to accept their partner's past. One woman described this fear and what she had learned in SE to facilitate this change:

When we come from a broken relationship, I think we have fears and I think I have overcome those fears thanks to my husband's help and because we have taken into account what we learned, to respect each other and ... to value your partner. (Female partner 9)

Overall, this change in thinking may have helped to increase the success of the couple relationship. The concepts taught in SE helped participants to reflect on their thinking and to reevaluate for the sake of the couple.

It takes time and to have more patience is the most important thing for me. Otherwise, I think ... we would not be together. It would have been so strong each day, and worse each day and maybe my jealousy and my hatred would have developed. And thanks to [SE], I realized that I was mistaken. (Male partner 4)

Communication. The communication changes within the couple relationship included an increase in day-to-day conversations and participants using more positive communication skills during times of anger and conflict because of SE. Conflict

management skills were evident when the participants described positive changes in their couple relationship. One man described that during times of conflict he tries to say, “We need to take a time out here. Let’s stop, let’s discuss this, and see what’s going on here.” (Male partner 1) One woman talked about the change in their couple communication by stating, “I used to get mad for nothing or would tell him unpleasant things” (Female partner 5). Other participants described improved communication skills that they still maintained in their couple relationship two years after SE that helped them during conflict:

It was more like talking, like “Okay, we need to sit down and talk about this,” not just sit and yell at each other and threaten each other and “well, I’m going to leave,” or “no, I’m going to leave”, or “well, you take the kids and you leave.” No, we would actually sit down and talk as a couple. (Female Partner 2)

We know now how to confront problems and how to resolve them. We have to resolve them, we can’t let them pile up, because the only solution to continuing forward is to resolve the problems and confront them. (Male partner 2)

This communication change was expressed as being an improvement 2 years later due to SE. Some participants compared how they used to express anger to describe the communication skills they had developed.

[I learned] how to have better communication, to try to talk things through, and to take a different path instead of arguing and fighting in front of the children. When I don’t like something, it’s better to talk about it instead of arguing and demanding. (Female partner 13)

The more we communicate and talk, and we avoid hurting each other... because as we learn these things, we are cautious with what we are going to say. [Our intentions aren't] just to offend. (Female partner 6)

Changes in the individual's communication helped them have a more successful couple relationship. Participants discussed how salient conflict management due to positive communication skills was to the couple staying together. One man said that they "try to resolve the problem instead of not understanding, and then divorcing" (Male partner 3). When referring to the benefits of SE, one man said, "It helps you to communicate with your partner...because if you don't have your partner's support, you won't get anywhere, especially here in the United States" (Male partner 2).

The participants also talked about the change in the amount of communication that the couple shared. One woman said that they "have a lot of communication and talk a lot between me and my husband" (Female partner 4). When asked what the most important concept learned from SE that improved the couple relationship was, one man said, "More than anything, communication. More than anything we try to talk more to each other" (Male partner 6). Another woman said, "Well, we have more communication, we have more freedom to express ourselves, and to give our opinions about certain things" (Female partner 9). Overall, the individuals expressed the importance of positive communication in their couple relationship as a result of SE:

Basically to communicate more with my wife. To talk about problems and how to resolve them. It made us see... the course explained to us the signs of a couple in trouble, and it made us look at that and see where we were in our relationship. (Male partner 13)

More unity. Many participants described how they became more united with their partner as they increased their level of couple agreement as they had learned in SE. One woman defined the effects of concurrence as, “to be in agreement in many things, [then] we feel more united” (Female partner 9). There were discussions throughout the interviews about the couple being more united 2 years after SE:

When asked about important concepts learned in SE, one man explained, “We both have to be together in everything, in everything. Especially when we have children, and stepchildren.” (Male partner 2)

The participants also referred to stability, commitment, strength, teamwork, and time together when discussing how they are more united as a couple. One man described this strength and stability as a result:

It has also helped us to be more united and not to be “you there and me here,” to be united in that plan, as a couple. It became more stable. Yes, it’s much more strong. More time as a couple. Before we preferred to be on our own, “you over there and I go over here.” But now it’s not like that. We have more time to be together. More commitment. (Male partner 4)

One woman spoke of the changes in their couple relationship over the last 2 years, “It’s stronger. Like, towards each other, in my point of view, we are more united” (Female partner 6). Another man described it as teamwork:

[I now] like to help my wife with the household chores. That’s something positive, and it works for me because when she is cooking I start cleaning, things I didn’t

do before. And that has worked, and I feel that we are a team; it's working in a team.

(Male partner 12)

Finances. The financial skills the participants gained in SE were seen 2 years later by some as they discussed the influence of not only having couple discussions on finances, but by also making changes to the ways they handled their money and bills. One man recalled what he learned about finances in SE, "They taught us about everything there, even about finances, how to manage money, things like that" (Male partner 3).

Some women described how the couple chose to change from doing their finances separately to pooling their money and distributing the money together as they learned in SE, "We tried to do them together instead of doing it separately, like they showed us in the classes. So, after that it was 'let's sit down together'" (Female partner 3). Another woman said, "We put the money together and pay things. Before he didn't consult what he did with the money and now he consults me" (Female partner 7).

Other women explained this as a very positive change in the couple relationship:

I do not know how to budget my money, and I did not want to let him be in charge...I didn't want him to control my money because I thought, "Oh he's going to think he can control me if he can control my money." But he took over our finances and yeah, we're like 110% better than we were before. (Female partner 2)

We have joined our bank accounts and we put everything together and from there, we pay our bills and take money for groceries and for the children. Before, each one had their own money. (Female partner 6)

It's amazing because even my husband has helped me. I have always taken care of finances, always. And this year, because of the economy, it has affected our home, and my husband has gotten involved in everything. He is involved in paying the bills. It's been better. (Female partner 1)

Some men described how they learned how to pool the couple's money in SE and the process that followed. One man explained how it is helping their couple relationship when he said, "That's why I tell you that sometimes we argued about money, and there they taught us how to share money" (Male partner 12). Another man described how he had been in charge of the money and bills: "I am the type of person that likes to handle the bills... We decided to join our accounts and to have the account on the same page" (Male partner 6). He described their financial priorities, "First comes the house, the bills, the children, everything that consists of our life, and if we have extra money, go ahead, to our relatives" (Male partner 6). Over time, he gave her more control of the finances, and then their priorities changed.

Currently we try to save more. She is controlling [the] spending more. And now we have a goal, a long term goal....It's a four-year term goal, to save and do something with that money. And it's a goal that we both proposed this year ...But we have now more balanced finances....[We learned] to save and to know how to balance money. (Male partner 6)

The process of moving from separate finances to pooling the couple's finances takes time. One man explained this process:

Finances have evolved... We both manage it. She knows how much comes in; she knows what she needs. When we took the course, I understood that it was important for her to be part of the worries I wanted her not to have. So again, regarding the course at that time, there was some information that advised me personally to open the possibilities to improve things. I did it, it improved a little, and from there it got better and better and better. (Male partner 10).

Parenting Changes

Through qualitative analyses described by Bogdan and Biklen (2006), it was found that 25 of 26 parents spoke of changes in their parenting behaviors over the past 2 years that had been influenced by participating in SE. The modifications the participants spoke of regarding parenting behaviors were coded into three subthemes: parenting styles, the use of discipline, and communication with their children.

Parenting Styles. The changes in the ways parents responded to their biological children was described in various ways, although, it was always positive changes that occurred due to the SE 2 years earlier. There was an understanding that there was not a one-size fits all approach to parenting. One woman described her parenting changes by saying, "We have to adapt" (Female partner 3). Flexibility in parenting was explained as a necessity. One mother said that she changed her parenting style as she allowed her child to express his feelings: "They have a right to have an opinion sometimes" (Female partner 13).

There was also a parenting change that occurred in these stepfamilies as some of the parents described how they became aware that biological parents should discipline their biological children. This understanding was seen 2 years after participating in SE.

[We learned] to not change each other's children and our discipline habits.

At first we tried to do that but it didn't work, and after that when we learned that keeping things separate first as far as discipline worked a lot better. (Male partner 4).

Discipline. Another parenting change observed was a change in their discipline approach. The participants explained that these positive changes were learned in SE. One woman said, “[My partner] used to be aggressive. He would yell, because she was little. But he changed a lot” (Female partner 5).

Participants were taught skills that were useful in disciplining children, and this change in parenting was seen 2 years after SE.

Before [SE] I would yell and would call their attention often and correct them. But, I had to change to sitting and talking. “Let's talk about this.”

However...we still have to be on them all the time as in, “Where are you going, and when, and with whom, and what time will you be back?” (Male partner 2)

They explained to us in the stepfamilies [education] how to treat our children and stepchildren. And not to have power, because that's doesn't serve us well and so the children don't understand that. We are adults and we do understand. (Male partner 4)

One man described how he learned more positive parenting skills to use instead of spanking:

I come from Mexico and we are like spanking the kids. [SE] changed me. Before, I wasn't that hard on my children but... a little kick or hit I would do. So, that doesn't happen anymore. It changed to have a time out, a punishment, but not [hitting], but words, or time. "Go to your room or you can't go out," or things like that. So that helped me to not be a hitting father. (Male partner 4).

Another man stated that he learned and implemented how the couple needed to be united in discipline:

I learned that ...the children know who will give in or not. There always be one who gives in more than the other. And I learned that to educate children well, we need to learn that if one says, "You are not going to play until you do your homework," [then] I can't say the opposite. Sometimes they try to fool us. They go with the mother first because "she will let me." So, I learned that we have to work together, not to have differences in disciplining him. (Male partner 7).

The changes that participants learned in SE regarding discipline can be challenging to maintain. One man explained this struggle in more detail:

Discipline is hard to maintain. I want to continue controlling my emotions, and controlling my voice, etc., in conversations and situations. But then the time comes when I don't remember the course anymore. The course is gone, and I start

raising my voice again in a conversation where there is something unpleasant to me. Is that clear? It happens to me and it happens to my wife. (Male partner 10)

One stepparent described how she changed her discipline style. She stated that “cross disciplining” one another’s children did not work for them:

We talk about discipline in the house now; it’s not that somebody is getting in trouble for doing something. It’s helping to change a behavior and so before the course and before I changed my way of thinking it was so and so did something wrong, and they needed a consequence for doing something wrong. And now it’s “Oh that’s too bad that you made that choice.” [It’s] not cross disciplining but cross counseling is what we call it now. Learning how not to change the discipline patterns that are already established in the established families. (Female partner 4)

Communication. The change in communication described by Latino parents included how they expressed themselves more positively in times of conflict and anger. These changes were a result of participating in SE and still seen 2 years later. One man explained, “Particularly before, I was a very strict person, got mad easily, and... yell at them. So, I had to tone down, and change” (Male partner 2). This man’s partner described her perspective:

From the course, the thing that we used was communication. My husband could not communicate with [the children]. We were always doing relayed messages. “Would you tell him this?” When we went to that course, communication helped us a lot because he was able to just go and say, “[Son],

you need to do this; I want you to do this.” It wasn’t relaying messages anymore. We’re still practicing...but we [now] know how to communicate in this family!” (Female partner 2).

