

Remarital Quality in the Context of Co-parenting:
Beliefs and Expectations of Biological Parents

by

Jennifer Dawn Pringle
B.A.(Hons.), Dalhousie University, 1997
M.Sc., Acadia University, 1999

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Despite the prevalence of remarriages and stepfamilies in North American society, there is a relative paucity of research regarding aspects of marital quality in stepfamilies relative to the abundance of empirical examination of first marriages. Related to the absence of clear norms and roles for remarried partners and stepfamily members, clinicians have noted that remarried individuals tend to hold beliefs and expectations of remarriage and stepfamily relations that are better suited to biologically-related nuclear families, as opposed to recognizing the unique and often complex circumstances of stepfamilies. As such, remarital quality may be particularly prone to disappointment due to unfounded expectations and beliefs that become problematic for adjustment of partners and their children. Similarly, the few guidelines for interactions between former spouses who continue to co-parent their shared children may lead to dissatisfaction for remarried parents attempting to manage these relationships. The current study aimed to predict two aspects of remarital quality – dyadic adjustment and relationship commitment – with a measure of the changes in one’s beliefs over time about remarriage and stepfamilies,

while also accounting for remarriage length and the self-reported well-being of the responding remarried parents. Changes in beliefs about co-parenting with one's former spouse were also assessed as potential predictors of co-parenting communication quality, which has sometimes been found to correlate with remarital quality. An online questionnaire was completed by 112 remarried mothers who shared parenting of their minor children with their former spouses. A small sample of 33 remarried fathers also participated, providing an initial comparison group with which to tentatively explore gender differences in changes in beliefs and their association with remarital and co-parenting quality. Most respondents reported remarital satisfaction and average communication quality with former spouses, providing little evidence for the spillover of conflict that has been noted previously. Emerging as predictive of better current remarital quality included a reported decline over time in the beliefs that stepfamilies only have a slim chance of success, and a belief that stepfamilies are "second-best" compared to nuclear families. Mothers who recalled the greatest decreases in these beliefs over time also reported more positive remarital adjustment at present, compared to those whose beliefs did not change as much. The earlier that these beliefs changed, the greater the benefits were to remarital adjustment. Change in beliefs was also predictive of co-parenting communication, more so than individual well-being. Few sex differences were noted. These findings suggest that changes in beliefs regarding marital transitions and co-parenting relationships are important for adjustment in these relationships and have potential to act as targets for intervention to facilitate smooth transitions to remarriage and stepfamily life. Highlighting the need for remarrying couples and their children to have opportunities to develop positive beliefs and expectations about

stepfamilies, possible applications in terms of public policy, community education, peer support, and family resources are discussed.

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Introduction

If one were to peruse a portrait gallery of various families, most of the images on display would show families of mothers, fathers, and children happily posing together. Hung row after row, one would see paintings and photographs of parents with children of various ages and stages gathered together for an enduring glimpse into their lives. Some portraits may include a grandparent or two, while others might also make room for a beloved family pet. The style of the pictures may vary – some posed in a studio, others shot spontaneously to demonstrate the daily lives and activities of the subjects, eating meals together, helping children with homework, enjoying a family vacation. Though fashions and haircuts would change over the years, these images nevertheless would be familiar to us all; one could surmise from their expressions and postures how the family members generally relate to one another, how they feel about one another, and perhaps even how their relationships will progress over time.

Displayed in a separate corridor, however, one might find a haphazard collection depicting other types of families – those who have divorced, re-partnered, and blended their households together in second or subsequent marriages. If displayed chronologically, older portraits would feature stepfamilies brought together through parental death and the subsequent remarriage of the surviving parent, either a father who needed a new wife to raise his offspring after the passing of their mother or a mother who needed a husband to provide financially for her bereaved brood. More recent depictions in the gallery would become increasingly varied, as divorce became prevalent throughout society and stepfamilies formed with the ongoing presence of both birth parents, new partners, children, and extended steprelatives. The prints of these remarried couples and

stepfamilies might appear blurry in their frames, and their relations are sometimes less clear. Who is in each family? What do they mean to one another? How do they interact? Although recognized as kin and thus admitted into this family portrait gallery, these images are often unintentionally excluded from the primary exhibit that depict “standard” families. Viewers do not always know what to make of them. The subjects in these types of family photos sometimes do not know what to make of themselves. These are the many faces of today’s remarried couples and their stepfamilies.

Remarriage and Stepfamily Research in a Brief Historical Context

Remarriage and stepfamilies have always been present in North American and European society but the typical circumstances from which these family transitions were initiated have changed dramatically over the centuries. Throughout much of history, divorce was a rarity and the death of a parent was the route into stepfamily living. The word *stepfamily* reflects this assumption, in that the prefix *steop* was derived from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “to bereave, or make orphan” (Bray, 1999). A stepparent in these circumstances was assumed to take on the responsibilities of the deceased parent and in effect replace their role, whether it had been as head of household and financial provider, or homemaker and child caretaker. While the new parent may not have been accepted by children with open arms, there was little question as to the role that the surviving parent’s new partner would serve in the now reconstituted family unit.

In the 19th century, rising concerns about domestic violence and spousal desertions led to a more vocal public discussion regarding the need for formal divorce processes. Instances in which partners were extremely ill-suited to one another to the detriment of their own well-being and that of the children they bore were slowly

becoming recognized and proponents for divorce reform began to advocate that marital dissolution was indeed necessary for the institution of marriage to succeed and continue. Although disapproved by religious institutions as immoral and shunned socially, divorce begrudgingly came to be considered an improvement over informal separations and was thus allowed (Furstenberg, Jr., 1994; Phillips, 1997). Despite the new legal status of divorce, formal divisions were uncommon and were preferably avoided in order to maintain one's social standing. Divorce was further indirectly discouraged in some jurisdictions by a financial penalty enacted for all second marriages (De'Ath, 1997). Highlighting the rarity of divorce even until the earliest decade of the 20th century, it was estimated that remarriages after spousal death were 70 times more frequent than after divorce.

Although early family service providers and policy makers advocated for a formalization and legalization of divorce, it is doubtful that even the staunchest supporters could have anticipated the frequency with which it would occur today. North American divorce rates experienced a surge following the American Civil War and steadily rose over the century, peaking during the divorce revolution of the 1960s which has been largely attributed to the feminist movement and the adoption of no-fault divorce legislation (Furstenberg, Jr., 1994). While family conservationist groups voiced concerns about the decline of the family and the apparent abandonment of the institution of marriage, high divorce rates soon began to contribute to the high marriage rate in North America as most divorced individuals remarry, sometimes re-partnering multiple times. Remarriages began to account for nearly half of all legal marriages, and there is now a higher remarriage rate than first-marriage rate even in light of the number of divorced

individuals who elect to cohabit with subsequent partners instead of formally remarrying. By the early 1980s, ninety percent of remarriages followed divorce while only ten percent occurred after spousal death (Glick, 1988), and today nearly half of all divorced men and women will remarry or re-partner with a common-law spouse after divorce (Wu & Schimmele, 2005). These data support the assertion that individuals are not in fact rejecting the institution of marriage itself, but rather they have rejected the particular marriages in which they were involved in anticipation that a more satisfactory union is possible with someone else.

Recent Canadian census data suggests a current divorce rate of approximately 35% of marriages, resulting in over 503,000 stepfamilies in this country today (Statistics Canada, 2001). Similar or higher rates are observed in the United Kingdom where over one million children are being raised in stepfamilies (De' Ath, 1997), and in the United States where it is now estimated that more than half of the population will be affiliated with a stepfamily in their lifetime (Larson, 1992). When one takes into account the number of stepfamilies headed by common-law couples that are not formally accounted for in national figures, this number grows even larger. Stepfamilies are becoming the new family norm.

Current Literature on Remarriage and Stepfamily Functioning

By virtue of numbers alone, stepfamilies can no longer be relegated to the back corridors of the family portrait gallery; it is imperative that the array of images be refocused and the collection expanded to reflect their prevalence and their unique experiences. Unfortunately, awareness and understanding of remarital and stepfamily transitions has been lacking relative to the frequency with which blended families are

developing. Even the term *stepfamily* did not appear in the Concise Oxford Dictionary until 1995, when England's National Stepfamily Association advocated for its inclusion (De'Ath, 1997). Psychological and social literature has not been immune to the knowledge gaps in popular family transitions as well. Following the dramatic increase in divorce prevalence in the 1960s, family researchers became keenly interested in the causes of divorce and its effects on various members, particularly children, but still tended to neglect the next phase of the family life cycle in which most divorced individuals do remarry (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997).

Cherlin's (1978) description of stepfamilies as an "incomplete institution" has been credited as the first paper to bring attention to the unique circumstances of stepfamilies relative to first-married households and to the difficulties that many blended families were encountering throughout their adjustment. In this piece he outlined how the rights and obligations of stepfamily members are more ambiguous than in nuclear families, with lesser agreement between members regarding their respective roles and less enduring bonds. He asserted that the policies of social establishments such as schools, health care institutions, and the legal system were not designed to accommodate the circumstances of stepfamily members, who then often faced barriers in trying to engage these organizations to serve their needs. The absence of appropriate terms to describe various post-divorce and stepfamily relationships was presented as evidence that there was no societal expectation for these relationships to exist, such as that between a former spouse and a new spouse. Most important in Cherlin's presentation of stepfamilies as incomplete institutions was his observation that there was a lack of norms for the roles of their members and thus few guidelines for adaptive behaviour in their

relationships. In the absence of stepfamily-specific norms, remarried couples and their children would be likely to try to recreate the typical interactions and home environment of biologically-related nuclear families, which would be simpler than dealing with the realities of stepfamily complexity and ambiguity and spearheading new norms.

Cherlin's assertions, combined with a developing observation of the prevalence of stepfamilies in surrounding society, instigated the concerted empirical study of families reconfiguring after divorce. Several key findings emerging from the recent academic interest in remarriage and stepfamilies have concerned the diversity and complexity of the stepfamily structure, the adjustment period required to develop stepfamily cohesion, children's adjustment to marital transitions, and the nature of the stepparent-stepchild relationship, each of which are now discussed in turn.

While notice of the presence of stepfamilies was slow in coming, lagging even further behind was proper recognition of the many different ways a stepfamily can form and coexist across households. Early stepfamily research has been critiqued for its failure to acknowledge the diversity and complexity of household structures that comprise the broad category of stepfamily (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997) though more recent studies and reviews have been thorough in their examinations and descriptions of the vast variety of family types that exist today (Carlson & Trapani, 2006; Colpin, Vandemeulebroecke, & Ghesquière, 2004). Some remarriages are created when a widowed individual remarries, while many others are established after divorce. What is a second or subsequent marriage for one spouse may be a first marriage for the other, or both may be embarking upon remarriages of multiple sequence. Individuals may bring their children into the home permanently when they remarry, while

others may have less frequent contact with their biological children. A stepfamily may mix children from one or more previous marriages (*simple* versus *complex stepfamilies*), and additional children may be born of the remarriage, leading some remarried parents to refer to different children in the home as either “yours, mine, or ours.” There may also be a significant number of homes in which members do not identify as a stepfamily yet many of the structural elements are present, such as when a custodial parent and his or her children move in with a temporary partner who may or may not assume parenting responsibilities in the short-term. Each of these stepfamilies will engage in a unique process of adjustment and chart their own course, which is being accounted for in more recent theory and research design (Tracy, 2000; Carroll, Olson, & Buckmiller, 2007; Coleman et al., 2000).

With the acknowledgement that stepfamilies may indeed function differently than nuclear families came the recognition that an adjustment period was necessary before a dependable sense of family cohesion and integration could be achieved. Accounts from family members and from longitudinal studies consistently note that in the first several months to a year after remarriage, stepfamily members experience less closeness, more communication difficulties, more problematic child behaviour, and more negativity towards children than do members of first-marriage families. From two to five years are typically needed in order for these challenges to settle and for a sense of stability and cohesion to develop instead (e.g., Bray, 1999; Bray & Berger, 1993; Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997). Following Cherlin’s (1978) description the poorly-understood stepfamily as an incomplete institution with few guidelines and standards, Jacobson (1995) described the process of adjusting to a stepfamily as one in which people from different

“mini-cultures” are integrated resulting in a culture shock transition period in which members must accept the misfit of certain expectations and adapt their ideals and behaviour to the new conditions. Well-adjusted stepparents tend to anticipate this adjustment phase and are flexible in their expectations of the family in the meantime (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1997), and partners who enter remarriage with fewer expectations regarding stepfamily member loyalty and closeness are more likely to enjoy an easier transition and report higher marital satisfaction (Afifi, 2003; Keshet, 1990).

In part due to the significant number of youth now residing in stepfamilies, and the abundance of research on how children respond to parental divorce, children’s adjustment to parental remarriage has become one of the best-studied aspects of stepfamily transitions. Child adjustment is prone to at least temporary disruption from remarriage and stepfamily transitions due to interference with usual family progressions and by introducing interactions with normal developmental tasks for which children depend on their parents to help them achieve (Bray, 1999; Rogers, 2004). Several circumstances affecting child adjustment have been noted to occur with increased frequency in stepfamilies versus nuclear families, including potential deterioration of a child’s relationship with the non-residential parent, disruption of community and school connections due to housing transitions, lower childrearing involvement and monitoring by stepparents relative to that by biological parents, lesser economic support, and greater incidence of child abuse by stepparents than by birth parents. There is now an accumulation of findings that children residing in stepfamilies face slightly elevated risks for educational and psychological difficulties such as poor grades, school dropout, depression, initiation of substance use, or other externalizing behaviours when compared

to their counterparts living continuously with both biological parents (Aquilino, 2005; Carlson & Trapani, 2006; Downey, 1995; Kirby, 2006; Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1994; Pong, 1997). Despite the consistency of findings regarding these increased risks for children in stepfamilies, however, the vast majority of stepchildren function well within normal limits, particularly if permitted an adjustment period in which few other significant transitions are introduced (Bray, 1999; Carlson & Trapani, 2006; Coleman et al. , 2000; Isaacs, 2002).

A related branch of research literature on child adjustment has focused on the influence of the relationships that form between children and their stepparents, with general consensus that stepparent-stepchild relations are typically more distant and conflictual than are biologically-related parent-child dyads (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Bray, 1999; Coleman & Ganong, 1997). Although many stepparents can develop a friendly bond and appropriate disciplinary role with their new partner's children, the optimal functions of a stepparent is not always clear and may not be agreed upon between biological parents, stepparents, and the children involved. Stepmothers often struggle against deeply entrenched expectations from society, their partners, and perhaps themselves that they should assume a maternal role with their stepchildren, even when the birth mother is already actively parenting the shared children or when the stepmother has little interest in parenting. Stepmothers derive little support for what parenting responsibilities they do choose to take on, often facing children's resistance to their authority, birth mothers' fears of competition, and negative societal images of stepmothers. Stepfathers typically experience both fewer expectations and less resentment regarding their role and thus tend to experience a smoother assimilation into a

stepfamily than stepmothers do. Conflicts are more likely to arise when the stepchildren are adolescents, however, particularly teenaged girls who often react very negatively to a stepfather's presence. The findings of longitudinal research and professionals who are experienced in supporting stepfamilies through their transitions advise stepparents to gradually assume parenting responsibilities once an amicable relationship has been established with the partner's children, in consultation with the wishes of the biological parent (Bray, 1999; Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Isaacs, 2002; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006).

Relatively less empirical study and theoretical attention has been devoted to understanding the relationship from which a stepfamily extends, that of the remarrying couple themselves. All remarriages in which there are children from a previous union experience a different developmental course than do first marriages. The presence of children from the outset, or lack of "honeymoon period," necessitates the immediate integration of several members from multiple generations who enter the family with varying experiences from their former families and their own hopes about appropriate family interactions in the remarriage. The couple relationship is less central to the household than it typically is in families developing from first marriages because parent-child relationships predate the marital relationship. Consequently, children's appraisals of the stepparent and the stepfamily as a whole exert more influence on marital adjustment than they do in first marriage families, which often creates loyalty conflicts for biological parents who struggle to balance the needs of their children with the wishes of the new spouse, as well as their own hopes for their remarriage (Afifi, 2003; Bray, 1999; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Pill, 1990).

Unlike in the typical 19th century stepfamily, most remarried couples today must also adapt to the ongoing presence of former spouses who still maintain varying degrees of involvement in the lives of their shared children. Divorced spouses who continue to communicate in some form with one another about the rearing of their shared children are often referred to as *co-parents*, although the process may not necessarily be a cooperative or jointly agreed-upon one. Post-divorce relationships vary greatly in terms of their ongoing level of conflict and cooperativeness, from highly contentious to caring and friendly (Fischer, De Graaf, & Kalmijn, 2005; Masheter, 1991), meaning that they can interact in a limitless variety of ways with a newly formed remarriage and stepfamily. Former spouses and stepparents may struggle to occupy the same parenting role within the family, creating tension for both the co-parenting dyad and the remarried couple. In more optimal circumstances, co-parents and new spouses may support each other's unique positions in relation to the children and biological parent through whom they are connected.

Related to the many ways in which a remarriage will differ from a first marriage, remarried partners who expect to recreate the romantic and nuclear atmosphere of newlywed life that they experienced in their first unions are at risk for conflict and disappointment when faced with the realities of their blended households (Bray & Kelly, 1998). The effort required to satisfy the varied preferences of parents, stepparents, and children is among the most stressful aspects of stepfamily life (Saint-Jacques, 1995) and has in part explained the increased risk for marital discord in second or higher-order unions (Afifi, 2003; Fine & Kurdek, 1995a; Hobart, 1991; Wineberg, 1992). Consequently, second marriages, particularly those in which the partners are younger or

have children from previous relationships, are at an increased risk for dissolution (Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006; Wineberg, 1992). They also tend to divorce more quickly compared to first marriages (Clarke & Wilson, 1994). Even when remarried couples with children are motivated to seek marital therapy to preserve their relationships, they are less likely than first-married couples with children to benefit from such interventions (Hampson, Prince, & Beavers, 1999), perhaps reflecting that existing supports are not adequately meeting the needs of remarried partnerships.

Researchers and clinicians with an interest in families should be concerned about instability and distress in remarriages because multiple marriages can amplify risks to the psychological well-being and lifelong relationship quality of both parents and children. Frequent marital transitions introduce instability and other associated stressors into daily life, such as housing transitions, financial burdens, lengthy legal proceedings, and emotional distress, each of which are especially difficult to manage if the transitions occur in short succession (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). Compared to individuals who have adjusted to only one divorce or remarriage, adults who have had two or more divorces may be more prone to developing symptoms of depression and personality dysfunction, while children who have undergone several major changes to their family structure are significantly more likely to exhibit problems with attachment, coping, and behaviour (Carlson & Trapani, 2006). Furthermore, current parental remarital quality has been shown to exert more influence on the relationship adjustment of adult children of divorce than does the previous quality of their parents' first marriage, as the parental remarriage serves as a more recent model of marital interactions (Yu & Adler-Baeder, 2007). Thus, it is extremely important to understand how remarried

parents are able to preserve the quality of their remarriages and maintain their stability, for the sake of their own and their children's long-term adjustment. More specifically, there is a need to understand the factors beyond simple marital status that tend to either enhance or inhibit the ability of remarried couples and their families to adapt to one another and maintain satisfying, stable relationships. What works in these relationships, and how can these benefits be conferred to other couples and stepfamilies?

Social Cognitive Theory: The Relevance of Expectations and Beliefs in Remarital and Stepfamily Adjustment

Noted throughout the literature on adjustment to remarriage and stepfamily life is the assumed importance of holding clear, realistic expectations about these transitions and of being flexible with regards to the timeline on which adaptation will occur.

Although the role of unrealistic beliefs and expectations is often cited in the clinical literature on remarriage, there is little empirical research as of yet linking these types of cognitions to marital quality once individuals have entered their new family and come face-to-face with the unanticipated realities.

An exploration of beliefs and expectations about remarriage and stepfamilies is well guided by social cognitive and earlier social learning theories (Bandura, 1986), which have been applied to intimate relationships in general (e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Fincham & Beach, 1999) and relationship perceptions as influenced by relationship transitions (e.g., Segrin & Taylor, 2006; Segrin, Taylor, & Altman, 2005). Social cognitive theory posits that individuals develop attitudes and learn patterns of social behaviour both through direct experience and through observation of others with whom one can identify. Applied to close relationships, this theory would assert that over the

course of one's life, direct experiences within one's own family of origin and observation of other couples and families will guide cognitions about typical marital life and the acceptable range of family interactions, lending a sense of meaning and order to interactions. Baucom and Epstein (1990) described five types of cognitions that interact in shaping interpersonal relations, including *perceptions* of interpersonal events as they occur, *attributions* about why events occur, *expectations* about what events are likely to occur again in the future, *beliefs* or *assumptions* about interpersonal roles and how relationships work, and *standards* against which to judge how relationships and interpersonal roles should be enacted.

Research has evaluated the role of some of these types of cognitions, their influence couples' interactions and long-term adjustment, and vice versa. For example, Baucom and colleagues (1996) found that spouses hold standards regarding aspects of their marriages such as the distribution of power and how emotionally invested in the relationship the partner should appear to be. These standards suggest to individuals how their marriage should be and provide a basic marker against which to compare one's own relationship. Individuals are likely to become upset and behave negatively towards their spouses when these standards are unmet in marital interactions. The potential response to unmet standards is in part mediated by the attributions that one makes, which refer to one's interpretations about the meaning and motives of the behaviour of another. If an individual assumes their spouse is dissatisfying them because of inherently negative qualities or a purposeful intent to displease them, they will make a negative attribution for that behaviour. Couples who are chronically distressed have been observed to ignore desirable behaviours or to discount them with a negative attribution, such as that the

positive behaviour was unintentional or could not be depended upon to reoccur, sometimes appearing within a distressing interactive cycle of negative attributions, blame, and relationship dissatisfaction (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). In contrast, attributions of positive intent regarding a partner's actions assume a more benign or temporary cause for a dissatisfying outcome. These interpretations are more enhancing to close relationships because they are likely to facilitate discussion or problem-solving, even regarding undesirable spousal behaviour, provided that the overall atmosphere of the relationship is positive and supportive and that partners are not avoiding significant problems requiring their attention (Baucom, Epstein, and Rankin, 1995; McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008).

More specific applications of social cognitive theory to remarriage and stepfamilies have been initiated only recently, aligning with the cognitive-developmental model of stepfamily adjustment by Fine and Kurdek (1994, 1995b; Banker et al., 2004). They proposed that individuals are information-processing organisms striving to make sense of all experiences, including those that occur in the process of stepfamily transitions and daily life. They suggested that maladjustment in stepfamilies results from conflicting perceptions and expectations between members, and from misconceptions in the way stepfamilies are portrayed in larger society. This model echoes the assertion throughout the literature that well-adjusted stepfamilies would derive benefits from clear and agreed-upon role expectations and from a shared assumption that stepfamily life will necessarily be different from interactions in a biologically-related nuclear family.

This model of stepfamily adjustment coincides with clinical observations that certain beliefs and expectations about remarriage and stepfamily life can make for a more

challenging transition, including expectations of instant family bonds and repair of past romantic hurts (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Visher & Visher, 1982). Endorsing myths about stepfamilies, such as the expectation that they can never be as good as nuclear families has been negatively correlated with the adjustment of mothers and their stepfather partners (Fine & Kurdek, 1995b). Alternately, appraisals that one is achieving the standards held for one's self has been associated with enhanced role satisfaction, such as was found with parents and stepparents who judge themselves as appropriately matching the script for standards of warmth and control in each of their respective relationships with children in their stepfamilies (Fine & Kurdek, 1994).

If expectations and beliefs about remarriage and stepfamilies are important for positive adjustment, then the current societal influences on such cognitions are concerning. Although remarriages and stepfamilies are becoming ever more common, cultural scripts for blended families have yet to be completed. In their absence, individuals are likely to rely on their beliefs and expectations about the more familiar and salient biologically-related family to represent all family forms, referred to as the nuclear family bias (Gamache, 1997) or the standard North American family bias (Smith, 1993). Due to the high emotional, social, and political value placed on marriage and family life in North American culture, there are countless films, books, stories, images, and other ideals of married life that accumulate to form the generic script or bias upon which most individuals will base their beliefs and expectations of marriage. When remarried couples and stepfamilies are portrayed in popular films and television programs, for example, they are frequently either shown operating as biological families or are portrayed as an inferior substitute for the ideal family form, which reflects the culture's current

incomplete understanding of remarried family dynamics (Leon & Angst, 2005). Jones (2003) noted that due to the conversion of childhood fairy tales and fables to movies and television programs, exposure to old notions of the stepfamily or stepparent as second-best or overtly negative have actually increased exponentially despite decades of examples of a variety of family types. Solidified over time, these images and ideals have formed a set of standards or norms by which all marriages are implicitly compared. Examples of these standards are the expectations that romantic partners will marry before they have children, and that children will be raised with both biological parents, both of which are violated by remarried couples and stepfamilies.

Although the influence of television and childhood fables can perhaps be disregarded, the bias towards nuclear families is visible at several other levels as well. Hospitals, schools, legal and financial structures are only just now accommodating to the unique needs of stepfamily members (De'Ath, 1997). As Cherlin remarked 30 years ago, members of stepfamilies are still often without clear roles or even titles for their position in the family. Examination of census data has revealed notable discrepancies across years in the number of children or siblings reported within stepfamilies, in that sizable minority of respondents report a greater or fewer number of siblings across waves, suggesting that stepfamily membership is a complex phenomenon that may be experienced as fluid and changing rather than concrete and static (White, 1998).

These standards for marriage and family in theory will influence one's expectations for entering one's own marriage, and ultimately one's behaviour in close relationships. In the absence of remarriage and stepfamily scripts to guide beliefs, an individual may expect a remarriage to operate much in the same way as a first marriage

and may assume that their stepfamily will take the form of a nuclear family in terms of daily interactions and emotional cohesion. A remarrying parent may also believe that individuals in stepfamilies should easily bond and may expect their new spouse and children to quickly form a close relationship with the characteristics of a typical parent-child relationship. Levin (1997) noted that remarried partners and their stepfamilies are in the unique bind of striving to succeed at a task for which there is no societal measure of success, hence the implicit comparisons to first-marriages and attempts to reconstruct the accepted markers of success of the nuclear family.

As delineated above there are several reasons to suggest that the nature and quality of remarital and stepfamily relationships may differ markedly from those of first-married couples, particularly in the first years of adjustment. The assumed superiority of the standard family concept has the potential to cause considerable distress to the members of stepfamilies. They may mourn a biological family that met neither the needs of the married couple who comprised it, nor the children who were raised in an unhappy home. They may judge the flaws and limitations of their past nuclear family, all the while believing that at least it had fit the norm of what a family is expected to be in terms of structure. Understandably, endorsement of stereotypes and myths about the superiority of the nuclear family structure has been linked to lower remarital adjustment as well as greater personal difficulties in those who live in non-nuclear families (Ganong, Coleman, and Mapes, 1990). Attempts to replicate a nuclear family atmosphere are most often associated with more struggles within a stepfamily's transition (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Pill, 1990). The most satisfied stepfamily members, in contrast, are those who acknowledge potential differences in their family from a first-

marriage family, such as a different type of closeness between stepparents and stepchildren compared to most birth parents and children, but who describe respect, warmth, and support of the new family structure and its participants. Unfortunately, reportedly only a minority of remarried couples possess an explicit and clear understanding of the roles to be played in a stepfamily, contributing to the adjustment difficulties frequently seen (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Falke & Larson, 2007).

