

Preface

We were fortunate to have started our research careers about the same time as the study of stepfamilies was “discovered” as a valid topic for social and behavioral scientists. We also started our own stepfamily during the same time period (the late 1970s), creating a “perfect storm” in which our personal and professional stepfamily interests were mounting as stepfamilies and related topics started to receive attention by researchers, clinicians, journalists, policy-makers, and others. Our skills as stepfamily researchers developed as the field advanced, and we feel privileged to have witnessed firsthand how stepfamily research and clinical practice has expanded over the past few decades. In fact, we have carefully and systematically written multiple reviews of research and clinical work targeting remarriage, step-parents, stepchildren, stepgrandparents, and other aspects of stepfamily living. Our goal is to make this book a readable, yet thorough, compilation of what is known about stepfamily relationships.

This is the third book we have written about stepfamily relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 1994, 2004). Since our first book, there has been a phenomenal increase in the amount of research on stepfamily relationships; the total number of publications about stepfamilies has increased exponentially. The quality of scholarship on stepfamily relationships has improved dramatically as well. As both contributors to and consumers of this professional literature, we know that the quantity and quality of scholarly work on remarriage and stepfamily relationships have changed profoundly. The time seemed right for yet another comprehensive review of this literature. Thus the idea for this current book was born.

As we started reviewing the literature on stepfamilies, we expected to be able to simply update our 2004 book—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 most 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, 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 (Chap. 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 (Chap. 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 pathways to stepfamily living (Chap. 3), with an eye towards how these various pathways affect stepfamily relationships over time. Continuing with this chronological orientation, we next examine courtship for stepfamily living (Chap. 4) and remarriage and cohabiting couple relationships (Chap. 5). We then review the literature on gay and lesbian stepfamily relationships in Chap. 6. We know there is a risk that we might be seen as marginalizing them by setting aside an entire chapter on gay and lesbian stepfamilies, but we think recent global changes in same sex marriage rights make them important enough for a separate chapter. In Chaps. 7 and 8 we present parenting and stepparenting processes, and then we follow with an examination of the effects of stepfamily living on children. A range of sibling relationships are explored in Chap. 10, as we compare siblings, half-siblings, and stepsiblings. In Chap. 11 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 Chap. 12 we deviate from this approach a bit by turning our attention almost exclusively to clinicians' contributions. Then, we summarize briefly in Chap. 13 the interventions with stepfamilies. In the final chapter we suggest future directions for researchers and clinicians.

As usual, we have many people to thank for making this book possible. Our large and growing "family" of former and current graduate students have enormously enriched our lives and our work with stepfamilies. Former students, whose names appear in this volume, include: Jason Hans, Shannon Weaver, Melinda Markham, Jessica Troilo, Elizabeth Sharp, Jennifer Hardesty, Tim Killian, Tanja Rothrauf, Jacquelyn Benson, Jonathon Beckmeyer, Tyler Jamison, Richard Feistman, Catherine Cushinberry, Annette Kusgen McDaniel. Current students whose work appears in this book include: Caroline Sanner, Luke Russell, Ashton Chapman, Nick Frye, Youngjin Kang, Sarah Mitchell, Kwangman Ko—we thank them for the many ways they have helped us finish this book and advance the scholarship on stepfamilies. Many other students have been part of our research and educational work—they are too numerous to mention, but we hope they know they are part of our academic stepfamily.

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 multigenerational stepfamily. We have learned the best lessons from them.

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Stepfamily Relationships

Development, Dynamics, and Interventions

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