The parents explained the effects of positive communication with their children. One woman stated, “They understand a lot better when you’re calm, than when you’re all you know, going crazy” (Female partner 3). One man with two children said, “I have learned to... talk to them more, ask how was school, what they are learning and to encourage them to keep going. Before, I didn’t do that” (Male partner 12).

The parents also explained how they tried to teach these skills to their children. One man explained, “If she has a problem at school or elsewhere, I tell her that she can talk to me and tell me what is going on” (Male partner 5). Another woman added:

More than anything, we try to talk more to each other. And, my daughter, especially with her. In problems, in how is she doing in school. [And] if she has problems in school, for her to tell us. Just talk among ourselves, a family conversation. And the same to the boy, we include him. We ask him the same, how he’s doing in school, how was their day. So that type of communication. (Female partner 6)

Communication can be challenging during conflict, and some participants explained how they did not always use the skills they had learned 2 years earlier. One man responded to a question regarding what parenting skills were helpful that he learned in SE, “One of the things was communication. That it was hard and even after the course,

it was still difficult. But, in time, we have gotten better with that. And communication was the hardest” (Male partner 1).

Family Changes

The third theme, family changes, included the changes regarding how the parents and children interacted due to concepts learned in SE. There was no longer a differentiation between biological and step-relationships. The three subthemes that emerged were: inclusion, the name of the group, and family activities

Inclusion. This subtheme refers to including all of the family members. The family members spoke of behaviors that did not make a distinction between biological or step-relationships due to knowledge they received at SE. One man spoke about how they teach the children and said, “If I have for the three of them, then for the three of them. If I don’t have, better not, then for no one. We treat them equally” (Male partner 3). Another man said, “I try to get more involved with my children” (Male partner 6). His partner stated, “[SE] helps you to be more focused on the family, and that’s important” (Female partner 6). Another woman with four children said, “We have learned to spend time together” (Female partner 9). Other men explained by sharing an experience:

We were all going to go swimming and he was just going to stay here and catch up on... and we convinced him to actually go swimming with us after a lot of prodding. Everybody had a good time, and when we got back we talked about why we had a good time. So, rather than just going and enjoying ourselves, we actually talked about why we had a good time. Everybody said, “Because we

were all there as a family.” So, it was nice to be able to recognize that being together as a family (everybody) and nobody excluded, is key. (Male partner 4)

We all go on vacation, and we all enjoy and come back happy. The most important thing I learned was to know that the family is the most important thing. And to work as a team [and] what it means to be part of the family. (Male partner 12)

One man explained that even his son changed how he referred to the family car as “your car” to saying “our car.” He also felt that the most important thing he learned in SE was the value of each member of his family, regardless of who the biological parents were:

One of the things ... the course helped us to reinforce the fact that each of my children is a complementing element in the home. And we try to take them into account in our decisions and plans and through a family meeting. We listen to their opinions..... I think these are the things that have impacted our family and that we have been able to reinforce in integrating our children to our decisions and plans. The most important thing I think was the value that children have, and the importance that they have within the family, regardless of whether they come from nuclear families or stepfamilies. (Male partner 10)

One woman described how beneficial participating in SE was in helping her to feel normal and the time it takes for stepfamily development:

[The most important concept was] that we are not the only ones going through this stage or problems. That there are many families like this and that all

the families deal with these problems with the children and partners, trying to find a way to all get along and how to adjust to the new home. That it's not easy and that it takes time, but that everyone has to make an effort. (Female partner 13)

Name of the group. Many of the individuals referred to the parents and children together as family due to improvements they had made due to SE. They no longer differentiated between biological and step-relationships. One man referred to his whole family as, "One family" (Male partner 7). One woman said it was important to her to "have a good relationship as a family, the three of us" (Female partner 7). Another man referred to his circle as, "the whole family" (Male partner 12).

Activities. Individuals explained improvements in their parent/child relationships as they described playing together or just being together due to SE. One man explained that due to his participation in SE, "We're just going to do family time" (Male partner 1). One woman stated regarding these changes in parenting:

We have had a lot more activities that we have tried to do together. Other than dad [going] off and [doing] something by himself, we try to have more involvement as a family and have activities as a family. (Female partner 4).

Another woman explained the activities that they do together as a family, even though they sometimes forget what they learned regarding family time in SE:

Since we took the course...there are things that we forget, like we stop spending time together, talking. It's important to be together and talk and listen to the children. Go to the park together, play for a while and talk. [Because of SE]

we started spending time more time together. Like we tried to cook something together. (Female partner 6)

One woman explained that it does not take a lot of time to have family time when she stated, “I have begun to value my family, my children, the house, and there is time for everything, even if it’s just 15 minutes” (Female partner 6).

Stepparenting Changes

The fourth theme that emerged were the changes within the stepparent/stepchild relationship within these Latino families because of SE participation. This particular theme had not been found in previous research within Latino stepparenting. There were three subthemes that emerged: time and interaction change with stepchildren, change in thinking, and stepparenting changes that changed us.

Time and interaction change with stepchildren. Individuals learned skills to help them develop relationships with their stepchildren. One stepfather said, “I realized that I was pushing the kid away from me instead of bringing him closer” (Male partner 4). Another man said, “I have to win them over also by giving them affection and love” (Male partner 5). Another lesson learned was “To give advice to my stepdaughters not to be on the wrong path” (Male partner 8). These changes were also seen in other stepparent’s responses:

I spent more time with them. I’ve done more things with them because of the class too. Last year I was their t-ball coach, I took them fishing, we went swimming a lot. I didn’t do that not because I didn’t want to do it, I just didn’t do

it. Because of the class..., that's why I started doing that with them. (Male partner 1)

Because not it's not the same when it's a couple who from the beginning had the children together. It's hard, and I am not replacing their father, but to come just like that, it's more difficult. Like how to behave better and understand [my stepdaughter] better. It's not easy when one has a marriage like that. Maybe if the kids were smaller, it would be easier. But after a certain age, in their adolescence, it's more complicated. But it has helped me in some things such as trying to talk to them, to help them in certain things, to go out sometimes for coffee or to eat out, or for ice-cream. (Male partner 10)

Stepparents spoke of the newly gained trust and love they had with their stepchild. One stepfather said, "I feel more committed because I know I love [my partner], and I love my children, and I don't want to separate from them" (Male partner 5). Another stepfather expressed how he learned how "to understand her situation and face the problem and if there is a solution, to talk about it and reach an agreement" (Male partner 6). Another stepfather said that the greatest improvement in the relationship he had with his stepson is that the stepson is slowly starting to allow him to have more authority:

Now when he wants to do something, he asks me, he asks for permission now. He comes to me now. Before it was just to his mom. Now I help [stepson] do his homework...that's one of the things we talked about in the course...I spend more time with him. (Male partner 7)

The stepfather further explained how his view of his stepson also changed:

I [used to] see him like a kid. But now, it's more like my son now. It's helping him do his homework, spend time with him, play video games, eat, go to the movies and stuff like that., Before the course, it wasn't like that. And then after the course, it did really help us out. It changed a lot of things. (Male partner 7)

Change in Thinking. This subtheme could be seen when the stepparent explained how they changed their way of thinking and chose to be supportive to the biological parent, as opposed to trying to be an authority figure to the stepchild because of SE. One man said, "I am not here to take the place of their father" (Male partner 9). Other stepparents shared their experiences related to changes and shifts in thinking:

So if I am with her, I should support her with that situation. I am not going to say no. So the same support that I give, I would like to receive... I help you with your daughter and you help me with mine. (Male partner 6)

The most important thing, I think it was that they treat you how to treat your stepchild... in my mind a stepmom is like the bad person in the picture, when in reality it's not like that. Yeah, everybody is different, but I don't think it's always like that. So I have to understand how to treat my stepson and also how I as a mother would want someone to treat my children. (Female partner 3)

At the beginning, it was difficult for my wife to relate to my 11-year-old son, and for me too, it was hard to relate to the six year old. At the beginning I didn't realize, I thought that when you get married, the children and stepchildren have to obey. So what we applied is to have a lot of patience with the children.

We are strangers to them, and that's what we implemented in our relationship. The most important thing that I learned from the course was to realize that I was wrong. To think that stepchildren had to obey us like... [SE] opened my understanding, that the right thing is to be patient or to love your stepson and to have patience. That's the most important, to realize how stepchildren are to be treated. (Male partner 4)

I think that before taking the course I used to feel strange towards the kid. I didn't know how to treat him. But now with the course, they teach you that you can be more open, not to replace the mother but to say, "I am your father's wife and I am here, and I can love you and attend to you like to my own daughters." I think that helped me a lot, and the same I think for my husband towards my daughter. (Female partner 3)

Others learned better ways to handle discipline within a stepfamily:

It helped us a lot in how to be with a child that is not your own. In that way it helped us to know how to behave, the things we can do. For example, if she does something bad, how to correct her without her feeling...bad...because I am like her father; she calls me dad. She was two years old when I got together with my wife. (Male partner 3)

[I learned] to have more affection for the children who are not mine. To have more affection for them and to think differently because sometimes it's that we are jealous about those children. And I have to be more aware. It's not their fault. (Female partner 6)

Some men learned in SE that a biological Latino mother could be protective of her biological children and how to adapt. One stepfather explained his view:

I am happy to have understood that, because I put myself in her shoes and I imagine it's like a lioness defending their cubs. So I realized how wrong I was. I said, "I am wrong and I have to change." It helped her a lot because she began recognizing that she also was defensive, like she would protect him. Not only was I guilty, but also she was over protecting, and in the end she realized that and she apologized. (Male partner 4)

One woman tried to explain her perspective on being a protective biological mother:

But at times I would be bothered that he would correct him, because he is not his father. And sometimes I would say, but it's my son. And they taught us there that we have to give him the right because he is with us. So it was hard, but now we work at it together. If he says no, it's no. If I say no, it's no. I think to this day we still have to work at it, because all the time, as a mother, we are over protective and if I don't like it, I try to respect what he says... (Female partner 7)

Stepparenting changes that changed us. Some stepparents learned that if they applied skills they learned in SE to their stepparent/stepchild relationships, these changes positively changed the couple relationship. A stepfather shared:

I admitted from that time that I had to change a lot regarding my stepson, the six year old. And something really positive is that there was a change between my wife and I. For example that when I changed with the little one, it also changed our relationship. We were able to break something that was between us.

So we were more at peace, more calm. It wasn't so much to argue about: "You don't tell him anything, you spoil him." It wasn't about that theme anymore. For example with my wife, we began to love each other more, to be more united, more happy, more related. (Male partner 4)

One mother explained how the stepfather changed the way he communicated with her biological sons, and that it saved their relationship:

He [learned] to communicate with the boys. I was ready to give up and go with my three boys, ready to get up and just leave because there was no communication. There was arguing, there was fighting, there was negative vibes all the time, and I thought I need to get out of this. (Female partner 2)

Discussion

Research with Latino stepcouples has resulted in considerable insight into the short-term benefits of SE within this specific population. Examination of what Latino stepcouples remembered about the course 2 years after SE and what experiences could be attributed to this knowledge is important because little is known about the lasting effects of SE and how these concepts can be applied to Latino stepfamily dynamics. The present study was designed to analyze 13 Latino stepcouples' interviews who participated in SE to explore the possible influences on the couple, parent/child, and family relationships and explore the changes that have occurred due to the influence of SE.

