The International Handbook of Stepfamilies
Policy and Practice in Legal, Research, and Clinical Environments

Edited By
Jan Pryor

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The International Handbook of Stepfamilies
This book is dedicated to Simon, Emily, and Esther, and to the memory of Alexander.
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Foreword

In the past, most stepfamilies were formed after the death of a parent. Today stepfamilies are more likely to be formed after a parental divorce or a nonmarital birth. Whatever the cause, stepfamilies are common because most people find it difficult to be single parents and long for a chance to find happiness with new partners. Stepfamilies represent new beginnings, opportunities to correct prior mistakes, and visions of a better future. Of course, the optimism of many parents is soon tempered by the everyday realities of stepfamily life—including children’s more skeptical views of these new unions.

We have always known that stepfamilies are complicated. Children in stepfather households, for example, have two father figures rather than one. And if the biological father remarries, then children also have two mother figures. Moreover, each partner may bring children from a previous relationship into the household, resulting in an intricate—and often volatile—mixture of people with different histories, expectations, and working models of family life. Understanding how parents and children navigate the complexities of stepfamily life has been a major focus of much prior research. But the increasing trend of nonmarital cohabitation has made this family form even more interesting—and more difficult to study. Consider the following questions: How do unmarried stepparents differ from married stepparents? In what ways are their roles similar or different? Do unmarried stepparents invest as much time and money in their families as do married stepparents? Are children better off if their parents and new partners marry? Finally, do the answers to questions like these depend on the cultures, policy environments, and legal systems in which stepfamilies are formed?

Although much has been learned about stepfamilies during the past several decades, this information is scattered across journals and books from multiple disciplines. Demographers have focused on counting the number of stepfamilies and documenting trends in their formation. Sociologists have asked questions about how stepfamily life varies by social class and other structural variables. Family psychologists have examined the
multiple sources of stress that often emerge in stepfamily relationships. Child psychologists have studied the implications of stepfamily life for children’s development, adjustment, and well-being. Clinicians and counselors have focused on interventions to facilitate the adjustment of stepfamily members. And law scholars have grappled with the legal ambiguities that stepfamilies generate, such as stepparents’ financial obligations to stepchildren and whether divorced stepparents should have visitation rights. Given this diversity of scholarship, a critical need exists for a single volume that pulls this information together to provide a resource for counselors, policy makers, and scholars working in diverse fields.

Jan Pryor has assembled an impressive collection of chapters on stepfamilies, the most comprehensive set of writings on stepfamilies currently available. The contributing authors include demographers, sociologists, family psychologists, clinicians, legal scholars, and communication researchers. All of these authors are among the top scholars in their fields. The chapters address a variety of topics, such as trends in the prevalence and incidence of stepfamilies, marital quality in stepfamilies, parent-child relationships in stepfamilies, children’s views of stepfamilies, sibling relationships in stepfamilies, stepfamilies and the law, and interventions for stepfamilies.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of this volume is the fact that the contributors come from a variety of countries, including the United States, France, Japan, Belgium, New Zealand, England, Wales, Canada, and Australia. This international flavor is missing from previous works on this topic. It is fascinating to know how the experiences of stepfamilies differ around the world. Studies conducted in the United States have tended to dominate the research literature on this topic, but good work is being done in many countries, and it is critical for family scholars to be aware of these contributions.

In addition to compiling and summarizing what we currently know about stepfamilies, this volume will undoubtedly stimulate new theoretical and empirical work. As our world becomes smaller and our methods of communication become faster, much of this new work will have a comparative and international perspective. I can foresee the formation of research teams comprising scholars from multiple countries, working on the same problems but viewing them through the lenses of their own cultures and legal systems. This type of arrangement is rare today, but it may become a more common research paradigm in the next several decades.

In summary, this edited collection will be a useful resource for scholars, students, and practitioners for many years. I congratulate the editor and the contributors to this volume for helping to shift the study of stepfamilies to a higher level of sophistication.

