

## Blended Family Functioning in Ethiopia: A Constructivist Grounded Theory

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### Abstract

**Problem:**The formation of blended families is mainly preceded by divorce, widowhood or romantic breakups for adults and parental separation or loss for children. As a result, the members are likely to form the new family with unsettled negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and hopelessness. This, in turn, is likely to affect the family's normal functioning. **Purpose:**This study aimed at exploring the family functioning experiences of blended families and constructing a grounded theory that describes and explains those experiences. **Method:**The study employed constructivist grounded theory both as a method and result of inquiry. Accordingly, the study is informed by the guiding principles, data organization and analytical tools the theory provides. We conducted in-depth interview with twenty-five family members drawn from eight blended families. **Result:**We developed a model that depicted the major family functioning experiences of blended families in Ethiopia. The study identified functional blended family, deteriorating blended family and dysfunctional blended family as the major categories that describe the blended family context in Ethiopia. Besides, we identified the core characterizing features of each category. **Conclusion:** The model could be used by educationalists, social workers and psychologists as evidence to design and develop intervention strategies to improve the family functioning of blended family members in Ethiopia. Besides, blended family researchers could use the model as a spring board to develop instruments that assess the family functioning of blended families in the context of Ethiopia.

**Keywords:**blended family functioning, constructivist grounded theory, deteriorating blended family, dysfunctional blended family, Ethiopia, functional blended family

## Introduction

Family is a socially constructed entity which means it is socially and culturally created; it is neither determined by biology nor by the natural world [1,2]. Accordingly, knowing this social construct requires understanding the context it situates. In this regard, blended family is one of the complex [2] and complicated family structures that needs to be explored in its social context.

A blended family is formed when at least one of the marriage partners bring a child or children from previous relationships [3]. The definition entails that a blended family, in its simplest sense, consists of a biological parent, a stepparent and a biological/step child. Besides, a blended family may have half siblings, full siblings and other extended family members as well. A blended family could be simple or complex depending on the number of stepparents in the household [4]. There is only one stepparent in simple blended families whereas both partners are stepparents in complex blended families. They have complex relationships and the family members are exposed to unique stresses [5]. Unlike intact families, where the couple relationship is the longest and oldest one, blended families have longer and older parent-child relationship [6]. Establishing new roles that fit the situation and the members involved is not an easy task [7].

Given their fast-growing size [5] and specific nature, the effort exerted so far to understand the dynamics in blended families is limited. Many researchers such as [8-10] have already identified the lack of sufficient investigation on issues related with blended families and reported that a lot has to be investigated in order to fully understand the nature of blended families and how they function.

Family functioning is conceptualized as how well a family system meets the needs of the family physically and emotionally, as a whole [11]; how well groups of people live with and depend on each other. The Beavers Systems Model of Family Functioning organized families into nine groups based on two dimensions; family competence and family style. The nine groups are optimal families, adequate families, mid-range families which is composed of three family groups, the next two groups are labeled as borderline families and the remaining two groups are labeled as severely dysfunctional families [12].

Creating a well-functioning family environment is a challenging task for most families. The challenge is even more complicated in blended families as bringing feelings of belongingness or family cohesion in stepfamilies requires additional effort from the family members [13]. Despite the existence of various family functioning theories, no theory is adequate to show the full picture of blended families and to serve as a tool to

solve the unique challenges they face. In this regard, [14] asserted that blended families face unique challenges but are met with standard solutions.

Majority of the studies that focus on family functioning have major gaps including: dominated by researchers from Western countries and using Western samples, most studies being quantitative [15], most studies being dependent on responses from a single family member [16]. To this effect, [15] emphasized the need to conduct a qualitative study and take into consideration the cultural dimension to understand the issue of family functioning. [3] reflected the significance of researching on blended families as the findings would help the families and those who support them to gain insights on the factors that foster the family's better functioning.

The purpose of this research therefore is to develop a constructivist grounded theory that describes and explains blended family functioning in the context of Ethiopia. Hence, on top of the research's potential contribution to fill in the identified gaps, the model would be used as a tool to enhance blended family functioning in Ethiopia. In this regard, Kelly (as cited in [17]) pointed out the need for models that promote healthy family functioning and a model that guides and instills hope in newly formed blended families.