The primary research question for this study was: When 13 Latino stepcouples participated in SE and were interviewed regarding what they remembered about the course 2 years later, how were the couple, parent/child, and family relationships

influenced by the concepts that were learned, and what experiences, if any, might they have had that could be attributed to the course? Four themes emerged after analyzing 13 stepcouples' interviews that had participated in SE 2 years earlier using Bogdan and Biklen's analysis methods (2006) to explore the lasting benefits of participating in SE. The themes reflected positive changes in relationships including: couple relationship changes, parenting changes, family changes, and stepparent/stepchild relationship changes. As the participants remembered concepts learned in SE, they reflected on changes they had made due to what they learned while attending SE.

Three of the four themes that emerged were consistent with the current literature—namely, couple relationship changes, parenting changes, and family changes. These changes were positive improvements that helped maintain the stepfamily's success. The couple relationship improved by understanding and accepting past romantic relationships, gaining effective communication skills that increased conventional conversations and improved conflict management, developing relationship skills that promoted more couple unity, and by pooling their money that increased their couple cooperation. The parenting relationship improved by changing the way they disciplined their children, becoming more authoritarian with their biological children, and by adopting better communication skills. The family relationship improved by including all members of the family in activities and not differentiating between biological and step-relationships, referring to their family as an entirety as opposed to his and hers, and by participating in activities all together. These improvements are supported by past research showing that changes in the behaviors and attitudes within the major concepts taught in *Smart Steps* could be seen one year later among the couple relationship, parent/child

relationships, and then the family relationships (Skogrand, Dansie, Higginbotham, Davis, & Barrios-Bell, 2011). It has been suggested that the gained communication skills taught in SE could improve all of the stepfamily relationships (Adler-Baeder, 2007; Afifi, Davis, Denes, & Merrill, 2008). The participants retained principles and concepts 2 years later and applied them to their couple, parent/child, and family relationships. These improvements reflect the design of the SE, specifically *Smart Steps*, based on family systems (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

These findings can be compared to the only known study that focused on the benefits of SE 2 years after participating among Latino stepcouples. The present study validates Skogrand and Higginbotham's (2017) findings regarding one Latino stepcouple. These findings included improvements in discipline, a decrease in couple conflict, and stress management. Their narrative study also showed improved financial management, family unity and couple commitment 2 years following SE. The present study adds to the literature by finding an important fourth theme—change in the stepparent/stepchild relationship.

As far as we know, the fourth theme, which revealed changes within the stepparent/stepchild relationship has not been reported in previous research. Different levels of discipline and nurturing may be used in various ethnic groups compared to non-Latino white parents (Kim et al., 2018). Some research suggests Latinos parents tend to use an authoritarian parenting style (Kim et al., 2018; Hillstrom, 2009). This parenting style among Latino men could be influenced by values such as machismo (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). Single parenting dynamics among Latina women may influence their parenting styles (Mowen & Schroeder, 2018). Stepfamily education teaches that

permissive parenting can be more effective in the development of the stepparent/stepchild relationship. The findings from this study revealed that the majority of stepcouples had shifted to permissive parenting behaviors within the stepparent/stepchild relationship and have found it to be a beneficial change to their stepparenting relationships and to their couple relationship. Although Papernow (2013) found that permissive parenting is among the best practices for unique stepparenting dynamics, this finding has not been confirmed among Latino stepfamilies. One stepfather explained that machismo does not have to be abolished to make positive changes within his family:

You don't have to be a "macho" to love your wife, to love your kids, to make a marriage. This class showed me the same thing. I don't have to wear the pants to make this family work. I can share the pants with my wife, and the marriage will still work and the kids will still have the respect for the father as wearing the pants as well as the mother. For that reason, because you're not going to lose your pants, you're not going to lose your "machismo." If there is any way [that] you can get this out to more families, and if I can help in any way, I would be willing to do it, too.

This stepparenting change positively affected the couple relationships. This was seen as the stepcouples described being more happy and more united, and feeling more love towards one another because they learned better stepparenting skills. This aligns with previous research findings that indicate, as stepcouples increase agreement on parenting, there is a decrease in couple conflict (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Visher & Visher, 1996). Palisi and colleagues (1991) explained that some of the strongest predictors of marital quality within stepcouples are couple agreement and decision-making processes

with respect to stepparenting. Reck (2013) found a decrease in couple relationship quality one year after SE among ethnically diverse participants in a quantitative study. The findings of the present study were not consistent with those findings.

To our knowledge, these data analyses are the first to examine such stepparenting changes within Latino stepcouples. These findings build on prior research on the positive effects of SE among Latino stepfamilies and lend support to the importance of understanding the influence of Latino values within stepfamily relationships. The findings are also consistent with the need for cultural modifications to SE for increased knowledge retention and effective application. As participants discussed their relationships, their Latino values were woven into their explanations. This included the influence of familialism and machismo. These values should not be overlooked in SE, but embraced to better communicate new skills to the participants. Cultural sensitivity combined with an understanding of Latino values may help not only in recruiting this diverse population, but also in helping participants to grasp new ideas outside of their value system, like shifting to a permissive parenting style with stepchildren.

These findings extend the literature on the positive benefits of SE 2 years after participation within the couple relationship, parent/child relationship, overall family relationship, and lastly, the often-challenging stepparent/stepchild relationship. An analysis of their comments from the interviews suggests that the principles and concepts learned were maintained over 2 years. These findings also illustrate how stepfamilies continue to develop over time, reinforcing past literature (Tracy, 2001; Papernow, 2013).

Limitations and Strengths

Interpretations from this study should be qualified by a number of factors. First, researchers designed this study from a strength-based perspective. Therefore, the results may appear highly positive. This may stem from interview questions that were developed to reveal the benefits of SE or social desirability of the participants. Second, the richness of the findings are a result of in-depth qualitative interviews, although, the narrow sample of participants does not allow the findings to be generalized to other Latino stepfamilies. Future studies might consider a larger sample that would require researchers to stay in contact and follow up with more participants. Third, the study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. This approach limits the conclusions as to when the specific changes took place, although Papernow's (1988) research was also cross-sectional. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to compare the present results with her model of stepfamily development. Fourth, these interviews looked at SE from a retrospective view. The stepcouples may have forgotten events and details. Finally, the interviews were completed with stepcouples who were still together after 2 years and responded to the call for participation. Findings may be different for those stepcouples who dissolved or who could not be located.

Implications for Research and Intervention

This study extends existing research on Latino stepfamilies by examining Latino stepfamilies' experiences 2 years after SE and has implications for interventions and additional research. For example, considering the research on the benefits of SE right after participation as described by Latina women and Latino men, the findings from this study indicate that Latino stepcouples still remember salient concepts and apply them in their stepfamily relationships 2 years after SE (Reck et al., 2013; Skogrand et al., 2014).

The use of SE curriculum designed to address the unique challenges of stepfamilies provided useful tools for the stepcouples to use with their families that were seen 2 years after participating. Although the curriculum was not specifically designed for Latino stepfamilies, the Latino couples were able to implement the skills that were taught to improve their couple, parental, and overall family relationships 2 years after participating in SE.

The results from this study prompt additional future research. First, a follow-up of these families or other stepfamilies would be beneficial when studying stepfamily development. It would be helpful to understand the lasting effects of SE past 2 years and to understand if these findings would be consistent with other groups of stepfamilies. Second, it would be useful to sample Latino stepcouples with more varied demographics, and it would be useful to explore effects of gender, degree of acculturation, and the effects of varied ages of the children. Third, this qualitative study could inform quantitative researchers regarding more effective survey questions to increase the depth of information that is known about Latino stepfamilies over time. Fourth, the findings could also inform practitioners or educators of the most salient concepts to the success of Latino stepfamilies to help them increase their relationship skills with their unique challenges. Finally, this study indicates that stepparenting adjustments can positively affect the couple relationship. Future studies regarding the continued success of stepcouples would also add to the literature.

Conclusion

In summary, a number of themes were derived from Latino stepcouples' accounts: changes in the couple relationship, changes in the parent/child relationship, changes in

the overall family, and lastly, changes in the stepparent/stepchild relationship. In addition to extending the literature regarding Latino stepfamilies, this study is noteworthy because it examined how Latino stepcouples apply SE to their unique stepfamily dynamics and continue to be successful 2 years after participation. The findings provide some validation of past research regarding the benefits of SE that has cultural adaptations for greater participant understanding and how Latino stepcouples apply this understanding 2 years later (Skogrand et al., 2009; Skogrand & Higginbotham, 2017). The findings also add to the literature regarding the parenting style changes from authoritarian to permissive among Latino stepparents and the subsequent positive effects for the couple relationship. Further development of the research in this domain appears necessary because of the continued rise in the formation of stepfamilies, including Latino stepfamilies, to better understand their diversity (Sweeney, 2010).

Finally, when asked about what was learned in SE 2 years earlier, one Latino stepparent's comment was representative:

[After] two years, what did I learn from it? I learned that there is hope in families that have stepchildren. There is hope, and it doesn't matter what age you get them. It's still hard, but if you have help, [and] you have programs like this [that] you can go to, they can show you the skills and the things that you need to know. There are skills you can [learn], and there is help for people that have stepchildren.

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CHAPTER 3

A NARRATIVE STUDY REGARDING CHANGES IN A LATINO STEPFAMILY TWO YEARS AFTER STEPFAMILY EDUCATION

Introduction

Latino stepfamilies comprise a large portion of the population today (Lamidi & Cruz, 2014; Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). They may experience challenges that are unique to stepfamilies in addition to issues that may occur in first-order marriages (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). Cultural concepts such as familialism, patriarchy, religion, and acculturation may also affect their stepfamily relationships (Chavez-Korell, Delgado-Romero, & Illes, 2012; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2008). This narrative study encapsulated one Latino stepcouple's experiences from post stepfamily education (SE) to 2 years after stepfamily education (SE) by restorying their journey (Creswell, 2013). Their unique circumstances are recounted chronologically to provide insight to the development of their stepfamily by examining their interviews over three time points.

Literature Review

Comprising over 17% of the population, the Latino community makes up a large portion of the United States' population (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Remarriage has become common among Latinos in the United States (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Lamidi and Cruz (2014) reported that Latino men born outside of the United States have the highest remarriage rate for men compared to other ethnic groups. Stepfamilies are formed through remarriage or cohabitation and have become a common family structure (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). It is estimated that 40% of children in the United States

will reside in a cohabitating stepfamily household, including 43% of Latino children (Manning, 2015). Stepfamily relationships may reflect similar challenges of first families, although, many are unique to their situation (Visher & Visher, 2013). Stepfamily education can provide the skills needed for successful stepfamilies.