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Books about stepfamilies, and families generally, abound. Yet most would agree that we are still in the dark as far as understanding the complexities, challenges, and joys of the ever-increasing numbers of stepfamilies. And increasing it is: As the rates of separations and divorces continue to rise, so too do the hopes of adults as they repartner in the earnest desire that this relationship and new family will work.

Sadly, the statistics tell us that second and third relationships are even more vulnerable than first ones. So families and households face further transitions and turmoil as they set about reorganizing themselves. Yet, many stepfamilies—often those unheralded by commentators and researchers—settle into a family life in which everyone thrives.

One response to the challenging aspects of stepfamilies is to discourage their formation by making divorce harder to achieve. David Popenoe has suggested that societies should be endeavoring to “halt the growth of stepfamilies” (Popenoe, 1994), and others have described them as incomplete institutions with few societal scripts available for guidance. There is no doubt that to try to understand stepfamilies is to aim at a moving and constantly changing target. However, it is true more generally that many families are now “incomplete institutions” as the traditional nuclear household is increasingly joined by other family structures such as cohabiting families, families headed by same-sex parents, and other combinations of adults and children. An alternative response to those who would discourage stepfamilies, and one taken by this book, is to acknowledge the reality that is family life in this century, which includes large numbers of stepfamily households.

Why, then, another book on this topic? It is my hope that this book is different from the others. First, it brings an international perspective on the subject; we have authors from Japan, France, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand, England, Canada, and the United States, and one U.S.-based chapter focuses on Mexican American stepfathers. This perspective highlights
the similarities faced by stepfamilies worldwide, as well as differences brought about by the culture in which they live.

Second, it brings together scholars from a wide range of disciplines, many well known and respected for their work, others young and innovative in their approaches. Included are sociologists, demographers, legal scholars, psychologists, and clinicians.

Third, the aim of the book is to record what we know and, importantly, to identify what we have yet to understand; further, it includes suggestions to further our knowledge about stepfamilies and to use that knowledge to the benefit of those stepfamilies yet to be formed.

In short, it is an exciting compendium of current knowledge combined with pointers to further our understanding of this burgeoning, complicated, and often thriving family form.

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Introduction

It is easy to be pessimistic about stepfamilies. Their very origins are steeped in notions of death: The word “step” derives from the Old English word steop, which in turn is related to astieped, meaning “bereaved.” Words such as “stepbairn” and “stepchild” were used in the past as synonyms for orphan. Today, as chapters in this book attest, stepfamilies are still beset by stigma and stereotyping and by seemingly endless chronicles of their difficulties. Are stepfamilies today more or less challenged than those formed in the past mainly as a result of death? It is probably impossible to know. In the past, the death of a parent called for repartnering, particularly, as was often the case, if a mother died in childbirth leaving other children to be reared.

Stepfamilies today are more likely to be formed as a result of divorce, and they are both more pervasive and more highly visible than in the past. One difference between stepfamilies now and 200 years ago may be stability. Today, if stepfamily households are unstable it is because, in the main, the couple relationship fails and the decision is made to part. In the past, a stepfamily formed because of the death of a mother in childbirth may have been more stable at least partly because far less was demanded of marriage in terms of satisfaction, and divorce was both less feasible and less acceptable than it is today.

One symptom of the lingering stigma attached to stepfamilies is the repeated finding that stepfamilies do not want to be considered different from “normal” families and resist the stepfamily label (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Another symptom is the prevalence of negative views and attitudes toward stepfamilies that abound, even in those who live in them. A compelling symptom of the wider reluctance to acknowledge stepfamilies as “real” families is the fact that countries such as Japan have had to invent a word based on the English word. In Sweden, too, common terms for stepparents are “plastic dad” and “plastic mom,” conveying an attitude of impermanence or superficiality. In this volume, some of the authors who live outside the United Kingdom and the United States are the first in their countries to
undertake research that focuses on stepfamilies, reflecting the lack of interest in this family form in some countries and the greater willingness of the United Kingdom, the United States, and parts of Europe to acknowledge its pervasiveness.

