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The New Extended Family: The Experience of Parents and Children after Remarriage

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Abstract

During the past 2 decades, the nuclear family, the predominant family form in the United States, has appeared to be more ephemeral than was once imagined by social scientists. Historians and demographers have shown that this family form was not nearly so common in earlier times as was once thought (Cherlin, 1981; Hareven, 1978). Paradoxically the nuclear family (ironically, now referred to as the traditional family) was more common in 1950 than in 1850 because of high rates of mortality, illness, and economic uncertainty (Uhlenberg, 1974). Large numbers of people never married or never had children, and among those who did, the prospect of living a settled and secure life was much lower than is nostalgically recalled.

Disciplines

Family, Life Course, and Society | Sociology | Sociology of Culture

The New Extended Family: The Experience of Parents and Children after Remarriage*

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INTRODUCTION

During the past 2 decades, the nuclear family, the predominant family form in the United States, has appeared to be more ephemeral than was once imagined by social scientists. Historians and demographers have shown that this family form was not nearly so common in earlier times as was once thought (Cherlin, 1981; Hareven, 1978). Paradoxically the nuclear family (ironically, now referred to as the traditional family) was more common in 1950 than in 1850 because of high rates of mortality, illness, and economic uncertainty (Uhlenberg, 1974). Large numbers of people never married or never had children, and among those who did, the prospect of living a settled and secure life was much lower than is nostalgically recalled.

This family form became more prominent by the middle of the 20th century though it hardly ever lived up to its cultural ideal. As soon as it became the modal form, the nuclear family was attacked for producing conformity, stifling children, concealing marital tensions, and frustrating women's legitimate aspirations (Gordon, 1972).

These tensions helped to usher in what some have called the "post-modern" family. Change came from many directions. The extension of education, the rise of a service-based economy, the growth of the welfare state, the improvement of contraceptive technology, and legal reform (especially concerning the rights of women and children) are but a few of the conditions that have contributed to the family's transformation (Thornton & Freedman, 1983). The social, legal, and economic changes in the kinship system brought about a heightened emphasis on individual discretion. A

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sense of obligation to kin is still strong, but these expectations have been tempered by a more voluntaristic conception of marriage and parenthood.

Although life-long monogamy is still esteemed, it is no longer expected of couples entering matrimony. In its place is a pattern of conjugal succession (Furstenberg, 1982). Couples are only expected to stay together so long as a marriage is emotionally gratifying. If it is not, the parties are permitted, even encouraged, to break the marriage contract and search for another mate. In the *National Survey of Children* (NSC), a study that will be described later in this chapter, 68% of a nationally representative sample of adolescent children and 71% of their parents agreed with the statement that "a couple should not get married unless they were prepared to stay together for life." However, three fifths of the children and close to half of the adults also agreed that "it should be easy for a couple that is unhappily married to get a divorce." The emotional quality of the relationship is the *sine qua non* of contemporary marriage. The central justification for marriage is emotional gratification, not economic cooperation or family continuity. This shift in sentiments about marriage also has implications for the strength of the parent-child bond and the nature of kinship ties more generally (Bohannon, 1970; Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984; Thornton & Freedman, 1983).

CHANGING PATTERNS OF DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

The changing norms of marriage and parenthood reflect a remarkable change in the actual risk of marital dissolution. The probability that an individual will divorce has tripled for those born in this century, rising from about 15% in the cohort born before World War I to 45% in the 1950s cohort (Preston & McDonald, 1979; Weed, 1980). Most current projections indicated that well over half of all those who married in the 1970s will end their unions voluntarily. Similarly, the probability of remarriage has risen accordingly so that at least a third and probably two out of five of those who wed in the past decade will remarry (Cherlin, 1981; Glick, 1984). Although the interval between divorce and remarriage has been growing, most remarriages still occur within 5 years after divorce, and many of those who do not rewed will enter a cohabitational relationship within that period (Spanier & Furstenberg, 1986).

About two fifths of divorcing couples are childless (Norton & Glick, 1976). Although marital dissolution under these circumstances may be no less painful for the individuals involved, it leaves few lasting social traces. However, most divorces involve children, and parents are frequently compelled to share childrearing responsibilities when they no longer live together. Parenting apart is a socially awkward arrangement, and most formerly married couples manage it poorly or not at all (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985).

Remarriage further complicates the life course of children of divorce.

