

Identifying Patterns of Role Negotiation in Blended Families and Their Effects on Cohesion and Identity

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the patterns of role negotiation in blended families and examine their influence on family cohesion and identity formation.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 26 participants from blended families in Iraq, including parents, step-parents, and children. Participants were selected purposively to ensure diversity in age, gender, and family role, with inclusion criteria requiring at least two years of experience in a blended family. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically with the aid of NVivo 14 software. Credibility was enhanced through member checking and audit trails, while thick descriptions ensured transferability.

Findings: Analysis revealed three overarching themes: (1) Role Negotiation Processes, encompassing parental boundaries, household responsibilities, communication patterns, and cultural influences; (2) Cohesion and Emotional Climate, including bonding among step-siblings, emotional connections between parents and children, feelings of belonging, and loyalty conflicts; and (3) Identity Formation and Adjustment, covering dual belonging, adolescent autonomy, the influence of past family structures, and resilience strategies. Participant narratives highlighted frequent conflicts around fairness, authority, and inclusion, with cultural norms and extended kin networks shaping both tensions and adaptation. Successful negotiation fostered cohesion and strengthened shared identity, while unresolved conflicts generated exclusion and fragmented identities.

Conclusion: The findings underscore that role negotiation is a central process in determining the stability, cohesion, and identity development of blended families. Effective communication, cultural sensitivity, and shared rituals emerged as key facilitators of integration. Interventions should focus on clarifying roles, managing loyalty conflicts, and promoting adaptive coping strategies to strengthen resilience and family cohesion in blended family contexts.

Keywords: Blended families; role negotiation; cohesion; family identity; stepfamily adaptation; Iraq; qualitative research

1. Introduction

The transformation of family structures across cultures has brought blended families—formed through remarriage, cohabitation, or union involving children from previous relationships—into the center of contemporary family research. With rising rates of divorce and remarriage worldwide, blended families represent a complex social reality that challenges traditional understandings of kinship, identity, and cohesion. The negotiation of roles within these families is not only a practical necessity but also a psychological and cultural process that shapes family functioning, individual adjustment, and intergenerational relationships (Bray, 2019; Kumar, 2017). This study seeks to explore patterns of role negotiation in blended families in Iraq, with a focus on how these negotiations affect family cohesion and individual identity.

Blended families emerge within the broader context of remarriage, a phenomenon increasingly recognized as a normative transition in family life (Bray, 2019). Research has consistently shown that remarriage brings both opportunities for renewed intimacy and challenges in redefining existing family roles (Deal & Olson, 2015). Stepfamilies must reconcile the emotional histories of previous unions while forging new bonds, which often results in tensions around authority, belonging, and identity (Hu & To, 2017). For instance, studies in Asian contexts reveal that remarriage after divorce or widowhood involves not only personal adaptation but also navigating community expectations and cultural norms (Erdélyi, 2020; Mo & Chan, 2023).

From a life cycle perspective, the blended family passes through stages of adjustment, conflict, and potential stability, much like nuclear families but with added layers of complexity (Kumar, 2017). The division of responsibilities, negotiation of parental authority, and development of trust between step-relatives are dynamic processes that require intentional communication. The absence of clear guidelines for these negotiations often creates uncertainty, leading to role confusion and weakened cohesion (Karahana, 2024).

The concept of role negotiation provides a useful lens to understand how members of blended families assign meaning to their relationships and responsibilities. Negotiation often involves defining boundaries between biological and step-parents, establishing caregiving responsibilities, and determining how discipline is enacted (H.Ganong et al., 2019). These processes are influenced by pre-existing family dynamics, cultural traditions, and

individual expectations. For example, adolescents may resist the authority of step-parents while seeking autonomy, creating cycles of conflict that can erode family cohesion (Lawrence & Adebawale, 2023).