## Methods

### Research Design

The study employed constructivist grounded theory both as a method and result of inquiry. The ultimate goal of this research was developing a theory that describes and explains how blended families in Ethiopia function. We employed the analytical tools that constructivist grounded theory provides and grasped the different meanings each family gives to blended family functioning [18].

### Participants

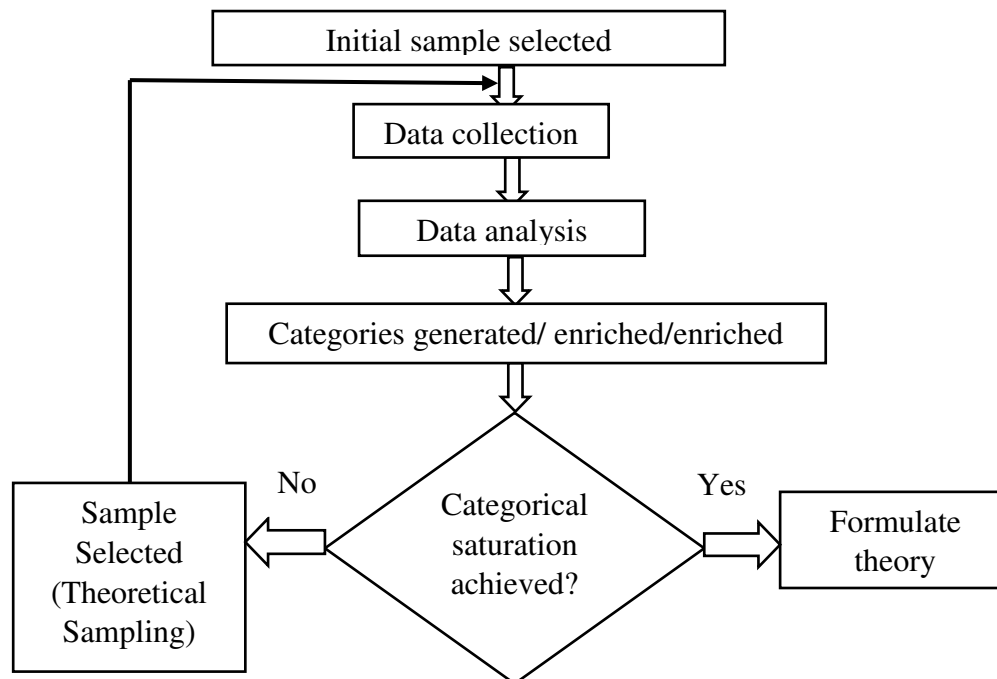
We selected our samples in two major phases. In the first phase, we employed purposive sampling technique to select families who qualified the inclusion criteria set. The first inclusion criterion is that at least one of the marriage partners should have brought a minimum of one child from their previous relationship at the time the new blended family was formed. Hence, the household is formed with at least one stepparent-stepchild relationship which reveals the dynamics in the family functioning process since the time of the family formation. The other inclusion criterion is that families who have been blended for a minimum of two years will take part in the study. As researches indicated that it can take a minimum of two years for families to create and solidify a new blended family [1,19].

In the first phase, we purposively selected four families that qualify the inclusion criteria. For the sake of heterogeneity, we selected the families from two regions and one City Administration namely; Amhara region, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region, and Addis Ababa City Administration.

### Data collection and Analysis

We interviewed 14 family members drawn from these three families. We employed the Constant Comparative Analysis Method (CCAM) and came up with initial categories. Then, we continued the second phase of our sampling using theoretical sampling technique. At this phase, we selected 11 family members drawn from four blended families. Here, sampling was dictated by categorical gaps as identified by the constant comparative analysis method. This made sampling more of theoretical as it was intended to fill in the identified gaps to form the theory. Figure illustrates the sampling process.

