AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE STEPFAMILY

CHRISTINA HUGHES, B.A.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the stepfamily
that was conducted between May 1985 and July 1986.

The main methods of social investigation were
participant observation, unstructured interviews and
documentary evidence. The study examines the role of
myth and its importance in the stepfamily from the view
point of the stepparent. Special consideration has
been given to consider the gender implications of
stepparenthood and remarriage and the place of myth in
the structuring of gender and stepfamily experiences.
An opening chapter surveys the theoretical background
to the study.

Chapter Two introduces the families who took part in
the study and contextualises their concerns. There are
further chapters which examine the myth of the wicked
stepmother, the importance of reciprocity in
stepparent-stepchild relationships, the gender
experience of second marriage and myth construction in
the stepfamily. Chapter Seven serves as a summary and
concludes that myth has a dual function in stepfamily
life. Specifically, myths impose constraints on the
stepmother's freedom of action which is not evidenced
for stepfathers. Nevertheless, through the
construction of myths within the stepfamily, myths
serve a legitimating role for both stepparents which
form the basis of stepparental perception.

Appendices A and B are concerned with the research
process and, given the personal nature of the research
to the researcher, stand as an integral part of the
thesis. In Appendix A two issues are considered. The
importance of biography in the research process and the
methods employed. Appendix B sets out the aides memoires
used for unstructured interviews.

Finally, Appendix C contains stepfamily trees and
serves as a presentation device to indicate the various
stepfamily relationships.

Finally, any inadequacies in this thesis are my own and for which I take full responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

The image of the stepfamily in Britain is steeped in a
mythology which conveys the most negative of
impressions. We have all heard of the wicked
stepmother of our childhood fairy stories within which
this mythology is partly located. Yet, even the word
'step' has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon English word
'astepan' which means deprived or bereaved. Indeed,
until the widespread advent of divorce, the stepfamily
was usually created through bereavement. This is not,
however, the case in Britain in the 1980's.

Divorce statistics (Social Trends 17, 1987) indicate
that in 1985 there were 175 thousand decrees made
absolute. This represented an increase of 11% over
1984 and is more than double the number of divorces
made absolute in 1971 when the Divorce Reform Act 1969
came into force in England and Wales. Moreover, as the
number of marriages between bachelors and spinsters
declined in 1985, there was a rise in the rate of
remarriages. Between 1971 and 1976 there was a large
increase in the proportion of marriages where one or
both partners had been married before from 20% to 31%.
In 1985, remarriage represented 35% of all marriages

contracted.   Of these 32% were remarriages of the
previously divorced.

With the rising divorce rate, the number of children
affected by divorce has also increased. In 1985, there
were 156 thousand children under 16 directly affected
by divorcing couples. Although no statistics are kept
of the number of children living in stepfamilies, these
figures are indicative of the significant numbers who
are likely to experience life in a stepfamily.
Nevertheless, the number of remarriages which
eventually breakdown is significantly high and in 1985
represented 23% of all divorces.   For many children,
therefore, in common with their parents, family
breakdown is experienced more than once.

The large proportion of stepfamilies in Britain which
these figures indicate leads one to question why the
stepfamily has received so little attention in the
sociological literature. Perhaps sociologists' lives
have been largely untouched by this phenomena that it
has gone unnoticed. Nevertheless, this is not true of
my own life and this research arose directly from
biographical experience. I am a stepmother. The
phrase itself has the same connotation as "I am an
alcoholic". It speaks of a problem.

My desire to consider this problem of the negative
stereotype was a primary consideration when I began the
research.   My aim was to overcome this image by
focussing on the positive elements of stepfamily life.
Nevertheless, as many researchers would testify, the
outcome has not been that which I envisaged.   The
research is indeed centrally concerned with myth yet it
has led me to consider both positive and negative
aspects of the stepfamily.

In **Chapter One** I examine the literature on the
stepfamily and argue that we need to go beyond broad
categories in order to acquire a deeper understanding
of what it means to be a stepparent.   In so doing we
will see the effects of myth on stepfamily life in
terms of management, strategy, decision making and
gender.

Chapter Two is principally concerned to introduce the
stepparents who took part in the research. The life
histories which this chapter contains illustrate both
the individual and the general in sociological
analysis. The concerns which are raised in the life
histories are the major concerns of the following
chapters.

As I have stated the starting point of the research was
the myth of the wicked stepmother. Cinderella and Snow
White are the most common examples of just how wicked
stepmothers are supposed to be. The central question
of **Chapter Three** therefore is what implications this
myth has for the role of stepmotherhood.

I examine the myth of wickedness in terms of its
oppositional nature to the ideological requirements of
motherhood. Specifically, I argue that stepmothers
have to take account of the myth of wickedness in their
everyday actions and dealings with stepchildren,
family, friends and even those beyond the immediate
family circle. This myth, therefore, is an overarching
consideration in stepmothers' daily lives.

The concern with children's well being as society's
future resources leads to an emphasis on their needs
which far outweighs the consideration given to parents
and stepparents. **Chapter Four** considers the
relationship of stepparent and stepchild from the
viewpoint of the stepparent. I argue that reciprocity
is a key factor in engendering successful stepparent-
stepchild relationships. In so doing, I indicate how
myths about stepchildren become constructed.

Chapter Four is also concerned to consider specifically
the stepfather-stepchild relationship. Despite the
fact that 'wicked' stepfathers exist in both literature
and reality, it would appear that stepfathers are
largely unaffected by any mythology of this kind.
Whilst I can only indicate why such a mythology does
not exist, I do consider the forms of action which are
available to stepfathers but which are not without
penalty when exercised by stepmothers.

As the statistics above indicate stepfamilies are also
usually second marriages for at least one partner. In
the study, this was the case for both partners. In
statistical terms, in 1986 16.8% of all marriages were
comprised of both partners marrying for the second or
subsequent time. However, second wives face a further
negative mythology. They are defined as 'gold diggers'
or 'floozies' (Walker, 1984) and are certainly not
given the same status as first wives. **Chapter Five**
therefore considers the gender implications of second
marriage as a different experience for female and male.

Second marriage also gives individuals and couples the
opportunity to begin their lives afresh. The extent
that the couples in the study were able to do this is
also the subject of Chapter Five.

The role and construction of mythology within the
stepfamily is the major focus of **Chapter Six**.
Nevertheless, the myths which are the concern of this
chapter are not those of children's fairy stories, but
are constructed by stepparents about their stepchildren
and previous partners. The analysis in this chapter is
centrally concerned to discuss how myths are created
and sustained. How they influence perception and how
they guide action.

Chapter Seven concludes the analysis on the stepfamily.
I argue here that myth is a prominent feature of the
stepmother's experience of living in a stepfamily which
is not equalled by the stepfather's experience. This
means that the lived reality of stepmotherhood is
generally stressful and marked by low self-esteem.
Nevertheless, the analysis of myth cannot be divorced
from the implications of the various ideologies of
parenthood. Specifically, the ideology of motherhood
itself places far greater demands on women's physical
and emotional resources than that of fatherhood.

These features of the myth of wickedness lead to a
greater understanding of the importance and place of
myths which are constructed within the stepfamily.
Here, I wish to indicate that these myths principally
enable stepparents to cope with the various

disjunctions which they experience between the ideals
of family life and the reality of stepfamily life.
Nevertheless, I also indicate that a general case can
be made here which would extend the analysis beyond the
stepfamily.

Although the appendices stand apart from the main body
of analysis, they should be seen as an integral part of
the work as a whole. The research itself could not
have been undertaken without the body of methodological
wisdom which researchers over the years have
accumulated and imparted. This point is even more
pertinent in this study as the focus of the research
was as much of direct concern to my own life as it was
to the individuals who took part. **Appendix A** contains
an account of how biographical features in my life
influenced the research process. Appendix A is also
concerned with methodological technique and argues that
we can no longer consider that participant observation
is a method inappropriate to family analysis.

Appendix B contains the aides memoirs which were used
as the basis of the unstructured interviews which were
undertaken at the beginning of the fieldwork.
Appendix C illustrates the extent of stepfamilial
relationships in the form of stepfamily trees.

Finally, it remains for me to say that it is in the
spirit of enquiry that this thesis is presented.

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL CONCERNS

> No-one identifies with the stepparent.
> The relationship is so stereotyped
> that even stepparents themselves are
> unsure what their real feelings are.
> They fumble along with mixed emotions
> of guilt, irritation, duty, affection
> and sometimes love.
> (Maddox, 1975, p1)

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is concerned with the role of
stepparenthood. It essentially aims to go beyond the
stereotype; to consider and examine the reality of the
roles of stepmother and stepfather. There is in fact
very little work on the stepfamily which is concerned
to analyse particular features of stepfamily life. The
majority of work has been conducted in the United
States and there are only two British studies on the
stepfamily. These are Burgoyne and Clark (1984) who
conducted a study of 40 stepfamilies in Sheffield and
Ferri (1984) whose work arose from the National Child
Development Study cohort of children born in March
1958. A review of literature concerned more generally
with the 'family' is also noteworthy for the relative
absence of any sustained critique of the stepfamily.
Given the predominance of this variant form of the
family this is rather surprising.

In particular, the stepfamily is usually mentioned as
a final outcome in the literature on divorce (see for
example Smart, 1984(a), Parkinson, 1987(a)) and is
indicative of the image of 'normality' implicit in two-
parent families. In more general commentaries on the
family, Rapoport, Rapoport and Strelitz (1977) are

notable for their early reference to the stepfamily.
It is only recently that the stepfamily has received
more widespread attention although it should be noted
that the page or two devoted to the stepfamily in these
works can only been seen as a token gesture (see for
example Elliot, 1986, Goldthorpe, 1987).

In contrast to the dearth of critical analysis of the
stepfamily, there remains a body of work where the
primary aim is to give advice. The existence of this
growing arm of stepfamily literature is indicative of
the problems which stepparents commonly face.
Unfortunately, however, whilst the work of such
'experts' is replete with examples of stepparental
difficulties, the role of advice giver lends a
moralistic tone which through their dialogue implicitly
underwrite the stereotypes of stepparenthood.

The advice contained in these works is aimed at
stepparents rather than stepchildren and so places on
them the responsibility for any measure of 'success' or
'non-success'.   For example, Burns advises stepparents
whose teenage stepchild is resentful or uncommunicative
to 'Give them space and don't go around with your
feelings on your sleeve' (1985, p75).   Franks in a
discussion about the benefits of a 'good divorce'
comments 'Mutual forgiveness, followed by mutual

giving, are highly necessary in an imperfect world. One of the paradoxes of human experience is that when we act generously towards someone we have felt angered with, the anger loses its force and may disappear altogether if the other person receives the act of generosity gracefully' (1988, p133). The interactive nature of relationships is lost under the weight of homilies of maturity and giving.

When it comes to the role of myth in stepfamily life, 'experts' have certainly acknowledged its existence, but have been keen to dismiss its far reaching implications. In particular, emphasis has been given to the role of the myth of the wicked stepmother. Here experts counsel 'A sensible adult behaving acceptably is a far more effective counter to the myth of wickedness than a conspicuous demonstration of niceness' (Collins, 1988, p45). Even Collins' subtitle for his discussion here 'Myths and Superstitions have no Place in a Modern Step-family' signifies its assignment to the periphery of concerns.

Essentially, 'experts' give advice which neither challenges the ideological assumptions of family life nor considers interaction as more than an opportunity to spout moral platitudes. Indeed, their authoritative status serves to bolster many of the idealised

expectations of family and stepfamily life as Rapoport, Rapoport and Strelitz indicate is the role of 'experts' generally (1977).

Given that the largest proportion of literature on the stepfamily is of this type, my aim is to indicate that this uncritical approach leaves many important questions unanswered. These questions relate primarily to the differing experiences of gender and to the manifest forms in which myth appears as a central feature of stepfamily life. Further, the minutiae of daily concerns and the interactive nature of stepfamily life are subsumed under broad categories which in themselves are treated unproblematically. If we are to reach an understanding of the stepfamily which goes beyond stereotypification, assumption and broad categorisation it essential that we adopt a critical approach to theorising.

I wish therefore to conduct a critique of the major arguments and theories of stepfamily life in the following way. I will firstly consider those arguments which relate to the effect on stepfamily life arising from the cause of remarriage. Secondly, I will consider the major theories which concern stepparent and stepchild relationships. Thirdly, I will discuss

the literature which relates specifically to the roles
of stepmother and stepfather.

It is within this latter category that literature on
the stepfamily is concerned with the effect of myth.
The role of myth has far reaching implications in this
thesis and whilst I will examine this at appropriate
points throughout the discussion, I wish also to
consider the literature on myth separately at this
point.

ANTECEDENTS: DIVORCE, DEATH AND REMARRIAGE

One of the particular features of analysis of
stepfamily life has been to distinguish between divorce
and death as antecedents to remarriage. The central
feature of the debate has been to distinguish between
the idealised image of a deceased partner and the more
physical intrusion of a divorced partner.
Nevertheless, the debate is contradictory and its
conflicting nature can in part be related to whether
the focus of the study is the effect of these
antecedents on the stepparent or their effect on the
stepchild.

Ferri's work, which concentrates on the experiences of stepchildren, argues that there is a clear trend for relationships between stepchildren and stepparents to be more positive when the remarriage had followed bereavement rather than divorce (1984, p49). Her findings can be contrasted to those of Bernard who, similarly concerned with the stepchild-stepparent relationship, argued that a stepparent who replaced a deceased parent was more likely to be resented than a stepparent who replaced a divorced parent (1956, pp 318ff).

Burgoyne and Clark (1982) whose work concentrated on the experiences of stepparents argued that a divorced partner will be a more intrusive presence in a second marriage than the 'ghost' of a deceased partner. In particular, Burgoyne and Clark argue that the influence which a deceased partner can exercise will gradually diminish over time whereas the divorced partner will always remain a prominent figure in the life of a second marriage (1982, p137). However, Maddox, also concerned with the experiences of stepparenthood, comments 'Death makes stepparenthood harder' (1975, p73).

Maddox' comment should be considered in the light of her own biography and indicates one of the problems of

comparative analysis. Maddox was a stepmother by marriage to a widower. Her comment highlights the importance of giving precedence to the individual's own view. As Maddox further states 'There is, I can report, one group of people convinced that stepparenthood through death is easier. They are the stepparents by divorce' (1975, p74).

In addition to giving primacy to the actor's view, it is rather misleading to dichotomise death and divorce in this way. Rather, we need to consider both the distinctive and the similar structural and emotional consequences of divorce and mortality. It is only in this way that we can go beyond broad comparative categorisation as I wish to illustrate.

Access and maintenance arrangements are considered to be a distinctive feature of divorce generated stepfamilies. These features give rise to special problems which are not experienced by stepfamilies which are generated by bereavement. Whilst this fact cannot be disputed, this is not to say that access and maintenance are either permanent features of divorce generated stepfamilies, or even universally experienced by them. In particular, evidence suggests the less than permanent nature of such arrangements.

Masson, Norbury and Chatterton's study of stepparent
adoption notes that only 14% of natural parents post-
divorce had continuing contact with their children and
in terms of maintenance arrangements, 30% of fathers
did not make any payments (1983, p9; see also Eekelaar
and Clive, 1977; Schlesinger, 1972). It is clear
therefore that access and maintenance do not always go
hand in hand with divorce. Moreover, access and
maintenance may be the subject of close regulation
through legal jurisdiction or it may be settled in a
less formal way between parents. The resultant effect
in terms of frequency, spontaneity and negotiation may
have significant consequences for stepfamily life.

We cannot therefore assume that access and maintenance
are features of every divorce generated stepfamily.
Nevertheless, this is not to signify that they are not
important. The literature here, as I have indicated,
has been concerned with the 'intrusive presence' which
these features gives rise to in the stepfamily in terms
of the stepfamily being able to operate as a 'normal'
family and to the financial consequences of maintenance
(Burgoyne and Clark, 1984). Nevertheless, the form in
which continuing contact with a previous partner is
maintained is crucial to the construction of
mythologies about that partner. This feature of access
and maintenance has not been the focus of attention in

the literature on the stepfamily and is a major area
which this thesis hopes to contribute to.

In addition to legal and informal post-divorce
arrangements, the decision to end a marriage is not
necessarily made with agreement. Specifically, one
partner will wish to end a marriage whilst the other
partner may be less willing and even antagonistic to
the idea. Hart (1976) has noted the importance of
these differing experiences of the divorce process.
Hart distinguished between these responses to marriage
break-up by defining her respondents as either 'total
active', 'total passive' or 'total intermediate' (1976,
p112). Whilst Hart noted the problems of respondents'
changing perceptions of their role in this respect, she
argued that those who initiate the break-up of their
marriage are far more equipped than those who were
defined as 'passive' to cope with the rsultant problems
of transition from the status of married to the status
of divorced (1976, pp115-118).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) also considered the
respective roles of marriage partners towards the
initiation or otherwise of divorce. They argued that
'the differences between husband and wife over the
decision to divorce set the tone for the interactions
of the separation period' (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980,

p17). Thus, a parent who opted for divorce viewed
their children as relatively well adjusted to the
situation whereas a parent who disapproved of the
divorce viewed their children as suffering from the
divorce process (ibid).

These factors have also been used in connection with
their effect in remarriage. By using definitions of
'initiator' and 'recipient' Burgoyne and Clark (1984)
considered the factors which led the divorced and
separated into new relationships, including remarriage.
Burgoyne and Clark found that the 'initiators' were
more prepared for the state of demarriage than the
'recipients' and that they quickly moved into new
relationships and marriages (1984, pp 5ff). The
'recipients' however were more circumspect and cautious
about decisions of this nature and experienced greater
loneliness and isolation. Their expectations of second
marriage placed greater emphasis on finding the 'right'
person (1984, pp 65ff).

The distinction between 'active'/'passive' or
'initiator'/'recipient' carries implicit understandings
of an individual's satisfaction with a marriage. The
'active' or 'initiator' will be deemed to have been
unsatisfied with the marriage. The 'passive'/
'recipient' will be considered to have been content.

These terms also find their parallels in commonsense
views of the divorce process where, despite the changes
brought by the 1969 Divorce Reform Act which came into
force in 1971, one party is defined as 'guilty' and one
party is defined as 'innocent'.

Whilst it appears important to consider the
significance of these factors in terms of the
preparedness and expectations of demarriage and
remarriage nevertheless these questions do not arise in
the case of widowhood. Upheld by social etiquette and
moral stricture, the assumption here is that the
marriage was a happy one and neither party wished it to
end. However, this may not necessarily be the case.
The degree of satisfaction or non-satisfaction which
the widowed experienced within marriage may well match
that of the divorced. Indeed, Marsden notes in his
study of single mothers 'Nor were all the widows grief
stricken, for something like half, the death had not
been a major upheaval and several even found it a
release (1969, p118).

In addition, the death of a spouse can be sudden or the
result of a long term illness. Problems of adjustment
in these terms may also find parallels to those of the
divorced. Again, in this connection Marsden found
'there was a striking similarity shown in the attitudes

to death by some widows whose husband's had died
suddenly or after long spells away in hospital. And
where the children's father suddenly disappeared or
departed, his spiritual 'death' for the wife left an
aftermath strikingly like bereavement (1969, p117).

In the light of these factors, I would argue that the
notions of divorce and death cannot be treated
unproblematicaly or separately if we wish to consider
their role in the stepfamily. These factors become
even more important when one considers the experience
of divorce and bereavement in terms of gender. On
divorce, although there is evidence that the number of
fathers gaining custody is increasing, it is still more
usual for mothers to have custody of children
(Maidment, 1984, p164). Mothers, post-divorce, are
therefore more likely to experience the status of being
a single parent. Fathers, on the other hand, are more
prominent among non-custodial parents with the special
problems this can bring in terms of access, housing and
finance (see Rowlands, 1980, Lund, 1987). When these
roles are reversed the importance of gender becomes
clear. Thus, fathers who have custody of children are
treated with more sympathy and given more help than
mothers where the situation is seen as an extension to
their 'natural' role. In contrast, mothers who elect

not to be the custodians of their children face a
stigma which is not experienced by fathers.

In the event of death, either mother or father will be
a single parent prior to remarriage. Nevertheless,
their experience of single parenthood may well match
that of the divorced. These factors highlight the need
to give prominence to gender in an analysis of the
stepfamily if we are to reach a deeper understanding of
the significance of marriage to a divorced or widowed
partner in gender specific terms.

Finally, the distinction between divorce and mortality
generated stepfamilies overlays those circumstances
where remarriage is a result of a combination of these
factors. In these cases, one partner will experience
the physical presence of the non-custodial parent
whilst the other partner will experience the 'ghost' of
the deceased spouse. These differing experiences
further suggest that divorce and death, whilst useful
shorthand terms, are too crude to be useful for close
analysis. In particular, I feel there are too many
anomalies to treat these terms unproblematicaly. For
these reasons, I felt it important to overcome the
dichotomisation of divorce and death and to consider
the stepfamily as a particular gendered experience.

In so doing, the importance of ideology and myth in the construction of experience can be examined.

In addition to the contradiction and confusion in the literature on the stepfamily with regard to the effect of divorce and death on remarriage, the literature is equally confusing in its discussion of stepparent and stepchild relationships. I would now like to consider this area in more detail.

STEPPARENT AND STEPCHILD RELATIONSHIPS

There are two factors which repeatedly arise in discussions about stepparent and stepchild relationships. These are the importance of the age of the child and the importance of the child's and stepparent's biological sex. However, as will be clear from the discussion, these categories are not defined in mutually exclusive terms but use the biological sex of the stepparent as a factor in both areas. However, for the purposes of drawing out the problems of the categories of age and sex I will consider each of these categories separately.

Age and stepparent-stepchild relationships

Researchers of the stepfamily emphasise the age of the
stepchild as an important factor in the likely success
of the stepparent-stepchild relationship. Without
rigour or precision it has been argued that the younger
the child on family reconstitution the more likely
developing relationships will be successful. Thus,
Franks argues in rather oblique terms that 'Stepmothers
relate best to young children (1988, p66). Wallerstein
and Kelly note with regard to stepfather-stepchild
relationships that 'The relationships with the younger
children, mostly those below the age of eight, took
root fairly quickly, and were happy and gratifying to
both child and adult' (1980, p288/9). Less precise,
however, was their categorisation of stepmother-
stepchild relationships. Thus 'Older girls were more
likely than younger children to resent the stepmother
and to elect not to develop a friendship with her'
(1980, p299).

Notwithstanding these views, Ferri's analysis (1984)
gives a contradictory view to the thesis that the
younger the child the more easily that child adapts to
stepfamily life. In particular Ferri could find 'no
evidence to support the claims that younger children
are most likely to develop positive relationships with

stepmothers and adolescents most likely to experience
difficulties in this respect' (1984, p49).

In contrast to researchers' and commentators' views of
successful and non-successful stepparent-stepchild
relations as experienced by stepchildren, Maddox (1975)
gives prominence to the stepparental view. Her comments
also bear testimony to the degree of difficulty which
stepparents face when living with stepchildren. Thus,
Maddox notes 'Many stepparents, if given the choice of
age of a stepchild, would argue that the older the
better, for the older the child, the sooner out of the
house' (1975, p68).

The ambiguous and contradictory nature of these
research findings lends confusion to any assessment of
the value of age as an important factor in stepparent-
stepchild relationships. In this respect, Finch's
comment is central when she remarks 'Put at its
simplest, the problem about age as an explanatory
variable is this: can age ever be said to explain
social actions? (1986, p19, emphasis in text).

Finch argues that despite its apparent independence and
factual basis, age cannot be treated as unproblematic.
One indication of the problematic nature of age can
arise when one considers whether there is a direct

relationship of a causal nature between the age of a
stepchild and the success or non-success of the
stepparent-stepchild relationship. Other
considerations may need to be taken into account.
Young children may be more adaptable, affectionate and
responsive than older children. Young children have
restricted powers to act on their own accord when
compared to adolescents. Adolescents can elect to
maintain relationships with non-custodial parents
without the custodial or stepparents knowledge. Young
children are more likely to be subject to arrangements
made for them. It may be these factors which may be
associated with age but are not caused by age in its
own right, which are important.

Other considerations also become important which may
link age to other aspects of biography. In this way,
we may need also to consider the sex of the child and
the sex of the stepparent, social class, race, and
reasons for family reconstitution. As Finch argues 'Age
should be seen as one important social division in a
complex pattern of social divisions which intersect
with each other' (1986, p25). To put it bluntly. Age
is too crude a category to be used alone.

In addition to age, the question of biological sex has
also been considered a key factor in the likely success

or otherwise of stepparent-stepchild relationships. As
I will illustrate, ambiguity is still a major problem.

Biological sex, gender and stepparent-stepchild
relationships

The sex of the stepchild and stepparent is considered
to be an equally important factor to that of age in the
likely outcome of relationships between stepparent and
child. Thus, in addition to age, Wallerstein and Kelly
(1980) distinguish between male and female child and
male and female stepparent. Similarly, Ferri (1984)
assigns the same importance to distinguishing between
these categories.

The findings in this area are no less clear than those
relating to age. Franks' view that 'stepmother-
stepdaughter relationships are the most problematic'
(1988. p66) is supported by Ferri (1984). However,
Ferri also argues that 'Boys, too, are less likely to
get on well with stepmothers than natural mothers'
(1984, p48). Wallerstein and Kelly note that 'Little
girls were especially responsive to the affections and
admiration of the new stepfather (1980, p289).
Nevertheless, in terms of the physical and educational
development of children Ferri argues that children with

stepfathers fared less well than children with
stepmothers (1984, p115).

The problems in this area relate in part to differing
foci with regard to what is being measured. The
discussion here therefore has a similarity to that
above regarding the effect of divorce and death on
remarriage. Thus, Ferri's analysis is concerned to
compare the steprelationship with that of the natural
parent and to compare outcomes of stepchild development
with those of children living with both natural parents
and with lone parents. Wallerstein and Kelly, however,
are more concerned with personal relationships within
the stepfamily when they suggest that the 'little girl-
stepfather' relationship was particularly harmonious
(1980, p289).

The problems also relate to assumptions which are made
with regard to biological sex and gender. These tend
to be used in a co-terminus way making little
distinction between the biological state of male and
female, child and adult and the gender implications of
particular roles of stepdaughter, stepson, stepfather
and stepmother. The quotations above from both Ferri
(1984) and Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) are indicative
of this where the use of terms such as 'boys'
'stepmothers' and 'girls' 'stepfathers' do not take

account of the gender role of stepson and stepdaughter
or the biological sex of woman and man.

In order to attempt to overcome some of these problems
the discussion throughout this thesis will use the
distinction of biological sex and gender stated by
Oakley (1981(a)). Thus:

> 'Sex' refers to the biological division
> into female and male; 'gender' to the
> parallel and socially unequal division
> into femininity and masculinity' (Oakley,
> 1981, p41).

The decision to do so is pragmatic. Oakley's
definition offers a simple understanding of the
division between sex and gender. Nevertheless, whilst I
do not wish to enter a discussion with regard to the
social construction of biological fact, it should be
stated that simplicity is taken at the cost of
precision. In particular, one needs to be aware that
'Whatever distinctions are made between the biological
and cultural it would seem to be important to recognise
that there is a constant interaction between them'
(Morgan, 1986, p35).

The problems which I have discussed here indicate that whilst the stepparent-stepchild relationship has indeed been the focus of much debate, overall there remain many problems of analysis and definition. I would argue that these problems arise in part because of the primary concern to consider outcomes in terms of the stepchild's emotional, physical and educational well being. The role of 'experts' as I have previously outlined play a prominent role here. The emphasis which they give to the child's interests through a support for the idealised structures of family life, leaves little room to consider the more problematic aspects of gender and age. In particular, the age and sex of the child appear to be treated in isolation. In this way, the interactive nature of the stepparent-stepchild relationship as a two-way process is overlooked.

These concerns led me to consider that age, sex and gender should not be treated separately but their interrelationship should be examined in terms of the interaction between stepparent and stepchild. As I am concerned in this thesis with the experience of stepparenthood, it is this feature which is the focus of attention here.

A further problem associated with the use of the gender terms masculine and feminine is that they tend to lead to essentialism and whilst it is important to retain gender as a key variable the problems of reification and taken-for-granted stereotypes remain (Morgan, 1986, p37 ff). Thus, Morgan argues that we need to deconstruct gender in order to maintain a conscious awareness of its complex and composite nature (1986, p44).

I now wish to take up this issue in connection with a discussion about the roles of stepmother and stepfather.

STEPMOTHERHOOD AND STEPFATHERHOOD

Discussion with regard to stepmotherhood and stepfatherhood locate these statuses within the spheres of our understanding of mother and father roles generally. Indeed, gender roles form a crucial explanatory theme in commentaries on stepmotherhood and stepfatherhood and this stands in contrast to the comments I have made above.

Specifically, the roles of stepmother and stepfather
are seen to have parallels to the roles of mother and
father in first marriages. Burgoyne and Clark (1982)
for example argue that stepfathers undertake a role
more in keeping with expectations of fathers generally.
That is one of material and emotional support. The
stepmother role in turn emphasises the day to day care
and responsibility for stepchildren which is also in
keeping with expectations of the mother role (Burgoyne
and Clark, 1984). Thus, stepmothers are placed
centrally within the stepfamily whilst stepfathers
become almost peripheral.

I would like to take up these issues a little more
fully by considering the roles of stepfatherhood and
stepmotherhood.

Stepfatherhood

Burgoyne and Clark argue that 'as long as we continue
to lack a full and adequate understanding of the
constituent elements, practices and meanings relating
to 'normal' family life' our understandings of
stepfatherhood as a different activity to fatherhood
cannot be fully explored (1982, pp197/8). In
particular, the notion that as fathers, and

stepfathers, live on the outskirts of family life,
their role is less problematic is open to question.

Research into fatherhood suggests that fathers face
unique problems. Thus, Backett (1982) states that
whilst mothers may experience dissatisfaction, they had
nevertheless achieved a satisfactory subjective base
for their role as mothers. However, mothers'
expectations of fathers included that they should have
direct involvement with their children. 'Therefore,
the problematical nature of being a father lay in
negotiating with the mother a mutually satisfactory
degree of _direct_ involvement in home and family life,
during the non-job time perceived as available'
(Backett, 1982, p195, emphasis in text). Being a
father therefore raises special difficulties which are
not experienced by mothers.

Studies of the father role in role-reversed families
indicate the similarities which fathers experience when
they take on a role which emphasises domestic concerns.
In particular, fathers experience the same sense of
isolation and depression as mothers (Lamb, Pleck,
Levine, 1987; Russell, 1987). Nevertheless, the
meaning of fatherhood cannot be divorced from more
economic concerns which support the ideological role of
breadwinner. Men's earnings are generally higher than

women's and decisions to reverse roles are usually only
made in times of unemployment or where wives are in
professional forms of employment (Russell, 1987).

The world of work therefore impinges heavily on the
father role, limiting the amount of time he can spend
in the home. Moreover, as Leonard (1984)
illustrates men's career prospects are usually pursued
at the same time as the onset of children, meaning that
fathers are even less available than previously.