Research has shown that stepfathers frequently engage in affinity-seeking behaviors—efforts to build closeness with stepchildren—that directly shape the quality of relationships and overall family harmony (H.Ganong et al., 2019). Similarly, mothers and fathers play mediating roles in facilitating or hindering these negotiations, depending on their communication styles and marital satisfaction (Kim, 2010). When role negotiation fails, families may experience polarization, where alliances form between biological parents and their children, excluding step-relatives and undermining integration (Sanner et al., 2022).

Cohesion refers to the emotional bonding among family members and is widely recognized as a predictor of resilience and stability in blended families (Fang et al., 2024). In contexts where step-siblings and parents can successfully negotiate roles, cohesion is strengthened, fostering a shared sense of belonging and family identity (Jensen & H.Ganong, 2022). Conversely, unresolved conflicts over roles often manifest as loyalty conflicts, jealousy, or exclusion, weakening cohesion. Studies of remarried families have highlighted that children's perception of fairness, inclusion, and respect plays a decisive role in their willingness to embrace a new family identity (PYDEHOK et al., 2022).

Identity formation is particularly salient for adolescents in blended families, who are often caught between multiple loyalties. Adolescents' resistance to new parental authority, coupled with their broader developmental task of autonomy, creates tensions that affect both individual adjustment and family functioning (Lawrence & Adebawale, 2023). When children feel forced to choose between biological and step-parents, their sense of self becomes fragmented, undermining the development of a cohesive family identity (Navabinejad et al., 2024).

The cultural context shapes how blended families negotiate roles and identities. In collectivist societies, such as many Middle Eastern and Asian contexts, remarriage is often mediated by extended kin and social norms (Hu & To, 2017; Mo & Chan, 2023). Research in China has shown that remarriage is embedded within filial obligations and community reputation, influencing how roles are assigned within the household (Hu & To, 2017). Similarly, in Iran, family structure has been linked to emotional well-being and patterns of marital conflict, underscoring the cultural

significance of family cohesion (Navabinejad et al., 2024; Vaezi et al., 2024).

In Western contexts, role negotiation often emphasizes autonomy and individual rights, whereas in non-Western contexts, cultural traditions and religious expectations play stronger roles (Erdélyi, 2020; Ma, 2023). For example, studies have demonstrated that in Korea, remarried families rely on resilience-building models that align with collectivist values of interdependence (Kim, 2012). In contrast, in Western Europe, stepfamily cohesion is often analyzed through relational quality between dyads rather than broader cultural norms (Fang et al., 2024).

Adaptation in blended families is not only structural but also psychological. Research indicates that effective parenting strategies, open communication, and marital stability are key predictors of children's adjustment (Sanner et al., 2022). Stepfamilies that succeed in role negotiation often establish rituals and narratives that reinforce belonging and reduce feelings of exclusion (Deal & Olson, 2015). Conversely, when parents fail to manage conflict, children may develop anxiety, behavioral issues, or alienation (Safikhani, 2022).

Studies suggest that psychological interventions, including art therapy for children of remarried families, can support self-esteem and self-regulation, thereby improving cohesion (Yun et al., 2024). Likewise, resilience-based models provide families with strategies to cope with identity challenges and loyalty conflicts (Kim, 2012). Interventions tailored to remarried families emphasize the importance of redefining roles collectively, rather than imposing them unilaterally (Karahana, 2024).

Blended families do not operate in isolation but are embedded in broader social and community networks. Social support plays a critical role in facilitating adaptation, especially for mothers who often serve as emotional anchors within remarried households (Faghiharam, 2019). The quality of social networks determines the extent to which families can buffer stress and maintain cohesion. Studies on extramarital relationships and family disruption among Latino populations, for instance, highlight the intersection of family stability, trust, and cultural norms (Sanchez et al., 2022).

Similarly, family structure has been shown to influence community participation and even broader societal development. For example, research indicates that the configuration of family units contributes to the construction of "smart communities," where social capital and cohesion extend beyond the household (Ma, 2023). This underscores

the significance of family-level role negotiation not only for individual well-being but also for community integration.