Stepfamily Challenges

Remarriages have been shown to be less stable and more prone to dissolution compared to first marriages (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007). This may be due to the unique challenges of navigating a variety of complex relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2004) which include the ex-spouse, stepparent/stepchildren, siblings from different marriages, and the new couple relationship. Cohabiting stepfamilies may also face these same challenges (Brown & Manning, 2009). Moreover, one major challenge for many stepfamilies, and the couple relationship in particular, is navigating the stepparent/stepchild relationship (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2013). This involuntarily formed relationship is preceded by the biological parent/child relationship, and then often results in two contrasting families. The diversity and challenges among stepfamilies can become more complex as stepsibling and half-sibling relationships are considered (Ganong & Coleman, 2011).

Stepfamily Education

Relationship education can help stepfamilies who experience unique challenges in their relationships (Nicholson, Sanders, Halford, Phillips, & Whitton, 2008). Stepfamily education often consists of basic couple skills such as communication, empathy, conflict management, and other concepts related to marital quality (Adler-Baeder, Robertson, & Schramm, 2010). However, unique to SE are key concepts including negotiating the

stepparent/stepchild relationship, making the couple relationship a priority, having empathy for other members of the stepfamily, and navigating relationships with former partners. These skills can benefit the entire stepfamily (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2009).

Results from research evaluation studies continue to show the effectiveness of these programs, including support received from others who are experiencing the same issues, learning from others through group discussions, and feeling normalized with others in their same situation (Skogrand, Torres & Higginbotham, 2010). These positive implications can be attributed, in part, to the group-formatted intervention, although, social support may be one of the most salient benefits of group-formatted SE (Robertson et al., 2006). Considering the extensive research on the effectiveness of SE, this study focused on one Latino stepcouple who participated in SE prior to their stepchildren residing in their home and how they implemented the skills that they learned over 2 years.

Stepfamily Education for Latinos

Research has shown relationship education to be beneficial with Latino stepfamilies (Reck, Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Davis, 2012; Reck, Skogrand, Higginbotham, & Davis, 2013; Skogrand, Mendez, & Higginbotham, 2014). The findings of these studies overlap, and generally indicate both Latino/a mothers and fathers in stepfamilies report relationship improvements for the couple, (step) parent/(step) child, and family.

Stepfamily education that reflects the participants' culture and values has also been shown to be more meaningful (Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, & Higginbotham, 2009).

Some of these cultural values include familialism, patriarchal families, and the influence of religion. Familialism has been described as the “most important factor influencing the lives of Latinos” (Cooley, 2001, p. 130). It can be defined as a commitment to family reciprocated by loyalty and obligation (Steidel & Contreras, 2003). Familialism stresses the importance of marriage and how it can positively influence the individual and family (Bulanda & Brown, 2007).

Many Latino families incorporate a traditional patriarchal view. This view influences all familial relationships (Vega, 1995) and is an overarching voice of authority over *la familia Latina* (Rodriguez, 2014). For example, no matter whether the woman chooses to work outside of the home or not, the couple agrees that the man has the majority of authority within the household (Hurtado, 1995). The Latino culture emphasizes a devotion to family, intertwined with an influence of patriarchy and religion (Rodriguez, 2014). Family traditions and values within the Latino culture are highly influenced by religion (Espin, 1994; Skogrand et al., 2009). Although Catholicism has been a major influence on Latinos’ attitudes, one-third of Latinos do not report being Catholic (Ellison, Wolfinger, & Ramos-Wada, 2013). Still, their frequent affiliation with religion tends to affect their family-related attitudes. Understanding the salience of familialism, patriarchy, and religion, and then incorporating it into relationship education can affect how Latino stepfamilies respond (Chavez-Korell et al., 2012). Providing SE within the context of the Latino culture can increase participation in and increase the benefits of SE (Skogrand, et al., 2009).

Acculturation may affect the degree to which cultural values influence stepfamily relationships (Skogrand et al., 2009). Though it is difficult to measure, acculturation can

be defined as the process of interactions between cultures and the effects on an individual's behaviors, values, and attitudes (Thomson & Hoffman-Goetz, 2009). This may be done through the adoption of the new culture's values while trying to preserve the individual's original ethnic values (Skogrand et al., 2009). During this ongoing process, beliefs and values may shift and affect familial relationships (Smokowski et al., 2008). Latino stepfamilies' beliefs and practices may be affected by acculturation regarding whether new ways are assimilated.

Stepfamily Education as Prevention

Even with increases in premarital relationship education, remarried individuals are less likely than those in their first marriage to attend premarital education (Stewart, Bradford, Higginbotham, & Skogrand, 2016). Despite the effectiveness of relationship education, there are a limited number of couples who seek intervention and even less that pursue help before considerable issues occur (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003). Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) expressed that preemptive education is designed to enlighten the participants of possible upcoming issues. It can also provide skills needed to help avoid future difficulties and possibly reverse any adverse effects that might have occurred already (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Research has also shown that couple relationship education is used most widely by White, middle-class, married couples (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Consequently, one might expect mostly White, middle-class couples to attend SE after remarriage and after experiencing challenges in their complex family relationships. Stepfamily education designed for Latinos as a preventative tool holds great promise.

This study examined a Latino couple who attended SE prior to the stepchildren residing in their home and how this helped them navigate their family relationships over 2 years with an ex-spouse, stepchildren, siblings from different marriages, and their new couple relationship. The present study can help fill a gap in the literature by analyzing the experiences of a Latino stepfamily who attended SE in search of relationship skills before they became a stepfamily and how they utilized these skills.

Method

This research study used a subsample of a larger demonstration project, which included an evaluation of the *Smart Steps* stepfamily education program and the different participant experiences (Higginbotham, n.d.). Many other publications have resulted from this project that have examined various aspects of implementing SE and participant outcomes (i.e., Higginbotham & Myler, 2010; Higginbotham et al., 2010; Reck et al., 2012; Reck et al., 2013; Skogrand, Dansie, Higginbotham, Davis, & Barrios-Bell, 2011; Skogrand & Higginbotham, 2016; Skogrand, Reck, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, 2010; Skogrand et al., 2010). This study differs from previous studies in that it uses qualitative data to examine one Latino stepcouple's experience over 2 years after participating in *Smart Steps*.

A qualitative narrative study was chosen to examine the three interviews of the stepcouple so that the individuals' experiences could be adequately explained through their stories. A qualitative approach allows the process to be better understood (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This holistic approach is appropriate for complex experiences so the stepcouple's voices can be heard (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The stories told by the couple were explored and then retold chronologically by the researcher. Elliott (2005)

explained this approach as organizing “a sequence of events into a whole so the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole,” (p. 3). It is a process of capturing the individuals’ unique experiences and then restorying them sequentially (Creswell, 2013). Narrative inquiry is best suited for experiences that take place overtime (Carr, 1986; Webster & Mertova, 2007). The data for this study was taken from individual interviews right after taking SE, one year later, and 2 years later.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

One purpose of the study was to explore the process of participating in SE prior to stepchildren residing in the stepcouple’s home and how the learned concepts were implemented. The researchers immersed themselves independently in the data to get a feel for the data and to get to know the characters involved (Creswell, 2013). Together, the researchers developed a timeline of events and experiences, although, the interviews were not intended to provide narratives. The participants did not tell their story chronologically as they were answering questions about what they remembered about the SE course and what concepts influenced their experiences. Thus, the six interviews: a post interview, one year follow up, and two year follow up for the man and woman independently, needed to be combed to determine the order of events for a better understanding (Creswell, 2013). This allowed the lead-up events and the consequences of participating in SE to be clarified (Creswell, 2013). This framework, called restorying, was then defined so that the individual’s thinking, actions, and reactions could be rewritten (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2000). Past, present, and future events can be examined after they are teased out of the context of the interview questions (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Therefore, the data becomes linear with a chronological dimension

(Soderberg, 2006). This meaningful sequence is created from multiple accounts of the events for a great understanding of the consequences (Soskolne, 2003). The consequences within this study are the positive influences of SE on the stepfamily.

This narrative study focused on one Latino couple who participated in SE. Their experiences and subsequent journey applying the principles and skills were examined, including how they applied the information in anticipation of stepchildren entering the family (Creswell, 2013). Kuhns (1974) posited that culture could be more fully experienced and understood through narratives. The in-depth narrative approach used here describes how the Latino stepcouple and family adjusted to stepchildren who immigrated to the United States to reside in an already established stepcouple relationship and give insight to the process involved. These findings are not evident in existing literature and add to the SE literature by providing an example of how one Latino couple attended SE in preparation for the arrival of stepchildren in hopes of preventing family relationship issues and learning new skills to deal with challenges.

Program

Each participant completed a six-week/12-hour relationship education course entitled, *Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey*, in a Western state (Adler-Baeder, 2007). This curriculum is designed to provide a variety of tools for the unique needs of stepfamilies to participants and was tailored to Latino stepfamilies for greater understanding and application. The facilitators understood the Latino culture and taught the course in Spanish. It was provided simultaneously to the adults and school-aged children in the families following a family systems philosophy. In this way, the entire family separately learned developmentally appropriate skills, which have been found

helpful in complex stepfamily relationships, for about 90 minutes, and then the whole family came together at the end of each weekly course to practice these skills. Such skills include communication, empathy, and stress management (Adler-Baeder, 2007).

Participants and Procedures

The researcher selected a heterosexual stepcouple from 13 couples who were interviewed three separate times over a two-year period following participation in a SE course between 2007 and 2011. The three interviews were conducted after the completion of the course, one year later, and 2 years after the course. This study concentrated on one particular couple who was chosen because of their unique stepfamily situation to illustrate the complexity of stepfamilies and explore their unique dynamics coupled with SE

The interviews were conducted in Spanish and completed by trained research assistants with the overarching purpose of examining the potentially long-term benefits of the stepfamily course. Some narrative studies are chosen because their story seems to represent the majority of experiences of the group who encountered a particular event. This narrative study was chosen for its uniqueness in hopes of enlightening the field regarding Latino stepfamilies. Thus, this couple's transcripts were purposefully chosen because of the rich narratives provided and for the unique story they shared. The purpose of this study is to capture and explore the process of a Latino stepcouple implementing skills learned in a SE course within their unique family structure and to restory their experiences in a chronological format to better understand their experience.

The couple was interviewed separately in their home three separate times over 2 years, specifically after completing SE, one year later, and 2 years later by different

graduate students who were unknown to the participants. The interviews lasted approximated 45 minutes each time. Participants completed a letter of intention and received \$20 for their time and participation (See Appendix A). The couple's interviews were transcribed and translated into English, and back translated into Spanish to check for accuracy. Questions from the interviews related to experiences within the couple relationship that occurred due to taking the course. See Appendix B for the Post SE interview questions, Appendix C for the one-year post questions, and Appendix D for the two-year post questions. One specific question asked directly after the SE course included, "Are there things you plan to do differently in your couple relationship or family life now that you have taken the course?" One year later participants answered questions such as, "Are there things you have done differently because of what you learned about stepparenting in the course?" Another question was, "What was the most important thing that you learned from the course?"

As the participants reflected on the last 2 years after the course, they answered questions such as, "Are there things that you used from the course that worked well for a period of time, but were difficult to maintain during the past years?", "Now, two years after taking the course, what were some of the most important things you learned?" The following research question was explored: What does the stepcouple remember about the course over 2 years, what concepts were useful, and what family experiences, if any, could be attributed to participating in the *Smart Steps* course?

