

Chapter 2

The Cultural Context of Stepfamilies

Abstract How do cultural values and norms affect stepfamilies? Stepfamilies do not live in a cultural vacuum. Cultural values affect stepfamily members. How practitioners and researchers think about stepfamilies also is affected by cultural beliefs and norms. Stepfamilies are incomplete institutions; in this chapter we examine what that means, and we explore a variety of ways in which stepfamilies are conceptualized in western societies. They are seen as incomplete institutions, as deviant family forms, or as reconstituted nuclear families. In the twenty-first century, there are signs that stepfamilies as adaptive and resilient families may be a new cultural model. We examine the implications of these various perspectives on stepfamilies for practice, policy, and research, and we consider their implications for stepfamily dynamics.

Keywords Incomplete institutions • Nuclear families • Nuclear family ideology • Stigma • Stereotypes • Myths • Epistemic values • Nonepistemic values

Stepfamilies do not live in a cultural vacuum, neither do researchers, educators, practitioners, or policy makers. As we noted briefly in Chap. 1, prevailing cultural values and belief systems about remarriages and stepfamilies affect the perspectives of individuals who study and work with stepfamilies. More importantly, cultural beliefs and values wield strong influences on the ways in which stepfamily members themselves think about their relationships, interact together, and feel about each other. In short, stepfamily relationships and the dynamics of stepfamilies are determined, at least in part, by the prevailing ideologies in their cultural contexts. For this reason, we present a brief overview of the cultural milieu in which stepfamilies live before we explore stepfamily functioning in depth in later chapters. We think it is important to understand the social and psychological environments in which individuals create stepfamilies (e.g., remarrying adults), find themselves conscripted into stepfamilies (e.g., stepchildren), or interact with stepfamily members (e.g., teachers, clergy).

What are the prevailing ideologies in the cultural context in which stepfamilies live? Over the last two decades researchers from around the world have examined how people perceive stepfamilies and stepfamily positions (e.g., stepmother, stepfather, stepchild). Ideologies about stepfamilies are remarkably similar in many parts

of the world—studies from Australia (Webber, 1991), Canada (Claxton-Oldfield, Goodyear, Parsons, & Claxton-Oldfield, 2002), Norway (Levin, 1997), the UK (Allan, Crow, & Hawker, 2011; Collins, 1995), the USA (Ganong & Coleman, 1997a, 1997b), Singapore (Webber, 2003), Hong Kong (Tai, 2005), New Zealand (Cartwright, 2006; Pryor, 2008), Ireland (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013), and other countries reveal comparable images and ideologies about stepfamilies.

These studies also indicate that the ideal model for North America, and to a lesser extent, *all* Western societies, is the middle-class, first marriage family, often called the nuclear family, consisting of a mother and father and their genetic or adopted children residing together in a household (Coontz, 1997; Scanzoni, 2004). In most European countries, first-union cohabiting nuclear families have become as common as first marriage nuclear families, but apart from the legal status of the adult couple, many cultural expectations for these families are similar.

What this means is that an idealized, biologically connected family serves as the standard by which all other families are evaluated, even though a wide diversity of family structures and family practices are present in all Western societies. In the idealized nuclear family, the husband/father is employed for wages and is generally considered to be the primary wage earner, even if the wife/mother also works for wages, and even if she earns more income than the husband/father. Her primary responsibilities are to provide care for the husband, household, and children. In the idealized version of this family form, children are loved and socialized by both parents to be obedient, mentally and physically healthy, and socially skilled. Spouses love each other and fulfill each other's emotional, social, and physical needs. In North America, this cultural ideal of the private nuclear family is based on white families of European descent—it ignores cultural and historical family patterns of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and other groups of families from collectivist cultural orientations.

How does this *nuclear family ideology* influence the cultural context of stepfamilies? We think there are three broad societal views of stepfamilies, all of them rooted in the nuclear family ideology—the stepfamily as an *incomplete institution* (Cherlin, 1978), the stepfamily as a *deviant or deficit family* form (Ganong & Coleman, 1997c), and the stepfamily as a *re-formed or reconstituted nuclear family* (Levin, 1997).

Stepfamilies as Incomplete Institutions

Andrew Cherlin (1978), in perhaps the most frequently cited stepfamily article ever published, argued that what he called *remarried families* were incompletely institutionalized in US society. He posited that the absence of guidelines and norms for role performance, the dearth of culturally established, socially acceptable methods of resolving problems, and the relative absence of institutionalized social support for remarried adults contributed to greater stress, inappropriate solutions to problems, and higher divorce rates for stepfamilies. Cherlin pointed to the paucity of language and legal regulations as illustrations of how remarriages are incompletely institutionalized.