The reality is that living in stepfamilies is an aspect of the lives of increasing numbers of adults and children worldwide. Stepfamilies are remarkably persistent and resilient as a family form, if numbers mean anything. And they are increasingly under scrutiny as their presence is more visible and, some would argue, increasingly troublesome. This is reflected in the increased attention to stepfamilies from clinicians, family scholars, and the law.

This volume represents recent work from an international group of researchers, clinicians, and legal scholars. It is divided, broadly, into four sections: the contexts in which stepfamilies form and establish themselves, dynamics within stepfamily households, influences beyond the household, and clinical and legal issues for stepfamilies.

In Section I, Jay Teachman and Lucky Tedrow establish a demographic framework by describing the prevalence and incidence of stepfamilies and the changing processes through which they are formed. Although their chapter is based predominantly on U.S. data, it is a fair reflection of trends in other Western countries. The perceptions and stereotypes of stepfamilies are then explored by Stephen Claxton-Oldfield in Chapter 2, where he describes research over the past few decades that suggests that stereotypes, if not disappearing, may be weakening over time.

Two chapters then address issues for stepfamilies in countries outside the United States and the United Kingdom. In Chapter 3, Jean-François Mignot describes demographic and historical aspects of stepfamilies in France and reports data from a recent study there. He interprets the state of stepfamilies in France and elsewhere using an evolutionary psychology framework to explain the negative aspects of stepfamily life. In Chapter 4, Shinji Nozawa presents the findings of the first Japanese study of stepfamilies, putting these into the context of Japan’s recent history of family cultures and family change. Finally in this section, Scott Coltrane and his colleagues explore differences and similarities between stepfathers in Mexican and Euro-American families. Taken together, these chapters give a context for stepfamilies that emphasizes ubiquity, diversity, and the importance of the cultural milieu in which stepfamilies live.

A great deal of scholarly effort has gone into understanding dynamics within stepfamily households, and some of these are addressed in Section II. The perspectives of stepfathers have received attention only relatively recently, and in Chapter 6 Jeremy Robertson discusses findings from an English study in which stepfathers talked about their roles. Of particular interest are his findings that stepfathers prefer not to be called stepfathers and that most of them welcome—or at least do not discourage—contact
between nonresident parents and their children. In Chapter 7 Marjorie Smith, using data from the same U.K. study as Robertson, explores the place of mothers in stepfamily households, noting the pivotal role they play between partners and children in holding the family together.

Sibling relationships in stepfamilies have similarly received comparatively little attention. In Chapter 8 Melinda Baham and her colleagues develop a conceptual model of sibling relationships and present data that support their framework. They widen the common focus on dyads to consider sibling relationships and their associations with other relationships in stepfamilies and with child well-being.

The child’s relationship with resident biological parents is another area that has received relatively scant attention from scholars. In Chapter 9 Claire Cartwright discusses three New Zealand studies that have investigated the impact of parental repartnering on the parent-child relationship and is able to illuminate factors that help and hinder it. Her work is an excellent example of how qualitative studies can uncover aspects of family dynamics that are not easily apparent in survey data.

In Chapter 10, Brad van Eeden-Moorefield and Kay Pasley examine the trajectory of marital stability and quality in four family groups: married couples with only biological children, stepfather-only families, stepmother-only families, and complex (stepfather-stepmother) families. Katherine Shelton and colleagues in Chapter 11 report on a study in Wales in which paths of influence from interparental conflict to child well-being both overlap and differ in families and stepfamilies. Their study is probably the first to apply parental conflict models to the study of stepfamilies.

In Chapter 12, Laurent Snoeckx and colleagues consider the division of labor between partners in newly formed stepfamily households. They describe these household dynamics in the context of the welfare regimes in which they are nested. Finally in this section, Tamara Afifi takes a whole-family approach to the understanding of stepfamily dynamics by focusing on stepfamilies as social units and reviewing recent research on communication in stepfamilies in Chapter 13.