Existing studies provide a robust foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities of blended families, yet several gaps remain. While research has examined remarriage in Western and East Asian contexts, fewer studies have explored Middle Eastern and Iraqi settings, where cultural traditions and extended family networks are highly influential (Navabinejad et al., 2024; Vaezi et al., 2024). Moreover, much of the literature has focused on dyadic relationships—such as stepfather-stepchild ties—rather than the holistic negotiation of roles across the entire family system (H.Ganong et al., 2019; Jensen & H.Ganong, 2022).

There is also a need to integrate psychological, cultural, and structural dimensions of role negotiation into a unified framework. While some studies highlight resilience and psychological adaptation (Kim, 2012; Yun et al., 2024), others emphasize cultural traditions or systemic perspectives (Erdélyi, 2020; Hu & To, 2017). Bringing these perspectives together is crucial for advancing both theoretical understanding and practical interventions.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates how blended families in Iraq negotiate roles, and how these negotiations affect cohesion and identity formation.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the patterns of role negotiation within blended families and their influence on family cohesion and identity. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an exploration of lived experiences, social interactions, and the meanings participants attribute to their roles within family structures. The research was conducted in Iraq and focused on families who had undergone the process of blending due to remarriage, the presence of stepchildren, or other related dynamics.

A total of 26 participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in terms of age, gender, and family composition to capture a wide range of perspectives. Participants included mothers, fathers, stepchildren, and in some cases, grandparents who were actively engaged in family interactions. The inclusion criteria required that participants be members of a blended family for at least two years, ensuring they had sufficient experience with role

negotiation processes. Participation continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or insights were emerging from the data.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided both flexibility and depth. An interview guide was developed to explore key areas such as the negotiation of parental roles, responsibilities among siblings, identity formation, and experiences of cohesion or conflict within the blended family structure. The semi-structured format allowed participants to express their views openly while also ensuring that the core research questions were consistently addressed across all interviews. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was conducted in a private and comfortable setting to encourage openness and trust. With the consent of participants, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach to identify recurring patterns and underlying meanings within participants' narratives. NVivo 14 software was employed to manage and organize the qualitative data effectively. Initially, transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity and to generate preliminary codes. These codes were then grouped into broader categories, which reflected emerging themes related to role negotiation, cohesion, and identity within blended families. Throughout the process, constant comparison was used to refine categories, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the data. The use of

NVivo software facilitated systematic coding, retrieval, and visualization of relationships among codes, supporting the rigor and transparency of the analysis.

To enhance trustworthiness, credibility was established through member checking, where participants were invited to review preliminary findings for accuracy. Dependability and confirmability were reinforced by maintaining a detailed audit trail of coding decisions and analytic memos. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the participants' contexts and experiences, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 26 participants drawn from blended families in Iraq. Among them, 14 were female and 12 were male, representing a relatively balanced gender distribution. In terms of age, 8 participants were adolescents (13–18 years), 10 were young adults (19–30 years), and 8 were parents or guardians aged between 31 and 55 years. Regarding family roles, the group included 9 biological parents, 6 step-parents, and 11 children or stepchildren, ensuring that diverse perspectives on role negotiation were captured. The average duration of family blending was 4.7 years, with 16 families reporting between 2 and 5 years of experience living as a blended unit, and 10 families indicating more than 5 years. Most participants ($n = 18$) lived in urban settings, while 8 resided in semi-urban or rural areas. This demographic diversity allowed the study to reflect a wide range of lived experiences across gender, age, and family role categories.