These insights into the role of fatherhood lead us to
the position where we can no longer discount the
distinctive nature of fatherhood and stepfatherhood.
Burgoyne and Clark's (1982) findings in this area note
that there were clear differences between the father
and stepfather role in that stepfathers took a more
conscious role in parenting of children and had to face
at the very minimum a symbolic presence of the non-
custodial father.   Nevertheless, stepfathers remained
the authoritative figure in the stepfamily and largely
saw their role as supportive, emotionally and
economically. In these terms, as Burgoyne and Clark
argue 'in the absence of any broadly based set of
assumptions about what constitutes a 'good' stepfather
it is apparent that more normalized, though equally
diffuse, images of the good father will serve as a

model for action and belief (1982, p207, emphasis in text).

These comments stress the importance of further work on the role of stepfather in order that it can be more fully understood and developed. In particular, the stress on the instrumentality of stepfatherhood needs to be examined. Nevertheless, this thesis is not only concerned with the way in which the ideological requirements of the father role are transposed into that of stepfather, but I also wish to consider the experience of stepfatherhood as both a similar and a different experience to that of stepmotherhood.

In this connection it has been noted in the Introduction that despite the existence of the wicked stepfather in literature and in reality, the role of stepfatherhood appears to be relatively untainted by any mythology of wickedness. Whilst Burgoyne and Clark note that 'Such negative stereotypes and feelings can have a powerful effect' (1982, p207) this thesis is concerned to discover the extent to which this is true for stepfathers (1982, p207).

The role of stepfather as a relatively neglected and largely unproblematic area in stepfamily literature is not matched by the issues which are raised with regard

to stepmotherhood. Indeed, as with commentaries about
the role of motherhood, the stepmother has received
significant attention and I would now like to consider
this more fully.

Stepmotherhood

I have indicated above that direct links have been made
between the ideological requirements of motherhood and
those of stepmotherhood. Such an ideology speaks of
caring, giving and devoting oneself to a child. But
not to the exclusion of caring, giving and devoting
oneself to a husband. As Rich indicates 'The welfare
of men and children was the true mission of women'
(1977, p49). This ideology of dualistic, yet
competing, care is encompassed within the stepmother
role in a variety of ways. As Burgoyne and Clark
indicate stepmothers not only take on the day to day
care of stepchildren but are seen to take
responsibility for the way in which stepchildren 'turn
out' (1984, p146). In terms of the division of labour
in the family this too would also appear to be
reflective of more prevalent forms as 'there was no
general pattern of movement towards second marriages in
which heavy emphasis was placed upon sharing of
household tasks and duties' (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984,
p95, emphasis in text).

The ideological requirements of motherhood and wifehood cannot be seen to be distinct from that of housewife. Moreover, 'women's expected role in society is to strive after perfection in all three' (Oakley, 1974, p9). Nevertheless, the need for perfection stands in opposition to a mythology which speaks of wickedness and cruelty. In this way, the myth of the wicked stepmother cannot be discounted despite attempts to do so.

Ferri comments 'The literature on stepfamilies is packed with extensive accounts of the almost universal 'wicked stepmother' mythology, and with interpretations of classic tales such as Cinderella and Snow White, which draw heavily on psycho-analytic theory..... Although we can treat the folklore image of stepparents with reservation, if not scepticism, the picture presented by more empirical investigations of stepfamilies is hardly more reassuring' (1984, p1). This dismissal of the importance of the myth itself is reflected in Burgoyne and Clark's work (1984) where mythology is not linked at all to any analysis of the stepmother role.

The 'extensive accounts' to which Ferri refers are to be found particularly in American literature on the stepfamily which do indeed relate mythology to

psychoanalytic theory. Examples of this can be found
in the work of Deutsch (1945) and Pfleger (1947).
Brown sums up the psycho-analytic framework in terms
that 'The psychoanalytic interpretations of the myths
as an explanation of child development fit in with the
psychoanalytic model of social work which was
predominant for a considerable time and is today still
influential. The persistence of the myths through
generations gives substance to the child's
psychological need to split the real parents into an
angel and a witch and it can be seen how, in
stepfamilies, the splitting can become over-emphasized
and damaging to the relationships' (Brown, 1982, p10) .

It is not the remit of this thesis to consider the
merits or demerits of psychoanalytic theories of the
stepfamily. Nevertheless, the mythology of the wicked
stepmother also receives extensive reviews in work
which is primarily aimed to give advice to stepmothers,
and importantly, is usually written by women who are
stepmothers. These works universally refer to the
historical background to such tales as well as to
noting their importance in stepmothers' conceptions of
their role. I think here this is a clear case of
'insider' knowledge to which Ferri and Burgoyne and
Clark did not have access and which indicates how
important ethnographic work is.

The omission of a consideration of the role of the
wicked stepmother myth in British research work is a
major area of neglect. Moreover, the commentaries in
'advice' books fail to make a systematic analysis of
the role of myth and its relationship to ideology.
They are in fact more likely to accept the
psychoanalytic theory outlined above. Nevertheless, I
would argue that one of the most important factors in
understanding the role of the wicked stepmother myth is
in terms of its relation to the ideology of motherhood
and its consequent effect of reality. This position
becomes more clear when we examine more general work on
myth and its relationship to ideology and reality. It
is this theme which I now wish to consider.

MYTH: ITS PLACE IN THE STEPFAMILY

It is easy to discount the stories of Cinderella and
Snow White as mere fairy tales. They form part of our
childhood which outwardly would not appear to have any
relevance to more adult concerns. Indeed, the more
usual meanings of myth suggest an element of untruth.
Oakley (1974) uses the term myth specifically to
indicate lack of truth in her discussion of woman's
place in society. Oakley states 'In the ideology of

woman's place, two statements popularly believed to be
true, but actually untrue, are these: 'Only women are,
ever have been, or can be housewives,' and 'Only women
as mothers are, ever have been, or can be the proper
people to rear children.' The former can be called the
'myth of the division of labour by sex' and the latter
the 'myth of motherhood'' (1974, p156).   Mount (1982)
similarly uses the meaning of myth to specifically
argue that many theories of the family are not based on
fact and are therefore not truthful.

Whilst this thesis takes the position outlined by Sykes
(1965) that notions of truth or untruth are largely
irrelevant to an analysis of the role of myth, the
relationship of myth to reality extends this discussion
a little further.   In particular, we cannot argue that
myth is a direct representation of empirical reality.
The reality of myth is to be found it the way that myth
helps society define situations which lie outside its
normative framework.   Moreover, they do so in a way
which justifies the message of the myth.   As Levi-
Strauss comments 'mythical speculation ... in the last
analysis do not seek to depict what is real, but to
justify the shortcomings of reality since the extreme
positions are only _imagined_ in order to show that they
are _untenable_. This step which is fitting for mythical
thought implies an admission (but in the veiled

language of the myth) that the social facts when thus
examined are marred by an insurmountable contradiction.
A contradiction which ... society cannot understand and
prefers to forget' (1967, p29).

In an examination of the wicked stepmother myth we can
see how Levi-Strauss' comments have a direct relevance.
In particular, the ideological message of the myth
suggests that to act in ways which are contrary to the
requirements of motherhood is untenable. This is why
our sympathies lie with Cinderella and Snow White and
never with the stepmother.

However, the contradictions implicit in the mother role
need also to be examined. Whilst the contradictory
nature of myths about woman are highlighted in the
opposing images of the Virgin Mary as the perfect
mother and Eve, the evil temptress responsible for
Man's fall from grace, de Beauvoir (1972) indicates
that the myths of motherhood are in themselves
counterposing. Thus, although it is through the
deification of the Virgin Mary that woman as mother
becomes 'the most highly perfected image of woman
propitious to man' it was also 'as mother that woman
was most fearsome' (de Beauvoir, 1972, p203). These
two countervailing themes of perfection and fear exist
side by side but are not allowed to be directly

confronted. However, the myth of perfection is
predominant and therefore inhibits any opposing image
which may threaten it.

Reminiscent of the psychoanalytic theory outlined
above, although located in an existentialist framework,
de Beauvoir argues that the tales of wicked stepmothers
allow the expression of a 'masked horror of maternity'
(1972, p206). Thus, man can encompass his negative
feelings about motherhood within the mythology of
stepmothers without damaging the purity of the concept
of mother. As de Beauvoir states 'The saintly mother
has for correlative the cruel stepmother' (1972, p284).

Whilst women and mothers face opposing images of good
and evil, there are further contradictions in the
mother role. In particular, the ideology of parental
love can be contrasted to the emotional and physical
demands of motherhood. How the stepmother, as social
parent, deals with these contradictions needs therefore
to be examined. In particular one may suggest that it
is more difficult for the stepmother to ignore the
contradictions of the ideology of motherhood in a way
which natural mothers may. Specifically, the
particular physical and emotional demands of
'mothering' may not be compensated by the more

subjective and taken-for-granted rewards of parental
love.

In these ways, we cannot assume that the ideologies of
motherhood, or even fatherhood, will have the same
meaning for a stepmother or stepfather, as it may for
natural parents. In particular, the 'step' role is
marked by ambiguity with regard to both rights and
expectations. This is clearly shown in the position of
the stepparent with regard to the law. For example,
the stepparent has no legal rights or duties in
relation to his or her stepchildren, nevertheless the
stepparent may be required to maintain them and may
also obtain custody or access rights in the event of
marriage breakdown (Masson, 1984). It is this
ambiguity which makes the myth so powerful and the
ideological influence so important to examine.

In addition to lack of truth, myths are also more
commonly associated with exotic stories from primitive
cultures or legends of Greek heroes and therefore may
not be thought to be relevant to an examination of the
stepfamily in the capitilistic economies of the west.
Consequently it is easy to see that a systematic review
of the relevance of myth to modern society can easily
be overlooked. More especially, perhaps, when

children's fairy tales form the starting point for a
discussion of mythology.

Notwithstanding these comments, in a discussion of the
meaning of myth in British society, Tillyard comments
that myth is 'the universal instinct of any human
group, large or small, to invest, almost always
unconsciously, certain stories or events or place or
persons, real or fictional, with an uncommon
significance, to turn them into instinctive centres of
reference ... Made thus typical, the stories become a
communal possession, the agreed and classic embodiment
of some way of thinking or feeling' (1962, p11,
emphasis in text). The degree of importance to which
Tillyard assigns to myth cannot be underestimated. As
Tillyard further comments 'Once a way of feeling or a
mode of action has been embodied in the mythology of a
large group of people it acquires an incalculable
power' (1962, p27).

The power to which Tillyard (op cit) refers cannot be
divorced from the ideological message of the myth.
This is brought out forcefully by Sorel (1968) who
discusses the effect of the myths embodied in the
notion of the general strike. Sorel comments '...we
know that the general strike is indeed what I have
said: the myth in which Socialism is wholly comprised,

ie a body of images capable of evoking instinctively
all the sentiments which correspond to the different
manifestations of the war undertaken by Socialism
against modern society. Strikes have engendered in the
proletariat the noblest, deepest and most moving
sentiments that they possess; the general strike groups
them all in a co-ordinated picture, and, by bringing
them together, gives to each of them its maximum
intensity" (1968, pp127, emphasis in text). If, as
Tillyard comments 'A healthy mythology is a nation's
most precious possession' (1962, p28) it takes little
imagination to understand its effect on individual
perception and in consequence on reality.

In addition to the relevance of the myth of the wicked
stepmother in stepfamily life, this thesis is also
concerned with the construction of myths about
stepchildren and non-custodial parents. These issues
arose during the fieldwork period when I became
concerned to understand the way in which images were
shaped from interaction of the most nebulous kind. The
work of Sykes (1965) became particularly important to
understanding the importance of these images in terms
of myth. Whilst Sykes' (1965) work is concerned with
the workplace, his analysis of the role of myth has a
far wider application as this thesis will stand
testimony. Sykes is specifically concerned with the

role of myth in the maintenance and transmission of
attitudes.   The attitudes which were encompassed in
the images presented to me by stepparents of their
stepchildren and the non-custodial parent were part and
parcel of the everyday life of the stepfamily.   Sykes'
work gave me valuable insights into understanding the
process of their construction and maintenance.

CONCLUSION

I have been concerned in this chapter to review the
literature on the stepfamily and to outline the
shortcomings and omissions therein.

I have argued that the literature is both confusing and
ambiguous. Specifically, I have argued that the
emphasis placed on divorce and bereavement as opposing
forms of stepfamily generation overlooks the
similarities of gender experience which are encompassed
within family reconstitution. Further, I have noted
that the categories of age and sex are used crudely and
without reference to the interactive nature of
stepfamily relationships.

In addition, I have noted the importance of considering the stepfather role with special reference to its distinctiveness and similarity to that of the stepmother.

I have also noted the absence of an analysis of the role of myth in the stepfamily. I have indicated that this is central to understanding stepmothers' concerns. Moreover, the form in which myth is constructed within the stepfamily gives valuable insights into the maintenance of attitudes towards stepchildren and non-custodial parents and their effect on relationships.

It is with these concerns in mind that this thesis is presented.

CHAPTER TWO

BECOMING A STEPPARENT: LIFE HISTORIES

> This rejection of the human subject
> highlights one of sociology's core
> contradictions: an interminable
> tension between the subjectively
> creative individual human being
> acting upon the world and the
> objectively given social structure
> constraining him or her.
> (Plummer, 1983, p3)

INTRODUCTION

With this sense of counter position, Plumber (op cit)
focusses upon the trend of positivism in the social
sciences and the consequent dismissal of the more
personal. In particular, Plummer refers to a general
lack of recognition given in theoretical construction
to personal documents and the collection of life
histories. The importance of the group rather than the
individual is the pivot of sociological analysis and
can lead to a position where 'some recent 'sociologies'
have gone so far as to eliminate 'the subject'
altogether; the human being becomes an epistemological
disaster' (Plummer, 1983, p3).

This is a far cry from the claims made by Thomas and
Znaniecki who stated that 'We are safe in saying that
personal life records, as complete as possible,
constitute the _perfect_ type of sociological material'
(1958, p1832). Nevertheless, the analysis of life
histories has been subjected to criticisms which have
been particularly concerned with validity and
interpretation.

The question of validity primarily centres around
notions of truth and the problem of retrospective

accounts. Put quite simply, one's memory and
interpretation of an event may be quite different to
that which actually happened or to attitudes at the
time. Nostalgia and the protection of self-esteem
certainly play their part in the telling of one's past
history yet without getting into the thorny debate
regarding what is 'truth', there are many ways in which
accounts can be verified for their more objective
truths (see Shaw, 1930, Bogdan, 1974).

The issue of interpretation mainly focusses on the
ability of individual accounts to generate general
concepts of social organisation and structure. In
part, the problem can be seen in terms of the greater
status which more positivist methods carry as Plummer
(op cit) indicates. It is also argued that the fault
lies with the pioneers of this method whose work was
more descriptive than analytic and where principles for
selection of data to be included in the life history
were unstated or varied. As Mandelbaum notes 'Most
social scientists who have pointed out the great
potential of the life history approach for their
respective disciplines have seen its chief difficulty
the lack of accepted principles of selection, of
suitable analytic concepts to make up a coherent frame
of reference' (1982, p146).

Plummer's work (1983) adequately sets the record
straight with regard to both the past performance of
life history records and to their future potential in
the role of theory generation. There can be no doubt
that Plummer is right when he argues that 'no longer
should we plead theoretical ignorance' in using
personal documents (1983, p133).With these points in
mind, I feel it appropriate that the purpose of the
life histories presented here should be clearly stated.

LIFE HISTORIES: A PROCESS OF SELECTION

In order to take up some of the issues raised in the
discussion above I wish to first of all note that there
is another facet to life histories which cannot be
ignored. They give 'flesh and blood' to sociological
analysis. They remind the reader that we are talking
about, and analysing, real people and real lives. It
is partly to give precedence to the individual that is
the concern of this chapter. In the accounts which
follow we will clearly see 'public' issues: marriage,
separation, divorce, bereavement, single parenthood,
childhood, adulthood, class, career. Yet these
accounts demonstrate the inner experience of each.
They resurrect the individual to a position of choice

and thereby set limits to the weight given to the
compulsion of social forces.

In these terms I wish to give primacy to the actor's
own view. Nevertheless, the question of validity and
the process of selection which I have referred to above
need to be considered in relation to the content of
these life histories .

In terms of validity and the position of retrospective
accounts, in addition to unstructured interview data,
from which these life histories have been drawn, I also
had access to the following documentary sources:
diaries, photographs, letters, personal files on
divorce, house sale and house purchase. Moreover the
participant observation which I conducted during the
fieldwork period allowed me to confirm these accounts.
This was particularly so through the deeper knowledge
of the individuals in the study I thereby gained and
the events which I personally witnessed.

In connection with the process of selection, this has
been a necessary part of the procedure in editing
individual's accounts. I wish therefore to note the
basis on which this has been made. The aim of the life
histories presented here is that they should serve as a
pivot to the discussion in the chapters which follow.

In consequence, selection has been based on the
following criteria. Firstly, the life histories are a
presentation device. They allow the reader to have
some background knowledge of the individuals who took
part in the study. Thus, I felt it was important to
include 'hard' data in terms of age, occupation, number
of children and so forth. In addition, I felt it
important that the reader should have some knowledge of
the more subjective aspects of personal life histories.
In this way, the objective experience can be
counterposed to the more subjective.

Secondly, certain issues contained in individual
biographies became important during the fieldwork year.
These points, therefore, are also included and serve
two purposes. They act as a presentation device in
order to avoid needless repetition. Furthermore, they
locate the issue in its appropriate time and space.
This is important in order that a wider understanding
can be gained with regard to the reasons why certain
issues are a recurrent theme in a life history and why
particular issues only become important at certain
times.

Finally, lest we wish to give further ammunition to
those who would accuse us of 'mere empiricism', within
the individuality of each account there are common

themes and differences from which we can draw general
concepts. This was the third basis on which data was
selected and I wish to consider these themes in greater
detail now.

LIFE HISTORY THEMES

There are four themes within each life history. These
concern first marriage, separation, divorce and
bereavement, remarriage and children and stepchildren.
Whilst each account reveals the distinctive features of
each process for the individuals concerned, the common
themes within each are important factors in our
understanding of stepfamily life. I will examine each
briefly.

All individuals in the study were married previously
and were consequently second wives and second husbands.
Comparisons therefore arose between first and second
marriage. Nevertheless, it would appear that there are
significant gender differences in terms of the effect
which such comparisons given rise to. Thus it became
important to explore the significance of first marriage
on the experience of remarriage, stepmotherhood and
stepfatherhood.

Of the ten individuals in this study, six were divorced (Simon, Jane, George, Frances. Louise, Meg). Each account portrays this process in terms of the factors which led to the break-up of marriage and are striking as individuals describe their overall commitment to making the first marriage successful. The life histories describe the effect on the children and the legal outcome in terms of maintenance and custody. Each account also indicate feelings and attitudes to the former spouse.

The life histories of the bereaved (Frank, Don, Henry and Susan) describe the tragedy of death and its effect on the family and work life. These life histories also describe the loneliness of their experience of single parenthood. The finality of death in respect of the ending of a life and the completion of legal affairs means that there can be no continuing relationship with an ex-spouse, as in the case of the divorced.

Embedded within the reconstitution of married life, therefore, these structural differences remain. Nevertheless, as I have argued in Chapter One, the distinction between mortality versus divorce generated stepfamilies remains an area of confusion within the literature on the stepfamily. One of my tasks is to assess the significance of this distinction.

Despite these structural differences, each account is
constant in terms of the relative lack of knowledge
individuals had of the realities of impending
stepparenthood and the requirements it would make of
them practically, financially, socially and
emotionally. Certainly, there is an acknowledgement
that 'of course there would be problems' (see Francis'
life history) and there are suggestions (see George and
Meg) of a growing realisation of the depth of the
difficulties ahead. However, in every case, prior to
remarriage, the basic attitude was one of optimism and
faith. It is the central theme of this thesis to
locate the roots of this optimism and to chart its
progress.

Finally, a few brief words are necessary at this stage
to further our insight into the way issues in each
biography came to play an important part in the
experience of remarriage during the fieldwork year.
This can be located at both a general and a specific
level. In general terms, through the process of the
'marital conversation' (Berger and Kellner, 1980, p313)
and 'the courtship as confessional' (Burgoyne and
Clark, 1984, p84) the remarried had an understanding of
their own past and that of their spouse which impinged
on decision making and attitudes. This is a recurring
theme in the chapters which follow.

At a specific level, more concrete issues were likely to reap repercussions during the fieldwork period. For example, Meg's account reveals a dissatisfaction with the legal process of divorce. The 'expensive' solicitor she believes her husband's girlfriend employed, gave him, in Meg's mind, an unfair advantage which she never felt able to fully challenge. This is an important factor to understanding her attitude towards her first husband and her decisions regarding maintenance payments for her two children. The issue of maintenance also became relevant for Louise during the fieldwork year and was a constant feature in Simon's life. Further relevant issues are indicated in the notes at the end of this chapter.

The life history accounts which follow are therefore organised in conjunction with these principles. It now only leaves me to introduce the individuals who so kindly participated in the study a little more fully.

INDIVIDUAL LIFE HISTORIES

Each life history begins with a brief summary of the individual's more concrete biographical details in terms of age, dates of marriage and remarriage, numbers

of children and employment. This summary is followed
by an account, in the individual's own words, which was
compiled from transcripts of tape recorded unstructured
interviews (see Appendix B). The editing of these life
histories was in accordance with the criteria outlined
above.

I arranged the accounts in alphabetical order on a
couple basis and to give primacy to the female they are
set out with the woman's life history first. Thus, the
life histories are set out in the following order:
Jane and Simon **BEAUCHAMP**, Frances and George **FIELDING**,
Susan and Henry **HOLMES**, Meg and Frank **TYLER**, Louise and
Don **WILLIAMS**.

To protect the identity of the families who gave their
time so willingly to this study, all names are
pseudonyms. Where appropriate, places and towns have
also been given alternative names.

JANE AND SIMON BEAUCHAMP

Jane and Simon were both divorced before their own
marriage. Jane's two children and Simon's three
children were living with them during the fieldwork
period and attended local schools. There were no
children of this marriage. Jane and Simon's
relationship with Simon's first wife, in terms of
access and maintenance, was a continuing theme during
the study.

Jane talks about her life abroad during her first
marriage, the time she spent as a single parent and her
meeting with Simon's children for the first time.

JANE BEAUCHAMP

Jane was born in 1948 in Dover. After school she
trained as a nurse and worked in this profession until
her marriage in 1969 to Richard, an executive for an
oil company. Richard's work was based abroad and after
marriage they immediately moved to Nigeria. They lived
in Nigeria for five years and then moved to the
Phillipines where they lived for three years. Jane and
Richard had two children: Joe born in 1971 and Harriet

born in 1973. Jane separated from Richard in 1977 and
returned to England. She trained as a health visitor
and continues to work in this profession. She met
Simon at a day conference on psychotherapy and they
married in 1984 after a short courtship.

JANE

I think things began to go wrong with having Harriet
because Richard was an only child and at the time, if
he were honest, he would have said he was quite happy
with one child. I think it was me who wanted a second
and he certainly couldn't relate to Harriet in the same
way he could to Joe. I was ill when I was pregnant and
he wasn't there when she was born. She wasn't a
difficult baby, a perfectly normal baby, but we'd been
spoilt with Joe who never needed feeding in the night
and it came as a bit of a shock to him. He'd never had
any dealings with the female of the species. He was
travelling a lot and when Harriet was six months old we
moved from Nigeria and spent six months back in this
country and then we went to the Phillipines. His job
there was to cover the whole of south-east Asia and he
was away I should say sixty percent of the time which
gradually got more and more as business picked up and I

wonder in fact whether my being hacked off and
miserable didn't push him away even longer.

I hated it, being on my own. It got to the situation
that whenever he was away something went wrong.
Something minor like the electricity failed, one of the
kids was sick or I was sick, and when he came back he
was so tired he wasn't actually interested in any of us
so it was a sort of Catch 22 situation, with him not
being around when he was needed and no bloody use when
he was around because he was so shattered. So we went,
down this spiral.

In the end I decided to leave. I thought what was I
going to be left with at the end of all this.
Increasingly more miserable? Was I going to stay
around because of the children or was I going to take
the bull by the horns and be on my own. Finally, I
worked out that I could really be happier on my own
with the children because at the end of the day the
children would leave home and what would I be left
with? A shell of a marriage and a wizened old cow to
boot.

But all this was really put off for about a year
because of Richard's drink problem and when that
finally came to light I can actually remember still to

this day thinking: "Christ, I can't leave a sinking ship but what do I do." So if you like the whole thing was deferred a year while that was sorted out and he was eventually admitted to hospital.

I didn't tell the children because they were too young. They were 4 and 6. Harriet can't remember much. Joe can remember a lot more. He can remember the unhappiness. I think we got passed the rowing stage. Joe lived a lie for a long time saying that we were living in England because I didn't like living in the Phillipines and the schooling was better here. Richard lived the same lie, so I heard from friends, though nobody really believed him. Harriet didn't really talk about it and to this day I don't know how she handled it.

So I moved in with my parents for nine months and then bought a house. I was on my own from 1973 to 1983. I did enjoy it because I made a life for myself. I trained as a health visitor and I think I was probably much nicer to live with after I'd got a job because I was getting out of the house. Fortunately I was able to get au pairs which worked very well. It was actually like coming home to a wife. You know that the meal was sorted and the washing and the ironing was

done and a cup of tea was made for me as I tottered
through the door.

Richard would visit when he was on leave. I used to
feel cross because every time he came he was laden with
gifts and would take them [the children] here there and
everywhere and lavish things on them and then sort of
bugger off and basically he had all the good parts and
none of the actual nitty gritty day to day care. At
the time I was very angry about it but there's not a
lot you can do about that really. Our relationship at
that time was bad (1) but that was me. Throughout all
that he strived to be thoroughly reasonable. It might
have been easier if he could have been as equally
unpleasant as I was trying to be. There was never any
problem with money or anything like that. He was
terribly British about it.

I actually asked him for the divorce but due to the
fact that I was heavily into Simon at the time he
actually got in with the divorce first which I think if
I'm honest I was a fool because I probably could have
got a lot more out of it financially if I'd divorced
him years ago but at the time I didn't see any point in
getting divorced and at the end of the day its
mercenary to take that point of view and at the end of

the day I didn't do so badly. We didn't argue over anything.

When it came to how much he earnt there was absolutely no doubt in my mind that he was not telling the truth (2) but having said that I had no way of proving that. I did talk to him about it and he just swore blind that was all he was earning. There wasn't an awful lot I could do short of going to court and making things messy and I wasn't prepared to do that because of the children really. I didn't think that would achieve anything. I suppose at the end of the day I wasn't prepared to go for my pound of flesh. The marriage was long since over. We agreed joint custody, sold the house and split the proceeds. There again it was an amazingly good buy at the time and we both came out of it with a reasonable amount of money.

I remember meeting Simon's children very early on. I just thought they were perfectly okay, perfectly normal horrible children. I think I viewed it through rose coloured spectacles. Again because we were so much in love I just thought everything would be okay [laughs].

I think the first time I really sat down and thought to myself "Christ what are you doing" was at Christmas time. My kids were with their father and he'd [Simon]

been with his kids and she [May, Simons first wife] was
going for custody. He was breaking his neck to make
everything at home as nice as possible. It was one
evening and the kids said they were hungry. He
immediately got up and went to make them something to
eat, which they ate, and they dropped everything then
he rushed round and lifted everything up and I thought
crikey I cannot take this because it's not how I would
treat my own children and I began to realize there
would be difficulties. But I didn't think they would
be insurmountable.

I remember being nervous the first time I met them. He
[Simon] was living with his parents. James and Angela
were there. Polly was at Guides. Angela was learning
the recorder. She was very affectionate. James was
very easy going. Incredibly easy going. They
certainly didn't react how my own children reacted when
any man walked over the threshold. Joe particularly
would barely speak to people. We picked Polly up from
Guides. She was silly but she was 11. We also took a
couple of her friends home. She'd never set eyes on me
so it was all giggles in the back of the car. It was
very easy.

I felt that they [Simon's children] were more in the
way than Simon did. He had become very dependent on

his children and I was resentful of that at first because I felt that whenever the kids were around we didn't have any time to ourselves.

Having lived on my own with the children with the help of an au pair I was suddenly stuck in this place [present marital home]. I was very resentful to start with that here I was with one hundred and fifty percent more children than I'd been used to, working and having to cope with the whole business on my own. I was driving up to London and back and then having to sort out the food, kids, washing. Simon's very good but he wasn't getting home till much later than I was, so inevitably it was me that was having to do the majority of the hard graft. In retrospect I don't know how we lived through that (3).

Simon talks about his first marriage and the reasons
why he and his wife separated and divorced. He
discusses his feelings about being a single parent and
his thoughts on becoming a stepfather to Jane's two
children, Joe and Harriet.

SIMON BEAUCHAMP

Simon was born in 1942 in Oxfordshire. He has worked
for a timber company since leaving school and has
progressed to the position of Sales Director. He
married May in 1967 and they had three children: James
born in 1970, Polly born in 1972 and Angela born in
1976. Simon and May were divorced in 1983.

SIMON

We were married for 15 years. As far as I was
concerned I was in love with my first wife. I thought
she was terrific and I was very happy to be with her.
Looking back I don't think she felt obviously quite the
same. I don't think she had for a long time, 5, 6, 7,
years and it worries me a little now because Jane says
the same things to me that May used to say in terms of

endearment and love, that sort of thing and I can
remember May saying them. I think we were in love for
5, 6, 7, years.

James was born in 1970. We'd been married for nearly 4
years. May was very wary about having children. I
wanted children, she wasn't so sure. She was flying
about from job to job. She never stayed in one very
long. She got so fed up with this one job she gave it
up and said "We'll have a baby" and we did. It wasn't
really decided. Perhaps that's where we went wrong.
It was assumed that she would stay at home and look
after him. She had a bad time at the birth, he was
breach and I said "I don't want to see you go through
that again" but she said "In for a penny, in for a
pound" so we decided we'd have another one fairly
swiftly afterwards. So Polly came along 20 months
later.

As far as I was concerned that was going to be it and I
think May did too. It was a nice family unit. In 1973
we decided to build our own house. I think I had
misgivings at the time but it was something which May
wanted to do so we went ahead and did it. I could
quite easily have said no but I think I felt (a) that I
knew May wanted to do it and (b) it just seemed like a
good idea so let's go ahead and do it. A lot of things

went wrong. The interest rates went sky high. We didn't sell our house before we started and that's the golden rule and we ended up with two houses and a lot of money being owed to the bank. It was a very very bad period and I think there's no doubt that it was that which was the chink in the armour if you like. That happened in 1973/74. I don't think I behaved particularly well over it. It really was a bad time for us. Angela occurred as a result of a farewell party in that house. She was born in April 1976.

My job took me to the North. We were there four years. I was working long hours getting home late at night. We'd sometimes pass on the door. May joined the local dramatic group (4). I understand she was quite keen on another guy. I found out a long time after. I didn't see any need for her to tell me. I'd rather not have known. I don't know how important it was at the time but it was obvious she was looking for outlets all the time and I was blissfully unaware of all of this. I suppose I was too wrapped up in work and not paying as much attention to May.