Cherlin's (1978) *incomplete institution hypothesis* has been extremely influential for researchers and clinicians, and it has engendered several studies, despite being difficult to operationalize (cf., Booth & Edwards, 1992; Clingempeel, 1981; Coleman, Ganong, & Cable, 1997; Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Giles-Sims, 1984; Grizzle, 1999; Hequembourg, 2004). Although this hypothesis has been criticized (Jacobson, 1995), for the most part the results of studies have lent support to Cherlin's ideas.

Absence of Appropriate Terms

Cherlin (1978) wrote that, "Where no adequate terms exist for an important social role, the institutional support for this role is deficient, and general acceptance of the role as a legitimate pattern of activity is questionable" (p. 643). In Chap. 1, we mentioned some of the labels for stepfamilies and stepfamily positions; Cherlin argued that this confusion of labels was a consequence of the incomplete institutionalization of stepfamilies.

In addition to the lack of consensus and a plethora of options about what to call stepfamilies and stepfamily positions, some stepfamily relationships remain nameless. For example, there is no word in English for the relationships between a father and a stepfather or between a mother and a stepmother. In Japanese, there was no word for stepfamily, so the English term stepfamily was appropriated (Nozawa, personal communication). The absence of terms is indicative of cultural expectations that such relationships do not and should not exist. There are other relationships in stepfamilies that have no labels, but are identifiable by simply adding a *step-* prefix (e.g., step-aunt, step-cousins). We have known individuals who have created terms for their kin; for instance, one of our graduate students, Sarah Pierotti, considered her father's former stepchildren from an earlier marriage to be her "quarter-siblings," a term she made up because no words existed for her to use. Sarah considered these young men to be her brothers because her father stayed involved in their lives after divorcing their mother and was a father-figure to them; she had regular contact with them while growing up. Another young friend has two half-siblings, one with whom she shares a father and one with whom she shares a mother. Her half-siblings have decided to call each other siblings, despite having no genetic or legal connections to each other, because they spend time together and are linked emotionally through their shared half-sister.

The absence of appropriate terms for specific relationships makes it hard to think about, much less communicate about, them. Although such *quasi-kin* relationships do not exist in nuclear families, they are common in stepfamilies, particularly in an era in which many children are in the legal and physical custody of both of their divorced parents. In shared custody stepfamilies, stepparents as well as parents become involved in planning the logistics of transporting children from household to household, in helping children with school, scouts, and 4-H projects, and in supporting children's activities through attendance at sporting, theatrical, and musical events. In these stepfamilies, a father and a stepfather may indeed communicate and

interact about the child/stepchild, as do mothers and stepmothers (Ganong, Coleman, Jamison, & Feistman, 2015). From the perspective of the incomplete institution hypothesis, these stepfamilies must create relationships for the good of their households in spite of the absence of normative assistance and the implicit expectation that such relationships should not exist. In our experiences in interviewing stepfamily members, when they tell us about the mother and stepmother (or father and stepfather) who talk to each other about the children, they nearly always preface such comments with, “I know it sounds weird, but . . .,” or “We are probably the only people who do this, but . . .” These comments indicate that stepfamilies often operate in ways that they perceive to be at odds with cultural expectations.

Little Institutional Social Support

Stepfamilies receive less social support than first marriage families from the social institutions and organizations with which they interact. For example, stepparents who are involved in their stepchildren’s schooling frequently find that the customs and procedures of school systems make little allowance for the presence of step-parents. Although there has been considerable improvement, enrollment forms may still have places for biological or adoptive parents’ names only, graduating seniors are given only two tickets for their parents to attend graduation ceremonies, and teachers are ill-prepared for a child to have three or more step/parents show up for parent–teacher meetings (Coleman, Ganong, & Henry, 1984; Crosbie-Burnett, 1994). Other social organizations, such as youth groups, religious groups, and health care systems also are based on policies and procedures designed primarily for first marriage families (Ganong, 1993). Members of stepfamilies and other family forms are usually welcome to participate in these organizations, but there are few attempts, if any, to accommodate organizational practices to facilitate their participation. A nurse who worked in a hospital intensive care unit (ICU) once told us that whether step-kin were allowed into the unit to see patients or not depended on who was working in the ICU at the time. The hospital policy was that only immediate family members were allowed into the ICU—some nurses considered step-kin to be immediate family, some did not. This nurse, who was a stepmother, advised step-kin to omit the prefix, step, when describing their relationships with the patient. This subtle social coercion on stepfamilies to present themselves as first marriage families puts pressure on stepfamily members to imitate as closely as possible the normatively expected behaviors of members of first marriage families.