Table 1

Main Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts of Role Negotiation in Blended Families

Category (Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Role Negotiation Processes	Defining Parental Boundaries	step-parent authority; limits of discipline; respect for biological parent; shared decision-making
	Division of Household Responsibilities	task sharing; financial contribution; childcare roles; household chores; fairness perception
	Communication in Negotiation	open discussion; hidden expectations; conflict escalation; compromise strategies; silence as resistance
	Conflict Resolution Patterns	mediation by parent; avoidance; repeated arguments; temporary agreements
	Flexibility vs. Rigidity in Roles	role adaptation; resistance to change; negotiated flexibility; role confusion
2. Cohesion and Emotional Climate	Cultural Norms in Role Assignment	traditional gender roles; religious expectations; extended family influence
	Bonding Between Step-Siblings	rivalry; shared activities; jealousy; developing trust; protective behaviors
	Parent–Child Emotional Connection	emotional distance; attachment seeking; rejection; affection building

3. Identity Formation and Adjustment	Sense of Belonging in Family	inclusion in decisions; being treated equally; labeling as “outsider”; shared family identity
	Emotional Support Mechanisms	empathy; encouragement; withdrawal; reliance on external friends
	Loyalty Conflicts	torn between parents; pressure from extended family; secrecy in alliances
	Negotiating Self-Identity	dual belonging; identity confusion; maintaining personal space; redefining roles
	Adolescents’ Search for Autonomy	resistance to control; desire for independence; selective obedience; secrecy
	Impact of Past Family Structures	memories of prior family; comparison with biological family; nostalgia; lingering grief
	Role of Extended Family in Identity	influence of grandparents; uncles/aunts as mediators; external labeling
	Gendered Expectations of Identity	daughters’ caregiving role; sons’ authority expectations; identity tied to masculinity/femininity
	Resilience and Coping Strategies	adapting through humor; academic focus; withdrawal; peer support; religious coping
	Integration into New Family Identity	adoption of new surname; family rituals; joint celebrations; “we” vs. “they” language

Theme 1: Role Negotiation Processes

Defining Parental Boundaries. Participants consistently highlighted the complexity of establishing parental authority in blended families. Step-parents often questioned the extent to which they should discipline children, while biological parents sometimes struggled with balancing loyalty and partnership. One father explained, *“I wanted my wife to help with discipline, but my children kept saying: ‘You are not my real mother, you can’t tell me what to do.’”*

Division of Household Responsibilities. The negotiation of domestic duties was a recurring theme, as families attempted to balance fairness with practical necessity. Mothers often described feeling overburdened, while children perceived unequal treatment. A stepdaughter shared, *“I had to do more chores than my stepbrothers, and it made me feel like a servant, not a family member.”*

Communication in Negotiation. Communication styles played a critical role in how roles were assigned and adjusted. Some families openly discussed expectations, while others relied on silence or avoidance, leading to misunderstandings. One participant remarked, *“We never really talked about who should do what. We just assumed, and that led to many fights.”*

Conflict Resolution Patterns. Families employed different strategies to manage conflicts around roles. While some relied on direct confrontation and mediation, others engaged in avoidance, resulting in unresolved tensions. A teenage boy noted, *“Whenever we argue about chores, my father just says, ‘We’ll talk later,’ but we never do. So the problem keeps coming back.”*

Flexibility vs. Rigidity in Roles. Flexibility in redefining roles was linked to smoother family adaptation, while rigidity often created resistance. A stepmother explained, *“At first, I tried to act like their real mom, but they resisted.*

I had to adjust and become more like a mentor than a mother.”

Cultural Norms in Role Assignment. Cultural and religious expectations influenced how families divided roles, particularly along gendered lines. For example, some participants emphasized that daughters were expected to help with caregiving regardless of personal preference. One mother stated, *“In our culture, girls must help in the kitchen. My stepdaughter refused, and it caused arguments with the elders.”*

Theme 2: Cohesion and Emotional Climate

Bonding Between Step-Siblings. Relationships among step-siblings were marked by rivalry and jealousy but also opportunities for solidarity. Some children competed for parental attention, while others gradually developed trust. A young participant shared, *“At first, I hated my stepbrother. But after playing football together, we became closer.”*