**Figure 1. Theoretical and purposive sampling**



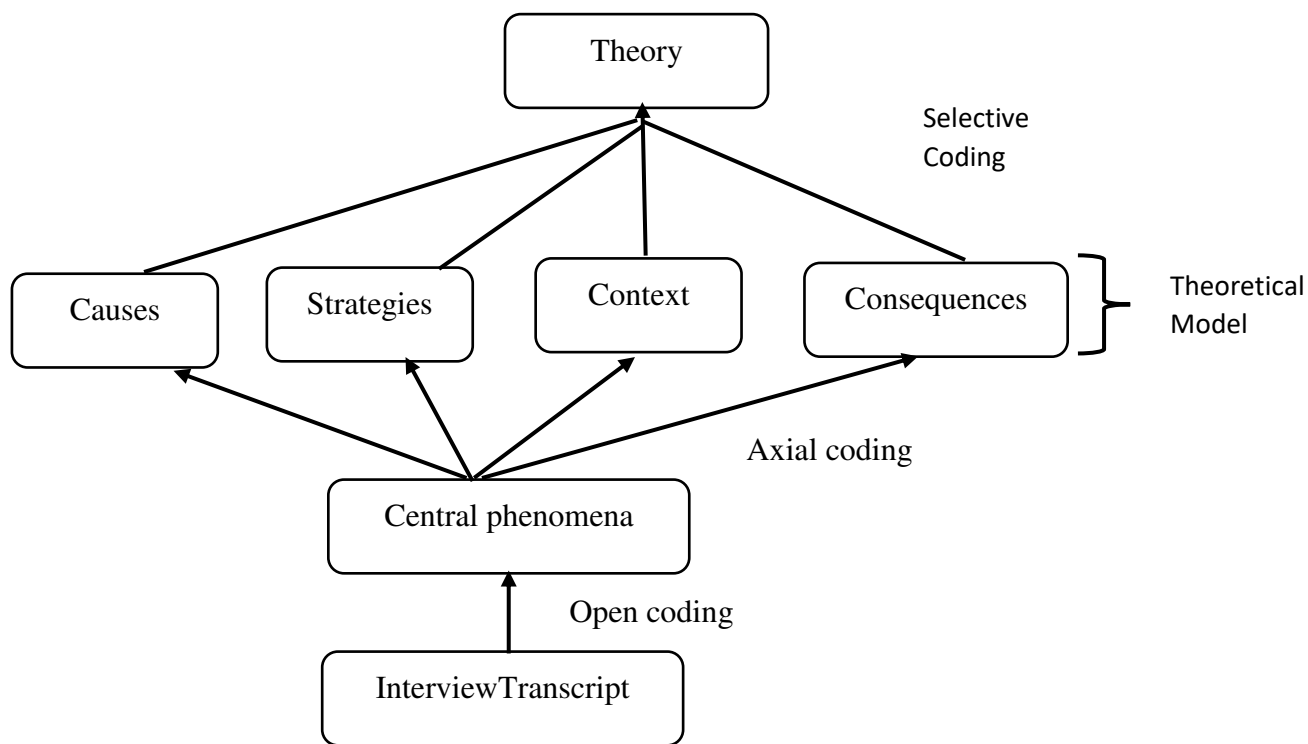
In-depth interview was conducted using unstructured interview guide and data was collected on diverse family issues from the participant family members. Accordingly, we informed them to freely narrate their story related with their blended family life. We

collected, coded, and analyzed the data simultaneously [20,21] and terminated data collection when theoretical saturation is meaningfully achieved. We conducted the interviews between June 2022 and March 2023. Each interview was audio taped and then transcribed. All interviews were conducted by ourselves which helped us to apply our knowledge and experience in the data collection phase. We were mindful in that appropriate techniques and styles of interviewing were in place including rapport building, managing emotional outbursts, and dealing with sensitive data. This helped us to build trust and credibility with the participants. Besides, the place, date and time of all interviews were set by the participants for their convenience. We observed that the interviewees were in comfortable situation during the interview.

We conducted member checking at the preliminary analysis phase. Here, we took back the preliminary analysis to five participants who belong to different families and collected feedbacks on the representation of their experiences. We then incorporated their feedback in the findings. This enabled us and the participants to maintain equality in the power dynamics and collaborate in the data collection, interpretation, and reporting phases [22]. It helped us to ensure the theory formulated is indeed grounded in the data.

We employed the constant comparative analysis method [21] to create categories and enrich them with relevant information. We continually and iteratively looked for information that fits in each category from the transcripts, field notes and upcoming interviews. This process continued until the categories were meaningfully saturated. Finally, a constructivist grounded theory has been constructed from the intersection of the categories. Figure II depicts the overall data analysis procedure.