The Central Perspectives of Remarried Parents

As stated previously, much of the research on stepfamily life has focused on the adjustment of children to their new family configuration and the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. In contrast, far less is known about the perspectives of biological parents who maintain child-rearing responsibilities for minor children and co-parent with their former spouses within the contexts of these remarriages. Visher (2001) argued that the key power-holder in a stepfamily is the parent who has remarried, as this individual forms the link between his or her children and the new stepparent with whom they will now interact on a regular basis.

Remarried parents who also maintain a co-parenting alliance with their former partners are often in the delicate position of having to balance the potentially competing needs of their associations with both the former and current spouses. These individuals are positioned to either suffer the burden of role strain, or to effectively model respectful caring behaviour towards each family member. To date, research has largely examined the remarried parent's relationships with the former spouse and the new spouse separately, examining either the quality of the co-parenting relationship or the adjustment

of remarried dyads and to some extent neglecting the remarried parent's central link between the two. The small number of empirical studies and theoretical reviews of their interaction have produced conflicting results to date, some suggesting that a close co-parenting relationship can be detrimental or threatening to remarital satisfaction (e.g., Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent, & Blais, 2004; Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Falke & Larson, 2007; Gold, Bubenzer, & West, 1993), while others concluding that remarriages can tolerate one's co-parenting relationship with a former spouse and produce ratings of remarital quality that are not markedly different from that of first marriages overall (Vemer, Coleman, Ganong, & Cooper, 1989).

In the case of a stepfamily, the former spouse's physical absence from the home and yet psychological presence in terms of parenting rights and responsibilities can contribute to a sense of role ambiguity and confused expectations. By incorporating the preferences of the former spouse into their decision-making, a remarried couple may find that the former spouse permeates their relationship beyond what is acceptable to them and begins to blur the boundaries of who belongs to their family. Considering that the former spouse once held at least some of the roles now assumed by the remarital partner, this can be confusing and stressful for the couple. The uncertainty that can arise from significant role ambiguity in transitioning families has been associated with distress, conflict, and poorer functioning than in families where roles and boundaries are clear (Carroll et al., 2007; Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999; Saint-Jacques, 1995). Not surprisingly, a persisting relationship with the former spouse can be particularly problematic for a remarriage if feelings of attachment linger between the formerly married individuals (Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Falke & Larson, 2007).

Although it has been difficult for empirical research to consistently quantify the disruptions that may follow from high boundary ambiguity specifically in remarriage (e.g., Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989), clinical literature asserts that this spillover that potentially occurs via the remarried parent is confusing and frustrating for family members and can ultimately be detrimental to remarriages (Bray & Kelly, 1999; Stewart, 2005). Clearly defining the expectations regarding the former spouse's involvement can reduce conflict and spillover stress between remarital partners and thus enhance remarital satisfaction (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999).

Having fewer interactions with the former spouse can be indicative of more distinct and clear boundaries between the past and present relationships, with fewer reminders of the past, and at least the appearance of a resolution of emotions and regrets related to the former relationship. Due to increases in shared parenting arrangements, however, it is becoming less and less likely that former spouses will be able to permanently differentiate from one another even after one or both of them remarry. Given the overwhelmingly positive effects of continued involvement of both parents in children's lives (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor, 2008; Finley & Schwartz, 2007; Hetherington et al., 1998), divorced co-parents are generally advised to try to maintain cooperative contact with each other, though in practice it has been found that long-term co-parenting relationships are more typically characterised by both high frequencies of friendly contact and of antagonistic contact than are other dyadic relationships (Fischer et al., 2005). In cases where ongoing contact with the former spouse is a factor, having the support and understanding of the remarital partner to maintain the co-parenting relationship is beneficial to reducing the negative spillover

effects that might otherwise arise. For example, when a custodial mother and her new spouse are in agreement regarding their beliefs about the appropriate amount and quality of contact with the former spouse as a co-parent, remarital satisfaction is generally higher than when partners disagree (Adamsons, O'Brien, & Pasley, 2007; Weston & Macklin, 1990). Positive experiences within the co-parenting relationship can lend themselves to increased remarital satisfaction through increased support for child-rearing, as long as the expected roles of all parties are clear and satisfactory to the remarried partners.

The parent who is initiating a stepfamily through remarriage thus has particular importance for the adjustment of the family overall. Remarried parents are urged by family researchers and clinicians to co-parent cooperatively and fairly with their former spouse, and also to maintain the stability of their second marriages, due to the potential negative and cumulative impact of multiple family transitions on children and parents if they should divorce again (Ahrons, 2007; Carlson & Trapani, 2006; Bray, 1999; Kurdek et al., 1994). The expectations and psychological well-being of the remarried parent will be pivotal in their ability to maintain these positive relations. In the transition period after divorce, one can experience distress and declines in adjustment that can colour future perceptions of other interpersonal relationships and interactions (Lakey, Drew, Anan, Sirl, & Butler, 2004). Ongoing conflict with the former spouse can contribute to a negative attachment to that relationship by maintaining hostile feelings and behaviours for several years after divorce, potentially interfering with positive adjustment in general. Consequently, this can contribute to challenges in finding and maintaining another satisfying close relationship. Individuals who are able to develop new social resources and to attenuate both positive and negative attachment to the former spouse, however, are

much more likely to experience better psychological adjustment after divorce (Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989). Depressive symptomatology has been shown to be particularly predictive of marital satisfaction levels (Whisman, Uebelacker, & Weinstock, 2004). Psychological well-being thus serves as a meaningful potential marker of detachment from the former spouse, and as a predictor of current remarital adjustment. Well-being also interacts in a bidirectional manner with cognitions in that those with high psychological adjustment are more likely than distressed persons to hold adaptive beliefs and expectations about various aspects of their lives, which in turn contribute to their adjustment.

Given the centrality of the remarried parent's role, it is important to understand their effectiveness at negotiating multiple relationships and the factors beyond psychological well-being that either enhance or inhibit this ability. There are few guiding principles for remarried parents who must maintain these various relationships, making the territory ripe for unrealistic expectations and erroneous beliefs. Some qualitative research has described the surprise and disappointment that remarried parents have reported regarding their entry into stepfamilies and the loyalty conflicts they experience in caring for their children and new spouse (Arnaut, Fromme, Stoll, & Felker, 2000). Other work has helped parents to articulate the frustration they experience in trying to make their stepfamily fit the traditional nuclear family "mould" (Bray & Kelly, 1998).

Researchers have yet to fully explore, however, the ways in which a remarried parent's expectations about remarriage and stepfamily life may influence their participation in dual relationships with a former spouse as co-parent and with a new spouse. The cognitions that an individual holds may be of explanatory value in

accounting for the wide variation in remarital quality, particularly in the context of few societal norms for stepfamily members and significant ambiguity regarding what they can expect from these transitions and new relationships. How might changes over time in a remarried parent's expectations and beliefs relate to their ability to maintain satisfying and cooperative relationships with both the non-custodial parent and the remarriage partner? Is the pattern of their beliefs from past to present associated with success in either or both of these relational domains, distinct from the presumed influence of their general psychological adjustment? In light of the typical adjustment phases for remarried partners and their stepfamilies to adapt, do those in longer remarriages indicate greater adjustment, given the lengthier experience against which their expectations can be compared? Do remarried mothers and remarried fathers differ from one another in either the changes in their beliefs over time or their accounts of their relationship quality? Identifying the expectations of remarried parents that predict marital quality in stepfamilies may help to create supports and resources for other mothers and fathers who occupy this central role in blended families and thus bolster overall remarital and stepfamily adjustment.

Overview of the Current Study

In light of these questions, the present study was designed as a survey of remarried parents regarding their perceptions of remarital quality, co-parenting relations with their former spouses, and changes in their beliefs about each of these relationships over time. The study examined as potential influences on remarital quality a remarried parent's relationship with the former spouse, and relative change in expectations and beliefs about remarriage and about shared parenting with former spouses. Previous

research has found that although having a strong, positive relationship with one's former spouse is beneficial to children after their parents' divorce, it can be an added strain in a remarriage and can cause tension with one's new spouse, sometimes referred to as a spillover of conflict. On the other hand, some remarried spouses have described that a positive relationship with their former spouses relieves stress in their remarriage because there are several adults involved in caring for children and fewer disagreements about parenting responsibilities. One possible explanation for these differing associations involves changing expectations and beliefs about remarriage, stepfamilies, and co-parenting with former spouses. It was anticipated that reported changes in beliefs and expectations about remarriage and blended families would act as a significant predictor of the perceived quality of both the remarital and co-parenting relationships and would account for a significant portion of the anticipated correlations between general psychological adjustment and quality of each of these relationships.

Furthermore, it was anticipated that changes in expectations and beliefs would act in a mediating manner in the prediction of relationship quality, both in the remarriage and the co-parenting relationship. In accounting for a portion of the expected general influence of individual well-being on relationship functioning, it was expected that adjustment within each of these important relationships would be partially accounted for by the degree of reported change in the beliefs that one held. Considering the presumed flexibility of beliefs in reaction to one's own life experiences, however, the length of one's remarriage was also evaluated in a moderating role, as the theorized influence of beliefs could be expected to diminish over time. Over time, one's own experiences in the remarriage and co-parenting relationship could be expected to usurp the earlier influence

of beliefs and expectations that were formed before remarriage via societal stereotypes and observations. A reported reduction over time in problematic beliefs about remarriage, stepfamilies, and co-parenting interactions was theorized to predict greater levels of self-reported adjustment in the remarital and co-parenting relationships, suggesting that managing these beliefs would be relevant in enhancing relationship quality.

Six central questions were considered: (1) to what extent do the remarital relationship and co-parenting relationship relate? (i.e., does a negative assessment of the co-parenting relationship appear to spill over into the remarriage in terms of a corresponding negative assessment of the remarital relationship?); (2) to what extent does psychological well-being relate to the quality of each of these two relationships? (i.e., do individuals reporting more symptoms of distress also tend to report dissatisfaction in their remarital and their co-parenting relationships?); (3) is change in beliefs about remarriage able to account for some of the hypothesized association between well-being and remarital quality, and if so, which beliefs appear to exert this influence? (i.e., do individuals who report a decline over time in problematic remarriage beliefs also report enhanced remarriages?); (4) similarly, how does change in beliefs about co-parenting relate to well-being and co-parenting communication quality? (i.e., do individuals who report a decline over time in problematic beliefs about co-parenting also report better co-parenting relations at present?); (5) is the length of one's remarriage related to the extent to which change in beliefs will predict remarital quality? (i.e., is a change in one's beliefs more strongly associated with higher remarital quality for relatively shorter or

longer unions?); (6) do mothers and fathers report differences in any of these hypothesized associations?

Hypotheses

Corresponding with these questions, the study investigated six central hypotheses:

(1) It was expected that significant positive correlations would be observed between ratings of perceived co-parenting communication quality and ratings of remarital adjustment, defined more specifically with measures of dyadic adjustment and marital commitment. These correlations would support the hypothesis that a supportive, low-conflict relationship with the former spouse is associated with positive adjustment in one's remarriage, and vice-versa. Participants who made low ratings of each of these variables would lend support to the notion of a spillover effect in which conflict in the co-parenting relationship is associated with stress and conflict within the new marriage.

(2) Significant positive correlations were expected between self-reported psychological well-being and ratings of quality in both the remarital and co-parenting relationships. More positive well-being was assessed via low ratings of undesirable mood and anxiety symptoms concurrent with high ratings of positive affect, while remarital quality was quantified with ratings of dyadic adjustment and marital commitment

(3) Next, it was anticipated that a reported decline in beliefs about remarriage that are presumed to be problematic for adjustment would mediate the expected statistical associations between well-being and current remarital quality. It was hypothesized that respondents who endorsed fewer problematic beliefs about remarriage at present, relative to the degree to which they recalled endorsing these beliefs prior to remarrying, would

report higher scores of current remarital quality such that the beliefs were expected to largely account for the expected statistically significant association between well-being and remarital quality. Two measures of remarital quality – dyadic adjustment and marital commitment – were expected to show this mediated relation with well-being; separate mediated regression analyses were conducted accordingly (see Figure 1).

(4) The length of remarriage was hypothesized to moderate the degree to which change in beliefs and remarital quality would be related. The association between reported change in beliefs and current remarital quality was expected to be stronger in shorter remarriages than in longer remarriages, suggesting that the change in beliefs would be more strongly related to relationship adjustment and commitment earlier in a remarriage, as the relationship adjustment of individuals in lengthier remarriages should be influenced more by cumulative experience than by beliefs grounded in initial expectations for remarriage (see Figure 1).

(5) Similar to expectations regarding the performance of remarriage beliefs, reported changes in beliefs about co-parenting were hypothesized to partially mediate the expected statistical connection between individual well-being and current ratings of the quality of co-parenting communication with one's former spouse. The greater the reported decline in co-parenting beliefs presumed to be problematic for adjustment, the more positive ratings of current co-parenting communication quality should be (see Figure 2).

(6) Finally, it was considered that the responses of remarried mothers and remarried fathers could differ significantly, though specific differences were not hypothesized. Sex of parent was explored for associations with changes in remarriage

and co-parenting beliefs, well-being, remarital quality, and co-parenting communication quality.

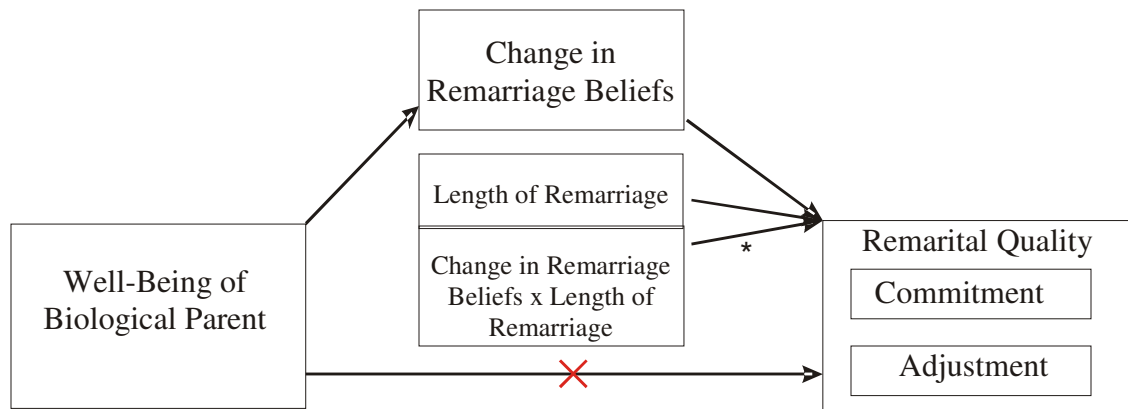


Figure 1. Hypothesized mediating relation of change in remarriage beliefs and the moderating relationship of remarriage length in the association between well-being and remarital quality.

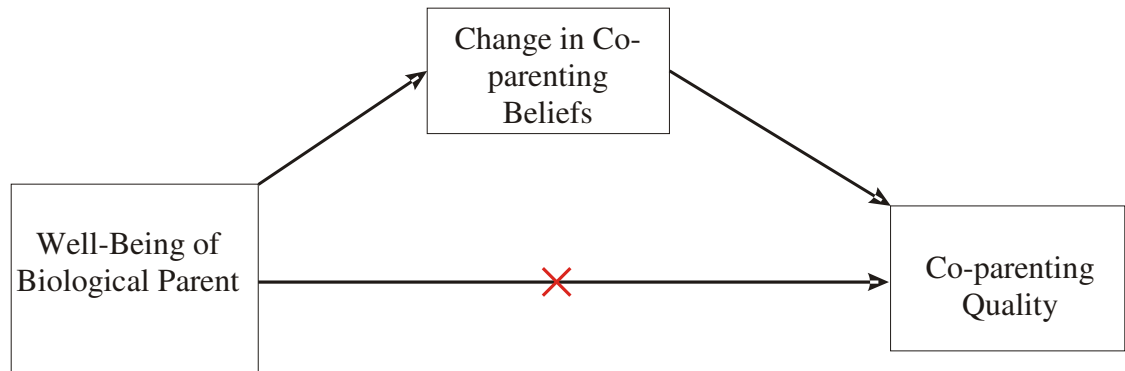


Figure 2. Hypothesized mediating influence of change in co-parenting beliefs in the association between well-being and quality of co-parental communication.

Method

Participants

The shared parenting relationship, or co-parenting, was defined by Ahrons (1981) as “the relationship between divorced parents who both continue to participate in child rearing” (p. 417) and at least minimal contact between the non-residential parents and their children once or more during the two months prior to study participation. To participate in the present study, respondents were required to share the parenting of at least one of their minor residential children with their former partners. Participation was further limited to parents who re-partnered after divorce and not after the death of a spouse or those for whom a co-parenting relationship with the other biological parent never existed. Eligible participants had separated from the other birth parent of at least one of their biological children and were living with a new partner in either a common-law stepfamily or a legal remarriage. Length of time since separation from the first partner was not restricted.

Remarriage was broadly defined as re-partnering via legal marriage or via cohabitation, to represent the diversity of blended family unions and the increasing prevalence of couples who choose to re-partner in more informal and fluid unions (Furstenberg, Jr., 1994). Length of remarriage was originally limited to 10 years or less to ensure that active co-parenting of shared children was ongoing. This length limitation was also based on previous findings that while stepfamilies have largely adjusted by 2.5 years, new problems commonly appear at the 5-7 year mark when many stepchildren are entering adolescence (Bray & Berger, 1993). This criterion was later relaxed due to low rates of participation and with the observation that respondents remarried longer than 10

years were still reporting at least monthly contact with their former spouses regarding shared parenting matters. Exclusion criteria also included experiencing more than one divorce, having no children under age 16, or having no contact with either one's biological children or the other biological parent of one's children and thus not actively co-parenting.

Equal samples of remarried mothers and fathers were sought. Although it is still more typical for mothers to assume physical custody and decision-making power regarding their children, the co-parenting and custodial roles of fathers have increased over recent decades (Kelly & Rinaman, 2003). Because relatively little is known about the role of remarried fathers after divorce, it was hoped that this study could obtain an adequate representation of remarried fathers' perspectives as well as those of remarried mothers. Also, some previous research has noted gender differences with regards to holding myths about stepfamilies (Kurdek & Fine, 1991). In spite of extensive and focused recruitment efforts to engage fathers (e.g., men's health internet sites, fathers' groups), however, significantly more mothers ($n = 112$) than fathers ($n = 33$) submitted eligible responses to the survey. Unfortunately, this sample of fathers was not large enough to meet the minimum requirements for the planned analyses.

Combining mothers and fathers into one general sample of parents was considered. Mothers and fathers did not differ significantly on important background variables such as length of first marriage, time elapsed since divorce, or length of remarriage. Fathers in this sample, however, were significantly older (age in years $M = 39.97$, $SD = 6.05$) than mothers ($M = 36.10$, $SD 6.02$), $t(143) = -3.24$, $p = .001$, and reported significantly poorer communication with their former spouses (Quality of Co-

parental Communication, QOCC; $M = 27.58$, $SD = 8.26$) than mothers did ($M = 30.79$, $SD = 8.09$), $t(143) = -2.11$, $p < .01$. Furthermore, mothers' and fathers' mean responses differed significantly on the predictor variable regarding beliefs about finances after remarriage, $t(143) = 1.99$, $p < .05$. Therefore, participant mothers and fathers could not be combined into a general sample of parents and the central hypotheses of the study were tested using the sample of mothers' data, while the fathers' data was later compared to that of mothers for exploratory purposes.

Description of mother sample. The 112 remarried mothers who submitted eligible surveys ranged in age from 23 to 52 years with a mean age of 36.1 years ($SD = 6.02$). The majority (76.8%) were Canadian, with other mothers responding from Australia ($n = 1$) and the United States ($n = 25$). The majority of respondents described their ethnic heritage as North American (71.4%) with British (11.6%), French-Canadian (4.5%), other European (3.6%), Latin (2.7%), Caribbean (1.8%), African (1.8%), Aboriginal (0.9%) and Arab (0.9%) backgrounds also represented. Ethnicity data was missing for one respondent. Most reported at least a high school education (85.7%), with the majority holding college or university degrees (71.4%). Nearly half (42.9%) indicated a family income of \$80,000 per year or more, with the average being in the range of \$40,000 to \$59,999 per year. As shown in Table 1, household incomes and education were comparable to that of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2007, 2008). As can also be seen in Table 1, the mothers more frequently self-identified as North American and less frequently identified as European, relative to the most recent census data available. The representations of British Isles, Caribbean, Latin, and African ethnicities were in close keeping with that of the Canadian population. French,

Table 1

Household income, education, and ethnicity compared to Canadian census data

Demographic Category	Census	Mothers	Fathers
Average household income	\$64,800	\$40,000-60,000	\$60,000-80,000
% High school educated	22.8	23.2	21.2
% College / University educated	87.4	71.4	75.7
% North American origins	31.6	71.4	51.5
% Other European origins	20.3	3.6	15.1
% Asian origins	17.3		3.0
% British Isles origins	13.9	11.6	23.2
% French-Canadian origins	7.4	4.5	3.0
% Aboriginal origins	3.4	0.9	
% Caribbean origins	1.8	1.8	
% Arab origins	1.7	0.9	
% African origins	1.4	1.8	
% Latin origins	1.1	2.7	3.0

Aboriginal, and Arab heritages were somewhat underrepresented, however, and mothers of Asian ancestry were absent from the current sample (Statistics Canada, 2008). Thus, the results should be considered as best reflecting the experiences of middle-class Caucasian North American mothers; remarried mothers who identify with minority cultures within North American may have reported different views.

Respondents provided a demographic picture of their past and present family circumstances. The mothers reported that their first marriages had lasted from one to 25 years, with a mean length of 8.34 years ($SD = 5.02$), and had ended from 1.5 to 16 years prior to survey completion, with a mean passage of 7.07 years ($SD = 3.05$) since the divorce. They bore from one to five children in their first marriages, with the majority having one (39.3%) or two (47.3%) children from the first marriage. Most mothers reported that they initiated the divorce (70.5%), while 15.2% indicated that the decision to divorce was arrived at jointly with their former spouses.

Following divorce, maternal primary custody was the most frequently reported arrangement (63.4%), followed by joint custody (33.9%) and paternal custody (2.7%). In terms of co-parenting between former spouses, the vast majority of mothers described at least monthly contact with their former spouses, with only 5.4% reporting rare contact of once or twice a year. Most mothers reported general satisfaction with their custody arrangements (71.5%), with somewhat less satisfaction regarding financial child support (57.1% somewhat satisfied or very satisfied).

At the time the data were collected, the length of the respondents' second marriages ranged from less than one year to 12 years, with a mean second marriage length of 3.52 years ($SD = 2.51$). In terms of stepfamily complexity, 21.4% of the

stepfamilies involved only mothers' children, with no stepchildren entering the family via the mothers' new spouses and no children born into the remarriages. The majority (78.6%) of the participating mothers lived in blended families; 42% reporting blended families with both spouses bringing biological children into the union, and 36.6% reporting complex blended families that also included one or more children born into the remarriage (see Table 2). Complex stepfamilies that involve a linking of two or more households were thus more frequent in this sample than in the general population.

Mothers described a range of supports that they accessed throughout their family transitions, including friends and family, books, websites, and formal services such as divorce or stepfamily education programs, counselling, or support groups for themselves or their children (see Table 3). They were more likely to have sought formal supports after divorce such as counselling, education programs, and support groups, than were individuals in similar circumstances as captured by census data.

Table 2

Percentage of four stepfamily types compared to Canadian census, 2002

Stepfamily Type	Census	Mothers	Fathers
Mother's children only	50.3	21.4	
Father's children only	10.0		33.3
Blended family without common children	7.7	42.0	36.4
Blended family with common children	32.0	36.6	30.3

Table 3

Percentage of mothers and fathers reporting use of formal supports for divorce or stepfamily transitions, compared to General Social Survey (GSS), 2006

Formal Support Type	GSS	Mothers	Fathers
Counselling (self or children)	27.0	48.2	36.4
Parent education/info sessions	9.6	28.6	15.2
Community resource centre for referrals or support groups	7.6	17.0	18.2

Description of father sample. The 33 participating fathers were largely a Canadian sample (72.7%) with the additional contributions of seven American fathers and two fathers living in Asia. Over half of the sample characterized their ethnicity as North American (51.5%), with British (24.2%), French or French-Canadian (3%), other European (15.1%), Latin (3%), and Asian (3%) backgrounds also represented. They ranged in age from 26 to 51 with a mean age of 39.97 years ($SD = 6.05$). Three-quarters of the sample reported that they had achieved a post-secondary education and 57.6% reporting a household income of more than \$80,000 per year.

As a group, the fathers' first marriages had lasted between two and 22 years with a mean length of 8.58 years ($SD = 5.03$). Each had from one to three children borne of their first marriage ($M = 1.66$, $SD = .60$). Nearly half (48.5%) reported that their former spouse had initiated their divorce, with approximately one third indicating the decision had been their own. According to fathers' responses, 9.1% had primary custody of the children from their first marriage, while 42.4% reported joint custody and 48.5% indicated their former spouses held custody; responsibility for decision-making regarding the children also corresponded with custodial arrangements according to fathers' reports. The majority of fathers reported monthly (21.2%) or weekly (48.5%) contact with their co-parents, while 18.2% indicated rare contact and 12.1% had daily contact. Fathers' acceptance of these reported custodial arrangements was nearly even split between reported satisfaction (48.5%) and dissatisfaction (51.5%).

At the time of survey completion, fathers had been remarried 3.42 years on average ($SD = 3.01$), including a range of less than one year to 14 years. Similar to mothers' reports of their new spouses' involvement in parenting their children from their

previous marriages, most fathers reported their new spouse's equal involvement in parenting first-marriage children (45.5%) or significant involvement in supervision or discipline (36.3%). A sizable minority of fathers (18.2%) reported that they were solely responsible for the parenting of their first-marriage children who lived in or visited the stepfamily home. Nearly half of the fathers had become stepparents when they remarried, reporting from one to three stepchildren ($M = .81, SD = 1.00$). A third of the fathers also had one to two children with their new spouse ($M = 1.10, SD = .57$).

Measures

Data were collected using an online questionnaire format. Due to the specific participant criteria necessary for inclusion in this study, an internet survey method was chosen to increase the accessibility of the project for suitable participants beyond the Victoria region and thus to increase the size of the potential sample. As this study also sought information on a variety of personal experiences regarding one's divorce and remarriage, the privacy offered by an anonymous online survey was expected to enhance participant recruitment. The use of internet surveys has become prevalent in psychological research, particularly those examining sensitive topics or seeking very specific participant populations, such as in studies of sexual behaviour (e.g., Trajanovic, Mangan, & Shapiro, 2007), drug and alcohol consumption (e.g., Barnwell, Earleywine, & Gordis, 2005), and symptoms of HIV disease (e.g., Harding, Molloy, Easterbrook, Frame, & Higginson, 2006).