Nonexistent or Ambiguous Laws and Social Policies

Family laws also are seen as failing to provide support to stepfamilies. Stepparents have been generally overlooked in federal and state laws in the USA and elsewhere; they have few legal responsibilities toward their stepchildren, and few rights as well

(Komamura, 2015; Mason, Fine, & Carnochan, 2004). Mahoney (1994) noted, “The preference for nuclear family finds expression in the legal system through laws that create distinct protections, entitlements, and responsibilities for spouses, parents, and children” (p. 1). Although there have been changes in family law that affect the legal relations between stepparents and stepchildren (e.g., in the USA, more states are allowing third parties, such as stepparents, to have postdivorce custody; in the UK and New Zealand, residential stepparents can obtain legal guardianship of stepchildren as third parents), there is still little consensus on what legal changes are needed, and there is little political pressure to alter existing policies and laws (Komamura, 2015; Mason et al., 2004). In Singapore, a small country where space and housing are precious resources, housing policies are primarily oriented to assisting young, previously unmarried couples to afford their own apartments. These policies make it extremely difficult for remarried stepfamilies to receive governmental housing grants, which is a disincentive to remarry after divorce. In Japan, laws are structured so that nonresidential fathers are marginalized, and policies often make stepchildren feel as if they have little control over adoption and changes to their surnames (Komamura, 2015). In contrast, New Zealand law allows stepparents to have legal decision making rights, without severing the legal responsibilities of parents; this federal law was designed to facilitate parent and stepparent involvement in child-rearing in a way that benefits stepfamilies (Pryor, 2015). This is an example of institutionalizing stepfamily relationships, but such examples are rare.

Relative Absence of Norms

“The day-to-day life of remarried adults and their children also includes many problems for which there are no institutionalized solutions” (Cherlin, 1978, p. 646). We can think of many of these issues. For instance, how should children be told about their parent’s marriage? When should they be told? What do stepchildren call their stepparent? How do stepfamily members introduce each other (e.g., “These are my parents?” “This is my mom and my stepdad?”)? How involved should stepparents be in child discipline? Who should make household rules for children to follow? Do children who are part-time household residents follow the same rules and have the same chores as full-time residents? Should stepparents be financially responsible for their stepchildren? How should stepchildren and stepparents feel towards each other—like parent and child, like friends, like what?

Clinicians have filled volumes over the last 50 years with example after example of dilemmas that stepfamilies face. Given their exposure to stepfamilies struggling to develop rules for functioning as a family, and because their stepfamily clients often attempt to solve these dilemmas by using institutionalized solutions designed for first-marriage families, clinicians generally attribute substantial validity to the incomplete institution hypothesis (Papernow, 2013; Visher & Visher, 1996). Finally, in our studies of normative beliefs about stepparents and stepchildren’s roles and responsibilities (e.g., Coleman & Ganong, 1998a, 1998b; Ganong & Coleman 1998a, 1998b, 1999), we have found, in general, that there is more consensus about nuclear family roles and responsibilities than about stepfamily roles and responsibilities.

Stepfamilies as Deviant or Deficit Family Forms

Nuclear Family Ideology and Stigma

The nuclear family model is associated with a moral, natural imperative—other family forms are thought to be immoral, or less moral, than the private nuclear family (Coontz, 1997). Part of the ideology is based on the belief that the nuclear family exists as a universal, necessary entity in nature (Scanzoni, 2004). The nuclear family ideology therefore contributes to stepfamilies being seen as deviant or operating at a deficit.

No doubt some of the social stigma related to divorce has been reduced in recent years, but remarriages and stepfamilies are generally seen as extensions of divorce, the consequences of what some pundits would refer to as *failed marriages* or *broken homes*. Although there now is less tolerance for the overt expression of such ill will, the veneer of civility hides the righteous nature of traditional mores that suggest those who do not conform to the family ideal should be punished (Scanzoni, 2004). The nuclear family ideology thus serves as a deterrent for stepfamilies to be open with outsiders and with themselves.

Because the status of stepparent has been stigmatized, people often do not openly share with others their stepfamily status (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013). Although hiding their stepfamily status may be an effective strategy to avoid unpleasant reactions from others (Dainton, 1993; Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990), hiding one's status excludes others from providing assistance, encouragement, and moral support when needed and may unintentionally contribute to their social isolation. Overall, stepfamilies are stigmatized via language, cultural stereotypes and myths, and media images.

Language as Stigmatizing

The noted family sociologist, Jesse Bernard, wrote years ago that, "Because of the emotional connotations of the terms stepchild, stepmother, and stepfather, they are avoided ... for they are, in effect, smear words" (1956, p. 14). The prefix *step* still triggers negative reactions in people and may be considered to be a pejorative (Claxton-Oldfield & Voyer, 2001; Ganong et al., 1990). We read an obituary in one of our local newspapers in which a man was described as being survived by a wife, daughters, and "blended-family children" (Columbia Daily Tribune, November 30, 2013). It is no wonder people want to disassociate themselves from this prefix—hardly a week goes by that we do not see the term *stepchild* in a newspaper, magazine article, or internet site being used metaphorically to refer to someone or something that is abused, neglected, or unwanted. For instance, the clarinet is twice called "Jazz's skinny stepchild" in an article in the New York Times (Nocera, May 5, 2013), and we learn from Business Week that "T-Mobile has always been a bit of a

stepchild” (Greeley & Moritz, 2014). On YouTube, we see that Liberia is “America’s stepchild” in a series of videos by the same name (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=stepchild). The pejorative use of the term stepchild is not only metaphoric, it is one of the standard definitions of stepchild in most English dictionaries! For instance, the first definition of the term stepchild given in the Merriam Webster online dictionary that accompanies Microsoft Word is: “One that fails to receive proper care or attention.” The second definition is “a child of one’s wife or husband by a former partner” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stepchild>).