I was almost intentionally trying to make life difficult for her and when I try to analyse this I put it down to the fact that I was asking for her attention. Subconsciously I was aware that she had

moved away. It was very subtle but very often the same
situation will arise with Jane and I. It's inflections
of the voice, taking a view of a remark which has been
made which is not the way the remark was meant to have
been made but purposely doing it another way. It's
little things, very little things. I certainly think I
was a contributor to what happened and I feel guilty
about it. I feel I drove her away almost but I didn't
behave badly. It was subconscious. It was subtle. To
get a response. I thought I was pretty good. It's
only looking back I can see this.

I used to do a lot of things round the house. Washing
up - there'd be no question of me not doing it. I
would always do it. Things like that. It would be
part and parcel. That's right. I could almost get at
May by doing the washing up. I knew she was going to
do it but I'd get up and do it knowing it was having a
little twist at her. When things were beginning to go
wrong I used to think we should go and see somebody.
Let them analyse what's going on. They'll see how
bloody good I am but I can see how the situation could
arise so easily between myself and Jane.

My job brought me back here and in June 81 it
transpired that May was heavily into this fella. We
talked about it. She said she would try and forget

about him and we moved up to another village but it was
too late. I don't think she made much of an effort
actually. I can appreciate if you're in love with
somebody you really want to be with them. I didn't
appreciate that at the time. No way did I. She
obviously wanted to go. She stayed from June to March.

During that time I made life so good for her. I made
it very very difficult for her to leave. There was no
sexual relationship in that period whatsoever, which
really got to me having been married for 15 years
[laughs] but I never did anything or tried anything. I
just felt I must make life easy for her and eventually
it would come. I was going to give it two years. I
knew that I'd said that. She then decided in March she
couldn't take anymore. She must go. She left. My
world had fallen apart by then. I was rushing around
trying to stop up the leaks for 6 or 7 months and it
really crashed around me. I was in a really bad way
for a while but I had the children and my whole life
was centred round them. I had something to focus on
and I worked for them.

I felt devastated enough when she asked me for a
divorce but it was worse when she went for custody. I
didn't have Jane at the time and I'd been fooling about
with odd girls here and there but I hadn't had any form

of permanent or stable relationship. I felt pretty
awful. I fought very hard for the children (5). I
also fought her about the money situation because
although I was very happy to split the proceeds of the
house 50/50 I didn't want to split up the money which
would accrue from the barn which had been given to us
by my father for us to live in. It was a wreck at the
time so I refused to let her have any of that. I think
I feel a bit guilty about that because if I'd been her
I'd have done exactly what she did which was to have a
go for it (6).

Once she'd gone I had to sort the children out. I used
to drop them off at my parents in the morning on my way
to work. They would have breakfast and go off to
school. And for the first period of time May would
come up three evenings a week, pick the kids up from
school, give them their tea and wait until I got home.
Then if I was going out I'd get a babysitter in. The
other two evenings they'd go to my parents. Then May
opted out of that. I can't remember why. Whether it
was financial. I had to pay her the petrol to come up.
Then I started employing a girl four evenings a week
just to get the kids sorted. I got a cleaner in too.

My life up to that point had been geared to being with
a partner. When the kids were away for the weekend and

I had nothing lined up I was lonely. I would come home
from work on the Friday and the house would be empty
and I just didn't know what to do. I hadn't arranged
anything. Nowhere to go and no-one to go with. I was
lonely. What was a compensation which I didn't realise
then was I could do what I wanted when I wanted and now
I miss that because I've got somebody else to think
about. I'm glad I've got somebody else to think about
because that's what I want but at the time it was a bit
lonely unless I'd gone to the trouble of arranging
things.

For a little while I didn't think of Jane in terms of
marriage. Not immediately. It didn't take long. When
I suggested we got married I then began to think Joe
and Harriet would be living with me. I certainly made
a conscious effort to get to know the both of them.
They were very difficult to get to know because they
were very protective towards Jane. Joe certainly had
assumed the father figure. I remember taking Joe out
one Sunday morning to play tennis and I said "Do you
want to go to the pub" because it was a lovely day (7).
Big man type thing. We had a drink outside. I said
you know, "Look I don't want to come in and take your
mother over but I would just like to share her with you
because I just happen to like her very much and I think
she likes me. I just want to share her with you". And

I said the same thing to Harriet. She was very
unapproachable. Both seemed to be okay about it which
made me feel pretty good. There were no real problems.
They appeared to accept me even when I stayed the night
with Jane. In the morning there were not too many
problems.

FRANCES AND GEORGE FIELDING

Frances and George were both divorced before their own
marriage. Frances' two children from her first
marriage lived with Frances and George until they had
left school and gone to college. George's four
children from his first marriage were at boarding
school at the time of George's marriage to Frances and
they spent their school holidays partly with George and
Frances and partly with their mother. George's
children had also all left home although George's
daughter, Anna, returned to live with George and
Frances during the fieldwork period. George and
Frances have a son, Luke, who was three at the time of
the study.

Frances talks about the reasons why she and her husband
parted and her thoughts about becoming a stepmother.
She also details some of the problems which she has
encountered, both medically and emotionally, in her
marriage to George.

FRANCES FIELDING

Frances was born in London in 1939. She worked as a
secretary until her marriage to Peter in 1958. They
had two children Christine born in 1961 and Julian
born in 1963. When her children started school Frances
trained as a primary school teacher and continues this
occupation as a supply teacher. Peter started up a
manufacturing business and continues to be self-
employed. Frances and Peter were divorced in 1977 and
Peter moved to the United States on his remarriage.
Frances met George in 1978 and they married in 1979.
They have a son Luke born in 1983.

FRANCES

We were married 19 years and had two children who were
15 and 16 when Peter left us. He went off with the
eldest sister of one of my daughter's friends. My
daughter was 16, and this girl was 18. It was a sort
of 40 plus passion. It was a big shock. I never
expected him to do anything like that. I knew he had
flutters. I knew he went off. He was away an awful

lot on business and I knew that very often he had a
sort of thing going with somebody but he always told me
about it and I always thought if he's telling me it
doesn't really mean very much. Back he always came but
this time he didn't tell me. I knew something was
going on but I didn't know who it was. I thought it
was an older woman altogether. In fact for a while I
thought it was the girl's mother because, you know,
such a disparity in the ages.

It hit Julian very badly his father leaving. He was
just about to do his 'O' levels. Christine was doing
her 'A' levels but somehow she managed to shut it out
and focus on what she was doing. She's always been
able to do that.

I met George through a dating agency. You know, they
send you a list of telephone numbers and names. He saw
my name and saw that I lived quite close, so he rang me
up. It started from that. As far as his children were
concerned, at the time I thought there would be no
problem at all. You see being a teacher and being
involved with children. I'd done some fostering. I'd
obviously thought there would be difficulties. I'd had
difficulties with my own children with their father
going. I knew that they would be feeling those sorts

of feelings about their mother going but I didn't think
there would be too many difficulties.

The first intimation that there would be was when I
went to the meeting with George's eldest daughter,
Sally. I didn't know it at the time because I'd never
seen a photo of her or anything. We'd gone to the
school to collect the children. His eldest daughter
saw the car arrive, saw her father get out of the car
and then she came to the car, took one look at me and
then ran off. I didn't even realise it was her. I
mean there you are in a boarding school full of girls
and I just thought it might be a friend and she's gone
to say that we're here or something. I didn't realise
but she wouldn't come back for a long time. She was
very angry actually, but not with me as such, she was
just angry with the whole situation and that was the
first time I sort of thought. I felt a bit nervous
then.

It was a pretty fraught year. Christine and George
didn't hit it off and it got sort of worse and worse
and in the end I moved out with her [Christine]. If I
hadn't found out I was pregnant that would have been
the end of our marriage actually. I was 45 when I had
Luke. We had one son who would be 5 at Easter [Charles
referred to below]. I had a miscarriage just after I

came back from our honeymoon. I then had another
miscarriage and I then had Charles who was born
perfectly except that his lungs weren't quite right.
He died. I really still can't quite believe that that
could happen. Then I had a rather nasty miscarriage.
I fell down the stairs. George had got flu and it
happened at Christmas time. We had Christmas, that was
fine. Everybody was here for Christmas and that was
lovely but I actually fell down the stairs on Christmas
day. George had flu and everybody went away, and on
New Years day I started to bleed. The next day my
daughter came back home and she and George weren't
speaking then. She was absolutely incredible. She
said "You don't look well mum". That was pretty awful
really and after that I did really begin to think this
is a silly game, you know. I don't want anymore. Then
we had this tremendous break-up and Christine and I
left.

Then I found I was expecting again. Christine was
absolutely fantastic. She did all the shopping and
cooking. Considering this was a child by a man that
she hated. She did have a cry. "Mum" she said "I hate
him. I wish you'd never married him, I wish you weren't
having this baby, but if you're going to have it you're
going to have it properly". She was going to college
every day but she left a tray on my bed. She was

absolutely marvellous. Occasionally George would come round. I think he felt very awkward. But ever since Peter left I had been determined not to be a drag on the children. I knew I would need a lot of help and the person to help me is my husband. So I came back home a little reluctantly. George was very good. He helped a lot. He wanted another child. I really don't know why. I still can't really understand it but anyway we had him.

George talks about his feelings with regard to his
first marriage, his children and stepchildren.

GEORGE FIELDING

Born in 1937 in Middlesex George went into farming
after completing his national service in the navy. He
is now a farm manager on a large estate. George and
Linda were married in 1959 and had four children:
Nicholas born in 1961, Sally born in 1963, Anna born in
1965 and Lucy born in 1968. George and Linda were
divorced in 1978.

GEORGE

I felt very sad when we got divorced. I think sad for
myself, pride and all that, and I think sad for the
children too. The children were angry and cross
because a lot of angry things were said. There were so
many factors involved in the break-up. I think I was
very chauvinistic in the sense that I expected a wife

to always be there. Linda was not a lazy person. Couldn't call her lazy. She had four children but you just don't appreciate it. Too much pride I think that was a lot to do with it. She left. I think she was really quite cross and angry. But I thinks she's probably quite happy now. I don't know. We just weren't getting on. The problem was there was no one thing that you could say was the reason unless she was terribly torn because the chap she's now married to used to give her lifts to work. Whether anything started beforehand and the two things went together you know. She was sort of drifting away anyway and once the children all got to school maybe she didn't feel there was very much to do. She wanted a much quieter way of life. Wasn't bothered about going out and wanted to live in very quiet places. Didn't want neighbours. That kind of thing.

It was more or less joint custody. I can't really remember those sorts of details now but the kids came to me and visited when they wanted. I'm sure it was joint actually. We'd just bought a cottage and she stayed there. I got a new job and moved here [present marital home] (8). I paid the school bills and all of that and they'd come here [present marital home] for part of the holiday. Nic didn't at all, and Sally did some of the time and then stopped. Anna and Lucy were

pretty good, you know. They'd spend half the holiday
with me and half with their mum. So that all worked out
fairly amicably but a very pragmatic way of life for
them. It didn't worry me, not particularly, not at the
time I don't think because I found them so cross and
angry I wasn't sorry when they went you see. Whatever
education they did after school they did from here.
They came to live here permanently.

I didn't give it a lot of deep thought taking on
Frances' children. Early on it was fairly alright but
as time went on it got more difficult. It built up.
The early rows were a shock. I think possibly because
they're all in their different ways, perhaps with one
or two exceptions, fairly strong personalities and all
felt important in their own different ways. I think,
well the sort of feed back I got, was Frances would be
favouring her two, putting things up in the loft or
whatever but um lots of jealousy and it was perhaps
more difficult for Frances' children as they'd come out
of their own house into a situation that others were
in. I felt they should fit in but I don't think they
did. They should give a bit but I don't think they
did. I think they were too, I don't know they sort of
came over as being selfish but I suppose equally I
doubt whether mine, sort of, gave too much to Frances'
way of wanting to do things.

As far as Frances' children were concerned it wasn't only taking on two more children. It was a boyfriend of Christine's as well. I didn't care for it too much when it got nearer the time as I began to become more aware I suppose of their personalities and, you know, the difficult side of things. You know, their personal habits when you sort of all get living in a room. You know, their presence was really quite overpowering and I think quite stressful really. And yes, I wasn't that happy at all but I thought they would have to conform, to sort of fit in. I just took it for granted that this would be a base and they could all operate from here.

We'd been married about three years before Luke was born. Things with him are fairly alright. I suppose one has one set of ideas seeing one set of children grow up, different ways of behaviour and how things have been dealt with. Well, obviously Frances is very different. Does things in a different way. She hasn't got the patience Linda had. You know, that sort of thing. Very difficult a second family, not only because I saw Linda with four children and Frances with Luke and there's a lot of things different. Whilst I remember perhaps the good things before, and I would like to see the good things in a similar way for Luke.

SUSAN AND HENRY HOLMES

Susan and Henry were both bereaved before their own
marriage. Susan's first husband died suddenly from an
asthma attack. Henry's first wife had multiple
sclerosis and had a long period of illness before her
death. Susan's two children from her first marriage
and Henry's two children from his first marriage were
both living with Susan and Henry during the fieldwork
period. Moving house and having a child of the new
marriage became particular issues during the study.

Susan talks about the shock and distress at her first
husband's sudden death starkly counterposed with the
joy of her daughter's birth three days later. She
discusses her feelings about being a single parent and
meeting Henry's children for the first time.

SUSAN HOLMES

Susan was born in 1957 in Hertfordshire. She trained
as a nurse and worked in a large London teaching
hospital where she met her first husband, Brian who was
a radiologist. They married in 1978 and had two

children, Ben born in 1980 and Hester born in 1982.
Brian died suddenly in 1982 from an asthma attack,
three days before Hester's birth. Susan met Henry
through Cruse (9) and they married in 1984.

SUSAN

We were very happy. When I found out I was pregnant
again he [Brian] was so thrilled. He was very keen to
have a little girl. He wanted a daughter. In fact
things were looking good. He passed the exams he was
working for. He only knew three days before he died
the he'd passed but he felt quite confident so he had a
few months without the pressure of revision and
expecting the baby. We were looking forward to the
future. He'd been offered a job in Liverpool pending
his exam results and he was really keen to go back
there as he'd been to university there so it was a
really special place to him. It was a good time. He
got his results on the Saturday and he died on the
Wednesday. I was out. I came back and found him lying
on the lawn. He'd had an asthma attack. Hester was
born three days later.

You go through so many feelings of anger. Why should
he leave you with the responsibility of the children

and so on. You knew pain. And of course Ben at the
time, he was two, was always asking about his daddy. I
found it particularly hard by the Christmas time. He
died in the August. The enormous burden it is bringing
up children. That you had to be both mother and father
to them and I felt I was failing. I didn't have the
patience at that time. I'd got so many emotions mixed
up together. Joy and grief. Pain and happiness. All
sorts. It was very difficult. My strongest desire was
for Ben to have a father figure. Christmas was a hard
time for me. You know Christmas being what it is. I
felt that the family wasn't complete. It went right
rock bottom when Hester went into hospital. She went
in Boxing Day and that was just dreadful. She was in
there for a week. I suppose that was the rockest of
rock bottom.

Gradually things started to improve. I started going
to Cruse (see note 9) and it was good to meet younger
people who had lost their partners. Unless you've been
through something like that you can't appreciate how
black it can be. You live eat and breath pain.

That was where I met Henry. I'd seen him before at
meetings but one day we got talking and it went from
there. Two or three times a week he'd come over, we

just used to stay in and chat. Sometimes we'd go out altogether with the children,

The thought of being a stepmother had quite a good picture for me. My mother had remarried so I had experience of the steprelationship. I remember feeling quite strongly partly the fact that my mother remarried so quickly after my father died and just feeling that my stepfather was trying to take Dad's place in his attitude to me. Which I now realise was partly correct but it was out of a deep sense of fondness whereas I took it as something that he felt he had to do and didn't really want to. Because I'd been lucky with my stepfather I felt quite positive about being a stepmother.

Henry and I started thinking really quite quickly about marriage. I was much more worried than Henry about his children. Henry said "There won't be any problem. They'll be pleased". (10) He was much more positive. I had quite a few conflicting feelings. I disliked the girls [Henry's children] for the way they treated Henry (11). Now with hindsight I can see why because Henry hasn't taken note or listened. But I felt you shouldn't treat another adult like that let alone your father. But Karen and Amanda were very much against the marriage. Henry asked them once what they'd do if

I ever told them off. Karen said she would leave home,
I've never felt I could say anything after that.

They [Karen and Amanda] particularly didn't like Ben.
They said they weren't used to having boys around.
It's not so bad now. They will tolerate him a bit now.
But, you know, they'd tell him to get out of their
room, tell him to go away. He became very clingy, he's
still a mummy's boy now really. But I had to take care
of him more. Fuss him more, you know, that kind of
thing. I heard Amanda say to him [Ben] once that Henry
wasn't his Dad. I felt so angry, I thought "He is his
Dad." It hurt very much.

Henry talks about his first wife's illness and the arrangements which had to be made to look after her and his children and their domestic life. He focusses on his thoughts about becoming a stepfather and the need to have some form of assessment with regard to whether he would be able to cope with the physical demands of looking after young children.

HENRY HOLMES

Henry was born in 1936 and was brought up in New Zealand by his aunt as his mother died shortly after his birth. He returned to England to attend university and is employed as a Research Scientist. He married Beatrice in 1964 and they had two children: Karen born in 1966 and Amanda born in 1968. Beatrice died in 1983 from multiple sclerosis. Henry married Susan in 1984.

HENRY

We did a lot of travelling in our marriage and I suppose the best times were related to some experiences we had on these holidays. We were both members of the

local historical society so we had a lot of interests
in common like that as well as obviously bringing up
the children, travelling, holidays. We had quite a lot
of holidays.

In 1976 Beatrice started to get ill. She had months
when her sense of balance went. She got out of bed and
felt dizzy. So she stayed in bed for a month. We
didn't know what was causing that. That got better and
we had this holiday in Crete which was extremely good
but she then started to have problems with walking.
She'd stumble if she walked too quickly. I was very
worried so that made one appreciate the holiday even
more. She went for tests and they told me straight
away she had Multiple Sclerosis. They didn't tell her
but in fact I then told Beatrice after about 2 or 3
days and that was very upsetting for both of us. At
that stage we didn't tell anybody else except for her
parents and my aunt who brought me up. We didn't tell
the children for a year. Over that year we got
adjusted to the idea. She was 35.

At first it wasn't progressing very fast. Then over the
next few years it got worse and we decided to find a
house where she didn't have to go upstairs. We ended
up in this one [present marital home] specially built
and internally designed for someone in a wheelchair

(12). She wasn't in a wheelchair at that stage. This
was 1978. By the time we moved in which was August
1979 she was progressively worse. Besides being
physically handicapped she was mentally handicapped in
the sense that her mind had started to wander but that
was a benefit. From being a very shy retiring sort of
person she became extrovert. Much more outgoing.

At the end she was being taken by ambulance to either
the community centre at the hospital or the day centre
which she went to. She used to flirt with all the
ambulance drivers. She used to have a whale of a time
which was completely out of character but I saw it as a
great blessing as she wasn't embarrassed by things like
her incontinence. She was also extremely cheerful,
very happy. She was a lovely person to be with.

Her condition deteriorated very badly and the
consultant told me she would not live longer than two
years. She died within the next six month.

While she was alive we had masses of help. The
district nurse came in every day and we had a home help
so I didn't have to do any housework. It ended up with
Beatrice being out at the centre all day so I could
carry on with my work. Though I wasn't actually
working full time I could still work a reasonable

amount. My place of work was very good. Then Beatrice used to go into the local hospital and stay for a week or so. So I could have holidays with the girls and have a bit of a rest because obviously it was a bit of a strain at that stage. And then we had a lot of various hoists in the house to help get Beatrice into bed but it obviously was a strain on the girls in a way. They couldn't express their worries because they knew I was under strain.

The help in the house continued for about a month after Beatrice died. After that I started paying for someone to come once a week to do the housework because I hate housework.

When Beatrice died people were very willing to listen to me because you want to talk. Then two months later I started going to Cruse (see note 9) which I found a great release because there again I could talk and it was at the June meeting that I spent some time talking to Susan and our relationship really very rapidly developed from that because of having these similar feelings about the long term and the problems with children. That sort of thing that you could strongly relate to emotionally.

Because I was worried there was going to be a lot of physical strain and whether I could actually cope, and various people said "You're taking on an awful lot taking on young children", we in fact went off for a holiday together, Susan and I and the two young children, to a hotel in Swanage, and in fact that worked out very well. We had very little problem. That was about when Hester was 15 months old and Ben was oh, about 3½ years, and that went very well. There seemed to be no particular strain. Although at this time Ben was very dependent on his mother, very clinging, due to the outcome of losing his father I should think, in fact he still was able to go and play with me and enjoyed playing on the beach and that all seemed very good (see Note 7).

It was interesting. In the last letter Susan had from Karen she was saying how much she missed her mother and I was thinking about that. For me it's much easier because I've got Susan and that completely replaces Beatrice and I sort of transferred, well, I think of Beatrice occasionally, but not really to any great extent. But in a way I may not even think of her [Susan] as necessarily a different person. I may think of her [Susan] as in a sense just being my wife and not define them [Susan and Beatrice] as separate people (13).

MEG AND FRANK TYLER

Meg was divorced and Frank was a widower before their
marriage to each other. Meg's two children and Frank's
two children from their previous marriages lived with
them after their own marriage. There were no children
of this marriage. Frank's daughter left home just
after the fieldwork period began, married and had a
baby during the course of the study. Frank's son
joined the police force half way through the study
period and thereafter only came home for weekends.
Meg's two children were still at school and remained in
the home.

Meg talks about her first marriage and the reasons for
her divorce. She focusses on the legal aspects of
divorce and her account portrays some of the problems
which she experienced as a stepmother.

MEG TYLER

Meg was born in 1942 in Birmingham. After leaving
school, she worked in various clerical posts. She
married James, a local government officer, in 1965.

They had two daughters: Julia born in 1969 and Virginia born in 1972. The marriage ended in 1981 in divorce. Meg and Frank had been colleagues at work but they did not start to go out together until Meg's marriage broke up. They married in August 1982.

MEG

I would describe my first marriage as happy, whilst I was in it. Though looking back, I can see the problems. James had a nasty temper and would hit me. He also drank a lot, especially towards the end. He would also be nasty with Julia and Virginia and that worried me. Children shouldn't be brought up in a home that revolved around drink and violence.

We were both members of a local operatic society (see note 4) and James told me one day that he had a 'fondness' for one of the other members. I didn't think anything of it really. Then one day his secretary blurted it out. She asked me if James was ill because a Dr Wilson keeps phoning him. I tackled him about it and he told me there was nothing going on. I believed him.

The next thing was that I caught them together at a New Year's Eve party. I just rushed out crying. It was the wrong thing to do I know. I should have gone and poured a beer all over them. Anyway James followed me and told me not to make a scene as all our friends were there. I told him I was going home and left in floods of tears. He stayed at the party.

I wrote to her. Told her it had got to stop. But it just went underground after that. You know lunch time drinks that sort of thing. That went on for about two years and James was drinking more by this time. I think he must have been alcoholic. And I wonder now if she [Dr Wilson] was supplying him with drugs (14). His whole personality changed. I tried and tried to get him to talk about it but he wouldn't. He never did, right until the end.

Things got so bad in the end that I got a solicitor to write to him saying I was divorcing him. I didn't say anything to him about it until the letter arrived. And even then he wouldn't talk about it. We were still living in the same house. The solicitor told me I had to stop cooking for him so I did and I moved into Julia's bedroom. He stopped giving me housekeeping.

We carried on like this for a while and then I received a letter from a very expensive solicitor (15)saying that James would admit adultery if I didn't name anyone. So that was it. Nothing discussed. He also offered me £30 per month maintenance. For me and two children! Ridiculous! Then at the beginning of June I had a phone call at work from his solicitor. He said the new maintenance offer was now £250 per month so there was now no reason not to go ahead. I put the phone down, stunned, and burst into tears. It struck me then that this was it (16). That was when Frank saw me. That morning. He was very calm and it did calm me down. I thought well, I can be independent. He [Frank] managed [Frank was widowed] and it must be worse for a man.

I had to tell Julia and Virginia. I told them he'd [James] fallen in love with another woman and was going to live with her. I think they cried. Julia was about 12. But their lives didn't really change. They'd not seen much of him before.

I didn't really have a time when I was on my own. I started having lunch with Frank from the day he found me crying in the office and he'd come to my house after work for a cup of tea before going home. I would come up here [present marital home] alternate weekends when

my two went to their father's. We didn't go out much.
In fact I complained about that and we started going to
the theatre.

The first time I met Sandy and David [Frank's children]
was a fortnight after my first date with Frank. Sandy
was just 17, David 15. Sandy was in here [living room]
and it irritated me she was there. It was the first
time I'd been there. And I said completely the wrong
thing to David I said "Hello David. You are good
looking. Just as good looking as your photographs".
He must have thought "Stupid woman".

I didn't think about them in terms of future
stepchildren. In fact I remember thinking as I left
here [present marital home] that first time "Couldn't
live there". Frank had had the damp proofing done and
there was no plaster on the walls or carpet on the
floor.

I think Sandy and David resented the fact that Frank
would call at my place after work for a cup of tea
instead of coming straight home to them. David was
particularly difficult. He would be very nasty to me.
He'd ignore me. Or tell me to get lost (17). I
finished with Frank for a short time. I think it was
mainly through David. I'd had enough hassles, enough

trouble and upset, and bad temper and violence. I
didn't want any of that. Fortunately for me, Frank
persevered.

I joined Gingerbread (18) to meet some other people. I
went out with one chap. He was very nice. He took me
out on the day before Valentine's Day and came back for
coffee after. We then heard a knock at the door. I
went and there was a single red rose on the mat and a
card. This chap said "Your friend must think a lot of
you to come all this way at midnight to deliver that".
So we [Frank and Meg] got back together.

I've been so lucky. I didn't plan to meet anyone else.
He was so lovely. I'd never met anyone who'd let you
be you. And there were no rows. When I think of all
the years with James. The rows were terrible.

Frank talks about the emotional trauma of sudden death
and its effect on his home and work life. His words
also portray his feelings about being a stepfather.

FRANK TYLER

Frank was born in 1933 in Hereford. His work brought
him to the Midlands in 1961 and he has remained working
for the same company as an electronics engineer since
that date. Frank and Emily were married in 1961 and
had two children: Sandy, born in 1964 and David, born
in 1967. Frank was widowed in 1980. He married Meg in
1982.

FRANK

I was married 18 years. What's to tell really. An
ordinary marriage. My wife was 10 years younger than
me. Same as Meg (see note 13). Emily was killed in a
road accident. She went to work one morning and that
was it. The police rang me at work. It was on David's
birthday. A car came across the central reservation and
that was it. I get upset even now [broke down]. You

think you've got over it all and you haven't. You
never do. You can't. I just carried on. I went to
work as normal and did the rest at nights and weekends.
I met Meg about eighteen months later. I was
definitely not going to get married again. I wasn't
going to risk going through that again [the heartache
of losing someone] but it just happened. It was the
best thing that could happen.

The hardest thing was being on your own. The fact that
you've got no-one to talk to. No-one wants to know. I
mean when you're married you come home, you've seen
something happen on the way and you can sit and talk
about it. Kids aren't interested. You're completely
and utterly on your own. That's the worst. The work
load. You just do it. It's hard. Made me realise the
worst job in the world is housework. It's the sheer
monotony of it. You do it this week, you do it next.
It's going to be there tomorrow. That sort of think I
couldn't stand. It is. It's the worst job there is.
I couldn't put up with it.

It [being widowed] put a strain on my job. At work for
six months I was on automatic. I couldn't do anything
at work. Jobs I used to do without thinking about
became insurmountable. I remember one day doing
something and I suddenly thought "I've done it!

Without any problem!   I've done a job".   I knew I was
getting better then.   For six months I couldn't do
anything. I went along you know but went through the
motions but everything was hard.   As I say a tiny
problem became enormous.   Just blew out of all
proportion.

When you're on your own you let the children get away
with murder because you haven't got the time or the
energy.   You can't be bothered.   It's easier to say yes
than to argue with them.   They were effectively in
charge.   They got more or less what they wanted.   They
sort of ran the place really.   They couldn't once I got
married.   That's one of the things they didn't like.   I
should have made life harder for the children instead
of doing everything for them which I did.   That was a
daft thing to do.   Now I think if they'd been working,
I mean, I should have said to Sandy "Sandy, you're 15
and doing 'O' levels now. I'm sorry you've got to leave
school and look after the house".   If I'd done that
when Meg came she might have said "Thank goodness
someone's come".   You're trying to be both parents and
you're working twice as hard to try and make up for it.
You couldn't anyway.

I can't really say I thought about being a stepparent
at the time.   I wanted to marry Meg and the children

came with it. I never really thought about it.
Obviously I thought when we got married we'd have a few
problems but nothing I thought we could never overcome.
I didn't get married for the children. I got married
because I wanted to marry Meg so it was just something
that happened when I got married. A minor part of
getting married I thought. Having two children of my
own of course it wasn't a major change in my life
really. If I'd had no children I might have thought
about it but two, four, six, what's the difference.
Children are children.

You get problems. There we were trying to make it work
and they were doing their level best to make sure it
didn't. That was the impression I got [laughs]. It
applies to all of them. They'd obviously got a
different attitude towards it than we had. I can't
think of any particular problems. They were just
horrible kids and kids are horrible anyway so I think.
Probably Meg more than me it seemed felt it. It seemed
more important to her. Women look at it differently to
men anyway. She took it more personally. You know.
Meg's children were nasty to me. They'd say things
like "You're not my dad". Well, fair enough, I'm not.
I can understand that. I don't expect them to be nice
to me. I mean, they came here. They'd been made to
come here and live with me and they didn't particularly

want to. I can see that. They were nasty and abusive and called me nasty things. That was part of it you know. It didn't worry me. I just hoped in time it would all settle down. Nothing particularly stood out. They were just kids reacting to a changed situation. It takes time. Don't let it get you down. It all sorts itself out eventually.

David's changed out of all recognition. He wouldn't even speak to Meg. Now as far as he's concerned he looks up to her more than he does to me (see note 17). It's fantastic. He's grown up. He doesn't get all upset about things that don't matter as kids do of course.

LOUISE AND DON WILLIAMS

Louise's first marriage ended in divorce and Don was a
widower before their own marriage. Louise's three
children and Don's three children all lived with Louise
and Don after remarriage. There were no children of
this marriage. Don's three children had since left
home to pursue their careers. However, during the
study period Don's son Clive returned home for a brief
period after leaving the army. Louise's children were
all still living in the parental home during the
fieldwork period and attended local schools.   Moving
house was an important issue for Louise and Don during
the study.

Louise talks about her first marriage and the problems
it raised. She also speaks of becoming a stepmother
and how she saw it particularly in terms of a 'job'.

LOUISE WILLIAMS

Louise was born in Lancashire in 1948. She worked as a
nurse until her marriage to Jonathan in 1969. They had
three children: Alex born in 1970, Belinda born in
1973 and Michael born in 1976. During her marriage

Louise had a variety of occupations but returned to
nursing after her divorce in 1978. Louise met Don at a
party and they lived together for twelve months before
marrying in 1979.