The questionnaires were hosted online by the phpESP ("Easy Survey Package"), version 1.8, available for download on the Internet (SourceForge, 2006). Php scripts allow non-technical users to create and administer surveys, gather results, and view basic

summary statistics. Data are stored in a secure, password-protected database and downloaded into Excel or SPSS, making it a confidential and expedient system for collecting and entering large volumes of data. All questionnaire items were typed into the php system. Response options were typed into drop-down menus of forced choice items, while blank text boxes were added for open-ended responses. Items were confirmed through the php preview mode and test runs of the entire survey were submitted by the researcher once the study was uploaded to the Internet.

The survey was divided into 13 pages. Participants visiting the survey website were greeted with a full description of the study's purpose, risks, and benefits (see Appendix A). They were required to check a box indicating their consent to participate in the study before survey items were visible. Subsequent pages of the survey solicited demographic information (see Appendix B), details regarding the participant's divorce, co-parenting quality, information about their children and stepchildren, remarital adjustment and commitment, remarriage beliefs, co-parenting beliefs, current well-being, and motivations for participating in the study, concluding with a complete debriefing form and the researcher's contact information. The measures used to assess each construct are described below.

Quality of co-parenting relationship. Ahrons' *Quality of Co-parental Communication* scale (QOCC; Ahrons, 1981) measures the quality of the co-parenting relationship from the responding parent's perspective. This 10-item questionnaire includes two subscales regarding *conflict* (i.e., "When you and your former spouse discuss parenting issues, how often does an argument result?") and *support* (i.e., "When you need help regarding the children, do you seek it from your former spouse?") within

the former spouses' interactions as they relate to shared parenting. Respondents are asked to indicate how frequently the supportive or conflictual co-parenting situations occur; agreement with each support item is rated from 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Always") and conflict items are reverse-scored. Total scores range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating more supportive, less conflictual communication. Mothers in the present study characterized their co-parenting relationships with former spouses as satisfactory on average (QOCC $M = 30.79$, $SD = 8.09$). Fathers reported average communication quality as well, with a mean score of 27.58 ($SD = 8.26$).

Ahrons (1981) described support for the measure's validity in terms of significant correlations between trained interviewers' ratings of the quality of co-parenting relationships and the parents' own responses to this measure. The author also reported alphas of .88 for women and .89 for men for the conflict subscale, and of .74 for women and .75 for men on the support subscale. Similar alphas emerged from the current data set, with alphas of .89 for women and .91 for men on the conflict subscale, and .81 for women and .78 for men on the support subscale, indicating that participants responded consistently across items.

Quality of remarital relationship: Dyadic adjustment. Parents' perceptions of the current quality of their remarriage were assessed with two multi-factored measures. First, the *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (DAS; Spanier, 1976; Spanier & Thompson, 1982) was employed as a general measure of current relationship satisfaction and adjustment over the past few weeks, applicable to both married and unmarried cohabiting couples. The DAS contains 32 items and yields an overall rating of relationship adjustment as well as four subscales tapping the constructs of *dyadic satisfaction* (i.e., "In general, how often

do you think things between you and your spouse are going well?”), *dyadic cohesion* (i.e., “Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?”), *dyadic consensus* (i.e., ratings of agreement regarding family finances, friends, or philosophy of life), and *affectional expression* (i.e., ratings of agreement regarding sexual relations or demonstration of affection). Depending on the wording of each item, several types of six- or seven-point Likert scales or yes/no ratings are used to assess agreement. Higher rating scores indicate more positive dyadic adjustment across each of the four subscales, yielding a total DAS score ranging from a minimum score of 11 to a maximum score of 158. Relational distress is characterized as a score falling below the cut-off score of 98, and the norm for happily married partners is 115. Overall, mothers who responded to the current survey described high levels of dyadic adjustment ($M = 122.51$, $SD = 17.44$). Fathers in this sample also reported high dyadic adjustment (DAS $M = 128.52$, $SD = 14.29$).

Due to reported high subscale intercorrelations, it is recommended that the DAS is best used as a global assessment of dyadic adjustment (Spanier, 1988). Cronbach’s alpha for the overall DAS score has been reported in the range of .91 to .96, with alphas ranging from .73 to .94 for each of the subscales (Spanier, 1976; Spanier & Thompson, 1982). Similar values were found for the current sample, with total scale alphas of .94 and .93, dyadic satisfaction subscale alphas of .93 and .86, dyadic consensus subscale alphas of .81 and .87, dyadic cohesion subscale alphas of .79 and .74, and affectional expression subscale alphas of .69 and .72 for mothers and fathers, respectively. The DAS has reliably discriminated between married and divorced individuals (Spanier, 1976), and it has been widely applied in both clinical practice and over 1000 empirical studies of

relationship satisfaction over the last three decades (Spanier, 1988). In a meta-analysis of 379 studies regarding remarital satisfaction, the DAS was the most commonly used measure of this construct (Vemer et al., 1989).

Quality of remarital relationship: Marital commitment. To capture an additional component of relationship satisfaction that is highly relevant in remarriages, which appear inherently prone to dissolution, a measure of relationship commitment was included. The *Multiple Determinants of Relationship Commitment Inventory* (MDRCI; Kurdek, 1995) contains 24 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly agree”) with eight items reverse-scored. Factor analysis suggests that the scale taps six unique components that are frequently discussed in the clinical and empirical literature on relationship commitment: *rewards* (i.e., “One advantage to my relationship is that it provides me with companionship”), *costs* (i.e., “I have to sacrifice a lot to be in my relationship”), *match to ideal comparison level* (i.e., “Overall, there is not much difference between my current relationship and my ideal relationship”), *alternatives* (i.e., “As an alternative to my current relationship, I would like to date someone else”), *investments* (i.e., “I’ve put a lot of energy and effort into my relationship”), and *barriers* (i.e., “I would find it difficult to leave my partner because I would feel obligated to keep the relationship together”). Relative to a possible total scale score ranging from 5 to 120, the current sample of mothers reported high commitment to their current marriages ($M = 94.85$, $SD = 13.19$). The sample of fathers reported a mean total commitment score of 97.91 ($SD = 10.51$) in their second marriages.

Kurdek (1995) reported that the four subscales of match to ideal comparison, alternatives, investments, and barriers as a set offered the best determinants of overall

commitment, and speculated that the subscales regarding rewards and costs were too highly intercorrelated with match to ideal comparison to account for additional variability. Support for the validity of the MDRCI was offered via the finding that dating couples endorsed significantly lower commitment scales on this measure than did cohabitating homosexual partners and heterosexual married couples (Kurdek, 1995). Good reliability for the measure was reported, with Cronbach's alphas for the subscales rewards, costs, match to ideal comparison, alternatives, investments, and barriers, respectively, of .80, .77, .85, .80, .82, and .67 (Kurdek, 1995). In the current samples, alphas were .78, .83, .90, .71, .50, and .55 for mothers and .73, .89, .78, .54, .27, and .78 for fathers, respectively. In the current study, a summary score of all six subscales was applied, yielding an alpha of .89 in the mothers' sample and .85 for fathers. Each of the six subscale scores was significantly correlated with the total commitment score at the significance level of $p < .01$.

Change in beliefs about remarriage and stepfamilies. Endorsement of potentially problematic beliefs and expectations about remarriage and stepfamily life was assessed with the 22-item *Remarriage Belief Inventory* (RMBI; Higginbotham, 2005; Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2005), which was developed to measure the degree of one's endorsement of a variety of beliefs about what to expect from remarriage and stepfamily life. Cognitions such as expectations and beliefs have been shown to be relevant to couple functioning in first marriages (e.g., Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000) and seem equally likely to influence dyadic adjustment in remarriages, as unrealistic beliefs may contribute to the increased risk for divorce in remarriage. Thus, the assessment of remarriage beliefs is relevant to both the empirical study of marital

functioning in stepfamilies and to pre-marital interventions and education programs with remarrying partners (Higginbotham, 2005). Respondents rate the strength of their belief in each RMBI item with Likert ratings from 1 (“Very false”) to 5 (“Very true”). With the exception of two reverse-scored items, higher ratings indicate stronger endorsement of beliefs thought to be problematic for adjustment to remarriage. In the current study, participants were asked to respond to all RMBI items twice in order to capture the reported change in beliefs, rating both their current endorsement of each item as well as their recollection of their endorsement of each statement *before* they remarried. Change was calculated by subtracting the rated value of the current belief score from the past belief score.

The RMBI was constructed after consultation of the clinical and empirical literature on frequent and potentially disruptive myths and beliefs in remarriage and stepfamily circumstances. The seven subscales reflect common, yet often unarticulated beliefs that (1) *adjustment comes quickly* in remarriage and blended family life (i.e., “Stepfamily members should feel close to one another soon after the stepfamily forms”), (2) *finances should be pooled* between remarriage partners regardless of their previous individual parenting or financial responsibilities (i.e., “Financial resources in a remarriage should be combined”), (3) the new *partner is perfect* when compared to the former spouse (i.e., “A new spouse should be everything the problematic old partner was not”), (4) the needs of *children are priority* over those of the remarried couple or new partner (i.e., “Wishes of the children should be taken over the wishes of the new spouse”), (5) *success is slim* in remarriage (i.e., “People in remarriages are likely to make the same mistakes they made in previous marriages”), (6) *stepfamilies are second-class*

relative to the nuclear families formed from first marriages (i.e., “All things considered, a stepfamily is a poor substitute for a biological family”), and (7) emotions from the *past must stay in the past* despite ongoing involvement with children or co-parents from the first marriage (i.e., “Emotional connection/feelings to an ex-spouse should end with a new marriage”). Based on a large subsample of participants who completed the questionnaire online, the measure has a reported overall alpha of .78, with subscale alphas ranging between .67 and .87. The alpha coefficients in this sample for mothers’ current beliefs ranged from .56 to .82 for each of the seven subscales and an alpha of .59 for the total scale. Fathers’ current beliefs yielded alphas ranging from .74 to .87 for the subscales (see Table 4) and a total scale alpha of .63.

Endorsement of these remarriage beliefs is expected to have varying implications for remarital adjustment. Higginbotham (2005) found that endorsement of items suggesting finances should be pooled in a remarriage was positively associated with ratings on a measure of marital satisfaction and one of marital adjustment. Remarried individuals who felt secure in pooling resources with their new spouses tended to be more content in their relationships. In contrast, stronger endorsement of items tapping the belief that success is slim was associated with lower marital quality on the same measures. Remarried individuals who lacked confidence in the success of remarriages in general also conveyed less satisfaction with their own remarriages.

Change in beliefs about co-parenting. An exploratory measure was constructed to assess respondents’ expectations and beliefs about co-parenting, intended to be predictive of one’s adjustment in the co-parenting relationship with the former spouse (Co-parenting Belief Inventory, CBI; Pringle & Ehrenberg, 2005; Appendix C). At

present, there is no existing standardized measure of beliefs and expectations about the co-parenting relationship. For the purposes of this study, various beliefs about co-parenting were drawn from clinical and research literature about shared parenting processes after divorce and were drafted into 18 items. Some items were written to reflect beliefs about co-parenting that are potentially problematic such as “For co-parenting to be successful, former spouses must have the same style of parenting.” Others are intended to reflect beliefs that may be more adaptive in the context of parenting with a past partner, such as “Former spouses should work to get along for the sake of their children”, which were reversed in the scoring of the full scale. Corresponding with the Remarriage Belief Inventory, respondents rated their belief in each co-parenting statement from 1 (“Very false”) to 5 (“Very true”) and higher scores indicate greater endorsement of a belief set theorized to be problematic for adjustment within the co-parenting relationship, such as pessimism and negativity regarding the co-parent, and rigid prioritization of the custodial parent’s wishes rather than shared decision-making. If the responses to this preliminary measure proved useful in predicting cooperative co-parenting in the current project, further efforts could be made to expand and validate it for broader use.

The current sample’s responses to this yet unstandardized measure were of limited reliability, however, indicated by relatively low coefficient alphas of .49 for mothers’ current belief ratings and .51 for fathers’ current beliefs ratings based on scoring of the total measure. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the measure’s 18 items, considering several criteria of its ability to be factored into multiple subscales capturing potential underlying constructs. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling

adequacy was .75 and thus above the recommended value of 0.5, indicating a moderate degree of common variance and suggesting that if a factor analysis is conducted, the factors extracted will account for a fair amount of variance. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 (153) = 665.84, p < .001$), indicating that the intercorrelation matrix did not come from a population in which the variables are noncollinear and provides evidence that the non-zero correlations were not merely due to sampling error. Communalities for each of the 18 items were all greater than 0.3, ranging from .48 to .76, indicating that each shared some common variance with other items. Thus, factor analysis was conducted with all 18 items. Using the extraction method of principal component analysis and varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization, initial eigenvalues showed that the first factor labelled *Conflict between co-parents* explained 23.34% of the variance and the second factor labelled *Strategies for resolving co-parental conflict* explained 11.46%. The third through sixth factors had eigenvalues just over one, explaining 8.72%, 7.48%, 6.92%, and 6.08% of the variance, respectively. These factors were labelled *Decision-making rights of custodial parent*, *Feelings towards co-parent*, *Influencing other co-parent*, and *Co-parental roles*. In total, the six factors explained 64% of the variance in responses to this measure and all items had factor loadings over .5 (see Tables 4 and 5).

. Beyond these six factors, eigenvalues were less than one in value and were noted to level off on a scree plot, suggesting that six was the maximum number of factors to be of value in categorizing underlying constructs within the co-parenting belief measure. Although six factors were extracted, when the internal consistency of each scale was examined using Cronbach's alpha, only the *Conflict between co-parents* and

Table 4

Loadings onto first three factors from exploratory principal components analysis for Co-parenting Belief Inventory as endorsed by total sample (N = 145)

Item	Conflict	Strategies	Decision
Frustrating to talk to former spouse	.74		
Must have same style of parenting			
Thoughts about ex only re: parenting	.68		
After divorce, maintain parenting roles			
<i>Common to have mixed feelings</i>			
<i>Talk about problems raising kids</i>		.60	
Should not remain friendly		-.51	
Defer to custodial parent's decisions			.80
<i>Say in decisions at other parent's house</i>			
Upsetting to see former spouse			
<i>Should work to get along for kids' sake</i>		.67	
Will not get along as co-parents	.66		
<i>Limit discussions to parenting issues</i>	.80		
Custodial parent's preferences first			.83
<i>Put differences aside for co-parenting</i>		.74	
<i>Discuss co-parenting problems</i>		.65	
<i>Same overall vision, accept decisions</i>		.51	
<i>Adopt a business-like attitude</i>	.76		

Note. Italicized items were reversed in scoring.

Table 5

Loadings onto last three factors from exploratory principal components analysis for Co-parenting Belief Inventory as endorsed by total sample (N = 145)

Item	Feelings	Influencing	Roles
Frustrating to talk to former spouse			
Must have same style of parenting		.56	.51
Thoughts about ex only re: parenting			
After divorce, maintain parenting roles			.84
<i>Common to have mixed feelings</i>	.75		
<i>Talk about problems raising kids</i>			
Should not remain friendly			
Defer to custodial parent's decisions			
<i>Say in decisions at other parent's house</i>		.75	
Upsetting to see former spouse	.70		
<i>Should work to get along for kids' sake</i>			
Will not get along as co-parents			
<i>Limit discussions to parenting issues</i>			
Custodial parent's preferences first			
<i>Put differences aside for co-parenting</i>			
<i>Discuss co-parenting problems</i>			
<i>Same overall vision, accept decisions</i>			
<i>Adopt a business-like attitude</i>			

Note. Italicized items were reversed in scoring.

Decision-making rights of custodial parent factors produced moderate alphas for the total sample of mothers and fathers, with values of .81 and .68, respectively. Alphas for the remaining four factors were less than .35 (see Table 6). Conducting separate factor analyses on separate samples of mothers and fathers did not notably improve the factorability of the items or the reliability of the total scale or subscales. For the present multiple regression analyses, the full scale was employed.

Parents' current well-being. Four subscales of the *Mood and Anxiety Symptom Questionnaire* (MASQ; Watson & Clark, 1991) were employed to assess the biological parents' overall psychological well-being over the last week. Three subscales pertain to General Distress, including clusters of non-specific symptoms reflecting broad negative affect, and the fourth subscale directly assesses High Positive Affect. The *General Distress: Mixed Symptoms* subscale includes 15 items that reflect the symptom criteria of both anxiety and mood disorders (e.g., "Got fatigued easily," "Trouble concentrating," "Felt something awful would happen"). The 11-item *General Distress: Anxious Symptoms* subscale includes anxious mood symptoms that are representative of a range of anxiety conditions (e.g., "Felt nervous," "Upset stomach," "Unable to relax"). Symptoms included in the 12-item *General Distress: Depressive Symptoms* subscale are non-specific experiences associated with mood disorders, such as "Felt worthless," "Felt sad," and "Pessimistic about the future." *High Positive Affect* is assessed via 24 items relating to positive emotional experiences, including "Felt cheerful," "Had a lot of energy," and "Looked forward to things with enjoyment," which were reversed in the scoring of the measure. All items are self-reported on a five-point Likert scale that asks respondents to indicate to what extent they experienced each symptom over the past two weeks, ranging

from 1 (“Not at all”) to 5 (“Extremely”). The complete MASQ also includes additional subscales to tap specific clinical-level experiences of anhedonia and of anxious arousal which were not included for the purposes of the present study. The four subscales included in the present study were combined to yield a total well-being score ranging from 61 to 305, in which higher scores indicated higher positive adjustment and fewer symptoms of anxiety, depression, or generalized distress. Based on their self-reports, the present sample of mothers tended to experience average well being at the time of survey completion ($M = 187.34$, $SD = 45.52$), as did the sample of fathers ($M = 203.64$, $SD = 36.90$).

Five separate factor analyses of the MASQ across student, adult, and patient samples support a tripartite model of negative affect in which specific depressive and anxious symptoms are assessed uniquely from general distress items (Watson et al., 1995). Reported alphas for the subscales described above are from .84 to .91 for mixed symptoms, .78 to .86 for anxious symptoms, and .90 to .92 for depressive symptoms. In the current study, alphas observed in the mothers’ sample were .86, .90, and .94, while those observed for participating fathers were .84, .82, and .93.

Table 6

Summary of study measures

Construct	Measure	Subscales	Reported Alphas	Moms' Alphas	Dads' Alphas
Co-parenting Quality	Quality of Co-parental Communication Scale	Conflict	.88-.89	.89	.91
		Support	.74-.75	.81	.78
Marital Quality	Dyadic Adjustment Scale	Total Scale	.96	.94	.93
		Dyadic Satisfaction	.94	.93	.86
		Dyadic Consensus	.90	.81	.87
		Dyadic Cohesion	.81	.79	.74
		Affectional Expression	.73	.69	.72
Marital Commitment	Multiple Determinants of Relationship Commitment Scale	Total Scale	-	.89	.85
		Match to Ideal Comparison	.85	.90	.78
		Investments	.82	.50	.27
		Alternatives	.80	.71	.54
		Rewards	.80	.78	.73
		Costs	.77	.83	.89
		Barriers	.67	.55	.78

Construct	Measure	Subscales	Reported Alphas	Moms' Alphas	Dads' Alphas
Remarriage Beliefs	Remarriage Belief Inventory	Adjustment Comes Quickly	.87	.81	.81
		Finances Pooled	.86	.82	.83
		Partner is Perfect	.67	.75	.86
		Children are Priority	.76	.56	.74
		Success is Slim	.80	.73	.83
		Stepfamilies as 2nd Class	.67	.77	.78
		Past Emotions Past	.74	.74	.87
Co-parenting Beliefs	Co-parenting Belief Inventory	Conflict Between Co-parents	.81	.77	.88
		Strategies for Conflict	.33	.33	.34
		Decision-Making	.68	.67	.64
		Feelings Towards Co-parent	.30	.28	.29
		Influencing Other Parent	.21	.22	.16

Construct	Measure	Subscales	Reported Alphas	Moms' Alphas	Dads' Alphas
Co-parenting Beliefs	Co-parenting Belief Inventory	Co-parenting Roles	.26	.31	.09
Parent's Current Well-being	Mood and Anxiety Symptom Questionnaire	Total Scale	-	.81	.69
		General Distress: Mixed Symptoms	.84-.91	.86	.84
		General Distress: Anxious Symptoms	.78-.86	.90	.82
		General Distress: Depressive Symptoms	.90-.92	.94	.93
		High Positive Affect	-	.96	.96

Procedure

Following ethical approval of the study by the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board, the PHP survey system was activated on the Internet and recruitment of participants commenced. Dillman (2000) advised that online surveys should use a multiple contact strategy to advertise a project. Participants for the present study were recruited from a range of community and online sources to secure a broad sample of remarried parents within and beyond Victoria, such as newspapers, community bulletins, recreation centres, counselling centres, military family resource centres, family drop-in centres, Native friendship centres, numerous fathers' and men's' groups, and to professionals who may have contact with stepfamilies such as family lawyers, counsellors, and educators.

To broadcast the study widely and enhance participation beyond the population of Victoria, Internet links to the study were posted on the websites of various relevant organizations across Canada and the United States, including stepfamily-oriented websites (e.g., Goodman, 2007a, 2007b; National Stepfamily Resource Center, 2006; Stepfamily Foundation of Alberta, 2006), forums and message boards pertaining to parenting and remarriage (e.g., Canadian Parents, 2006; Parents Canada, 2006b; Canadian Living, 2006a, 2006b; Kids in Victoria, 2007; StepTogether, 2006; Weddingbells, 2006), and websites listing volunteer opportunities (Craigslis, 2007; Hanover College Psychology Department, 2006; Kijiji, 2007). In addition to contacting several fathers' groups via email and poster announcements, notices were also posted on online message boards thought to be of special interest to fathers who may also meet the study criteria (Men's Health, 2007a, 2007b; Parents Canada, 2006a). Word-of-mouth or

“snowballing” recruitment was also encouraged; twice throughout the study’s duration, previous participants were emailed and asked to inform acquaintances with similar family circumstances of the study. Posters and Internet advertisements supplied potential participants with the study’s online address, which they accessed voluntarily. A sample poster is shown in Appendix D.

Upon accessing the study web page, participants found a statement of informed consent focused on ethical issues such as safeguards to confidentiality and potential use and dissemination of data. Participants clicked a button to indicate they had read and understood this statement and agreed to their informed consent (Appendix A), after which they were directed to a new webpage initiating the survey items. Survey items were presented in several different sections, categorized as *Questions About You* including individual demographic items, *Questions About Your Separation/Divorce* regarding the details of their divorce process and custody arrangements, *Questions About Your Relationship with Your Former Spouse* including the QOCC, *Questions About Your Child(ren) and Stepchild(ren)* including demographic items about the children’s ages, sex, and visitation schedules, *Questions About Your Remarriage* including the DAS and MDRCI, *Questions About Your Beliefs* including the RMBI and CBI, *Questions About Your Thoughts and Feelings* presenting the MASQ, and *Questions About Your Participation in this Study* to assess the motivation for participation. Each section required completion of the previous items before progression to later items. Participants were informed how many sections remained after the one on which they were currently working and could quit the survey at any time either by clicking an exit button or by choosing not to submit their questionnaire once completed. A submitted survey had to be

completed in one session, however, as a partially finished survey could not be saved upon exiting for completion at a later time. Once all items were complete, participants were presented with a debriefing explanation that they could print for their records or receive in hard copy by contacting the researcher. The debriefing form included a brief explanation of the study's purpose and main hypotheses, and reiterated the researcher's contact information for those who may have questions or concerns about the study (Appendix E).

Upon completion of the online survey, all respondents meeting eligibility criteria and submitting a complete survey were offered a \$20 e-certificate for redemption at the online vendor www.chapters.indigo.ca. If participants elected to provide an e-mail address for compensation, the e-certificate was sent directly to this e-mail address. E-mail addresses were stored separately from participant data to preserve confidentiality and Chapters-Indigo staff members were not aware of the purpose of the research study for which the certificates were being sent. During the data collection process, however, a fraudulent misuse of the survey system necessitated a procedural change to mailing gift cards to participants' home addresses instead. To receive the gift cards, participants in the later phase of data collection provided an e-mail address to which an identification code was sent. Participants e-mailed the Families in Motion research laboratory address with their identification code and their mailing addresses in order to receive the gift cards. The majority of participants elected to receive the gift e-certificate or cards, although non-Canadian respondents occasionally declined the offer. Participants were also invited to supply an e-mail address in order to receive a summary of the study's results upon its completion.

With the understanding that not all individuals eligible for participation in this study have Internet access or familiarity, completion of the study via traditional methods was also offered. Participants from the Victoria area were offered the option of completing the questionnaires online or in person in the Department of Psychology at the University of Victoria. Participants from other communities could contact the researcher for a paper copy to complete and submit via mail. One paper copy was requested but was not returned. Seven individuals elected to participate in additional exploratory qualitative interviews that were available for Victoria residents. They responded to additional questions regarding the transition to remarriage and stepfamily life, their feelings towards the former spouse with whom they continue a co-parenting relationship and the influence of this relationship on their remarriage, and how their current relationship experiences compare to their expectations prior to remarriage (Appendix F).

After closure of the study and completion of the current analyses, a summary of results was posted on the website of the Families in Motion Research and Information Group (<http://www.uvic.ca/psyc/fmrig>). The summary was also emailed to agencies who had assisted with participant recruitment and had indicated an interest in the findings, as well as to participants who had indicated interest in the results and who had provided a valid email address for this purpose.

Results

The results of this study will be presented in four main sections. The first section will summarize the preparation of the data for analyses and the transformation procedures considered. Next, correlations between perceived co-parenting quality and remarital adjustment are examined, to test the hypothesis that a supportive, low-conflict relationship with the former spouse may contribute to positive adjustment in one's remarriage, and vice-versa. Following, moderated regression analyses test whether the length of one's remarriage influences the degree to which changes in one's remarriage beliefs and one's remarital quality are related. Further multiple regression analyses address the hypothesized mediating process through which changes in remarriage beliefs might account for a portion of the variance in the relationship between individual well-being and remarital quality. Finally, a multivariate analysis of variance explores sex of parent in its association with changes in remarriage and co-parenting beliefs, in an attempt to compare the data of the relatively small number of participating fathers with the larger pool of mothers' data.

Data Preparation and Reduction

Missing data. As per the data cleaning guidelines of Tabachnick and Fidell (2006), missing values in the data set were addressed first. Missing values were minimal, largely due to the use of the internet survey system which required all items be complete before a participant could progress to the next page of the survey. In spite of this safeguard, however, there were two important participant-entered items that yielded inconsistent responses. When participants were asked for the month and year of their divorce and of their remarriage, the format in which they should write this date in the text

box was not specified (e.g., “mm/yyyy” versus “Month, Year”). Unfortunately, this discrepancy in the format of entries across participants resulted in a problem with how these data were stored within the survey system and several missing values appeared when the data were downloaded into SPSS.

Participants for whom the date was missing or incomplete were emailed to ask for the date(s) and the majority responded with the necessary information. A small number of participating mothers did not reply to this follow-up request for their remarriage date ($n = 9$). Although a common solution for missing data is to calculate the mean value using the available data, this method may have suggested an estimated remarriage date that pre-dated the divorce date for some cases. Instead, for participants who did not respond to the email request, a similarly conservative estimate of the remarriage date was made by calculating the number of years since their divorce and dividing this value in half, thus employing the *prior knowledge* method of replacing missing data values (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006). Cases were then dummy coded as either having a confirmed remarriage date or an estimated remarriage date and were examined for significant group differences in the two key criterion variables of remarital adjustment, the measures of dyadic adjustment (DAS; Spanier, 1976) and of marital commitment (MDRCI; Kurdek, 1995). Cases for which an estimated remarriage date was created did not differ significantly from cases with confirmed remarriage dates in terms of dyadic adjustment, $t(110) = .57, p = .45$, or marital commitment, $t(110) = .60, p = .11$.