Most young children who see their parents' marriage dissolve are likely to enter a stepfamily before they reach adulthood. Using data from the NSC conducted in 1981, it is estimated that 40% of all children will encounter divorce, and about one in four will live with a stepparent before they reach the age of 16. If we calculated as well the existence of stepparents, not living with the child, *probably a third of all children growing up today will be part of a stepfamily before they reach adulthood.* (See also Bumpass, 1984; Hofferth, 1984, for similar estimates.)

Cherlin and McCarthy (1985) have reported in a recent analysis of households with children that approximately one in six presently live with a stepparent or parents who are remarried. This figure will continue to grow if divorce and remarriage rates remain at their current levels. Clearly, not all such arrangements involve regular contact with stepparents and stepsiblings, but most children who do enter a stepfamily will have ongoing relations with a variety of steprelatives. Bumpass (1984) has estimated that a third of all children entering stepfamilies will acquire a halfsibling within 4 years, and close to two thirds will eventually have either a step- or half-sibling. Beyond the immediate household, children in stepfamilies can expect to amass a vast collection of stepkin. Clearly the boundaries of the family are being expanded by marriage at least as much as by childbearing.

What these structural changes in the form of the family imply for the quality of family life is an intriguing question in kinship research. How does the pattern of conjugal succession modify the nature of marriage, childbearing, and childrearing? Are relations with extended kin altered in response to new and complex arrangements created by divorce and remarriage? These questions will be addressed in this chapter, which reports on evidence from one completed small-scale study of divorce and remarriage and an ongoing longitudinal investigation of families interviewed from 1976 to 1981. Special attention is given to several important topics relating to family reconstitution: (1) the viability of second marriages, (2) their economic status, (3) strategies of co-parenting, and (4) the well-being of children.

Sources of Data

In the late 1970s, when I first began to examine the process of family recycling, I undertook a comprehensive review of the existing sociological literature on remarriage and stepfamilies. While this survey, no doubt, failed to uncover some references, it turned up only about a dozen studies that reported results from nonclinical samples (Furstenberg, 1979; Walker, Rogers, & Messinger, 1977). Even these studies were not methodologically sound enough to provide more than suggestive evidence on processes of remarriage and stepfamily life. The situation has improved considerably in the past few years as several major studies and countless small-scale investigations are

now underway. The present volume and its predecessor published in *Family Relations* signal a scholarly commitment to empirical research on remarriage and stepfamily life (see Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1984).

The evidence presented in this chapter was collected in a series of studies carried out with a number of colleagues. In the first, Graham Spanier and I followed some 200 recently divorced individuals in central Pennsylvania for a period of two and a half years, during which time about half remarried or reestablished new partnerships. Our aim was to explore how individuals redefined marriage and parenthood as they negotiated the transition from one relationship to the next. (For a full account of the results, see Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984.) The second study examines a national sample of children over a 5-year period, contrasting the development and family patterns of young adolescents whose parents experienced marital disruption with those who have continuously lived with two biological parents. This study was designed by Nicholas Zill, James Peterson, and myself to measure the consequences of marital change for the development and well-being of children (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Furstenberg & Allison, 1985). In 1976, a nationally representative sample of 2,279 children between the ages of 7 and 11 from 1,747 households were interviewed. Data on the children and family experiences were also collected from a parent, usually the child's mother. School information on the children was also obtained from teachers through a mailed questionnaire. In 1981, all the children from disrupted families and families with high marital conflict in 1976 were reinterviewed, as well as a random subsample of children in low-conflict families. Data were also collected again from parents and schools. (A full description of the study design and data collection procedures can be found in Furstenberg *et al.*, 1983.) As an add-on to this study, a sample of the grandparents of the children was interviewed to determine how conjugal succession affects the bonds between generations (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986).

The Stability of Remarriages

A hotly debated issue is whether remarried persons are at special risk of divorce. Rates of divorce have been rising as a growing number of individuals enter second unions (Cherlin, 1978, 1981). One of the painful issues of stepfamily life is the fragility of the new marriage. In the NSC, we estimated that at least a tenth of the children in our study would see their parents divorce, remarry, and divorce before they reached the age of 16. These figures probably understate the true incidence of this risk because they include the divorce risk only of the parent in the household, and only of parents who legally remarried, thus eliminating some of the short-lived cohabitation arrangements.

In a cogent review of the literature on remarriage, Cherlin (1978) argued

that the risk of *redivorce* may be elevated by the absence of clear-cut guidelines for dealing with the day-to-day dilemmas that surface in stepfamilies. He lists a number of pivotal problems such as the potential occurrence of incest, the confusion over kin terms, the difficulties of exercising discipline, and division of responsibilities between residential and nonresidential parents to mention but a few. Unquestionably, as I shall show later, these problems are real ones and seem to contribute to the higher level of stress within stepfamilies and, no doubt, sometimes elevate the level of marital tensions (see White & Booth, 1985).