People associate the term *stepmother* with the adjectives *mean* and *wicked* (Ganong & Coleman, 1995), and the *stepfather* label frequently conjures images of an abuser or a sexual predator (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2002). In Hong Kong, a second wife is referred to as “worn shoes” (Tai, 2005, p. 193). The French call stepmothers *la belle mere* (translated as “beautiful mother”), which sounds nice until you realize that it is meant to be a sarcastic sardonic use of the language to mean just the opposite. The term, *stepsister*, has also become a way to indicate someone that is ugly (Faulkner, 2013) or wicked (Schutz, 2007), as in Cinderella’s stepsisters, and even *stepbrother* is used pejoratively (e.g., “stupidity, wisdom’s little stepbrother”; René, 2007, p. 139). In fact, the proliferation of labels for stepfamilies (see Chap. 1) may be less a matter of social scientists and others being unable to agree on a suitable term, than a consequence of the cultural ambivalence towards step-relationships and remarriage and attempts to relabel stepfamilies and stepfamily positions in order to reduce negative reactions (Ganong et al., 1990). Hallmark has been making greeting cards for stepmothers for Mother’s Day, but they avoid the term stepmother at all costs, addressing them to “Dear Dad’s Wife” and using other euphemisms (Sudduth, 2014). We have seen stepdad cards, but in general “step” terms are avoided by greeting card manufacturers.

Other language usage, such as describing biological parents as *real* or *natural* parents, implicitly conveys the message that stepparents (and adoptive parents, foster parents, and others) are unreal, or unnatural. Identifying first marriage families as *normal*, *real*, *regular*, or *traditional* similarly signifies that other families are abnormal, unreal, irregular, and nontraditional. The use of language can serve to legitimize certain family forms and place others on the fringe of acceptability. Language helps shape thinking, and the lack of language about relationships in stepfamilies may make it more difficult for family members to develop positive identities and satisfying relationships (Coleman & Ganong, 1995).

Stereotypes About Stepfamilies

Contact with stereotyped groups reduces stereotypes (Leyens, Yzerbyt, & Schadron, 1994). The growing numbers of stepfamilies make it unlikely that people do not know someone who lives in a stepfamily, is a stepparent, or stepchild. In general, this greater familiarity likely has had the net effect of reducing the view of

stepfamilies as deviant, although this widespread familiarity also means that someone knows a horrible stepfamily example that reinforces this negative perception. Although the approval of stepfamilies has not been studied in the USA, a fairly recent study of how Americans perceive diverse family forms (e.g., single parent families) conducted by the Pew Center (Morin, 2011), found that about one-third rejected diverse families as poor environments for children (and adults), one-third tolerated diverse families but had concerns about them, and one-third completely accepted diverse families and had no concerns about them. Our guess is that these percentages also generally reflect how people think about stepfamilies as deviant or benign environments.

As a test of your ability to recognize cultural views of stepfamilies, put a check next to the following descriptors that you think were written about stepfamilies, and an X in front of those that were given as descriptors of nuclear families.

- ☐ 1. Secure, stable, happy, moral, normal
- ☐ 2. Complex negotiations, sacrifice, understanding, extra opportunity, options
- ☐ 3. Stability, lifelong relationships, strong sense of belonging, well-defined roles
- ☐ 4. Conflicts, anger, confusion, children acting out, insecurities, compromising
- ☐ 5. Happy, legitimate, a real family, normal, functional, structured, closely knit
- ☐ 6. Dysfunctional, wicked, complex, tumultuous, rocky/shaky, child-rearing problems
- ☐ 7. Correct, happy, well functioning, father as leader, mother as helpmate
- ☐ 8. Together but not unified, complex, confusion or chaotic interaction, many children
- ☐ 9. Happy, several children, conservative/religious
- ☐ 10. Lots of arguing, somewhat happy, lots of children, liberal, less educated
- ☐ 11. Intimate, help each other, support each other, democracy
- ☐ 12. Confusion, dysfunction, complex
- ☐ 13. Togetherness, loving, normative, correct, compromising, good communication
- ☐ 14. Misunderstandings about feelings, power issues, disagreement over possessions
- ☐ 15. Tied by blood, normal, close, loving, whole, unblemished
- ☐ 16. Confusion, jealousy, feeling of intrusion
- ☐ 17. Security, consistent discipline, caring parents, working together, stability
- ☐ 18. Openness to ambiguity, insecurity, more accepting of differences in others
- ☐ 19. Together, cohesive, communication, loving, caring
- ☐ 20. Chaos, confused children, conflicts in all areas, divided, stressful

We asked some college students to generate descriptors that they believed to be characteristic of either stepfamilies or first marriage families. According to these American college students, the odd numbered statements above described first marriage families and the even numbered statements described stepfamilies. We are not suggesting that descriptions from students from one university represent cultural stereotypes about stepfamilies. Obviously, we would need to collect data from multiple, diverse samples before drawing conclusions, but the lists above illustrate clear differences in the stereotypes about nuclear families and stepfamilies.