Figure 2. Data analysis procedure



## Results

### Participants' profile

A minimum of two and a maximum of five members were interviewed from each of the eight families. Participant families have been blended from a minimum of three years to a maximum of 15 years. In depth narrative interviews were conducted with a total of 25 family members. For the sake of maintaining privacy and confidentiality, codes are used for all family members. Accordingly, families are designated by F1 to F8. Husbands, wives, daughters and sons are identified by adding the letters H, W, D and S respectively in the family code. For example, F3W represents the wife in family 3. In families where we interviewed more than one child, we used D1, D2 or S1, S2 to distinguish one child from the other, for example, F1D2 represents the second daughter in F1. Table I gives brief information about the participant families.

**Table 1. Participants profile**

Name	Designation	Have Common Child	Years since blended	No. of Members Interviewed
Family 1	F1	Yes	11	4
Family 2	F2	Yes	7	2
Family 3	F3	Yes	6	3
Family 4	F4	No	3	3
Family 5	F5	Yes	15	5
Family 6	F6	No	12	4
Family 7	F7	No	3	2
Family 8	F8	Yes	6	2

We identified “Blended Family Condition” as the core category that emerged from three categories, functional blended family, deteriorating blended family and dysfunctional blended family. Each of these categories has characterizing features that emanate from the interview data. The core characterizing features of the three blended family categories are presented in this section.

### **The core characterizing features of functional blended families**

Functional blended families are characterized by establishing the family on stable ground, communication, understanding, acceptance and solidarity, and sense of sustainability. The family members revealed the tendency of understanding each other. For example, in F7 the girls were “not so good” at cooking while the son is “excellent” which is against the gender norm in Ethiopia. Yet, the family members accepted their differences and used it to build solidarity. For example, the daughters in F7 enjoyed cooking special food with their step brother. Besides, the family has strong sense of wholeness especially during holidays and family events.

The couples in the functional blended family category had been single parenting their children for several years that ranged from three (F5H) to 15 (F7W). This might have helped the family members to work out with the challenges the marital/parental loss caused and to move on. The couple in F1 and F5H have lost their former spouses in death. F5S2 has no contact at all with his biological father, all children and partners in F7 rarely communicate with their biological parents/ former spouses. The members believed that this has limited the negative influence of nonresident biological parents on the new blended family. Besides, children who have a feeling of being abandoned by their biological parents revealed a tendency of accepting their stepparents (F5S2, F7D1 and F7D2).

Functional blended family members have strong sense of sustainability. They recognized that families face challenges and setbacks due to various reasons such as mismatch in child rearing practices as in F<sub>1</sub> and F<sub>3</sub>, managing imagined love affair of stepsiblings', as in F<sub>7</sub>, and dealing with actual occurrence of love affair in stepsiblings', as in F<sub>5</sub>, and dealing with the feeling of abandoning a biological child who lives elsewhere as in F<sub>3</sub>. Regardless of the challenges they faced, the members believed that challenges are to be resolved in a way that enhances the stability and sustainability of their family. Besides, the parents are working towards the success of their stepchildren in their education such as F<sub>3</sub>H academically supported his stepdaughter, F<sub>5</sub>H educated his stepson in a technical college covering his fee, F<sub>7</sub>W shared her stepdaughters' so that they could focus on their education. Here are some reflections that come from members of functional blended families:

Both of us were concerned about the wellbeing of our children. We have invested a lot for their wellbeing and we never want to ruin that at any cost. We prioritize our children than our own needs and desires (F<sub>7</sub>H).

F<sub>1</sub>D<sub>1</sub> is both my sister and my best friend. We share our secrets. She was only a grade ahead of me. However, since she is a very clever student, she supported me in my education(F<sub>1</sub>D<sub>2</sub>).

We sat down and discussed about the way forward. We arranged private bedrooms for each of them, we agreed to have a separate account for their school fee. For example, I save 2000 Birr per month to my son's fee and he does the same for his daughter. We listed down all our family consumption expenses and settled our contribution(F<sub>7</sub>W).

Father [stepfather] raised me since I was three and I did not know that I have another father. I used to sleep with him and I was always with him wherever he went, be it to the farm or the nearby town (F<sub>5</sub>S<sub>2</sub>).

The role of F<sub>5</sub>W [stepmother] for the peaceful life of the whole family has been very great. She and I discuss and resolve what so ever the case is. She is intelligent, sociable and has a very strong persuasion skill. She contributed a lot for our understanding and reaching where we are now(F<sub>5</sub>S<sub>1</sub>).