As with the sample of mothers, an estimate of the length of remarriage was required for a small number of fathers ($n = 4$). Cases for which an estimated remarriage date did not differ from those with a confirmed remarriage date in terms of dyadic

adjustment, $t(31) = .22, p = .82$, marital commitment, $t(31) = .23, p = .82$, quality of co-parental communication, $t(31) = 1.98, p = .06$, or length of remarriage, $t(31) = .30, p = .77$. A difference was noted, however, in terms of well-being, $t(31) = -1.82, p < .001$, in that the small number of fathers for whom remarriage length was estimated tended to report higher well-being ($M = 234, SD = 8.91$) than did those with a confirmed remarriage length ($M = 199.45, SD = 37.39$).

Detecting and managing outliers. For each key predictor and criterion variable, boxplots and scatterplots were created to examine the range of responses and the placement of any univariate outliers. Descriptive statistics next confirmed the presence of univariate outliers and significant skewness that existed within the distributions of several variables. Length of remarriage exhibited considerable positive skew in its distribution, as a small number of lengthier marriages drew the distribution significantly above the mean length of 3.52 years ($SD = 2.51$). Adjustment measures of dyadic adjustment (DAS), marital commitment (MDRCI), and individual well-being (MASQ) each exhibited significant negatively skewed distributions, with trends towards higher adjustment and commitment overall that were influenced by a small number of less satisfied, less committed, or less well-adjusted respondents, respectively. Normal distributions were found for measures of co-parental communication quality (QOCC), each of the seven subtypes of remarriage beliefs (RMBI), and the single measure of co-parenting beliefs (CBI).

Case-by-case examination of each outlier in these key variables satisfied the assumption that the univariate outliers detected were indeed valid responses and were not impossible scores. Thus, a judgment call was made to retain all outliers due to their

validity so as to preserve as much of the sample as possible. Employing Log10 transformations achieved normal distributions for remarriage length and individual well-being (MASQ), while square root transformations best achieved normal distributions for dyadic adjustment (DAS) and marital commitment (MDRCI). Ultimately, however, analyses were conducted using non-transformed scores, as results did not differ when using transformed versus non-transformed data.

Three multivariate outliers were detected using the $p < .001$ criterion of Mahalanobis distance. Two of the discrepant cases were due to participant-reported changes over time in a subset of remarriage beliefs that was unusual relative to the rest of the sample. The third multivariate outlier was attributable to an unusual change in co-parenting beliefs in the context of minimal change in other beliefs, relative to changes reported throughout remarriage by the rest of the sample. Tabachnick and Fidell (2006) advise that transformation may not address multivariate outliers as appropriately as it does univariate outliers and therefore advise using discretion in whether to remove or retain multivariate outliers. Due to the small number of multivariate outliers detected, the exploratory usage of the belief measures in the current study, and the dearth of existing knowledge about how beliefs could be expected change throughout remarriage, these cases were retained in the sample.

Past versus current Remarriage Belief Inventory scores. Several scoring variants were available for participants' responses to the Remarriage Belief Inventory (RMBI; Higginbotham, 2005) as administered in the current study. Typical scoring of the RMBI yields seven values to represent endorsement of seven different belief domains, labelled by the measure's authors as *Children are priority (Children)*, *Past should stay in the past*

(Past), *Finances should be pooled (Finances)*, *Stepfamilies are second-class (Stepfamily)*, *Partner is perfect (Partner)*, *Adjustment comes quickly (Adjustment)*, and *Success is slim (Success)*. In the current study, participants responded to each item twice, with regards to their current beliefs as well as the beliefs they recalled holding before they remarried, defined as current and past beliefs. The present sample supported Higginbotham's findings that the seven beliefs appeared distinct from one another, as Pearson product correlations across each belief held by the current sample of mothers were largely uncorrelated (see Tables 7 and 8). Past and current beliefs within each belief domain, however, were significantly correlated, indicating some relatedness of beliefs from before to after remarriage (see Table 9). Thus, although beliefs may change due to the experience of remarriage, former beliefs appeared to retain a correlation to the degree to which one would currently endorse each belief.

To ascertain whether the changes in reported beliefs from pre- to post-remarriage were statistically significant, differences between mothers' reported past and current ratings of each of the seven beliefs were calculated. The current belief score was subtracted from the past belief score, such that a positive remaining value would indicate that previous endorsement of a belief had reportedly lessened over time. For example, a belief that changed from 'very true' in the past to 'very false' at present would yield a change score of $(5 - 1)$ or +4, the highest degree of change able to be assessed. A negative change score would indicate that one currently endorsed the belief more so than in the past, such as if one provided ratings of 'very false' in the past and 'very true' now, calculated as $(1 - 5)$ or -4. Results of a series of paired samples t-tests using change scores comparing past beliefs to current beliefs are listed in Table 9. Although the modal

Table 7

Intercorrelations among mothers' endorsements of seven remarriage beliefs as recalled from the past

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Children are priority	-	.18	-.36**	.26**	.06	-.12	.17
2. Past should stay in past		-	.05	.12	.36**	.14	-.02
3. Finances should be pooled			-	-.03	.07	.25**	-.20*
4. Stepfamilies are second-class				-	<.01	-.12	.38**
5. Partner is perfect					-	.18	.04
6. Adjustment comes quickly						-	-.10
7. Success is slim							-

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 8

Intercorrelations among mothers' endorsements of seven reported current remarriage beliefs

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Children are priority	-	-.01	-.14	-.08	<.01	-.01	-.08
2. Past should stay in past		-	.12	-.09	.36**	.08	-.20
3. Finances should be pooled			-	.09	.06	.20*	-.22*
4. Stepfamilies are second-class				-	.02	-.08	.47**
5. Partner is perfect					-	.12	-.02
6. Adjustment comes quickly						-	-.20*
7. Success is slim							-

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 9

Correlations between mothers' reported past and current endorsement of seven remarriage beliefs and mean change scores reported in beliefs pre- to post-remarriage

Subscale	Correlation	Mean Change (SD)
Children are priority	.51**	-1.0 (2.39)**
Past should stay in the past	.70**	-.38 (1.78)*
Finances should be pooled	.50**	1.12 (3.36)**
Stepfamilies are second-class	.41**	-.87 (2.53)**
Partner is perfect	.76**	-.20 (2.19)
Adjustment comes quickly	.40**	-1.16 (3.8) **
Success is slim	.34**	-.41 (4.09)

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

change score for each of the seven beliefs was zero reported change, results indicated that on average, this sample of mothers did report significant changes in several of their beliefs about remarriage over time. Beliefs that were reported as significantly less salient included the viewpoints that children should take priority over one's new spouse, that emotional ties to the past spouse should stay in the past, that stepfamilies are substandard to biological families, and that stepfamilies will quickly adjust to the transitions they are facing. The only belief reported by this sample of mothers to become significantly more salient since remarriage was that finances between remarriage partners should be pooled. No significant change was reported for the beliefs that one's new partner is perfect in relation to the former spouse, or that a stepfamily's chance of success is slim. The distributions of change scores were normal across the sample of participating mothers. These examinations of the various RMBI scores resulted in a decision to use change scores as predictor variables in the regression models, instead of using only past or current belief scores. Use of change scores provided a more contextualized understanding of how beliefs about stepfamilies adapted over time and how they were potentially influenced by the first-hand experience of remarrying and fostering a blended family.

Past versus current Co-parenting Belief Inventory scores. Change scores were also calculated for the exploratory measure of co-parenting beliefs that was created for the current study, the Co-parenting Belief Inventory. Ratings of reported co-parenting beliefs from before remarriage and currently were significantly correlated, $r(111) = .61$, $p < .01$. The two sets of ratings also indicated a significant increase in mothers' reported

endorsement of these beliefs from pre-remarriage to currently, as indicated by a significant paired samples *t*-test ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 6.16$), $t(111) = 3.52$, $p < .01$.

Relation of Co-parenting Quality to Remarital Adjustment

As stated in hypothesis one, it was expected that significant positive correlations would be observed between ratings of perceived co-parenting communication quality and each of the two remarital adjustment measures of dyadic adjustment and marital commitment. These correlations would support the premise that a supportive, low-conflict relationship with the former spouse is associated with positive adjustment in one's remarriage, and vice-versa. Contrary to hypotheses, the self-reported quality of communication with one's former spouse, comprised of items regarding both conflict and perceived support, was not correlated with remarital quality in the form of dyadic adjustment ($r = -.05$, $p = .62$) or marital commitment ($r = .005$, $p = .96$). According to the participating sample of remarried and co-parenting mothers, relationships with one's former spouse and one's current spouse are distinct and do not appear to experience a spillover strain from one relationship to the other.

Assessing Correlations with Dyadic Adjustment and Marital Commitment

In preparation for running a series of regression analyses regarding remarital adjustment and quality of co-parenting communication, Pearson product correlations among the key variables were examined. Table 10 reports the correlations of variables anticipated to be related to the criterion variables of dyadic adjustment (DAS), marital commitment (MDRCI), and co-parental communication quality (QOCC), which are also summarized here.

Table 10

Intercorrelations among variables included in each regression model

	MASQ	DAS	MDRCI	QOCC
Well-being (MASQ)		.55**	.50**	.09
Dyadic Adjustment (DAS)	.55**		.79**	-.05
Commitment (MDRCI)	.50**	.79**		.005
Remarriage Length	.02	-.08	.09	-.01
Change in RMBI Child Priority	-.003	.06	.02	-
Change in RMBI Past in Past	-.003	-.06	.02	-
Change in RMBI Finances Pooled	-.17	-.12	-.19*	-
Change in RMBI Second-class	.19*	.15	.17	-
Change in RMBI Partner Perfect	-.12	-.24**	-.20*	-
Change in RMBI Adjust Quickly	-.18	-.14	-.13	-
Change in RMBI Success is Slim	.23*	.39**	.38**	-
Change in CBI Co-parenting Beliefs	.19*	-	-	.17
Current CBI Co-parenting Beliefs	-.10	-	-	-.60**
Past CBI Co-parenting Beliefs	.07	-	-	-.42**

Note. MASQ = Mood and Anxiety Symptom Questionnaire; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale; MDRCI = Multiple Determinants of Relationship Commitment Inventory; QOCC = Quality of Co-parental Communication; RMBI = Remarriage Belief Inventory; CBI = Co-parenting Beliefs Inventory.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Parental well-being and remarital quality. Hypothesis two stated that significant positive correlations should emerge between self-reported psychological well-being and ratings of quality in both the remarital and co-parenting relationships. Parental well-being, as self-reported on the MASQ, was moderately and significantly correlated with the criterion variables of dyadic adjustment (DAS; $r = .55, p < .001$) and commitment to one's remarriage (MDRCI; $r = .50, p < .001$). Mothers who characterized themselves as high in positive affect and low in symptoms of depression and anxiety were more likely to also report higher levels of satisfaction in, and commitment to, their remarriages than were mothers who reported current distress in general.

Parental well-being and change in remarriage beliefs. The predictor variable of parental well-being was significantly correlated with self-reported changes in some beliefs about remarriage. Note that a positive change score indicates a decrease in endorsement of a belief over time, and a negative change score reflects the reported growth in a belief over time. Self-reported parental well-being was significantly associated with the degree of change that mothers reported in their beliefs that stepfamilies are second-class ($r = .19, p < .05$), and that remarital success is slim ($r = .23, p < .05$). Change in the belief that adjustment comes quickly was very close to reaching a significant correlation with parental well-being ($r = -.18, p = .052$). Mothers who self-reported higher current levels of well-being on the MASQ were more likely to recall and report decreasing beliefs from pre- to post-remarriage that stepfamilies are second-class and that success is slim, as well as a somewhat increasing belief that adjustment comes quickly in the development of a stepfamily. In other words, endorsement of some problematic beliefs about remarriage reportedly changed over time in mothers reporting

good personal adjustment, simultaneous with the experience of remarrying and forming a stepfamily.

Change in remarriage beliefs and dyadic adjustment. Change in two of the seven beliefs about remarriage had significant associations with the remarital quality variable of dyadic adjustment as self reported on the DAS. Note again that a positive change score indicates a decrease in endorsement of a belief before and after remarrying, and a negative change score reflects the reported growth in a belief. The degree of change in the belief that remarriage success is slim was significantly and correlated with dyadic adjustment ($r = .39, p < .001$). More specifically, a self-perceived decrease in this belief from past to present was associated with more positive ratings of current remarital adjustment. A significant negative correlation was noted between dyadic adjustment and the degree of change in the belief that one's remarital partner is perfect in comparison to the former spouse ($r = -.24, p < .05$). It appeared that the acquisition of this belief over the course of remarriage was associated with adjustment and satisfaction in the relationship. Although belief that one's partner is perfect is seemingly unrealistic, it may be less problematic than other remarriage beliefs if it is reflecting valid satisfaction and compatibility in one's remarriage relative to what was experienced in the first marriage.

Change in remarriage beliefs and marital commitment. Change scores in three of the seven remarriage beliefs were significantly correlated with the second measure of remarital quality regarding commitment to one's remarriage as self-reported on the MDRCI measure. Higher commitment to one's remarriage was associated with larger reported changes over time, namely decreases, in the belief that remarital success is slim ($r = .38, p < .05$). Mothers who reported decreases in this belief since remarriage were

more likely to report higher commitment to their remarriages than were mothers whose slim success belief had not declined as much. Marital commitment was also correlated with increased beliefs over time that finances should be pooled ($r = -.19, p = .05$) and that one's partner is perfect ($r = -.20, p = .05$). Highly committed remarried mothers in this sample reported that they were increasingly likely over the span of their remarriages to wish to pool finances, and to view their partners in an increasingly positive light compared to their former spouses.

Remarriage length and remarital quality. It is plausible that one's commitment or satisfaction within the remarital relationship could be related to the length of one's remarriage. Jose and Alfons (2007) found that marital satisfaction did fluctuate along with the length of one's marriage, whether it was the first or a remarriage. Predictably, marital satisfaction in their sample declined gradually over the years until an increase emerged after 30 years of marriage, a transitional point that is often associated with re-energizing due to the empty nest, financial security, and retirement. They also found that remarried individuals rated their marital satisfaction higher than did first-married persons, which they theorized was related to comparing one's remarriage to the former relationship which was sufficiently unrewarding that it was dissolved. Simple correlations from the data of the present study indicated that the length of the mothers' remarriages was not significantly correlated with dyadic adjustment ($r = -.09, p = .38$) or with marital commitment ($r = .09, p = .33$). Participants in this study reported a restricted range of remarriage lengths, however, which likely limited the ability for length to correlate significantly with other variables. A range of degrees of satisfaction were

reported across remarriage lengths, making note again that mothers in this sample tended to report above average marital adjustment and commitment.

Assessing Correlations with Quality of Co-parental Communication

Surprisingly, parental well-being as self-reported on the MASQ did not demonstrate a significant correlation with the self-perceived quality of communication with one's former spouse regarding co-parenting matters (QOCC; $r = .09, p = .34$). Furthermore, co-parental communication was not correlated with the length of one's remarriage ($r = -.01, p = .90$) or with a reported change in co-parenting beliefs over time ($r = .17, p = .07$). Co-parental communication was associated, however, with the ratings of co-parenting beliefs at present ($r = -.42, p < .001$) and as recalled from prior to remarriage ($r = -.60, p < .001$). Lower endorsement of the problematic co-parenting beliefs, at present and as recalled from before remarriage, was associated with better reported communication with one's former spouse.

Regression Analyses Regarding Remarital and Co-parenting Quality

Five regression analyses were planned for the present study in consultation with the statistical references of Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003). The third hypothesis was that a reported decline in beliefs about remarriage that are presumed to be problematic for adjustment would mediate the expected statistical associations between well-being and current remarital quality. Tests of mediation were conducted to assess whether changes in remarriage beliefs accounted for a significant portion of the observed correlation between parental well-being and relationship quality. Next, to assess the fourth hypothesis that remarriage length would moderate the degree to which change in beliefs and remarital quality were related, two moderated regression analyses were

planned to evaluate whether changes in remarriage beliefs are moderated by length of remarriage in their hypothesized relation to dyadic adjustment and to marital commitment. It was hypothesized that endorsement of the problematic beliefs about remarriage would adapt over time as individuals became accustomed to the unique circumstances arising within their second unions and stepfamily formation, which could in turn correlate with various degrees of marital quality. Finally, the fifth multiple regression tested hypothesis five, in which beliefs about co-parenting were hypothesized to partially mediate the expected statistical connection between individual well-being and current ratings of the quality of co-parenting communication with one's former spouse. The greater the reported decline in co-parenting beliefs presumed to be problematic for adjustment, the more positive ratings of current co-parenting communication quality should be.

Mediating effects of change in remarriage beliefs. The three-step regression approach of Baron and Kenny (1986) was used to test whether changed remarriage beliefs mediated the association of mothers' well-being on dyadic adjustment and commitment to remarriage. The third hypothesis had stated that a statistical relation between well-being and each of the two measures of remarital quality would be at least partly due to changes in beliefs about remarriage. More specifically, a reported reduction of problematic remarriage beliefs from before to after remarriage was expected to mediate a portion of the correlation between individual well-being and one's adjustment and one's commitment within remarriage. The first step of this analysis required that the hypothesized mediators of changed beliefs about remarriage correlated with the independent variable of well-being. Table 10 shows that reported changes in the beliefs

that stepfamilies are second-class and the belief that success is slim for stepfamilies each correlated significantly with parental well-being. Change in the belief that stepfamilies are second-class, however, was not correlated with either of the two remarital quality measures and so only change in the belief that success is slim was evaluated as a potential mediator. Step two involved predicting remarital quality measures via well-being alone, and step three involved predicting remarital quality with both well-being and the potential mediator of change in beliefs about success in stepfamilies.

Table 11 summarizes the results of the mediation analyses. Sobel's test of mediation was significant for change in the slim success belief and its effect on the association between mothers' well-being and their dyadic adjustment ($p < .05$). A reported change in the belief that stepfamilies' chances of success are slim accounted for approximately 7.1% of the variance in the relation between well-being and dyadic adjustment. Change in this belief was not, however, a significant mediator in the connection between well-being and marital commitment, though it did approach a significant value on this conservative test ($p = .051$).

Moderating effects of remarriage length. As stated in hypothesis four, it was expected that the length of one's remarriage would have moderating effects on reported changes in remarriage beliefs and their proposed prediction of the remarital quality measures of dyadic adjustment and commitment. More specifically, it was expected that the reported degree of change in beliefs would be less influential on the remarital quality of respondents who had been remarried for longer periods of time, relative to those in newer remarriages, as their individual experiences within their own stepfamilies would become more relevant than pre-remarital expectations. To determine whether the

Table 11

Results of regression analyses testing whether change in belief that success is slim mediates relations between well-being and two measures of remarital quality

Predictor in Regression	Regression Coefficient	<i>p</i>	% Total Effect Mediated	Sobel Test	<i>p</i>
Prediction of DAS					
Well-being	.49	<.001	-	-	-
Change in slim success belief	.28	.001	29.6	.024*	.048
Prediction of MDRCI					
Well-being	.44	<.001	-	-	-
Change in slim success belief	.28	.001	25.5	.018	.051

**p* < .05.

predictive utility of these changed beliefs differed between those who had been remarried longer versus shorter periods of time, moderated regression analyses were conducted in which dyadic adjustment and marital commitment were regressed onto the change scores of each of the seven beliefs and their interactions, performing a separate analysis for reported changes in each belief. The independent variables of remarriage length and belief change scores were first centered to equate the value of zero with the distribution mean for each, and interaction terms were computed (Cohen et al, 2003). Belief change scores, length of remarriage, and their cross-products were entered into each model in a single step. Of the seven regression analyses, change in two beliefs, that stepfamilies are second-class and that they have a slim chance of success, were significantly moderated by remarriage length.

Regressing dyadic adjustment onto the predictor variables and their products resulted in an R^2 of .10 for change in the belief that stepfamilies are second-class ($F(3, 107) = 3.78, p < .05$) and an R^2 of .21 for change in the belief that success is slim ($F(3, 107) = 9.54, p < .001$). Regarding change in the belief that stepfamilies are second-class, the equation predicting dyadic adjustment revealed that only the interaction of this belief with remarriage length was a significant predictor ($\beta = -.36, p < .01$). For change in the belief that success is slim, dyadic adjustment was significantly predicted ($\beta = .46, p < .001$), as well as from its interaction with remarriage length ($\beta = -.24, p = .01$). Remarriage length alone was not a significant predictor of dyadic adjustment.

Changes in beliefs that stepfamilies are second-class and that success is slim were similarly predictive of marital commitment. Regressing marital commitment onto the

predictor variables and their products resulted in an R^2 of .12 ($F(3, 107) = 4.65, p < .01$) for change in the second-class stepfamily belief and an R^2 of .20 ($F(3, 107) = 8.98, p < .001$) for change in the belief that success is slim. Change in the belief that stepfamilies are inferior was a significant predictor ($\beta = .20, p < .05$), as was its interaction with remarriage length ($\beta = -.28, p < .01$). Also significant were changes in the belief that success is slim ($\beta = .46, p < .001$) and its interaction with remarriage length ($\beta = -.24, p = .01$). Again, remarriage length itself was not a significant predictor of marital commitment.

Having established the presence of significant interactions between reported changes in beliefs and length of remarriage in the prediction of both remarital quality measures, the specific form of these interactions were analyzed post hoc using simple slope interactions. The value of a reported change in the belief that stepfamilies are second-class was predictive of the dyadic adjustment of mothers who had been remarried for shorter periods of time ($\beta = .46, t = 3.20, p < .01$), but not of the dyadic adjustment of women in longer remarriages ($\beta = -.10, t = -.79, p = .43$). Change in the belief that success is slim was predictive of dyadic adjustment for mothers in remarriages of all lengths, but the effect was greater for shorter remarriages ($\beta = .66, t = 4.92, p < .001$) than for longer remarriages ($\beta = .26, t = 2.61, p = .01$). Similarly, the marital commitment of women in newer remarriages was more strongly predicted by changes in the beliefs that stepfamilies are inferior ($\beta = .51, t = 3.57, p < .001$) and that success is slim ($\beta = .65, t = 4.78, p < .001$) than were commitment ratings of longer remarried women ($\beta = -.10, t = -.78, p = .44$, and $\beta = .24, t = 2.44, p < .05$, respectively). These patterns of interactions, depicted in Figure 3 regarding the DAS and Figure 4 regarding

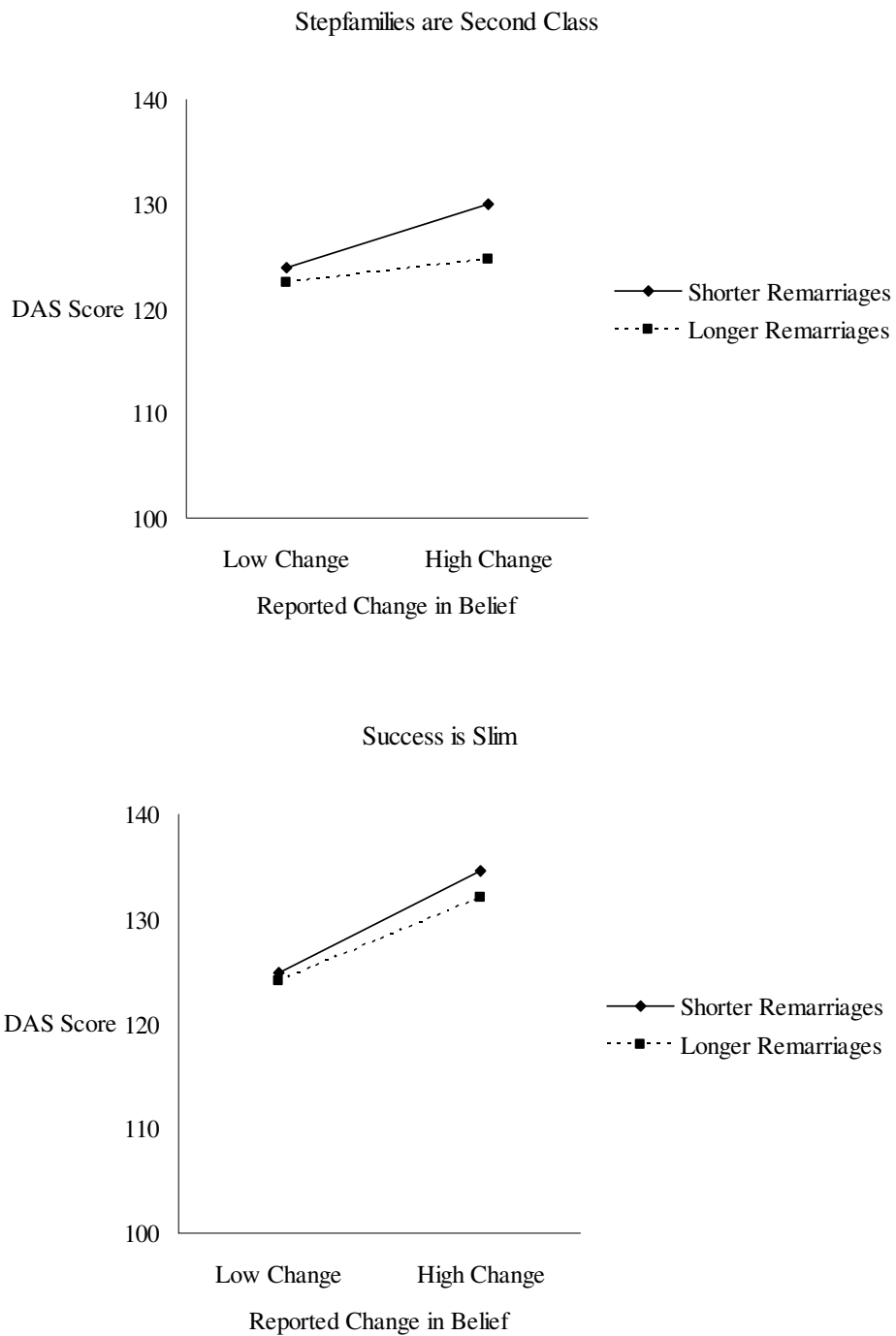


Figure 3. Moderating effects of remarriage length on changes in one's beliefs that stepfamilies are second-class and that success is slim in predicting dyadic adjustment

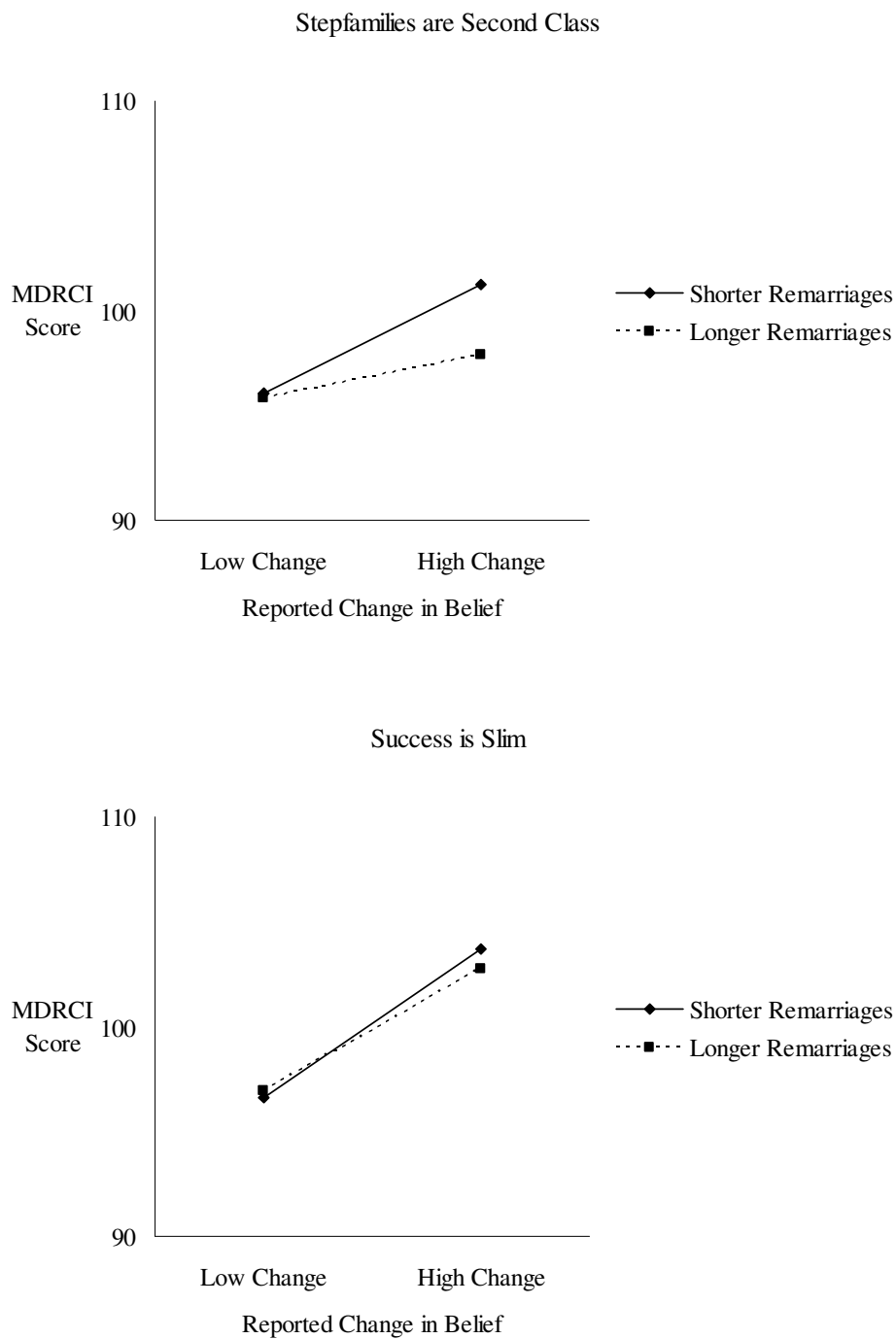


Figure 4. Moderating effects of remarriage length on changes in one's beliefs that stepfamilies are second-class and that success is slim in predicting remarital commitment

the MDRCI, suggest that a reported reduction in these problematic beliefs about remarriage was particularly predictive of the remarital quality of newly remarried mothers, more so than that of mothers remarried for longer periods of time.