We have consistently found in our studies that stepmothers and stepfathers are perceived more negatively than are mothers and fathers, respectively, and stepchildren are stereotyped more negatively than are children living with both of their parents (e.g., Bryan, Coleman, Ganong, & Bryan, 1986; Bryan, Ganong, Coleman, & Bryan, 1985; Coleman et al., 1997; Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990). However, not all studies have found that stepparents and stepchildren are stereotyped negatively (e.g., Claxton-Oldfield & Kavanagh, 1999), and some have found that individuals rely on cultural stereotypes of stepparents in some situations, but not others (Claxton-Oldfield et al., 2002). There is some evidence that stigma associated with stepfamilies is diminishing (Troilo & Coleman, 2008), perhaps because there are so many of them that many individuals are either members of extended stepfamilies or know someone who is.

Most investigations of cultural stereotypes of stepfamilies and stepfamily members have assessed perceptions only, which led us to conduct two studies designed to assess behaviors as well as perceptions (Ganong & Coleman, 1997a, 1997b). In these studies, trained actresses, one portraying a patient and one portraying a nurse giving a physical examination, were videotaped. Study participants, all female registered nurses, were given information about the patient's marital and parental status (e.g., married mother, married childless, unmarried mother, stepmother). All of the information given to study participants, except for the patient's marital status, was identical. In two studies using this design, but with different presenting problems of the patient, we found that nurses evaluated and perceived the patients' health status in similar ways, regardless of family structure. However, we also asked the nurse participants to pretend they were the nurse examining this patient, and to answer questions that the videotaped patient asked (we stopped the tape after each question to allow for the nurses to respond). The nurses supplied appropriate factual information to patients regardless of family structure, but nuclear family ideology subtly affected the behaviors of even well-trained and experienced nurses, as their responses to women who they thought were in first marriage families were warmer and more elaborate than were responses to women in stepfamilies and single mother families.

Myths

Myths are beliefs that reflect cultural standards and ideals. They often contain kernels of truth, although they are seldom accurate as generalized truths. The main function of myths is to communicate cultural values. Stepfamily myths include: (a)

stepchildren resent and dislike their stepparents, (b) stepchildren have more problems than other children, (c) stepfamilies are just like other families, (d) stepparents and stepchildren never can learn to love each other, (e) adoption transforms stepfamilies into normal families, (f) children should be loyal to one mother and one father only, (g) stepparents should love their children easily and immediately, and (h) stepmothers are mean and evil (Visser & Visser, 1996). As this list attests, myths can be directionally oppositional. For instance, in contrast to the myth that stepparents and stepchildren can *never* learn to love each other, the myth of instant love says that stepparents should *immediately* love their stepchildren. The underlying assumption of this myth is that remarriage reconstitutes a nuclear family, and the stepparent functionally and emotionally replaces the nonresidential parent. This myth is clearly based on nuclear family ideology, complete with the expectation that love is both an automatic experience and a requisite emotion. Clinicians argue that the myth of instant love puts stepfamilies under great strain; stepparents feel pressured to feel love even when they hardly know their stepchild. On the other hand, the myth that stepparents and stepchildren can never learn to love each other is unduly pessimistic and may hamper efforts to even try to relate positively to each other.

Every culture has myths and stereotypes that are idiosyncratic, but the evil stepmother myth is apparently common in many cultures (Wald, 1981). The Cinderella tale, or one of the 345 variations of it, has been traced to ninth century China (Smith, 1953). Researchers have observed that stepmothers are disturbed by this myth, and the myth influences their behavior and how they think about themselves (Church, 1999; Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

Media Images

From fairy tales to motion pictures, stepparents and stepchildren have been portrayed in ways that stigmatize them (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000). In fairy tales, children's stories, and movies stepmothers are portrayed as mean, uncaring, and interested in their husbands' money and little else (Ganong & Coleman, 1997c). Stepfathers escape negative images in fairy tales but make up for it by being portrayed as evil, predatory and abusive in books and movies (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000). In a review of 55 movie plot summations that mentioned stepparents, Claxton-Oldfield reported that over half depicted stepparents negatively, and none presented them in a positive manner. According to Oldfield, "unless the plot summary information about the stepparent was neutral, there was almost bound to be an element of stepparental wickedness—a bullying or sexually harassing stepfather or a murderous or destructive stepmother" (p. 55). Of course, not all cinematic stepparents and stepchildren are so depicted (e.g., Julia Robert's portrayal of her character in the movie, *The Stepmother*, is sympathetic to stepmothers), but for every benign stepfather or stepmother there are dozens of horrible, mean stepparents with neglected and unloved stepchildren. In fact, there was a series of movies (i.e., *The Stepfather*, Parts 1–5, from 1987 to 2009), in which the lead character murdered his stepchildren in a variety of grisly ways.