Oddly enough, however, when one examines the risk of marital dissolution, the rates of divorce and *redivorce* are fairly similar in first and second marriages. Remarriers are approximately 10% more likely to become divorced than first marriers (56% vs. 49% [Weed, 1980]), a disparity that is not very large considering the obvious difficulties surrounding life in stepfamilies. Moreover, when this risk of divorce is examined more closely, it appears not to be exclusively attributable to the complexities of stepfamily life. Remarried couples without children seem to have as high a risk of *redivorce* as those with children, suggesting the possibility that personal characteristics of those who remarry account in part for their being at higher risk for divorce (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984).

In a recent study of remarried couples, however, White and Booth (1985) specifically identified the presence of stepchildren in the home as a principal source of strain in second unions. They report that couples in complex households, especially those in which both partners are remarried and have children, are more likely to say that they should not have gotten remarried. Apparently, having stepchildren in the home diminishes the satisfactions of family life.

Some researchers have also reasoned that the divorced are different from the never-divorced if only because the former have been ideologically and psychologically prepared to end an unhappy marriage (Halliday, 1980). In contrast, the population in first marriages includes some people who are equally unhappy but unwilling or unprepared to dissolve their unions. Couples in central Pennsylvania reported that virtually everyone who goes through the process of divorce and remarriage is committed to making their second marriage work. Both the qualitative case studies and survey data suggest that remarried couples think about marriage differently if they have done it before. Many, although certainly not all, approach marriage a second time with fewer illusions, less imbued with romantic expectations. They are wary of wanting too much, but determined not to settle for too little. Consequently, they are more likely to view marriage with a "third eye" and monitor the quality of their relationship than are individuals in first unions.

What they want from a marriage, however, is remarkably similar to what people in first marriages value: communication, sympathy, and trust.

Table 3-1 presents findings from the NSC in which parents were asked about their attitudes concerning marriage.

A similar profile of conjugal beliefs emerged when persons in first and subsequent marriages were compared. Roughly the same portion agreed that a good marriage should have no secrets, spouses should be one another's best friends, working women make more interesting partners, it is wrong to have sexual affairs, and individuals should not get married unless they were prepared to stay together for life. Remarried individuals were, however, significantly less committed to the principle of romantic love as a basis for marriage, more supportive of living together before marriage, a little less likely to value shared interests, but only slightly more tolerant of divorce. Generally though, conjugal expectations do not seem to vary greatly by marital status.

Consistent with previous research, the NSC data also reveal that the quality of remarriages, at least those which have survived the early years, seem to be fairly similar to the assessments offered by those in first marriages (Glenn, 1981; Glenn & Weaver, 1977; White & Booth, 1985). The great majority of both marital subgroups are positive about their relationship. In the central Pennsylvania study remarried respondents generally explained that their unsuccessful first marriage resulted from poor selection rather than

Table 3-1. General Statements from Adults about Marriage and Family Life by Family Type (Percentage of Those Who Strongly or Mostly Agree)

	Total	Nuclear	Remarried
In a good marriage, a couple should not have any secrets from each other	82	83	86
A person's spouse should be his or her most intimate friend	92	91	94
A husband and wife are better off not sharing too many interests	13	12	18
Working women make more interesting partners in marriage	44	44	42
Marriages are better when the husband works and the wife runs the home and cares for the children	65	65	61
As long as it is secret, a sexual affair would not harm a good marriage	10	11	7
Unless a couple is prepared to stay together for life, they should not get married	74	74	74
People should not get married unless they are deeply in love	95	96	86
Living together before marriage makes a lot of sense	17	14	36
It should be easy for unhappy couples to get a divorce	43	42	46
Unweighted <i>ns</i>	(669)	(580)	(119)

from inadequate preparation or personal immaturity. But, most confess that they married for foolish reasons: a response to social pressure, romantic illusions, or to escape from home. In their second marriage, they claimed to have resisted social pressures and selected more wisely. Evidence from the central Pennsylvania studies suggests that individuals who remarry are not immune to social pressures, although they may be of a different kind than those experienced early in life (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984).

The Economics of Remarriage

It is well known that divorce greatly alters the economic situation of adults and their dependent children. Marital instability is a source, if not *the* major source, of economic insufficiency in American families (Bane & Ellwood, 1984; Rawlings, 1980; Ross & Sawhill, 1975). While it can be safely assumed that remarriage repairs some of the damage done by divorce, it is not well known how families allocate resources when they are supporting more than one household. Most divorced fathers do not pay significant amounts of child support. In fact, the majority do not pay any money on a regular basis to their children (United States Bureau of the Census, 1979). One reason for the low level of child support may be that most divorced men have assumed support for a new household and are unwilling or unable to divide their limited resources. But we simply do not know the essential economic facts about remarriage (Weitzman, 1985).