In Section III, dynamics and influences beyond the stepfamily household itself are addressed. First, in Chapter 14, Graham Allan and his colleagues consider the question of how stepfamily members think about relationships with family members outside the household, the “family kin” network. He concludes that kinship operates rather differently for stepfamilies from the way it is used in first families. In Chapter 15 I focus on the relationship between children and nonresident parents and the overlaps between children’s relationships with resident and nonresident parents of the same sex. This issue has become increasingly salient as nonresident parents become more involved with their children after divorce and when resident parents repartner.
Marilyn Coleman and her colleagues in Chapter 16 address the differences in the experiences of stepmothers depending on whether or not they live with children. She considers the role of conceptualizations and evaluations of stepmothers and the factors contributing to these, and she moves beyond earlier studies of stepmothers that have tended to treat them as a homogeneous group to consider the different experiences of resident and nonresident stepmothers.

Another aspect of stepfamily life that is attracting recent attention is the pattern of intergenerational relationships that are created when stepfamilies form. In Chapter 17 Lawrence Ganong addresses these complicated relationships, pointing out the different ways a person can become a step-grandparent and the particularly vague expectations of the relationships between stepchildren and their step-grandparents. The concept of incomplete institutionalization is particularly relevant to these relationships, as elders struggle to determine roles for themselves in stepfamilies.

Section IV focuses on clinical and legal issues for stepfamilies. Patricia Papernow emphasizes the importance for clinicians of recognizing that models based on first families will not work for stepfamilies; she describes “stepfamily architecture” and its implications for successful clinical work with stepfamilies. In Chapter 19, Sarah Whitton and colleagues review the literature and the interventions addressing couple relationships in stepfamilies. They note the importance of well-designed evaluations of programs that aim to help couples to function optimally. Jan Nicholson and her colleagues in Chapter 20 report on findings of two intervention studies carried out in Australia that focused on children’s functioning in stepfamilies.

The law has moved slowly in many countries to intervene legally in the lives of stepfamilies. Stepparents and stepchildren have been described as legal strangers, and where legitimization of their relationship has been put in place it varies in terms of its power and of its implications for other relationships the child has. In Chapter 21, Bill Atkin identifies some of the key issues and questions faced by legal systems in regulating stepfamily life. He uses the New Zealand example to illustrate the complexities and difficulties involved in this venture. Sarah Malia in Chapter 22 provides a comprehensive description and critique of the law as it applies to stepfamilies in the United States.

In the final chapter, I identify some of the key questions, challenges, and trends that emerge from the chapters in this book. There is a promising transition that is apparent: from a focus on stepfamilies as units and assemblages of relationships to a consideration of the wider social, political, legal, and cultural contexts in which they function. I look to the near future in terms of how research with stepfamilies might advance.

No book can cover all topics, and I am aware of two major omissions. First, same-sex stepfamilies are not addressed, despite the fact that they are
an increasingly prevalent group in which dynamics both overlap and differ from those in heterosexual families (see van Eeden-Moorefield, Henley, and Pasley, 2005, for a discussion on this topic). Second, there is no chapter that addresses African American stepfamilies, again a group that deserves more attention than they receive.

Terminology in regard to stepfamilies is difficult and ambiguous. Some authors here have addressed issues of definition, and others have not. Despite the many objections to the term “stepfamily,” most writers, including myself, come back to it because it is widely understood and other terms can be vague or misleading or just silly (see Ganong & Coleman, 2004, for a discussion of terminology). Similarly, terms for the family structure against which stepfamilies are most often compared include nuclear, intact, biological, and first families. None of these is particularly accurate; even the word “biological” excludes families formed by adoption, and many stepfamilies would consider themselves to be intact. Again, authors have used varying terms in this book.

REFERENCES


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Section I

INTERNATIONAL, DEMOGRAPHIC, AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS