A model of blended family (stepfamily) formation in Ethiopia: a constructivist grounded theory

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at developing a model that describes and explains blended family formation in Ethiopia. It is part of an ongoing dissertation entitled "Family functioning experiences of blended families in Ethiopia." We employed constructivist grounded theory both as a method and result of inquiry. This theory states that knowledge is constructed out of the dynamic interaction between the researcher, participants, and the context. Accordingly, we were informed by the guiding principles, data organization and analytical tools the theory provides. We interviewed fourteen participants drawn from seven families. We developed a model that depicted the major contributing factors to blend, and the procedures partners use to form their families in the context of Ethiopia. The study identified the state partners were in, categorized as problem state and aspiration state, before blending as contributing factors. Problem state refers to the challenging situation partners were in due to several factors. Aspiration state refers to the situation of partners who were seeking for a marriage partner for the betterment of their life. The result also showed partners' decision and action of blending were influenced by community and family members involvement. We discussed the results in light of the Ubuntu philosophy, the Ukama and the Ujamaa African theories. Finally, we provided recommendations that would give insight to enhance the quality of blended family formation in Ethiopia.

KEY TERMS: aspiration state, blended family formation, constructivist grounded theory, Ethiopia, problem state, Ubuntu, ujama, ukama

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was developing a model that describes and explains blended family formation in the context of Ethiopia. As a qualitative study with grounded theory design, we employed purposive and theoretical sampling. Accordingly, eight participants were selected purposively while the remaining six were selected using theoretical sampling based on identified analytical gaps. Initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding were conducted to generate codes, themes and categories. We applied the constant comparative analysis method (CCAM) on the data to come up with a model grounded on it. CCAM is used to construct a substantive theory by constantly comparing emerging codes with existing ones and to generate categories. We used this method to develop the blended family formation model, which is grounded on the interview data. The results were presented based on the research questions followed by the resultant model and its description. Finally, we discussed the findings in light of selected African theories and provided recommendations and conclusions.

BACKGROUND

Dynamics in blended families

Marriage is a highly valued, respected and normative pathway to family formation and childbearing in Ethiopia. Accordingly, parents experience strong sense of accomplishment when their children got married which is refered as "ለወግ ለማዕረግ ማብቃት" literally translated as "enabling one's child to be a respected adult/ citizen". Families prepare wedding ceremonies to share their joy and fulfillment with the larger community. The community named this feeling of extreme joy and happiness as "አለማችንን አየን" literally means "enjoyed life in its utmost". Reports revealed higher percentage of married adults and small percentage of nonmarital childbearing in Ethiopia. To this effect, the World Family Map report (WFM, 2019) recognized Ethiopia as the second highest sub-Saharan African country, next to Nigeria, on the percentage (62%) of married adults in the reproductive age group (15 to 49). Similarly, the Central Statistics Agency of Ethiopia (CSA, 2016) reported, 64% of women and 56% of men as married or cohabitating. On the contrary, Gizachew, Melash, Gedefaw, and Yared (2020) reported the first marriage of a quarter of married women in Ethiopia ended in divorce, which led the researchers to conclude that Ethiopia has high rate of divorce. Likawunt and Getu (2023) identified Ethiopia as a country with high risk of marital instability. The facts on the increasing divorce rate and the high proportion of adults in marital union imply high rate of remarriage in Ethiopia which contributes to the formation of blended families.

Blended families are defined as families formed by the union of two adults, at least one of whom has one or more children from previous relationship. Couples forming blended families have features that make them unique from those engaging in first marriages. They have lost their former marriage/ romantic partners; the biological parent of their children is no more at home. Some have biological children who live elsewhere. According to the Africa Social Work Development Network (ASWDNet), n.d. the Individual-in-Family Theory of Africa states the family member's well-being is influenced by the family circumstances. Njoroge and Kirori (2018) identified the dynamics in blended families negatively influenced the academic performance of children in Kenya. Moore (2021) explored the strategies parents and stepparents implemented to reduce the negative influence the new family structures on school performance of their children. According to Aemero and Lakshim (2013), stepfamily members in Ethiopia exhibited poor academic performance and problematic behavior. The societal attitude toward the stepparent-stepchild relationship is negative as portrayed in the fairy tales and idioms such as "ያልወለድኩት ልጅ ቢለኝ አባባ አሬን አለው ዳስ ዳስ።" meaning "I feel odd when my stepchild called me Dad." and "የእንጀራ እናት ጠነከርሽ እንደ ጅማት።" meaning, stepmother is as stiff as tendon referring to the bias that she does not have heart for her stepchild(ren). This situation motivated us to construct a model that describes and explains the pushing or pulling factors of blended family formation.