Some economic information on stepfamilies was collected in the NSC. Less than a third of the women in second marriages were receiving child support from their first husbands. On the whole, the situation of remarried women was not very different from women in first marriages; they were just as likely to work and were no more or less likely to express anxieties about their economic situation. Remarried women, however, had somewhat lower family incomes and contributed a larger share to the household earnings than did women in first marriages. Apparently, working experience between marriages may strengthen the employment situation of females. Also, greater economic demands on the family may press remarried women into a more prominent economic role. Remarried persons probably do not make out quite as well, perhaps because of preexisting socioeconomic disadvantage or perhaps because of the loss of assets following divorce. On balance, however, remarried women are about in the same economic position in a second marriage as they would have been had they stuck it out in their first (Jacobs & Furstenberg, 1986).

An intriguing question is how families merge their economic assets and obligations. Fresh from disentangling economic interests in their first marriages, couples may be reluctant to throw everything into a "common pot." Moreover, some parents may resist new obligations such as the support of

stepchildren. To my knowledge, no careful study exists of how families manage these allocations or what consequences economic exchanges have for the emotional quality of relations between the marriage partners and their children. Incidentally, the same issues arise when we turn to intergenerational relations. Grandparents, for example, must decide whether and how to assist stepgrandchildren. Qualitative evidence from the grandparent survey suggests that withholding resources from stepgrandchildren can create considerable tensions between the middle and senior generations (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986).

PATTERNS OF PARENTING IN STEPFAMILIES

Dividing material resources within stepfamilies raises similar issues as those facing parents in allocating their time and affection among biological and stepchildren both within and across households. In making such comparisons, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that there is as much diversity among stepfamilies as there is among families of first marriage. Not to recognize the variety of stepfamily life runs the risk of sociological stereotyping—creating distinctions between families where none exist or exaggerating only trivial differences. In fact, some differences do exist between first families and stepfamilies; however, they generally are not large enough to conclude that, typically, stepfamilies behave one way and first families another. For the most part, the overlap between the two populations is far greater than the divergence between them.

Existing research has produced conflicting accounts of the quality of relations and the general level of harmony within stepfamilies. (See, for example, the special issue of *Family Relations* edited by Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1984.) Clinicians have uncovered a great deal more evidence of strain than have investigators employing survey methods on nonclinical samples (Esses & Campbell, 1984). Quite possibly, these differing results may be an artifact of the methods employed or the research design. Clinicians have searched with more probing tools but have usually examined patient populations, consisting of families who are in the process of negotiating the transition to stepfamily life. Not surprisingly, they have discovered more distress than researchers who have examined more general indications of family functioning in larger and less-select populations.

The NSC provides information about a broad and fairly representative sample of stepfamilies, some of which were longstanding units while others had been constituted only for a short time. Thus, we can contrast established and newly formed stepfamilies and compare both of these groups to never-divorced couples. Moreover, we have observations from both parents and children on a number of dimensions of family life.

A useful point of departure is to ask whether and when steprelatives are incorporated in the family system. Both parents and children were asked who specifically they included in their family. Whereas only 1% of the parents failed to mention their biological children, 15% of those with stepchildren *in the household* did not list them as family members. Similarly, just 7% of the children excluded a biological mother and 9% a father, compared to 31% of those with a residential stepmother or stepfather. Moreover, 19% of the children with siblings omitted at least one biological sibling whereas 41% of the children living with stepsiblings did not include one or more in their family. Length of time in a stepfamily, interestingly, was not related to the acknowledgment of steprelations. Apparently, time alone does not guarantee that family boundaries will be redrawn.

These figures provide a window into stepfamily life by showing that a fairly small fraction of parents and a much greater proportion of children partition biological kin and stepkin. The definition of the family provides an indirect measure of family relations among biological kin and stepkin, suggesting the possibility of serious rifts. Table 3-2 presents a more direct set of indicators measuring the quality of relationships within different family types. Parents and children were asked to rate varied dimensions of their family life over the past several months. Parents in first married families consistently rated the quality of family relations in more favorable terms than those in stepfamilies. The differences, however, are relatively small and generally not statistically significant. Moreover, in all instances, the great majority of adults, regardless of their situation, portray the quality of life in relatively rosy terms. Children are no less positive about their household ambience, although they are somewhat more influenced by their current family structure than are adults. Even so, the majority of children in stepfam-

Table 3-2. Parents' and Children's Assessment of Quality of Family Life in Last Few Months, by Family Type (Percentage Who Agreed with Listed Quality)

Quality of Family Life	Parents		Children	
	Nuclear	Stepfamily	Nuclear	Stepfamily
Relaxed	75	67	83	67
Orderly	67	66	85	74
Close	87	78	75	66
Sharing	92	91	91	81
Complex	27	39	26	34
Tense	24	30	20	30
Disorganized	27	29	20	24
Unweighted <i>ns</i>	(580)	(119)	(776)	(161)

ilies provide a positive portrait of their family life. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that most of the differences that do occur are located in stepmother families. Households with biological mothers and stepfathers receive almost identical ratings. I shall return to these differences between types of stepfamilies shortly.

When the family descriptions are examined by the longevity of the stepfamily, it can be seen that family life did not become more settled or harmonious over time. This again points to the conclusion that most families appear to be able to reconstitute in fairly short order. Perhaps, also the expectations of members in newly formed families are more modest and consequently produce fewer discontents. Finally, we must consider the possibility that children who experience divorce and remarriage early in life may encounter more adjustment problems than those who encounter family disruption in later childhood (see Furstenberg & Allison, 1985; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

In addition to these subjective appraisals of family life, a good deal of information on family routines and practices was obtained from the adolescents and their parents. Table 3-3 compares reports of family contact in first marriages and stepfamilies. The picture that emerges in Table 3-3 is not unfamiliar by now. On most items, children in the two family types offer rather similar depictions of the level of interaction. Stepfamily members are almost as likely to go to the movies, go shopping with the child, work on some project together, or play a game or sport during a specific time interval. They are somewhat less likely to have gone out to dinner together or taken a trip, and children in stepfamilies are noticeably less likely to have received help on homework.

In the bottom section of Table 3-3, the household expectations and family rules as reported by parents and children are displayed. Again the data reveal rather little variation by family form. Children in stepfamilies are somewhat more likely to be called upon to help out with certain household chores, perhaps because they played a larger role in household maintenance during the divorce. In other respects, there is little to distinguish the family types. The application of rules, the children's participation in rule making, and their response to family regulations are nearly identical. Parents and teens in stepfamilies report arguing about rules slightly more frequently.

Overall, though, the daily character of stepfamily life does not appear to differ greatly from the perception of life of members in first-married households. Moreover, once again, we did not discern differences in family interaction and routines among more recently formed stepfamilies as compared to long-lasting ones. Indeed, contrary to expectation, there was a slight tendency for families reconstituted in the past 3 years to report higher levels of positive interaction and lower levels of conflict, but the differences are neither large nor entirely consistent.

Table 3-3. Percent Who Replied "Yes" on Questions of Family Interaction, Rules, and Expectations by Family Type

	Parents		Children	
	Nuclear	Stepfamily	Nuclear	Stepfamily
Within the last month have you and your parents: ^a				
attended movies			23	23
gone out to dinner			66	52
gone shopping			70	63
taken a trip			41	28
Within the last week have you and your parents: ^a				
done things together			49	53
school work			34	19
played game			42	43
In your home, are you regularly expected to help out with:				
straightening your room	98	96	96	97
keeping rest of house clean	81	75	82	80
doing the dishes	64	69	60	69
cooking	35	38	32	43
Are there any rules about:				
watching TV	61	70	33	35
keeping your parents informed about your whereabouts	99	91	94	92
doing homework	84	91	76	75
dating and going to parties	76	74	70	64
Do you argue about the rules?				
(often or sometimes)	56	52	41	48
How often do your parents talk over important decision with you?				
(often)	62	60	64	60
Unweighted <i>ns</i>	(580)	(119)	(776)	(161)

^aNot asked of parents.

Despite this pattern of similarity, it is clear that stepfamilies do face a set of problems not experienced in nuclear units. In the NSC, adults with both biological and stepchildren were asked their views about certain features of stepfamily life. The results (presented in Table 3-4) show that most parents acknowledge difficulties in assuming the stepparent role. A majority said that it was more difficult to be a stepparent and most reported some reservations about their ability to give love and affection and to discipline their stepchild-

dren. A substantial proportion perceived that their stepchildren did not entirely accept them as parents.