LOUISE

I met Jonathan at a dance. He was only around for
three months and then he went off to Yorkshire. He was
training to be a BBC engineer but he didn't get to the
end of the course. We saw each other once a month. We
then went on holiday the following April and I got
pregnant and Alex was born in the January. We had
wanted to get married and engaged anyway so it wasn't
too much trouble.

We got a lot of parental opposition. My dad wanted me
to have an abortion. I remember thinking when we got
married. You know, how you get a premonition you'd
done the wrong thing. I really felt I'd made a
mistake.

We weren't too bad. Alex was born. That was quite
happy. We hadn't got much money. We had a flat that
was too expensive. We moved two days after I left

hospital with Alex. Jonathan drank quite a bit. I
don't know. It was bearable. We were still quite
happy. I got post-natal depression which didn't help.
We were alright for a couple of years and then I got
restless and wanted another child. I'd got married
young and I wanted children quickly. Jonathan didn't
really want another one yet. He said to wait till Alex
was seven. I wasn't willing to do that. Then I got
pregnant with Belinda and things got a bit sour then.

Then he had to go away. Four months before Belinda was
born. That was alright to a degree. But it meant he
was coming back at weekends. I was a wee bit tired.
You know, seven months pregnant. He'd come back tired.
I heard later he'd been out socialising. I had heard
there were other women. I don't know.   It got so bad
that I was determined when Belinda was born not to tell
him. You know. He'd come back and Belinda would have
been born a couple of days. It had got to that stage.

After Belinda was born we moved to Norton. I decided
to put everything I had into the marriage. You know, I
tried to get the perfect house. Everything was cleaned.
I became a registered child minder. You know, I tried
to make it nice. The trouble is. I was so busy trying
to make it nice that by the time he [Jonathan] came
back I was absolutely shattered. And looking at it, he

was working funny hours and we weren't actually getting
the extra pay so I think he was making out he was at
work when he wasn't.

He [Jonanathan] then got an offer of a job running a
social club. I wasn't very keen. I'd never cooked for
large numbers. I was expected to do the cleaning. So
we moved into that. I had to cook for wedding
receptions. Once we had seventy people in after a
hockey match. I'd never done anything like that before.
And I'd got two little ones and had to get people to
look after them and that didn't help. But we managed
to get through that.

In the meantime, I don't know how but I got caught with
Michael. I don't know how. I think he must have got
through the sheath and the cap. I know there was no
reason why I should have got pregnant so that didn't go
down at all well.

Jonathan became an alcoholic. He used to get so bloody
drunk he'd open drawers and pee into them. For want of
a better word he was really foul. It got to the stage
when he was really drunk he'd get violent. He didn't
actually hit me but it was getting that way.

I'd already got the idea that he was very friendly with the girl behind the bar [Mavis]. He'd be out while I was looking after the bar. In the end there was some question about the accounts [at their place of employment] being fiddled and we had to leave. Luckily we had our names down on the list for a council place so we managed to get a house.

Jonathan didn't even turn up for Christmas dinner that year. My dad said "It's okay for you to go down but how far do you want the children to go down". It hit (see note 16). We decided to separate but he didn't want anyone to know so we carried on but went our own ways.

We got to about the April and one of his mates came round. You know, he must have thought I was fair game you see. We were talking and he said "You know about Mavis then and I said "Yes, I know about her" and, silly devil, he told me the whole damn lot. That Jonathan had been going out with her for two years. Jonathan phoned the next day. Apparently the place he worked at had been burgled. And I said "Well you've got another problem. I've found out about Mavis and put the phone down".

[Louise and Jonathan continued to have sporadic contact
and then Louise met Don at a party.]

Jonathan took an overdose and told his mates to ring me
up and try to get me to go back to him. He got himself
admitted into a mental hospital. Even the nurses were
ringing. Asking me to go and visit him. Don said "If
you go and see him we're finished". You know. It's up
to you. It's your choice. But if you go over there
you still care. Jonathan had threatened to kill me as
well so it was okay I'd got Don. What I was supposed
to have done to him [Jonathan] I don't know. To my
mind he'd done everything to me. Luckily all this time
I was going through counselling which really helped me.

The last time I saw him was on the court case six years
ago. When he went to court they wouldn't even let him
have access because of his behaviour.

When I started going out with Don I was a bit stupid to
be honest. I didn't really think too much about his
children. I was at that stage where I couldn't really
fight and I was just being carried along. I don't
really think I thought about it.

I remember the first time Don took me to meet them
[Don's children]. They were all sat next door [next

room]. I can't stand games and Don said "Let's play Yangste" and I don't play games like that. So they were all sat down, dressed up very nicely, obviously washed and scrubbed. The house was immaculate. They got me a cup of tea. We sat there and we had quite a nice evening. They were on their best behaviour. I think Don had had a word with them and told them they had to behave otherwise there'd be hard consequences (see note 10).

When we were talking about getting married – because I lived here [present marital home] for six months before – I did have a few reservations. Not about Don but whether I could cope with the eldest of the stepchildren. I wasn't quite sure. He was still at the trouble maker stage. He used to pick on my three kids and I was worried about that.

I did regard it very much as a job [becoming a stepmother]. I wanted Don and it was a price I had to pay. I never thought of it as a choice. At times it got so hard. Don was being a father to mine. I wasn't earning so I regarded it as a job, a mission in life.

Don talks about his first marriage and the turmoil of
bereavement. He discusses how he felt influenced by his
wife, even after death and his feelings about his
stepchildren.

DON WILLIAMS

Don was born in Nottingham in 1940. His parents
divorced and he was brought up by his paternal
grandmother. Don joined the police force and married
Jacqui in 1963. They had triplets, Jason, Jimmy and
Clive, born in 1965. Jacqui died of cancer in 1977.
Don met Louise six months later. They lived together
for twelve months and were married in 1979.

DON

My first marriage was okay. I don't know whether it
was good or whether it was bad. Couldn't really tell
you. You may think that's silly. It isn't so silly.
We met just at an ordinary dance. I wasn't terribly
committed. Jacqui was. We met in Nottingham. I came
to work down here and she followed me down. We were
both single. She got a job in Newtown. I was posted to
Newtown and we got married.

We went through the trials and tribulations of children and it was never very happy. Lots of strains. Though we thought a lot of each other, there were a lot of strains in the marriage. Then she got cancer and how much that contributed to her behaviour I don't know because she got very nasty in the last two years. On getting cancer she got very nasty and bitter and we'd only been here six months [present marital home] when she got that. The boys were getting up to, what, eleven, I think. So we was getting over the worst. Getting to that plane of settling and building when this comes along and made her very bitter.

We didn't know how long she was going to live although we thought probably it would be many years but she'd be ill. So it was difficult and not long enough to analyse the problems of the early years of the marriage. Whether or not those problems were a real problem or whether it was just the kids. Then we got the problem of her getting very nasty and bitter. So you never had the chance to analyse it.

She was at home until she became incontinent. It got to the stage where I couldn't look after her and carry on working at the same time. We had a nurse come in for about a fortnight but it was too much for a district nurse to cope. It got so critical that she

was taken to hospital. It was very quick at the end.
Quite honestly I hadn't expected it.

One the Monday she wasn't too bad. She could speak
reasonably well. Tuesday she was pretty poor but she
was giving the impression she was drunk which was put
down to the drugs. So there was no reason to think she
was going to die. Even at that stage. When I got home
she was talking to the boys [Don's children] on the
telephone quite normally. So she'd obviously made an
effort to talk to them. She must have known the end
was near. And I was phoned at five in the morning.
She'd had a rough night and was asking for me. I
rushed over and I walked in, she just opened her eyes,
saw me, took three or four deep breaths and died. It
was total shock really. It was just like her being
killed. I'd got no idea.

I was in such a confused state. My stepmother came and
stayed with me for a few days and that took the
pressure off. I remember when she left and I shut the
door. It hit me. I broke down then. I really
couldn't cope. It really was terrible. Then I knew I
was on my own. I'd got problems.

The police force wasn't helpful. They put me back on
the beat on nights. I'd got three thirteen year old

kids and that's what they did. So that created a lot
of problems. I had to leave them to go to work. They
were becoming unruly. I came home one day and found
the front porch smashed up. One of them had tried to
get in. I'd got the neighbours complaining at their
behaviour. I could see I was going down fast.

I went to Gingerbread (see note 18). I was persuaded
to go there by a friend. I thought that would help.
That's where I met Louise although I wasn't looking for
anybody. She was in a bad way. I could identify with
her problems and I was able to help her with the things
she needed and she was able to help me with the things
I needed.

It's funny though. I wasn't interested in meeting
anybody else. I didn't want to meet anybody else, but
my first wife was called Louise (19), so it was Louise
and Don, no change. Jacqui (first wife - see note 19)
was a nurse. Louise is now a nurse at the same
hospital. There were three children in the first
marriage. Louise has three children. So we doubled
up. Richard [Louise's son] the baby. He was the last
person Jacqui took into the operating theatre for an
operation. She [Jacqui] came home and told me about
this lovely little baby. She really took to him and I
mean I didn't know Louise then. The first time I met

Louise was after Jacqui had died and she was telling me about Richard and going to the hospital and the two tied up. It was funny that Jacqui came and told me about this lovely little baby and now he's my boy. A lot of things make you suspect that there is life after death. When a person does have an influence on your life and I don't think they pass over straight away. I think Louise was chosen by Jacqui to be the one to look after her boys [Don's children].

Mind you, I'd never really thought about myself being a stepfather. I'd obviously heard of it from my job. I'd always considered a stepparent family as a problem family. You heard the wicked stepmother syndrome but you certainly didn't hear of a happy integrated stepfamily.

Obviously when I met Louise the first thoughts were of confusion if truth be said. I'd now got another problem. I'd got to decide on how it was going to be. The way I played in was very much how the children were going to be. So I set out a little bit to brainwash my children. I set out as well to brainwash Louise's children to accept me. You've got to win their love and affection. A bit sneaky really (see note 7).

I think I did this with Michael. He took to me very well. He took to me straight away. Absolutely no problem right from the beginning. Belinda was a very difficult girl. She was very affected by the divorce. I basically left her and let her come round on her own accord. Still being kind but not pushing it. Alex even more so. I tried to become his friend so eventually over the years he's come to accept me as a friend. But even now you don't push it too far. Occasionally I have to come a bit hard and heavy and I think that helps because he knows you care. And that helps to build a relationship. To know that you can only go so far. If they go over the top they're pulled up.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed in this chapter the place of life
history materials in the social sciences. I have
further argued that the inclusion of life history data
in this thesis forms a central reference point for the
chapters which follow. They do so in the following
ways.

Firstly, the life histories give precedence to the
individual and so remind us that, above all, human kind
is _the_ concern of sociological analysis. Secondly, the
life histories act as a presentation device to allow
the reader to place the concerns of the individuals who
took part in this study in their appropriate time and
place. Finally, each life history contains general
themes which are the focus of this study. These themes
include first marriage, separation, divorce,
bereavement, remarriage and family reconstitution. Each
theme is examined in this thesis in order to further
our understanding of stepfamily life.

Embedded within each account there are sub-themes. In particular, there appear to be significant gender differences in terms of attitudes and experiences of stepparenthood. I now wish to explore this issue more fully in an examination of the effect of the myth of the wicked stepmother on the experience of stepmotherhood.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO: BECOMING A STEPPARENT:
LIFE HISTORIES

1   At the time of the study, Jane and Richard's
        relationship was very amicable. See Chapter
        Five for a discussion of this.

2   The theme of a husband not being honest about
        his financial affairs is also raised in
        Meg's life history and is indicative
        of the lack of control women experience on these
        matters during divorce.

3   At the time of the study Jane and Simon had
        employed part-time domestic help.

4   Meg's life history also indicates that
        her first husband began a relationship with
        a woman from the local dramatic society. I
        think this is a point of coincidence in this
        study given the small number of people
        involved. A further factor in the study
        is that Louise, Jane and Susan were all
        nurses. Again, given the small number
        of participants, I can only judge this also
        to be coincidental.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO (CONTINUED)

5   Simon was awarded custody of all three children. However, May's interest in the children is reflected in Jane's attitudes. See Chapter Four for further detail.

6   The 'barn' was a continuing source of conflict between Simon and May during the fieldwork period.

7   This conscious attitude of getting to know future stepchildren is paralleled in Henry and Don's life history. The gender implications of this are discussed in Chapter Four.

8   George and Francis lived in tied accommodation.

9   Cruse is a national organisation offering support to the bereaved.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO (CONTINUED)

10   See Louise's life history for her
     description of Don's attitude. There are
     similarities here to the attitudes
     described here by Susan about Henry. In
     particular, both men appear to wish to
     minimise any potential problems which their
     own children might raise.

11   Susan felt Henry's children were
     disrespectful.

12   The place of residence and the reminders
     it holds of a previous spouse is a theme
     taken up more fully in Chapter Five.

13   Henry's comments portray the similarity
     with which he views Susan and Beatrice as
     'wife'. Don talks explicitly of the
     similarities between Louise and Jacqui as
     positive features in the relationship.
     Frank also makes the comment "same as Meg".
     These comparative features between first
     and second marriage are discussed in
     Chapter Five.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO (CONTINUED)

14   The construction here of an image of what
        is commonly termed 'the other woman' has
        links with the discussion on Images raised
        in Chapter Six.

15   Meg felt that because Dr Wilson was
        financially comfortable and could afford
        to pay for 'expensive' solicitors her own
        chances at law were significantly reduced.
        This is one of the reasons she attributed
        to her poor outcome in the divorce settlement.
        This point is further raised in Chapters
        Four and Six.

        A further issue which should be noted is
        that it may well be a myth that Dr Wilson
        paid for James' legal representation. Such
        a view was assumption on Meg's part rather
        than factually based. Nevertheless, the
        affect on Meg's perception of the situation
        is that which I have outlined above and
        links can be made here with the discussion
        on myth throughout this thesis.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO (CONTINUED)

16   The incident described here would appear
to be very much a critical event in terms
that Meg realised her marriage was over.
Louise describes a similar event in her
life history.

17   Frank's life history describes the outcome
of David and Meg's relationship. The theme
of stepparent and stepchild relationships
is the focus of Chapter Four.

18   Gingerbread is a national organisation
which offers support to the separated and
divorced.

19   I have given Don's first wife the
pseudonym of Jacqui to avoid the
confusion of using the same names
for both first and second wife.

CHAPTER THREE

WICKED STEPMOTHERS: THE MYTH EXAMINED

> Rosy were a little maid as had a
> stepmother and her were so wicked
> and good-for-nothing as twopennorth
> of God-help-us stuck on a stick.
> Rosy hadn' no love for she.
> (An English folksong cited in
> Briggs and Tongue, 1965, p28)

INTRODUCTION

There is a general consensus from research on the
stepfamily that the role of the stepmother is far more
difficult than that of the stepfather. (Smith, 1953,
Bowerman and Irish, 1962, Duberman, 1975) Burgoyne and
Clark give three reasons for this (1984, p15 ff):

1   Due to unsatisfactory and temporary arrangements
        for child care, children in motherless families
        experience far more disruption and distress than
        children in fatherless families. From the outset
        therefore the in-coming stepmother faces a more
        difficult family situation.

2   In statistical terms, stepmothers are more
        likely to have been unmarried and childless
        than stepfathers. Their lack of experience
        of both marriage and childcare means that
        they are required to make greater adjustments
        than stepfathers both to living as part of
        a married couple and to living with stepchildren.

3   The role expectations of motherhood stress that
        mothers not only undertake the wide range of
        domestic tasks associated with child care but

they are also held to be publicaly accountable
for such children in their care. Conversely,
the role expectations of fatherhood relate
primarily to that of breadwinner. Fathers,
and stepfathers, therefore have less direct
contact and responsibility for children than
mothers and stepmothers.

The purpose of this chapter is to contribute and
thereby extend our understanding of why the role of the
stepmother is more difficult than that of the
stepfather. One factor which Burgoyne and Clark do
not consider is the effect of the myth of the wicked
stepmother. Nevertheless, this featured in the
accounts of the stepmothers in this study. For these
reasons, we must consider the role of myth in
constructing stepmothers' perceptions and experiences
of their role in the stepfamily.

I have argued in Chapter One that one of the most
important factors in understanding the role of the
wicked stepmother myth is in terms of its relation to
the ideology of motherhood and its consequent effect on
reality. This chapter begins by considering the ways
that stepmothers encompass such an ideology within
their understanding of their role in the stepfamily. It
then illustrates how stepmothers perceive their actions

to be judged in terms of a mythology of wickedness
which is the very antithesis of their understanding of
the mother role. Finally, it considers the effect that
this disjunction between ideology and mythology has on
stepmothers' own assessment of their role within the
stepfamily.

A PRIORITY OF CARING

I have argued in Chapter One that one of the central
ideological features of motherhood is that of selfless
care and the nurturing of children. This ideology is
conveyed in Rich's description of the archetypal mother
as 'the source of angelic love and forgiveness in a
world increasingly ruthless and impersonal' (1977,
p52).   Selfless love therefore means that the needs of
husbands and children come before the needs of mothers.

An indication of the extent to which mothers undertake
the requirements of this ideology in their everyday
lives is illustrated by research on one of the most
basic necessities of life - the distribution of food
within the family. Research findings indicate that
rather than cater to their own tastes, wives cater to
the tastes of their husbands. In low income, single

mother families food is a key area of budgeting and
mothers reduce their own intake rather than that of
their children (Graham, 1984). Women are also more
likely to have lower status food than their husbands.
(Charles and Kerr, 1987). As Charles and Kerr indicate
'As providers of food for their families they (women)
come to subordinate their own needs and interests to
those of their partners and children. (1987, p 173)
Such research illustrates the depth to which women take
for granted the subordination of their own needs in
order to fulfil their role as carers within the family.

The stepmothers in this study held explicit notions of
their role as carers. Meg sums up this notion of a
woman's place when she discussed her initial feelings
towards Frank in the early days of their courtship.
Her comments are all the more interesting when one
notes that Meg was also in paid employment when she
made these comments. Meg thus remarked:

> I didn't like to see Frank doing so much.
> On Friday he used to do the washing. After
> a man's been at work all week it isn't right
> that he has to come home and do all the
> housework and cooking.

Meg also had strong feelings of maternal
responsibility. She spoke of difficulties in her
relationship with her stepson David when she first
began to visit Frank at his home (1). Her feelings of
distress were tempered with an attitude which placed
caring at the forefront of acceptable feelings. Meg
commented:

> He would show things to his father he wouldn't
> show to me. "You've got your own place why don't
> you go there". Slamming back doors shouting "Why
> don't you sod off". Of course I used to get
> upset, very upset but well, with both of them
> [David and Sandy], I was determined to care.

Frances and George had also faced difficult situations
with their stepchildren. George had finally stopped
his stepchildren from visiting the house (2). Frances
does not see that she can or even should take similar
action. The attitude expressed by George's action does
not accord with good maternal practice. Frances made
these comments in this connection.

Frances: I'm quite good friends with
          all his children and he isn't
          for mine. It doesn't seem to
          bother him. It would worry
          me. I don't think I could, I
          certainly couldn't ban his
          children from the house. I
          couldn't.

CH: No?

Frances: No. How can you do that to
          children?

In addition to the realm of expressed attitude, the
division of responsibility for caring can also be seen
in terms of decision making. Frances illustrates the
primacy with which she acted in the role of carer
despite an opposing philosophy from a more legitimate
caring figure - the natural father.   Frances related
this incident:

    I remember particularly when I was in hospital
    having Luke. Sally [Frances' stepdaughter]
    had done her year at college
    and she'd decided that she wanted a place of her

own. Well she got a flat in an awful district.
The winter came on and the pipes were all frozen
up and well it was dreadful. George came down
to me in the hospital you know and told me Sally
had phoned him up to ask him to help her with her
sink that was all blocked up and I just said "Get
that kid home". He said "Don't you think she
should struggle on".   I said "No I don't". She
was ever so unhappy. George has this funny thing
that there is this cut-off age when children
should be on their own (3). I have always felt
children need you as long as they need you and
they will go when they are ready. You need to
be there when they need you.

Frances' words indicate the degree to which she
expressed a caring role for her stepchildren in
contradiction to her husband's own view. Maddox wryly
sums up a stepmother's propensity to act in these terms
with the following comment. 'Blessed Mother.
Intercede for us. It is a familiar role for women'
(1975, p 161).

THE CRUEL STEPMOTHER

I have noted in the Introduction that tales of the
wicked stepmother permeate every culture and from early
childhood pervade our consciousness. I have in
consequence argued in Chapter One that the existence of
such a myth bears a direct relation to our lived
reality. In Malinowski's terms myth is a 'hard worked
active source' used by society as a guide to action and
assessment of that action (1954, p101).   In her work
on the position of women, de Beauvoir (1972) similarly
poses the two questions that I now seek to consider.
Namely, what is the importance of myth in daily life
and to what extent does it affect the customs and
conduct of individuals? Again, de Beauvoir sees the
answer in the relationship myth bears to reality.

De Beauvoir is concerned with myths of femininity,
those stories, and more importantly, those ideas which
describe woman. De Beauvoir's theoretical basis is
located within French existentialist philosophy. She
argues that women's identity is relational to men.
Man, acting in the world needs an Other to 'affirm his
existence and to break away from immanence' (Okely,
1986, p73). Woman is this Other. In consequence she is
object and never subject, her reality always defined

through men. In her analysis of myth, de Beauvoir
seeks to demonstrate this.

De Beauvoir argues that the myths of womanhood and
feminity create definitions which, despite any
contradiction between experience and myth, are
changeless and absolute. Thus reality and experience
may deny the myth, but the myth remains pre-eminent.
For example, 'we are told not that Feminity is a false
entity but that the women concerned are not feminine'
(de Beauvoir, 1972, p 283).

In connection with the state of stepmotherhood,
Bohannan makes a similar comment. Stepmothers, 'have a
cruel reputation throughout the world even when they
are good and loving surrogate mothers, they suffer from
this stigma (1975, p 133/4). In consequence, women's
actions and ipso facto those of stepmothers are defined
in terms of the relevant myth.

I now wish to consider how stepmother's feel they are
judged in terms of the myth of wickedness. In this
connection, the discussion is located in two spheres:
Public accountability and Private responsibility.

Public accountability

I noted at the beginning of this chapter that one of
the reasons given for the more difficult role which
stepmothers face is that they are held to be publicaly
accountable for their stepchildren (Burgoyne and Clark,
1984).   Thus, just as a woman's competence and
standards as a mother are judged by the cleanliness,
behaviour or general upbringing of her children so too
are stepmothers judged with regard to the stepchildren
in their care.   Such public accountability was well
recognised by the stepmothers in this study.   Their
concern on this issue falls into two areas.   The
disquiet they felt with regard to how they and their
actions were viewed by friends, neighbours and the more
public world.   In addition, a concern about the
impression that their stepchildren gave publicly of
family life.   In particular the image of the wicked
stepmother was felt to be the paramount view of them
held by others and portrayed by their stepchildren.

Clive (Don's son) had returned to live with Don and
Louise whilst he was unemployed. This arrangement was
conceived by both Don and Louise as temporary and would
continue only until Clive found work. There was some
pressure placed on Clive to do this within a reasonable

time period as Don and Louise were in the process of
moving to a smaller house. Nevertheless, they both
felt that as Clive had lived away from home for the
past three years a renewal of his independence would be
automatic.

Don in particular went to great lengths to use his
network of personal contacts to find employment for
Clive. In addition, the relationship between Don and
Clive was at times explosive and fractious. On one
occasion I arrived at the house with an appointment to
meet Don and found he was not at home. He later
telephoned me to apologise saying that he had 'had to
get out for a while' as he had been having 'problems'
with Clive. They had been arguing less than half an
hour before the time of my appointment. Clive
eventually found employment and accommodation.
However, the tense relationship between father and son
meant that Clive did not leave on the best of terms
with Don and Louise.

Notwithstanding Louise's knowledge that both she and
Don were agreed on their course of action with regard
to Clive, Louise still felt that it would be she who
would be held culpable for Clive's departure.
Louise's feeling that she would be held publicly
accountable is even more pertinent when we take into

consideration Don's own attitude to his children.   Don
had frequently commented that "I've always maintained
that when they're eighteen they're on their own" (see
note 3).   In addition Louise was also concerned that
Clive would portray the situation publicly in negative
terms.   Louise remarked:

> You know what he's [Clive] saying don't you?
> We're kicking him out. And what people will
> think. It's her getting his father to do it.
> The wicked stepmother thing.

Meg faced similar issues after Sandy, her stepdaughter,
had left home. Sandy was renting a cottage from her
boyfriend's parents, Victor and Josie. She later
became pregnant and Sandy and Marcus decided to get
married. Frank and Meg were invited to meet Victor and
Josie to discuss the wedding plans. Meg felt that
Josie in particular was critical of her qualities as a
mother. Meg also felt that part of Josie's assessment
of her was due to comments by Sandy which portrayed her
in a disparaging way. Meg made the following comments:

> She [Josie] told me she doesn't believe in
> mother's working. She doesn't think it's right.
> Of course she doesn't work. I really felt as if
> she was having a go at me. As if I was neglectful

or something. Otherwise why would she say it. And
I don't know what Sandy has been saying. I think
Josie has got the impression that she has been
hard done by by her wicked stepmother. They
[Victor and Josie] said that even if Sandy and
Marcus don't get married, Sandy would always
have a home (4). Why should they say that
unless she's [Sandy] said something. I told
her she'd always have a home with us. I
said that that's what I said to Sandy on the
day she left. That she'd always have a home
with us.

These two examples illustrate the way in which
stepmothers assume that they will be judged publicly in
terms of a myth of wickedness. Thus, although
stepmothers themselves <u>do not believe</u> the wicked
stepmother myth as they do believe the myths which are
constructed about stepchildren and previous marital
partners and which are the subject of Chapter Six,
nevertheless they do believe that society will judge
them in accordance with this myth. In this way the
mythology has a direct relationship to stepmother's
perceptions as we have seen above.

Stepmothers were, however, confronted at times with
definitions which are primarily linked to their gender

rather than their status.   However, this is not to say
that the effect of these definitions in themselves did
not lend themselves to stepmothers having rather a low
self-esteem and therefore would make the wicked
stepmother myth a double burden.   In particular,
husbands would comment to me privately, and I have no
reason to suppose that they did not at times make these
comments to their wives publicly, that they thought
their wives were 'neurotic' or 'go over the top
sometimes' (5). In this connection, it is the private
world of the stepfamily which I now wish to consider.

Private responsibility

We have seen that stepmothers not only assume that
society will be harsh judges of their actions but that
their stepchildren also will be bearers of tales which
portray them to the public world in unfavourable terms.
I now wish to consider how stepmothers feel they are
judged within the family.

One of the problems which stepfamilies face concerns
their financial circumstances. Burgoyne and Clark
(1984) indicate that financial arrangements on divorce
continue to have their effect on remarriage.
Stepfamilies may be receiving maintenance on the one
hand from the stepmother's ex-husband and paying it out

on the other, from the stepfather to his previous
spouse. In addition, due to the presence of children
from previous marriages and decisions to have further
children on remarriage, stepfamilies tend to be large
in size. Consequently budgets can be tight. As a
result, Burgoyne and Clark argue that the 'material
inheritance of the past, which continues to shape the
everyday domestic life and potential conflicts of
remarried couples, is itself structured by the policy
and practices of public law and welfare institutions'
(1984, p135).

Whilst it is true that public policy contributes to the
structuring of stepfamily life, Burgoyne and Clark do
not consider the question of its meaning at the
interactive level of stepfamily members. For example,
money difficulties or settlements can also be an area
where stepmothers feel that their very presence is
perceived by their stepchildren to have had a
detrimental effect on the financial affairs of the
stepfamily. In this way, they feel that it is they,
and not the policy and practice of public law and
welfare institutions, who is held responsible by their
stepchildren for the family's financial circumstances.

During his first marriage, Henry was in receipt of
various sources of state benefit to help him care for

his invalid wife. The benefits he was receiving,
combined with his salary, meant that the family were
financially comfortable. The state benefits continued
for a short while after the death of his wife.
However, the cessation of benefit coincided, quite
accidentally, with his marriage to Susan. Susan has an
investment income from the equity from her previous
marital home but it is not sufficient to cover the loss
of state benefit. This effective drop in income has
meant that the family budget on remarriage has to be
more tightly controlled than in the past. Susan feels,
with a sense of injustice, that Henry's children view
her as the cause of their now stringent budgeting.
Susan comments:

> We have to be very careful with our money. There
> never seems to be enough. I think Amanda and
> Karen [Susan's stepdaughters] think we, me and
> the children are draining the family finances.
> They don't seem to realise that we bring in more
> than we take out.

Meg has similar thoughts about a compensation
settlement made in connection with the accidental death
of Frank's wife, Emily. As she comments, Meg feels she

is held accountable by her stepchildren for Frank's
decisions:

> Henry was still trying to sort out the
> compensation for the accident when we
> met. Emily was just the innocent victim.
> It had been going on for two years. He
> asked me what he should do. I told him
> it was up to him. The solicitor told
> him that they had an offer to settle out
> of court. Do you know how much it was?
> £3000. Ridiculous!   I think Sandy and
> David blame me for that. I think they
> thought they were going to get thousands
> and it was my fault Frank settled. But
> I told him it was up to him. He said
> "She's gone and nothing will bring her
> back".

In addition to a view that stepmothers are held solely
responsible for the difficulties which the stepfamily
faces, they may also face direct sanctions on their
behaviour which indicates that their position as
stepparent is indeed qualitatively different from that
of natural parent. The following incident related by
Jane is illustrative of this.

I had arrived at the Beauchamp's during late afternoon
in September. Jane's first act of welcome was to put
the kettle on to make tea. As she did so, I asked her
very generally "How are things?" She told me about an
incident which had occurred at a dinner party they had
given a few days previously.

The children were eating in the kitchen and we
were in the dining room. Polly [her stepdaughter]
had asked me to buy some tapioca so, even
though I can't stand the stuff, I
bought some. I told her if you want it, fine, but
you can make it yourself. I think that's fair
enough, don't you? Well, I knew what the
reaction would be to having tapioca for afters,
yuk, so I told them. Simon and Bill [family
friend] started to joke about it, making
of Polly. You know, we've got frogs spawn
for pud, that sort of thing. They all
thought it was hilarious. Then Polly
asked if we could have macaroni cheese sometime.
Well, I told her that's something you can have
at your mother's. I'm not buying that. I only
said it as a joke. They were all joking.
But Simon really came down on me.
He said 'You can't say that sort of thing

to my kids'. But he'd just been joking about the
same thing. I couldn't believe it.

The problems associated with food consumption and
mealtimes have been documented previously (Maddox,
1975; Burgoyne and Clark, 1984).   The discussion
centres around what Maddox terms the 'emotionally laden
daily bread' (1975, p 137). Food is a symbol of love
and an area of conflict. Such conflict arises when
tastes differ and children reject food prepared by
stepmothers. Stepchildren may also make unfavourable
comparisons with regard to food prepared by step
mothers. 'Mommy makes it better' is a summary comment.
Conflict also arises with regard to different standards
and expectations of mealtime behaviour. Maddox remarks
that 'Just as the image of stepmother is witch, so the
image of her food is poison' (1975, p 137).