Two researchers immersed themselves in the data and together developed a timeline of events for the individuals. After a consensus of the timing of facts and experiences was established, the researchers merged the couples' stories in an effort to

clarify the details. The narrative is told from the earliest event to the latest in an effort to restory their journey in a sequential manner. The participant's names have been changed to protect their identity.

Results

Juan, age 38, and Elisa, age 37, were in a committed relationship for over seven years, and were not married. They had two children together, ages three and four years old, when they attended SE. Both of them had been married before. Juan had two sons from his previous marriage in Mexico, and Elisa had five boys from her previous marriage in El Salvador. When the couple attended SE, all of the children from previous relationships still lived outside of the United States with their other biological parent. Juan and Elisa gained skills that could be beneficial for the unique challenges of stepfamilies in hopes that someday they might have a chance to unite their families.

Looking Back

Elisa did not plan to live in the United States for a long time after she emigrated from El Salvador, but hoped to return with enough money to be able to raise her five biological children on her own. Elisa believed that most immigrants have a similar goal to come to the United States to work, buy a big house, open a bank account, and go back to their native country in two to three years, but that dream does not always happen. Elisa, too, had realized that her American dream was not that easy and became more difficult as time went by. She worked at a fast food restaurant and used most of her money to pay off debts and to send some money back to her ex-husband to help support her children in El Salvador. It was not long before she thought it might be best to move her children to the United States. Earning only five dollars an hour did not go very far,

although she worked very hard to try to save the necessary funds to be able to bring her five children here that were still in El Salvador. The boys were 2, 4, 6, 8, and 14 years old when she moved to the United States and left them in their father's care.

Juan was also divorced, but did not share the same intentions of returning to his native country or his two sons. His culture taught him that once a relationship ended, even if it included children, all communication also ended. Therefore, he did not speak with his ex-wife or with his two boys that still lived in Mexico. He said there was "no looking back."

Soon after Elisa moved to the United States, she met Juan who had emigrated from Mexico. Elisa's experience with other Mexican men had been that they generally do not want to date a woman who has children from a previous relationship. She knew that this was a cultural difference that could affect their relationship, so she was up front with Juan and explained that she had five children from her previous marriage. Juan was attracted to Elisa and decided that even though she was a mother, he did not mind since her children lived in El Salvador. Over time, their family grew as they had one daughter and one son together. They had financial difficulties, including considerable medical debts, and chose to keep their finances separate. The family lived in a small, rural town in Northern Utah where Juan laid concrete for a living and reported earning an annual income of \$25,000-\$30,000. They struggled financially, but were very happy together.

Attending Stepfamily Education

Juan and Elisa chose to participate in SE with an anticipation that someday her children who were still in El Salvador with their biological father might move to the

United States to live in their home. They did not know how the stepchildren would react towards Juan or how he would react towards them. Elisa's children knew about her new partner, but she also knew that there could be many challenges if they someday moved to the United States.

After taking a SE course, Juan said the most important concept he learned was that when there are children and a couple separates, "there is always going to be a relationship, within reason, with the previous partner." This was difficult for Juan to accept. *Machismo* influenced his beliefs, and he still thought it was ridiculous that Elisa communicated with her ex-husband about the children. He was trying to change his way of thinking, although, it was still causing conflict in their couple relationship.

Together, the couple learned many skills from participating in SE. Juan learned better communication skills that he used in his couple relationship and with their two biological children. He also learned to be more patient and tolerant, and he learned better ways to get along with his children. Juan felt that he learned to be more flexible, the importance of doing things as a family, and how to be more united as a couple. Elisa learned to listen to Juan, to pay attention to his feelings, and to think of herself less. She felt consumed by work and learned that time together as a couple was important to their relationship success. However, the curiosities they had regarding stepparenting and stepfamily development were still obscure.

The Struggle Was Real

Elisa continued communicating with her ex-husband trying to convince him to allow the children to move to the United States. He did not want to send the boys once he

learned about Elisa's new relationship; he was worried that Juan would mistreat the children. One day the *Pandilleros* (El Salvadoran gang) came to the boys' door in El Salvador. They pressured the boys to start using drugs and to join the *Pandillo* to "become men." The boys' biological father ultimately decided that he would rather communicate with his sons once a month on the phone than visit them in a cemetery. Despite the ordeal her sons experienced, Elisa was achieving her dream.

Months after the SE course, three of Elisa's boys arrived in the United States to live with Juan and Elisa. They were 22, 16, and 14 years old. Without the skills that Juan and Elisa gained from SE, they might have separated after the children arrived. Since he took the SE course preemptive to the arrival of his stepchildren, Juan understood that he was "going to be a different figure than what I was before." When he participated in SE, he only knew Elisa's five boys' names, but had never met them or had the chance to get to know them. Juan's reaction to their new family dynamics after the boys arrived was, "And there we were in the battle..."

Elisa also struggled with her new family of two young children and three older boys from her previous marriage. She tried to protect the children, who recently moved from El Salvador, from any discipline from Juan. This was not because he was harsh, but because she understood how different life was for them now. She knew they had had few rules and were not used to having parents tell them what to do. It was a big change for her, but an even bigger change for the children. She was also sensitive to the challenges they faced having a new stepfather in their life. However, these feelings of protection also brought on feelings of guilt. Juan and Elisa had both saved money to move her sons to the United States and without his financial help, she could not have moved her sons. She

would then feel guilty for not allowing Juan to parent how he wanted, but she remembered the parenting skills they learned in SE. They would discuss how to slowly parent the boys and to try to have more activities together to unite them. This was not just about helping the children adjust to different homes, but adjustments to living in different countries, too. Elisa felt that without the SE skills, there would have been power struggles between her, Juan, and the children. Elisa said the “course was like a preventative measure, like an alarm for what was going to happen.” She was thankful for the skills she had learned in SE.

One year after taking the SE course, the couple spoke of skills they still used from the course. Juan still used techniques he had learned to help him raise and teach the children. He still tried to respect the relationship Elisa had with her ex-husband. He remembered from the course that since they had children between them, Elisa and her ex-husband should not be enemies, and there needed to be communication. Even though the couple knew that it was best, Elisa sometimes chose to hide to talk to her ex-husband in an effort to diminish any conflict. She also used the communication skills she had learned with all of her children. She felt that if she took the time to talk to them more, then they would obey more.

The couple also learned stress management skills during SE. One of Elisa’s greatest struggles was feelings of being “in the middle.” She found herself torn between Juan and his new stepchildren. She was torn between her children from her previous marriage and her two children she had with Juan. It was a lot of responsibility for Elisa as she tried to guide the children during their adjustment to the ways of their new country and to their new family. She tried to guide her older children to have a good relationship

with her young children. Having different last names was more challenging for the children than she anticipated. Elisa learned to take deep breaths and count to ten before reacting.

The family endured many challenges during the development of their stepfamily; it was not as easy as they had thought it would be. During challenging times after Elisa's boys arrived, the couple had even discussed separating. Elisa said, "If each of us goes their own way, we don't accomplish anything. But if we unite, we will be fine." Elisa loved and respected Juan for choosing to be with her even though she had five children from a previous marriage. The children also went through challenges after moving from El Salvador to the United States. Juan knew it was hard for them to adjust. He tried to help them by getting up earlier than usual so he could help all the children get ready for school. He knew that his behaviors influenced their behaviors. One year after SE Juan said, "If I didn't treat them [stepchildren] well, that was an effect on the family."

Elisa's youngest boys, ages 12 and 10 years old, were still living in El Salvador with their father and eventually moved to the United States to live with Elisa and Juan. Elisa's 10-year-old was only 2 years old when she moved to the United States, so getting to know him, his habits, and his temperament took some time. Again, she slowly tried to parent the boys and encouraged Juan to do the same thing.

Two years after taking the SE course, the couple was still utilizing skills they had previously learned. Juan still tried to use empathy and came to realize that he could not implement it every day as he hoped. He was trying to be the best dad he could be for his children/stepchildren, but he admitted, "Sometimes it's hard." He understood that they were still children, but would sometimes raise his voice with them. Juan understood the

benefits of implementing empathy every day, but also understood his limitations. He said, “It would be great if I could do it every day.” Elisa was thankful for the relationship skills she and Juan had gained in SE 2 years earlier. The couple had participated in SE to learn skills in the event Elisa’s children would be able to move and live with her and Juan. Elisa understood that their life would change with the arrival of her five boys, who would be Juan’s stepchildren, into their home. She said, “We are not going to be a normal couple.” However, she had learned how to put herself in her husband’s shoes before reacting. She was thankful for the good communication that her and Juan had and for the good example they showed to her children. This was a change from her previous marriage.

Elisa and Juan’s financial decisions had also changed over 2 years. The couple now pooled their income and made joint financial decisions together. Elisa felt their conflicts over money had decreased, and they were wasting less money. They were trying to save money and had learned better money management skills.

Looking Forward

Now, a family of eleven (Juan, Elisa, their two biological children (ages 5 and 6), Elisa’s four children (17, 15, 13, and 11), and Elisa’s oldest son (age 23), wife, and baby 2 years after SE, the couple was still together. They were not just surviving—they were thriving as they were searching for a new home where they would have more room and could still be together as a “family.” The most important concept Elisa gained from the SE course 2 years earlier was the importance of their couple relationship. She was thankful for Juan and the sacrifices he made. She wished all of the kids could have taken the course with the family instead of her and Juan trying to teach them what they learned.

Two years later Juan was still grateful for being able to participate in SE and for the information he learned. The most important lesson he learned was how to get along in a stepfamily and recommended SE to anyone that was in a “new family.”

Looking back, Elisa said, “It’s great that we took the course before they [my children] came because I don’t think we would have known how to handle it without the class.” When they attended SE, Juan told Elisa, “This won’t work; it’s just theories.” However, 2 years later Elisa said, “Now he knows. Now he knows it worked; it helped us.” Even with such a large family in such a small house, Elisa encouraged Juan to try to communicate with his two biological boys who still lived in Mexico. After the experiences of blending their families, she hoped that someday his biological sons could move to the United States, and they could all be together as one big family.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine one Latino stepcouple’s experience from post SE to 2 years after SE by composing a narrative and to explore the effects of SE prior to forming a stepfamily. Past research within the Latino population regarding stepfamilies has shown SE to be beneficial, although, little is known about the long-term outcomes of those individuals who participate in SE prior to stepchildren living in the home. Exploration of a Latino couple’s decision to participate in SE preemptive to forming a stepfamily is important to those promoting preventative stepfamily education, as well as understanding the positive outcomes they gained to increase essential relationship skills for the success of the stepfamily. By arranging the stepcouple’s responses into a chronological order, their experiences were combined in an effort to restory the events to better understand the phenomenon of attending SE preemptive to

any challenges that might occur when stepchildren reside in the home. The results provide insights into the processes that occurred in the development of this unique stepfamily through qualitative interviews obtained over three time points in 2 years and how they used the skills they learned in SE.