This table also shows some significant shifts in these sentiments according to how long the stepparent and child have lived together. Stepchildren are harder to love and discipline in the early years of remarriage, and stepparents are more likely to be regarded as friends rather than parents. On the other hand, children become more difficult to manage in long-term stepfamilies, presumably as they enter adolescence. Apparently, only some of the distinctions between biological and step-children subside over time. Moreover, it is important to recognize that families with severe strains may not have survived, and thus, the NSC data may overstate the positive trajectory of adjustment. The limitations of these cross-sectional impressions point to the desirability of carrying out longitudinal research on the adaptation to stepfamily life over a fairly long period of time, simultaneously examining the situations of children and parents who may not adjust at the same pace or end up at the same place. Furthermore, in this preliminary overview, we have ignored age and gender distinctions, a theme which will be explored in a later report on the NSC.

Further information on the quality of relations between children, their biological parents and stepparents are presented in Table 3-5. These data show trivial or no differences in the quality of relations between children and their biological parents, living in nuclear and stepfamilies. The levels of closeness, affection, and identification are about the same in the two family types.

Table 3-4. Parents Opinions about Stepfamily Life by Length of Time in a Stepfamily (Percentage of Those Who Agree Somewhat or Very Much)

	< 3 years	3-7 years	> 7 years	Total
It is more difficult to discipline your stepchild(ren) than your own child(ren)	70	53	43	53
It is generally harder to love your stepchild(ren) than to love your own child(ren)	52	46	40	47
You find it easier to think of yourself as a friend than a parent to your stepchild(ren)	61	54	47	53
It is harder to be a stepparent than a natural parent	47	47	66	53
Your child(ren) would have had fewer problems with two natural parents than with one natural parent and one stepparent	64	41	33	43
Your stepchild(ren) can't think of you as a real parent	70	33	61	49
You've had problems getting your parents to accept your stepchild(ren) as grandchild(ren)	10	34	20	20
Unweighted <i>ns</i>	(8)	(18)	(14)	(40)

Table 3-5. Quality of Relations between Children and Their Biological Parents or Stepparents as Reported by Children, by Family Type

Family Type	Mother			Father		
	b-m ^a b-f	b-m s-f	s-m b-f	b-f b-m	b-f s-m	s-f b-m
Say often or sometimes argue with parent	46	45	67	33	36	32
Report parent spends enough time	80	71	74	75	61	76
Report parent given enough affection	96	90	81	93	88	79
Say often do things together with parent	34	33	22	43	39	23
Feel extremely or quite close to parent	87	84	44	81	86	56
Want to be like parent when they grow up	72	65	33	73	78	44
Unweighted <i>ns</i>	(776)	(134)	(27)	(776)	(27)	(134)

^ab = biological, s = stepparent, m = mother, f = father.

When it comes to relations with stepparents, the story is quite different. There are huge disparities in children's feelings toward step and biological parents. Parents and their non-biological children alike report less intimacy. Children are less likely to report doing things with stepparents, much less likely to feel close to them, and most do not want to be like them when they grow up. Other data not shown in this table seem to corroborate the children's perceptions that their stepparents are less involved in their care and supervision. A higher proportion of biological parents in stepfamilies complain that their spouse assumes too little responsibility for childrearing and does not have a great deal of influence over the child.

Large as the variations in Table 3-5 are, it is important to note that the majority of parents and children in stepfamilies have fairly or very positive relations. Although they are distinctly more distant from stepparents than from biological parents, most children express benign, if not lavishly positive sentiments. This fact may help to explain why the impressions of family life reported earlier were not so very different for step- and first-marriage families.

Are there specific conditions that account for the variation among stepfamilies? A series of possible explanations was explored to explain the differences just described. First of all, children's experiences were contrasted in stepmother and stepfather households. Although there were only a small number of stepmother families in the cohort ($n = 27$), it is clear that relations between children and stepmothers are more stressful than relations between children and stepfathers. For example, 44% of children say that they feel "extremely" or "very close" to their stepmothers as compared to 56% of children reporting about their stepfathers. Similarly, 34% of the children say they want to be "quite a bit" or "very much" like their stepmothers when they

grow up, whereas 44% of the children with stepfathers give a similar response.

Families with residential stepmothers are, of course, unusual. Typically, mothers do not relinquish or lose custody. Therefore, we can assume that patterns of parenting that preceded the divorce and the divorce process itself often differed from what transpired in stepfamilies in which the mother retained custody. (Alternatively, fathers may have been given responsibility for a child who was not, for one reason or another, able to adjust to the mother's household.) Previous analysis revealed that nonresidential mothers maintain closer contact with their children than do nonresidential fathers (Furstenberg *et al.*, 1983). Consequently, the possibility of competition between biological mothers and stepmothers looms larger. A substantial minority of fathers in stepmother households frequently reported that dealings with their former spouse put a strain on their current marital relationship. Many also said their former spouse interfered with the stepmother's relationship to the child. Respondents in families with stepfathers were much less likely to lodge similar complaints of interference.