Whilst Jane's remarks above relate to a difference of
taste between herself and Polly, the issue which is
paramount is the way that this difference becomes a
focus for what is acceptable and non-acceptable
behaviour. There are parallels here to Voysey's comment
in connection with disability in the family that 'The
'same' phenomena can be evidence of 'good' and 'evil'
depending on the particular aspects of parents' own and
others' situations which they emphasize' (1975, p199).

The emphasis in this case was the distinction made
between natural and social parenting which Simon gave
weight to. Jane felt that she was acting within the
social ambiance of the occasion. Yet she was left in
no doubt of the unacceptability of her comments. She
had stepped beyond the parameters of conduct permitted
to a social parent.

I have argued in the foregoing that there are various
forms in which stepmothers feel that they are judged
both publicaly and privately in terms of a mythology of
wickedness. I now wish to consider the strategies by
which stepmothers manage this myth in their day to day
lives.

COPING STRATEGIES: MANAGING THE MYTH

Stepmother's accept a definition of their personae
within the stepfamily which includes attributions of
wickedness. Clearly this notion of wickedness does not
fit with other ideals which they also hold of good
mothering. Neither does it accord with stereotypes of
normal family life. The stepmother is therefore
presented with opposing images of good and bad, evil
and virtuous, abnormal and normal.

I now wish to illustrate how this disjunction between
myth and ideology is negotiated on a day to day level.
This discussion therefore has to be considered in terms
of the way in which stepmothers manage the myth of
wickedness. In Chapter Six I will discuss the obverse
of this, namely how myth itself acts as a coping
mechanism.   However, the discussion which follows can
broadly be seen in terms of the forms by which
stepmothers attempt to manage the impression which
others will form of them. Goffman notes that 'when an
individual appears before others he will have many
motives for trying to control the impression they
receive of the situation' (1959, p26). I would argue
that the motive in this case is to allay the imputation
of a myth of wickedness. I will therefore consider
this issue in relation to strategies which take place
in the private domain of the family and strategies
which occur in the public world of friends and
neighbours.

Negotiating the stepfamily

In a journalistic account of stepmotherhood, Burns
makes a comment which summarises the powerful effect of
mythology on action. She remarks 'most stepmothers
will verge on the masochistic in order to assure

themselves and anyone who's watching that they are <u>not</u> wicked' (Burns, 1985, emphasis in text).

One way in which Jane responded to this was to try to meet every demand which may be placed upon a caring parent, to the extent of creating pressure and fatigue. Jane's comments reflect the 'double shift' of being in paid employment and having responsibility for the home (Sharpe, 1984, p87). As Sharpe notes the most apparent negative effect of this is 'tiredness consequent upon a double shift - work outside the home followed by work inside it. (1984, p87).

This fatigue is exacerbated by the need to be seen as caring and loving by one's stepchildren. In this instance, Jane felt that she should attend Angela's (her stepdaughter) school open evening. This occurred on an evening when she was normally required to work late. A conversation I witnessed between Jane and Simon illustrates the extent to which Jane as stepmother felt she should show her concern and interest in her stepchildren.

Simon's response indicates that as a natural parent it is legitimate to waiver such dedication in favour of more pressing demands. Simon's attitude therefore further stresses the impact of the mythology of

wickedness on stepmother's lives.

Jane had returned home the evening before late from
work. She found no meal prepared and the children were
still up.   Simon was decorating. They had had an
argument and this was commented upon during my visit.
In the course of explaining to me the reasons for their
marital discord, I witnessed the following
conversation.

> Jane: I knew I shouldn't have come in. I should
>   have turned round and driven on. It's
>   alright for you. When you come home the
>   kids are in bed and there's a meal
>   waiting.

> Simon: I'm sorry. I thought I'd get on with
>   the decorating while I had a bit of
>   time to spare.

> Jane: It isn't fair that I have to do so
>   much. And it's Angela's Open Day
>   tomorrow. And I've got a meeting.

> Simon: You shouldn't try to do so much. Don't
>   worry about Angela. I'm often too busy
>   to go to these school things.

> Jane: But I've got to go. How will she
> [Angela] feel if I don't.

The need to assure their families that they are indeed
not wicked means that a stepmother's behaviour must be
beyond reproach. Comments from Louise's neighbour and
husband illustrate the degree to which they, as well as
Louise, were conscious of this process.

Louise's neighbour called on Louise during one of my
visits. I had been talking to Louise about her first
days as a stepmother as the neighbour arrived. The
conversation proceeded as follows:

> Louise: Beryl [the neighbour] will tell you
> what I was like, won't you?
> [turning to Beryl] [Beryl looked
> slightly bewildered] This is Christina.
> She's doing a study about stepfamilies
> and she was just asking me what I was
> like when I first came here.

> Beryl: [laughing] She was always too busy
> trying not to be the wicked
> stepmother.

> Louise: I was. It's true. I used to try to
> do everything for them.

Don, Louise's husband made similar comments. His
remarks were made with reference to discipline in the
family and illustrate the negotiation of different
standards between natural parent and stepparent. The
importance of this negotiation as a means of avoiding
conflict within the stepfamily has been noted by
Burgoyne and Clark. (1984, pp167 ff) The point I wish
to make, however, is the terms within which decisions
are made. As a natural father Don is a figure of
legitimate authority to his sons. However, Don is
clear that at least one of the grounds upon which he
surrendered his authority was in deferment to the
impact of mythology.

> I used to be strict with them [his own
> children] and I should have continued
> but I let things go. She [Louise] had
> to think she could cope. I know for a
> fact that I'd tell them they couldn't do
> something and when I'd gone she'd say "It
> doesn't matter" and let them do what they
> wanted. She was very hung up on this
> wicked stepmother thing.

Burgoyne and Clark indicate that 'in particular
stepparents felt that they lacked legitimacy as figures
of authority because they were not 'real' fathers or
mothers' (1984, p169).   Whilst Burgoyne and Clark's
remarks relate to both male and female relations, I
wish to indicate the special importance of discipline
for women (6). To do so I will consider discipline in
the context of a mythology of wickedness. As an
overtly negative, sometimes punitive act, discipline
actually fits the requirements of the myth quite
neatly.   Given Don's comments above, therefore, it is
not surprising that as in Louise's case it is an area
where behaviour will favour avoidance rather than
confrontation.

Susan also undertook a position which stressed
avoidance. She made the following comments in
connection with expectations with regard to keeping the
house tidy.

> I know I'm too easy with them. I expect
> them [her stepdaughters] to see that
> things need doing. I can't ask.

I did witness an occasion when Susan avoided any
confrontation. Susan had asked Amanda (her
stepdaughter) to look after her daughter Hester while

we 'talked' in an adjacent room. Hester in fact came
into the room several times, asking for a drink or
wanting toys and Susan asked her to find Amanda to help
her. During our conversation, Amanda came in and
announced that she was going shopping. Susan said
"Okay" and Amanda left the house leaving Hester alone
and unoccupied. Susan turned to me and commented.

> It really annoys me when she does that. It means
> Hester isn't being occupied. We might as well stop
> [talking] now. There's no point.

Nevertheless, there are strategies which are utilised
which seek to impose discipline but in a form which
will not incur upon oneself the attribution of
wickedness. This is to act through a more legitimate
figure, that is the natural parent, by asking them to
undertake the task.

Simon and Jane had invited me to dinner at a local
restaurant. James and Angela (Simon's children)
accompanied us. My field notes read as follows.

> The atmosphere during the meal was strained. The
> occasion did not get off to a very auspicious
> start as before we had left Angela had said that
> she felt unwell. She had a headache. My reasons

for feeling that the atmosphere was tense was due
not to what was said but rather its absence.

Simon and Jane sat together on the same side of
the table. James sat opposite Jane. Angela sat
opposite Simon. I sat between the children.

Angela asked for sausage and chips. She did
not eat it, saying she still felt unwell.
Simon said to her "It's because you had a
late night last night". Jane took no part
in 'parenting' Angela. She neither commented
on her table manners, nor remarked on the fact
that she wasn't eating. This was left to
Simon. Patterns of direct conversation were
thus: James-Jane; Jane-Simon; Simon-James;
James-Angela; Simon-Angela.

As sweet was being ordered, Angela said she
felt a lot better. Simon said "I'm not sure
you should have pudding. You didn't eat
your dinner". Jane said quietly to Simon
"If the decision were left to me she
wouldn't have any". Simon murmured his
agreement to Jane's comment. However, he
said nothing directly to Angela. Angela

> ordered her sweet without anything further
> being said.

Jane's attempts at placing sanctions on Angela did not
come to fruition. In effect Simon had dismissed her
viewpoint. This in itself contributes to a self-image
of wickedness for Jane as her comments at a later
point in time indicate. Jane:

> He's [Simon's] only just beginning
> to take notice of what I say.
> Before I felt he thought I was
> just being cussed and nasty.

Frances similarly looked to George to achieve an
outcome which she desired. During August, Anna
(Frances' stepdaughter) had returned to the parental
home as she had been experiencing financial
difficulties. George had previously lent her a deposit
for a flat she had rented. Anna returned on the basis
that she would repay this sum of money once she had
sorted out her finances. Anna had also agreed to pay
a sum of money towards her board when she was in a
financial position to do so.

As the months passed by Frances began to express to me
disquiet with regard to Anna's lack of speed in making

an offer to repay her debt or to make a contribution
towards the cost of housekeeping. Nevertheless, she
felt constrained to ask Anna directly about the
situation.   Instead she looked to George to make the
necessary approaches:

> I've asked him several times to
> have a word with her [Anna]. She owes us
> for the deposit and for the cost
> of keeping her. It's been five
> months now and nothing. I know
> George has mentioned it, but that's
> all. Only mentioned it. She said
> she would pay. But when?

Frances' dissatisfaction at George's handling of the
matter eventually led her to take action on her own
part. Frances told me:

> Anna had a bank statement this morning and
> it was too good an opportunity. I told her
> she's been here since August and that it
> added up to rather a lot of money. She
> didn't like it. I know she didn't. But she
> gave me a cheque.

Whilst Frances was able to take control for herself of
a situation she found problematic, such control also
has its penalties. Frances could still not overcome a
feeling that somehow she would be seen as the one in
the wrong. She thus said "The trouble is. If he
doesn't back me up it makes me look like an ogre".

It is important to remember that strategies such as
avoidance or enlisting the support of a more legitimate
authority figure are not used in isolation. Indeed
given the failure of the latter method as an effective
means of creating change, the only recourse available
is to approach the difficulty directly. Nevertheless,
there is still the problem of being viewed rather
negatively which Frances faced. An alternative method
is to rationalise and thereby objectify the need to
exert control.

The form which this rationalisation took for Meg was in
the compilation of rules. Meg comments on the system
that she and Frank implemented:

> It was such chaos with so many children. And
> so expensive. The water heater would be on
> all day. And everyone would be wanting baths
> in the morning. So we drew up some rules.
> They would each have their bath day and they

> couldn't have baths if it wasn't their turn.
> We're on Economy 7 so baths had to be taken
> either before 7.00 in the morning or after
> 10.00 at night.

Jane would make public acknowledgements with regard to
the similarity of her actions and the myth of wicked
witches. Thus, when she had had to discipline them
she would shout to all the children "Watch out, I'm on
my broomstick". Alternatively, if Jane was discussing
previous behaviour with me and the children were
present she would turn to the child and comment "I've
been on my broomstick this morning haven't I?.

By confronting the myth directly, Jane's actions can be
seen in terms of a strategy designed to cope with the
mythology of wickedness by attempting to control the
impressions which others (7) may form about oneself and
ones actions. As Goffman comments in this connection
'This control is achieved largely by influencing the
definition of the situation which the others come to
formulate, and he can influence this definition by
expressing himself in such a way as to give them the
kind of impression that will lead them to act
voluntarily in accordance with his own plan' (1969,
p15). Jane's own acknowledgement of the myth is
sufficient to defuse its impact.

We can see that the implementation of rules or
statements of intent apply to all children in the
household. This in itself is a sign that the
stepmother is not acting unfairly or even wickedly. As
all children are treated as equals in this way it is a
further means by which any assignment of the myth can
be refuted.

The various coping strategies which have been the
subject of discussion here have been located within the
private domain of the stepfamily. Nevertheless,
stepmothers also develop various strategies to overcome
the myth of wickedness in their more public dealings
with the world beyond the immediate family.

Negotiating the public world

I have argued that stepmothers perceive that the public
world of friends, relatives and even strangers will err
towards a harsh view of their motives, thoughts and
actions. Moreover, as Voysey indicates 'It is in
public that parents' 'good identity' is most at stake'
(1975, p50). Voysey therefore argues that it is in the
public world that parents' practices are most likely to
accord with ideal prescriptions. There is therefore a
felt need to rectify any misunderstandings which may
have arisen in the minds of such publics. This can

either be accomplished by public displays of caring or
by passing on information which portrays the stepmother
in a favourable light. Meg employed both of these
methods in the course of Sandy's wedding.

Although Sandy was no longer living in the parental
home, Meg had invited Sandy's relatives to the house
for a drink before the wedding. Sandy had initially
said that she would spend the night before her wedding
with Meg and Frank. The morning thus provided an
opportunity to demonstrate the unity of the family and
can therefore be seen as a public display of caring.
However, shortly before the day Sandy told Meg that she
had decided to stay at her own home for the night and
would travel to the wedding with Marcus' parents. This
caused Meg a great deal of distress. Whilst Meg tried
to understand Sandy's reasons she was also aware that
the united front she sought to make visible to Sandy's
relatives may not be possible. Indeed the imputation
would be quite the reverse. She commented:

> I don't think she's being deliberately
> hurtful. Just thoughtless perhaps. But
> she's hurt me a lot lately. I can
> understand why she wants to stay at
> her own place. All her stuff's there I
> know and it's easier for her. But what's

>   everybody going to think when they get
>   her and Sandy's not here. They'll wonder
>   what's wrong with us that she didn't want
>   to be here.

While the setting up of such a display of caring can be
viewed in terms of a strategy to influence the
impression of others, as Meg's comments indicate the
outcome may not always be that which was planned. This
ineffectiveness of the strategy has to be seen in terms
of the discussion earlier that stepmothers do not feel
it legitimate to attempt to directly control the
actions of their stepchildren.   In particular, Meg did
not feel that she could say anything to Sandy about her
decision.

Nevertheless, in the event although Sandy did not spend
the night at the parental home, she did spend the
morning of the wedding there to be with the other
guests.   However, Sandy's decision to do so was not
through the intervention of Meg or Frank, her father,
but was the result of intervention by her brother
David.   As Meg commented to me "David made her do it.
I don't know how". In this way, siblings can act as
legitimate authority figures in the same way I have
noted earlier natural parents can.

The fine detail of the wedding itself was also a focus
for showing care for Meg. A relative of Sandy's had
offered to make the wedding cake and, in the interests
of diplomacy, both Meg and Sandy had agreed. However,
when the cake arrived Meg was concerned at its lack of
decoration. Despite the joint agreement between Meg
and Sandy, Meg feels she will be held responsible for
the 'look' of the cake.

> It's got no decoration on it. No bells or rings
> or birds. All it's got is a cheap looking
> champagne glass with Christmas ribbon hanging
> out of it. What will people think? They'll
> think I don't care.

In consequence, Meg felt obliged as a sign that she did
care to buy further decorations to be placed on the
cake.

The wedding also provided Meg with an opportunity to
rectify what she considered was a mistaken impression
of her by Sandy's new in-laws Victor and Josie. I
referred earlier to an incident during Meg's first
meeting with Victor and Josie where Meg felt as if she
was being criticised by Josie. Meg was placed next to
Victor during the reception. Her opportunity to give
Victor a different impression than the one she supposed

he had of her occurred when they began to talk about
the making of wills.   Meg spoke of her actions as
follows:

> I told him that we'd left our will to be split
> equally among all the children. Do you know he
> looked surprised. "Really?" he said. "Yes"
> I said. "They'll all get equal shares".
> I think Sandy has led him to believe something
> different.

The false impressions which Meg felt were held of her
by Victor and Josia are those which arise from a
mythology of wickedness which acts on the consciousness
of the stepmother in both her dealings with the private
and public world. The strategies which the stepmothers
in the study developed to overcome this myth, as I have
shown, were various and were not always successful. I
have argued that this lack of success can be seen in
part as a consequence of the myth itself which prevents
stepmothers acting directly on their own accord. In
addition, the ambiguous nature of the stepmother role
can inhibit freedom of action.

ROLE AMBIGUITY

I have attempted to illustrate above the ways in which
stepmothers act in order to overcome a private or
public assignment of their motives which defines them
as acting in a contrary form to that required of a good
mother. In each of these instances they can either act
as friend or mother or neither. The ambiguous nature
of the stepparent role generally has been noted by
others (Walker and Messinger, 1979; Ferri, 1984).In
particular commentaries compare the stepparent role to
that of roles within the nuclear family. Thus, Walker
and Messinger argue that 'remarriage family roles
differ from nuclear family roles in two key respects,
the degree of clarity about which behaviour is
appropriate for a role incumbent, and the degree to
which the role is either ascribed or achieved' (1979,
p186).

The uncertainty of her role and place within the
stepfamily which a stepmother experiences can also be
combined with an expectation that her presence will be
seen as presenting problems to her prospective
stepchildren. Susan's comments with regard to her
feelings about meeting Henry's children for the first
time illustrate this:

> I was a bit wary but I felt quite positive
> about it. I was very nervous, frightened
> about what they thought of me, not really
> knowing what my position was, how they saw
> me, whether they saw me as a threat.

The extent to which stepmothers accept the legitimacy
of their presence as being threatening is indicated by
Jane's comments. As Jane's life history illustrates,
Simon's children were welcoming to Jane when she first
began to see Simon. However, Jane's children behaved
with hostility towards Simon at the start of their
courtship. Joe in particular would make rude comments
or ignore Simon. Jane's view that her childrens'
behaviour is a normal reaction to the circumstances
endorses common sense understandings that
stepparenthood is problematic.

> I thought it was peculiar if you like.
> I thought it was unusual that they
> should be so welcoming of a stranger
> who quite obviously was something big
> in their father's life. I did find that
> peculiar. Although it had been easier
> for me I felt that my children's reaction
> was actually more normal that there was

the prospect of another man in their life
whereas his children - not in the slightest.

Jane's comments highlight one of the perceived problems
of stepparenthood for children that they will be
replaced in their parent's affections by a new partner.
As Wallerstein and Kelly note children "were concerned
that they might be shunted to the side and replaced or
excluded by the new marital relationship" (1980, p291).
In addition, the step-role in terms of stepping-in for
an absent parent is also viewed as potentially
problematic as Susan's comments indicate:

It mainly worried me that they [Susan's
stepdaughters] would feel that their
mother had been pushed out. That I was
getting in the way of their relationship
with their mother.

Stepping-in for an absent mother was a course of action
which quite clearly presented itself to Meg. During
the course of Sandy's wedding, and as part of the
ritual expectations placed thereon, the photographer
called for 'Bride and Mother'. The phrase will be
heard at every wedding but as Meg shows its meaning
will be of particular significance to a stepmother.
There is no automatic and even unthinking

acknowledgement of right as there would be for a
natural mother.   Meg's words indicate the dilemma
which she initially faced when effectively challenged
by the photographer to either take up the role of
mother or to disclaim it. Her words also highlight the
insecurity which she felt in making this decision.
Specifically, Meg did not know how Sandy felt about
the situation.

> The photographer shouted "mother of
> the bride. Come on". I looked at
> Sandy and well. I didn't know what to do.
> What did she want. Then I thought.
> Blow it. I've got every right to be there.
> After all her mother's dead. So I
> said to Sandy "Let's oblige".

Meg's comments indicate not only the ambiguity of the
stepmother role but also her lack of clarity about
Sandy's own feelings.   Nevertheless, there were
occasions when stepmothers were aware of the
stepchildren's attitudes and feelings and I wish to
encompass this within a discussion of the role of
praise in the stepfamily.

THE ROLE OF PRAISE

The importance of praise cannot be underestimated in
the management of a mythology which defines the
stepmother as wicked. This is because the allocation
of praise provides a statement that just as the parents
of handicapped children so too stepmothers are
'fulfilling the responsibilities of parenthood and
maintaining a normal family life'. (Voysey, 1975,
p211) For stepmothers praise validated their very
presence within the stepfamily and confirmed that they
were indeed acting in accordance with good motherly
practice. In short they had some form of tangible sign
that they had achieved the ideological requirements of
the mother role. Praise therefore becomes a signal
that, despite all, they are not wicked stepmothers.

Praise can come in many forms and from many sources.
The praise which Meg received came indirectly through
gossip. Meg's mother was travelling to Sandy's wedding
by bus and by chance Sandy's aunt was on the same bus.

> They [Meg's mother and Sandy's aunt] got off
> at the same stop and my mother said she
> thought she must be going to the same place
> as she'd asked the bus conductor to put her

> off. Well my mother asked her and they got
> talking. Do you know what she said? She
> told mum that Sandy's mother would have
> been much harder on her, [Sandy] being pregnant
> before she got married, you know. And
> she certainly wouldn't have given her such
> a good wedding. In fact, she said Sandy's
> mother would have been very angry with her
> indeed.

The degree to which this information was important to
Meg is reflected in the fact that she told me this
story on three separate occasions.

Susan received a more indirect form of praise in the
shape of a show of affection but from a more direct
source. I arrived one morning at Susan's house and as
she opened the door, the very first words she greeted
me with, with a large smile on her face, were:

> I must tell you. Amanda came up to me and
> hugged me. She said she loved me.

There was no doubt, in my mind, that her evident
happiness and the immediacy with which she passed on
this information meant that Amanda's show of affection
was of immense value to Susan.

Praise can also be found in positive feedback related
to the minutiae of daily life. And it can come in a
very indirect form. Frances expressed pleasure at the
way Anna had met her personal standards. Frances saw
this as a sign of acceptance. The following comments
are in respect of the way Anna set the table for
dinner. Frances:

> She made a lovely job of it. Just how
> I like it done. We did have very different
> sets of standards when we got together and
> I know all of them have jibbed a bit but
> latterly they've said to me, well not said
> to me but made comments such as, you know,
> Frances has done it the right way and that's
> how it should be done.

Signs of acceptance can also be received from a spouse.
Throughout the fieldwork Jane was concerned with
ongoing problems of access and maintenance in
connection with Simon's children. In many ways her
concerns fit Burgoyne and Clark's (1984) primary
argument that the heritage from the past will continue
to make its effect felt in the present. In this
particular instance, settlements and arrangements made
at the time of divorce continued to present problems to
Simon and Jane. One of the ancilliary problems which

arose from this situation was a difference of opinion
between Simon and Jane with regard to how much Simon's
children should know about the divorce settlement and
its current effect on their lives.

The effects of their disagreement with May (Simon's
first wife) were particularly felt by Jane and were
therefore feeding into the marital relationship. May
had repeatedly asked for maintenance to cover the cost
of the children's weekend and holiday visits to her.
On one occasion this had caused Jane to become very
upset. She described her emotions as follows:

> I began to think about things, you know
> and when I got back I was determined to
> stand up for myself. We had a blazing
> row. I broke one of the kitchen cupboards.
> It's still broken. You'll see it in the
> kitchen. I ended up sitting in the car
> sobbing.

Simon decided to tell the children about the divorce
settlement. This was of particular significance for
Jane. By discussing the divorce with the children he
was conveying to them that he and Jane had legal and
moral grounds for their refusal to pay May maintenance.
Thus, their actions in this context could be seen as

reasonable and not the result of Machiavellian plots by
their evil stepmother. Further, it has to be noted
that the need for the children to be told came from
Jane. Thus, Simon was acting on behalf of Jane in a
similar fashion to that discussed above.   Jane made
the following remarks:

> He did something I've been wanting him
> to do for ages. He had the children in
> the living room and went through the
> divorce piece by piece. I've always
> told my children everything but Simon's
> never told them anything. He showed
> them the letter from the solicitor
> saying that May wasn't entitled to
> any maintenance and that in fact we
> were entitled to claim from her - but
> we haven't.

My field notes contain a comment that Jane 'was
evidently a lot happier about the whole thing'. Praise
can act as a turning point for the stepmother on a very
personal level. Praise acknowledges in a very public
way that the stepmother can in Frances' words
sometimes do it 'the right way'. Thus, it acts in
contradiction to the accusations of the myth.

My remarks above regarding Jane's happiness stand in opposition to my field notes on previous occasions which repeatedly read 'as she told me the tears trickled down her face'. Jane in fact summed up her sorrow herself when she said "I'm always ill when you come".

Similarly, I have remarked about the evident pleasure which Susan found in Amanda's act of affection. For Meg the wedding which she had been 'dreading' was 'fine, no problem, lovely'.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has been concerned to examine the myth of the wicked stepmother in terms of the reality of daily life which stepmothers experience. I began my discussion by locating the stepmother's experience within an ideology of motherhood. In particular, I argued that stepmothers accept the notions of selfless care and nurturing which are encompassed within this ideology.

I then argued that stepmothers feel that they face a myth which portrays them in extremely negative terms.

I traced the forms in which the myth presents itself to
stepmothers in terms of public accountability and
private responsibility.

I further noted that the ideology of motherhood and the
ascription of a myth of wickedness form a disjunction
which has to be negotiated by the stepmother. This
negotiation takes the form of strategies within which
the stepmother attempts to manage the impression which
others will form of her.

These strategies were various, were certainly not
mutually exclusive and were sometimes ineffective.
Within the private domain of the family they included
over-compensation, avoidance, acting through a more
legitimate authority figure and making public
statements. In the public domain, strategies
emphasised displays of caring and directly countering
perceived false impressions.

I noted the ambiguous nature of the stepmother role
with its emphasis on the problematic. Finally, I noted
and the importance of praise as one means of resolution
of that problematic.

In these ways I have sought to describe the affect of
myth on the lived reality of stepfamily life and more

particularly on the lives of the stepmothers in the study.   Whilst the stepchild has been an implicit feature within this chapter, I now wish to explicitly consider stepparent-stepchild relationships.   This is the subject of the following chapter.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE: WICKED STEPMOTHERS:
THE MYTH EXAMINED

1   As Meg's life history shows the stepparent-
     stepchild relationship which Meg discusses
     here initially resulted in her decision
     to end her relationship with Frank.   The
     resolution in terms of David's acceptance
     of Meg is noted in Frank's life history.
     However, these issues have direct links
     with the subject matter in Chapter Four.

2   See Chapter Four for a further discussion
     of this.

3   Frances' remarks about George's attitude
     are also held by Don referred to later in
     this chapter under the heading Public
     Accountability.

4   This comment was made in terms that
     Josie and Victor would continue to allow
     Sandy to rent the cottage despite any
     discontinuation in Sandy and Marcus'
     relationship.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE (CONTINUED)

5   The subject of men's comments about their
     wives is raised in Appendix A in
     connection with the research methodology.

6   Chapter Five considers this question more
     fully in terms of stepfatherhood.

7   It should be noted that the term "others"
     includes the researcher as well as the members
     of the family. In this sense, the researcher
     is a representative of the public world.

CHAPTER FOUR

STEPPARENTS AND STEPCHILDREN

> ... it is clear that a stepfamily's
> success stands or falls on whether
> the step-parents and stepchildren can
> adapt to each other. The question of
> how the adult-child relationship can
> best be tackled should therefore be
> uppermost in one's mind in making the
> decision about whether to set up a
> stepfamily.
> (Hodder, 1985, p16)

INTRODUCTION

Hodder's comments (op cit) indicate the importance
which is given in literature on the stepfamily to the
stepparent-stepchild relationship. As I noted in
Chapter One in this connection, there is an emphasis on
the use of age and biological sex as determinants of
likely success here. Specifically, it is argued that
good stepparent-stepchild relationships are easier to
form with younger children than older and particularly
adolescent children (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980,
Franks, 1988). It is also argued that stepmother-
stepdaughter relationships are the most difficult of
all steprelationships (Franks, 1988). Nevertheless, as
I have indicated, within this broad band of findings
there is anomaly and ambiguity.

I have, however, argued that we need to give full
account to other salient features of biography which
will enhance our understanding of factors that are seen
to be attributable either to age or sex. In this
connection I will indicate the importance of these
issues by considering the interactive and negotiable
nature of stepparent-stepchild relationships. In
particular, I will illustrate how ideals of family life

contradict with the reality of day to day living in the stepfamily.

There are two ideals which will be considered. These are the centrality of the child within the family and the ideal of love as a fundamental modus operandi of family relations. I will also consider the notion of reciprocity in connection with these ideals. In so doing this chapter will illustrate the ways in which the reciprocal nature of stepfamily relationships has a direct bearing on the successful or non-successful resolution of stepparent-stepchild relationships. In the course of discussion, the construction of mythology is briefly examined (Chapter Six considers this issue fully).

A 'CHILD-FOCUSSED' APPROACH

The importance which is given to the developmental
needs of children has to be seen in the context of an
equal emphasis on the family as the primary place where
those needs should be met. As Rapoport, Rapoport and
Strelitz argue 'It is increasingly apparent that the
idea that we, <u>as a society</u>, are child-centred is a
contemporary myth (1977, p10, emphasis in text).
Rather, we live in a 'child-focussed, mother-oriented,
expert-guided society' (Rapoport, Rapoport and
Strelitz, 1977, p3) and the central point of such
'child-focussing' is the family.   Indeed, children are
considered an essential factor in the transition from
'married couple' to 'family' (Busfield and Paddon,
1977).

Within the family, the importance of children can also
be seen in the primacy given to their needs over those
of the mother. Thus, 'The 'good mother' is very often
thought of as someone ... who puts her children and
family <u>before</u> herself' (Busfield and Paddon, 1977,
p165, my emphasis). Moreover, legal and social work
decisions give precedence to 'the best interests of the
child' and to children's rights and locate these issues
in family based matters such as custodianship disputes.

Children who have experienced the loss of a parent
through death or divorce are seen as children with
special needs or special vulnerabilities.   Children
whose parents divorce are often described as coming
from 'broken homes' and are seen as more likely to
exhibit delinquent behaviour or to have poor school
attainment.   'Experts' contribute to this belief. As
Burgoyne and Clark note 'Such beliefs are legitimated
in a variety of academic research and literature and in
the occupational ideologies of many personal service
workers such as teachers and social workers, as well as
in popular fiction, TV drama and so on' (1984, p143).

The nature of remarriage and family reconstitution as
representations of a deviation from 'normal' families
which I discussed in Chapter One also gives rise to the
need for assessments of any pathological outcome for
children living in stepfamilies.   Thus, Bernard (1971)
conducted the Bernreuter Personality Inventory on
children from stepfamilies to assess whether there were
any personality differences between them and children
living with both natural parents.   Similarly, Ferri
(1984) used data from the National Child Development
Study in a comparative way to study the effects of
remarriage on children. Psycho-social adjustment,
emotional behaviour, educational attainment, physical

health, social and material circumstances were all
factors for analysis.

Given the degree of importance which 'experts' and the
general public attach to the needs of children per se
and to the possibility of pathological outcomes for
children living in stepfamilies it is not surprising
that emphasis has been placed on analysing the factors
which are likely to contribute to a 'successful'
stepparent-child relationship.   Although an
assessment of this 'success' is linked to the wide
variety of factors which I have outlined above, the
more emotive sphere of stepfamily life is a further
area where judgements are made.   It is this subject
that I will now consider.