The medium of television has occasionally depicted stepfamilies over the years, the most infamous or famous being *The Brady Bunch*, a popular US sitcom of the 1980s that is still on television in the USA in endless reruns. Although television programs have not been systematically studied for stepfamily content as have other media, it seems to us that stepfamily depictions on the small screen have stigmatized stepfamilies less than other media (e.g., *Modern Family*, *Mad Men*, and other popular shows tend to portray stepfamilies rather matter-of-factly). However, most movies appear on television eventually, and some made-for-TV movies and special programs seem designed to exaggerate stepfamily relationship problems.

Researchers that have examined popular publications like magazines find that authors focus on stepfamily problems more than on positive dimensions of stepfamily living (Coleman, Ganong, & Gingrich, 1985; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1985). Stepfamilies in novels written for children and adolescents have fared slightly better than in visual media (Coleman & Ganong, 1988), but it has not been empirically determined how authors of adult fiction depict step-relationships.

Stepfamilies as Reconstituted Nuclear Families

The final way in which stepfamilies are viewed in Western culture is as re-created or re-formed nuclear families. Given the choices of struggling to find solutions to problems without being supported in their efforts to do so or being stigmatized as deviant, it is not terribly surprising that many stepfamilies choose to present themselves as if they were a first marriage nuclear family and to model their family interactions after nuclear families. By doing this, they can enjoy the normative support provided for nuclear families, they avoid stigma and social disapproval, and they become or feel they become “normal” again. They can go from being *unclear families* to *nuclear families* (Simpson, 1994), which from the perspective of many newly remarried adults, is a welcome thing.

There is some cultural support for stepfamilies to make this transition. Obviously, adoption legally transforms a family and relationships within it from step to nuclear. Stepparents are the single largest group of adoptive parents in the USA, which is often done to legally alter the step-relationship and to transform the stepfamily into a nuclear family.

Friends, extended kin of the newly remarried couple, and others with whom they interact (neighbors, teachers, store clerks) generally will treat the stepfamily as if it were a first marriage family. It is almost as if the nuclear family is the cultural default, so when an adult male and female and children live together, outsiders react to them as if they were a first marriage family, until they find out differently. Often adults in stepfamilies find it easier to go along with this than to explain their family structure (e.g., “Susan is my wife’s daughter”), and sometimes even a little family history (e.g., “Susan and Tim are not brother and sister. Susan is my wife’s daughter from a previous marriage, and Tim is my son. That is why they don’t look like each other”), to people they encounter. In general, as the preceding pages must surely

have implied, it is easier to pass as a first marriage family, at least if everyone in the stepfamily agrees. Often this is not the case, however, especially with older children, adolescents, and nonresidential parents and their extended family not willing to allow the stepfamily to function as a nuclear family. Because nonresidential parents are more involved and more likely to share legal decision making with residential parents than in the past, it is becoming harder for stepfamilies to function as if they were nuclear families. That does not mean, however, that stepfamilies have abandoned this as a way of trying to resolve the challenges and ambiguities of stepfamily living.

Implications of the Cultural Context of Stepfamilies

Implications for Stepfamily Members

Cultural values indirectly and directly affect how stepfamily members think, feel, and interact with each other. People have beliefs about stepfamilies before they ever consider becoming part of one, and the cultural values to which they have been exposed help to shape their expectations for what stepfamily living will be like. These expectations can be profound forces on the subsequent relationships that develop. The nuclear family ideology gives stepfamily members few positive expectations—(1) ambiguity and uncertainty, (2) deviance and problems, or (3) trying to fit themselves into a family model that may not be realistic for them.