Next, the effect of contact with the nonresidential parent on the child's relationship with the stepparent was examined. Children were just as attached to their stepfathers when they continued to see their biological father on a regular basis as when contact was intermittent or nonexistent. Although the number of stepmother families is too small to produce reliable findings, children appear to have more difficulty handling simultaneous relations with two mothers (Furstenberg, 1987). This finding seems to be corroborated by the views of the adult respondents who reported greater competition between mothers and stepmothers than between fathers and stepfathers.

One might expect that these difficulties become resolved over time. Contrasting stepfamilies of differing duration, no consistent pattern in the quality of relations between children and their stepparents could be discerned. Not enough families are captured in the earliest stages of transition to ascertain how long it takes for children to establish an intimate bond with a stepparent, if such a bond is formed at all, but ties between children and their stepparents do not become progressively stronger over time. Again, this result might be explained by the fact that younger children seem to be most vulnerable to the adverse effects of marital disruption. And, it is not possible to examine separately the age of the child at the time of separation and the duration of remarriage. Were it possible to consider each of these influences on the quality of relations between stepparents and their children, one might find that the duration of remarriage has a positive effect on the strength of the parent-child bond.

To sum up, the findings on the nature of stepfamily life reveal a rather mixed picture that neither supports the dire descriptions of many clinical researchers nor substantiates the completely rosy view of some survey re-

searchers. Stepfamilies do have more different types of problems than do first-marriage families. While relations between biological parents and their children are quite similar among family types, children in stepfamilies frequently do experience problems in establishing close ties with their stepparents. Given sufficient time, most children establish relatively close ties to their stepparents, especially their stepfathers, but a sizable minority report troubled relations with stepparents in adolescence.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of stepfamilies appear to function rather well. Indeed, there was little to distinguish the overall description of family life, offered by both parents and children, in step- and first-marriage families. This seems to suggest that an absence of positive relations between stepparents and children typically does not disturb the overall family functioning, or that there are compensations that offset the relatively weak dyadic ties between stepparents and children. However, again it must be noted that the sample screens out the stepfamilies that did not survive. These may include a disproportionate number of complex families which White and Booth (1985) describe as families at risk of disruption.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF REMARRIAGE FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

A critical question is how relations within stepfamilies affect the child's performance outside the family. In an ongoing analysis, the development of children in families of first marriages, single-parent households, and stepfamilies is being compared. Provisional results reveal that on a variety of outcomes including mental health, school achievement, social adjustment, and anti-social behavior, children are better off when they come from families of stably and happily married parents than when they do not. Children in stepfamilies perform about the same as children in single-parent households, when background differences are taken into account. Both are somewhat less well adjusted at home and in school than adolescents who are living with both biological parents (Furstenberg & Allison, 1985).

It is important to put the magnitude of the risk associated with family structural differences into perspective. The great majority of children in stepfamilies are not experiencing problems if we rely on reports of their parents, their own self-reports, or evaluations from their teachers. In other words, if we were trying to predict whether a child was prone to emotional or academic problems, it would help only a little to know the marital history of his or her parents. Clearly, however, marital disruption does impose some kind of developmental risk that is neither erased generally nor aggravated by remarriage.

If these preliminary findings hold up, these results will have important

practical implications for those who work with families. Most of all, they suggest that we should take great care not to stigmatize stepfamilies. As we have seen from the data presented, stepfamilies operate differently from nuclear families in certain respects, but these differences are not typically hazardous to children. In our zeal to prevent or ameliorate problems, we sometimes define dangers that do not exist. To paraphrase an old adage, let us not manufacture a solution to a problem that is worse than the problem itself.

Our challenge, then, is how to identify families truly in need of services. Researchers can help to make finer discriminations by identifying specific processes that lead to family malfunctioning or promote successful adaptation to stressful situations.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT TO THE CHILD IN A STEPFAMILY

One important determinant of the child's capacity to cope with family disruption is how parents manage the situation. Most existing research focuses on the period during the divorce itself. It seems highly plausible that the amount of conflict between the parents and the way that they separate has an effect on the child's subsequent adjustment, but the data from the NSC do not show that the divorce process itself has a long-term effect on the child's sense of well-being unless parents sustain a high level of conflict after the marriage dissolves.