Research gap in blended families

Researchers (Adjiwanou, Boco & Yaya, 2021; Ganong et al., 2019) have identified shortage of researches that address the complicated issues blended families face. Adjiwanou et al. (2021) indicated lack of research on stepfamilies in Sub Saharan Africa, given the high prevalence of divorce and remarriage in the region. Another study conducted on family structure transitions in four countries including Ethiopia indicated the need for a more contextualized understanding on how families are impacted by family structure transitions (Oldroyd et al., 2021).

Portrie and Hill (2005) asserted that blended families face unique challenges but are met with standard solutions that did not consider the multicultural context. The researchers further underlined the need to conduct qualitative researches so as to *"create rich and descriptive understanding of blended families"*. Yet, several families researches conducted in Ethiopia were guided by Western theories and tools which may not be adequate to uncover what contributes to the nuance in blended families in Ethiopia. We believe knowing what contributes

to the formation of blended families and how they are formed might help to understand their unique nature and improve the quality of blended family formation.

METHODOLOGY

As an Ethiopian woman running a blended family, I, the first author, brought to this research the knowledge that blending families and working towards their stability is a complicated task. My experience motivated me to conduct my dissertation on "Family functioning experiences of blended family members in Ethiopia: A constructivist grounded theory". The current study is part of my ongoing dissertation. It is a qualitative study with grounded theory design and CCAM (Charmaz, 2017), similar to the larger study. Two inclusion criteria were used to select participants: 1) At least one of the marriage partners in a couple should have brought a child[ren] from former relationship. 2) The couple should have a minimum of two years' experience after blending their families.

An Ethiopian proverb goes to say "የሀገሩን ሰርዶ በሀገሩ በሬ" verbatim translated as "plough the nation's land using the nation's ox" literally means "the problem of a nation is best solved by its own resources", we developed a model that answers why couples blend their families in the context of Ethiopia based on the interview data collected from 14 participants. The sample selection, data collection and data analysis methods were informed by the social values of the Ubuntu African worldview which is termed as *Medemer* (Ubuntu Research Group URG, 2023) in Ethiopia. We consciously demonstrated genuine, respectful, and compassionate behavior in the relationships we had with the participants. We conducted the interviews at the homes of the participants to build respectful relationships, balance the researcher-participant power relationship and better understand the family and community context. The interview was in Amharic which is a widely spoken and the day-to-day language in Ethiopia (Khupe & Keane, 2017). To benefit from the oral culture of Ethiopia, participants were asked to freely narrate the reasons behind their blended family formation and the procedures they followed to form their family. They shared us their experiences, the stories and the events that push or pull them to blend their families. Meaning making was mainly done by the participants but it was also informed by our conscious engagement in understanding the interview data and interpreting contextual descriptions. We made a comprehensive data analysis and identified core and subcategories as presented in the next section.

Ethical issues were seriously considered in this study. We got oral consent from each couple after explaining the purpose of the research and providing all the necessary information about the data collection process and other details. We obtained ethical approval (Ref. No. SoP-Eth-008/2023) from Addis Ababa University, School of Psychology, Research Ethics Committee. As social psychologists and qualitative researchers, we managed emotional disturbances interviewees encountered through providing counseling and referral services.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

We identified "Partner's State" as the core category that emerged from two categories, problem state and aspiration state.The former emanated from the subcategories economic challenge, struggle with child rearing, poor health and gender-based violence while the latter came from the subcategories family expansion, companionship, and dignity and respect. The state partners were in before the formation of their blended families contributed to their decision and action of blending, and the procedure they followed to blend. The categories and the model that emerged from the data are presented in this section.

Problem state

Some partners described the challenging situation they were in before blending their families. Economic challenge, struggling with child rearing, poor health condition and exposure to gender-based violence were their major challenges. Economic challenge was a shared problem while gender differences were observed in the others. Men partners associated their blended family formation with the need to get care and support for self and children. Here are reflections from the then widowed single fathers.

> *Taking care of the little boys was very much challenging for me. That was the only reason that pushed me to marry another woman while I was still mourning the loss of my former wife, who died on the 16th day after she gave birth to our third child (C5 Husband).*

> *My former wife died when my son was 10. I have been a good farmer all the time, but I am not good at child rearing. My relatives and friends advised me to get married and raise my child properly (C4 Husband).*

Since I could not afford to hire a house maid, I was the one who took care of my daughter. I was responsible to cook and wash our clothes, I was the one who prepared her lunch box and accompany her to school. As a priest, my duties at church were also demanding (C1 Husband).

Another participant with complicated health problem decided to get a "wife" who could support and treat him. He was living and working in the USA and experienced difficulties to overcome the life challenges he encountered there. He explained his decision: *"I decided to get a wife who can support me in generating income and treat me at home. It has been hard to get healthy food and my medication on time which exacerbated my health condition"* (C2 Husband).

Women participants' decision to form blended families had been mainly influenced by economic challenge and their exposure to gender-based violence. They shared their feelings:

The men in my neighbourhood were abusive; they tried to snatch part of my land assuming that I am incapable, a widowed woman who would give up to pressure (C1 Wife).

There were two men who forcefully nagged me for marriage. Especially one of them was abusive; when I said no, he started threatening me. He said, "if you would not marry me, I would abduct you." (C5 Wife).

It was the most challenging time in my life. I was not able to feed myself and my two children. The father of my daughter was imprisoned and that of my son was irresponsible. So, I accepted his (Husband's) *proposal and joined his family just the day after our introduction* (C4 Wife).

Aspiration state

The only reason I needed marriage was to give birth; to have more children. And yet, I wanted it to be in a respected way…em..I did not want to have a child out of wedlock. So, I was firmly interested to get married and have a child from a responsible person (C2 Wife).

When my youngest child joined kindergarten and saw the fathers of his friends, he started to consistently ask about his father and insisted me to bring one for him. It was to satisfy his need that I got married. (C6 Wife).

I got married when my son was at the verge of completing high school. I was worried about being alone. Who is going to be by my side whenever I needed protection? (C7 Wife).

The data also revealed couples with similar life experiences tend to blend their families. Accordingly, C1, C3 and C7 valued the similar life challenges they encountered and believed that has motivated their decision to blend. Similarities may be described based on status before blending families such as partners in C1 were widowed single parents of their respective daughters of similar age. The partners had been struggling to balance work and life. The partners in C3 have a daughter each from their former marriages which ended in divorce. Both experienced emotional disturbances and hassles in dealing with former spouses. The partners in C7 were single parenting their children for more than twelve years. They have feelings of achievement as their children were in secondary schools at the time, they decided to get married. The couple wanted to relax and enjoy the years ahead.

The partners in this category were aspiring for expanding their families such as getting a child, substituting the missed parent, and getting stepsiblings to their children. The women in this state were aspiring to fulfill the desires of their children and enjoy life with a marriage partner. Some were aspiring to "regain" dignity and respect through remarriage. Accordingly, the decision of wives was mainly influenced by their desire to expand families and get companions. Here are some of their reflections:

I got married just to give birth to more children. And yet, since my first child grew without a father, I did not want to raise another child without a father. Hence, I was firmly interested to get married and have a child from a responsible person (C2 Wife).

I had been single parenting my son for seven years and that was the most enjoyable time of my life. We were like friends. I got married when my son was at the verge of joining university. It was my son who initiated the idea of my marriage. I accepted his idea to avoid loneliness and to enjoy life with a partner (C7 Wife).

Similarly, the husband in C7 was single parenting his two daughters for twelve years. He believed he had invested a lot in rearing his children alone without "exposing" them to a stepmother. He formed the current family after

his younger daughter turned10. He believed by then they were already grown up to support each other and protect themselves even if they encountered a harmful stepmother. His decision to get married was influenced by his sense of achievement in child rearing and the desire to live for "self" in the remaining years of his life.

The husband in C6 was neither married nor had a child before the formation of the current family. He witnessed that it was his partner's character that influenced his marital decision. He said, "*The decision I made was odd for many. She was a single mother of three and 11 years older than me. But she was a loving and caring woman.*" (C6 Husband).

Both partners in C3, C6 and C7 were from the aspiration state and the women's marital decision was influenced by their children's involvement.

Blending procedure

The result revealed most of the marriages were initiated and facilitated by the engagement of family or community members. The result also identified that the time partners took to blend their families was quite short.