Parent–Child Emotional Connection. The emotional bond between biological parents and their children often clashed with new relationships. Children expressed fears of losing affection, while step-parents felt excluded. One mother reported, *“My son told me, ‘You love him more now.’ It broke my heart because I never wanted him to feel replaced.”*

Sense of Belonging in Family. The feeling of inclusion—or exclusion—significantly shaped identity and cohesion. Children often described moments when they felt like outsiders. A stepdaughter explained, *“During family gatherings, they always say ‘this is our tradition,’ and I don’t feel part of it.”*

Emotional Support Mechanisms. Families varied in how they provided or withheld emotional support. Some created open spaces for empathy, while others relied on external friends or extended relatives. One teenage girl

noted, *"I don't talk to my stepmom when I'm sad; I call my best friend instead."*

Loyalty Conflicts. Children frequently reported feeling torn between their biological and step-parents. Pressure from extended families further complicated these dynamics. A participant explained, *"My grandmother always says, 'Don't forget your real father,' so I feel guilty when I bond with my stepdad."*

Theme 3: Identity Formation and Adjustment

Negotiating Self-Identity. Many participants described a sense of dual belonging, struggling to reconcile identities linked to both biological and blended family structures. A boy shared, *"Sometimes I feel like I live two lives—one at my dad's house and another here."*

Adolescents' Search for Autonomy. Adolescents often resisted authority and sought independence, creating clashes with step-parents. One participant explained, *"I don't want my stepfather telling me when to go out. I already have a father for that."*

Impact of Past Family Structures. Memories of previous family arrangements shaped current attitudes. Some children expressed nostalgia, while others carried unresolved grief. A mother recalled, *"My daughter always says, 'When dad was alive, things were different,' and it makes her reject the new family."*

Role of Extended Family in Identity. Grandparents and relatives played significant roles in shaping children's identities and loyalties. One boy explained, *"My uncle keeps telling me, 'You are from our side, don't forget it,' so I feel I can't fully accept my stepfamily."*

Gendered Expectations of Identity. Gender roles influenced identity development, with daughters often expected to provide caregiving and sons expected to adopt authority. A participant noted, *"They always say, 'You're the man of the house now,' even though I'm only 15."*

Resilience and Coping Strategies. Children and parents employed diverse strategies to adapt, including humor, academic focus, peer support, and religious coping. A girl remarked, *"When things get tense, I just study harder. School is my escape."*

Integration into New Family Identity. Over time, some participants adopted rituals and symbols that reinforced a collective family identity. A stepmother explained, *"We started celebrating birthdays together, using the phrase 'our family,' and little by little, the children felt more united."*

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the patterns of role negotiation in blended families and their influence on family cohesion and identity within the Iraqi context. Through semi-structured interviews with 26 participants, the findings highlighted the centrality of defining parental boundaries, negotiating household responsibilities, and managing loyalty conflicts in shaping the cohesion and identity of blended families. These findings align with a growing body of international research that underscores role negotiation as a decisive factor in determining the success or failure of blended family integration (Bray, 2019; Kumar, 2017).

One of the most prominent findings of this study was the challenge of defining parental boundaries, especially between step-parents and biological parents. Participants frequently described conflicts about authority, discipline, and the extent to which step-parents could assume parental roles. This resonates with the work of Ganong and colleagues, who found that stepfathers often engage in affinity-seeking behaviors to establish closeness with stepchildren, but these attempts are not always reciprocated, particularly when children perceive a threat to their relationship with the biological parent (H.Ganong et al., 2019). Similarly, Jensen and Ganong's research highlights that dyadic relationship quality between parents and children is deeply tied to overall stepfamily functioning (Jensen & H.Ganong, 2022).