The popular impression that many divorced couples are unable to disengage is not substantiated. Indeed, we found just the opposite to be true. The overwhelming majority completely severed their ties and in so doing abandoned the prospect of collaborative childcare. Fully half of the noncustodial parents in the NSC had not had any personal contact with their children in the previous year. Most of those who had seen their child at all did so only on an occasional basis. Noncustodial mothers had more interaction with their children than did fathers, but males comprised nearly 90% of the noncustodial parents. Only one in six managed to see their children as often as once a week on the average during the year preceding the survey (Furstenberg *et al.*, 1983).

Even if we confine our attention to the small minority of cases in which noncustodial parents maintain regular contact with their children, parents still operated without regard for one another. More than half of these coparenting couples said they "rarely" or "never" discussed matters about the childcare. Elsewhere we have described this postmarital arrangement as "parallel parenting," rather than coparenting, a term that seems to imply more sharing than customarily occurs.

While at first glance this pattern of parallel parenting might seem highly

undesirable, it has some beneficial consequences. The potential for conflict is reduced between the formerly married couples by segregating their activities. It probably also reduces strain between parents and stepparents by minimizing the capacity of each to observe the other. Relatively few parents report interference by their former spouse in their current marital relations or in their present spouse's relations with their children. While competition between parents and stepparents undoubtedly occurs, most couples manage to contain it by restricting contact except on ritual occasions. Naturally, we are all familiar with exceptions where former and current spouses and their respective children build close family ties, but this is rare according to the data from the NSC.

In coping with transitions, children are frequently sustained by relations outside the nuclear family. Grandparents, in particular, are often figures of stability. To observers of black family life, this finding is nothing new (Hill, 1977; Stack, 1974). Extended kin have a preeminent position in systems where conjugal ties are weak or insecure. Divorce strengthens the lineage ties of the custodial parent (usually on the mother's side) while the bonds to the noncustodial parent's family (usually on the father's side) are often attenuated (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986). This pattern is far from inevitable. When noncustodial parents remain involved as caretakers, associations between the child and extended kin remain strong. Typically this does not occur.

The contraction of the kinship network after divorce is usually temporary because of the acquisition of new relatives through remarriage. Remarried respondents in the NSC were asked if their parents had problems accepting their new grandchildren; four fifths reported no such difficulties. In the central Pennsylvania study, children were almost as likely to see their stepgrandparents as frequently as their biological grandparents, even though some remarriages had only recently occurred. Evidence from qualitative case studies reveals that grandparents often showered attention on their grandchildren acquired by marriage, partly as a means of strengthening their bonds to the middle generation (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984).

Divorce then may expand a child's kinship network if it is followed by remarriage. Little is known about how families manage the competing claims of various sets of grandparents, but in central Pennsylvania we learned that the more children see one side of the family, the more they are likely to see of the other sides. Thus, it appears that the kinship network is more like an accordion than a pie. The children we studied seemed to have little difficulty accepting the existence of five, six, or more sets of grandparents and what to the outside observer, appeared like a bewildering array of aunts, uncles, and cousins. The pattern of conjugal succession may have the consequence of enlarging the pool of kin available to children. How enduring these ties will be in later life is another issue that deserves future research. The recent survey of grandparents indicates that relations among stepgrandparents and their

stepgrandchildren are likely to be emotionally thin, unless they are established when the child is young and nurtured by frequent contact (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986).

CONCLUSION

It is tempting to try to attach a bottom line to the changes that have taken place in our family system. Most accounts reckon the costs of divorce and remarriage to families without mentioning some of the offsetting conditions. The objective of this chapter has been to assess some of the potential consequences of moving from a system of life-long monogamy to one in which marriage is treated as a conditional contract. I have mentioned how this transformation is changing conceptions of marriage, parenthood, and kinship. In the United States, we seem to be moving from a kinship system where family membership was an obligation, whether or not it offered much gratification, to one where the search for gratification has become paramount. The question that looms large is what this will mean for the viability of the family and its capacity to fulfill its principal mission, the nurturance and training of future generations. Most observers are at least troubled by the changes that have taken place, feeling that children's interests often come last.

The results presented here probably will not console those who believe that the pattern of conjugal succession is creating chaos and disintegration in what was otherwise a strong and effective family system. While such a view cannot be dismissed, much of the evidence reviewed here is not as alarming as some might fear. Family life has become less predictable and secure, but it has also become more flexible and, at least sometimes, more rewarding. Whether accommodation to the interests of adults means that the family is not serving the needs of the children remains to be confirmed. For now, it is in our interest to monitor closely the changes that are taking place and their potential effects on the next generation.

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