### **The core characterizing features of deteriorating blended families**

We identified one family, F<sub>4</sub> that belong to deteriorating blended family. The family is characterized by unhealthy comparison, disapproval and rejection by influential others, and other aggravating factors. The family members tend to consistently compare their current life with the former one and get disappointed. F<sub>4</sub>W who used to generate



income and support her children before the formation of the current family feels remorse as she is now completely dependent on the little income her husband generates. Besides, she perceives imbalance in the way she treats her stepchildren and F<sub>4</sub>H treats her biological children and feels that she is being exploited by the current family.

The couple in F<sub>4</sub> encountered rejection by their own children, relatives and community members as their act of forming a new family was recognized as inappropriate. The couple reported that they are misunderstood and their respective family and community members have wrongly interpreted their actions of blending. In the case of F<sub>4</sub>H, the fact that he blended his family in the year his former wife died made his eldest daughter, F<sub>4</sub>D and all his in-laws down since they considered his act as a sign of brutality and absence of grief to his former wife. In many parts of Ethiopia including the region where F<sub>4</sub> resides, prolonged grief to the loss of loved ones is taken as a culturally appropriate behavior.

Besides, factors such as financial and health related problems worsened the functioning of this family. The family members demonstrated low resilience whenever they encountered additional challenges. For example, F<sub>4</sub>W cursed the decision she made to form the current family whenever her biological children needed some money that she could not afford. This, in turn, upset F<sub>4</sub>H as he considered his wife is not understanding his struggled to cover the expenses of his family let alone to help “others”.

Regardless of all the challenges and turmoil, the members in deteriorating blended families want to maintain the current family. They attributed the challenges they faced to external factors mainly to economic problem. They believed there is nothing personal in their disagreements and recognized the effort each one of them exerted for the wellbeing of the family. They assumed the family will be fine if the factors that aggravate their situation are resolved. They appreciated the way family members supported each other and enjoyed the company of one another. In this regard, F<sub>4</sub>D appreciates the way F<sub>4</sub>W treats the children and she feels good for her little brothers to have a compassionate stepmother.

One of the major contributing factors for the family’s deterioration is the family’s particularly F<sub>4</sub>W’s inability to support her nonresidential biological children due to the family’s economic challenge. F<sub>4</sub>W was engaged in her own small-scale businesses like selling milk, butter, and coffee. Her income was enough to support her two children who lived with their grandparents. She stopped her business when she joined the new family as taking care of her stepchildren became her major responsibility. Consequently, she stopped supporting her biological children which made her to be vulnerable and in a state of confusion. F<sub>4</sub>W feels bad as she is not helping her children. Here is an instance she mentioned “Last time my son asked me 200 Birr [≈5 USD] for educational materials

but I had nothing to give him so I cried.” Here are some of the reflections that come from the members of this deteriorating blended family:

I got married for the sake of my children. The money I earn is not enough to cover our basic expenses such as food items, school fee, transportation and medication let alone to hire a babysitter. Besides, no one supports me. The parents and sisters of my late wife took me as a rival. They harassed me; one of her sisters even beat me as if I got married to satisfy my body (F<sub>4</sub>H).

He [F<sub>4</sub>H] should have raised us hiring a house maid. Our mother’s death was accidental; she was not sick. She was in her maternity. We used to live a better life when she was alive. But, just within a year he got married. Our grandparents and aunts [mother’s side] are also mad at him (F<sub>4</sub>D).

She [F<sub>4</sub>W] is good for all of us. She treats my brothers like her own children; she cleans their feces, washes their body, feeds them... everything. She is like a friend to me. We chat and laugh each other; I tell her what happened in school. I feel by far comfortable with her than with my father after he got married (F<sub>4</sub>D).

He [F<sub>4</sub>H] treated me in the same way as he treated his daughter. When he brings something be it socks or slipper, he brings for both of us. He did not differentiate me from her. He never bought anything for himself after his [former] wife died. All his clothes and shoes were bought when she was alive (F<sub>4</sub>W).

I cannot bring them here to live with us as we are hardly fulfilling even the basic needs of the household. My children complained for abandoning them. My daughter blamed me for divorcing their father. We argue in every issue. I think she has some bad spirit that created hatred between us. Even some community members criticized for taking care of my stepchildren leaving behind my own (F<sub>4</sub>W).

