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## The Influence of Role Strain on Stepfamily Adjustment

*The purpose of this study was to explore the dynamics of stepfamilies and the adjustment difficulties such families may experience. The study describes some socio-demographic characteristics of a sample of 117 stepfamilies. The independent variables were stresses due to adjustment difficulties, which were defined as "role strains". Socio-demographic variables included gender, family income level, length of time since remarriage, type of stepfamily, and the existence of any children born to the new marriage. The dependent variable was the extent of stepfamily adjustment, expressed as a scale. The factors influencing family adjustment included stepparent gender, family income level, type of stepfamily, and various role strain variables (family boundary ambiguity, role conflict, etc.). Practical recommendations for social work are made and possibilities for future research in this area are discussed based on the results of this study.*

Due to industrialization over the last few decades, the Korean family has experienced social changes in areas such as family structure, family values, and family functions. One aspect of changing family dynamics is the noticeable increase in number of divorces and remarriages, accompanied by a huge

corresponding increase in the number of stepfamilies. It is reported that 25.2% of the total number of marriages comprise remarriages. These remarriages are usually between middle-aged individuals with children: the average remarriage age is 44.8 years for men and 40.1 years for women. At the time of their divorce, 70% of remarrying individuals had children under 20 years old (Korea National Statistical Office, 2008). In Korea, according to relevant data from the Korea Legal Aid Center for Family Relations, the number of remarried couples filing for divorce in 2008 was 17%, a figure that confirms a rising trend in this area by increasing every year. This suggests that the potential for stepfamilies in Korean society to disband is very significant.

Earlier research from other countries describes stepfamilies with children from previous marriages as "incomplete institutions" in terms of family structure, and suggests that they experience a different set of family adjustment problems than first-marriage families (Cherlin, 1978; Cherlin & Furstenburg, 1994; Felker *et al.*, 2002). Foreign research related to family adjustment in stepfamilies also shows that role strain variables, such as ambiguity of family boundaries and roles, are most closely related to successful family adjustment in stepfamilies (Beaudry *et al.*, 2004; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Giles-Simes, 1984; Gonzales, 2009). Stepfamilies exhibit serious family adjustment

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*Key Words: stepfamily, role strain, family adjustment*

problems if they experience role conflict and stress that is difficult to handle in stepparent–stepchild relationships. However, Korean stepfamily studies have usually limited their focus to the stepmother as subject-her role conflict, psychological distress and adjustment problems (Kim, 1999, 2002, 2007; Yim, 1997, 1996). Studies by Jeong *et al.* (2000), Jang and Min (2002) included both step-father and stepmother as subjects, but did not focus specifically on the stepparent–stepchild relationship. Jeong *et al.* (2000) found that due to sampling limitations for step-father families, their quantitative study of current remarried life could only be regarded as investigative. The research by Jang and Min (2002) was limited by its small sample size. Studies on stepfamilies have tended to focus on the more prevalent types of stepfamilies, or on the adjustment problems of stepmothers. These studies can therefore only be of limited help in fully understanding the dynamics of stepparent–step-children relationships, or the level of family adjustment typically achieved within remarriages.

As there are very few large-scale Korean studies on adjustment in stepfamilies, and considering that stepparent–stepchild dynamics exert a huge influence on the overall adjustment of stepfamilies, we selected stepfamilies with adolescent stepchildren as our research subjects. The major purpose of the study was to explore the influence of role strain as a factor in adjustment, together with other socio-demographic variables. The results of this study will contribute to our understanding of the degree of adjustment in stepfamilies with adolescent children, and the problem of role strain as perceived by family members. The study results also provide useful raw data for devising intervention strategies to promote better adjustment among members of stepfamilies.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *Stepfamily Adjustment*

It is clear that there is a need to study family adjustment within the whole stepfamily, focusing not just on stepchildren and the remarried couple but

also on the relationships between stepparents and stepchildren. However, there has been a lack of research on this subject due to sampling problems (Coleman & Ganong, 1994). Current research trends indicate the importance of studying both stepparents and stepchildren in relation to adjustment within stepfamilies, and also of studying the relationships between stepparents and stepchildren (Crosbie-Burnett, 1983).