The Iraqi participants' narratives also reflect findings in Asian contexts, where parental boundaries are further complicated by strong cultural and religious expectations. For example, Hu and To documented how remarriage in China involved renegotiating authority within strict cultural frameworks that emphasize filial obligations (Hu & To, 2017). Mo and Chan also showed that stepfamilies in Hong Kong Chinese culture face significant challenges due to traditional values that constrain the flexibility of role negotiation (Mo & Chan, 2023). The present findings similarly demonstrate that cultural context is crucial, as Iraqi families often adhered to traditional gender norms and religious expectations when defining roles, echoing Erdélyi's historical analysis of widowhood and female agency where cultural traditions dictated role legitimacy (Erdélyi, 2020).

Another central theme was the negotiation of household responsibilities. Participants reported unequal distributions of chores and financial contributions, which often fueled perceptions of injustice and conflict between step-siblings. This finding mirrors Fang, Poortman, and Brons's work,

which demonstrated that perceptions of cohesion in stepfamilies are closely related to whether children perceive fairness in role assignments (Fang et al., 2024). Deal and Olson also emphasized that successful stepfamilies develop clear agreements regarding household responsibilities to prevent feelings of exploitation or exclusion (Deal & Olson, 2015).

Cultural variations were evident as well. In the Iraqi context, daughters were frequently expected to contribute more heavily to domestic work, reflecting broader societal norms about gendered responsibilities. This observation is consistent with research by Vaezi and colleagues, who argued that capitalist and patriarchal systems reinforce unequal gender expectations in family structures (Vaezi et al., 2024). Similarly, Kim's study of remarried Korean couples found that gender norms significantly influenced marital satisfaction and family dynamics (Kim, 2010). These cross-cultural parallels suggest that while negotiation of responsibilities is a near-universal challenge, the specific contours of negotiation are shaped by cultural ideologies and social systems.

Family cohesion emerged as both an outcome and a mediating factor in role negotiation. Participants described how unresolved disputes over roles led to emotional distance, loyalty conflicts, and a diminished sense of belonging. These findings are in line with previous research showing that stepfamily cohesion depends on children's perceptions of inclusion and fairness (Fang et al., 2024). Sanchez and colleagues also noted that when loyalty conflicts are heightened by extramarital tensions or secrecy, family cohesion is severely undermined (Sanchez et al., 2022).

Children in this study often expressed feelings of being outsiders, echoing findings from European research where step-siblings competed for parental attention, resulting in exclusionary dynamics (Bray, 2019). Moreover, loyalty conflicts were intensified by extended family members, a phenomenon also documented in Eastern Europe, where kin networks often dictate children's loyalties after remarriage (РУДЕХОК et al., 2022). This reinforces the idea that cohesion in stepfamilies is not only negotiated internally but also influenced by external actors and broader kinship networks.

Identity formation was another key theme, particularly for adolescents. Participants often described experiencing dual belonging, struggling to integrate identities tied to both their biological family and their new blended unit. This is consistent with Lawrence and Adebawale's findings that

adolescents from non-traditional family structures face increased risks of self-esteem challenges and school disengagement due to identity confusion (Lawrence & Adebawale, 2023). The Iraqi adolescents' resistance to step-parental authority also reflects broader developmental needs for autonomy, as reported in international studies (Kumar, 2017).

Furthermore, the role of extended families in shaping identity was particularly strong in this study. Participants described uncles, grandparents, and other relatives reinforcing old loyalties and limiting the integration of new family identities. This observation aligns with Navabinejad and colleagues' findings that family structure strongly influences the risk of emotional divorce, where unresolved tensions fracture identity and cohesion (Navabinejad et al., 2024). Similarly, Ma's work on family structure and community development emphasized that household configurations extend beyond the private sphere to affect broader social integration (Ma, 2023).

The findings also highlight resilience strategies, including reliance on peer support, academic focus, and religious coping. These strategies parallel Kim's model of resilience for remarried families, which stresses the importance of adaptive coping mechanisms for both children and parents (Kim, 2012). Yun and colleagues further demonstrated the benefits of therapeutic interventions, such as art therapy, in promoting self-esteem and self-regulation among children from remarried families (Yun et al., 2024). The current study's evidence of coping through faith and humor reflects culturally specific strategies but resonates with global literature on stepfamily resilience.

The Iraqi participants' experiences underscore the need for interventions that strengthen role negotiation and reduce loyalty conflicts. Karahan's review of remarried family interventions emphasized that structured programs can help families openly discuss expectations and define roles collaboratively (Karahan, 2024). Similarly, Sanner and colleagues identified effective parenting strategies in stepfamilies, highlighting communication, boundary-setting, and shared rituals as essential practices (Sanner et al., 2022). The narratives in this study confirm that when families intentionally create rituals—such as shared celebrations or consistent household rules—children are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and identity.

Cultural considerations are also paramount in designing interventions. Safikhani's research on cognitive imagery techniques among mothers demonstrated that culturally sensitive interventions can enhance emotional processing

and resilience (Safikhani, 2022). Faghiharam's work similarly underscored the importance of social health and networks in sustaining family cohesion (Faghiharam, 2019). These insights suggest that interventions for Iraqi blended families must consider cultural norms, extended kinship ties, and community dynamics in addition to individual family practices.

This study contributes to the growing theoretical understanding of blended families by integrating cultural, psychological, and systemic perspectives. The findings support Kumar's life cycle model of blended families, which emphasizes the transitional challenges of integration (Kumar, 2017), while also reinforcing Deal and Olson's practical insights on building strong stepfamilies through communication and fairness (Deal & Olson, 2015). Moreover, the Iraqi context illustrates how structural and cultural dimensions intersect, echoing Vaezi's analysis of broader socio-economic systems (Vaezi et al., 2024) and Ma's conceptualization of family structures as building blocks of smart communities (Ma, 2023).

By situating the Iraqi findings within this diverse body of literature, the study demonstrates that while role negotiation challenges are universal, their manifestations and outcomes are highly context-dependent. This underscores the necessity of culturally grounded frameworks for both theory and practice in stepfamily research.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the role negotiation processes of blended families in Iraq, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 26 participants, though sufficient for reaching theoretical saturation in qualitative research, limits the generalizability of findings. The study's reliance on purposive sampling also introduces potential bias, as participants may represent families more willing to discuss challenges openly. Furthermore, the study relied exclusively on self-reported data, which may have been influenced by social desirability or selective memory. Another limitation is the absence of longitudinal data; the cross-sectional design captures negotiation patterns at a single point in time, without addressing how roles and identities evolve as families mature. Finally, while the study aimed for diversity, most participants were from urban areas, limiting insights into rural or tribal contexts where cultural traditions may exert even stronger influences.

Future research should address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples, including participants from rural and tribal backgrounds. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts in the Middle East could deepen understanding of how cultural norms shape role negotiation processes. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for examining how role negotiation evolves over time and how resilience strategies change as children grow older. Incorporating quantitative methods alongside qualitative interviews could also enrich analysis by allowing researchers to test causal relationships between negotiation patterns, cohesion, and identity outcomes. Finally, future research should explore the role of extended kin networks more explicitly, given their strong influence in Middle Eastern contexts, and investigate how digital communication and social media affect negotiation and identity processes in blended families.

From a practical standpoint, the findings underscore the importance of designing culturally sensitive interventions for blended families. Practitioners should focus on facilitating open communication, clarifying roles, and building shared family rituals that foster belonging. Programs should also include components for extended family members, recognizing their influential role in shaping children's loyalties and identities. Schools and community organizations can provide additional support by offering counseling services and peer support groups for children in blended families. Moreover, training programs for parents and step-parents should emphasize fairness in household responsibilities, respect for adolescents' autonomy, and strategies for managing loyalty conflicts. By integrating these practices, policymakers and practitioners can contribute to strengthening cohesion and identity in blended families, ultimately enhancing the well-being of both children and adults.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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