PARENTAL LOVE AND RECIPROCITY

The life history accounts in this thesis convey a sense
that remarrying couples had little specific knowledge
about the degree of difficulties they would encounter
when living as a stepfamily. Their attitudes are
summed up by Visher and Visher when referring to
stepmother expectations that stepmothers will 'Love
their children instantly and equally to their natural

children' (1979, p50). Indeed, just as the family is
considered the harbour for society's most positive
values, so too the ideal of love is considered an
indispensable part of family relationships. As
Busfield and Haddon note 'It is widely accepted in this
society that family life should be based on, and
encourage certain characteristics amongst its members:
love and affection, companionship and support,
tolerance and understanding, generosity and altruism'
(1977, p164).

Nevertheless, the notion of reciprocity has not been
neglected in accounts of family life. Anderson (1980)
notes the importance of this in his historical account
of family life in a Lancashire mill town. Elderly
relatives were left to the exigencies of the Poor Law
if they were unable to contribute, in kind or
materially, to the precarious economic base of their
families lives. Reciprocity is also considered a value
which children should learn. In a discussion on
punishment and reward, Newson and Newson note 'To the
extent that the expectation of co-operative behaviour
is part of the notion of reciprocal obligations which
middle class mothers are at pains to instill, the
rejection of rewards on principle understandably has a
middle class bias' (Newson and Newson, 1976, p340).

Notwithstanding these issues, whilst reciprocity in terms of give and take may be considered a value, when it comes to the issue of parental love the question is far more ambiguous. Although mutuality of love is the goal, the mother is considered to be the appropriate person to take the lead. Bowlby's work (1965) gives a clear example of this where the mother's needs have to be subsumed to the infant's. However, to be able to do this there has to be a complementary bond of love. Accordingly, Bowlby claims that 'Just as a baby needs to feel that he belongs to his mother, a mother needs to feel that she belongs to her child, and it is only when she has the satisfaction of this feeling that it is easy for her to devote herself to him' (1965, p77).

In terms of fatherhood, there are perceived gender differences. One such example occurs during the bonding process between father and child. In particular it is argued that this can be interfered with by feelings of jealousy on the part of the father. As Rapoport, Rapoport and Strelitz point out child care manuals accept the condition but put the responsibility for its correction on the mother and thereby highlight women's responsibility for the emotional sphere of life. 'Mothers are admonished to ensure that fathers were not made to feel too jealous of the baby' (Rapoport, Rapoport and Strelitz, 1977, p47). Thus,

fathers, in their own right, are not expected to commit
themselves first in the act of parental love.   Indeed,
whilst a mother's love is unconditional, a father's
love has to be earnt.

To love a child, whilst it may have different
implications for mothers and fathers, is therefore part
of the common stock of knowledge which is held in our
society. As Rapoport, Rapoport and Strelitz note
'Parents are expected to give all to child rearing'
(1977, p10). Love is part of that all.

Reciprocity in consequence stands in opposition to the
giving nature of love and therefore may be a difficult
need to admit. This may be particularly so in
stepparent-stepchild relationships where the emphasis
is placed on the stepparent, as adult, being mature and
balanced. In her advice to stepparents Burns' comments
reflect this. Burns states 'Professionals unanimously
agree on two invaluable attributes for a stepmother:
patience and maturity' (1985, p9). The burden is
increased when one considers the emphasis given to the
needs of children which I have outlined above.

In an attempt to redress the balance of parent-child
relationships generally Rapoport, Rapoport and Strelitz
indicate the importance of the interactive nature of

love. They comment 'Parents influence and give to
their children, but so do children influence and give
back to their parents. Both sides of the interaction
should be recognised' (1977, p30). Moreover, their
argument that 'Reciprocity as a principle of family
life is a dynamic aspect of maintaining some kind of
balance and harmony' is the major theme of the
following analysis (Rapoport, Rapoport, Strelitz, 1977,
p30).

In order to develop this theme more fully I will
consider the forms in which the reciprocal nature of
stepparent-stepchild relationships was enacted within
the stepfamilies in the study. I will do this by
examining ideas of reciprocity in terms of a dichotomy
of acceptance and rejection.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RECIPROCITY IN STEPPARENT-STEPCHILD
RELATIONSHIPS

In order to assess the importance of reciprocity in the
emotional sphere of family life, I will consider
attitudes stepparents portrayed about their
stepchildren. In particular I will illustrate how
feelings of rejection or acceptance are formed and

changed.   The construction of myth will be indicated.
In addition, I will also illustrate how such attitudes
crossed any boundaries of age or sex.   In so doing I
intend to convey the impact that this process has on
stepparent-stepchild relationships.

An examination of stepparent's comments with regard to
their feelings about their stepchildren portray two
dominant responses. These were feelings either of
rejection or acceptance by particular children. As we
will see there is a direct relationship between these
feelings and rejection or acceptance by stepparents of
such children.   At this point there is no distinction
between stepmother or stepfather. Both experienced and
held the same meanings of such attitudes.

Feelings of rejection

Stepparents, by the nature of their position as parent
figures, were already placed in a situation where they
were giving something to their relationship with their
stepchildren.   At its very lowest level this would be
through financial, material and domestic support.   The
feelings of rejection which stepparents expressed must
therefore be seen as something particularly hard to

accept. It bears testimony to all the stepparents in
the study that they each attempted to do their utmost
to maintain harmonious and satisfying relationships.
However, the extent of hurt experienced meant that this
was now always possible.

The forms of rejection which stepparents experienced
ranged from direct comments from stepchildren to
aspects of behaviour which were interpreted by
stepparents as rejecting. George was clear of his
feelings of rejection by both his stepchildren which he
attributes to a comparison with his stepchildren's
natural father.   His feelings are confirmed in
Frances' life history account in Chapter Two when she
states that her daughter Christine said "I hate him".
George expressed his own feelings as follows:

> They [George's stepchildren] didn't
> like me. I'm totally different to
> their father, I think. I suppose as
> much as one tries to be friendly it
> didn't work out. I think I felt a
> little bit rejected by them.

Meg had similar feelings of rejection from Sandy. As
an example of poor stepmother-stepdaughter
relationships the cause is often attributed to sexual

jealousy, competition or physical resemblance. As
Maddox notes 'In many cases the child is a physical
replica of the last person in the world the stepparent
wants to think about' namely the previous spouse
(Maddox, 1975, p82). Nevertheless these factors were
never mentioned by Meg. Moreover, the competition
which Meg experienced was enacted with regard to
Sandy's mother-in-law Josie and not with Sandy's mother
Emily (1). However, Meg did experience a series of
rejections which need to be considered as contributory
to any difficulties Meg experienced with regard to her
feelings about Sandy.

In contrast to George's certainty of his stepchildren's
feelings Meg was uncertain about Sandy's real feelings.
For example, a comment Meg made about Sandy was "She's
a closed book". The doubt which Meg experienced was
compounded by various incidents which left Meg unsure
about Sandy's motives. Meg told me of one occasion
when she went to check some arrangements with Sandy in
connection with Sandy's forthcoming wedding. Meg
commented:

> She [Sandy] kept me on the doorstep.
> She's done that several times
> before. I've told Frank to go

> down to see if she does the
> same to him but he's not bothered.

Meg's comments indicate the uncertainty with which other's actions can be interpreted. They also indicate the lack of confidence which stepparents have with regard to their relationships with their stepchildren when compared to those of the natural parent.

After Sandy's wedding and during the time that Sandy was in hospital giving birth to her baby, Meg faced several incidents which were interpreted as rejections. These rebuffs were always seen in terms of a preference Meg had assumed Sandy had for her mother-in-law Josie. One such rebuff occurred when Josie had the wedding photographs before Meg. Meg's knowledge of this only came after she had visited the photographers herself to collect the photographs causing her much embarrassment and chagrin. Josie also spent a lot of time at the hospital with Sandy, leaving Meg feeling rather secondary.

The feelings of hurt which built up over this period culminated in certainty that not only she, but also Frank, had been rejected in favour of Sandy's family by marriage. Thus, in contrast to the expected norm that a mother would be the first to hear the good news when

her daughter gave birth, this was not the case for a stepmother. With reference to the birth of Sandy's baby, Meg commented "We'll be the last to know".

The permanency of damage which can occur as a result of the feeling of hurt and rejection which stepparents experience can be seen in Louise's comments regarding her three stepsons. They had been openly hostile towards Louise when she first began to live with them. In particular, they would refer to her as 'the cleaning lady' or 'dad's bird'. They would also move household objects from where she had placed them with the comment that 'Mum always kept them there'. However, Jason now calls Louise 'Mum' which may be considered a clear sign of acceptance. As Collins notes 'To call someone 'Mother' or 'Father' is to imply something fairly unmistakable about the relationship' (1988, p86). Nevertheless, Louise's remarks illustrates her doubts about this.

> I don't like it [being called 'mum'].
> You can't be 'mum' to thirteen year
> olds can you? I've talked to him about
> it and he said he means it. But I
> don't know.

Louise's uncertainty about Jason's motives reflects
that of Meg's above.   It would appear that where
uncertainty lies, the stepparent is more likely to err
towards feeling rejected than to take a more positive
view.   I would argue that this is an aspect of
stepfamily relationships which highlights the social
nature of such parenting.   Whilst natural parents may
be secure in the love of their child, indeed may even
take it for granted, this is not the case for the
stepparent.   The ambiguity, which I have argued in
Chapter Three, is inherent in the stepmother role can
be extended here, when one considers that as stepparent
there is no automatic right to a child's love as in the
case of natural parenthood.   Thus, stepparents feelings
of rejection reflect the ambiguity of their own status.

This issue becomes clearer when we consider those cases
where acceptance of the stepparent was the major
feature of the stepparent-stepchild relationship.
Principally, acceptance by the child of the stepparent
was expressed in very clear terms indeed.   In the
following commentary there is no place for ambiguity.

Signs of acceptance

The signs of acceptance which stepparents experienced
from their stepchildren were, first and foremost,
evidence _from_ the stepchild _to_ the stepparent of some
degree of care for that adult. For two stepfathers
(Don and Henry) such signs came immediately in their
relationship with the child. These children were, in
Don's case fifteen months old (Michael) and in Henry's
case eighteen months old (Hester). Given that these
children were no more than babies, their affectionate
response to adult attention is perhaps not surprising.
The relevance of age in this case represents their
appropriate lack of social and psychological
development.

I shall consider Henry's relationship with Hester quite
fully below in order to draw direct comparisons with
his relationship with his stepson Ben (see section:
Changing Relationships: Acceptance Realised). However,
Don and Louise's comments regarding Michael illustrate
the very personal nature with which they both saw
Michael's response to Don.   In addition, Michael's
role as acceptor of Don is crucial to Don's responses.
In this connection, I witnessed the following
conversation between Don and Louise:

Don: Michael was just a few months old
          when I met Louise and he took to me
          straight away.

Louise: Yes he did. He never used to go to
          anyone but Don. As soon as he saw
          him that was it. He [Michael] cried
          when he left. I'd never seen
          anything like it.

Don: He's mine. I always think of him as
          my child.

The evidence that Don and Michael do indeed have a
close relationship was clear on one occasion when I
visited Don and Louise. We were talking about
stepparenting whilst Michael was in an adjacent room
watching television. During our conversation, Michael
aged nine came and sat on Don's lap and said "You're
not a stepdad.   You're my dad".

Don's acceptance of the title 'Dad' can be compared to
Louise's non-acceptance of the parental nomenclature.
Indeed, Louise was often to remark on this and my field
notes record the following comment on four separate
occasions.   Indeed, its importance to Louise is
reflected by my recording this comment on my very first

visit to see Louise and Don. In particular Louise
would comment to Don:

> I get really resentful that
> you've [Don] got six [children] and
> I've got three. I have to put
> in more effort.

Louise's reference that Don has six children reflects
the fact that her own children call Don 'Dad'.
Nevertheless, as I have indicated above, when Jason
calls Louise 'Mum' she is unsure about his motives.
Whilst I am mindful of the gender implications here,
and which I take up later in this chapter (see
Stepfatherhood: Some Proposals) I would state that
Michael's acceptance of Don has left Don quite clear
about his feelings towards him. There is no ambiguity
in Don's response.

For other stepparents in the study, such acceptance
only came by overcoming difficulties and obstacles in
their relationships with their stepchildren. I now
wish to consider the changing nature of stepparent-
stepchild relationships by further drawing on the
notion of reciprocity.

CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS: TWO CASE STUDIES

I have set out two elements of stepparent-stepchild
relationships. In particular I have argued that
acceptance or rejection by a stepchild is a key factor
in determining the nature of that relationship. I will
now consider this process in a less static way by
considering those relationships in the study which
evidenced change.

In addition, in order to add further support to the
notion that reciprocity is a fundamental aspect of such
an analysis, I will draw on the categories of age and
sex. In doing so I wish to illustrate that these
categories cannot be isolated from a consideration of
the role of reciprocity in stepfamily relationships.

I discuss below two case studies of changing
relationships in terms of the above dichotomy of
acceptance and rejection whilst also indicating the
relevance of age and sex.

Changing Relationships: Acceptance Realised

Henry's difficulties with his stepson Ben indicate the
degree of care which should be taken when one wishes to
use age as an explanatory factor in difficult
stepparent-child relationships. Ben was approaching
four years of age when Henry and Susan married. Whilst
he was the elder in relation to his sister Hester, who
was approaching two years of age, he was still an
extremely young child.   Ferri's summary comment that
'Investigators who have taken account of age ..... are
in general agreement that younger, preschool age
children adjust most easily to stepparents' (1984, p9)
therefore needs some examination.

Henry's explanation of the problems he experienced with
Ben are in part explained in terms of previous
biographical and parental experience. In this way,
Henry's comments confirm Burgoyne and Clark's findings
that 'respondents themselves were engaged in the
process of making sense of the present in terms of the
past' (1984, p99). Nevertheless, the impact of Henry's
previous parental experience has to be tempered with
the stereotypical notions of gender behaviour which
Henry's comments reflect. Thus, the past is not the
only source of information on which explanations are
drawn. In this instance, wider ideas of boys and girls

behaviour are also pertinent. Henry made the following
remarks in this connection:

> Having two girls I didn't you know
> play rough games things like that.
> That boys like

One of the ways in which Henry experienced difficulties
with Ben was through behaviour which Henry found
psychologically demanding. Moreover, despite Henry's
previous attempts to gauge the likely problems of
becoming a stepfather which are indicated in his life
history account (see Chapter Two), Henry's comments
illustrate that once living together the difficulties
he encountered were far more demanding than he had
earlier envisaged. Henry remarked:

> After we were married things turned
> out to be much harder than certainly
> I anticipated. Ben was particularly
> difficult and er, yes, I'm trying to
> think what the right word is, but
> basically he was just trying to stir
> things up. You know, intentionally
> destructive really. Not so much
> physically but mentally.

Ben was also physically rejecting of Henry. He would
refuse to go to him or hold his hand. Whereas one may
reason that adults should be mature about such issues,
Henry's comments reflect the very personal nature of
the emotional hurt which stepchildren cause. To the
extent that it overrides mature balanced judgement as
Henry makes clear:

> Ben was very rejecting and that made
> it very difficult to ... well to be balanced
> about the behaviour that he was expressing.
> I mean on a sort of logical level yes one
> could understand why he was doing it but it
> was very difficult to accept it on an
> emotional level because it was, so much of
> it was directed against me.

Nevertheless, as I have stated relationships are not of
course static but subject to reassessment and
modification.   The measures which Henry took to
overcome his feelings of rejection are in accordance
with Burgoyne and Clark's notion of 'conscious
parenthood' where compared to the spontaneity displayed
by natural parents the remarried tend to think
carefully about conduct and decisions involving
children   (1984, p152). Henry and Susan read some
literature on child rearing which proved to be

beneficial. However, whilst Henry provided the framework for change, it is important to note that its success depended upon Ben's acceptance. Henry commented:

> We read that it was a good idea to ensure
> that each child realised that it was special
> by taking each child out individually rather
> than taking them always as part of the family
> and so we started doing that. I, well it must
> have been last Autumn, early on when things
> were still pretty bad, I took Ben up to
> London. He was dead keen on dinosaurs at
> the time so we went to the Natural History
> Museum. We also went to the Science Museum
> and that was one of the first times that
> Ben actually wanted me to hold his hand.
> He'd been very rejecting on that until then.
> But it was somewhat strange walking along
> the road and Susan wasn't there and he then
> wanted me to hold his hand. That was quite
> an important development.

Henry received a further sign from Ben of acceptance when Ben began to call him Dad. There is here a marked contrast in Henry's total acceptance of such nomenclature to that of Louise mentioned above.

However, Henry's rationalisation of Ben's motives have
similarities to Louise's remarks in that they portray
the insecurity of the stepparent:

> Another major breakthrough was when Ben went
> to school after Easter. Within the first
> weeks he changed from calling me
> Henry to well not all the time, the majority
> of time calling me dad or daddy.
> Presumably because that's what the other
> children were talking about and he then
> wanted to say, my dad did
> this or whatever it was. And it was really
> to my mind, a very dramatic change over.

In contrast to Henry's difficult start in his
relationship with Ben, Henry found his relationship
with Hester significantly more accepting.   A
consideration of Henry's attitudes towards Hester draws
out fully the contrasting nature of the acceptance-
rejection dichotomy. Specifically, Hester had never
rejected Henry but had gone to him demanding his love
and attention as Henry comments:

> Hester because she met me from so young
> I suppose had always been very, well
> certainly accepted me if not loved me,

> from very early on and she's quite keen
> on being cuddled so it was much easier
> to become affectionate to her because
> she was so reciprocating, or more to the
> point she was the one who came forward.

The more positive relationship Henry experienced with
Hester meant that he did not have to create preplanned
or thought out situations in order to overcome problems
between stepparent and stepchild as was the case with
his relationship with Ben.   Henry remarked on this in
the following terms:

> Not so much [taken her out separately]
> with Hester. Partly because she was
> too young in a way and anyway she had
> always been well, in a sense, demanded
> to be special anyway. So she got a lot
> more sort of cuddling and well if we
> went out for walks or something, I would
> push her pram or hold her hand. So to
> some extent it wasn't necessary to do
> that.   And she probably went out with
> me more often just to do things like
> going into town shopping and that sort
> of thing.

Nevertheless, Henry does experience behaviour problems
with Hester but these are regarded in the light solely
of what can be expected from a two year old, not as an
indication of stepparental problems or difficulties in
their personal relationship. Henry's description of an
outing with Hester fully illustrates this:

> Last time we went shopping we had
> bad tantrums. Hester decided half
> way she didn't want to go. She didn't
> want to go home. She didn't want to
> go anywhere. So we go into the
> building society and she sat on the
> floor and yelled and we went into
> the bank and she sat on the floor and
> yelled. I find it relatively easy to
> accept. Yes, she got into a fair rage
> in the bank but it doesn't actually
> worry me.

The features of age and gender which are inherent in
Henry's relationships with Ben and Hester can be
further considered to draw out the importance of the
notion of reciprocity in stepparent-stepchild
relationships. Whilst Hester was the younger of the
children, in general terms Ben and Hester were both
very young children. For these reasons, therefore, age

needs to be considered in relation to the wider aspects
of biography.

We know from both Henry and Susan's life history
accounts in Chapter Two that Ben was very close to his
mother. In addition, he held memories of his father
which clearly Hester could not. These may be the
reasons why Ben was initially rejecting of Henry.

In terms of gender relationships, I am mindful of
Wallerstein and Kelly's view (1980) quoted in Chapter
One that the 'stepfather-little girl' relationship is
particularly successful. However, in this case the
relationship may have been favoured through
biographical features in Henry's life. In particular,
his parenting experience of his own two daughters would
have given him confidence in his relationship with
Hester which he did not have with Ben.

By considering these biographical features and
acknowledging both the interactive nature of personal
relationships and the interactive features of age and
gender, I would argue that the notion of reciprocity is
a fundamental aspect of stepparent-stepchild outcomes.

In order to consider this more fully, I now wish to
discuss the opposite aspect of acceptance, that of
rejection.

Changing Relationships: Rejection Experienced

The process of change which Henry experienced in his
relationship with Ben also formed part of the fabric of
stepparenting for Jane. However, in this case Jane's
previously good relationships with her stepchildren
Polly and James were to become problematic.

Jane's comments about her feelings towards her two
stepdaughters, Polly and Angela, made at the beginning
of the fieldwork period, add further support that age
in itself is not a relevant criterion on which to base
assessments of successful or non-successful stepparent-
child relationships. Polly was the elder at twelve and
Angela was eight. Accordingly, one may expect that
Jane would be experiencing more difficulty with Polly
than Angela. However, the reverse appeared to be the
case for Jane commented that Polly was "Okay" whilst
Angela "gets on my nerves somewhat".

In order to fully understand this one needs to consider
past biographical details. Burgoyne and Clark discuss

a process which they term the 'courtship as confessional' by which couples discuss their previous marriages (1984, p84). In this way they dismantle various 'psychological and emotional barriers' (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984, p84). Family history and the pictures of the children's previous family life this conjures up for the stepparent adds a further dimension to understanding the relevance of this process. In particular it plays an important part in forming the attitude a stepparent will develop towards a child.

When discussing his first marriage, Simon had commented that Angela was his wife, May's, 'favourite' and when Angela was born Polly became a little 'neglected'. Jane similarly told me that 'from what Simon has told me' this was how she understood the family relationships of Simon's first marriage.

Simon's view of mother-child relationships also received more tangible support during Simon and Jane's courtship when May applied for custody of Angela. Eventually, May applied for custody of all three children but this was explained as a rational response to legal procedures and expectations. Both Simon and Jane understood her action in terms that:

She had to go for all three in order to get
Angela. It would have looked bad her only
wanting the one.

In consequence Polly was perceived as the unwanted
child and thereby evoked an appropriate sympathetic
response. In contrast Angela appeared to be very much
wanted by her natural mother. Such understandings of
the family situation led Jane to comment that she "felt
sorry for" Polly.

Nevertheless, Jane's amenable approach to Polly changed
during the twelve months of fieldwork. The reasons for
this can be linked to a feeling of rejection by Polly
of Jane in favour of her natural mother May. Between
January and March 1986, Jane and Simon heard from the
children of May's proposals to move to Devon. In
February 1986 Jane and I had the following
conversation:

> CH: Have you heard any more about May's
> plans to move to Devon?

> Jane: Yes, stacks from the kids but nothing
> from her (2). We've heard they are
> planning to buy a restaurant but
> they haven't put their house up for

                sale yet so I don't know
how definite the thing is. [brief
conversation about the pros and cons
of being a restauranteur]
I do have an idea though that Polly is
planning to go too.

CH: I thought it was Angela that May
wanted?

Jane: It is but I think May would use Polly
as a lever to get Angela.

CH: What makes you think Polly wants to
go?

Jane: I don't know. It's just a feeling.

Jane's comment that "It's just a feeling" is indicative
of the sense of insecurity inherent in the
steprelationship which I have previously outlined. In
particular, this 'feeling' was supported for Jane by
events which occurred during the same evening. The
following extract from my field notes indicates how key
events lead to the construction of ideas of this kind
and in particular to a mythology about the stepchild
(3).

Jane reported that Polly had received
a telephone call from her mother's friend,
Gill.   Gill had been trying to get hold
of Polly's mother but without success and
had telephoned Polly to ask her if her
mother had gone away.   Jane said that she
had asked Polly why Gill wanted her mother
so urgently and Polly had replied that she
did not know.   Nevertheless, Jane commented
that the fact that Gill had telephoned
Polly was sufficient to suggest that
"something was afoot" which involved
Polly and that consequently some sort of
conspiracy was going on.

When Simon returned home Jane recounted
the above incident and suggested that
he should telephone Gill and see what it
was she wanted (4).   Jane said that she
thought "something is going on with Polly"
and Simon agreed at first this was a
possibility. However, his second thoughts
suggested that Gill wanted to arrange a
squash match as they often played together.
"It could be as innocent as that" Simon
commented.   Jane accepted that this
was a possibility.

Meanwhile, Polly had been trying to telephone
her mother as Jane had asked her to find out
why Gill had wanted her.   When Polly
returned to the sitting room,
Simon asked her "Why does Gill want Mummy?"
Polly replied "I don't know. I've been
phoning but I can't get any reply. Should I
phone Gill and ask her". Simon told Polly
"Not to bother". Polly left the room.

When Polly had left Simon turned to Jane
and said "That seemed perfectly reasonable
to me. I don't think she's hiding anything".
Jane agreed without demur.

The intangibility of such a seemingly minor incident is
in itself important to understanding the construction
of Jane's feeling of rejection. Whilst, in the final
analysis, Jane agreed that "Perhaps I was seeing too
much in it", nevertheless, the insecurity she felt was
heightened by incidents of this kind.   Moreover, as we
have seen, Simon also felt at first that Jane's
suggestion was a possibility.   It was only through his
own knowledge, which of course Jane does not share,
that his first wife played squash with Gill that he was
able to offer an alternative explanation.   We can see
here, therefore, that absence of knowledge about a

partner's past is also important to the formation of attitudes.

Notwithstanding Jane's agreement on this occasion that Polly was not involved in a conspiracy, Jane still felt insecure in her relationship with Polly as other incidents arose which Jane construed as rejecting. Thus, Polly gave up her paper round without telling Jane or Simon. Jane again felt that Polly had an ulterior reason for doing so but importantly she did not know what it was.

Again I would reiterate that these incidents are important in the construction of a mythology about stepchildren and as I will argue in Chapter Six, mythology has important consequences on the way that individuals perceive situations. In particular, the relationship became marked with a lack of trust. My field notes contain the comment "The relationship between Jane and Polly now seems to be extremely difficult". The perception which Jane held of Polly was encompassed within ideas of rejection. In order to further review the value of considering rejection as a key factor in stepparent-child relationships I now wish to give attention to the changing nature of Jane's relationship with her stepson James. By so doing we

can see that the same processes are at work in cross
sex relations as they are in same sex relations.

Jane described her relationship with James as "good" at
the beginning of the fieldwork. Indeed I witnessed
evidence of this good relationship on many occasions
during the first six months of fieldwork when Jane and
James' relationship appeared warm and open. In
particular, Jane felt that James had some understanding
of her position and in consequence that he had some
feelings of loyalty towards her. The following is an
extract from a letter which I received from Jane which
is indicative of this. The extract refers to a
proposal from James that his mother, father and
stepmother should consult the Marriage Guidance Council
(5) about their difficulties. Indeed, James had gone
so far as to make an appointment for them and Simon and
Jane had received a letter from the Marriage Guidance
Council offering an appointment (6):

> We finally talked with James on
> Thursday evening and were able to
> state our side of the story. It
> was obvious that his mother has
> said a lot of derogatory remarks
> about us which he hasn't been able
> to look at from our side (as it

> has never been discussed) and
> hopefully it gave him a less
> biassed view of things. For
> example, we were able to
> discuss the financial situation
> and hopefully give him some
> reasons as to why we feel she
> has opted out of any sense of
> responsibility.

The fact that Jane and Simon were able to give their
'side' was also raised in Chapter Three to indicate the
importance for the stepmother to be viewed as acting in
a reasonable way. Again, here it is important to Jane
in that it allows the child to see the legitimacy of
the stepparent's views. James' acceptance is of course
crucial to this process.

My field notes arising from my visit to the Beauchamps
after I received this letter note that "Jane was
satisfied that James understood her viewpoint".
Indeed, I note that this incident with James was made
very little of by Jane, compared to that with Polly
recounted above. Nevertheless an incident which
occurred in April caused Jane to reassess her attitude.

Simon received a letter from May in which it stated
that James visited her at lunchtimes from school. This
fact was entirely unknown to either Simon or Jane and
is illustrative of the fact that older children have
some freedom of movement to make their own arrangements
for visiting the non-custodial parent. Jane's comments
bring the issue of loyalty to the forefront. This is a
subject which has been well documented in the
literature on divorce and remarriage with particular
regard to children's feelings.

In terms of divorce, Wallerstein and Kelly note the
feelings of conflict which children of divorced parents
have in respect of divided loyalties. Thus 'The
marital battle is often conceptualised by children as a
pitched battle between two opposing sides. They feel
pulled by love and loyalty in both directions'
(Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, p49). Maddox notes the
problems of having two parent figures of the same sex
when she comments 'Stepchildren also have to solve the
difficult puzzle of loving two parents of the same sex'
(1975, p76). Collins further notes the reciprocal
nature of loyalty when he describes it as 'the
characteristic that allows us to develop and sustain
mutual obligations' (1988, p28). Loyalty is therefore
both conflicting and mutual. It encompasses the need

to show support which can be both divisive and
reciprocal.

Jane's comments reflect the stepparents' view of the
need to feel such mutuality. They convey the hurt and
shock Jane felt with regard to the contents of May's
letter. Jane expressed her feelings in the following
way:

> We had no idea he was going there [to May's].
> No idea at all. Could you believe it. I
> thought he understood our side of things. But
> how do I know now? He must think she's got a
> point.

Jane's feelings that James had deceived her led to a
change in attitude towards James. On a day to day
level she became irritated with his presence and the
more frequent time he spent in the house due to exam
leave and teachers' strike action placed Jane under
great mental strain. For her part Jane was aware of
the unreasonableness of these feelings which she felt
certainly caste her as the 'wicked stepmother' and can
be linked to the discussion in Chapter Three. It was
therefore something which she could not openly admit
within the family but she began to take steps which
would separate her and James so that she could minimise

the amount of time she would have to spend in his
company. She thus encouraged him to find a job for the
summer holidays which would involve staying at an
aunts. In particular, the effect of the letter from
May about the lunchtime pass led Jane to become openly
antagonistic towards James. For example, she reported
that she had had an argument with him during which she
said as an ultimate disclaimer for any responsibility
or reciprocity:

> You're not my son and therefore ultimately
> I don't really care what you do or what
> happens to you.

Through an examination of the interactive and changing
nature of stepparent-child relationships I have
illustrated that the difficulties and the successes
which are experienced by stepparents are not sex
specific, either in terms of the sex of the stepparent
or in terms of the stepchild nor are they age specific.
Rather the need for reciprocity in the emotional sphere
of stepfamily life and the repercussions where this was
felt to be absent would appear to be a major factor in
directing the course of stepparent-stepchild
relationships.

Nevertheless, there are indications that some responses
to stepchildren are gender specific. In particular,
stepfathers were more willing to take direct action as
a means of solving negative and conflictual situations.
Stepmothers, however, as I have argued in Chapter
Three, regardless of any difficulties they experienced
with their stepchildren, often acted in an ameliorative
way.

I now wish to consider the role of stepfatherhood in
this connection to indicate the nature of these
different approaches.

STEPFATHERHOOD: SOME PROPOSALS

I have argued in Chapter Three that the existence of a
myth of wickedness attributable to stepmothers
represents an effective constraint on their freedom of
action. For example, the fear of their actions being
construed as meeting the requirements of the myth
places them in a position where they have to look for
more indirect sources of control. However, whilst
stepfathers in the study may themselves use indirect
sources of control or be unwilling at times to exert
any control over their stepchildren's actions, they did

not call upon mythical imperatives as explanations of their actions. Further, it would appear that in toto stepfathers experience more freedom of action with regard to their relationships with their stepchildren in these respects.