As can be inferred from the story of F<sub>4</sub>, the family is struggling with economic, social and psychological challenges. Due to the economic challenge, the family is not affording the basic needs of nonresident children. Besides, the blended family is not accepted by the resident and nonresident daughter, extended family members and other community members. From F<sub>4</sub>H’s side, the community believes that it is a betrayal to his late wife to get married that “soon”. From F<sub>4</sub>W’s side, the community considered her as a heartless woman who abandoned her biological children.

### **The core characterizing features of dysfunctional blended families**

Dysfunctional blended families are characterized by negative emotions such as negative attitude toward the former spouse of one's partner, the perception of being exploited, lack of trust, negative step relationships, communication gap, taking former partner/ family as a reference. They experienced either perceived violence, as in F8 or actual violence as in F2. Physical violence and gender-based violence are the main characterizing features of dysfunctional blended families. The conflict in F8 escalated when the mother perceived that her husband is sexually abusing his stepdaughter. Similarly, the conflict in F2 escalated the moment F2H started verbally abusing his stepdaughter.

The members in dysfunctional blended families feel that they are no more benefiting from the family; they rather perceived it as a loss. Dysfunctional blended families demonstrate abusive relationship such as yelling, insulting and beating amongst themselves. All the three dysfunctional blended families experienced short term family separation and they believe the family would end up in divorce any time.

F2H reported the current family has forced him to lead a life against his plan. He continuously compared his current life with the one he had before and regret his decision to marry F2W. He believed that they are completely different people who do not match at all. He described:

My life is damaged because of this family. I am forced to live out of my plan. Before, doing a job was not a must for me. If I was not interested, I would just take rest. But now it has never been optional; I have to work and get money. The woman I married is not my type in age, interest, behavior. I should have married a woman who would be on my side in everything. A woman who listens to, treats and supports me; a woman who would not upset me (F2H).

F2H is 21 years older than his wife and at first, he was not concerned about their differences. He came to take their differences seriously as his friends informed him that it is for the sake of coming to the USA that she married him and would definitely ask divorce once she got the chance. He, then, started to question himself about why she married him. According to his perception, a young artist who lives in her own condominium and drives her own car should have no reason to marry him unless she has some hidden intention. Now, he believed that what his friends said is true. He, therefore, wanted to delay processing their visa as he thinks it is much easier to send money to Ethiopia rather than supporting his child in the USA; as he is expecting his wife to claim divorce once she is there. He wanted to maintain the marriage for the sake of raising his child in a two-parent household. He stated, "Otherwise, I will return back to Ethiopia and raise my child there. I want to live with her for the sake of raising my child." (F2H).

F6W was a widowed single mother with three children when F6H joined the family. F6H is 12 years younger than his wife and he is a driver at a government office. F6W is a business woman and has never faced financial challenge. The children were fourteen, eight and five years old when F6H joined the family. The couple has been facing disagreements since the children grew up. F6W attributed the source of their disagreement to lack of open communication. She said,

He holds umbrage whenever conflicts or disagreements occur between us. He is not open for discussion. We love and respect each other and you know, disagreement is normal for a husband and a wife. He had never quarreled with the children. I am the one who cover every expense of the family. Why would he quarrel with them? He has no financial contribution for their development (F6W).

F6W is the source of income for the family. She believed that covering every family expense is an instrument to avoid F6H's interference in the life of her children. Except the youngest, the other two children have no verbal communication with their stepfather. They believe that F6H is abusing their mother and she is unnecessarily tolerating his destructive behavior.