Crosbie-Burnett (1983) regarded stepfamily adjustment as the balancing of role expectations, the ability to meet those expectations, and family integration. This study defines stepfamily adjustment as the happiness and cohesion of the entire family, including the happiness of the married couple and the relationship between stepparents and stepchildren. There are several other measures of the health of stepfamily adjustment. All parent–children relationships in the family, including those between stepparents and stepchildren, are valuable sources of information.

### *Socio-demographic Variables*

We know that the overall level of adjustment in the stepfamily is related to the gender of the stepparent (Clingempeel *et al.*, 1984; Coleman & Ganong, 2002). For example, it is reported that stepmother–stepchildren relationships are more problematic than step-father–stepchildren relationships, and amongst all the step-stepfamily types, the stepmother family experiences the most conflict (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Hobart, 1991). In other words, stepmothers are less satisfied with their relationship with the children than are stepfathers (Hobart, 1988), and exhibit more negative behaviors towards their stepchildren (Hetherington, 1993). In contrast, research shows that stepfathers tend to make a greater initial effort to build positive relationships with their stepchildren when living in the same home, thus creating strong familial stability (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). According to Bray (1992), over time the stepfather–stepchild relationship tends to become more negative. However, stepfathers with sole or joint custody of their biological children tend to view their role as parents in a positive light. Some studies claim that there are no differences between stepsons

and stepdaughters in terms of problematic behavior displayed during the period of family adjustment (Fine *et al.*, 1993; Skaggs & Jodl, 1999), but other research has indicated that step-daughters experience more psychological and social problems and display more problematic behavior than stepsons (Amato & Keith, 1991; Crosbie-Burnett, 1988; Lutz, 1983; Spruijt, 1997).

Conclusions drawn from studies on the effect of children born into stepfamilies are not all in agreement. Some maintain that the birth of children after remarriage strengthens family bonds, and that remarried couples with children are happier than other couples (Ambert, 1988; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). One study found positive signs of stepfamily stability in couples remarried for over 10 years (Wineberg, 1992). But others claim that when children are born into stepfamilies this can worsen the relationships within the stepfamily and become a source of stress, conflict, and discord (Fine, 1995; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Still others show that the birth of these children has no effect on the adjustment of remarried couples, stepparent-stepchildren relationships, biological parent-child relationships, or the overall perception of affection between the members of the stepfamily. In contrast with the findings of Ganong and Coleman (1994), Chung *et al.* (2000) conclude that it is better to have no further children after remarriage. The implication is that dysfunctional remarried couples give birth to children after the remarriage only as a means to cement their relationship.

Studies show that time is needed for the stepfamily to develop emotional intimacy between its members (Bray, 1992; Furstenberg, 1987; Hetherington, 1993). According to Furstenberg (1987), couples remarried for more than seven years tend to have fewer problems in raising children and are more accepting of diversity within the stepfamily than couples remarried for less than seven years. Also, Bray (1999) concluded that stepfamilies in existence for two-and-a-half years functioned in a healthier manner than stepfamilies only six months old. He therefore concluded that it would take three to five years on average for a family to develop

emotional bonds and internal integration.

Many studies have regarded family income as an important factor in stepfamily adjustment. Messinger (1976) cited financial problems as the biggest factor affecting remarried couples' marital adjustment, saying that financial issues were the main cause of conflict between partners, and could be deepened when child-raising expenses for stepchildren were a factor in the financial difficulty. Other studies (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Lown & Dolan, 1988) have pointed out that financial problems, parenting issues, and agreements between couples on financial management, all play an important role in helping new stepfamilies to function well.

#### *Stepfamily Role Strain and Family Adjustment*

"Role strain" describes the predicament of individuals who must confront diverse values and roles in a social system; it expresses their difficulty in understanding and performing their roles in a complex situation. Role strain relates to the psychological stress, conflict, and challenge contained within an individual's response to the social situation (Pearlin, 1983). When developing new family relationships in a new environment, members of the stepfamily experience role strain through family boundary ambiguity, role ambiguity, and role conflict. Boss coined the term family boundary ambiguity in the 1970s to express the uncertainty in family members' various role expectations of each other. Family boundary ambiguity is a concept that encapsulates the psychological and physical incongruence of stepfamily members. Many researchers (Lutz, 1983; Stewart, 2005; White & Booth, 1985) have reported that family boundary ambiguity, which is often observed in family environments, imposes negative stresses on the family, interferes with family relationships, and negatively affects family adjustment. In relation to role ambiguity, most researchers (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Giles-Sims, 1984; Stewart, 2005) have asserted that role ambiguity associated with remarriage is the biggest threat to couples in their adjustment to new family relationships. Since remarried couples have ambiguous family categorization and boundaries, spouses can