Juan and Elisa felt there were many positive outcomes that resulted from participating in SE. First, they learned how to better communicate with everyone involved in their stepfamily. SE taught them that continuing to communicate with their biological children who lived with the other parent after divorce was important. This concept was not stressed in their culture, but over time, the couple saw the benefits to their family. They also learned about the need to communicate with an ex-spouse, which was also different from what they were culturally taught. Juan said that he had to respect this past relationship for the sake of his new couple relationship. The couple also learned how to communicate better with one another and with their mutual biological children. Second, the couple learned a different way to manage their finances. They first kept their money separate, but later combined their money to finance Elisa's boys' move to the United States. After 2 years, the couple found that pooling their finances worked best for their relationship. Third, the couple learned the need for empathy. This understanding was essential between the couple and towards the biological children and immigrating children. Trying to see one another's perspective with compassion facilitated flexibility and sensitivity. Fourth, they learned in SE about the need for gradual parenting and saw the positive effects in their new parenting relationships. Gentle discipline from not only Juan towards his stepsons, but also Elisa with her estranged sons of eight years, promoted

stronger (step) parent/child relationships in a short time period. Using this parenting style in their new parent/child relationships was beneficial to both Juan and Elisa.

Two salient concepts needed for successful stepfamilies were reinforced from this study, namely stepparenting skills and the precedence of the couple relationship. The couple somehow knew that stepparenting was challenging, and this was their overall reason for attending SE. Neither traditional biological parenting nor the Latino culture promotes permissive parenting (Hurtado, 1995; Visher & Visher, 2013). This stepcouple learned the art of stepparenting and found it useful with Juan and his stepsons and Elisa with her estranged sons. This extends Papernow's findings (2013) that permissive stepparenting in the stepfamily's early years assists in building parent-child relationships due to the brief history they have had. This allows a friendship to be established before discipline and authority occurs (Visher & Visher, 2013). The second overarching concept seen in this study was the central importance of the couple relationship. The couple considered making the couple relationship a priority after learning about its importance in SE. They learned positive couple communication, the need for empathy for one another, and that working together was better than struggling apart. These concepts add to the framework developed by Adler-Baeder and colleagues (2010), which describes the need for general marriage education among stepcouples. Couple time was essential for Juan and Elisa, and family activities positively affected their couple relationship, making them feel more united. These feelings of family spillover to the couple relationship and the perception of unity extends Skogrand, Mendez & Higginbotham's (2014) study, which found improved parent-child, couple, and family relationships among Latina women due to participating in SE.

The present study analyzed the experiences of a Latino stepfamily who attended SE in search of relationship skills before they became a stepfamily and how they utilized these skills. SE helped the couple navigate their family relationships over the observed 2 years with an ex-spouse, stepchildren, siblings from different marriages, and their new couple relationship. Learning these skills prior to the onset of stepchildren residing in their home helped the couple to begin their new stepfamily with readiness and skills, instead of having to mend and rebuild hurt relationships by using their antiquated skills they used years ago in their first marriages with biological children. SE provides new and renewed skills to help couples from previous relationships build strong relationships with one another and their children (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). Traditional styles do not always work, and SE can supply stepfamilies new techniques to step out of their old ways (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008; Whitton, Nicholson, & Markman, 2008).

There were many concepts found in this study that were consistent with other research including stepparenting skills, making the couple relationship a priority, the need for empathy, and relationships with former partners (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2009). The importance of effective communication in the couple, parent-child, and other family relationships was reiterated in this study as an essential component learned in SE comparable to past research (Adler-Baeder, Robertson, & Schramm, 2010; Skogrand et al., 2011; Skogrand, Mendez, & Higginbotham, 2014).

The findings of the benefits of SE within the Latino population were also extended. As the couple expressed the influence of their Latino culture, they explained how the SE concepts could be woven into their thinking for their benefit of their

stepfamily. Juan and Elisa explained relationship improvements for the couple, (step) parent/(step) child, and family, which echoes findings from previous studies (Reck et al., 2012; Reck et al., 2013; Skogrand, Mendez, & Higginbotham, 2014). These processes could have also been affected by acculturation, nonetheless, the modifications positively affected their familial relationships (Skogrand et al., 2009; Smokowski et al., 2008).

Lastly, this study explored the couple's decision to participate in SE prior to the formation of their stepfamily. As few couples choose to pursue relationship education before substantial issues occur (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003), Juan and Elisa purposefully sought SE in preparation for stepparenting challenges. This finding could aid those in recruiting for SE to aid stepparents in building stepparenting relationships before practicing their usual parenting authority. These skills could help avoid future challenges before they happen (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

To our knowledge these data are the first to reveal the process that a Latino stepcouple experienced as they became a couple, chose to attend SE, moved the stepchildren into their home, and implemented the information they learned with their stepfamily. These findings build on prior research on the benefits of SE and the need to provide culturally appropriate education for better understanding. This study also suggests that SE prior to stepfamily development can provide essential skills to create a smoother transition when bringing two families together. We now turn to a discussion of the limitations of the present study, followed by their implications for future studies.

Limitations and Strengths

There are limitations to the current study. First, the sample is not representative of all Latino stepcouples living in the United States. This narrative study only focused on one Latino stepcouple. As a result, these findings cannot be generalized to other Latino stepcouples, although, it also allows a more in-depth look at the processes of one stepcouple. Furthermore, it would be helpful to conduct additional focus groups with individuals who decided to participate in SE prior to forming and living within a stepfamily to examine if other couples had similar experiences. The findings within this study could help guide researchers in identifying quantitative questions to gain further insight, such as the process of stepfamilies uniting across borders and the process of Latino stepparenting changes over time. Nevertheless, this study was designed to examine a very unique set of circumstances surrounding one couple who chose to participate in SE prior to any stepchildren living in their home and, consequently, any stepfamily-specific challenges. Lastly, the potential biases of the researcher as a stepmother and participant of SE could have affected the results of this study, although, her understanding of stepfamily dynamics may have allowed for greater understanding.

Implications for Research and Intervention

As this study examines a stepcouple's experience over a two-year period post SE, it would be valuable for future studies to examine the benefits of SE past 2 years to evaluate how long the positive effects of SE endure. These findings were consistent with the results of Skogrand and colleagues' (2011) study completed one-year post SE. Therefore, examining stepcouple's experiences past 2 years could assess if SE had lasting effects past 2 years.

This study helps to clarify our understanding of existing research on stepfamilies. For example, considering the unique challenges that stepfamilies face, enlightening stepcouples of the possible upcoming issues within their stepfamily and the skills to combat the possible conflicts could save a family from another life-changing dissolution. Given that SE is intended to not only assist with the challenges that come with stepfamilies, but also for preventing problems within the stepfamily that might add to couple conflict and possible dissolution, the results and long-term effects of SE participation preemptive to the stepfamily residing together have the clearest implications for practice (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Since this stepcouple attended before the actual formation of their stepfamily, it would be helpful to make facilitators aware that not all stepfamilies that attend SE are the same; some may attend in prevention. In addition to recruiting stepfamilies that are in turmoil, targeting couples who are considering remarriage/repartnering would arm them with known effective approaches. This study shows that in addition to focusing on the deficits that stepfamilies face, concentrating on the positive influence that successful stepparents can have on stepchildren is an effective recruiting strategy. It would be helpful to reach out and recruit stepfamilies to attend SE prior to stepfamily formation, and seemingly, overnight challenges. This would require a preventative aim as opposed to a repair workshop.

This narrative study suggests that there is a multitude of factors that can influence stepfamily development. Moreover, as researchers and practitioners are cognizant of the differences in biological families compared to stepfamilies, stepfamilies can feel more normalized and continue stepfamily development among its complex relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Family counselors and practitioners should also attend to the

complex dynamics in combining families that can be compounded when dealing with immigrating family members, acculturation, and cultural influences (Skogrand et al., 2009). Combining an understanding of both family challenges and providing SE within the context of the Latino culture can increase the overall benefits of SE (Skogrand et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Although benefits of SE have been well documented, little is known about Latino stepcouples who decide to participate in SE preemptive to forming a stepfamily and how the gained skills are utilized over a two-year period. The study presented here indicates that one Latino stepcouple who decided to participate in SE prior to the formation of their stepfamily gained extensive skills that contributed to a successful stepfamily and possibly prevented additional challenges to their unique family situation. Further development of research in this domain appears necessary as Latino stepfamilies continue to form and the skills needed are not always known to the stepcouple.

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CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The two studies in this dissertation are some of the first published studies of the benefits of Stepfamily Education (SE) 2 years after completing a course within the Latino population. The other qualitative study that also examined the benefits of SE 2 years after completing a course was a case study with one Latino stepcouple (Skogrand & Higginbotham, 2017). This study, plus the two included within this dissertation, lay a foundation of understanding of the possible benefits that Latino stepcouples could receive from participating in SE and continue benefitting over time. Additional studies that explore the benefits past 2 years would be helpful in explaining any lasting effects past 2 years.

The studies within this dissertation increase understanding of SE by showing that many concepts learned in SE are remembered and implemented by some Latino stepcouples 2 years later, including the benefits of communication skills used among stepfamily relationships, financial management skills, and the importance of family time. These findings advance other studies regarding Latino stepfamilies by showing that these particular Latino stepcouples continued to implement the concepts they learned in SE 2 years later and that these skills contribute to their stepfamily success as each of them were still together and doing relatively well (Reck et al., 2013; Skogrand & Higginbotham, 2017; Skogrand et al., 2011; Skogrand et al., 2014).

The primary research question for the first study was: When 13 Latino stepcouples participated in SE and were interviewed regarding what they remembered

about the course 2 years later, how were the couple, parent/child, and family relationships influenced by the concepts that were learned, and what experiences, if any, might they have had that could be attributed to the course? The stepcouples described positive changes within the couple relationship, parenting relationships, and overall family relationships that added to the stepfamilies' successes. Noteworthy and unexpected changes occurred in many of the (step)parent/(step)child relationships that add to the literature on Latino stepfamily development. The change to a more permissive parenting style within this sample was described as a positive change in stepparenting and coincidentally, a positive change within the couple relationship. While these studies provide a greater understanding and better knowledge of the lasting effects of SE over 2 years, there is still much to be learned by SE participants and how they implement the course contents in their lives and families.

The most notable concept gained from this particular study is the process that many of the Latino stepparents experienced as they chose to move from a more authoritarian parenting style to a more permissive style as described by Papernow (2013) for the improvement of the stepparent/stepchild relationship. This process has been shown to be helpful with other stepparents, but not necessarily among Latino stepparents (Papernow, 2013). Future studies are necessary to explore this stepparent/stepchild relationship within the Latino population, the effects of cultural values, and how these stepparenting modifications might improve these challenging relationships.

Findings from this study, related to a spillover effect, align with Bray and Berger's (1993) findings that showed when stepfathers formed a close relationship with their stepchildren, there was positive spillover with couples reporting higher levels of

satisfaction. Since researchers such as Hetherington and Kelly (2002) have stated the salience of the stepparenting relationship in terms of the success of the stepcouple's relationship, it is imperative that a deeper understanding of the spillover effects and direction be gained for the sake of Latino stepfamilies.