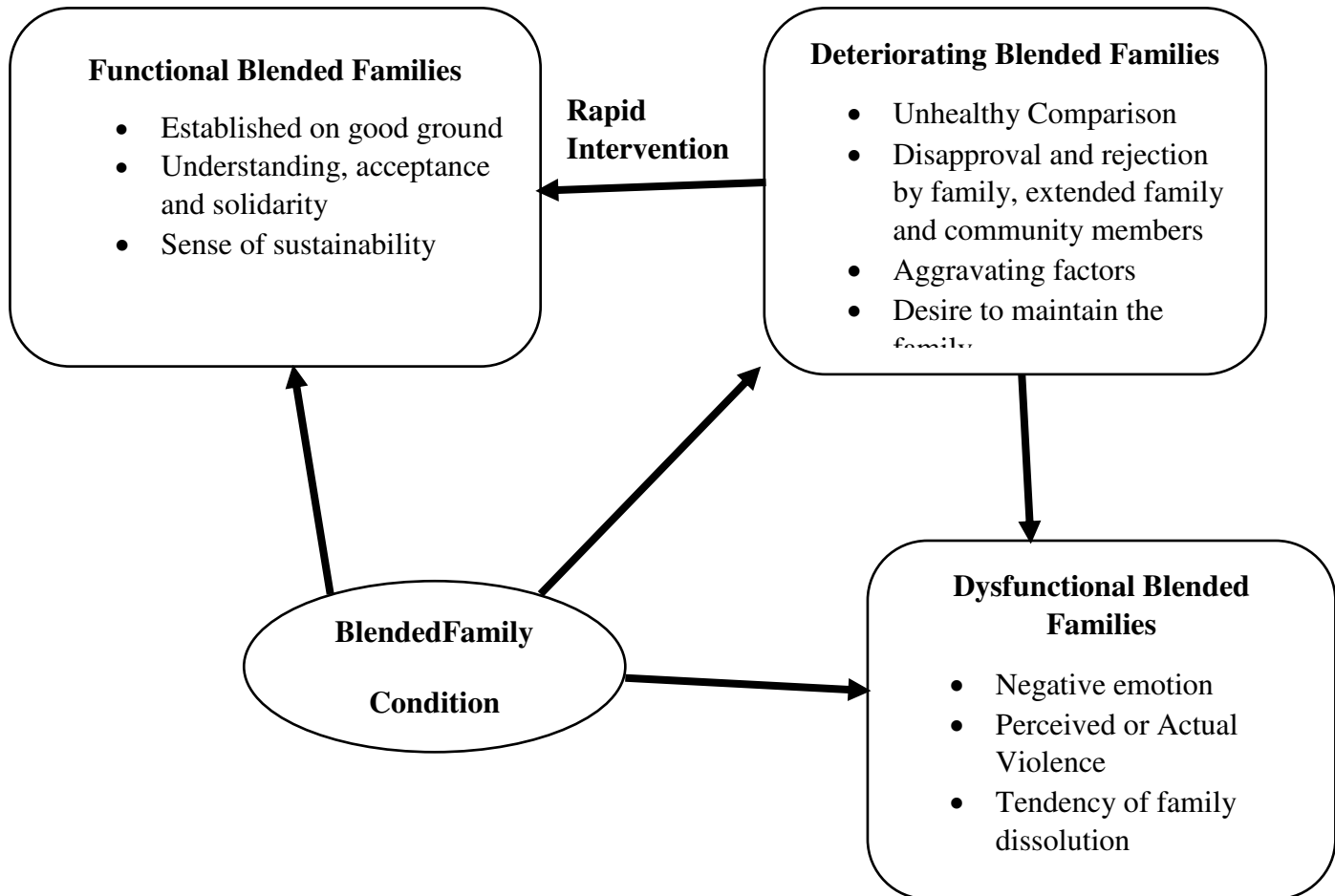
As we grew up, we started to look into matters and evaluate whether things were right or wrong. The very negative impact was the imposition on our Mom, meaning the respect and love for her as well as the support he provides to Mom was not satisfactory, he even stands negative on various issues. When she [F6W] consulted him on what she thinks are good he is always opposite and that is not good for us. Meaning if he does not make her happy, we cannot accept him as a father and such cases make us angry (F6D).

F8W brought two children from her former marriage whereas F8H was single and had no child before the formation of the current family. Now, the couple have two common children. Though their marriage was not accepted by their respective parents and close relatives, the couple resisted the pressure and formed the current blended family. However, the couple's difference in child rearing has been a major source of conflict since the formation of the family. F8W feels that her husband is treating the children as a "stepparent" whereas F8H believes he is directing them in the way he wanted. The couples conflict aggravated as the children grew up. F8H describes their current situation as follows:

We were separated a couple of times. She left me alone and went to her parents' house; taking all the children. I do not want to go there and she knows that. We are hurting each other. Both of us are not happy now. Even our discussions are not doing any good as we are only blaming one another. So, the reason why we are living together now is; she does

not like to terminate her marriage for the second time. And I do not want to miss my children (F8H).