experience role conflict when assuming parenting roles and making decisions pertaining to the raising of stepchildren; such crises can lead to larger crises that can ultimately threaten the new marriage. Role conflict is defined as any dysfunctional characteristics of role performance expected from a family member in a given situation. Role conflict arises when remarried couples face contradictions between the various roles expected of them. Remarried couples may face role strain when contradictory roles are imposed on them, and this can lead to difficulty with both their own children and their stepchildren. stepmothers in particular experience role strain due to a lack of agreement among family members on the stepmother's roles, and conflicting expectations from their spouses and the spouses' relatives (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Fine, 1995; Kim, 1999, 2002, 2007).

Stepchildren may experience similar boundary and role ambiguity, increasing the likelihood of a stressed and dysfunctional family. Gross (1987) surveyed the personal or subjective definition of family amongst children aged 16 to 18, and determined four categories of family: retention, substitution, reduction and augmentation. These categories were associated with different levels of stress within the families and could apply to all families, not only stepfamilies. Whether all family members have the same or very similar family categorization determines the level of family stress. Unclear or ambiguous family boundaries, excluding the stepfather or stepmother, often create a high level of stress-resulting in unhappy or unsatisfactory family life (Lutz, 1983; White & Booth, 1985).

Adolescent children within the stepfamily also face role conflict (Adler *et al.*, 2004; Dunn *et al.*, 2005; Fine & Kurdek, 1994; Gosselin & David, 2007). For example, a child from a previous marriage may now acquire siblings for the first time, or be placed in a new position within a sibling hierarchy. Very often these children will experience confusion or anger when failing to adjust to the new relationship setting. Their dual roles in stepfamilies may be complex, leading to obvious difficulties in adjusting to the new family social environment.

Based on these studies, the following research

question was posed for this study: "Does role strain in stepfamilies, under various socio-demographic variables, affect the success of family adjustment?"

## RESEARCH METHOD

### *Participants*

This study deals with role strain and family adjustment within stepfamilies. Therefore, the subjects of this study comprised stepfamily members (stepparent, biological parent, and middle or high school adolescent stepchild) living throughout Korea who satisfied the following conditions: (1) stepparents were under sixty years of age; (2) they had more than one stepchild from one spouse or both; and (3) they had been married for over six months. A fourth condition was that stepfamily members should not be attending family counseling or therapy at the time of this study, because such intervention could have influenced the research results. A purposive sampling technique was used since, the nature of stepfamilies made it difficult to perform accurate probability sampling. Subjects were recruited through such media as middle and high school class reunions, religious organizations, matchmaking companies, advertisements in daily newspapers, and word of mouth. After the study objective had been explained to them, those couples who were identified as remarried were requested to complete a questionnaire. The research period spanned five months from early June to late October, 2005. A total of 500 questionnaires for parents and children were distributed around the country, of which 147 were returned. After the study objective had been explained to the participants, those who were identified as stepfamily members were requested to complete the questionnaires. For each participating stepfamily, three members were required to fill in a questionnaire. Each stepfamily that completed the questionnaires received 30,000 Korean won in cash. While 30 of the returned questionnaires were excluded due to incomplete answers, the remaining 117 were included in the study. Of the 117 questionnaires, 70 were collected through the mail.