I have noted in the Introduction the fact that there is not a myth in society about the 'wicked stepfather' stands in opposition to their existence in literature, ancient mythology and reality. Perhaps this much we may attribute to male power. As de Beauvoir states 'myth is in large part explained by its usefulness to man' (1972, p289). Thus, David Copperfield's stepfather Mr Murdstone exhibited rather evil tendencies as did Perseus' stepfather King Polydectes who sent him after Medusa's head. Factually, Maria Colwell was killed by her stepfather and reports of child abuse by stepfathers are frequently reported in the press.

In addition, as I have argued in Chapter One, the gender expectations of the father role also emphasise its instrumentality. Thus, fathers and stepfathers, give financial and emotional support to their wives (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984, Oakley, 1981(a)). In this way their role with regard to children is rather more indirect as they are not responsible for their day to

day care. Nevertheless, the father role is seen to be one which carries 'traditional authority' and in this way is in line with male power in society generally. Fathers perceive that they therefore have greater legitimacy to act in the family in ways which mothers may not.

None of the stepfathers in the study ever referred to themselves or conveyed any impression that they perceived their actions may be thought of as 'wicked'. This stands in direct contrast to the way these matters arose spontaneously and repeatedly for stepmothers. Indeed, as I have indicated in Chapter Three comments about their wives' attitudes to the subject indicated that their own feelings were that stepmothers 'thought too much about it'. At this level, therefore, it was an issue which did not appear to have any significance for them personally.

Nevertheless, because of its limited nature the evidence I present here can only be viewed as suggestive that the non-existence of a mythology of wickedness and the particular gender requirements of the father role are significant factors to understanding the gender differences of stepfatherhood and stepmotherhood.

Burgoyne and Clark note the various approaches
stepfathers had to the matter of discipline with
particular emphasis to the differences which arose
between couples themselves (1984, pp167ff). At this
point I wish to consider the question of discipline in
relation to the stepfather's view of himself as a
legitimate father figure by considering two polar
responses to the issue.

Simon's response to his stepson Joe has parallels to
those of stepmothers outlined in Chapter Three in
respect that Simon feels unable to directly discipline
Joe. Thus, he makes tentative remarks which are
designed to intimate disapproval and, when this fails,
ultimately says nothing at all. Nevertheless, his
reasons for this do not invoke fears of being viewed as
wicked. In particular, they are because of the
antagonistic reaction which it is likely to raise from
Joe and because Simon does not feel he has the
legitimacy of a father figure. I reproduce the
following extracts from my field notes which relate to
an evening meal I took with Simon.

> Whilst we were eating Joe came in and
> said he was hungry. "That's not like
> you" Simon said. Joe got himself a

cheese sandwich. Joe was slicing rather
heavily into the cheese and Simon said
"Are you sure you've got enough?" Joe
replied in a serious voice "No, I think
I'll just have a bit more". Simon didn't
reply but Joe looked at me and smiled. I
smiled back.

Simon put the treacle tart on the table
and Joe dived into it and cut himself a
piece whilst Simon was doing the same.
After Joe had gone, Simon turned to me and
said:

"That's [his emphasis] another problem. I
can't say anything. He'd only cause a scene
but if it had been James [Simon's son] I would
have and he would have waited until I'd
finished cutting.

Don's freedom of action in matters of discipline with
regard to his stepchildren portray quite contrary
responses. Moreover, in contrast to Simon, Don clearly
viewed himself as a legitimate father figure as has
been raised previously in this chapter. His comments
regarding his stepchildren and his natural children
further portray this. In particular, Don remarked "I

don't think of them as stepchildren. Mine are more
like stepchildren".

Don was able to discipline all his stepchildren as
various events reported to me by both Don and Louise
indicated. In similarity to Simon, Don did not express
any fear with regard to being viewed in a negative way.
Rather, in connection with one incident regarding his
stepson, Alex, Don invoked notions of adult authority
and power as prime motivators for his actions. Don
describes an incident which illustrates his ability to
discipline in these terms:

> There are times when I have to put
> my foot down and I have to be one
> hundred percent adamant if a dispute
> arises I will win it. Like Alex came
> home the other week and he was drunk.
> And he challenged me basically. I
> wanted him to have a shower because he'd
> got sick all over him and he wouldn't.
> I had to make sure he had a shower and it
> got physical. I got my own way. He did
> it and he was very sorry afterwards. If
> I'd have left it he would have won it and
> there was no way I would ever have been able

> to come back again and maintain a discipline.
> I would have lost my authority.

Don's attitude here also has to be seen in terms of his philosophy that discipline is a form of showing care. As Don says in his life history account when referring to "coming the hard and heavy" with Alex that "I think that helps because he [Alex] knows you care". These attitudes, however, are the antithesis of those expressed by the stepmothers in this study who primarily equate discipline with acting in a 'wicked' way.

In addition to areas of discipline, stepfathers did not appear to experience the same pressure to act publically in a caring role. This is not to say that they did not care for their stepchildren but there was no imperative to _show_ in a public way that care. For example, Frank's dismissive attitude to Julia exhibits none of the stress which stepmothers feel they are placed under to exhibit care and to overcompensate. Julia (Frank's stepdaughter) had gone to the local youth club for the evening and on her return came straight into the living room where Frank and I were talking. The brief conversation between Frank and Julia is illustrative of these features:

Julia: You didn't pick me up.

Frank: No.

Julia: Oh.

Julia leaves the room.

Finally, perhaps the most clear example that
stepfathers have a freedom of action which is not
experienced by stepmothers can be seen in the steps
which George took to remedy a conflictual and
antagonistic stepparent-stepchild situation. The
difficulty of their relationship was sufficient and
just cause to stop them from visiting the house he
shared with Frances.   It should be noted, however,
that the house they were living in was tied
accommodation, in which George was already living when
he married Frances. The sense of belonging which
George would have compared to Frances may well have
further legitimated George's action here. I would
suggest George would have found these steps more
difficult to take if he was living in Frances' previous
marital home (7).   George expressed his attitude in
the following way:

> Frances knows full well that
> I found her children irksome. I
> mean, you know, they are living
> their lives and she see's them
> every so often. It's a side of
> life in which I have no place.

George's attitude extended to not allowing Frances to
take their son Luke on visits to see Frances' son
Julian. This situation had arisen primarily from a
visit Julian had to the United States to visit his
father.   The events which occurred there, together
with George's earlier statements above and in his life
history account (See Chapter Two) also indicate how
myths are constructed about stepchildren.

Whilst Julian was visiting his father in the United
States, Julian's stepmother, Gwen, accused Julian of
sexually assaulting his half-sisters. Although the
case went to court in the United States, it was
dismissed. However, George's comment was "There's no
smoke without fire". He had consequently telephoned
the NSPCC (8) to ask their advice about the likely
dangers for Luke when associating with Julian. George
commented:

> They told me it was better that
> Luke had nothing to do with him
> because you can never be sure. Frances
> knows my views. I've told her
> she isn't to take Luke when she
> goes to see Julian.

The myth which was constructed about Julian had a
direct relationship on George's attitudes and
perceptions. In particular, Luke was seen to be in
'moral danger' through any contact with Julian.
Moreover, George felt it sufficient reason that as a
father he should protect his son in this way as an
explanation of his actions. Myth therefore serves as
a coping mechanism and I discuss this further in
Chapter Six.

These examples of the differences between
stepfatherhood and stepmotherhood would seem to further
indicate the degree of importance which the myth of the
wicked stepmother, as a stand in opposition to the
ideological requirements of motherhood, has in
contributing to the lived reality of the stepmother's
life.   Stepfathers call on ideas of authority and
reason as explanations of their actions and therefore
their actions are unproblematically located in terms of
the ideological requirements of fatherhood generally.

In consequence, they are unhampered by any fear of such
actions being viewed as problematic or even 'wicked'
and can act directly and unequivocally. As I have
argued previously, this is not the case for
stepmothers.

CONCLUSION

I have argued in this chapter that the use of age and
sex as determinants of stepparent-stepchild
relationships needs to be further examined in terms of
the notion of reciprocity. Nevertheless, I have argued
that reciprocity in the emotional sphere of life may be
a difficult need to admit given the emphasis on the
ideals of the centrality of children's needs and of
love as a fundamental modus operandi within the family.

In particular, I have sought to show that reciprocity
can be examined through a consideration of accepting
and rejecting relationships.   The stepparent, as
parent figure, is automatically placed in a 'giving'
relationship by virtue of the various parent roles and
functions performed. She or he therefore looks to the
child to be accepting of the stepparent. In the case
of acceptance by the child of the stepparent, the

relationship is more harmonious. When stepchildren are rejecting of the stepparent, the relationship is characterised by distrust and hostility.

In addition, I have indicated how ideas of rejection can be constructed through key events which eventually lead to a mythology about a stepchild. The role of myth in the stepfamily is thereby further extended.

Finally, I have considered the distinctiveness of the stepfather role in relation to parenting to that of the stepmother. I have argued that the non-existence of a myth of wickedness, coupled with the particular ideological features of fatherhood, enable stepfathers to view their actions unproblematically.

I now wish to consider further the role of myth in the stepfamily by examining this with reference to particular features of second marriage.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR: STEPPARENTS AND STEPCHILDREN

1   There are two issues which are relevant here.
        Firstly, Meg attributes to Josie, Sandy's
        mother-in-law, many of the features which other
        stepmothers in the study held with
        regard to the absent mother.   An
        analysis of Meg's attitude towards Josie shows
        clearly the construction of myth.   Whilst I
        do not bring this into the text in Chapter Six
        as I specifically discuss there the
        construction of myths about non-custodial
        parents, I do wish to note the similarity
        of meaning which Josie had in Meg's life.
        In these circumstances, the notion of 'sexual
        jealousy' is further overlaid
        Secondly, I note Meg's particular feelings
        about Emily in Chapter Five.

2   The role of children as 'Sources of
        Information' is taken up fully in Chapter
        Six.

3   I take up the use of 'key events' in the
        construction of a mythology in Chapter Six.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR (CONTINUED)

4   The fact that Jane asks Simon to undertake
this task indicates Jane's acknowledgement
of the legitimacy of Simon and May's
continuing relationship. I discuss this
further in Chapter Six in connection with
the construction of mythology.

5   The Marriage Guidance Council was renamed
Relate in 1988.

6   James' action here should be seen with
reference to the discussion in Chapter
Six of the role of children as 'Carriers
of Messages' and 'Sources of Information'.
James undertook both these roles and it
would appear that this gave legitimation
to undertaking the role of arbiter.

7   The issue of belonging and ownership in
connection with place of residence is
discussed in Chapter Five.

8   NSPCC - National Society for the Prevention
of Cruelty to Children.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EXPERIENCE OF SECOND MARRIAGE

> Both widowed and divorced who remarry
> are living not alone with the second
> spouse, but to some degree also with
> the first spouse.
> (Goode, 1956, p336)

INTRODUCTION

Goode's statement (op cit) forms the very essence of
this chapter. Indeed, the extent to which second
marriage is shared with the spouse of the previous
marriage has, as I have noted in Chapter One, given
rise to a debate which focusses on the differing effect
divorce and death as terminators of a marriage have on
any subsequent marriage. Centrally, the debate has
been focussed around the issue of whether the 'ghost'
of a deceased person is a less or more intrusive factor
in the second marriage than the actual presence of a
divorced partner.

I commented in Chapter One that the findings in this
area tend to be contradictory but that this in part
arises from the various foci which researchers have
used. In particular, findings may be those which give
perspectives which relate to the stepparent or they may
be those which relate to the stepchild. Nevertheless,
ambiguity can arise when studies are focussing on the
same perspective. Thus, Ferri's (1984) findings that
stepchildren have more difficult relationships with
stepparents who replace a parent through divorce can be
contrasted with Barnard (1956) who argues that the

stepparent who replaces a natural parent who has died is most resented.

Moreover, I have argued in Chapter One that we need to consider the particular structural and emotional effects of divorce and death in terms of both their similarities and their differences in order to gain deeper understandings of these processes and their effect on remarriage and stepfamily life. For example, despite any role they may have taken to initiate or have been the recipient of divorce action, men and women may well have different experiences of the divorce process due to custodianship or non-custodianship of children. Legal decisions which favour the mother as custodian of children is one aspect of this. Thus, generally speaking mothers continue to be full-time parents and fathers have to construct parental relationships on a part-time basis (Lund, 1987). The specific gender experience of the widowed needs to be similarly considered, particularly as both mother and father will remain a full-time parent after bereavement. By considering gender, rather than divorce and widowhood, the similarities and differences may be further explored. Literature on the stepfamily appears to have paid scant regard to this issue.

In order to more fully explore the importance of gender in both the experience and process of remarriage with reference to divorce and widowhood, this chapter considers the role of the second wife. In so doing, it illustrates the commonness of experience of this status. It examines the particular constraints which the women in this study experienced as a second wife in terms of the negative and comparative nature of this status. In addition the chapter is concerned to consider the questioning attitude to rights and obligations within marriage, and as parents, which second wifehood raises. It also considers the importance and the form in which the women in the study as second wives engaged in 'world building' (Berger and Kellner, 1980). Throughout, reference is made to the ways in which the roles of second wife and stepmother are intertwined. Finally, the role of the second husband is considered.

MYTH AND THE SECOND WIFE

As well as being stepmothers, all the women in the
study were also second wives. The twin status which
they shared in this respect is also paralleled in terms
of various mythologies which are ascribed to second
wives. Accordingly, in addition to a well articulated
mythology about the wicked stepmother which has been
the focus of discussion in Chapter Three, there are
also various cultural myths which society holds about
second wives. These are not expressed in children's
fairy stories but are well documented in the modern day
'blockbuster' and media presentations.

In true journalistic style Walker (1984) describes the
myths which second wives face. She comments 'Who can
say that they have not encountered the mythical
archetype of the second wife? She comes in two basic
styles: 'The full-chested floozy', who sets out to
lure another woman's husband away from hearth and home,
dangling her physical charms like a carrot in front of
a donkey, or 'the scheming, conniving, gold-digger' who
seeks not so much a healthy man in her bed as a man
with a healthy account in the bank' (Walker, 1984, p2).

Second wives, and stepmothers, therefore face
definitions of their status which convey extremely

negative images. It is this condition and the sense of comparison which it gives rise to which I wish to consider. In order to do so, I will first of all discuss the form in which second wives felt they were compared to first wives.

MOTHERHOOD AND WIFEHOOD: THE BASIS OF COMPARISON

The women in the study did not make statements which led one to conclude that either of Walker's 'two basic styles' formed part of their self-image in the same way that I have argued in Chapter Three that myths of the wicked stepmother do. However, it is clear from their comments and concerns that the previous wife was both an intrusive presence in their daily lives and a source of comparison.

The form of intrusion which these women experienced was, as I have noted, either through the physical presence of the previous partner or a more metaphysical image of the deceased. The likely idealisation of the deceased is subsequently counterposed with the reality of the divorced.

Hodder notes in her advice to stepmothers who marry
widowers 'As a stepmother, the most difficult aspect
for you to accept is the stepchildren's unrealistic
glamorisation of the mother; in comparison you seem
inadequate, grey and increasingly tarnished' (1985,
p58). Burns makes similar comments when referring to a
previous wife who has died that 'her memory may be more
formidable to reckon with' (1985, p56). A deceased
spouse is therefore attributed with an image which
emphasises their faultlessness.

Nevertheless, such idealisation does not necessarily
only occur in the case of death. The absence of a
parent would appear to be a more salient factor.
Wallerstein and Kelly note that when children
experienced disruption and absence in their
relationship with their fathers after their parents'
divorce this led to idealisation of the missing parent
(1980, p248).

In contrast to the idealisation of the absent parent,
the physical presence of the non-custodial parent is
perceived to be conducive to children making a more
realistic definition of their qualities. As Collins
remarks 'It is, of course, very much harder to idealise
someone who is temporarily or fitfully absent rather
than dead, because his or her inglorious reality serves

as a constant check on any unrealistic tendencies
towards sanctification' (1988, p148).

However, through access and maintenance, the non-
custodial parent can exert a power which the deceased
cannot.   In particular, the non-custodial parent can
present 'unexpected and unpredictable interventions'
which 'may continue to shape the fabric of everyday
life in the new family' (Burgoyne and Clark, 1982,
p137). (1)

The form in which the previous wife intruded into the
second marriage and consequent steprelationships did
indeed vary between divorce and mortality generated
remarriages. Nevertheless, factors additional to
divorce and bereavement also appear to be important.
These were the length of time of remarriage, the age of
stepchildren, the presence of a child of the remarriage
and whether or not the second wife was living in the
home her husband previously shared with his first wife.
Moreover, idealisation of a previous partner was not
confined to the deceased and non-idealisation was not
confined to the divorced.

In terms of those marrying divorced men, Jane had been
married for two years and her stepchildren were aged 9,
13 and 15. Further, the intrusive presence of Simon's

previous wife, May, was considerable. In particular, the issue of maintenance was a continuing source of friction. Moreover, due to the age of the youngest stepchild, Angela, access arrangements necessitated the active cooperation of all parties, including Jane as stepmother (2).

For Frances, who had been married for six years and whose youngest stepchild was aged twenty, the intrusion was negligible in terms of her relationship with her stepchildren. Nevertheless, Frances felt a particular sense of comparison in relation to her parenting of her son of her remarriage, Luke.

Louise, Meg and Susan were all married to widowers. For Louise the presence of the first wife is clearly linked to the age of her stepchildren and to the fact that she was living in her husband's previous marital home. This was also the case for Meg and Susan.

The life history accounts (see Chapter Two) clearly show that direct comparisons were made between first and second marriage. In terms of the comments made by previously bereaved men, Don, Henry and Frank all remarked that in some way their second wives were the 'same as' the first wife. George, previously divorced, is clear that he takes a more favourable view of his

first wife's parenting qualities.   Simon, also
previously divorced, speaks of the fear he experiences
when common experiences in first and second marriage
arise.   Nevertheless, despite the varying nature of the
source of comparison, and the issue of bereavement and
divorce, the sense of comparison which the women in the
study felt exposed to was primarily in terms of their
qualities as a wife and mother.

Louise actually faced very direct comparisons with
Don's first wife, Jacqui, as Don's life history in
Chapter Two indicates. They shared the same name (3),
profession and had a similar physical appearance.
Moreover, Don himself stated that he felt 'Louise was
chosen by my first wife to be the women to look after
her children' (4).   Jacqui therefore is the most
perfect of mothers as, even after death, she ensures
that her children's well-being is secured.

The 'ghost' of Jacqui was in fact a very real and
continuing force in Don and Louise's life and they both
spoke of its effect.   As Don states, Jacqui's 'spirit'
remained in the marital home until her children were
over the age of 18: (5)

            I strongly believe there's life
            after death.   I strongly believe

> that Jacqui's spirit was a very
> active thing in this house until
> the boys were well over 18. And
> I think if you ask Louise she would
> tell you the same thing.(6)

Jacqui's 'spirit' exerted an influence over the
decision making with regard to Don's children which can
only be interpreted as a form of control and
discipline. Both Don and Louise described various
incidents which they ascribed to Jacqui's 'presence',
such as objects being moved or disappearing. These
incidents were paramountly seen as signs of disapproval
from Jacqui that decisions were less than perfect.
Louise commented that "It would happen when we (7)
hadn't made the right decision about the boys [her
stepchildren]".

Objects would 'return' once such decisions had been
reversed or changed thereby suggesting that Don and
Louise had finally made the 'right' decision.   Louise
was clear that the force which Jacqui extended over her
life did not cease until Don's sons had left home as
Louise's comments illustrate:

> It was only when the lads [her
> stepchildren] left home that I

> felt that Jacqui actually left the
> house. I was frightened upstairs,
> in the bedroom. I was absolutely
> frightened. I hated it when Don
> wasn't here. In fact I wouldn't
> go to bed half the time. I wouldn't
> go up there.

Susan is also clear that she felt Beatrice was seen by
her husband and stepchildren to have been a perfect
wife and mother. She would therefore make comparisons
between her own actions and the type of behaviour her
husband and stepchildren had conveyed were appropriate
to Beatrice. Importantly, this led her to reconsider
her own parenting attitudes. Susan commented:

> I always felt that I was expected to do
> things the way they had been done in the
> past. I felt particularly with the girls
> [Henry's children] that I was always being
> compared. I had to live up with my children
> the way Beatrice brought up the girls. I
> felt I was always in the wrong because I'd
> do things different.

In addition, Susan is equivocal that her husband's love
for Beatrice and her impression of the pattern of their

lives together was also influential. The ideas that
Susan has gained of Henry and Beatrice's life arise in
part from the 'marital conversation' through which
husband and wife construct 'the little world in which
they will live' (Berger and Kellner, 1980, p308).
Through this process the individual past biographies of
husband and wife are reinterpreted to form a 'common
memory' (1980, p308) (8). The effect of this is to
lead to a sense of comparison in which Susan feels her
own experience and biography create problems. For
Susan, therefore, this in itself is a very negative
experience as she indicates:

> Henry loved Beatrice and you feel you want
> to be like her. Beatrice was quite laid back
> and accepted everything that Henry said.
> Things were quite calm for them. I was
> challenging Henry because I had been used to
> running my own life. I felt that that was a
> difficulty.

Jane similarly is aware that comparisons may be made of
herself with Simon's first wife, May. Jane's comments
illustrate that she had herself formed an idealised
image of May and reminds us of the role that second
wives themselves play in the construction of images of
a partner's previous spouse (9). Nevertheless, Jane

has the opportunity to contrast an idealised image
which she had pictured with reality.   Jane describes
her thoughts on seeing May for the first time:

> I wondered what she [May] looked like.
> I thought she must be quite attractive.
> You know, being older than Simon. But
> when I saw her I just didn't see what
> there was about her. I was jolly glad
> to see she was nothing like me. I think
> that would have made me run a mile. It
> would have been as if he was marrying
> another first wife.

Jane's words convey the importance for a second wife of
being an entirely different person to the first wife.
Nevertheless, this does not solely relate to physical
appearance. One of the bases on which Jane felt she
should be different to May was in terms of being a wife
and mother.

In comparison to Susan and Louise, who have been
presented with idealised images of the deceased, Jane
has the opportunity not only to see for herself but
also to hear negative comments from friends who had
known May. In the main, notions of respect prevent
similar comments being made with regard to the

deceased. However, although Simon's wife was defined
as certainly less than perfect, the effect for Jane is
the same as that for Susan. A felt need to be the
perfect stepmother and second wife. The imagery which
Jane uses illustrates her awareness of the
idealisation.

> I had heard things from Simon but mainly it
> was from other people. People who had known
> them as a couple. You know the sort of thing.
> The house was always a tip and the kids were
> always grubby and snotty nosed. I was
> determined to be the very opposite. I was
> the fairy godmother come to put things right.

The sense of comparison which Frances experienced arose
particularly through her parenting of the son of this
marriage, Luke. In this way we can see how the role of
second wife has distinct implications for the role of
mother. The poignancy of Frances' remarks here
illustrate the depth of this comparison:

> She [Linda] was always here [present
> marital home] with us. With the
> children [her stepchildren] mentally.
> And I think in all sorts of ways I
> was compared. I felt it particularly

>with Luke. George even called me by her
>[Linda] name when he [Luke] was born. I know
>these things happen. That you'll
>forget and say someone else's name.
>But I didn't want to be reminded of
>her just then. It hurt terribly. He
>thought she was perfect.

Nevertheless, Frances is contradictory of the image she
feels George portrays about Linda. Her reasons have
the same import as Jane's comments.   Principally,
Frances judges Linda in terms of her qualities as a
mother and finds her lacking. Linda's decision to
leave her children is contrary to any principle of good
mothering as Frances' words indicate:

>I didn't agree with him [George].
>I didn't think she [Linda] was
>better because she went off and
>left her children. Whatever sort
>of mother would do that?

Meg's feelings and attitude towards Frank's first wife,
Emily, suggest also that she did not feel that she had
to compete with an idealised image of Emily.   It would
appear, therefore, that non-idealisation is not solely
confined to the divorced. However, in contrast to

Frances and Jane, who can use specific forms of
behaviour as justification for her view, Meg cannot.
Social mores do not allow us to criticise the dead.
Thus, Meg calls on perceived wisdom in her conception
that Emily could not have been perfect.

> I never felt insecure about her. I didn't
> think of her as a person. Because she had
> died. It might have been different if I'd
> know her. I didn't feel I had to compete
> with anybody. Nobody's a saint are they?

One cannot, however, discount that at times Meg did not
feel a sense of comparison. The pleasure which Meg
expressed when told that she had provided a 'better'
wedding for Sandy than Emily would have done is
indicative at least of an awareness of this (10).

For each of the women in the study, the status of
second wife led to comparisons which gave rise to a
need to be as good as or better than the first wife.
The arena for such competition is the domestic sphere.
As Oakley states 'the most basic form of competition
between women relates to the institution of marriage'
(1981(a), p266). Nevertheless, the need to engage in a
competition which gives the husband as trophy should
not be seen as innate to the status of first and second

wifehood. As these accounts clearly show, husbands and stepchildren had a role which was conducive to engendering such competition.

In addition, the idealisation of a previous spouse is not only linked to bereavement and absence. In particular, we need to consider which features are being idealised. The statements above are clear that, for the women in the study, the ideals which were being presented to them, and importantly, which they presented to themselves, were those of motherhood and wifehood. Yet the construction of an idealisation also depends as much on the second wife's acceptance of the idealisation as on the extent that idealisations can be refuted. Death may be more conducive to idealisation but as Meg's comments indicate this is not always the case. Moreover, as Frances' statements suggest, it may not only be the bereaved who construct ideal images of a previous partner. It would appear that the divorced can also engage in this activity.

Nevertheless, the intrusion of the first wife into the marriage of the second, not only arose through comparisons of their qualities as wives and mothers. The place of residence was also a major feature where second wives felt the continuing presence of the first wife. Louise's comments above portray the continuing

effect of living in her husband's previous marital
home. This was also the situation for Meg and Susan.
The need to create a sense of identity and even a sense
of security was a common theme for these women.

By considering the more material aspects of such an
enterprise, these needs can mark an extension to Berger
and Kellner's (1980) notion of 'world building' as
second wives fashion to world in which they live. I
now wish to consider this process of 'world building'
in relation to the structural constraints of second
wifehood. The discussion will be concerned with place
of residence and will take the following form.
Firstly, it will consider the primacy of male wishes
with regard to place of residence. Secondly, it will
consider the way in which the women strove to create a
sense of identity in their new homes. Finally, the
discussion will indicate the continuing need which
these women experienced to live in a home which arose
from the joint biography of the remarried.

The role of the women in the study is central to this
discussion and in this connection I am concerned to
illustrate the use of pragmatic statements as a form of
legitimation and negotiation. In this way, I will
further indicate the particular structural constraints
which face the second wife.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

All the women in the study in one form or another moved to their husband's place of residence. Louise, Meg and Susan all moved into their husband's previous marital homes. Whilst Jane and Simon bought new property together their home was in Simon's home town and necessitated a change of job for Jane and a change of school for her children. Simon's children remained at the same schools and Simon's place of work remained the same. George was in tied accommodation, where he had lived alone since his marriage had ended. Frances moved into the tied house on marriage (11).

These findings do not concur with those of Burgoyne and Clark (1984). In particular, Burgoyne and Clark argue that because the legal process gives precedence to the rights of the mother to be the children's custodian in consequence the mother is more likely to retain the matrimonial home. 'Thus, when a mother in possession of the matrimonial home finds a new partner they will usually start living together in her old home, even if they move subsequently' (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984, p138).

The fact that this was not the case for the couples in this study is on the one hand indicative of the

variable nature of the law with regard to divorce and
property. With regard to property matters 'the courts
have evolved various permutations to balance the
interests of husband, wife and children, in differing
circumstances' (Burgoyne, Ormrod and Richards, 1987,
p68). As I have noted with regard to Meg's life
history, at a subjective level Meg felt particularly
disadvantaged in the legal process because of the
disparity between the type of legal help she could
afford and that which her husband obtained.

Notwithstanding this, at the time of the divorce
settlement Meg had already met Frank and as Smart
indicates 'the process of depolitisation and
individualisation which solicitors and courts engage
in' make it likely that Frank's presence would have
affected the legal outcome (1984, p190). As Smart
further comments this is due to the propensity of the
courts and solicitors to see the decision making
process in terms of 'the desirability of off-loading
her [an ex-wife] on to someone else' (ibid).

Frank's presence had by that stage also entered the
decision making process for Meg and is also indicative
of the individualisation with which the recipients of
legal jurisdiction experience that process. Thus, the
opportunity to sell her previous marital home and still

have somewhere for herself and her children to live was
an option available to Meg. Moreover, such a decision
was seen in quite pragmatic terms as Meg remarks:

> I had to sell my house because my
> ex-husband wanted his half. There was
> plenty of room here [present marital
> home] to extend.

Pragmatism was also the context of reasoning for the
other couples. Indeed, Burgoyne and Clark noted a
similar tendency that 'Relationships among the divorced
tended to be described in ways which place great
emphasis upon practical considerations and the
constraints of a particular situation (1984, p87). In
this way, second marriage in itself is viewed on a more
contractual and reciprocal basis than first marriage.

Nevertheless, whilst not denying the very real and
rational appeal of decisions of this kind, 'the reality
of everyday life always appears as a zone of lucidity
behind which there is a background of darkness' (Berger
and Luckman, 1966, p59). Such pragmatism cannot,
therefore, be taken at its face value. The fact that
all the women in the study moved to their husband's
home or home town still needs some explaining. I wish
to indicate that in order to do so we have to take

account of male primacy and male power.   This was
evidenced in a variety of ways as I will now detail.

The pragmatism expressed by Susan refers to the more
substantial aspects of Henry's home than her own and is
indicative of his greater financial status.   Susan
commented:

> We thought at first we would sell both
> houses and buy something new together
> but we would never have found anything
> as good as this (12). So we sold mine
> and the children and I moved here.

Don also portrays the reasons why Louise moved into his
former marital home in terms that his own home was of a
higher status. Nevertheless, Don's comments here have
also to be considered in connection with his statement
that he 'loved the house'. Don remarked:

> Louise was living in a council place
> so it was obvious she should move
> here.

The assumptive nature of male primacy, and female
acceptance, are also reflected in Louise's comments

about the move to Don's home. Louise explains how her
belongings were removed whilst she was away:

> I was away on holiday and when I came
> back everything was moved. The lot.
> Right down to the wardrobe. He'd [Don]
> done it while I was away. I thought I'd
> got a choice. My idea was to get a
> council exchange to here so I'd be
> nearer. But I just got on with it.

Frances' move into tied accommodation highlights the
importance of the male breadwinner role. Whilst we may
accept the pragmatism as rational and real, the
unquestioning nature of the decision to move into what
is effectively George's house lends weight to the
importance of the male's occupation. Frances
commented:

> George came to live here [present marital
> home] when he and Linda separated. The
> house comes with the job so we had no
> choice really. I had to move here.

Jane also gives very practical reasons for her decision
to move to Simon's home town. Nevertheless, her
comments also reflect male precedence:

> Simon didn't want to move his
> children to me. And as Joe was
> changing to secondary school
> that year I thought the move
> may not be too bad a thing. You
> know, get him away from the
> temptations of the city.

