

STEPFAMILIES

FOR PROFESSIONALS:

RESEARCH UPDATE

STEPMOTHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF KINSHIP: WHO'S IN YOUR FAMILY?

By Kay Pasley, ED.D

A recent study published in the *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 31(1/2) by Dr. Elizabeth Church (1999) caught my interest for two reasons: (a) the focus was on stepmothers and SAA members are often members of stepmother families; and (b) the study provides insight into issues facing women in remarriage and reflect common themes from studies of stepfather families.

Dr. Church argues that the ways we think about "family" has a profound effect on how we act and the kinds of roles we assume; this is not a new notion, but one that many scholars share. As such, understanding how stepmothers view kinship can provide understanding of how women see their roles and the kinds of ideals they hold for themselves. She used a volunteer sample of 104 women who identified as stepmothers, and she conducted interviews about the meaning attached to this role. These women are described as white, middle-class professionals, of whom 45% had been a stepmother for 6+ years. The majority (71%) had been a resident stepmother (at least one of the stepchildren had lived with them at least half time), and 56% also had biological children.

Results showed five kinship models (Nuclear, Extended, Couple, Biological and No Family) that were associated with the ways they thought of themselves and their roles as stepmothers. What they saw as positive/beneficial and difficult corresponded to their beliefs about kin.

Specifically, 23 stepmothers believed that the NUCLEAR family was the ideal model for the stepfamily to emulate; these women wanted to be called "mom," encouraged step- and half-siblings to refer to each other as brother/sister, and several desired to be mistaken as the biological mother. Typical behaviors included (a) limiting outside relationships with those that don't fit this

ideal, such as the in-laws and ex-wives, and (b) emphasizing their role as the primary parent/mother. This nuclear ideal was the source of conflict as they tried to live like a nuclear family unsuccessfully. For example, they had difficulty with the stepchildren's strong connection to the biological mother or the fact that they did the work of the mother without recognition.

The EXTENDED model was reflected in the lives of 28 of the stepmothers. Whereas they were similar to the nuclear model stepmothers because they considered their stepchildren kin, they were different – they did not see themselves as mothers to these children. They defined "family" more broadly and inclusive, and they viewed the expanded network positively and resulting from choice. These women saw their role as an addition to that of the biological parent (e.g., aunt), but not as mothers. As such they held the most positive views of the biological mother. Difficulties arose from the inclusionary perspective, especially when others (e.g., biological mother) failed to share it (e.g., the ex-wife made it difficult for the father to see his children).

The COUPLE model was found in 32 stepmothers who focused on the marital relationship and viewed their relationship with stepchildren as secondary. Most became stepmothers by "default," since they wanted to be married to their spouses and his children were part of the "package." They had not considered what being a stepmother might entail. Thus, both the stepchildren and ex-wives were viewed as intruders to the couple relationship. Their ideal role was that of friend to the stepchildren rather than any kind of kin relationship, although many believed they were important as a supporter of their spouses and enjoyed "fun" activities. Others had ambivalent or strained relationships. Conflict arose over the

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If you have ever considered becoming a Professional Affiliate member of SAA, now is the time to do so.

With the increased media attention on stepfamilies, we are receiving more and more calls requesting our assistance in identifying counselors and therapists who have a solid background and understanding in working with stepfamily issues.

In addition to becoming a part of our network of professionals to whom we can refer, we have also just expanded our benefits package for Professional Affiliate members.

Membership benefits include:

- Two copies of SAA's eight step success program and information on stepfamily development in one book, *Stepfamilies Stepping Ahead*
- Two subscriptions to SAA's quarterly publication, *Stepfamilies*
- Twenty copies of SAA's *Catalog of Stepfamily Resources* to share with your clients.
- Fifty copies of Kansas State's *Stepping Stones*. This one page informational handout is to give to clients. Handout topics covered include guidelines for parents, grandparents, and financial and legal issues.
- Access to members only services through SAA's website including: a chat room for discussion with other Professional Affiliates throughout the country, opportunities to discuss clinical questions and issues with stepfamily professionals, up-to-date annotated bibliography, access to research information on stepfamily issues and online access to SAA's quarterly publication, *Stepfamilies*.
- Inclusion in SAA's Professional Affiliate Directory in print and online through SAA's website
- Discounts on book purchases through SAA's resource catalog
- Discounts on SAA-sponsored training institutes and conferences
- As a Professional Affiliate with SAA you will be helping to support millions of individuals throughout the country learning how to be successful in their stepfamily relations.

Contact our office today and we will send you our P.A. application and criteria.

Stepmothers & Perceptions of Kinship

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perception that their spouses put the children first, and many were not also mothers.

The BIOLOGICAL model (18 stepmothers) defined their family along biological lines, emphasizing parent-child relationships. Some exclude their spouses and his children from their notion of "family" and descriptions reflect two families co-existing in one household. These women saw their role in two ways (as friends or distant/troubled), stemming from their liking of the stepchildren. They believed the biological parents should be responsible for care. For some this belief was apparent from the start; for others it was the result of their partner's lack of support for their efforts to parent. Conflict resulted when partners wanted them to assume the mother role or when his children came first. Conflict also resulted from guilt due to a lack of emotional connection of the stepchildren, or the imperative to take on the mothering role which they refused.

Only three stepmothers had the NO FAMILY model. These women felt like isolated outsiders who had conflicted relationship with their stepchildren and relationships with their spouses. In the beginning they reported both positive expectations for their relationships with the stepchildren and the ex-wives. However, they were not granted any place in the family nor were their efforts appreciated, so things deteriorated. To them, being a stepmother was only seen in negative terms.

These findings reinforce the belief that stepfamilies are diverse in the ways in which they operate and the ways members think about them. Professionals erroneously assume that stepfamilies are homogeneous, they also may assume there is "one way" to operate in a stepfamily and do a disservice when working with such families. These kinship models provide insight into the possibilities for stepmothers in stepfamilies and reflect similar models evident in James Bray's work on stepfather families in *Stepfamilies: Love, Marriage, and Parenting in the First Decade* (Broadway Books) where he describes the neotraditional, romantic, and matriarchal stepfamily patterns. Thus, there are common themes that emerge from studies that provide insight to understanding of step-relationship and stepfamily dynamics.

STEPFAMILIES: LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND PARENTING IN THE FIRST DECADE

By James H. Bray, Ph.D. and John Kelly

Okay. Finally our intuition has been confirmed by scientific study. No matter how well-meaning you are, maneuvering through the first couple of years as a stepfamily is hell for everyone – the couple and the kids. Nearly a quarter of stepfamilies fail in this short, tumultuous, conflicted period.

But *Stepfamilies: Love, Marriage, and Parenting in the First Decade* by Bray and Kelly (Broadway Books, \$13), which puts forth this thesis, doesn't end with that conclusion. The book, based on a nine-year study led by James H. Bray, a clinical psychologist, and associate professor of family medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, has a much more positive ending. Over the course of the project, the study examined 200 families (half of them were stepfamilies in which the children in the household are only biologically linked to the mother and the other half were nuclear families). It determined that when a marriage works in a stepfamily, it often works especially well.

Maybe the pure research would be dull reading (though I think not), but the book by Bray and Kelly reads like a take-off on your life. It's informative, lively, and illuminates the points it makes with evocative stories from real life experiences. One thing we learn as we read through it is that while each stepfamily is unique, there are persistent stepfamily themes that run through them — especially in their early and middle years. You might not identify with all the couples who share their seesaw existences, but you will find bits and pieces in each story that will have you shaking your head in recognition of a situation you've experienced or are in the midst of now.

Consider a few of *Stepfamilies'* conclusions.

- The success of a stepfamily is based on the choices it makes when dealing with its four major tasks: parenting (issues surrounding loyalty, discipline, guilt, jealousy); managing change (which as we all know moves at breakneck speed in a stepfamily), separating the remarriage from former marriages (too much overlap doesn't work); and dealing with the nonresidential parent (often a source of great irritation).
- After the initial "hell" years, stepfamilies coalesce into three types (not neatly, of course, since nothing is so

perfectly classified) – neotraditionalist, matriarchal, and romantic.

- Of the three, neotraditionalists are best able to forge shared values and a shared worldview – a clear "us."
- They also invalidated the theory that a stepfamily could never look like a nuclear family. Eventually, family members in neotraditionalist stepfamilies were bound closely to one another and to the stepfamily. And at the heart of this family lay a stable, satisfying marriage.
- In the matriarchal stepfamily, mom is the intellectual and emotional nerve center of the family most of the time. The marriage is nurtured by the couple's activities together, and interestingly, many matriarchal stepfamilies do very well – perhaps because of the nature of the people who enter this type of marriage and the healthy development of the children.
- The romantic stepfamily unit has the greatest potential for disaster. It's built on totally unrealistic expectations. Because it isn't able to alter those expectations to match the reality, all the good intentions and true desire for an idyllic family life is shattered.

The perceptions of both the insiders in the study (the moms and kids who came as a package to the marriage) and that of the outsiders (the stepfathers who may or may not have biological children living elsewhere) are so different in the early stages of the remarriage that that alone could destroy the marriage. The principal bridge across the seemingly insurmountable chasm is made up of mutually agreed upon compromises. Back and forth, back and forth – even if that means expressing complaints and arguing. "In order for a compromise to work," Bray states, "it has to incorporate the perspectives of both parties, and it is very hard to do that if one or both parties cannot state his or her perspective clearly and forthrightly."

For me, some of the most interesting observations didn't always show up in the useful "Points to Keep in Mind" section at the end of many of the chapters. One example is that all stepfamilies start with some unrealistic expectations. (Whew! Good to know we weren't the only Brady Bunch dreamers.) Yet if the couple can edit

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UNIQUE ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS FOR STEPFAMILIES

By Dr. Jeff Larson, Chair, Marriage and Family Therapy Program, Brigham Young University

Stepfamilies are very different from nuclear families and so assessing them requires the clinician to use stepfamily-friendly instruments or questionnaires. For example, the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES) self-report questionnaire, one of the most popular short measures used in family therapy settings must be interpreted carefully to avoid pathologizing stepfamilies. If a therapist uses the norms for "all families in the national sample" when interpreting a stepfamily's results, they will likely look "chaotically disengaged." However, if one uses the stepfamilies only norm table, the therapist will be able to compare the family's adaptability and cohesion in comparison to a sample of other stepfamilies. And thus, the stepfamily will probably look less dysfunctional and more developmentally on-track.

A recent review of the literature on self-report instruments specifically designed for stepfamilies showed the results listed below (right). It notes that genograms are equally or even more important to use with stepfamilies as with nuclear families because of the rich (complicated?) history many stepfamilies present. Other self-report in-

struments are also listed. One of the most promising instruments is Crosbie-Burnett's (1989) Stepfamily Adjustment Scale which has undergone rigorous testing for validity and reliability. For more information on validity, reliability, and how to obtain these instruments you can contact me at:

E-mail to: LarsonJ@cc.byu.edu

or find many of them in these books which are available at most college libraries:

The Handbook of Family Measurement Techniques by John Touliatus, et al (1990) Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Stepparenting: Issues in Theory, Research & Practice by Kay Pasley & Marilyn Ihinger-Tallman (1995) Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

Unique Assessment Instruments for Stepfamilies

CAUTION: Nuclear Family Instruments
Genograms - essential!

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STEPFAMILY ADJUSTMENT SCALE (Crosbie-Burnett, 1989)

- Stepparent role ambiguity
- Mutual suitability of step relationships
- Relationship with non-custodial parent

STEPPARENT ROLE QUESTIONNAIRE

(Hetherington & Clingenpeel, 1992)

- Communication with ex-spouse
- Relationship with children
- Parental role

LOYALTY CONFLICTS ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

(Clingenpeel 1981)

CONTENT OF CO-PARENTAL INTERACTION

(Ahrns & Goldsmith, 1981)

- Cooperation & competition

FEELINGS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD FORMER SPOUSE

(Ahrns & Goldsmith, 1981)

- Guilt, anger, compassion, parenting skills, psych distance

DIMENSIONS OF ATTACHMENT TO THE SPOUSE IN DIVORCE

(Kitson, 1982)

EX-SPOUSE PRE-OCCUPATION SCALE (Berman, 1998)

ACRIMONY SCALE (Emery, 1987)

Book Review

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those expectations to fit reality, the marriage has a good chance of surviving. Another, was that stepdads who at first simply monitor their stepchildren's actions (like reporting to his wife that Susie said she'll be back from her friend's at 8 p.m. or offering to pick up Sam after his ballgame) rather than dive actively into the role of fatherhood, make the transition for themselves and the kids much easier. Another was that men and women who could not free themselves from the influence of a first marriage usually ended up destroying a second. And then, there was the warning not to be surprised if your out-of-resident stepchildren move in. About 20 percent of children do take up residence with their father in early adolescence.

I've read enough books on stepfamilies to know that most have kernels of truth and a few have some good tips for parenting. But *Stepfamilies* by Bray and Kelly puts it all together in an uncommonly readable, sensible, and useful way. I would recommend it for anyone in the first five years of stepfamily life.

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In our summer issue we will be highlighting stepfamily weddings. We are looking for stories that inspire, support and entertain us. We're looking for good ideas, tips to pass on, and of course those really funny stories that you may not have been able to laugh at until now! Send your best wedding stories to us at SAA, 650 J St., Suite 205, Lincoln, NE 68508. Please limit your word count to 500 words. Deadline is May 1.