**Figure 3.A model of blended family functioning in Ethiopia**



**Discussion**

The blended family functioning model we developed has three categories namely; functional blended families, deteriorating blended families and dysfunctional blended families. Each of these categories has their own core characterizing features as presented in the findings section. In this section, we are discussing our blended family functioning model in light of the Beavers Systems Model of Family Functioning.

**Functional blended families.** Blended family members who belong to this category have demonstrated healthy family functioning. The members have accepted their membership in their family, they demonstrate positive interaction with their steps and have sense of sustainability in the family. The step-sisters in F1, who were eight and nine years old at the time the families blended, easily identified themselves as friends and

sisters. They enjoyed the company of one another, one supports the other in their learning, collaborate to outnumber their parents in television channel selection and the like. The stepsiblings in F7, who were aged between 16 and 20 at the time their families blended, have positive interaction, collaboration in household chores where the girls appreciated their stepbrother's cooking skill, they also felt safe and secured to walk at night because of their stepbrother's company. The children in this category felt good for their parents as they now have someone who companies them and shares their responsibilities. Similarly, the parents and stepparents in functional blended families have feelings of getting someone who supports, loves and takes care of their children; which is boldly reflected by parents who were rearing their respective single child before the formation of the blended family. They also have feelings of dignity, respect and stability. The features that characterize functional blended families are in line with the features mentioned in optimal and/or adequate family groups in Beavers Systems Model of Family Functioning[12].

**Deteriorating blended families.**The formation of the blended family has resulted in extreme confusion and disorder for the deteriorating blended families. The situation of families who belong to this group is similar with the border line families in Beavers Systems Model of Family Functioning as they are neither as bad as the dysfunctional blended families or as health as those in functional blended families. Yet, unlike the chaos in the border line families [12] of the Beavers Systems Model of Family Functioning where it is basically with members of the family, the chaos in deteriorating blended families is dominantly with non-residential family members, extended families and community members. Regardless of the parental coalition, and stepmother-stepchildren attachment and positive interaction, the rejection and complaints that come from "outsiders" have psychologically and socially affected the family members particularly the parents. The effect may be significant due to the fact that Ethiopia is a collectivist culture where social support tremendously impacts the success of particular families [1].

**Dysfunctional blended families.**Blended families in this category share several features demonstrated by the severely dysfunctional families [12] stated in Beavers Systems Model of Family Functioning. For example, the behavior manifested by F2H, F6H and F8W are unusual for neighbors and other community members. The dominant problem in these families is lack of effective communication. The family members commonly experience extreme chaos and have poor problem-solving skill. They lack a common goal and are highly engaged in activities that stir up family breakups. They have

experiences of spontaneous separation and they feel that the family would end up in divorce at some point. The families consist of violent, vulnerable, and/or excluded members.

## Conclusion

In the current study, we employed the constructivist grounded theory design to develop a model that describes the family functioning experiences of blended families in Ethiopia. The analysis resulted in three categories of blended families; functional blended families, deteriorating blended families and dysfunctional blended families. Features that describe each section have emerged from the data. The model could be used as evidence to design and develop intervention strategies to improve the family functioning of blended family members in Ethiopia. It can be used by educationalists, trainers, social workers and psychologists to raise the community's awareness regarding the nature of blended families. Besides, blended family researchers could use the model as a spring board to develop instruments that assess the family functioning of blended families in the context of Ethiopia.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, we suggest the following recommendations:

- Blended family members in Ethiopia should assess their blended family condition and identify where they belong based on the model of blended family functioning in Ethiopia.
- Functional blended family members should identify and appreciate their strengths and enhance their sense of sustaining the family.
- Social workers, counselors, social psychologists, and developmental psychologists should help deteriorating blended family members to explore and apply positive coping mechanisms that might help them to promote their family to functional blended family.
- The government of Ethiopia should strengthen its law enforcement mechanisms to protect dysfunctional blended family members from harassment and domestic violence.
- Quantitative research should be conducted to assess the magnitude of blended families in each category to develop evidence-based family intervention programs.

### Ethical clearance

We obtained ethical approval (RefNo SoP-Eth-008/2023) from Addis Ababa University, School of Psychology, Research Ethics Committee.

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