

# **Stepfamily Relationships**

*Development, Dynamics, and Intervention*

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## *Development, Dynamics, and Interventions*

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**Springer-Science+Business Media, LLC**

Stepfamily relationships: development, dynamics, and interventions / edited by Lawrence

H. Ganong, Marilyn Coleman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4613-4797-2 ISBN 978-1-4419-9112-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-4419-9112-6

1. Stepfamilies. 2. Stepfamilies—Psychological aspects. 3. Remarriage.

I. Ganong, Lawrence H. II. Coleman, Marilyn.

HQ759.92.S7294 2004

306.874'7—dc22

2003060446

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ISBN 978-1-4613-4797-2

© 2004 by Springer Science+Business Media New York

Originally published by Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York in 2004

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2004

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# *Preface*

About a decade ago we wrote a book about stepfamily relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). That volume was one of a series of books about various aspects and types of close relationships, and because it was part of a series there were page limits. Even with those limits, we believed we were able to adequately cover most of what was known about stepfamily relationships. Since then, there has been a phenomenal increase in the amount of research on stepfamily relationships; the total number of publications about stepfamilies has probably quadrupled. The quality of scholarship on stepfamily relationships has improved dramatically as well (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). As both contributors to and consumers of this professional literature, we knew that the quantity and quality of scholarly work on remarriage and stepfamily relationships had changed profoundly (Coleman et al., 2000; Coleman & Ganong, 2000). The time seemed right for another comprehensive review of this literature. Thus the idea for the current book was born. Additional motivation for this new book was that our previous outdated volume was being translated in other countries. Translating our outdated volume when there is such an increased and improved corpus of literature seemed unfortunate to us.

As we started reviewing the literature on stepfamilies we expected to be able to simply update what we had summarized before—a straightforward task. However, once we began to systematically review the research, theory, and clinical writing about remarriage and stepfamily relationships, we were surprised to discover how profoundly the body of knowledge had changed in a short period of time. What we had expected to be an update has become, at least in some areas of step-relationships, an entirely new look at a substantially different body of knowledge.

Throughout our careers we have investigated stepfamilies using what we have called a *normative-adaptive perspective* (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). This perspective does not deny the possibility of problems in stepfamilies, nor does it preclude comparing stepfamilies with other family forms. However, the main focus

is not on problems, nor is it on seeing how stepfamilies and stepfamily members fare against the standard of the first marriage family. Instead, the normative-adaptive perspective looks at both positive and negative dimensions of stepfamily life; stepfamilies are conceptualized as a legitimate family form with several variations, all of them worthy of examination and consideration. We have consistently raised research questions to explore the ways in which certain stepfamilies have been able to function well, meeting the individual needs of stepfamily members as well as the needs of the stepfamily as a whole. In short, our focus has not been on finding ways in which stepfamilies fail to function well—what we have labeled a deficit-comparison perspective. Instead, we have sought adaptive, well-functioning stepfamilies and tried to figure out how they differ from those who struggle to cope.

Other scholars also have employed this normative-adaptive perspective. Sometimes this has been labeled a risk and resiliency model (Hetherington et al., 1999), and sometimes researchers have eschewed labels, simply examining relationships in stepfamilies without taking a deficit-comparison perspective. In this book, we continue with the normative-adaptive perspective; we have made an effort to focus on a wide range of behaviors and outcomes in stepfamily relationships, both positive and negative.

We start this book with a brief history of stepfamily relationships as a field of study, reviewing the development of clinicians' and researchers' perspectives on remarriage and stepfamilies (Chapter 1). We then look at the cultural context in which stepfamilies live, and review what is known about how relationships are initiated, maintained, and generally influenced by cultural values (Chapter 2). Anyone familiar with our writing about cultural views, social stereotypes, and stigma will not be surprised at our attention to the cultural backdrop of stepfamily living.

We then look at precursors to stepfamily living (Chapter 3), with an eye toward how these various precursors affect stepfamily relationships over time. Continuing with this chronological orientation, we next examine courtship for stepfamily living (Chapter 4) and adult couple relationships (Chapter 5). After reviewing gay and lesbian stepfamily relationships in Chapter 6, in the next two chapters we present parenting and stepparenting processes, and the effects of stepfamily living on children. A range of siblings relationships are explored in Chapter 9, as we compare siblings, half-siblings, and stepsiblings. In Chapter 10 we review the growing body of knowledge about grandparents and stepgrandparents. Throughout the book, we try to interweave researchers' and clinicians' contributions because, as applied researchers who have worked with stepfamilies (as educators, counselors, and mediators), we think this approach provides the reader with a more complete picture of the development and dynamics of stepfamily relationships. In Chapter 11 we deviate from this approach a bit by turning our attention almost exclusively on clinicians' contributions. Finally, we summarize briefly in the last chapter what we have learned about stepfamilies in the last

decade. As part of this retrospective evaluation, we suggest future directions for researchers and clinicians.

As usual, we have many people to thank for making this book possible. Several colleagues read chapters and gave us valuable feedback—Larry Kurdek, Jean Giles-Sims, Kim Leon, Elizabeth Sharp, and Shannon Weaver went beyond the call of friendship and collegiality in their rapid and helpful suggestions. Connie Ahrons generously shared drafts of chapters from a book she is writing based on her longitudinal data set on post-divorce families. Jason Hans and Anne Gore provided us with great assistance in tracking down references. Tia Schultz and Tanja Rothrauff contributed greatly to creating the index. Other colleagues pointed us toward information that we would not have seen otherwise (Paul Amato). At Kluwer, Sharon Panulla was patient and supportive, and we thank her for giving us this opportunity.

Over the years, we have been privileged to have met and studied hundreds of stepfamily members. We clearly owe them a great debt for sharing their lives with us. Some of their stories appear in this book—in some ways, all of them are reflected in what we know and write about stepfamilies.

Finally, we are indebted to the members of our own stepfamily. We have learned the best lessons from them.

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