Friends, acquaintances, nearly everyone that stepfamily members encounter serve not only as part of the cultural context, but as members of society they are affected by cultural values and beliefs about stepfamilies as well. Despite the fact that everyone that we have ever met has a remarriage and step-relationship somewhere in their family histories, a lot of what people know about stepfamilies comes from media images and fairy tales. We still encounter people who claim that they do not know anyone who lives in a stepfamily. When we have asked graduate students to think about the step-relationships in their family trees, many claim they have none, because nobody in their family has ever divorced. We point out to them that a century ago, when life spans were about 40 years, and when many women died in childbirth and men in farm accidents, most people remarried if they could. Most students can find a step-relationship in their extended families without a lot of effort, sometimes going back only a generation. More than one student has discovered past divorces that nobody in the family talks about, and there are always post-bereavement remarriages in family histories. Some have mentioned not finding out until they were young adults that one of their parents (usually a father) had been previously married and that they had half-siblings they had never met. We mention this because this illustrates to us how strongly we mold our experiences, and those of our ancestors, to fit the ideal. Consequently, nobody knows remarried people or stepchildren or stepparents, because everyone they know is “normal.” We are far from “normalizing” stepfamilies in our society, in spite of, or perhaps because of, their prevalence.

The news in recent months have been filled with stories about *unconscious racial bias*. This is a phenomenon that occurs when individuals claim that they are not prejudiced towards other racial and ethnic groups, and they truly feel as if they are not, and yet their subtle actions and language indicate that they hold biases (Haider et al., 2011). The news media are showing, despite many examples of broad racial tolerance in our society, that there are many indirect, almost imperceptible signs of widespread racial prejudice. We think a similar phenomenon occurs when family structure is the focus—there is an *unconscious family structure bias*, even among the most tolerant individuals. Here is an example—we recently taught a class on stepfamilies in which a panel of 10 remarried or repartnered adults talked about their stepfamily experiences. In response to a student’s question about stigma, not one of the stepfamily adults thought there was stigma any longer, nor did they think they had ever experienced any bias against them for being members of a stepfamily. However, they also were consistent throughout the class period in trying to normalize their families: “We don’t use the prefix ‘step’”; “We’re just like a normal family;” “Nobody knows we are not a regular family.” In short, they exhibited *unconscious stepfamily bias*.

Implications for Clinicians

Cultural values also shape clinicians’ behaviors. Cultural beliefs about how families should function, combined with beliefs based on the idealized family model, influence clinicians’ assessment and treatment of all kinds of families, including stepfamilies. As we note later in this book, some practitioners were slow to abandon therapeutic and educational models that were based on middle-class, first marriage white families. This hindered practitioners as much as it did stepfamilies. Over the past two decades, however, many clinicians gradually have come to recognize the limiting influences of the prevailing ideology on stepfamilies. Clinicians that specialize in working with stepfamilies have created alternative models for thinking about family relationships and family functioning that accounts for the unique dynamics of stepfamilies. John and Emily Visser were enormous influences on clinicians, and the second generation of stepfamily practitioners, such as Scott Browning (Browning & Artelt, 2012) and Patricia Papernow (2013), have had their ideas disseminated widely. These clinicians are quietly helping to create new ways of thinking about stepfamilies.

Clinicians who followed interventions and preventions that ignored societal and cultural influences probably found that there was much they did not comprehend when working with stepfamilies. In Chap. 11 we discuss general approaches to working with stepfamilies, and implications of the cultural contexts on practice are presented as well. We want to end this chapter examining how cultural values and beliefs have affected policy makers and researchers.

Implications for Policy-Makers

Stepfamily policy is virtually nonexistent in the USA. Most family law and policy focuses on what the legal system calls the *natural family*. Stepparents generally are “legal strangers” to stepchildren. Stepfamilies are almost always an afterthought when family policy is discussed in the USA. Divorce has dominated much of the discourse in family public policy over the past 45 years, and nearly all of the attention has been focused on parents’ obligations to provide financial support for their children, physical and legal custody of children when parents are separated, and children’s well-being.

Legal traditions regarding parenthood, such as the parental rights doctrine and the view that parenthood is an exclusive status in the USA, are barriers to policy changes for stepparents and stepfamilies. The parental rights doctrine gives biological parents fundamental rights to make decisions about their children, and these rights are not easily overcome by grandparents, stepparents, or even the government. In the USA, a child may not have more than two parents (individuals with parental rights shared with no one else). Because of this tradition, for a stepparent to have legal rights, one of the biological parents must terminate their parental rights. In a few states, stepparents do have some responsibilities for financial support of stepchildren, but these obligations usually end if the remarriage ends. Similarly, policies in other countries that are based on nuclear family models, such as housing policies in Singapore and family registration policies in Japan, create hardships for new stepfamilies.

Implications for Researchers

Although one of the traditional hallmarks of science is to be objective and value free, it would be naive to assume that social science researchers are not influenced by cultural ideologies and belief systems about family life. Researchers’ values, opinions, and beliefs about stepfamilies likely have influenced every aspect of the research endeavor, including the types of issues addressed, the way hypotheses and research questions are worded, the selection of samples and measurement instruments, and interpretations of the meaning of data (see Cherlin [1999] and Amato [2004] for excellent discussions of the roles played by values in family research in general). In spite of social science researchers’ attempts to limit biases in their research designs, their personal values and beliefs about families may introduce subtle biases into studies. Stepfamily members’ values are also relevant (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013).