Facilitators

Four partners came to know each other through facilitators who created introductory platforms, provided "reliable" information, served as mediators and encouraged partners to blend their families. Partners reflected:

> *"Since I trusted my God father, I accepted the person he recommended immediately. I believed that God has accepted my prayers and gave me the life partner I wished for long. (C1 Wife)"*

> *"As a religious person who came from countryside, I was shocked by the lifestyle of girls and women in Addis Ababa. Thanks to my friend, he got me a blessed wife* (C1 Husband)*."*

> *"it was awkward to meet a to-be marriage partner in this way. My friend tried his best to set the stage and help me feel relaxed* (C2 Wife)*."*

> *"He was one of my mediators. My wife's brother was not happy by the marriage fearing she would be hurt as this is her third marriage. It was with the help of my relative that they accepted the marriage* (C5 Husband)*."*

The wives in C3, C6 and C7 described that the idea of their marriage initially came from their children. The former two were divorced mothers of a single child who had been single parenting for more than seven years. Despite the challenges, they marked the period they single parented as the best family time. Both reported it to be end of the dysfunctional marriage they had and beginning of submitting themselves to satisfy their children's desire. C6 was a widowed single mother of three children whose youngest son was a toddler when her former husband died. When this son joined kindergarten, he started to "nag her to bring a father". They shared how the children initiated the idea of their marriage:

> *My daughter's childhood dream was to reconcile her father and I when she grew up. As a result, she became mad when she saw me with anyone of the opposite sex whoever the person is. When she was 14, her father married his third wife and she became disappointed. She even felt guilty for controlling me from engaging to a new life. So, she begged me to get married and promised to accept the person as a father* (C3 Wife).

C7 wife's son was also against his mother's marriage for many years assuming the man would "take" his mother's love. He used to be angry when her relatives and friends suggested her to get married. Then, when he was left with a year to join university, he started to be concerned about the fate of his mother. She said:

> *My son started to worry a lot about my life as he was going to leave me shortly. He felt mistaken and complained to me "why did you listen to me. I was a small child to deal with such issues. You should have married ignoring my irrational interests"* (C7 Wife).

> *When my youngest child joined kindergarten and saw the fathers of his friends, he started to consistently ask about his father and insisted me to bring one for him. He used to say "I am the only one without a father." It was to satisfy his need that I got married.* (C6 Wife).

Rapid family formation

All couples except C2 and C5, concluded their marriage in less than a week's time after their first introduction. The rapid family formation was catalyzed by three factors. Firstly, they trusted the information they got from the facilitator, and they believed there is no need to spare time studying their partners. Secondly, they believed the situation they were in was so devastating that they badly needed a person who could reduce their burden. Thirdly, they were satisfied to get a person who can perceivably share their value system. Here are their reflections:

> *We tested for HIV on the third day of our introduction and got married on the fifth day. Since I was afraid of that person* (the person who had been harassing her)*, I did not want to delay it* (C5 Wife).

> *She is a good person, and the children were nice by then. We were happy when we pass time together. After few days of introduction, I just brought my luggage and started to live with them* (C6 Husband).

> *I decided right away as he fulfilled my two preconditions. One was a person who is ready to receive the Holy Communion ("Kidus Kurban") with me. The second was a person who has only one daughter, just like me* (C1 Wife).

All couples except C6 established their families legally but without formal marriage ceremonies. Two couples practiced sending mediators to the woman's parents to get approval of the marriage; this is a tradition in Ethiopia.

Figure 1. Blended family formation model
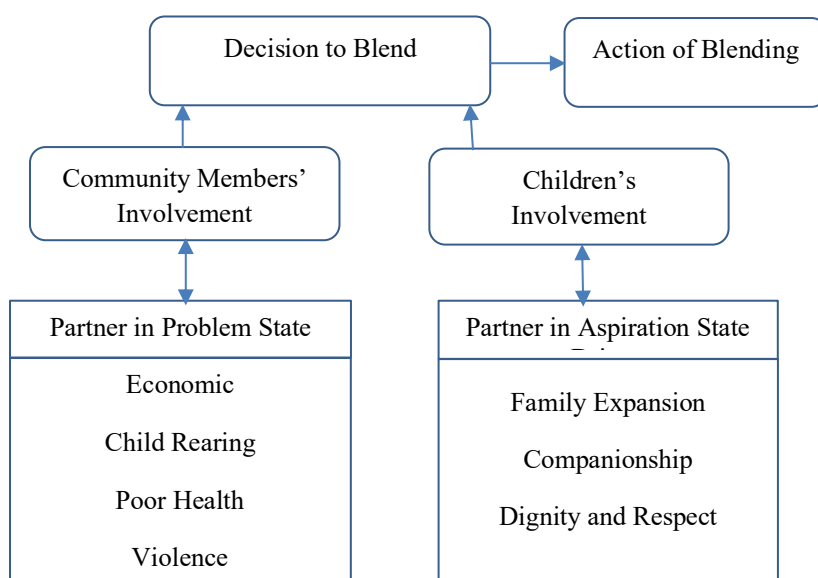
Description of terms in the model

Partners' state: refers to the situation the members in a couple were prior to blending their families. Two categories emerged from the data based on the level of challenge or severity of the problem the partners were in; problem state and aspiration state.
   Problem state: partners who reported experiences of hardship and severe problems including life threatening challenges were categorized in this state. The major challenges observed here were economic challenge, child rearing, poor health and gender-based violence.
   Aspiration state: Partners who reported to be in a relatively stable state in terms of fulfilling their basic needs but were aspiring to expand their families and enjoy life with a partner were categorized in this state.
   Children or community members' involvement: refers to ideas, advices, requests, encouragements and other services partners reportedly received from community members and their children and used the service in their decision to blend. The involvement could be initiated either by one of the partners or by the child or community member.
   Decision to blend refers to the decision couples made to live together blending their respective families.
   Action of blending: The situation where couples actually merged their families and started to live as a household.

DISCUSSION

The data implied that partners mainly form blended families either to curb the challenges they faced or to get what they aspired for. Here, we would like to discuss the results in light of the Ubuntu philosophy and the Ukama African

Family theory and the ujamaa communityhood theory.

The findings revealed that partners either needed or wanted to be connected with others for their survival or meaningful existence. This sense of interdependence and connectedness is in line with the Ubuntu African philosophy and its maxim *a person is a person through other persons* (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). The facilitation roles community members played in the blended family formation processes are in line with the Ujamaa Communityhood Theory as communities take care of each other and work for the betterment of human life (ASWDNet). Besides, the application of Ujamaa was more relevant and visible for partners in problem state than those in aspiration state. These partners considered the formation of the new family as a way out from the problems they used to face. Four families were established with at least one marriage partner who was in problem state. The community involvement gives sense as the challenge was more severe for partners in problem state and solution was beyond the capacity of the family. Whereas Ukama was more applicable for partners in aspiration state as parents were looking for life fullfillment and the role of children and other family members was critical to address the desires of the family. Partners in aspiration state value family expansion, companionship, dignity and respect. This can be explained in terms of the pillars of the Ukama Theory (ASWDNet) particularly value for marriage, value for childbearing and value for strengthening the bond between the families involved in the marriage. Partners in this state value marriage and considered it as a normative pathway to give birth and raise a disciplined child.

The findings also revealed the perceived sense of insecurity single mothers faced as a result of being harassed, threatened and disrespected by their own neighbours and abusive men in the community. This finding is against the philosophy of Ubuntu which focuss on promoting humanity through values such as dignity, respect, care and support (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, we suggest the following recommendations:

- In Ethiopia, particularly partners in problem state should give due consideration while deciding to form blended families. They should exhaustively consider alternatives and weigh the cost and benefit of their decision rather than merely focusing on solving their immediate problems.
- Social workers, counselors, social psychologists and developmental psychologists should enhance family and community support systems through promoting the application of Ukama Family Theory and Ujamaa Community hood Theory in the context of Ethiopia.
- The government of Ethiopia should strengthen its law enforcement mechanisms to protect single mothers and their children from harassment and violence.
- The government, in collaboration with the community should provide family support services that address the unique challenges of economically struggling single fathers and their children.
- Further research should be conducted to explore the reasons of blending and blending procedure play in the functioning of blended families in Ethiopia.

CONCLUSION

Partners form blended families for two basic reasons; to mitigate the problems they faced or to fulfill their aspirations. The decision to blend families was facilitated by partners' community and family members. Couples with at least one partner in the problem state tend to be satisfiers while couples with both partners in the aspiration state tend to be maximizers in their decision. In all the cases, the decision to blend was followed by an immediate action of blending. The study developed a model that describes and explains blended family formation in Ethiopia. This model was developed based on the principles and analytical tools of the constructivist grounded theory. As depicted in the model, the state partners were in before blending their families contributed for the decision and action of blending. Accordingly, we provided recommendations that promote positive blended family formation.

DECLARATIONS

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