Regression Regarding Quality of Communication Between Former Spouses

As stated in hypothesis five, beliefs about co-parenting were anticipated to partially mediate the expected statistical connection between individual well-being and current ratings of the quality of co-parenting communication with one's former spouse. Hierarchical multiple regression was employed to determine if the exploratory measure of current beliefs about co-parenting with one's former spouse (CBI Now) could improve prediction of co-parenting communication quality (QOCC) beyond that made by differences in one's self-reported well-being (MASQ). Participants had reported a significant change in these co-parenting beliefs from before to after remarrying, but this change score was not correlated with co-parenting communication quality whereas current co-parenting beliefs were, so current beliefs were used in the analyses versus past beliefs or a change score. Length of remarriage was also included in the analysis, as planned a priori, but was not expected to contribute significantly to prediction due to its non-significant basic correlations with co-parenting communication quality. Table 10, above, includes the correlations among the variables and Table 12 displays the unstandardized regression coefficients (B) and their standard errors ($SE B$), the standardized regression coefficients (β), and R^2 and ΔR^2 after the second step.

Table 12

Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting quality of communication with former spouse (N = 111)

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>
Parental well-being	.01	.02	.08
Co-parenting Beliefs Now	-.71	.09	-.60**

Note. $R^2 = .006$ for Step 1 and $R^2 = .36$ for Step 2 ; ΔR .

At Step 1, self-perceived quality of co-parenting communication was not predicted by parental well-being (MASQ), $R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 109) = .63$, $p = .43$. After step 2 when length of remarriage and current co-parenting beliefs were added to the equation, prediction improved drastically as R^2 rose to 0.36, $F(3, 107) = 20.27$, $p < .001$. After all variables were entered, well-being accounted for less than 0.5 % of the variance whereas current co-parenting beliefs accounted for 35.6%. As in the other regression equations, length of remarriage did not add to prediction. In summary, ratings of the quality of communication with one's former spouse regarding co-parenting are strongly predicted by beliefs about co-parenting and appeared largely uninfluenced by individual well-being in the participating sample of remarried mothers.

Exploratory Analyses of Fathers' Versus Mothers' Responses

Due to the significant size discrepancy in the samples of participating mothers ($n = 112$) versus fathers ($n = 33$), and the significant differences between the sexes in the dependent variable of co-parental communication quality and at least one type of remarriage belief predictor variable, sex of parent was not included in the central regression analyses. Fathers' perspectives are valuable and often underrepresented in family research, however, which warranted an exploratory analysis to begin to characterize how this small sample of fathers responded and whether their responses differed meaningfully from the mothers who responded. Hypothesis six considered that the responses of remarried mothers and remarried fathers could differ significantly, though specific differences were not predicted. MANOVA was used to test whether remarriage and co-parenting beliefs differed significantly between mothers and fathers.

Comparing fathers' past and current beliefs. This sample of fathers reported no significant changes from before to after remarriage in their ratings of the remarriage beliefs, except for the belief that children should take priority over the new spouse, $M = 1.15$, $SD = 2.41$, $t(32) = -2.74$, $p = .01$. Fathers reported a diminishment in their belief that children should take priority over their new spouses, a transition which would be expected to be beneficial for remarital adjustment. Fathers also reported a significant change in their beliefs about co-parenting as they recalled them from prior to remarriage to currently, $M = 2.46$, $SD = 6.76$, $t(32) = 2.09$, $p < .05$. Although fathers did not report changes in all of their beliefs over time, mothers' change scores had been used for the bulk of analyses in this study and so fathers' belief change scores were used in MANOVA to maintain conceptual correspondence with the results presented for mothers.

MANOVA for mothers' versus fathers' beliefs. A between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance was performed on eight dependent variables of the reported changes in the seven types of remarriage beliefs, and change in co-parenting beliefs. Sex of parent was the independent variable, using the available samples of 112 mothers and 33 fathers. With use of the Pillai's trace criterion to account for unequal sample sizes, the combined dependent variables were not significantly affected by sex, $F(8,136) = 1.04$, $p = .41$.

Although multivariate differences were not significant between the sexes, one between-subjects effect may be cautiously considered. The degree of reported change in the belief that finances should be pooled in remarriages differed between mothers and fathers, $F(1, 143) = 4.47$, $p = .04$. On average, mothers reported a slight increase in this

belief from pre- to post-remarriage ($M = -1.13$, $SD = 3.36$), whereas fathers indicated a near-negligible decrease ($M = 0.18$, $SD = 2.08$).

Summary of Results

Across the analyses employed in this study, hypotheses were only partially upheld. Contrary to the first hypothesis, the self-reported quality of communication with one's former spouse was not correlated with dyadic adjustment or marital commitment. According to the participating sample of remarried and co-parenting mothers, relationships with one's former spouse and one's current spouse appeared distinct in that a spillover of strain from one relationship to the other was not found, as is sometimes reported in the literature (Bray & Kelly, 1999; Visher & Visher, 1982). Discussed below are considerations of unique factors within the present sample that may protect them from this disruption to their remarriage and co-parenting relationships.

Mixed support was received for hypotheses regarding factors contributing to differences in dyadic adjustment and remarital commitment. The strong statistical relation between mothers' well-being and dyadic adjustment was partially mediated by only one type of remarriage belief, a reported change over time in the belief that one had only a slim chance of successfully maintaining a remarriage and stepfamily. Change in other beliefs over time did not appear to share a significant proportion of the variance in dyadic adjustment that was explained by mothers' well-being. Related hypotheses that remarriage beliefs would also mediate the association between well-being and marital commitment were not upheld. Although change in the success is slim belief approached significance, this variable did not emerge as a significant mediator in the association between commitment and well-being.

Some of the proposed moderating effects of remarriage length were observed in the sample of remarried mothers. The correlation between remarital quality and reported changes in the belief that stepfamilies have a slim chance of success was moderated by length of remarriage. Reported changes in this belief was more strongly associated with dyadic adjustment as well as marital commitment for newly remarried mothers than they were for mothers who had been remarried longer periods of time. Although the belief that stepfamilies are substandard to biological families was not significantly correlated with the measures of remarital quality overall, these relationships were moderated by remarriage length such that for shorter remarriages the correlations were significant; the remarital quality of those in longer remarriages was not associated with the belief that stepfamilies are second-class and their marital commitment was associated to a lesser degree than was that of mothers in newer remarriages.

Hypotheses regarding the prediction of co-parenting quality received some support. Ratings of the quality of communication with one's former spouse regarding co-parenting were strongly predicted by current beliefs about co-parenting and appeared largely uninfluenced by individual well-being in the participating sample of remarried mothers. Discussion of the differing importance of beliefs in the co-parenting relationship versus the remarital relationship follows. Practice implications with beliefs regarding the status and success rates of stepfamilies are discussed below, particularly with regards to how they may be used to enhance the remarital quality of newly remarried individuals.

A post hoc multivariate analysis of variance did not reveal significant multivariate differences between mothers and fathers with regards to how their beliefs about

remarriage and co-parenting changed with the experiences of remarrying and forming a stepfamily. Beliefs about pooling finances within stepfamilies may differ based on the sex of the parent, however, in that mothers in this study appeared more likely than fathers to endorse this approach to budgeting. The discussion will consider a range of reasons for fathers' relative reticence in participating in the study, and will explore this preliminary comparison of reported changes in mothers' and fathers' beliefs about remarriage and co-parenting.

Discussion

Overview

This discussion is presented in nine sections. The *first section* compares the sample of participating mothers and fathers to national samples of parents and remarried individuals, to situate the findings within a broader interpretive context. *Section two* presents a general picture of the primary sample of remarried mothers in terms of their remarital adjustment and commitment, compared to the more familiar picture of first-married individuals. *Section three* provides a snapshot of the mothers' beliefs about remarriage and stepfamilies, as well as how their initial expectations appear to have changed over time by their accounts. The discussion will further focus on how changes in these beliefs appear to relate to their current adjustment within their second marriages. This section will also present possible reasons for why the study's hypotheses were only partially supported and will consider explanations for the lack of association of certain beliefs with remarital quality ratings. *Section four* will pinpoint the role of reported changes in two beliefs that emerged as particularly relevant in the prediction of remarital quality, regarding pessimism about a stepfamily's chance for success and the second-best status of stepfamilies relative to biological, nuclear families. Of significant interest was the finding that changes in these beliefs appeared even more relevant for the functioning of those who had been remarried shorter periods of time. *Section five* will review the findings on co-parenting quality and the influence of current beliefs about co-parenting with a former spouse, while *section six* presents the preliminary results for the small sample of fathers regarding changes in their beliefs and remarital adjustment. *Section seven* will revisit the study's hypotheses and will summarize how they were partially

upheld by the current results. *Section eight* discusses the implications of this research for supports and education programs for remarried couples and stepfamilies, followed by a *ninth section* that discusses the study's limitations as well as potential areas for future research.

The Interpretive Context for the Study's Results

To best understand the results of the current study, it is necessary to compare the obtained sample of remarried parents to that which exists in the Canadian population. The most striking difference in the obtained sample versus that at large across Canada is the relatively small number of participating fathers. Approximately three times as many remarried mothers as fathers responded to the survey, yet across several decades men have generally been more likely to remarry than women have been, in Canada and elsewhere (e.g., Hetherington & Elmore, 2003; Wu & Schimmele, 2005). Furthermore, demographers note that when one considers the range of family types that are linked after divorce and remarriage, including both residential and non-residential family members, stepfamilies are somewhat more inclined to be comprised of remarrying fathers and first-marrying women than of remarrying mothers and first-marrying men due to tendencies for men to marry younger women who may not have been married or parented before (Wu, 1998). This implies that there should be an even larger available pool of remarried fathers than remarried mothers eligible for participation in a study such as this.

Two plausible explanations for the observed difference in mothers' and fathers' participation are related to sex differences inherent in child access after divorce, or sampling bias. Though men may be more likely than women to remarry, mothers are still more likely than fathers to hold primary custody or primary residential status with

shared children in cases of joint custody (Statistics Canada, 2004). Many fathers who were informed of this study may not have frequent contact with their children or ongoing co-parenting relationships on which to comment with regards to the current study's questions. Many fathers also report conflicts with former spouses related to securing regular and adequate visitation with their children, as well as regarding other post-divorce arrangements such as financial support (Bonach, Sales, & Koeske, 2005). These ongoing conflicts can interfere with father-child relationships either directly, such as in cases in which fathers are discouraged from or unable to maintain stable relationships with their children, or indirectly, such as when the complexities of linked household become too cumbersome or distressing for some non-custodial fathers to manage (Aquilino, 2006; Buehler & Ryan, 1994). Thus, many remarried fathers may not have met this study's eligibility requirements in terms of amount of contact with their children or with their former spouses as co-parents. In contrast, nearly half of the select fathers who did respond to this survey reported that they had shared custody of their children, communicated with their former spouses approximately once a week, and engaged in shared decision-making regarding their children. Approximately three-quarters of the fathers indicated at least some satisfaction with their current custody or visitation schedule, with a quarter of them reporting high satisfaction. Furthermore, though the fathers reported lower co-parenting communication than mothers did, they did report average levels of quality of the communication with their former spouses which presumably facilitates their ongoing relationships with their children from that union.

Perhaps more likely responsible for the low rate of fathers' participation is a sampling bias, either due to the recruitment efforts failing to reach enough fathers in the

applicable circumstances, or reflecting their reluctance to participate in such a study. Hesitation to participate may be particularly plausible in light of many fathers' feelings that they have been misunderstood and maligned as parents, disadvantaged in divorce and child custody decisions, and disenfranchised from the researchers who attempt to better understand their circumstances (Nielsen, 1999). Attempts were made to advertise the survey directly to men via word-of-mouth recruitment, fathers' and men's groups, and online forums aimed at men, such as a men's health-related message board and fathers' sections of parenting websites. These methods were partially successful, in that participating fathers indicated that they were referred to the study from a wide range of sources, such as parenting websites, men's interest websites, posters in the community, and via word-of-mouth from spouses and friends.

There are vastly more such resources that target women, however, and even seemingly gender-neutral resources such as community centres and general parenting websites appeared to direct many more mothers than fathers to the study. Women have been reported to perceive more problems within their remarriages than men do (Eells & O'Flaherty, 1996), which may explain their greater inclination to seek out information and advice regarding family issues. Some research has found that women are generally less inclined to use the internet than are men (Ono & Zavodny, 2003), but others have reported that when self-concept characteristics such as self-orientation versus other-orientation are considered, women emerge as the more frequent internet users of online opportunities such as message boards as they are more likely to identify with a communal, other-orientation and to express an interest in communicating and connecting with like-minded others (Hupfer & Detlor, 2007). Considering these personal

characteristics instead of biological sex, fathers who seek out community and online resources regarding parenting and stepfamily issues may be particularly motivated to connect and inform themselves in these ways, as well as to share their experiences via this online survey. Overall, the fathers who did provide data could differ significantly from their non-participating counterparts in terms of their success in obtaining custody and visitation with their children, the quality of their co-parenting interactions with their former spouses, or in their usage of various parenting resources and supports. Due to these issues with father recruitment, the sample of participating fathers cannot be considered representative and their results must be considered exploratory in nature and thus interpreted with considerable caution.

Focusing on the primary sample of remarried mothers, several comparisons and contrasts to Canadian census data are noteworthy. Reported education levels and household incomes are comparable to recent national averages. Slight differences exist between the participating sample and the available pool of remarried mothers in terms of ethnicity, stepfamily structure, and use of formalized support services when transitioning from divorce to remarriage. This sample of mothers more frequently self-identified as North American and less frequently identified as European, relative to the most recent census data available. In the 2006 Canadian census, 31.6% of the population identified North American as their single ethnic origin response and 20.3% indicated a European single ethnic origin, in contrast to the proportions of 71.4% and 3.5% in this sample. This may be an artefact of the census allowing respondents to indicate multiple ethnicities whereas the present study requested a forced choice of only one ethnic category. Given our nation's large number of multiple-generation Canadians of

European and other ancestries, respondents may have differed in their choices of which ethnicity to acknowledge in this forced choice. The representations of British Isles, Caribbean, Latin, and African ethnicities were in close keeping with that of the Canadian population. French, Aboriginal, and Arab heritages were somewhat underrepresented, however, and mothers of Asian ancestry were absent from the current sample. Thus, the results should be considered as best reflecting the experiences of middle-class Caucasian North American mothers; remarried mothers who identify with minority cultures within North America may have reported different views. Given the differences with which various cultures can view family, divorce, and remarriage, it should not be assumed that the patterns of beliefs and experiences presented by this sample of remarried mothers would align necessarily with all others.

A wide variety of child custodial and visitation plans were reported by the remarried mothers, reflecting the true uniqueness that exists in stepfamily life and underlining the challenge of describing a “typical” stepfamily. Four stepfamily structures are recorded by the Canadian census: households with children only from the wife’s first marriage, those with children only from the husband’s first marriage, blended families in which both spouses bring biological children from previous relationships, and blended families in which the new spouses bring children from their previous relationships and have also borne one or more children together. The latter two blended family structures are considered throughout the clinical and empirical literatures to be more complex in terms of household patterns, roles, and relationships, as there are more family members and a greater number of boundaries, roles, and allegiances to be established within and across the linked households. Among the sample of remarried mothers who participated

in the current study, there appeared to be an overrepresentation of both types of blended families relative to the current Canadian population. Participants were more likely to reside in blended families with or without common children than they were to report a stepfamily with children only from one spouse's prior relationship. As a result, the stepfamily dynamics of the sample of mothers who responded to this survey may be more complex than that of many other remarried parents. Linking households with two former spouses, instead of one, may necessitate more active decision-making to develop schedules, choices, and values that work for all involved. The choice by complex stepfamily mothers to participate in the survey could have been motivated by hope that aspects of the survey could help them navigate through these dynamics, by raising awareness of some of the challenges to be faced. Alternately, participants who have successfully adapted within complex stepfamilies may be eager to share their positive experiences for the benefit of others who are in transition, a theme that was mentioned by several participants when asked why they completed the survey.

Relative to Canadian population data on formal service usage after divorce, including personal counselling, education programs, and support groups, this sample appeared more likely to take advantage of available formal supports within their communities. They reported higher rates of use of personal counselling for either self or child, participation in divorce education programs, and involvement in support groups regarding divorce or stepfamily transitions. High rates of support-seeking could be related to the higher complexity of these stepfamilies compared to the national profile, in that formal services may have been of great benefit in making the many adjustments to the new family structure. Reports of frequent service usage could also be an artefact of

the ways in which this online survey was advertised, as participants may have been more likely to encounter the survey when seeking information or resources through an organization that agreed to promote the study, such as family resource centres, therapy offices, and other community-based support agencies. More mothers indicated that they learned of the study through a parenting website or word-of-mouth, however, than through a service agency. Overall, this sample of mothers appears to be resourceful in finding and using both formal and incidental supports and information. Interacting and communicating with others in similar circumstances, both in person and online, could have contributed to the degree of change in remarriage and stepfamily beliefs that was reported over time, by providing a larger context or norm in which remarried mothers could situate their experiences and beliefs about stepfamilies and remarriage. Participation by individuals who feel more isolated in their stepfamily experiences may have elicited different findings.

The participating sample reported high relationship satisfaction. Only 7.6% of the entire sample of mothers ($n = 11$) and fathers ($n = 1$) were categorized on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale as being in currently distressed marriages. The mean adjustment scores for both mothers and fathers were slightly higher than that of the sample of married persons who completed the DAS in Spanier's (1976) validation study. Participants also reported average communication quality with their former spouses and co-parents, similar to that reported by co-parents in the standardization sample reported by Ahrons (1981) and correspondent with other findings that former spouses are likely to report both friendly contact and conflictual interactions (Fischer et al., 2005). Approximately half of this sample indicated that they sometimes perceived their co-

parenting relationship to be conflictual, and nearly a quarter indicated that conflict occurred rarely or never. Approximately one quarter of this sample reported that it was often or always conflictual, similar to the 28% of Ahrons' sample reporting high conflict. This sample reported lower levels of perceived support than did Ahrons' sample, however. Approximately half of this sample perceived the relationship to be sometimes supportive, versus almost two-thirds of Ahron's sample. This relatively restricted range of relationship satisfaction, both within the remarriage and the co-parenting relationship, provides an important context for the study's findings. Those who are currently experiencing significant distress in either relationship would conceivably report different results with regards to how their beliefs and expectations about remarriage and stepfamilies have changed over time.

In summary, the findings of the present study are most reflective of middle-class North American remarried mothers who tend to enjoy average quality of relationships with their current and former spouses. Their complex stepfamily households and usage of several supportive resources have provided them with experience and information that has likely influenced their beliefs and experiences about remarriage and stepfamily life in a supportive way, and the findings below should be interpreted within this context. Individuals in significantly different circumstances may have held different beliefs and expectations, either at present or before remarriage, which may lead to alternate associations with their well-being and relationship adjustment.

Mothers' Well-being and Remarital Quality: The Big Picture

Returning to our imaginary portrait gallery of various families, recall that many of the images depicting remarried couples and stepfamilies were blurry in their frames. The

high rate of subsequent divorce in second marriages and the series of adjustment hurdles this can create for couples and children alike necessitate that the portraits of remarriages and stepfamilies be refocused. As other remarriage and stepfamily researchers have repeatedly stated, there is a need to clarify in particular what factors contribute to positive adjustment within these family contexts so that others can benefit from their guidance and the incorporation of these factors into interventions. The mothers in this study have allowed an important view into their remarriages, by providing accounts of the adjustment in their relationships and themselves and reported changes over time regarding their beliefs about the functioning of their remarriages and stepfamily environments. This discussion now embarks on presenting a broad view of the mothers' well-being and remarital functioning, which then provides the backdrop for more focused snapshots of their remarital beliefs and co-parenting interactions over time.

The contextualizing variables captured by the current portraits include mothers' individual well-being, the length of their marriages, and relationship quality measures of dyadic adjustment and commitment. These factors are common to all types of relationships, though there is a need for greater clarity regarding the specific presentation of each within remarriages and stepfamily contexts. In light of clinicians' and researchers' concerns about relationship stability and satisfaction in remarriages versus first marriages (Rodrigues et al., 2006; Wineberg, 1992), it is noteworthy that this sample of remarried mothers produced higher average dyadic adjustment and commitment scores than the averages obtained in samples of first-married individuals (Spanier, 1976, Spanier & Thompson, 1982). These simple findings offer reassurance that relationship satisfaction is possible after divorce, despite the societal tendency to cast remarriages in a

less desirable standing than first marriages. Based on the experiences of these mothers, re-partnering can often result in a very gratifying and stable union.

It was hypothesized that personal well-being, and to a lesser extent, remarriage length would be correlated with and predictive of adjustment and commitment within the remarriages surveyed. Enjoyment of a satisfying romantic relationship is often linked to one's personal qualities and emotional adjustment (Lakey et al, 2004; Whisman et al., 2004). This group of mothers suggested that as a group, they saw themselves as average in terms of their psychological functioning, with scores reflecting average levels of depressive and anxious symptomatology as well as positive affect. As expected with any sample of individuals, a range of well-being scores were observed indicating that some mothers were currently experiencing more distress than others.

Given the complexities of maintaining a healthy relationship, factors other than individual well-being can arise to dilute the association between individual and interpersonal functioning, such as was likely in operation for the current sample in that well-being was only moderately correlated with dyadic adjustment and commitment to remarriage. Those who characterized themselves as high in positive affect and low in symptoms of depression and anxiety were more likely to also report higher levels of satisfaction in, and commitment to, their remarriages than were mothers who reported current emotional distress in general, though a significant portion of relationship quality variability that went unexplained by self-reported individual functioning. It is uncertain whether one's perceived well-being contributes to a satisfying remarriage, or whether an enjoyable relationship enhances well-being. A continual interaction between the two, as well as an interplay with factors not captured here, is most plausible.

Length of remarriage was included in the current analyses because relationship satisfaction often wanes over time, particularly in the childrearing years (Bonds-Raacke, Bearden, Carriere, Anderson, & Nicks, 2001; Hatch & Bulcroft, 2004; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007) which reflected the developmental context of the vast majority of participants. Jose and Alfons (2007) found that marital satisfaction fluctuated along with the length of one's marriage and declined gradually over the years until an increase emerged after 30 years of marriage when many couples are able to enjoy their empty nest, financial security, and retirement. In this study, remarriage length was not significantly correlated with dyadic adjustment or commitment. It must be noted, however, that only a restricted range of marriage lengths was captured by the present sample. The majority of mothers had been re-partnered for less than five years on average, at which time satisfaction still could be at a relative high. Individuals from longer remarriages than the ones included here may have reported lower satisfaction, varying along with the typical challenges and complaints that arise across lengthier marriages. Had a larger sample with a broader range of relationship lengths been available for the present analyses, a significant negative correlation with remarriage length may have been found.

Changes in Mothers' Beliefs About Remarriage and Stepfamilies: Comparing Snapshots in Time

As posited by social-cognitive theory, one's beliefs and expectations about close relationships undergo a continual evolution over time, shaped through interactions with others, self-evaluations, and feedback as to whether others share similar perceptions (Baucom & Epstein, 1990). Inevitably, these beliefs will exert their own

counterinfluence on interpersonal relations as well, the results of which were the primary motivation to examine transitions in beliefs about remarriage and stepfamily life. In this study, mothers' endorsements of the seven measured beliefs about remarriage and stepfamilies, both now and as they recalled them from prior to remarriage, provide snapshots in time to compare how their initial expectations appear to have changed since entering a new family structure. Methodologically, retrospective reports of beliefs cannot provide the clearest representation of their true evolution, but allow for tentative speculation about some of the cognitive processes the mothers may have undergone after remarrying, nonetheless. It appears by their accounts that some beliefs persisted over time while others became more or less salient, suggesting some degree of flexibility of cognitions, that was recalled by participants as being concurrent with the experiences involved in remarrying and forming a stepfamily. An initial understanding of these snapshots later permit a focus on how shifts in certain beliefs appear to uniquely influence adjustment and commitment in remarriage.

Reported to be relatively constant over time was the mothers' belief that their new partners are "perfect" or, at minimum, that they represent a marked improvement in comparison to the former spouses. As a group, mothers maintained that their current positive regard for their remarriage partners was as strong as it had been initially, although those who reported an increase in the belief tended to also enjoy higher dyadic adjustment and marital commitment. The relative stability across participants of the view that one's new partner and relationship are near perfect was not expected and is somewhat surprising, as it is often assumed that the greater familiarity with a partner's character that develops over time leads to a less idealistic view of their qualities and

habits (Bonds-Raacke et al., 2001). It has been theorized that individuals initially form idealized views of their partners in order to enhance feelings of closeness and attachment, but that over time these images are replaced with more realistic assessments of the partner's inevitable flaws. This evolving view can lead to feelings of disillusionment, decreased affection, and sometimes divorce, depending on the magnitude of the discrepancy between the original idealized view and the reality that later becomes apparent (Miller, Niehuis, & Huston, 2006). Interestingly, however, other longitudinal research has suggested that initial idealism in newlywed couples is actually predictive of stability of love after 13 years, rather than a decline in attachment (Miller et al., 2006). Partners who initiated their marriages with strong positive illusions of one another have been found to be more in love as newlyweds and to enjoy some protection from the typical declines in love over time, versus those who did not endorse such illusions at the outset of the relationship. Positive illusions did not appear to prohibit divorce, however, indicating that they benefited marital love more so than marital stability in the long term, two relationship constructs which have been repeatedly demonstrated to be distinct within assessments of marital relationships (e.g., Previti & Amato, 2003). As noted by Fine, Kurdek, and Hennigan (1992) in their exploration of stepfamily myths and well-being, it must be remembered that strong endorsements of what is typically viewed as a myth do sometimes reflect one's actual positive experience and these positive experiences should not be discounted for not adhering to reported averages. In the current study, given the high ratings of remarital adjustment and commitment, stable beliefs that the current partner is better than the former spouse may simply reflect a reality that these individuals have been fortunate to meet a more suitable match than they

had in their first, dissolved marriages. Subscale items such as “A new spouse should be a better marriage partner than the one he/she replaces” and “A new spouse should be everything the problematic old spouse was not” may be interpreted in this context as “Partner is perfect for me and my relational needs at this stage of my life,” more so than “Partner is perfect” in absolute terms.

As anticipated, several beliefs were reported to have decreased since remarrying. Mothers’ endorsements suggested that they perceived declines over time in the beliefs that children should take priority over the new spouse, that emotions about the former spouse should stay in the past, that stepfamilies are an inferior structure compared to biological nuclear families, and that stepfamily members should be able to quickly adjust to their new circumstances. Reports of declines in the belief that children should take priority over their new spouses is in concordance with Papernow’s (1993) assertion that in the early stages of stepfamily development, family members tend to divide themselves along biological family lines as these are the easiest and most reliable connections within the developing stepfamily system. When asked to consider the stability of this belief from pre- to post-remarriage, mothers in the current sample reported a decrease over time in their belief that children should take priority over the new spouse in a remarriage. Based on their current assessments, they seemed to perceive a shift from a child focus to a marital focus within their own choices and behaviours. This reported shift may facilitate a strengthening of the marital bond, or may reflect a mother’s observations over time that as her children grow and adjust to the remarriage they are less needy of her focus, thus freeing her attention to prioritize her spouse more so than before. Also, some remarried couples may have experienced relationship challenges that extended beyond

the expected initial adjustment period and which may have necessitated that the marriage take precedence for a period of time in order to preserve it. This sample of mothers reported relatively high current remarital satisfaction on average, but without a longitudinal assessment of remarital satisfaction or of parent-child relations, it is not possible to determine which, if any, of these potential explanations are appropriate. Nevertheless, given previous findings that the quality of remarital adjustment begins to exert a greater impact on children's well-being in the later years of remarriage (Bray & Berger, 1993; Bray, 1994; Yuan & Hamilton, 2006), this reported change in mothers' priorities may actually benefit children in the long term more so than might be initially apparent, if the marital focus indirectly protects children from experiencing another parental divorce.

This shift in mothers' child-focused beliefs may be at odds, however, with how young people view the responsibilities of mothers who remarry. Although there are few clear norms in place for remarital and stepfamily transitions, it appears that adolescents have been able to articulate their own standards and expectations for parent-child relationships within these transitions. For example, Moore and Cartwright (2005) found that approximately half of a sample of college-aged young adults from both divorced and non-divorced families believed that remarrying mothers should prioritize their children over their new spouses due to children's dependence on their mothers. They also thought that mothers' loyalty should be guided in consideration of the fact that children do not choose to enter stepfamilies but rather they become stepfamily members via a parent's choice to remarry. The majority of the responding young adults also indicated that mothers should assume more responsibility than stepfathers for discipline of children and

should intervene on their children's behalf when disagreements arose between their children and the new spouse. Youth who expect their mothers to maintain a warm and authoritative role after remarriage may struggle with shifts in their attachment to and security with their mothers if they come to feel secondary to their stepfathers. Indeed, in a qualitative study by Koerner, Rankin, Kenyon, and Korn (2004), more than half the adolescents with lived experience in stepfamilies also reported diverging perceptions from their remarried mothers regarding re-partnering after divorce, particularly the quality of their relationships with their new stepfathers and the ways in which their relationships with their mothers were affected by her remarriage. Despite many of the mothers' beliefs that their children were happy with their re-partnering, many adolescents reported dislike of their stepfathers as well as dissatisfaction in the amount of attention they received and closeness they felt with their mothers. Neither study of adolescent perceptions examined youth outcomes, however, to provide comment on whether their perceived declines in the mother-child relationship affected them to a significant negative extent; nor were mothers' perceptions of child well-being assessed in the present study. Further research is needed to continue to explore the impact on mother-child relationships and stepfamily dynamics in households in which mothers and their biological children hold differing ideals about how mothers should prioritize their children versus their new spouses.

As noted above, mothers responding to this survey tended to perceive a decline in their belief that emotions towards the former spouse and first marriage should stay in the past. Remarrying individuals are often advised by professionals and popular media sources of the importance of having moved on emotionally from their first marriage

before starting a second one (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1982). The decline in this belief as reported by the current sample may suggest, however, that these mothers came to believe that there cannot always be a clear demarcation of feelings about that person in the context of continued contact due to shared parenting. While forgiveness of blame for the marital breakdown is facilitative of ongoing co-parenting quality (Bonach & Sales, 2002), eliminating all positive emotions towards the former spouse may not be necessary. Indeed, in order to continue a functional, long-term shared parenting relationship, some degree of positive feeling and cooperation is likely and desirable (Ahrons, 1981; Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999). Rather than the lack of positive emotions towards a former spouse, it is a lack of preoccupation and low hostility that are considered most beneficial to a harmonious co-parenting alliance (Masheter, 1991; 1997). While unresolved romantic feelings or intense hostility towards the former partner would complicate not only the co-parenting relationship but also the remarriage, positive feelings between former spouses can reflect and enhance an adaptive commitment to shared parenting that is likely to benefit their children and can possibly even improve their opinions of one another post-divorce (Masheter, 1999). For these mothers to have seemingly relaxed the belief over time that one must release all feelings towards the former spouse may have contributed to the average quality of co-parental communication that they reported.

A problematic belief that is pervasive throughout societal perceptions is that adjustment to a stepfamily will happen quickly after remarriage. While a minority of stepfamilies do report an accelerated transition in which members hold similar expectations and bond quickly, it is more likely that a family atmosphere will develop at

a gradual pace with many unique characteristics relative to nuclear families.

Furthermore, anticipation and acceptance of this gradual pace make eventual closeness more likely, instead of trying to force family-like relationships that are not yet sustainable (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Mothers in this sample reportedly perceived that their belief in rapid adjustment lessened over the time they had been remarried, in that they thought they were less likely to endorse this belief now than they would have been before remarriage, on average. Without prior personal experience living in a blended family, individuals may think that the transition to sharing one's home with a new spouse and each other's children may be a straightforward and uncomplicated one. Pill (1990) found that a sizable minority of remarried individuals actually did not think about or plan for the stepfamily transition in any way while courting, or had only a vague anticipation of the adjustment period that would follow. For the current sample of mothers to have the same expectations about a fast transition would then not be uncommon. Also plausible is the expectation that because the introduction of one's partner to one's children has gone smoothly throughout courtship, that forming a new stepfamily home will also unfold without challenges. Researchers and professionals with expertise in assisting remarried partners and their stepfamilies typically witness, however, a two- to five-year transition period in which the stepfamily members adapt to both the expected and unanticipated negotiations and challenges that arise (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2001; Bray, 1999; Bray & Kelly, 1998), which Jacobson (1995) had likened to a merging of familial mini-cultures.

In a qualitative analysis of a small sample of stepfamilies, however, Michaels (2006) reported that quick adjustment was an important theme in successful stepfamilies' own accounts of what led to their positive adjustment together. Stepfamily members who

characterized themselves as thriving and happy families were likely to describe in interviews that not only did a strong sense of family develop within their stepfamilies, but that this group identity formed quickly after remarriage. Remarried partners described immediate efforts to create new family traditions, routines, and a shared family history. They also reported widespread acceptance that the stepfamily system was best for all members involved, from parents to children to extended relatives. Individuals were regarded as family members, irrespective of biological versus step status and all children in the households were described as “ours,” versus “yours” and “mine.” Michaels recommended that professionals who support remarrying couple should reconsider the low expectations for stepfamily cohesion that they encourage when advising partners not to expect closeness immediately, if ever. Yet, it is unclear from her analyses how the other biological parents were involved within the stepfamilies she interviewed. Striving for a nuclear family model within a blended family household may be much easier to achieve if there is little co-parenting with a former spouse, especially if stepchildren are younger at the time of the remarriage. Nevertheless, the current sample of remarried mothers may too have experienced relatively easy and positive transitions to stepfamily, which could be a marker of success and a source of happiness and pride for them.

One of the beliefs assessed here by the Remarriage Beliefs Inventory was reported to increase over time by the mothers' accounts. On average, they tended to endorse more strongly at present the belief that finances should be pooled between spouses, which was also associated with stronger ratings of marital commitment. This view is in contrast to the findings of Allen, Baucom, Burnett, Epstein, and Rankin-Esquer (2001), who found that remarried spouses, relative to first-married spouses, tended to indicate stronger

preferences for autonomy and separateness between partners regarding finances, as well as childrearing. Remarried women in their study were more likely to endorse standards for financial autonomy than were remarried men, an attitude which was unrelated to marital adjustment. Allen and colleagues theorized that finances and rearing of children from previous relationships are issues that today's remarried partners view as distinct and external from the functions and adjustment of their romantic relationship together. If each partner has financial obligations related to past relationships such as alimony, child support, and legal costs, this may necessitate autonomy regarding finances, making the sharing of finances between remarried partners a complex process that is likely best navigated on a family-by-family basis.

Despite the beliefs that remarried partners may hold regarding financial arrangements, in practice it appears that many remarried couples gradually do develop a system involving shared finances at least to some extent. Van Eeden-Moorefield, Pasley, Dolan, and Engel (2007) found that women in longer remarriages enjoyed greater financial security than newly remarried women, suggesting that the practice of pooling assets does become more likely over time. Consistent with some previous research, their sample of remarried women reported that finances were managed in their new relationships with a combination of both pooled and separate bank accounts, thus benefiting both from their own financial independence and equality, as well as from the support of the new partner. Additional evidence suggests the existence of a general societal belief that a biological father's child support payments should be reduced when a biological mother remarries, reflecting an assumption that the new husband becomes the head of the household and will assume financial responsibility for his new wife's children

(Coleman, Ganong, Killian, Kusgen-McDaniel, 1999). Belief in shared finances appears to align with a social exchange theory of remarriage in which one's financial assets are considered within an overall evaluation of his or her appeal as a mate, whether assessed consciously or not. For example, Schmiede, Richards, and Zvonkovik (2001) found that remarrying women were not likely to explicitly cite the financial status of their new partners as a motivator in the decision to marry him, but that failure to provide financial support was a common reason for subsequent divorces. Although it is unclear which reasons have motivated remarried mothers in the current sample to adapt their financial preferences, they appear to perceive a shift in their financial management that is in accordance with the practices of other remarried women and with some of the assumptions that others may hold about such decisions within stepfamilies.

Beyond examining how mothers' individual beliefs reportedly changed over time, it is also enlightening to review the correlations among several pairs of remarriage beliefs and how their associations appeared to evolve over time when assessed retrospectively. Some beliefs remained connected within the mothers' experiences from past to present, whereas others appeared to lose their relation over time. Examining the interrelations of beliefs as recalled from past to present provides additional information about the way these mothers have come to view the complexities of their remarriages and stepfamilies. Initially, a significant negative correlation existed between endorsement of the belief that children should take priority over the new spouse, and the belief that finances should be pooled. Mothers' recollections of these beliefs prior to remarriage suggested that the more strongly that one believed in children being the priority, the less likely one was to endorse the sharing of finances with the new spouse. Perhaps these mothers' initially

prioritized their funds for their children's benefit and were concerned that pooling their money could disadvantage their children, relative to the needs of their new spouses or their stepchildren. When asked to rate current beliefs, however, this correlation became non-significant. Generally, the mothers had reported a tendency to prefer a shift towards shared finances over time, along with greater prioritization of the spouse relative to the children than was felt at the beginning of the remarriage, but at present there was sufficient variation in the strength with which mothers endorsed these beliefs such that the earlier pattern was no longer consistently reported among them. It may be that as the stepfamily developed and solidified, some mothers' feelings of security and comfort with pooled finances increased and they became less concerned with separating resources for their biological children's benefit. This changing correlation could also represent an increased devotion and commitment to the remarriage as the centre of the stepfamily and a desire to manage the home as close to the nuclear model as possible.

Evolving correlations were also noted across the two times for the beliefs that children should be priority and viewing stepfamilies as a second-class family form. Mothers reported a significant positive correlation between these beliefs prior to remarriage, perhaps suggesting that they had concerns about the ability of a stepfamily to meet the needs of their biological children. In the present study, however, no significant correlation existed between the mothers' current endorsement of beliefs, indicating that the sample of mothers observed a range of changes in these beliefs. Some may have still held both, while others reported decreases in either one or both of the beliefs. With the experience of living in a stepfamily, it may be that these concerns were eased over time and some mothers became more satisfied that their children were thriving within the

stepfamily context. On the other hand, given that overall the child priority belief had decreased across the whole sample of mothers, the diminished correlation between that belief and the second-class belief may suggest that some mothers felt increased concern about the status of stepfamilies relative to first-marriage nuclear families.

Current beliefs about quick adjustment and the chance of success in a stepfamily also changed in their reported relation to one another from before to after remarriage. No significant correlation was described between these beliefs before remarriage, but when asked about current beliefs, the mothers endorsed a negative correlation between the two. At present, the more one believed that quick adjustment was possible, the less likely one saw a slim chance of success for stepfamilies. Perhaps the experiences and challenges of transitioning to a remarriage and stepfamily eased these mothers' concerns and reinforced beliefs not only that success was possible, but that the adjustment period may pass more quickly than anticipated. Conversely, mothers who were not convinced of rapid adjustment were more likely to be pessimistic about a stepfamily's chance for success. If they were finding their own transition to stepfamily life difficult and slow, concerns about their own family's sustainability may have arisen over the years.

Four correlations between pairs of beliefs persisted over time, according to the mothers' recollections. The correlation between the beliefs that success is slim and that stepfamilies are inferior to biological families endured over time, from the mothers' perspectives. The more concern one had about stepfamilies being second-class, the more likely they also were to believe that stepfamilies had little chance of success, seemingly regardless of the passage of time from pre- to post-remarriage. Also persisting was the correlation between the pooled finances belief and the likelihood of quick adjustment

within a stepfamily. Perhaps the sharing of resources was seen as a result of, or a means of securing, a smooth and automatic transition to the new family unit. The negative correlation between beliefs in sharing finances and the likelihood of a stepfamily not being successful was also reported as consistent over time. Mothers who endorsed the pooled finances approach were less likely to rate a slim chance of success for stepfamilies, again implying that pooling resources was seen by respondents as being key in the solidification of the stepfamily. Also persisting over time was the correlation between beliefs that the new partner is relatively perfect and that past emotions should stay in the past. Mothers' who endorsed the notion that their new spouse was a markedly better partner than their former spouse were more likely to also believe that emotions about the dissolved relationship and former spouse should not persist. This association suggests that the ability to clearly demarcate feelings within their past and current relationships was consistent over time; if one was able to distinguish between these feelings earlier in the remarriage, they appeared to continue to be able to do so after years past. Conversely, those who did not report their new partner as clearly a better match than the former spouse may have also experienced more lingering feelings.

It was expected that well-being and changes in beliefs would be correlated, as one's outlook on various life circumstances should influence one's adjustment, and vice versa. Mothers' self-reported well-being was significantly correlated with a reported reduction in the beliefs that stepfamilies are second-class and that success is slim, and nearly significantly correlated with an *increase* in the belief that adjustment comes quickly. Again, no causal direction can be confidently implicated in these simple correlations. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the perception of one's own flexibility in

certain beliefs about remarriage and stepfamily functioning is associated with a sense of personal well-being and commitment to the second marriage. The near-correlation between the well-being measure and the belief in quick stepfamily adjustment is particularly interesting, in that the expectation of instant love and cohesion in a stepfamily is usually described as a risk factor for both adults and children to have difficulty in adjusting after remarriage (e.g., Bray & Berger, 1993). Differing expectations between family members regarding how and when their relationships should develop can lead to confusion, conflict, shame, and a sense of failure (Papernow, 1993).

Remarital quality measures were associated with reported changes in a subset of the seven primary remarriage beliefs. Interestingly, ratings of both satisfaction and commitment within remarriage correlated with a reported increase over time in the belief that one's partner is perfect; the acquisition of this belief over the course of remarriage was associated with better adjustment and satisfaction in the relationship. Although an increase in this belief over time is seemingly unrealistic and could conceivably lead to problems with disillusionment about one's partner, it may be less problematic than other remarriage beliefs if it is reflecting valid satisfaction and genuine contentment in one's remarriage. Also, perceiving a partner to be one's perfect match may have a different meaning in the context of a remarriage versus a first marriage, in that remarried partners are likely comparing their new partner's suitability to that of their former spouse. To view one's new partner as an improvement over the former partner could seemingly then have positive implications for marital satisfaction, as observed here.

Of the seven remarriage beliefs that participants were asked to focus on, some appeared only minimally connected to remarital quality. It is interesting to note the

absence of a significant correlation between dyadic adjustment and change in the belief that finances should be pooled, though change in this belief was correlated with remarital commitment. Higginbotham (2005) found within the large standardization sample responding to the Remarriage Beliefs Inventory that this belief was positively associated with marital adjustment and satisfaction in remarried individuals. It was theorized that the decision to pool finances was representative not only of a commitment to a shared future but also ability to communicate about a complicated issue. The mixed findings in the present study is also in keeping, however, with Allen and colleagues' (2001) report that financial autonomy beliefs were unrelated to marital adjustment one way or another in their sample, as well as with results of a survey of marital problems occurring in midlife couples, both remarried and first-married. Henry and Miller (2004) found that while financial matters were rated by both married men and married women as the most common marital problem overall, remarried couples were significantly less likely to mention this concern than were first-married couples. Instead, remarried couples referred to dealing with children as the primary concern in their relationships, reflecting that child-rearing issues can be more salient and demanding of a couple's problem-solving focus in blended family contexts. Furthermore, although their survey revealed that finances were rated as the most frequent marital concern overall, their effect of actual satisfaction was considered by couples to be less distressing than issues related to values, communication, commitment, decision-making, emotional intimacy, and sexual relations. In light of these mixed findings, it is important for clinicians working with remarried couples not to assume they practice a certain approach to financial management, or to interpret a desire for financial autonomy as indicative of mistrust, dissatisfaction, or lack

of commitment to the marriage, as this may be more accepted by remarried individuals than for first-married partners.

Also notable in its absence was a correlation between remarital quality and the belief that children should take priority over the new spouse. Conceivably, a prominent focus on child well-being over the spouse's preferences may result in unhappiness or resentment between partners, particularly a stepparent who enters the marriage without children of his or her own and perhaps holds more nuclear family ideals. It has been suggested that the higher divorce rate in second and subsequent marriages may be in part due to the fact that remarrying partners are trying to establish and solidify their relationships with children present, versus first married couples who are far more likely to be without children yet (Bray, 1999; Coleman et al., 2001; Pill, 1990). Forming a romantic relationship while children are present necessitates a focus beyond the dyad which may inhibit the strength of the marital bond that is created. This hypothesis was not supported in the current study, however, as a significant negative correlation between high child priority beliefs and lowered remarital quality was not observed. This sample of remarried mothers, many of whom were also stepmothers to their new partner's children, reported high satisfaction and commitment in their relationships overall, apparently unrelated to beliefs about the relative priority of children versus spouse.

Predicting Mothers' Remarital Quality: A Close-up on Changes in Beliefs Regarding the Status of Stepfamilies

As described above, several beliefs were prominent in the opinions of remarried mothers either now or in the past, some of which also correlated with a range of remarital quality levels. The presence and variation over time of beliefs about remarriage and

stepfamilies is most interesting to the extent that they may affect one's experiences and satisfaction within a blended family context. It was hypothesized that the degree to which beliefs were reported to diminish over time would be predictive of current remarital adjustment and commitment. Respondents who noted a shift away from the measured problematic beliefs were expected to report a more satisfying remarriage than would those whose problematic beliefs remained stable, in part due to adapting their expectations to better reflect a realistic and well-adjusted transition to a stepfamily. The length of one's remarriage was also expected to interact with this influence, as individuals who had been remarried for longer periods of time would have surpassed the typical adjustment period and would have had more opportunities to adapt to their new circumstances and compare the realities of their stepfamily life to initial expectations.

To better understand variations in remarital quality across this sample of remarried mothers, the lens now focuses on changes in two particular remarriage beliefs that demonstrated interesting connections with remarital adjustment and commitment and thus offer unique explanations for some of the variations noted between portraits. Deeming that a stepfamily's chance of success is slim and that stepfamilies are second-class reflect important assumptions about the social standing of blended families, which understandably could have a significant impact on how happy one is to be part of such a family structure. Always providing a context to reported changes in one's beliefs, individual well-being remains the backdrop in which the impact of these beliefs are best viewed, as it explained the largest proportions of variability in remarital quality outcomes.

While it was anticipated that one's personal well-being would be the strongest predictor of remarital quality, changes in the extent to which one endorsed problematic beliefs about remarriage and stepfamilies was also expected to mediate and help to make meaning of the more specific nature of this strong relationship. Generally, the degree of pessimism regarding the likelihood of a stepfamily being successful was relatively stable over time, according to the mothers' recollections of this belief. Variability across participants was high, however, as some mothers did not strongly endorse this belief for the past or present while others appeared more concerned about the risks of the family's dissolution. Higginbotham and Adler-Baeder (2005) had found that pessimism about the chance for remarital success was negatively correlated with remarital satisfaction, a result which was replicated within the current sample of remarried mothers. Dyadic adjustment and current commitment to remarriage were both significantly correlated with a reported decrease in the belief that success is slim. Although the causal direction cannot be assumed, a reported reduction in this belief from before to after remarriage was noted by respondents who were currently satisfied and secure within their remarriages. It may be that objective questioning of this pessimistic view over time allowed mothers to relax and enjoy their relationships without fear of a second divorce. Alternately, experiencing a satisfying remarriage may have assured them that the fear had been unfounded all along.

Perhaps the belief that is most problematic as well as most entrenched in societal norms is that of the biological nuclear family being the standard against which all other family forms should be measured, captured in the present study as the belief that stepfamilies are second-best to nuclear families and sometimes referred to as the standard North American family bias. It is hoped that if one did hold nuclear family stereotypes

initially, positive experiences within a stepfamily over time would counteract the belief and allow for a flexible appreciation of what it provides as well as or better than the former nuclear family. Again, the causes for changed beliefs as reported by the current sample of mothers cannot be determined in this survey, but this type of experiential process may have occurred for the current sample of mothers who reported declines in their beliefs at present compared to before remarriage. Before becoming a part of a blended family, mothers may have had misconceptions or low expectations of a stepfamily's potential to act as a satisfying and functional arrangement compared to the assumed benefits of the original family. Regardless of what process influenced their recollection of their beliefs over time, it seems positive that these remarried mothers came to acknowledge that the stepfamily can work and can provide a happy and nurturing environment for all its members.

Current adjustment in one's remarriage was best predicted by a combination of one's self-reported well-being, with a small but statistically significant improvement in prediction due to a reported increase in the belief that remarriages can be successful. Interestingly, it appeared beneficial to one's current remarital quality to report declines in the belief that stepfamilies are second-class and that a stepfamily's chance of success is unlikely, but even more so for mothers who were in relatively shorter remarriages. Increased optimism about the social status and success rates of stepfamilies was particularly enhancing for the remarital quality of newly remarried mothers, more so than that of mothers remarried for longer periods of time. Although mothers may have held these problematic beliefs before or at the beginning of their remarriages, those who shifted these views early into the relationship were even more likely to enjoy better

dyadic adjustment and stronger commitment than were mothers who had been remarried longer. For those who were remarried longer, the change in these beliefs did not appear to offer the same boost to remarital quality at present, though it cannot be determined from the present study at what point in time beliefs had changed, whether it was earlier in their remarriage or relatively recently. Thus, it is unclear whether an earlier shift in beliefs may have once been enhancing to their relationships but was no longer as influential at their later phase of marriage, or whether a belief change that occurs later in remarriage fails to exert the same positive influence on marital functioning that an early change has. It may be that a positive shift in one's beliefs early on in the remarriage could reflect a relatively easy transition to stepfamily life, or a concerted effort on one's part to overcome problematic ideas that may otherwise inhibit early adaptation. This fits with Michaels' (2006) conclusion that the couples heading successful stepfamilies have been proactive in developing their own meaning of family and are not limited by prevailing beliefs. As years pass, remarital adjustment may be more affected by immediate expectations such that beliefs held before the remarriage have little impact on current interactions or satisfaction.

Considered together, the influence of changes in these two beliefs appears to suggest that the quality of new remarriages is enhanced by a positive view of stepfamilies and their status in society. Being able to appreciate a household that differs from the standard North American family can be difficult if one has little exposure to a variety of family structures beyond the biologically related nuclear family, and negative stereotyping by stepfamily and non-stepfamily members alike is common (Coleman & Ganong, 1995), which unfortunately can result in stepfamily maladjustment. For many

individuals, their own remarriage may represent their first close encounter with an alternative type of family. The transition necessitates a cognitive process that incorporates new ideas about stepfamily relations, resulting in either an improved or worse assessment of how satisfactory one's new family experiences are. Although societal stereotypes may persist, being able to shed one's own endorsement of negative labels has positive implications for one's satisfaction and adjustment in a family structure that differs from the assumed norm (Ganong et al., 1990). This type of cognitive process occurs in many new experiences, but may be particularly complex in the case of stepfamily transitions, as one must incorporate not only societal impressions that are either negative or unrealistically idealistic but also competing beliefs and experiences of various stepfamily members (Coleman & Ganong, 1995). For much of this group of mothers, their cognitions reportedly were altered with time and experience to include a more positive view about the opportunities and status afforded by stepfamilies, and their own remarital satisfaction appeared to be enhanced by the assimilation of new beliefs. This apparent cognitive flexibility is encouraging not only for the adjustment of remarried partners and their families, but also for the evolution of the societal view of blended families which is hoped to follow suit in time.

Predicting Mothers' Co-parenting Quality: A Chance for Re-takes Post-Divorce?

The ongoing relationship with one's former spouse through co-parenting can be a source of stress and conflict, or support and contentment, in general or at various intervals. Although a couple may decide to end their marriage, there are many instances in which their interactions and communication improve after separation if they are able to concentrate on building a constructive relationship with which to raise their shared

children. The ease with which this improved relationship develops can depend greatly on one's personal adjustment and the expectations that are brought into co-parenting. In this study, mothers tended to enjoy co-parenting relationships of at least average quality according to their reports, and current beliefs about co-parenting emerged as a key factor in explaining differences in the quality of communication with one's former spouse about childrearing.

Similar to the strong influence of personal well-being on current remarital adjustment, it was hypothesized that individuals with higher positive well-being and lesser endorsement over time of a set of problematic beliefs about co-parenting would enjoy a better quality of communication with their former spouses regarding childrearing matters, including perceptions of both conflict and perceived support. Co-parenting dyads in which one or both parents has adjustment difficulties often have more challenges in communicating peacefully and effectively with one another regarding their shared children. Surprisingly, well-being explained little with regards to variability in the quality of one's communication with the former spouse and co-parent. Contrary to hypotheses, the self-reported quality of communication with one's former spouse was not correlated with or predicted by perceptions of one's own well-being. As a methodological explanation, perhaps this sample did not include a sufficiently broad range of individuals experiencing either significant personal distress, or significant post-divorce conflict. It may also be that respondents represented their personal qualities and interpersonal functioning as more positive than objective raters would consider them to be, which would make meaningless the relation between self and co-parent ratings. More optimistically, it is also plausible that remarried parents with very positive remarital

relationships, as frequently reported in this group, may be protected from the expected negative influence of communication problems with the former spouse, as spousal support is a strong buffer against the impact of a variety of stressors (Neff & Karney, 2004). Indirect support that aligns with this possibility is the finding that reported co-parenting communication was not correlated with dyadic adjustment or commitment, indicating that respondents were not experiencing a significant negative spillover effect, in which the remarriage suffers from the presence of ongoing conflict with the former spouse.

Unexpectedly, current beliefs about co-parenting offered a far more meaningful explanation for co-parenting communication variations than did mothers' well-being. Endorsement of these problematic beliefs was significantly negatively correlated with co-parenting communication quality, now and as recalled prior to remarriage. More negative beliefs about co-parenting were predictive of worse co-parenting communication. Interestingly, mothers tended to endorse more of the problematic beliefs about co-parenting at present than they recalled holding before remarriage, allowing for some speculation about whether they might have reported even better co-parenting communication in the past. This strong association between current co-parenting beliefs and co-parenting communication was found even in spite of the exploratory nature of the measure of co-parenting beliefs and its poor reliability. Refinement of the measure may reveal further evidence of the importance of past or present beliefs in describing variations in co-parenting quality.

This association between beliefs and relationship quality appears to operate in reverse with regards to the co-parenting relationship versus the remarital relationship.

Beliefs and expectancies reportedly improved and became more optimistic with regards to remarriage and stepfamilies, with a trend towards better remarital adjustment as a result. In the co-parenting relationship, however, it seems that beliefs became more negative over time and the co-parenting relationship followed suit to a minor extent, though still within average quality. The strength of co-parenting beliefs in predicting co-parenting communication quality was particularly noteworthy in light of the exploratory nature of this set of questions about co-parenting beliefs and the poor psychometric properties of this preliminary version of such a measure. Refinement of this questionnaire in the future may permit the emergence of other pertinent findings of how beliefs about the former spouse relate to personal adjustment and co-parenting quality. Although the causal direction of the perceived worsening of co-parenting beliefs cannot be ascertained, the associations suggest significant potential for interventions and supports that incorporate beliefs as agents of change in difficult co-parenting relationships. Co-parenting workshops are often recommended for divorcing individuals who wish to share parenting responsibilities, to promote at least a cordial and business-like relationship between co-parents and to minimize the ill effects of overt parental conflict on children after divorce.

Changes in Fathers' Beliefs About Remarriage, Stepfamilies, and Co-parenting: Test Shots

With the small number of fathers who participated in this study, only a few preliminary comments are possible about the ways in which changes in their beliefs influence their functioning in remarriage and co-parenting relationships. Converging the mothers' and fathers' survey responses into one large sample of remarried parents was

considered, but the sample of fathers differed from the mothers on a few important dimensions. This group of fathers were slightly older than the mothers and they reported worse co-parenting communication with their former spouses, though still within the range of average communication compared to clinical samples. More relevant to the hypotheses of this study was the relative stability of the fathers' beliefs as reported from before to after remarriage. The mothers recalled changes in their beliefs over time, largely in terms of reductions of beliefs that were conceptualized as problematic for remarital and stepfamily adjustment. The fathers, in contrast, recalled their earlier beliefs as being relatively similar to the ones they currently held, with the exception of the view that children should take priority over the new spouse. As with mothers, the fathers agreed that this belief declined over time as a greater prioritization of the remarital relationship developed. Mothers had noted an increase over time in their problematic beliefs about co-parenting with the former spouse, whereas fathers reported a decrease in these types of beliefs in spite of their reportedly more difficult co-parenting relationships.

Although mothers and fathers reported different patterns in their endorsement of various beliefs since the time of remarriage, it appeared that these small changes led to their actual beliefs becoming more similar over time, as there were no significant differences between ratings of their current beliefs overall, other than a slight difference that was noted regarding pooling finances. Mothers reported they became more likely to want to share finances in the stepfamily whereas fathers reported a near-negligible decrease in their endorsement of this type of arrangement. This difference may reflect the greater likelihood for fathers to be providing financial support to biological children in other households, and their wish to reserve a necessary portion of their income for

those obligations. Typically, mothers are more likely to have their biological children living with them within the stepfamily home, in which case shared finances may benefit them. If further study revealed this to be a reliable difference between men's and women's preferences for financial management within a blended home, then this would be an important point of discussion for remarrying couples and a potential topic to include within remarriage education programs. Otherwise, the relative similarity of mothers' and fathers' current beliefs may be an encouraging sign of how remarrying partners might come to agreement on the various challenges and decisions that are common to many stepfamilies.

Summary of Partial Support for the Study's Hypotheses

Returning to the initial questions posed by this study, partial support for the hypotheses was observed. In terms of the hypothesized relation between the remarital relationship and the co-parenting relationship, a negative spillover of conflict from co-parenting to remarriage was not observed, although this was apparently to the benefit of the responding mothers as they generally reported satisfaction and support in both relationships. Psychological well-being related to remarital quality in the form of significant positive associations with both dyadic adjustment and remarital commitment, but interestingly, was not correlated with the measure of co-parenting communication quality. Thus, while those reporting better individual adjustment also tended to enjoy better remarital adjustment, personal well-being appeared unrelated to the experience of conflict and support in the co-parenting relationship with the former spouse.

Of greatest interest in the current project was the hypothesized role of shifts in expectations and beliefs in accounting for some of the expected associations between

well-being and each of the two measures of remarital quality, dyadic adjustment and marital commitment. For one of the seven measured remarital beliefs, a decline over time in problematic remarriage beliefs was linked to partial reports of remarital enhancement, as depicted in Figure 1. More specifically, change in the belief that stepfamily success is slim was a significant mediator of the relationship between well-being and dyadic adjustment, though not between well-being and commitment. Also partially supported was the hypothesis that remarriage length would moderate the relationship of changes in some beliefs and remarital quality, as a change in one's beliefs that success is slim and that stepfamilies are second-class appeared more important for remarriages of shorter duration, when members are likely still adjusting to their family transition.

Figure 2 depicted a mediation model between individual well-being and the quality of communication between co-parents. Interestingly, current beliefs about co-parenting appeared as the significant predictor of communication quality, while well-being demonstrated no meaningful association with this outcome. Although this result was unanticipated, it is nevertheless interesting in terms of how relevant beliefs can be in former spouse interactions and provides useful insight into helping former spouses to get along better.

Overall, these findings lend partial support to a social cognitive model of remarital quality, in which expectations and beliefs appeared to change over time and influence relationship quality. As posited by practitioners and researchers alike, various problematic beliefs about remarriage transitions are more likely to be held in light of the lack of clear guidelines and norms for stepfamilies. Although respondents in this study

recalled that they initially held many beliefs considered to be unrealistic or problematic, they also perceived that at least two of these specific beliefs changed over time, seemingly concurrent with their ongoing experiences of living in a blended family and contributing to higher ratings of remarital quality. The cognitive process that is assumed in this change was adaptive for remarital functioning, as an earlier change (as reported retrospectively) was even more enhancing to dyadic adjustment and commitment than was a belief change that reportedly occurred later in the remarriage. Despite the lack of support for the mediating influence of five of the seven beliefs, this partial support for the study's hypotheses provide encouragement for a social cognitive view of remarital adjustment and for a clinical focus on some of the expectations and beliefs that can influence the well-being of remarried parents.

Working With Beliefs About Remarriage: Implications for Practice

Social cognitive theories of interpersonal relationships have consistently demonstrated the importance of beliefs and expectations in guiding interactions between close individuals, and how upsetting it can be to an individual, a dyad, or a family unit to have hopes go unmet (e.g., Baucom et al., 1996). Thus, a general aim of education and interventions for remarried couples, stepfamilies, and co-parenting former spouses is to raise awareness of one's own expectations and standards for interactions, to help identify discrepancies between individuals in terms of these hopes, and to facilitate a compromise or enhanced understanding between different positions. Although only a small number of beliefs assessed in this study showed evidence of an impact on the current quality of the remarital and co-parenting relationships, these associations have relevance for education programs and interventions to support both stepfamilies and former spouses. Changes in

two beliefs that emerged as influential in the earlier phase of remarital adjustment – stepfamilies are second-best, and stepfamilies have a slim chance of success – are ones that appear amenable to modification through greater awareness of stepfamily diversity or therapeutic interventions to address fears about future instability. In particular, the moderating influence of remarriage length that occurred on the impact of these two changed beliefs on adjustment necessitates focusing these educational efforts on people who have recently remarried and formed stepfamilies suggests that the sooner that problematic beliefs can be tempered, the greater the potential benefit to the remarried couple's adjustment. Co-parenting beliefs are also worthy of focus by education programs, peer support groups, and formal interventions. This section will discuss ways in which beliefs are already being addressed in resources for remarrying couples and their families, as well as how to intensify and improve these efforts via the media, community education, support groups, and therapeutic offerings.

Media and community education. Many mental health and well-being campaigns have demonstrated the benefits of having several levels of support at our disposal to accommodate a range of needs and various degrees of adjustment, from basic informational support and community education, to emotional support from peers, to skills-based interventions and practical recommendations from professionals. Education and informational support are necessary foundations in supporting remarried couples and the stepfamilies they create, for those accessing information on their own as well as for those who seek the assistance of family therapists (Browning, 1994). For many people who are re-partnering, media and the popular press serve as the most prominent sources of information and guidance for what to expect and how to navigate these transitions.

Unfortunately, these sources may have inadvertently contributed to the prevalence of problematic beliefs such as those that stepfamilies are inferior to nuclear families and that they are susceptible to difficulties and failure. Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1985) reviewed women's magazines published between 1940 and 1980 and found that in the earlier decades of the 20th century, a sense of optimism regarding stepfamily functioning was apparent. Problems were largely attributed to temporary conflicts between children and stepparents and were assumed to resolve in time with familiarity and the adoption of an authoritative parental role by the new spouse. The tone of popular media articles became more cautious and warning beginning in the 1960s, however, and a significantly less hopeful message was conveyed to readers; blended families were increasing in numbers and finding that their transitions did not necessarily follow easy or obvious patterns. Since that article review was published, stepfamilies have now virtually exploded in numbers across North America and the world, and many more stepfamilies are forming due to divorce and remarriage versus the historically more common stepfamily that developed due to remarriage after a parent's death. Media practices have also changed, giving parents more frequent and direct messages about the ways in which their decisions impact their children's adjustment, as well as more authoritative expert advice about how they should be optimizing their functioning. It would be interesting to examine how today's messages about stepfamilies differ from those presented in earlier decades, as magazines are still a very common way in which scientific research findings are communicated to the public. In particular, beliefs about whether children should take priority over the new spouse may be discussed in mainstream publications and may influence remarried parents' ideas about how to balance their loyalty to each of these

relationships. Resources aimed at parents of younger children may be more likely to emphasize a child-oriented focus than would media for parents of older children, for example. On a more promising note, articles and stories in which remarried partners share their personal accounts of their own transitions to their stepfamilies have potential to convey more constructive beliefs to a broad audience, regarding the typical adjustment phase to expect and how successful a stepfamily can be with appropriate expectations and preparation.

Television and film have also served as prominent conduits of social perceptions about families. Leon and Angst (2005) found that most popular films typically portrayed stepfamilies through a negative or, at best, mixed lens. Common themes communicated in 26 mainstream films were stepchildren's resentment of stepparents, nuclear family myths, and abusive stepfathers, all presented as either negative extremes or conversely, with an unrealistic optimism. Without consciously critiquing such sources of stepfamily imagery, remarrying parents and their children could develop either expectations that their stepfamily will experience rapid bonding, or considerable fears that they are as doomed to fail as the troubled families portrayed on screen. The authors recommended to stepfamily counsellors and educators a list of more realistic film clips to share with clients, as well as discussion points to help contextualize the unsupportive or unrealistic clips in a more reassuring and constructive manner. Those working to educate and support remarrying partners and their stepfamilies should maintain an awareness of the media messages regarding blended families, taking care to suggest pieces that reflect the range of stepfamily types and adjustment levels that exist beyond clinical populations. Although the rate of divorce in remarriage is higher than in first marriages, approximately

half of stepfamilies do remain intact (Michaels, 2006), meaning that many examples of successful stepfamilies exist. Remarried individuals will benefit from seeing media images of successful stepfamilies, particularly to counterbalance the problematic beliefs that success is slim and that stepfamilies are an inferior structure, which were found in this study to be particularly relevant for remarital adjustment. Having realistic models of well-adjusted stepfamilies is beneficial for the adjustment and commitment of remarried partners, particularly when such models are evident early on in remarriage. Portrayals of successful stepfamilies may give a sense of hope to newly remarried partners who are navigating the earliest transitions to stepfamily life and perhaps feeling discouraged. Similarly, hearing and seeing constructive illustrations of cooperative co-parenting is also valuable to exemplify how former spouses can work together towards their children's best interests.

In addition to presenting useful images of remarriages, stepfamilies, and co-parents to the general public, it is also important for media and educational programs to portray a range of positive stepfamily types rather than a single image of how to achieve the ideal successful stepfamily. Seeing a diversity of positive models is more likely to raise hopes and increase the likelihood of noticing a family somewhat like one's own, towards which they can aspire, which the current findings suggest would significantly enhance remarital functioning. Schrodts (2006) identified two distinct stepfamily styles out of a typology of five discrete types that could be classified as well-functioning families: functional and bonded stepfamilies, in contrast to evasive, ambivalent, and conflictual stepfamilies. From a large survey of stepchildren ranging in age from adolescence to middle adulthood, he found that functional and bonded types of

stepfamilies were both described by family members as having low conflict and satisfying levels of involvement between members, though were distinguished from one another by higher reported degree of closeness, communication style, and perception of stepparental authority in the bonded families. Of note is the fact that nearly half of the sample described the stepfamily in which they grew up as either functional or bonded, demonstrating that the avoidant, distant, or conflictual stepfamily cannot be considered the norm, despite their frequent portrayals in popular media. Similarly, Braithwaite and colleagues (2001) identified several different trajectories for potential stepfamily development, again in which two well-adjusted types following either an accelerated or prolonged pathway was frequently cited in the bonding of a successful stepfamily. Giving stepfamily members multiple models towards which they can aspire lessens the risk of feeling like one's own version of a stepfamily is inferior, and reminds researchers and counsellors that one single prescription for success does not exist.

Beyond encouraging remarried couples and their families with more hopeful and reasonable images of stepfamilies, it is also important to disseminate information and positive images about the realities of blended family life to the general public. Information about family transitions is most often targeted at the individuals who are currently undergoing or living within such households, but it cannot be predicted who will eventually enter a remarriage or who may eventually serve as a source of social support to a remarrying individual. Spreading positive and diverse messages throughout the broader population will expand awareness of unique stepfamily circumstances and encourage sensitivity to their needs and their contributions to the well-being of their members. General educational opportunities often exist through community centres,

libraries, churches, schools, and parenting groups. Family support personnel and stepfamily members interested in advocacy should remain alert to opportunities to educate others about these family transitions.

Peer support. Awareness that others have overcome the same decisions and problems may sustain partners through difficult phases of the transition, as well as provide a receptive audience to hear about successful outcomes. In this digital age, many remarried individuals and stepfamily members have already taken it upon themselves to share their stories, challenges, and advice with one another across a plethora of heavily populated websites, online journals, and chat rooms devoted to stepfamily and co-parenting issues where newly or soon-to-be remarried individuals can regularly interact with more experienced stepfamily members. Together, many of these individuals are creating a new identity for the stepfamily and co-parents themselves, filling in the gap in the societal script. For example, one study of the online narratives of stepmothers found that as a means to deconstruct long-standing myths regarding “wicked stepmothers” and to counteract the negative effects felt from being characterized as such, participants actively created an opposite narrative in which biological mothers were “wicked” and stepmothers were “good” (Christian, 2005). Online communities attract such large numbers of diverse individuals that they also provide opportunities to hear about the creative ways that some families have adapted and responded to their circumstances; reading about former spouses who still gladly socialize with one another along with their new spouses, for example, can pique one’s curiosity about how others are able to manage relationships that are often assumed to be challenging. Clinicians should familiarize themselves with a range of written, audio-visual, and online resources and select a few to which they might

refer clients who would benefit from examples of real stepfamilies and shared parenting alliances. It would also be particularly recommended that community presentations and other resources such as books, online journals, and support groups be led by stepfamily members, not just by professionals who interact with and support them, to hear stories of success and creativity from those with similar experiences. The current results suggest that these efforts could contribute to an enhanced view of the social standing of remarriages and stepfamilies and thus to better remarital quality overall.

Professional support. In some cases, interventions may be required to help stepfamily members or co-parents counteract the negative effects they experience in part due to myths and unmet expectations. It would be interesting to survey stepfamily therapy clients regarding the beliefs they held at therapy initiation; it seems plausible that these family members would be even more prone than the general remarried population to hold problematic beliefs regarding a low social status of stepfamilies. Unfortunately, although several workshops and interventions exist for the benefit of stepfamily transitions and may be capable of improving pessimistic views of the stepfamily (for reviews see Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Hughes & Schroeder, 1997), their effectiveness has often been difficult to evaluate due to low attendance. Co-parenting workshops are required for separating couples in some jurisdictions during the divorce process and are often otherwise sought out in an effort to cope with conflict after separation (though ongoing co-parental relations after remarriage are often neglected by educational programs, according to the review of Hughes and Schroeder, 1997). Stepfamilies, on the other hand, have been noted to be far less likely to seek outside support or to participate in formal programs than are newly divorcing families even when

self-guided, home-based programs are available (Duncan & Brown, 1992). Low participation in stepfamily programs makes general informational support and prevention of problems via realistic expectations all the more important.

How might professionals make stepfamily workshops and interventions more relevant and appealing to those they aim to benefit? Examination of the types of beliefs strongly endorsed in the current study may be able to shed light on the specific issues that remarried couples could be grappling with and which may draw them into participation in available programs. For example, one's approach to financial management appeared to evolve, at least according to retrospective reports, in part based on beliefs which could be discussed in this type of program. Although finances are often cited as one of the most common issues of contention between married partners, there is some question about how detrimental any disagreement is to marital satisfaction. Nevertheless, some have recommended that educational materials incorporate a component on financial management for blended family homes in particular, as spending habits and saving needs may depart significantly from the patterns that serve many nuclear families well (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Lown, McFadden, & Crossman, 1989). Findings in the current study suggest that beliefs about finances can change considerably over time and may differ between men and women. If the majority of mothers come to prefer a shared financial arrangement over time, as noted within this sample, this shift may raise issues between partners who had previously agreed on separate finances to support each of their own offspring. It is unknown, however, whether the mothers follow this belief in practice or whether their partners are in agreement with this financial approach, and thus it is unknown whether this presents a source of conflict in their remarriages that would

have benefited from discussion prior to marriage. Regardless, the topic is worth discussing in remarital preparation workshops. Financial sharing within a stepfamily may connect to other decisions and values that then warrant clarification between partners, such as whether a stepparent's financial support of a stepchild permits them a voice in the child's upbringing or motivates the couple to pursue official adoption of the child (Coleman et al., 2001). By raising the topic of financial management before or early in remarriage, couples should be better prepared to discuss and decide which approach will best meet their family's needs over time. Couples who are aware that many others have changed their financial strategy over time will be better prepared for the possibility that their needs and preferences may shift as well, buffering them from some of the potential stress of unclear expectations between partners.

Another belief that warrants discussion is that of adopting a general stance of prioritizing one's children versus one's new spouse after remarriage, a belief that was reported to decline over time according to mothers' retrospective reports. Many existing programs for remarried couples incorporate discussion of the vulnerability of the remarriage relationship and encourage development of general couple-building skills of communication, problem-solving, and emotional bonding (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Significant changes in this belief were reported over time, suggesting a cognitive process which some individuals may wish to discuss with their peers and their new partners. Spouses who both bring children to the remarriage may have differing expectations of their relative standing with one another, particularly if their children are in different developmental stages that require more or less parental attention and direction. For example, a partner with relatively independent adolescent or young

adult children may look forward to marital privacy and intimacy that is not as feasible for a spouse with school-aged children or a child with special needs. Expectations may also differ between partners who vary in their visitation with their children; a spouse with only occasional contact with their youngsters may be disappointed, lonely, or resentful of a spouse with primary custody whose children are present most of the time. Discussing the realities of these arrangements will help partners to manage their expectations and negotiate solutions; doing so in a group setting of peers can also serve to generate new ideas about how to handle differing beliefs or simply to empathize with shared concerns.

Most importantly, stepfamily groups and family- or individual-level therapeutic interventions allow a forum in which to express fears and beliefs about the social status of stepfamilies and their chances for success. Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) reported that the majority of remarriage and stepfamily formation support groups do incorporate components designed to validate the stepfamily experience, such as discussing stigma, lack of supports, and strategizing ways to advocate for stepfamily needs within other social institutions of schools and the legal system. The connection of these beliefs to remarital quality as observed in the current analyses support the continued and expanded inclusion of this topic, particularly for groups and workshops targeted towards newly or soon-to-be remarried couples, who stand to benefit the most from modification of pessimistic beliefs about stepfamilies.

To promote acceptance of one's own stepfamily status, clinicians can also work actively with new couples and their children to create a vision of a stepfamily in which bonds are based on affection, role responsibility, and respect, rather than solely on biological ties. This would also serve to counterbalance the problematic belief that

stepfamily adjustment should come quickly, by focusing on gradual interpersonal processes and habits rather than simple family status. While the quick adjustment expectation was reported by mothers in the current study to diminish over time anyway, particular focus on adapting this belief within stepfamily programs could potentially prevent many initial difficulties that could arise due to this assumption. This may involve brainstorming all the elements of blended family life that members enjoy, such as having another parenting partner or new siblings, developing new holiday traditions, or having someone in the household with expertise on a new subject. Writing new narratives of negative stepfamily stories is a popular process in therapy and stepfamily support groups, helping individuals to identify and begin challenging the stereotypes that exist, rather than becoming discouraged by their critical themes. For example, participants might be encouraged to re-write fairy tales that rely heavily on negative stepfamily images, to reinterpret the details of the story in such a way that better takes into account the context of a remarriage or stepfamily (Bernstein, 1999; Jones, 2003). These exercises can help remarried partners and stepchildren to see one another as individuals rather than as mere role occupants, a cognitive distinction that has been demonstrated to exert a positive influence on relationship satisfaction (deTurck & Miller, 1986).

With regards to co-parenting interventions, attention to beliefs about the former spouse remains a crucial component of the curriculum. The finding in this study that beliefs predicted co-parenting communication quality far beyond the ability of individual well-being reinforces the role of cognition in ameliorating difficult co-parenting relationships. It can be tempting to vilify the former partner but clinicians can encourage co-parents to identify positive attributes about one another that benefit their children.

Amicable co-parenting teams can also serve as positive role models by guest-speaking at workshops and describing how they have managed to see beyond their differences to work together for their children's best interests. Although a supportive co-parenting relationship may take a very long time to develop after a contentious marital dissolution, it is hoped that witnessing the possibilities evident in others' relationships can spark the beginnings of a cognitive process that can evolve over time.

Public policy. Finally, government and public policy makers have a role to play in supporting remarried couples and stepfamilies, via the procedures and systems through which stepfamily members must pass, including schools, hospitals, public housing, courts of law, financial systems, child care legislation, and census polls. For example, difficulties may arise when stepparents are not permitted to collect ill children from school or when adolescent stepchildren are denied student loan funding due to an assumption that their stepparent will provide financially for their education. Furthermore, neglecting to collect sufficiently detailed census data regarding remarriage and blended households prevents an accurate understanding of the diversity of family types, maintains their legal and political invisibility, and fails to encourage the development of resources and policies to support all family types (De' Ath, 1997). Although seemingly only minor hassles, these types of issues conceivably contribute to problematic beliefs that stepfamilies are secondary to nuclear families who are inadvertently offered more convenience and social standing through these procedures. By routinely acknowledging remarital and stepfamily status and adapting policy to incorporate various types of families, administrations in effect are legitimizing stepfamilies and their presence in society, rather than contributing to the repeated sense

of misfitting the norm, which present findings suggest has implications for remarital adjustment. Policy-makers should consult with stepfamily members to gain an understanding of the range of stepfamily types that need to be represented, and consider flexible options to better serve family configurations beyond the nuclear norm. Given the social costs of repeated divorce and maladjustment, it is in the interests not only of stepfamilies themselves but also various public agencies to help contribute to healthy beliefs in the aim of enhancing remarital quality and stability.

Limitations of the Current Study and Directions for Future Research

While this study sheds light on certain beliefs that can impact remarital adjustment and co-parenting quality, it also includes several limitations. As discussed above, the small number of fathers who participated in this study is a significant limitation to the generalizability of the findings. Given the number of remarried men in stepfamilies in the national population and the relative paucity of research on fathers throughout marital and family transitions, it was hoped that the results of this study would be able to speak to fathers' perspectives as well as mothers' views. A range of recruitment methods were employed to try to reach remarried fathers and encourage their participation, but were only partially successful. The obtained sample only permits a very preliminary speculation of how mothers' and fathers' beliefs about remarriage and stepfamilies compare, in part due to the small number of sex differences noted and largely due to the low representation of fathers. Future efforts to include fathers in similar research should consider not only how to better reach male populations but also how to present research invitations in ways that are more appealing to fathers. When recruiting, for example, it may be necessary to re-word advertisements to reflect a

concerted interest in hearing fathers' viewpoints as opposed to parental perspectives in general. Highlighting the potential benefits to fathers may also encourage participation, as some men's groups have concerns about the ways in which family theory and research has been used to fathers' disadvantage in divorce and custody proceedings, perhaps contributing to reluctance to promote this type of study to their members.