Table 1. *Socio-demographic Characteristics*

| Variables                         | Frequency (%)  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Family Type (Stepparent's gender) | Stepmother 82 (70.0%)<br>Stepfather 35 (30.0%)   |
| Step-partner's Average Age        | Step-father 48<br>Stepmother 43  |
| Education Level                   | Mean 13.17 years,<br>High School Graduate (Female: 45.1%, Male: 30.9 %)<br>College Graduate (Female: 15.1%, Male: 35.2%) |
| Family Income                     | 2,330,000 Won  |
| Stepchild's Gender                | Male 58 (49.6%)<br>Female 59 (50.4%)   |
| Stepchild's Age                   | 13–15 years 72 (61.5%)<br>16–18 years 45 (38.5%)   |

A frequency analysis was performed on the 117 families to determine the general characteristics of the subjects. The results revealed that 82 were stepmothers while 35 were stepfathers. The average age of the participants was 45.9 years (males: 48; females 43) both a few years older than the average remarriage age (male: 44.8; female: 40.1). The most common educational level for females was high school (45.1%), followed by university (15.1%), making the combined figure for high school or above 60.2%. For males, the most common educational level was university (35.2%), followed by high school (30.9%), and vocational school (18.3%), making the combined figure for high school or above 84.4%. These percentages for high school or above are greater than the national average of 55.3% for females and 79% for males, according to the 2008 census data (Korean National Statistical Office). Total family incomes ranged from 1,000,000 to more than 5,000,000 Korean won per month.

The frequencies and means of the general socio-demographic characteristics of the subjects are presented in Table 1.

Socio-demographic factors selected were stepparents' and stepchildren's gender, family income, type of stepfamily, length of remarriage, and presence of a mutual child. The question asked about family income was: "What is your monthly average family income?" The question about educational level was: "What is your highest completed educational level?" Answers were graded on a 6-point scale ranging from "elementary" to

"graduate school". The question on the length of remarriage was: "How long have you been married to your current spouse?" with the respondents being asked to denote the duration in parentheses in the format "( ) years and ( ) months". Also, remarried families were identified as simple or complex remarried families. The question was: "Which type is your family?" with the response option 1 denoting "a simple remarried family" and 2 denoting "a complex remarried family". The question pertaining to the presence of a mutual child was: "Have you had a biological child with your current spouse?" with 1 denoting "yes" and 2 signifying "no".

Role strain, the independent variable in this study, was defined as "the tension and conflict experienced by stepfamilies when they play certain roles in their new family life". By modifying the 8 dimensions and 30 questions in the role strain index developed by Whitsett and Land for remarried couples, 11 questions were specifically prepared for this study. The details pertaining to family boundary ambiguity, role ambiguity, and role conflicts were as follows.

First, family boundary ambiguity factors were expressed as three different items, including: "My ex-spouse's children appear lost between me and their biological parents", and "My ex-spouse is an obstacle as I try to fulfill my responsibilities as a stepparent". Cronbach's alpha, with which this factor was measured, was found to be .79. Family boundary ambiguity factors for stepchildren comprised three different statements, including: "What do I call my

stepparent?” and “I don’t know how to act between my parent and step- parent.” Cronbach’s alpha for this factor was found to be .90.

Second, role ambiguity comprised five statements, including: “I do not know how involved I should be in disciplining and educating my spouse’s children,” and “I do not know how much affection I should give my spouse’s children”. Here, Cronbach’s alpha of stepparents’ role ambiguity was found to be .87. Role ambiguity for stepchildren included the statements: “I feel bad for betraying my biological parent whenever I get along with my stepparent” and “I feel my loyalty conflicts between my parent and stepparent”. Cronbach’s alpha of stepchildren’s role ambiguity was found to be .93.

Third, role conflict comprised three questions, including: “It is difficult to successfully play both roles of a biological child and a stepchild” and “I still do not understand my role as a stepchild”. Cronbach’s alpha of stepparental role conflict was found to be .76. Cronbach’s alpha of stepchildren’s role conflict was found to be .91. The response options ranged from “not at all” to “very much so”. The higher the score, the greater the intensity of role strain. The closer the mean of family boundary ambiguity, role conflict, and role ambiguity to a score of 4, the more difficult it is to be clear about family boundary ambiguity, role conflict, and role ambiguity.

This research adopted the stepfamily adjustment scale (SAS) developed by Crosbie-Burnett (1983) for measuring adjustment as a dependent variable. The SAS is a self-reporting instrument for measuring remarried family members’ diverse experiences and related behaviors: it includes a set of three questionnaires, for stepparents, biological parents, and stepchildren. The SAS has three subscales: family happiness, family cohesion, and marital happiness. In this study, the stepfamily adjustment level is the mean of the three respondents’ answers. The family happiness factor comprised eight items, including the statements: “I am proud of my stepfamily” and “It is a good thing for my stepfamily that I got remarried”. The resulting Cronbach’s alpha was .79. Family cohesion questions comprised seven items, including the statements: “I feel upset and angry because of family problems” and “I get close to

my stepchildren (as a stepparent) compared to other stepfamilies”. Here, the Cronbach’s alpha was .81. Marital happiness questions comprised ten items, including: “My remarried life is satisfactory” and “I see my spouse as an important person”. Cronbach’s alpha for these was .80. The response categories ranged from “very dissatisfied” to “satisfied”. The higher the score on this scale, the greater the level of stepfamily adjustment.

#### *Analysis Method*

The collected data was analyzed using SPSS Windows 15.0 software. The frequency, mean, and standard deviation of the general characteristics of the subjects are presented in Table 2. Statistical techniques such as basic technical analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis were employed in this study.

## RESULTS

### *Analysis of Correlations between Main Variables Associated with Family Adjustment*

Results of a correlation analysis to detect multicollinearity and assess correlations between dependent variables were  $-.58 < r < .49$ . The Durbin Watson statistic was 1.87, which indicates that no autocorrelation existed in the residuals. During the regression analysis, a VIF test was also performed to detect any multicollinearity. The results showed that all the values were distributed between 1 and 2, negating multicollinearity as a problem in the analysis. Analysis of the correlations between the main variables and family adjustment shows that adjustment is negatively correlated with family boundary ambiguity, role conflicts, and role ambiguity, the presence of a biological child belonging to the remarried couple, and the type of stepfamily. This implies that if family boundaries and roles are more ambiguous, or if the remarried family is a complex remarried family, stepfamily adjustment is poor.

### *An Analysis of Effects of Role Strain on Family Adjustment*

A regression analysis was performed in order to

Table 2. Mean, SD, and Frequency of Main Variables

|                       | Variables                                | Mean (Sd)<br>(N = 117)   | Family Happiness | Family Cohesion | Marital Happiness |
|-----------------------|--|--|------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Dependent Variable    | Family Adjustment                        | 3.30 (.35)   | 3.14 (.30)       | 3.33 (.42)      | 3.42 (.35)        |
| Independent Variables | Gender (Stepparent)                      | 117 (82 Stepmothers, 35 Stepfathers)                                       |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Gender (Stepchildren)                    | 117 Adolescent Stepchildren  |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Family Income                            | 2,350,000 South Korea Won  |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Type of Stepfamily                       | Simple Remarried Family 122 (77.7%)<br>Complex Remarried Family 35 (22.2%) |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Length of Remarriage                     | 5.97 (3.46)  |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Mutual Child                             | Yes 24 (25.7%), No 93 (74.3%)  |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Family Boundary Ambiguity (Stepparent)   | 2.89 (.71)   |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Role Ambiguity (Stepparent)              | 2.69 (.73)   |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Role Conflict (Stepparent)               | 2.56 (.79)   |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Family Boundary Ambiguity (Stepchildren) | 2.62 (.66)   |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Role Ambiguity (Stepchildren)            | 2.56 (.76)   |                  |                 |                   |
|                       | Role Conflict (Stepchildren)             | 2.50 (.50)   |                  |                 |                   |

Table 3. Effects of Role Strain Factors on Family Adjustment

| Model  | Unstandardized Coefficients |      | Standardized Coefficients | t (p- value)      |
|--|-----------------------------|------|---------------------------|-------------------|
|  | Beta                        | Se   | Beta                      |                   |
| (Constant)   | 3.813                       | .355 |                           | 8.198*** (.0000)  |
| Stepparents' Gender (Stepmother = 1)               | -.040                       | .047 | -.284                     | -5.034*** (.0002) |
| Children's Gender (Step-daughter = 1)              | .043                        | .057 | .045                      | .146 (.0107)      |
| Family Income                                      | .031                        | .024 | .195                      | 3.317** (.0051)   |
| Type of Remarriage (Complex Remarriage Family = 1) | -.057                       | .030 | -.278                     | -4.117*** (.0001) |
| Length of Remarriage                               | -.079                       | .007 | -.101                     | -1.117 (.3821)    |
| Mutual Child (Presence = 1)                        | -.092                       | .054 | -.129                     | -1.341 (.4248)    |
| Family Boundary Ambiguity (Stepparent)             | -.043                       | .061 | -.264                     | -4.088*** (.0001) |
| Role Ambiguity (Stepparent)                        | -.071                       | .035 | -.199                     | -3.337** (.0046)  |
| Role Conflict (Stepparent)                         | -.185                       | .130 | -.189                     | -3.257** (.0087)  |
| Family Boundary Ambiguity (Stepchild)              | -.110                       | .057 | -.257                     | -4.033*** (.0001) |
| Role Ambiguity (Stepchild)                         | -.062                       | .038 | -.175                     | -2.959* (.012)    |
| Role Conflict (Stepchild)                          | -.078                       | .039 | -.153                     | -2.239* (.023)    |

R square = .315 F (12, 119) = 7.071\*\*\*  
Adjusted R square = .321

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .01 \*\*\*p < .001

explore the influence of independent variables, including socio-demographic variables, on stepfamily adjustment. The results of the regression analysis are shown in Table 3. R square = .315, F (12, 119) =

7.071 (p < .001), as presented in Table 4. According to the standardized beta coefficients used in this study, stepparent gender (-.284, p < .001) was found to be the most significant factor in interpreting the

level of family adjustment, followed by type of stepfamily ( $-.278, p < .001$ ), stepparents' family boundary ambiguity ( $-.264, p < .001$ ), stepchildren's family boundary ambiguity ( $-.257, p < .001$ ), stepparents' role ambiguity ( $-.199, p < .01$ ), family income ( $.195, p < .01$ ), stepparents' role conflict ( $-.189, p < .01$ ), stepchildren's role ambiguity ( $-.175, p < .05$ ), and stepchildren's role conflict ( $-.153, p < .05$ ), in descending order of statistical significance. Stepchildren's gender, the presence of a mutual child, and the length of remarriage were not statistically significant.

This result shows that the gender of the stepparent impacts most significantly on the level of family adjustment. The stepmother experiences more difficulties in adjustment than other mothers: she is more stressed, insecure, depressed, angry, or unhappy (Kim, 1999; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987; Yim, 1996). Stepmothers have more trouble with their stepchildren than stepfathers (Clingempeel & Segal, 1986; Hobart, 1988, 1989; Kurdek & Fine, 1991). According to Yim (1999), a stepmother's stress differs according to whether she is in a first or second marriage. The first-marriage stepmother experiences stress in raising stepchildren, educating and correcting their behaviors, and establishing a new mother-children relationship. The second-marriage stepmother experiences stress with stepchildren who are visiting and communicating with their natural mother. These children tend to rebel against the stepmother's authority. These results indicate that the type of stepfamily can have a significant impact on the marital satisfaction of remarried couples; they are consistent with the findings of earlier studies. These findings suggest that complex remarried families with adolescent children may have to contend with bigger problems due to the many complex issues in the parent-child relationship, the existence of a shared family history, or lack thereof, and changes in parent-child alliances (Bray & Berger, 1993; Coleman *et al.*, 2000; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Kim & Um, 2006). For example, on account of the complicated family structure, parents in a complex remarried family are more likely to discriminate between stepchildren and biological children in terms of affection. This

confirms the argument by Coleman *et al.* (2000), who opined that having stepchildren from both partners' previous marriages can contribute to a higher re-divorce rate because it increases tension between the spouses and destabilizes the stepparent-stepchild relationship, an argument which is certainly applicable to Korean society.

Family income variables also affect family adjustment. Income level is an important factor for family happiness. This is congruent with existing literature (Hobart, 1981; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988; Knaub *et al.*, 1984; Lown & Dolan, 1988; Messinger, 1976). The higher the family income, the more comfortable family life becomes. Having a comfortable life evidently results in adjustment in remarriage for all stepfamily members (Hobart, 1981; Ihinger-Tallman, 1983; Knaub *et al.*, 1984; Messinger, 1976).