Epistemic and Nonepistemic Values

Clingempeel, Flescher, and Brand (1987), in a review of the research on stepfamilies from a constructivist perspective, identified what they termed *paradigmatic constraints* on the development of this body of knowledge. The constructivist perspective holds that all knowledge is invented, rather than discovered, and is based on the beliefs and cognitions of researchers, rather than on a single set of objective facts (Gergen, 1985). The belief systems of researchers are based partly on the values and beliefs they have been taught as scientists regarding how research should be conducted (*epistemic beliefs* and values), and partly on personal values and beliefs (*nonepistemic beliefs*). Applied to family research, Clingempeel and his colleagues defined nonepistemic values as attitudes about what is good or bad for families, and epistemic values as the best methods for conducting research on families. Both epistemic and nonepistemic values of social scientists are influenced by sociocultural and historical factors.

Clingempeel and colleagues argued that nonepistemic beliefs that comprise the *nuclear family ideology* are responsible for several of the research limitations noted in Chap. 1: (a) minimal attention given to the structural complexity and heterogeneity of stepfamily forms, (b) emphasis on the problems and weaknesses of stepfamilies rather than on potential strengths and advantages, and (c) generally ignoring the possibility that relationships within stepfamilies may differ in fundamental ways from relationships within nuclear families, yet still be functional. There are undoubtedly other nonepistemic values that have impacted research on stepfamilies.

According to Clingempeel and his colleagues, epistemic constraints that have influenced the shape of stepfamily literature include a bias toward between-group comparisons (i.e., comparing stepfamilies to other family structures), a disciplinary ethnocentric bias (i.e., ignoring the methods, perspectives, and theories of disciplines other than the one in which a researcher was trained), and the *rational objectivity bias* (Clingempeel et al., 1987). This last bias is a result of the belief that scientists should be objective and emotionally removed from their subjects; study participants are seen as passive objects to be examined, rather than active co-participants in the research endeavor (Thompson, 1992), which slows the process of understanding. The net effect of these epistemic constraints has been to limit the breadth, depth, and speed at which the body of knowledge on stepfamilies developed.

Since Clingempeel and colleagues' made their insightful argument there has been noteworthy movement, at least by some scholars, away from these research biases. If nothing else, researchers more often are aware of their epistemic biases, which makes it harder for them to conduct business as usual. One result has been an increase in qualitative or interpretive methods of gaining knowledge about stepfamilies. We find much to be optimistic about when considering the changes over time in the approaches to studying stepfamily relationships.

Even when researchers, clinicians, and stepfamily members attempt to use other models of family life to guide their thinking, the idealized nuclear family functions as the implicit comparison (e.g., Gamache, 1997; Levin, 1997; Smith, 1993). It is

nearly impossible to think about stepfamilies, to study them as a researcher, or to work with them as a practitioner, without implicitly or explicitly holding them to an idealization of first marriage families.

Stepfamilies in the Twenty-First Century

We have just presented a rather discouraging view of stepfamilies operating in the shadow of a prevailing nuclear family ideology. Although these three views of stepfamilies are still operational—stepfamilies as incomplete institutions, stepfamilies as deviant and dysfunctional, and stepfamilies as reconstituted nuclear families—there are signs that the cultural context is gradually changing for stepfamilies in the twenty-first century. A complicating factor in the USA, and perhaps elsewhere as well, is that a growing proportion of stepfamilies are not formed by remarriage, but by shared residence (cohabitation). This new demographic shift in the stepfamily phenomenon has clouded the status of stepfamilies and added more ambiguity about them even as other forces have worked towards greater understanding of stepfamilies.

Stepfamilies as Adaptive and Resilient

We see evidence that a fourth way of thinking about stepfamilies has gradually evolved. Stimulated in part by the work of John and Emily Visser, founders of the Stepfamily Association of America, this resilience perspective is what we have called a *normative adaptive* approach, one that begins with the premise that stepfamilies can function well and can be effective living environments for children and adults. In this growing perspective, stepfamilies are seen as different than nuclear families, but not necessarily dysfunctional or damaging to children and adults. It is a perspective that focuses on “what works,” and on what resilience processes operate in effective stepfamilies. This resilience perspective is seen among many clinicians, is influencing an increasing number of researchers, and has been taken to heart by a growing proportion of stepfamily members. Stepfamily differences and similarities to nuclear families are accepted, and there is a recognition that most stepfamilies are effective environments for children and adults. Adherents to the resilience, normative-adaptive perspective embrace the uniqueness of stepfamilies, and focus their efforts on understanding how to help stepfamilies find ways to function that suits them. Gradually, the old model of stepfamilies that was based on the first marriage, nuclear family household model—a mother and a father sharing their household with one or more children—has expanded into multiple models of stepfamily development and maintenance.

Stepfamily Relationships

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2017, XV, 343 p. 11 illus., 2 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4899-7700-7