The findings from this study also add to the literature regarding stepfamily development. Papernow (1980) established a sequence of typical stepfamily development that is evidenced in this study. The middle stage is described as a reorganization of roles that is necessary to the success of the stepfamily. The components of this stage include changes in parenting styles and discipline, boundaries, and communication as stepparents voice their concerns. Conflict may arise in this stage, but tools provided in SE can help to alleviate the struggle of changing roles and communication skills. During this time of the stepfamily cycle (Papernow, 1984), combining old and new ways or creating new rituals and rules is common. These concepts could be seen as the stepfamilies in these studies worked for increased family activities and tried to include all of the family members in various events. Empathy is essential for the stepfamily during this process, which can be learned in SE. Papernow (1984) also described the need for prioritizing the couple during the middle stage and changes that often occur between the stepparent and stepchild. These changes are crucial so that the stepcouple can "function as a unit," instead of individually (Papernow, 1984, p. 360). It typically takes about five years for a stepfamily to complete Papernow's (1984) stages, although, each situation and family is unique. The stepcouples in this study varied in the time that they had been together. Participating in SE may affect the timing and pace of their development through the stepfamily cycle as

they obtained the tools to negotiate the challenges more effectively at the same time point.

This qualitative study revealed rich outcomes as a result of examining the interviews of Latino stepcouples, and using a phenomenological lens for the first study allowed the researcher to explore the stepcouple's lived experiences. Their lived experiences were better understood by analyzing their responses to questions about lasting influences of SE and the personal stories added unique insights (Van Manen, 2007). By discovering the essence of the core concepts that still influenced the stepfamilies after 2 years, this study exhibited how the couple, parent/child, and family relationships changed over 2 years after participation in SE.

The primary research question for the second study was: What does the stepcouple remember about the course over 2 years, what concepts were useful, and what family experiences, if any, could be attributed to participating in the *Smart Steps* course? The narrative study illustrated one Latino stepcouple's process of participating in SE prior to stepchildren residing in their home. This in-depth knowledge that could only be understood through qualitative means could have useful implication to practitioners interested in preventative work. However, since there is only one stepcouple that experienced this phenomenon, among the group of stepcouples, more research is necessary to make generalizations or adjustments to protocol for preventative SE.

One of the unique findings from this study may hint at the possibility of some couples benefiting from SE before children/stepchildren arrive. Gonzales (2009) explained how his model of educating stepfamilies before they are living in such a complex family structure could provide an increased likelihood of success just as

premarital counseling/education can provide. Gonzales (2009) stated, “Although knowing a little about what to expect and being armed with as many of the anticipated necessities as possible does not guarantee a successful journey, one can only imagine in what a lack of these things will likely lead to” (p. 150-151). Perhaps one way of approaching this aspect of SE is asking practitioners to create supplemental lessons or modules within their traditional SE materials for stepfamilies that do not immediately gain stepchildren into their family. It could be an online module, an additional module that could be explored together at home, or covered in an extra session for couples if it was applicable. This addition should address how to adapt and transition to children/stepchildren arriving after the stepcouple relationship is formed. As this small sample advanced our knowledge of preventative SE within a Latino stepfamily, future research in this domain could help to advance our knowledge to help protect the growing number of Latino stepfamilies in the United States.

An important aspect of all qualitative research is the influence of personal biases. Admittedly, biases played a role in analyzing and interpreting the interviews in this study, which contributed to the results. The researchers’ interpretations of the data were mediated by the stepcouples’ experiences and an understanding of their biases (Van Manen, 2016). Personal experience with remarriage, participating in SE, and the challenges of stepchildren assisted in the author’s understanding of the participants’ words and experiences. An overall appreciation for stepfamily development and the journey of blending families helped the researcher to decipher and hear the voices of the stepcouples. In sum, the biases and perspectives of the author are acknowledged and contribute to how results are interpreted and presented.

Overall, more qualitative research is needed with stepfamilies, and more specifically, Latino stepfamilies that have participated in SE. By listening and trying to understand the stepcouples' situations, a greater appreciation for the unique family structures that stepfamilies create can be obtained. Encouraging members of a stepfamily to talk about their struggles and accomplishments cannot only be beneficial to the individual members and their families, but to researchers as well. Qualitative research allows and promotes researchers to find and explore the nuances that quantitative studies likely would have missed. As we seek for successful stepfamilies' strengths and commonalities, we can disseminate skills, patterns, strategies, normalities, and success stories to a growing family form, so that they, too, may be successful.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:
Letter of Intent

Interview Letter of Intent for the Stepfamily Education Course
ID# _____

- Participation is completely voluntary and participants may skip any questions they do not feel comfortable answering. Participants can end the interview at any time.
- By law, we are required to report child abuse and neglect.
- Interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and where necessary translated from Spanish into English. Audio and written files of the transcripts will be saved.
- If portions of the interviews are published or presented, participant names will not be listed.
- Participants will be given a stipend of \$20 for their time and participation.
- As with all information in this study, the transcripts of interviews will be protected and kept confidential. Names will not be associated with answers; transcripts will only be identified by an ID number. Any proper names used on the recording will be deleted from the transcript.

My signature certifies that I have read this form, had my questions answered, agree to participate, and have received the stipend.

Participant's Signature Date

Participant's Printed Name

The signature of the interviewer certifies that the interview was completed and the incentive was given to the participant.

Interviewer Signature Date

Appendix B:
Interview Questions – Post SE

Interview Questions-Participants-Post SE

1. Please tell me why you decided to attend the stepfamily course.
2. How did you hear about the course?
3. Who from your family attended?
4. Did providing a meal for your family influence whether you attended this stepfamily course?
5. Did you attend all the classes? If not, what kept you from coming?
6. Please tell me about the best part of the stepfamily course for yourself?
7. What was something that was not so good for yourself—or that you wish you could change about the course?
8. Did you have a child(ren) attend and if so what ages? Stepchildren attend?
 - a. How did you feel about having your children involved in this course?
 - b. What was the best part of the course for your children?
 - c. Are there things that you would like to change about the activities for your children?
9. Were there any things that were taught in the course that didn't make sense to you or that you couldn't use in your couple relationship or your family relationships?
10. Please tell me about good things that have happened in your couple relationship or in your family which resulted from taking the course?
11. Are there any negative things that have happened in your couple relationship or in your family which resulted from taking the course?
12. Are there things you plan to do differently in your couple relationship or family life now that you have taken the course?

13. Are there issues or concerns that you would like to have heard about that were not addressed?
14. Tell us about the experience of taking this course with other stepfamilies.
15. Overall, would you recommend this course to others? Please explain why or why not.
16. Would you have participated in this class if there was a fee to attend? Please explain why or why not.
17. Did you receive an incentive for attending this class?
18. Would you have attended this course if there were no incentive? Please explain why or why not.
19. Is there anything you would like to add that we did not ask you about?

Appendix C:
Interview Questions – One Year Later

Interview Questions-Participants-One Year Later

Please look back on the stepfamily course you attended a year ago as you answer these questions.

1. If you were in a relationship or married to someone while you attended the course, are you still with that person? If not, please explain.
2. Did you have a child(ren) who attended the class and if so what age(s)?
 - a. Looking back, how do you feel about having your child(ren) involved in this course?
 - b. What was the best part of the course for your child(ren)?
 - c. Was there something that happened that was negative or bad for your child(ren) as a result of taking the course? Please explain.
3. What things from the stepfamily course have you used in your couple relationship or family life?
4. Are there things that you used from the course that worked well for a period of time, but were difficult to maintain? Please explain. What were the obstacles in maintaining the changes?
5. Would it be useful to have follow-up classes to revisit what you learned in class? If so, when should they be offered?
6. Looking back on what you learned in the course, is there something that has had a positive effect on your family life? Please explain. Could you tell a story or provide an example of what happened?
7. Is there something that has had a positive effect on your couple relationship? Please explain. Could you tell a story or provide an example of what happened?

8. Is there something that has had a negative effect on your family life? Please explain. Could you tell a story or provide an example of what happened?
9. Is there something that has had a negative effect on your couple relationship? Please explain. Could you tell a story or provide an example of what happened?
10. Are there things that you learned in the course that affected the stability of your couple relationship? Please explain.
11. Are there things you learned in the course that affected your commitment to your couple relationship? Please explain.
12. Are there things you have done differently because of what you learned about stepparenting in the course? Please explain.
13. Are there things you have done differently because of what you learned about parenting with your ex-spouse/partner in the course? Please explain.
14. Are there things you have done differently because of what you learned about finances in this course? Please explain.
15. Are there other things that we have not asked you about that you have done differently because of the course? Please explain.
16. What was the most important thing that you learned from the course?
17. Are there issues that have come up in your stepfamily since the course that you wish you had learned about? Was there anything missing in the course?
18. Have you recommended this course to others? Please explain why or why not. Would you recommend it?
19. Is there anything you would like to add that we did not ask you about?

Appendix D:
Interview Questions – Two Years Later

Interview Questions-Participants-Two Years Later

You took the stepfamily course approximately 2 years ago and we interviewed you a year ago about how the course had impacted your family. Today, we want to focus on what has happened in the past year as a result of taking the course.

1. If you were in a relationship or married to someone while you attended the course, are you still with that person? If not, please explain.
2. Did you have a child(ren) who attended the class and if so what age(s)?
 - a. Looking back over the past year, how do you feel about having your child(ren) involved in this course?
 - b. Looking back over the past year, what was the best part of the course for your child(ren)?
 - c. Looking back over the past year, was there something that happened that was negative or bad for your child(ren) as a result of taking the course? Please explain.
3. What things from the stepfamily course have you used in the past year in your couple relationship or family life?
4. Are there things that you used from the course that worked well for a period of time, but were difficult to maintain during this past year? Please explain. What were the obstacles in maintaining the changes?
5. Would it be useful to have follow-up classes to revisit what you learned in class? If so, when should they be offered?

6. Looking back on what you learned in the course, is there something that has had a positive effect on your family life during this past year? Please explain. Could you tell a story or provide an example of what happened?
7. Is there something that has had a positive effect on your couple relationship during this past year? Please explain. Could you tell a story or provide an example of what happened?
8. Is there something from the course that has had a negative effect on your family life during this past year? Please explain. Could you tell a story or provide an example of what happened?
9. Is there something from the course that has had a negative effect on your couple relationship during this past year? Please explain. Could you tell a story or provide an example of what happened?
10. Are there things that you learned in the course that affected the stability of your couple relationship during this past year? Please explain.
11. Are there things you learned in the course that affected your commitment to your couple relationship during this past year? Please explain.
12. Are there things you have done differently this past year because of what you learned about stepparenting in the course? Please explain.
13. Are there things you have done differently this past year because of what you learned about parenting with your ex-spouse/partner in the course? Please explain.
14. Are there things you have done differently this past year because of what you learned about finances in this course? Please explain.

15. Are there other things that we have not asked you about that you have done differently this past year because of the course? Please explain.
16. Looking back, what was the most important thing that you learned from the course?
17. Are there issues that have come up in your stepfamily during this past year that you wish you had learned about? Was there anything missing in the course?
18. Now, two years after taking the course, what were some of the most important things you learned? (new question from year one)
19. Have you recommended this course to others in the past year? Please explain why or why not. Would you recommend it?
20. Is there anything you would like to add that we did not ask you about?