Role ambiguity also affects the success of family adjustment in stepfamilies, as demonstrated both in this research and others (Giles-Sims, 1984; Keshet, 1990). Many scholars agree that such role ambiguity is the prime source of stress affecting stepmothers' adjustment (Giles-Simes, 1984; Keshet, 1990). This finding is consistent with that of many researchers outside of Korea (Beaudry *et al.*, 2004; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Family boundary ambiguity affecting stepfamily adjustment is also congruent with findings in the existing literature (Smart *et al.*, 2001; Stewart, 2005). Defining the family boundary is therefore necessary and important to all members of the family in the early stages of the remarriage. This research shows that role conflict and family boundary ambiguity do cause family stress, which negatively affects family adjustment.

## CONCLUSION

Korea is experiencing rapid change as a post-industrial society. Divorce is becoming more common and the number of stepfamilies is increasing. However, studies on stepfamilies are both scarce and sketchy. This may be attributed to the fact that, although the traditional family has been rapidly disappearing and large-scale changes in family life

and types of marriage have been occurring, the idealization of the first marriage, the nuclear family, and the remnants of traditional patriarchal values with taboos on the remarriage of women—even viewing remarriage as a sin—have all combined to prevent Korean society from facing up to actual social realities. With the increasing number of divorces and remarriages in Korea's fast-changing society, more attention needs to be paid to understanding and measuring the reasons for stepfamily's adjustment. This was the prime reason for the present study of the relationship between role strain and family adjustment in stepfamilies. The results of this study indicate that role conflict, the type of remarried family, family support, family boundary ambiguity, and role ambiguity all have significant impacts on stepfamily adjustment. On the other hand, gender and length of remarriage were found to have no impact on adjustment. Based on the results of this study, some recommendations on ways to boost stepfamily adjustment via social welfare are presented below.

First, since role strain factors such as role ambiguity, role conflict, and family boundary ambiguity have been found to impact significantly on the social adjustment of stepfamilies, finding ways to reduce role strain is essential. Remarried couples who have lived in different family systems need time to develop emotional intimacy in conjugal relations; at the same time, however, they immediately have to assume a stepparenting role: this might well lead to role strain. Since role strain is often encountered due to high expectations and the resulting anxiety surrounding new remarriages, training and support programs for stepfamilies need to be developed. These programs need to be relevant to the expectations and problems experienced by stepfamilies, so they must be both realistic and sympathetic. Such programs need to be easily accessible to all stepfamily members, and should provide tips on stress prevention, stress management, and problem-solving skills.

Since role strain impacts on adjustment, social workers dealing with the stepfamily should pay attention to this factor and search for measures to reduce role strain. Role strain arises out of the high

expectations placed on the new marriage and the resulting anxiety. Therefore, social workers need to acquire knowledge about these issues and the problems of remarriage.

Second, the gender of stepparents evidently affects family adjustment. The stepmother-stepfather, natural father-stepmother, and natural mother-stepfather sets affect family adjustment very differently. In the United States, the mother raises the children and brings them from her previous marriage to her remarriage. Therefore, about 80 percent of US stepfamilies are stepfather-type families (White & Booth, 1985), so that the stepfather-type family has been an important issue in American family research. In Korea, on the other hand, the stepmother-type family is more common than the stepfather family, so Korean researchers need to pay more attention to this type of stepfamily.

Third, the type of remarried family—either simple or complex—is observed to have a significant impact on remarried couples' level of family adjustment. This finding is consistent with the results of earlier studies which concluded that complex remarried families, due to the complexity, have bigger problems than simple families (Bray & Berger, 1993; Coleman *et al.*, 2002; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). On the other hand, this finding differs from the argument by Jung *et al.* (2000) that couples where both partners have remarried after divorce dealt better with the negative emotions caused by remarriage than those where only one partner had remarried. As the sharing of experiences of marital dissolution and remarriage may have a positive influence on remarried couples, more detailed studies on the effects of the type of stepfamily on family adjustment should be conducted in the future.

Although this study has attempted to provide insights into the degree of marital satisfaction among remarried Korean couples with adolescent stepchildren, caution should be exercised in generalizing from these findings. This research had a limited database and it is unclear how well the sample group represents all stepfamily members. However, even as an exploratory research study, it contributes to our journey towards the goal of

happily remarried couples and their families. Despite its limitations, however, this study is significant, in that, it has examined empirically the influence of role strain as a factor on family adjustment in stepfamilies. Further in-depth studies as well as longitudinal surveys with large sample sizes are recommended.

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Received April 10, 2009

Revised July 15, 2009

Accepted July 16, 2009