Mothers readily responded to the online survey, but a more heterogeneous sample would have enhanced the generalizability of their results, as limited ranges were observed for some measures. It would be interesting to see results based on relationships with a broader range of satisfaction and commitment levels, to see if some other beliefs have an association with those outcomes. Women who were less committed and satisfied with their remarriages might have endorsed more problematic beliefs at present and described more stability or more increases in these beliefs over time. For instance, the belief about the partner being perfect was anticipated to be maladaptive and unrealistic but was actually correlated with higher dyadic satisfaction in the current sample. Would women who noted a decline in this belief over time have reported lower satisfaction and commitment? Or, might they have accepted the common belief that one will inevitably discover flaws about the partner over time that will not necessarily impede marital adjustment? Similarly, this sample of mothers as a group was relatively content in their co-parenting relationships with their former spouses. Those who experience more conflict and less support in shared parenting interactions may have indicated stronger endorsement of the problematic co-parenting beliefs, or may have reported the oft-cited spillover of co-parenting issues into the remarital relationship. Recruitment efforts again may have been able to secure a broader range of relationship satisfaction, had more

advertisement focused on therapeutic settings and other agencies providing support to couples and families.

Another methodological consideration with regards to participant recruitment, irrespective of gender, concerns the use of an internet survey versus more traditional survey methods such as inviting participants to complete the study in person at the university or within the community agency at which they first learned of the project. Although it is estimated that approximately two thirds of adults are at least occasional internet users (Horrihan, 2006), this method of data collection would nevertheless have limited the participation of individuals without internet access or familiarity, who may also be a population of wider diversity than the present sample in terms of education, socio-economic status, and personal well-being, any of which could also limit the range of relationship quality ratings and belief endorsements that were made. Even amongst those who use the internet, this survey would have been accessed most often by individuals who were seeking information or support regarding their remarital, stepfamily, or co-parenting circumstances; those who seek out resources on these topics may already be more inclined to have contemplated their transitions and changing beliefs over time, while others with more stable beliefs may not search for such information and vice versa. Although the beliefs that emerged as relevant to remarital adjustment – success is slim and stepfamilies are second-class – possess a degree of external validity as they were also found by Higginbotham (2005) to be significant, he also used an internet survey to assess beliefs in a remarried sample. It would be interesting to note whether other recruitment and survey methods captured notably different samples of remarried individuals with a contrasting pattern of beliefs.

With regards to the measurement of changes in the beliefs themselves, it is not possible to claim confident knowledge of the degree to which beliefs truly did change over time or the causal direction of the obtained relations between beliefs and remarital quality. As with any retrospective self-report, one's recollection could be easily influenced by a recency bias or limited self-awareness of one's thoughts and experiences. Raising concern of this potential issue, it should be noted that a small subset of participants indicated that none of their beliefs changed from pre- to post-remarriage, which seems unlikely in light of the intricate and evolving processes through which social cognition is developed and influenced. Perhaps these individuals could not recall their original beliefs before they were shaped by the stepfamily experience or perhaps the self-report questionnaire approach was unable to tap into their recollections in a vivid way. An interview process that situated participants within their earlier experiences, cognitions, and feelings may be better able to elicit participants' memories of the specific expectations and beliefs with which they began their transition to a remarriage and stepfamily. A small number of pilot interviews were conducted with participants from this study, in which they had opportunities to give examples of specific beliefs and expectations they held before remarriage and how they were confirmed or transformed through their subsequent experiences. For instance, regarding changes in the belief that a stepfamily's chance for success is slim, one remarried father articulated that he now thinks he should not have "sold himself or the (remarital) relationship short" and that based on his satisfying remarriage, he "should (have) expect(ed) more". With this awareness now, he indicated that he planned to take more risks with his partner in communicating his preferences and his personal motivations for decisions that affected

her too, comforted by the security and contentment he had experienced with her thus far. Interviews also permitted several of the participants to clarify their interpretations of the belief that the new spouse is “perfect.” Rather than presenting their partners in idealized terms, they commented rather on how their remarriage was an improvement to their first marriage, particularly because they felt a better emotional connection to their new spouse versus the former spouse. As one mother commented, “We have fun together and laugh. I could count on one hand the number of times me and my ex laughed together during our long marriage.” These few comments shed further light on the way in which the presence or adaptation of certain beliefs about remarriage over time can indeed enhance the relationship in the long term.

As in many other studies of couples’ functioning, this project too is guilty of soliciting the viewpoint of only one half of a dyad in the aim of explaining interpersonal relations. In the future it would be very informative to obtain the perspectives of both partners in a couple and to compare the similarity of their beliefs both now and as recalled from their early courtship. Divergent beliefs between partners may lead to conflicts that could impact on each person’s happiness in the remarriage, but it may also be discovered that couples have their own processes by which they compromise these beliefs or accept one another’s different points of view. Tracy (2000) noted that agreement between stepfamily members regarding roles and expectations is often theorized as critically important for blended family success, but that little empirical evidence exists to support this assertion. Agreement between individuals is difficult to conceptualize and measure, but it would be illustrative to determine whether couples who enjoy high satisfaction and strong commitment to their remarriages are also bolstered by

an agreement about the dynamics and values at work in their stepfamilies, and whether or not this agreement was inherent or hard won through communication and negotiation.

Longitudinal assessment of expectations and beliefs from the courtship through several years of remarriage could further explore the processes by which beliefs and relational adjustment interact over time.

Concluding Thoughts

For many years, theory, research and clinical literature has struggled to keep pace with the changing face of the North American family. The standard family portrait that used to consist of mother, father, two point five biological children, and one beloved pet now must make room for additional members in unique relational configurations. The delay in recognizing and welcoming these new and varied portraits has left many remarried couples and their stepfamilies with a set of ill-fitting guidelines for how to interact with one another and what to expect as they build their lives together. It has long been suspected that some of the assumed beliefs about family life were not suitable for the unique experiences of most stepfamilies, and the results of this study lend support to that concern. Changes in certain beliefs demonstrated unique relations with the early period of remarital quality, most notably expectations of stepfamily failure and holding a view of stepfamilies as inferior to nuclear families. Similarly, negative current beliefs about co-parenting were also able to account for some differences in more versus less satisfying communication with the former spouse.

If shifts in beliefs and expectations about remarriage and stepfamily life are relevant in how well one adjusts to remarital transitions, it is important that remarrying couples and their children have opportunities to develop positive beliefs and expectations

about stepfamilies. The media can play an important role, by showing a broader range of successful and well-adjusted stepfamilies on television, in movies, in books and magazines. Communicating with experienced stepfamilies via support groups, online communities, and social networks is also an excellent way to expand a positive view of remarriage and stepfamilies. Family counsellors can help by encouraging remarrying couples and their children to examine their own beliefs about the stepfamily they are forming together and to consider ways of problem-solving worries or concerns they might have about the transition. While rigid endorsement of certain beliefs over time could be detrimental to a remarried couple's satisfaction or to the quality of the ongoing co-parenting relationship, the current findings also indicate, however, that many remarried individuals are flexible in their beliefs and are reaping the relationship benefits of adapting their expectations about their remarriages, stepfamilies, and former spouses over time. The exploration of beliefs holds considerable potential to further understand and support remarital and stepfamily adjustment, making the portrait gallery more representative of all families.

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Appendix A Participant Consent Statement

Why is the study being conducted?

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled **Marital Quality in Stepfamilies** that is being conducted by Jennifer Pringle and Dr. Marion Ehrenberg at the University of Victoria in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Jennifer Pringle is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Victoria. As a graduate student, she is required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree in Clinical Psychology. You may contact Jennifer if you have questions about the study by emailing jpringle@uvic.ca or calling 250-721-8589. The study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Marion Ehrenberg (ehrm@uvic.ca; 250-721-8771). This research is being partially funded by an award to Dr. Ehrenberg by the Social Sciences Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

What is the study about?

The purpose of this research project is to learn more about marital satisfaction and commitment in stepfamilies. We are particularly interested in the experiences of remarried parents who continue to share parenting responsibilities with their former spouses. Research of this type is important because it will help us better understand the needs and experiences of remarried parents who continue to share parenting responsibilities with their former spouses. The results may help us in developing resources to support remarried parents in enhancing their second marriages and their parenting relationships with their former spouses.

Who can participate?

To participate in this study, you must meet all of the following requirements:

- You have divorced (or ended a common-law relationship with your child(ren)'s other parent, but have not divorced more than once
- You have been remarried (legal or common-law) for 10 years or less
- You are a parent with biological children from your first marriage, at least one of whom is under age 16
- You continue to share parenting responsibilities with your former spouse. For the purposes of this study, this means that you have contact with your former spouse with regards to parenting issues on average at least once a month via phone, email, letter, or in person
- Your children have contact with their other parent (your former spouse) on average at least once a month via phone, email, letter, or in person
- You have not already completed the survey on-line or on paper

What is involved for me?

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, you will be asked to complete several paper-and-pencil questionnaires. These questionnaires ask about your overall adjustment, your thoughts and feelings about your current marriage, and your thoughts and feelings towards your former spouse with regards to parenting together. You will

also be asked about some of the circumstances of your stepfamily, such as the number of children and stepchildren, your living arrangements, and your shared parenting plan. After returning the completed questionnaires you will be mailed a debriefing form that explains more about the hypotheses of the study.

What Are the Risks & Benefits to My Participation?

Although expected to be minimal, participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you. The study is expected to take approximately 45-60 minutes of your time.

It is possible that you might experience unpleasant feelings while completing this study. You may experience discomfort from thinking or talking about the circumstances of your former marriage and divorce. You may experience discomfort from thinking or talking about any difficulties in your remarriage, or in your parenting relationship with your former spouse. You may experience discomfort from thinking or talking about any adjustment difficulties that you have had recently. If you experience distress of this nature, a list of relevant books and web resources about divorce, remarriage, and stepfamilies is available from the researcher. If needed, the researcher can provide information on how to access counseling and support services across Canada. Your family physician can also refer you to supportive services within your community.

As a way to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your participation, you will be offered a gift card valued at \$20 Cdn for use at Chapters/Indigo/Coles book stores. This gift card will be available to you if you choose to supply the investigator with a mailing address to which the gift card can be mailed upon receipt of your completed questionnaires. *Unfortunately, due to a misuse of the system, we are no longer able to offer e-certificates.* It is important for you to know that it is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants and, if you agree to be a participant in this study, this form of compensation to you must not be coercive. If you would not otherwise choose to participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline. Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used, and you will not be asked to supply an address for the gift card.

Will my information be kept private?

In terms of protecting your anonymity, all questionnaire and interview responses you provide are kept in an anonymous, confidential format. The data you provide are identified only by a code number. Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data are protected by storing all data in a password-protected computer file that will only be accessed by Jennifer Pringle, Dr. Marion Ehrenberg, and by approved members of Dr. Ehrenberg's research team, all of whom are aware of the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of our participants' data. All written reports using this data will only describe the results as an overall summary of the responses provided by all respondents. No individual data will be identified. If you choose to provide your email address in order to receive the Chapters.Indigo gift certificate, your email address will **only** be used

for the purposes of emailing the gift certificate to you and **not** for the purposes of any advertising or promotion.

What will be done with the information?

The questionnaire results of this study will be shared with others as the basis of the researcher's Ph.D. dissertation. It is anticipated that questionnaire results will also be shared with others via a summary on our website (www.uvic.ca/psyc/fmrig), published articles in a scholarly journal and presentations at scholarly or professional meetings. It is also possible that questionnaire results will be described by the media, such as in newspaper or television reports on remarriage and stepfamilies. In all instances, questionnaire results will be discussed only in terms of overall group findings. Individual responses will not be identified. If you would like to receive a summary of the study's questionnaire findings once complete, you will have an opportunity to provide your email address for this purpose at the end of the survey. Data from the study will be disposed of after a period of seven years, by erasing the electronic data.

Can I get more information before I agree to participate?

More information is available from Jennifer Pringle (jpringle@uvic.ca; 250-721-8589) or Dr. Marion Ehrenberg (ehrm@uvic.ca; 250-721-8771). In addition to being able to contact the researcher or the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545).

Checking the box below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

By checking this box, I am acknowledging that I have read and understood the information above and consent to participate in the study. I also confirm that I have not completed the survey before and will complete the survey only once.

I consent and confirm the above statement.

Appendix B
Demographic Questionnaire

Questions About You: This section asks for general background information about you.

1. What is your gender?
 Male Female

2. What is your age in years? _____

3. In what province/territory do you live?
 British Columbia
 Alberta
 Saskatchewan
 Manitoba
 Ontario
 Quebec
 New Brunswick
 Nova Scotia
 Prince Edward Island
 Newfoundland
 Yukon Territory
 Northwest Territories
 Nunavut

5. If not a resident of Canada, where do you live? _____

6. What is your ethnic background?
 North American origins
 Aboriginal origins
 British Isles origins
 French origins (e.g., French-Canadian)
 Caribbean origins
 Latin, Central or South American origins
 Northern European origins (e.g., Scandinavian)
 Western European origins (e.g., German, Dutch)
 Southern European origins (e.g., Italian, Greek)
 Eastern European (e.g., Slavic, Balkan, Polish)
 African origins
 Arab origins
 West Asian origins (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Afghan)
 South Asian origins (e.g. Thai, Filipino)
 East & Southeast Asian Origins (e.g., Japanese, Korean, Chinese)
 Pacific Islander
 Other (Please specify: _____)

7. What level of education have you completed?
 Less than high school completion
 High school diploma
 Undergraduate degree
 Master's degree / Professional Degree (e.g., LLB)
 Doctorate degree / Medical degree
8. What is your occupation? _____
9. What is your annual household income per year?
 less than \$20,000
 \$20,000-39,999
 \$40,000-59,999
 \$60,000-79,999
 \$80,000 or greater

Questions About Your Separation/Divorce: This section asks about your separation and/or divorce from your child(ren)'s other parent, referred to here as your "former spouse." This section also asks about your relationship with your former spouse.

10. How many times have you divorced? _____
11. How long were you and your former spouse married (or living together, if common-law) before you permanently separated? _____
12. Who initiated the separation? Me My former spouse Decided together
13. In what month and year did you end your marriage (or common-law relationship) with your former spouse? _____
14. How often do you have contact with your former spouse about issues related to parenting your children? Include contact via phone, email, letter, or in person.
 Never – not since our divorce
 Rarely – once or twice a year
 About once a month
 About once a week
 Daily
 A few times each day
15. What is the custody plan between you and your former spouse regarding the biological child(ren) you share from your former marriage?
 I have primary custody
 My former spouse has primary custody
 We have joint custody (50-50)

16. How much time does your former spouse spend with the biological child(ren) you share from your former marriage?
- With my former spouse nearly 100% of time
 - With my former spouse about 75% of time
 - With my former spouse about 50% of time
 - With my former spouse about 25% of time
 - Visit with my former spouse occasionally
 - No contact between my former spouse and my child(ren)
17. How satisfied are you with the custody and visitation plan between you and your former spouse regarding your shared child(ren)?
- Very dissatisfied
 - Somewhat dissatisfied
 - Somewhat satisfied
 - Very satisfied
18. How satisfied are you with the financial arrangements between you and your former spouse to support your shared child(ren)?
- Very dissatisfied
 - Somewhat dissatisfied
 - Somewhat satisfied
 - Very satisfied
19. Who makes most of the decisions regarding the child(ren) from your former marriage? Me My former spouse Shared decision-making
20. Which of the following resources did you and your former spouse use to help decide on the custody and visitation for your children? Check off as many as apply.
- Lawyers (but didn't go to court)
 - Lawyers and a court judge
 - Mediation
 - Having a "custody and access" assessment and report completed (such as by a psychologist)
 - Decided on our own
 - We are still trying to come to an agreement about custody and visitation
 - Other (Please explain briefly: _____)

21. Which of the following resources and support services have you or your children used in adjusting to your divorce and remarriage? Check off as many as apply.
- A divorce education class or workshop
 - A support group for divorcing parents
 - A stepfamily education or support group
 - A children's divorce group
 - Personal counselling
 - Books about divorce (List: _____)
 - Internet communities or chat rooms (List websites: _____)
 - Support from family members
 - Support from friends
 - Other (Please list: _____)
22. If you checked "Books about divorce" please list the titles of books you have found helpful. _____
23. If you checked "Internet boards or chat rooms" please list which websites you have found helpful. _____
24. Has your former spouse remarried or moved in with a new partner? Yes No
25. Does your former spouse have any biological children other than the ones he/she shares with you? Yes No
26. If your former spouse is in a new relationship, does he/she now have stepchildren? Yes No

Questions About Your Child(ren) & Stepchild(ren): In this section, “child(ren)” refers to the child(ren) from your former marriage/relationship for whom you are the biological or adoptive parent. “Stepchild(ren)” here refers to the child(ren) brought to your remarriage by your current spouse. If you have legally adopted your spouse’s child(ren), please refer to them as stepchildren for the purposes of this questionnaire.

27. How many biological children do you have from your former marriage? _____

28. Please list the age and gender of each of your biological children from your former marriage, and indicate how much time they spend living with you and your new spouse.

	<u>Child 1</u>	<u>Child 2</u>	<u>Child 3</u>	<u>etc.</u>
Age	_____	_____	_____	
Gender	_____	_____	_____	
<i>Choose one for each child:</i> With us nearly 100% of time	_____	_____	_____	
With us about 75% of time	_____	_____	_____	
With us about 50% of time	_____	_____	_____	
With us about 25% of time	_____	_____	_____	
Visit with us occasionally	_____	_____	_____	
No contact	_____	_____	_____	

29. If your biological children do not live with you, when did you last have contact with them, either via phone, email, letter, or in person?

30. How many stepchildren do you have? _____

31. Please list the age and gender of each of your stepchildren, and indicate how much time they spend living with you and your new spouse (the stepchild’s biological parent):

	<u>Stepchild 1</u>	<u>Stepchild 2</u>	<u>Stepchild 3</u>	<u>etc.</u>
Age	_____	_____	_____	
Gender	_____	_____	_____	
<i>Choose one for each step-child:</i> With us nearly 100% of time	_____	_____	_____	
With us about 75% of time	_____	_____	_____	
With us about 50% of time	_____	_____	_____	
With us about 25% of time	_____	_____	_____	
Visit with us occasionally	_____	_____	_____	
No contact	_____	_____	_____	

32. Have you and your new spouse had any children together? ___ Yes ___ No

If yes, list the child(ren)’s age and gender below.

	<u>Child 1</u>	<u>Child 2</u>	<u>Child 3</u>	<u>etc.</u>
Age	_____	_____	_____	
Gender	_____	_____	_____	

Questions About Your Remarriage: This section asks about your remarriage to your CURRENT spouse. This includes relationships in which one either has legally remarried a new partner, or has moved in with a new partner whom they consider to be one's common-law spouse.

33. How long in months had you and your new spouse been together before legally remarrying or moving in together? _____
34. In what month and year did you remarry (or permanently move in with) your current spouse? _____
35. To what extent is your current spouse responsible for the co-parenting of your children from your first marriage (your spouse's stepchildren)?
____ Not at all – I hold all the parenting responsibilities in the home
____ Some supervision of my children, but no discipline
____ Supervision and discipline but only in my absence
____ Equal parenting responsibilities to me, including supervision, discipline, and decision-making for my child(ren)
____ Other (Please describe briefly: _____)

Questions About Your Participation in this Study

36. How did you learn about this study?

37. Why did you decide to participate in this study?

38. If you would like to receive a summary of the study's results when it is complete (2008), please provide an email address to which it can be sent:

Appendix C
Co-parenting Belief Inventory (CBI; Pringle & Ehrenberg, 2005)

The questions in this section ask you to consider some of your beliefs about co-parenting with your former spouse. There are no “right” or “wrong” beliefs, as many people have different beliefs and expectations about family life. You will be asked to respond to each question twice – once to reflect your beliefs before you remarried, and once to reflect your beliefs today. Please try your best to remember the beliefs you held before you remarried and respond as accurately as possible.

-
1. It is frustrating to talk to one’s former spouse.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

2. For co-parenting to be successful, former spouses must have the same style of parenting.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

3. After divorce, thoughts about your former spouse should only be about his/her parenting.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

4. After divorce, parents should maintain the same parenting roles they had when they were married (for example, which parent takes child to sports events, which parent attends parent-teacher conferences, which parent helps child with school projects).

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

5. It is common to have mixed feelings about your former spouse.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

6. Co-parents should talk with one another about problems they are having in raising their shared children.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

7. Former spouses should not remain friendly with each other.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

8. The non-custodial parent should defer to the parenting decisions of the custodial parent.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

9. Co-parents should have a say in most of the parenting decisions made at the other parent's house (for example, bed times, meal choices, which TV programs or movies are allowed).

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

10. It is upsetting for former spouses to see one another.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

11. Former spouses should work to get along for the sake of their children.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

12. If former spouses could not get along in their marriage, they will never get along as co-parents.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

13. After divorce, discussions between former spouses should be limited to parenting issues.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

14. The preferences of the custodial parent should always come before those of the non-custodial parent.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

15. After divorce, former spouses should put their differences aside and concentrate on parenting together.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

16. Co-parents should discuss with each other any problems they are having in the co-parenting relationship.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

17. As long as co-parents have the same overall “vision” for how to raise their shared children, they should accept one another’s parenting decisions.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

18. Former spouses should adopt a business-like, distanced attitude with one another.

BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT *BEFORE REMARRIAGE*:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

CURRENT BELIEF IN THIS STATEMENT:

1	2	3	4	5
Very false	More false than true	Neither	More true than false	Very true

Appendix D
Sample Poster Used in Participant Recruitment

Are You a Parent Who Has Remarried?

Please share your experiences with us

• ***Do you have biological children from your first marriage?***

• ***Is your former spouse still involved in parenting your children?***

• ***Have you remarried (legal or common-law) within the last 10 years?***

If you answered **yes** to each of these questions, please consider completing our confidential survey to receive \$20 in Chapters gift certificates

Researchers at the University of Victoria are now studying how remarried parents feel about their relationships with their former spouses, as well as with their current spouses.

Research of this type is important in helping us to better understand remarital quality. We hope the results can be used to support remarried parents who continue to share parenting duties with their former spouses.

This confidential survey will take approximately 45 minutes to complete and can be accessed on the Internet.

To complete our study, visit
www.uvic.ca/psyc/fmrig
and click on "What's New?"

Contact **jpringle@uvic.ca** or **250-721-8589**
for more information or to complete a paper copy of the study instead

www.uvic.ca/psyc/fmrig
Click on "What's New?"

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Click on "What's New?"

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Click on "What's New?"



Appendix E Participant Debriefing Statement

Thank you for participating in the study Marital Quality in Stepfamilies. This study is being conducted at the University of Victoria, as part of the requirements for Jennifer Pringle's Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree in Clinical Psychology, under the supervision of Dr. Marion Ehrenberg.

The purpose of this research project is to learn more about marital satisfaction and commitment in stepfamilies. We are particularly interested in the experiences of remarried parents who continue to share parenting responsibilities with their former spouses. Research of this type is important because it will help us better understand the needs and experiences of remarried parents who continue to share parenting with their former spouses. This knowledge may help us in developing resources to support remarried parents in enhancing their second marriages and in maintaining positive, effective co-parenting relationships with their former spouses.

This study is exploring two possible influences on remarital quality: 1) a parent's relationship with his/her former spouse, and 2) expectations and beliefs about remarriage and about shared parenting with former spouses. It is predicted that these possible influences could be even more useful than measures of overall adjustment in explaining differences in satisfaction with one's remarriage and shared parenting relationship. Some previous research has found that although having a strong, positive relationship with one's former spouse is beneficial to children after their parents divorce, it can be an added strain in a remarriage and can cause tension with one's new spouse. On the other hand, some remarried spouses have described that a positive relationship with their former spouse relieves stress in their remarriage because there are several adults involved in caring for children and fewer disagreements about parenting responsibilities.

One possible explanation for these differing reactions involves one's expectations and beliefs about remarriage, stepfamilies, and shared parenting with former spouses. Individuals may have differing beliefs before remarriage about what kind of relationship they will have with their former spouses, how involved their new spouses will be in childrearing, and how their stepfamilies will operate. If an individual enters a remarriage and finds that his or her expectations are not met, this may lead to frustration or conflict with his or her new spouse or former spouse. Although there are now over half a million stepfamilies in Canada today, there are still many misconceptions about this type of family that can make it challenging to know what to expect when remarrying. Many people find that it takes several months or years for all family members to adjust to one another. This study is exploring how various beliefs impact how satisfied and committed a parent is to his/her remarriage, as well as in his/her shared parenting relationship. By better understanding the kinds of expectations and beliefs that parents describe before and after remarriage, we hope to be able to support parents in adjusting to their remarriages

and their shared parenting relationships. It is hoped that this information will benefit not only parents and their partners, but also their children.

For more information about this study, please contact Jennifer Pringle (jpringle@uvic.ca; 250-721-8589) or Dr. Marion Ehrenberg (ehrm@uvic.ca; 250-721-8771). If you would like to receive information on the study's findings once it is complete, you may provide your email address for the researchers to email a written summary to you.

For more information about divorce, co-parenting, and stepfamilies, please visit our website at www.uvic.ca/psyc/fmrig to find list of books and other resources related to family transitions. For help with overall adjustment, mood, or anxiety, please talk to your family physician about options available in your community.

To receive a copy of a summary of the study's findings, please enter your email address below and it will be sent to you when the study is complete (estimated to be in 2007).

Participants who completed this survey and who meet all the eligibility criteria are offered Chapters gift certificates in the value of \$20 Cdn. To receive the Chapters.Indigo e-gift certificate in thanks for your participation, please enter a valid email address below. Your e-gift certificates will be sent to the address provided within 48 hours.

Thank you again for you participation! You may print this page if you would like a copy for your records, or you may obtain one by contacting the researcher at jpringle@uvic.ca or 250-721-8589.

Appendix F
Optional Pilot Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your relationship with your former spouse in the few weeks or months after your separation?
2. What were your feelings towards your former spouse in the few weeks or months after your separation?
3. How would you describe your relationship with your former spouse now?
4. More specifically, how would you describe your relationship with your former spouse with regards to co-parenting?
5. What are your feelings towards your former spouse now?
6. How would you describe your relationship with your current partner?
7. What are your feelings towards your current partner?
8. How does your relationship with your former spouse influence your remarriage?
9. How does your remarriage influence your relationship with your former spouse?
10. How do you feel about managing these two relationships – with your former spouse and your current partner?
11. What supports you in maintaining or balancing the relationships with your former spouse and your current partner?
12. What makes it more challenging to balance the relationships with your former spouse and your current partner?
13. How would you describe your child(ren)'s experience with adjusting to the remarriage and/or stepfamily?
14. Many people have expectations or assumptions about what a stepfamily will be like before they remarry. What expectations did you have for your remarriage and stepfamily?
 - a) How did your expectations of remarriage and stepfamily life compare to your real experiences?
 - b) What unique aspects of remarriage and stepfamily life were you prepared for?
 - c) What aspects did you think would be different than they turned out to be?

- d) What are your feelings about your expectations versus your real experiences?
- e) If you could go back in time, what might you change about your family life?