Sheryl Goodey
Sheryl.Goodey@usu.edu

Education

- Ph.D.** ***Human Development and Family Studies, Utah State University***
December 2018.
Dissertation: *Latino Stepouples' Experiences Two Years After Stepfamily Education and A Narrative Study Regarding Changes in a Latino Stepfamily Two Years After Stepfamily Education*
Committee: David Schramm, Ph.D.; Kay Bradford, Ph.D.; Brian Higginbotham, Ph.D.; Travis Dorsch, Ph.D.; Victor Lee, Ph.D.
- B.S.** ***Biology Secondary Education, Weber State University***
May 1991. Included 2 years of Education courses, Practicum, and Student Teaching,

Professional Experience

Stepfamily Program Manager

USU Extension
May 2014 – present

Assisted in applying/writing TANF grant. Maintained partnerships with various human service agencies, searched out and developed relationships with new agencies to collaborate (11 total agencies). Implemented stepfamily education program. Trained agency staff. Developed site visit evaluation instrument. Prepare subawards and coordinate with directors. Completed site visits throughout state to ensure fidelity. Processed invoices. Analyzed data and created quarterly and Annual Reports. Analyzed participant feedback qualitative surveys. Collaborated with Human Service Agencies to promote relationship education and partner. Coordinated advertising. Budget with Leslie Hofland.

Fatherhood Assistant Program Manager

USU Extension
August 2015 – present

Assisted in applying/writing Federal grant. Helped to hire 12 facilitators statewide. Trained facilitators in 4 curricula. Developed Teachback Forum for family life educators to practice teaching and receive quality feedback. Monitored social media. Administer Online weekly trainings. Substitute for facilitators statewide. Complete Quarterly and Annual Reports. Statewide site visits. Qualitative research with facilitators to survey

challenges, recruitment strategies, retention, and lessons learned. Collaborated with Human Service Agencies to promote relationship education and maintain partnerships.

- Curriculum Trainer and Coordinator
- Online weekly training Coordinator

Community Grant/DWS Assistant Program Manager

USU Extension

Logan, UT

August 2014-2017

Trained facilitators in 3 curriculum. Ensured fidelity through site visits. Substituted and completed site visits at Department of Workforce Service-statewide, County Jails -11 counties, high schools-statewide, and other human service agencies. Conducted training conferences. Collaborated with Human Service Agencies to promote relationship education and partnerships.

Graduate Instructor

Utah State University

Logan, UT

August 2015 – May 2016

Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development. FCHD 2660: Parenting and Child Guidance, Fall 2015 (89 Students), Spring 2016 (37 Students), Fall 2016 (66 students), Spring 2017 (94 students)

Designed and taught four semesters of an undergraduate Parenting course, which fulfilled a core course requirement for the FCHD department. In designing the course, I determined which subjects were taught, developed my own syllabi, and developed my own assignments. During these semesters, I also designed and maintained the course webpage via Canvas (classroom management portal) by uploading course content, maintaining contact with students, overseeing and posting grades for student assignments. Additionally, I mentored other graduate students in grading and lecturing. At the end of the first semester, I requested a new textbook and then developed a different course, essentially from the ground up to ensure research-based material.

Teaching Assistant

Utah State University

Logan, UT

August 2011 – May 2013

Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development. FCHD 3530, Adolescence – Face-to-Face and Online, Troy Beckert, Ph.D. Four semesters. Assisted students by answering questions. Managed discussion board posts for students online. Graded assignments and provided

extensive feedback on writing assignments and APA formatting. Provided guest lectures.

Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development. FCHD 4230, Social Policy. Grant Bartholomew, M.S. One semester. Assisted in classroom management during discussions. Managed discussion boards. Graded papers and provided feedback to each student.

Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development. FCHD 1500, Human Development - Online. Johanna Winn, M.S. One semester. Managed discussion board posts for students. Graded papers and provided feedback.

Research Assistant

Utah State University
Logan, UT
August 2013 – 2014

Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development, Extension Project. Brian Higginbotham, Ph.D.

Assisted in the data entry and management of a pre- and post-surveys as an evaluation project focused on relationship education. Completed site visit evaluations for 8 different social service agencies. Developed a Site Visit Evaluation instrument after a Qualitative study of the various sites, facilitators, and their needs. This form is still used for various grants and settings. Promoted to Stepfamily Education Program Manager.

Teaching

Teaching Experience

Utah State University

FCHD 2660	Parenting and Child Guidance	Fall '15, '16 Spring '16, '17
FCHD 3530	Adolescence	Fall '11, '12** Spring '13, '12
FCHD 4230	Social Policy	Spring '13
FCHD 1500	Human Development	Fall '12**

Weber State University

MATH 0950/0960	Pre-Algebra I	Fall '89, '90 Winter '89
COMM 2800	Learning Communities/Academic Skills	Fall '89 Winter '89, '90 Spring '91
Weber State Upward Bound- High School Students		
Math	Useful and Everyday Mathematics	Summer '89

Bold and Italics: Served as instructor of record

** Online course

Invited and Guest Lectures

HDFS 1500. Shanda Parkinson, M.A. (instructor). *The Challenges of Adulthood: Parenting, Marriage, Divorce, and Stepfamilies*. Fall 2018.

FCHD 6010. Scot Allgood, Ph.D. (instructor). *Parenting with Stepfamilies*. Spring 2018.

FCHD 2660. Kay Bradford, Ph.D. (instructor). Co-presented: *Parenting Within Stepfamilies*. Fall 2017 and Spring 2018.

FCHD 2660. Aryn Dotterer, Ph.D. (instructor). *Parenting School Age Children*. Fall 2017

FCHD 6220/7220. Dave Schramm, Ph.D. (instructor). *The Science & Study of Interpersonal Relationships guided discussion*. Fall 2017

FCHD 7910. Scot Allgood, Ph.D. (instructor). *Surviving & Thriving in Stepfamilies*. Spring 2017.

Curriculum Development

Avoid Falling for a Jerk, Home Run Dads, 24/7 Dad, Inside Out Dad, Couple Links, Fathering with Love and Logic. I worked with the curriculum developers and authors to edit and strengthen the curricula for the extension program. I condensed the lessons from the original format to adapt to our time constraints. I promoted more research-based information, and the authors added the material that I researched and wrote. I established objectives for each of the curricula to ensure fidelity across programming.

David Schramm, Ph.D. has two separate research teams that are developing two curricula for use in the community at human service agencies. This is a volunteer position where I help conduct meetings, encourage and mentor graduate and undergraduate students, and edit their writing.

Research

Research Interests

Stepfamily Dynamics and Development
 Relationship Education with individuals, couples, and families
 Relationship Education with diverse populations including inmates
 Qualitative Research

Publications

Higginbotham, B., & **Goodey, S.** (2016) Relationship and marriage education for remarried couples and stepfamilies. In J. J. Ponzetti (Ed.), *Evidence-based approaches to relationship and marriage education* (pp. 301-316). New York, NY: Routledge.

Goodey, S., Spuhler, B., & Bradford, K. (in press). Relationship Education among Incarcerated Populations. *Marriage and Family Review*.

Manuscripts in Preparation:

Goodey, S., Schramm, D., Skogrand, L., & Higginbotham, B. *Evaluations of Latino stepcouples: A study of stepfamily dynamics overtime.*

Goodey, S., Schramm, D., Skogrand, L., & Higginbotham, B. *A narrative study regarding changes in a Latino stepfamily two years after stepfamily education.*

Goodey, S., Schramm, D., Bradford, K., & Higginbotham, B. *Beyond machismo: A qualitative study on Latino stepfathers' changes in parenting styles two years after stepfamily education.*

Goodey, S., Skogrand, L., & Higginbotham, B. *How Latino couples in strong marriages talk about their children.*

Goodey, S., Bradford, K., & Higginbotham, B. *It's not like the movies: Lessons learned from facilitators teaching in jails.*

Goodey, S., Skogrand, L., & Piercy, K. *We want more: High school students experiences with premarital relationship education.*

Spuhler, B., **Goodey, S.**, Bradford, K., & Higginbotham, B. *Breaking into jails: Relationship education with incarcerated populations.*

Research Presentations and Posters

National Conferences

- November 2018 **Goodey, S.**, Schramm, D., Bradford, K., & Higginbotham, B. (2018). Beyond machismo: A qualitative study of Latino stepfathers' family relationships two years after stepfamily education. Poster symposium presented at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, November 8, 2018, San Diego, CA.
- Laxman, D., **Goodey, S.**, Bradford, K. Spuhler, B., & Higginbotham, B. (2018). Statewide relationship education across diverse venues: Recruiting and retaining fathers. Poster symposium presented at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, November 8, 2018, San Diego, CA.
- November 2016 Spuhler, B., **Goodey, S.**, Bradford, K., & Higginbotham, B. *Breaking into jails: Relationship education with incarcerated populations.* National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference. Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Regional and Local Conferences

- April 2018 **Goodey, S.** *Stepping Lightly Into Stepparenting*, Brighter Life. Online Webinar.
- February 2018 **Goodey, S.** *Ways to Prevent your Stepfamily from Dousing the Flame of Remarriage.* Northern Utah Marriage Celebration. Ogden, Utah.
- February 2018 Spuhler, B., **Goodey, S.**, Bradford, K., & Higginbotham, B. *Quantitative and Qualitative Outcomes of Relationship Education within Incarcerated Populations.* Utah State University Human Development and Family Studies Research Day. Logan, Utah.
- January 2017 **Goodey, S.**, Spuhler, B., Crapo, S. *What Goes on Down the Hill? Research in Extension-based Relationship Education.* USU Brown Bag Research Forum. Logan, Utah
- October 2016 Higginbotham, B., & **Goodey, S.** *Lessons Learned Within Stepfamily Relationship Education.* Brigham Young University Social Work Conference. Provo, Utah.
- August 2015 **Goodey, S.** *What Works With Stepfamilies?* Child and Family Support Services Family Conference. Logan, Utah.

Grant Writing Workshop Spring 2014
Utah State University, Logan, UT

A full day workshop that assists in the process of identifying large grants, the process of applying for grants, and appropriate writing techniques for grants.

College Teaching Course Fall 2011
Utah State University, Logan, UT

Over the course of a semester, we covered andragogy, teaching methodologies, syllabus development, new course development, and technology that enhances learning.

Service

Professional Service

Northern Utah President

Socks For Souls (Non-Profit Organization) 2016-present

Professional Affiliations

National Council on Family Relations 2015-Present

Honors and Awards

Margaret Fleming Coleman Scholarship Recipient Spring
2016

This scholarship provides financial assistance to students who have demonstrated excellent academic performance and need. The Coleman scholarship provided \$500 for two semesters to assist with tuition and materials required for school.

T. Clair & Enid Johnson Brown Scholarship Spring
2016

This scholarship provides financial assistance to students who have demonstrated excellent academic performance and need. This scholarship provided \$800 for two semesters to assist with tuition and materials required for school.

T. Clair and Enid Johnson Brown Scholarship Spring
2014

This scholarship provides financial assistance to students who have demonstrated excellent academic performance and need. This scholarship provided \$750 for two semesters to assist with tuition and materials required for school.