Despite the primacy of male wishes in terms of housing
and the broad acceptance which each woman portrays here
regarding her place of abode, the women actively
engaged in imposing their own sense of identity on
their homes. Whilst the heart of the following
discussion concerns Meg, Louise and Susan, the process
of 'world building' in this context was not limited to
them. During the fieldwork year, Jane and Simon were
busy with a range of structural and renovative repairs
to their property. Frances also had described how she
decorated the house after moving into it.

Even prior to the move, Susan began to shape the house
according to her own designs. Moving to a house which
was primarily designed for Henry's first wife,
Beatrice, who was wheelchair bound, the house contained
extra wide doorways and light switches and electric
sockets at waist height. Although these structural

features were not altered, Susan arranged for the house
to be completely redecorated as she indicates:

> It was so dull and pokey. I
> insisted on having it redecorated.
> We did it before the wedding.

The move to one's spouse's former marital home not only
raises questions of home decor, but brings with it a
series of decisions regarding personal possessions.
Joining two homes not only means combining two sets of
children, but also means two cookers, two three piece
suites, two sets of cutlery and so on. Moreover, the
household items were purchased with a former spouse.

The process of facing a spouse's past life continue
therefore as decisions are made about which possessions
to keep. The emotive nature of inanimate objects and a
sense of ownership is displayed in Louise's comments
about the negotiable tenor of the exercise. Louise's
words also remind us that the men may have been
experiencing similar feelings. I will return to this
point in the final section of this chapter. Louise
described the decision making process in these terms:

> We have a system. I get rid of one
> mine and he gets rid of one of his.

Nevertheless, women's role as housekeepers means that
they are prime movers in respect of domestic duties.
Susan illustrates that as confidence grows about one's
right of place in the new home, so the degree of
consultation diminishes:

> After I moved in I started to sort
> the cupboards out. At first I would
> ask Henry if he wanted to keep things
> but, well, I thought, I'm the one who
> uses them. It's up to me, isn't it?

Nevertheless, there remain areas of the house where the
reminders of a partner's past are too painful to face.
Both Louise's and Meg's words indicate the continuing
presence of the previous wife.

> Louise: The attic's full of Don's
> things. It'll stir things
> up the day we get it out.
>
> Meg: There's a bureau in there
> [indicating the dining room].
> It's the only place I've never
> touched. All Frank and Emily's
> papers are in there. I never
> open it. I just can't.

Notwithstanding these various attempts to create a
sense of belonging in their husband's homes, Louise's
comments indicate that despite extensive internal
redecoration and structural alterations, the continuing
sense of living in someone else's house remains.
Louise described her feelings about this in terms of
specific rooms in the house:

> It's funny, I like to sit in this bit [a
> new extension] because this bit is mine.
> The extension is ours. I mean Don has
> been great. He's done the house. The
> house is completely different. If she
> [Jacqui] came back she wouldn't recognise
> it. Everything of the first marriage has
> been cleared. But it took a while.

The Tyler's home was also redecorated and extended.
Overall, Meg was content to live there, but she had no
sense of permanency.

> We plan to sell up and move to Scotland
> when Frank retires. Until then this will
> do.

Meg's plans to move house were actually realised by the
Williams' and the Holmes' who both moved during the

fieldwork period (13). A consideration of their household removal gives further evidence of the importance of 'world building'. In addition, the pragmatic nature of the discourse throughout this period gives insight into the process of negotiation between husband and wife. In particular, I wish to argue that pragmatic reasoning acts as a form of legitimation which places the negotiation in the context of priorities and decisions which have previously been held as mutually acceptable.

The importance of legitimation has been noted by Backett who comments that the 'process of negotiating parental behaviour was characterised by the use of legitimations and legitimating tactics. These involved explaining behaviour to oneself and others so that it could be seen to be compatible with the mutually-held reality being created' (1982, p44). I will consider this more fully with reference to the concerns of Susan and Louise throughout their period of household removal.

NEW BEGINNINGS

There are several strands to the analysis of pragmatism
which need to be considered in order to draw out the
full implications of its role as a form of
legitimation. In order to contextualise the
negotiation process, this discussion will look at the
nature of pragmatic statements and compare these with
evidence of more subjective reasoning. It will also
indicate how it is important to consider that Louise
and Susan were prime instigators of the move.   The
interests and attitudes of their husbands, Don and
Henry are also indicated.

In part, this discussion reflects Voysey's analysis of
parenting disabled children when she remarks 'parents'
responses tell us nothing about what it is like to have
a disabled child in the family, but a lot about other
people's ideas of what it ought to be like' (1975, p2).
Thus, for the divorced it may be less legitimate to
talk of second marriage in terms of romantic love when
a first marriage based on these very principles broke
down. Similar forms of practical reasoning may also be
necessary to appropriately locate discussion within the
realms of the mutually-held reality of the remarried
couple.   In other words, to place such discussion on

the marital agenda in a legitimate and even a non-threatening form.

The decision to move house in each case was primarily rational and practical. For Louise and Don the chance of buy a new home was viewed in terms of future retirement. Thus, Don commented:

> It's too good an opportunity to miss.
> It'll be a nest egg for us.

For Susan and Henry moving house was also a way in which they could ameliorate some of their financial constraints. Susan considers the likely benefits and drawbacks. Her diary records:

> ### Tuesday 11 March 1986
>
> 3.30 p.m. Part of me feels it's a waste of time and money to move as I'm not sure how much we'd gain financially for a smaller house - if that makes sense. Are we going to have to pay almost as much as we sell this for for something much smaller.

Whilst accepting the rationality of these motives, in order to consider the way in which pragmatic reasoning

acts as form of legitimation one needs to take account
of the more subjective feelings of Susan and Louise in
connection with their living arrangements. Both Susan
and Louise's words reflect the continuing sense of
living in someone else's house. Thus, Susan commented
in previous conversations before moving house was
placed on the public agenda "I felt like an intruder".

Louise's comments were made only after the decision to
move had reached its conclusive stages. The emotive
nature of her words indicate how reminders of a
partner's past life encompass every facet of the living
space:

> I always hated that house. I never bothered
> with the garden. You don't want to look
> after flowers another woman's put in do
> you. Really, you'd rather poison them.

In these ways therefore the need to move house was
placed in a far more emotive sphere than more reasoning
comments would suggest. The very personal beneficial
effects of moving house also indicate the degree of
discontent which Susan and Louise experienced. After
moving house, their comments depict the pleasure of
living in their new homes. Thus, Susan remarked "It's
wonderful. It's just what we wanted". Louise

remarked "Don says I've changed completely. I go round
singing. I never used to sing at the other house".

Moreover, the level of dissatisfaction with living in
their husband's previous marital home can be viewed in
the fact that they were each the prime instigators of
the move. Louise had heard of a new housing estate
being built close to their present home and had
persuaded Don to see it. Susan had been out driving
and by chance saw a house for sale in a road where
friends from their local community centred lived.
Susan remarked:

> At the end of the road I saw this
> house for sale. I couldn't believe
> it. I went straight to the estate
> agents and got the details. It
> seemed perfect. When I got home I
> showed the details to Henry. He said
> it was worth a look so we went to
> the estate agents straight away and
> got the key.

Nevertheless, the issue is not a clear cut as this. In
particular, Susan's comments in her diary portray her
early thoughts on the matter and convey the tentative
and complex nature of her motivations.

Monday 10 March 1986

> 7.30 p.m. The estate agents are coming
> tomorrow to value the house. I had this
> grand notion of moving. I think it's
> really only because I'm a bit frustrated
> and bored and somehow the thought of
> moving added some excitement to my life.....
> I feel rather unsettled. I don't know why.
> things seem to be okay between the girls
> [Susan's stepdaughters] and me. I think I
> need to work this through more.

The uncertainty which Susan expresses needs to be
viewed in the context both of the pragmatic
understandings with which earlier decisions to live in
their present accommodation were made and in the
context of their husbands' feelings about their homes.
Henry had been positive about the benefits of the
family home. He made these comments while he and Susan
were in the process of looking for another house.
"We're not going to find anything else like this".

Don had been quite vehement with respect to his home
before any suggestion of removal had been raised "I'll

never leave here. I love this place. I'll never
leave".

In consequence the negotiation process between husband
and wife reflects the resultant need to be
accommodative. Louise was clear in this respect as she
said:

> I let him choose [the house type].
> He was the one who didn't want to
> move.

The importance of gaining Henry's agreement can be seen
in Susan's comments in her diary entry for the next
day. Henry had designed many of the features in their
present home and this was something which he
particularly enjoyed. The negotiation to move,
therefore, takes account of Henry's interests.

Tuesday 11 March 1986

> 1.30 p.m. I don't suppose we will move. I
> think it'd only happen if we could design
> our own house.

The tentative nature of the decision making process
between husband and wife exacerbated the ready made

tensions of buying and selling property. Louise was
particularly fearful that the purchaser for their
property would not be able to complete the necessary
transactions before the builders required their own
completion monies. Primarily, Louise felt that if the
purchase fell through Don would not consider an
alternative. Louise commented:

> We'll never move if we don't get this
> one. He [Don] won't go anywhere else.

Whilst pragmatic reasoning may offer immediate and
understandable motives for particular courses of action
in terms of the 'marital conversation' (Berger and
Kellner, 1980) between husband and wife (14), the
negotiable and accommodative nature of the discourse
also indicates that more subjective motives will also
be important. This subjectivity cannot be overlooked
when one wishes to consider the deeper meanings for
second wives of living in their husband's previous
marital homes.

Moreover, this form of 'world building' is important to
these women and to their marriages as an exercise in
creating mutuality of experience. As Henry commented
when they were negotiating the purchase of their

present marital home "It's given us something to share and that's been missing before".

The importance of a shared biography can also be seen in couples' needs to have a child of their marriage (15). The decisions which have to be made in this respect further indicate the specific constraints of second wifehood.   In addition, decisions of this kind allow us to analyse the taken-for-grantedness of first marriage.

CHILDREN AND SECOND MARRIAGE: THE QUESTION OF AN 'OUR' CHILD

Busfield and Paddon note that 'there is little evidence that many (married couples) are choosing to remain childless throughout marriage' (1977, p133). The major decisions which those in first marriage make, therefore, do not arise in respect of whether or not to have children but are concerned more with spacing and number. This cannot be said of couples in remarriage where children are already present. Here questions of spacing and number although relevant are rather secondary. The major question revolves around a more indefinite 'if' where the decision to have a child has

further ramifications than solely making a 'marriage' a
'family'.

Burgoyne and Clark (1984) argue that the need to have
children in remarriage can in part be seen as a
consequence of the perceived limitations of social
parenting as compared to the significance of blood
ties. Burgoyne and Clark's data included stepfamilies
where one partner was previously childless. In
particular, Burgoyne and Clark argue that 'Not
unexpectedly almost all the families in which custodian
fathers married childless women had already had babies
in their new marriages'. In this way their legitimacy
as a mother was enhanced (1984, p158 ff).
Nevertheless, Burgoyne and Clark argue that
stepfathers, who are also non-custodial fathers, are
'able to derive sufficient fulfilment from the social
aspects of parenting presented by their acquisition of
stepchildren' (1984, p160).

The couples in this study were all custodial parents
and therefore we need to locate their need to have a
child beyond the scope of the limitations of social
parenting. Nevertheless, the need to have a child,
where this was evidenced, primarily arose from the
woman in each case. Thus, the importance of such a
decision to mothers/stepmothers in particular has to be

considered. These points will be considered in
relation to the range of issues which having a child of
a second marriage brings forth. These issues included
the family's stage in the family life cycle, the number
of children they already had and the likely financial
and accommodation implications. Whilst each couple
displayed a range of variation in their attitude to the
subject of having a child of the remarriage,
nevertheless wider evidence suggests that the presence
of an 'our' child can be seen as fulfilling one of the
major aspects in developing a joint biography.

For Louise and Don the question of having more children
had never presented them with any difficulties. Don
had had a vasectomy and Louise felt, having had three
children, that she had had enough. In addition, Don
especially looked upon Louise's youngest child,
Michael, as his 'own'. I noted in Chapter Four that
Michael was only fifteen months old when Don and Louise
first met. Moreover, as I also noted in Chapter Four
Michael was particularly responsive to Don. The
reciprocal nature of Don's feelings were summed up by
Don who commented with reference to Michael that 'We've
got a child of ours I think'.

George and Frances already had a child of their
marriage, Luke, who was aged 3 during the fieldwork

year. For Frances, in part, the need to have another
child arose out of an unresolved desire to have had
more children in her first marriage. Frances' life
history account (see Chapter Two) conveys the medical
difficulties which Frances experienced in connection
with child bearing. These had also occurred in her
first marriage and Frances and her first husband,
Peter, had decided not to have any more. Nevertheless,
Frances commented 'I had wanted more than two'. Her
comments regarding children therefore indicate that her
ideas are located in terms of family size. Second
marriage, therefore, presented Frances with a second
chance where decisions in the past can be reassessed in
new circumstances.

The sensitive nature of decision making with regard to
having a child in remarriage was illustrated by the
Beauchamp's and is summed up by Burns who comments 'To
have a child or not to have a child ... the answer can
be more divisive than any other issue facing
stepmothers and their mates' (1985, p152). Jane's wish
to have a child was resisted by Simon. In particular,
Simon's reasons highlight one of the differences
between first and second marriages. Those in second
marriages will by definition be older than those in
first marriages. Simon's comments therefore reflect
ideas about the implications of having children in

terms of 'companionship, energy, patience and
attention, all of which it is assumed become more
difficult to provide if parents bear their children
rather late in life' (Busfield and Haddon, 1977, p291,
note 27). Simon thus commented:

> You have to remember that we'll
> be in our late fifties before it's
> grown up.

The pain which Jane experienced over Simon's refusal to
change his mind and the unresolved nature of her own
feelings can be seen in her comment:

> When people ask I tell them I'm not
> allowed [her emphasis] to have any.

Henry and Susan entered their marriage with the view
that they did not want any more children. Henry was as
similarly concerned as Simon that his age was an
important deciding factor. In his forties, Henry had
felt that he was 'too old'. With regard to having
children in her first marriage, Susan had commented
that they had planned to have more than two.
Nevertheless, on remarriage Susan had also thought that
she did not want any more children but as she began to
realise that she did she felt that she had deceived

herself about her real feelings. In this context,
therefore, the need to have children is in similarity
to Frances in part related to ideas about family size
generally. Susan commented:

> No, I didn't think I wanted more children
> when Henry and I met but you kid yourself.
> I was sure I didn't but really I was fooling
> myself.

Nevertheless, the decision to have another child was
not simply connected to ideas and wishes about
appropriate family size and spacing, as it may be in
first marriages, but required a variety of obstacles to
be overcome. In medical terms, the most specific
obstacle which faced Susan and Henry was that the
decision to have children required Henry to have an
operation to reverse a vasectomy he had had ten years
previously. This caused Susan some misgivings as she
wondered about the wisdom of such a step in terms of
the discomfort it would cause Henry. Such worries were
compounded by the attitudes expressed by Henry's
daughters, Amanda and Karen. At this point, the roles
of second wife and stepmother become interrelated. In
particular, Amanda and Karen had expressed disquiet at
the idea of acquiring a half-brother or sister (16).
Susan said:

> They [Amanda and Karen] said they
> wouldn't like it. They can't understand
> why we want children and if we did have
> one it had to be a girl as they don't
> like boys.

Nevertheless, whilst the feelings of other children are
taken into account in first marriages, the form in
which this takes is usually to ensure that older
children are not jealous of any new babies born.
Parents awareness of this issue is resolved in terms of
taking appropriate steps during pregnancy and after the
child has been born. For example, Leach advises
mothers 'Don't make the older child feel guilty about
jealous feelings' (1977, p401). However, in Susan's
case, her stepdaughters' resistance to the idea was
compounded with the worries she had expressed about the
necessity of Henry's operation. These difficulties
were sufficiently intrusive to cause her to have doubts
about the feasibility of having another child.
Furthermore, they engendered a sense of guilt about the
primacy of her own needs (17). Susan's words conveyed
these feelings clearly when she said "I feel selfish.
After all it's my need. I'm the one pushing for it".

Despite Susan's fears and worries, she was "overjoyed"
when Henry's appointment for his operation was

finalised. As the possibility of another child became
more of a reality, so Henry and Susan's thoughts began
to focus more directly on those which Busfield and
Paddon (1977) highlight as facing couples in first
marriage. This was the issue of spacing.
Nevertheless, Henry's thoughts also make it clear that
their decisions with regard to the age gap between
children needs also to take account of Henry's age as a
particular feature of this second marriage. Henry
commented:

> We think the age gap between the
> new baby and Hester [Susan's daughter,
> aged 3] will be too wide so we've
> decided to have two children not one.
> I hope it'll be twins then at least
> the age gap between myself and the
> babies will be lessened - if only
> slightly.

The issue of having children received minimal
consideration for Frank and Meg. Meg's comments fit
neatly the typology of stepfamilies drawn up by
Burgoyne and Clark (1984). Accordingly, in this
respect Meg's feelings would be defined under the type
'Looking forward to the departure of the children'

(Burgoyne and Clark, 1984, p194). Meg expressed her
thoughts in the following manner:

> At first I thought it would be
> nice [to have another child].
> But the children will be off
> our hands soon and then we'll have
> time to ourselves.

However, becoming a stepgrandparent was an important
process for Meg and one which further highlights the
questioning nature of a second wife's position in the
stepfamily and the interrelationship between this role
and that of stepmother. Two factors serve to highlight
this. The first concerns the way that the public world
confirms and conveys the lack of authority which the
second wife/stepmother holds. The second concerns the
way in which the taken-for-granted of first marriage
becomes questioned in second marriage.

During the birth of Sandy's baby, Meg kept Sandy's
grandparents, who live in Yorkshire, informed of the
progress of the birth. As admittance to hospital and
the actual birth were rather protracted, occurring over
a period of forty-eight hours, agitation was expressed
by Sandy's grandmother. In particular, she doubted
that Meg knew the full 'story'. A more legitimate

authority was Sandy's mother-in-law, Josie. Meg
described how she felt that this significant other
defined her as lacking in authority:

> I telephoned to let them [the grandparents]
> know how Sandy was getting on and she
> [the grandmother] asked for Josie's phone
> number. She didn't think I was telling
> her everything.

In addition, becoming a stepgrandparent raises concerns
with regard to the issue of names. For grandparents,
the preference for naming will revolve around the
desire to be called granny, grandmother, nanny,
granddad or even grandfather. For Meg her particular
worry was that she would not be called any of the
familiar titles given to grandparents but Sandy would
encourage the baby to call her by her christian name.
Meg's consciousness of the issue highlights its
problematic nature and the questions it raises with
regard to the not so taken-for-granted nature of
stepfamily life. Meg remarked:

> I'm not going to be called Meg.
> I shall insist that the baby calls
> me granny. I shall.

It is clear from the foregoing that the need to have a
child of a remarriage or to become a stepgrandparent
raises many questions and problems which are not
usually of concern to those in first marriages.   In
addition, although I have been anxious to illustrate
the especially difficult position of the second wife as
a distinct role within the stepfamily, for the couples
in the study the decisions which they needed to make
regarding further children illustrates the
interrelationship between second wifehood and
stepmotherhood.   This is not, however, to state that
the role and position of second husband is not
distinctive from that of first husband.   It is this
subject which I would now like to briefly consider.

SECOND HUSBANDS

I have argued that the existence of the first wife,
either as an image or as a physical presence, has
important repercussions on the role and experience of
second wifehood.   Nevertheless, it would appear from
the dearth of sociological literature on the second
husband that the distinctive features of this role have
been widely neglected.   In particular, data is implied
rather than specifically concerned with this subject.

For example, Goode considers the effect that the
presence or non-presence of a first husband has on the
wife's relationship with the second husband.
Specifically, Goode considers the frequency of
arguments between wife and second husband which arise
in connection with the first husband (1956, p336 ff).
It is the relationship between wife, first husband and
second husband which I wish to discuss.

Whilst the men in the study had varying responses to
their wive's first husbands, the most striking feature
of each account was the negligible effect first
husbands appeared to have on the lives of second
husbands when compared to the data with regard to
second wives (18).   Overall, second husbands were
dismissive of first husbands as if they were of no
concern to them.

The ability of husbands to be able to do this should be
seen in terms of their role within the stepfamily. As
I have indicated in Chapter Three, it is the
stepmother, rather than the stepfather, who undertakes
most of the day to day domestic needs of stepchildren.
In this way, stepfathers are very much protected from
some of the least pleasant aspects of stepparenthood
than are stepmothers. Further, the ideological
concerns of fatherhood place stepfatherhood within the

parameters of emphasising a breadwinner role. The
concerns of stepmothers are located principally in the
emotive and subjective.

What it takes to be a 'good mother' is therefore
singularly different to that which constitutes a 'good
father'.   In consequence, stepfatherhood takes on a
rather more detached quality than that of
stepmotherhood.   Stepfathers, who primarily see their
role as supportive, materially and emotionally, are
distanced from such close and sometimes intensive
involvements with their stepchildren.

This distancing is important when we consider the
nature of the competition which may arise between
second and first husband. As I have outlined
throughout this thesis, to be a good stepmother is an
extremely subjective and personal exercise. The form
of the competition is therefore also very personal in
nature. To be a good stepfather is rather less
personal by comparison. The regularity and size of the
wage packet may form the basis of competition but there
can remain a rather detached quality to the
interaction.

The attitudes of the men in the study to the first
husband were either that he was irrelevant to their

lives, he had no place in their lives or he was
encompassed within the stepfamily circle quite
unproblematically. Importantly, none of the men spoke
of the first husband of their own accord in the way
that the wives did. This, I feel, is also indicative
of the little relevance first husbands had to their
lives.

George's comments directly link the material
responsibilities of stepfather and father as the basis
on which he sees appropriate contact. Beyond these
matters, George feels that Frances' first husband,
Peter, has no place in his life. George remarked:

> I don't have anything to do with him
> [Peter]. I went to see him one. About
> getting some money for the children.
> But no. I have nothing to do with him.

Simon's relationship with Jane's first husband,
Richard, was friendly and accepting, with elements of
reciprocity. Richard enters Simon and Jane's house
freely and easily. They have all enjoyed social
occasions together, such as a meal in a restaurant and
returning to Richard's flat for drinks afterwards.
During the fieldwork period, Richard bought Simon and
Jane a video recorder both for their use and also so

that they could record programmes for Richard to watch in Spain where he works.

There is therefore no animosity or denial in the relationship been Simon and Richard. The only source of aggravation which Simon expressed about Richard was concerned with the material aspects of the father relationship. In this case it was the amount of money which Richard spent on his children Harriet and Joe. Simon felt it was unfortunate that he could not afford to buy for his own children the clothes, gifts and holidays which Harriet and Joe enjoy. Nevertheless, this issue was not by any means a major area of disagreement and is indicative of the impersonal nature of financial competition. Simon is able to be accepting and empathetic. He remarked 'If I were him, I'd do the same'.

Frank's attitude to Meg's first husband, James, is interesting in that Frank places his stepchildren's relationship with their father in the context of more extended family relationships. By doing so, the periodic arrangement of children's access visits can be encompassed within wider understandings of 'ordinary' family arrangements. Frank's comments are also reflective of gender typifications of the father role in the sense that he is able to remain relatively

uninvolved in the arrangements for his stepchildren's access visits. Indeed, Frank's words suggest they are peripheral to his main concerns:

> I never really think about him [James].
> Obviously he comes and calls for the
> children. It doesn't really affect
> me. I don't get involved. I don't
> know him so it's like them going to
> visit an uncle as far as I'm concerned.
> Obviously they listen to what he
> says. He's their father and I'm not.

Louise's first husband, Jonathan, did not have access to her children during the study period. The reasons for this can be located in legal judgment, the non-custodial parent's attitude and the stepparent's feelings. Louise's life history account (see Chapter Two) indicates that Jonathan was not granted access by the courts because of his alcoholism and general behaviour. Moreover, Louise had stated to me herself that during the divorce Jonathan had said that he would 'Get out of the children's lives'. Nevertheless, Jonathan does send the children birthday and Christmas presents.

Don's attitude to access indicates the extent to which
he also encouraged non-contact between his stepchildren
and their natural father. In particular, Don feels
that access should be discouraged. He places his
argument impersonally, in the context of the needs of
children. With regard to the presents which Jonathan
sends, Louise depicts Don's feelings about these in
terms that they do indeed represent a significant
reminder of Jonathan which Don would rather not face.
In particular, she commented that Don 'didn't like'
such intrusions. Nevertheless, Don himself here gives
the opposite impression about the presents. He is able
to do so by reducing the significance of the presents
to the children. In this was he dismisses any
relevance they may have in his stepchildren's, and
consequently, his own life. Don commented:

> We never have any contact with him
> [Jonathan]. It's always been done
> through solicitors. So there are no
> problems there. It's very important
> in my view that you don't have contact
> for the children's sake. They will
> make contact when they're 18. When
> they've gone to school and when they've
> achieved something. It's up to them
> then. They'll be old enough to make

> their own minds up. Until then they
> shouldn't be disturbed. They have their
> presents. We'd never stop the presents.
> Because we don't stop them and because
> we let them come they [Don's stepchildren]
> more or less shrug their shoulders at them.
> Throw them in a corner. They don't bother
> with them.

The relatively impersonal nature of this statement is
also reflected in comments which Don made on another
occasion concerning Jonathan. Louise had said to him
in my presence that whatever Jonathan's failings he was
still her children's natural father and therefore had
'undeniable rights'. Don's reply locates his argument
also in terms of parental rights, but they are still at
an impersonal level.   Don thus said to Louise:

> I think when parents are cruel to
> their children they should forfeit
> any right to see them. The natural
> parent isn't necessarily the best
> parent for a child.

The force with which these words were spoken were
indicative to me that Don felt particularly threatened
by any suggestion that Jonathan should have access.

Nevertheless, the form in which his statement was made
can be compared to those which stepmothers made
about non-custodial mothers. Stepmothers words were
located directly in the particular and the personal
under the aegis of '<u>She</u> is an unfit mother' rather than
the more impersonal '<u>Parents</u> who are ....' which is the
form which Don uses.

There are two levels therefore which this argument must
take account of. Firstly, the form of speech between
male and female is conducive to interpretations of the
abstract and the personal being similarly located in
gender stereotypifications. The more abstract the
speech the less likely the interpretation will be made
about subjectivity of feelings. Impersonal speech
forms also lend an authority which is denied to the
more personal speech form (Spender, 1980).

Secondly, the degree of intrusion which a previous
partner has in gender terms can also be evidenced
through more structural features as I indicated above.
For stepfathers, the basis of competition is less
personal and the degree of involvement in
stepchildren's lives is less direct. Whilst I can
have no doubt that from time to time the first husband
represented an unwanted intrusion in the lives of
second husbands, these structural features enabled the

extent of any intrusion to be kept under greater
control than was the case for the second wives.

Given these factors, I would argue that second wives
faced a far more problematic situation than was the
case for second husbands. Second husbands were very
much protected from the force of intrusion of a first
husband by various intervening factors. In particular,
these were the detached nature of their role with
regard to stepchildren and the impersonal form in which
they could achieve the ideological requirements of
fatherhood. In these ways, the structural features of
the role of second husband enhance their ability to
maintain control.

CONCLUSION

I have been concerned in this chapter to examine the
institution of remarriage and to consider its
interrelationship with stepparenthood. In particular,
I have argued that we need to overcome a dichotomy of
divorce versus mortality generated stepfamilies in
order to consider the specific gender implications of
remarriage.

I have, therefore, considered the role of second wives
in remarriage in the following ways. I have examined
the extent to which second wives feel first wives
intrude into their marriage. Specifically, I have
argued that the form in which this intrusion takes is
on the basis of a comparison of the qualities of
motherhood and wifehood.

I have further examined the way in which a husband's
previous partner intrudes into the lives of the
remarried through their place of residence. I have
argued that second wives engage in a form of 'world
building' (Berger and Luckman, 1980) in order to create
a sense of identity in their homes. The extent to
which they are able to do so is limited by the
continuing presence of the first partner.

I have also examined 'world building' in the context of
having children in remarriage. Here I have argued that
second wives face various structural constraints which
challenge the taken-for-granted nature of first
marriage.

Finally, I have consider the role of the second
husband. I have suggested that the structural
requirements of their role enhance their ability to

cope with any intrusion which the first husband may make into their lives.

In summary, therefore, I would argue that the role of the second wife is far more problematic than that of the second husband. In particular, the interrelationship of stepmotherhood with second wifehood, means that the women in the study were doubly disadvantaged. Both roles are structurally, and consequently more personally, demanding. Moreover, both roles are embellished with a mythology which emphasises the negative. Stepmothers are wicked. Second wives are drones.

In order to bring out the major importance of mythology in the experience of stepfamily life, I now wish to consider how mythologies are constructed and used by stepparents on an everyday basis - a subject that is answered in Chapter Six.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE: THE EXPERIENCE OF
SECOND MARRIAGE

1   This issue is further taken up in Chapter Six.

2   James was able to make his own access arrangements
    as Chapter Four indicates.   The implications of
    this are also discussed in Chapter Six.

3   I have previously noted in Chapter Two that I have
    used different names to make the distinction clear
    between first and second wife.

4   See Don's life history in Chapter Two.

5   This was the age when Don's children left home.
    It is also the age that Don maintains is
    appropriate for children to be 'independent'
    from their parents.   See Chapter Three, note 3.

6   Don was the initiator and constructor of this
    myth about Jacqui.   Nevertheless, as the 'ghost'
    had 'left' before the fieldwork began, I have no
    way of knowing the extent to which this very
    elaborate and covert form of control was used
    by him with regard to Louise.   In addition, I

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE (CONTINUED)

6   have no way of knowing what role Don's children
     may have add in substantiating the myth.

7   Louise uses the form 'we'. Nevertheless, I feel
     there is an element of doubt here and the term
     could be 'I'. This comment is made with reference
     to the remarks made in Note 6 above.

8   Burgoyne and Clark refer to a similar process
     which they use specifically in connection with
     remarriage and which they term 'courtship as
     confessional' (1984, p84)

9   The construction of images of a non-custodial
     parent is discussed in Chapter Six.

10   See Chapter Three.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE (CONTINUED)

11   Finch notes in connection with women living in
     tied accommodation that 'it removes from her
     any real possibility of participation in
     decisions quite fundamental to her lifestyle
     and puts them into the hands of her husband's
     employer. These are decisions about where she
     shall live, and the character and the quality
     of the accommodation of the housing, she shall
     occupy' (1983, p61). Frances' situation therefore
     needs to be considered as a special case in the
     light of these comments.

12   Henry's former marital home had six bedrooms,
     two bathrooms and three sitting rooms.

13   I discuss in Appendix A the relevance of moving
     house in connection with autobiographical data.

14   And of course, to the researcher.

15   I discuss in Appendix A the relevance of having
     a baby in connection with autobiographical data.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE (CONTINUED)

16 I comment in Appendix A how Susan used my own
    pregnancy as an example to Amanda and Karen.

17 See Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1983, p145 ff for a
    discussion on the generality of guilt inducing
    feelings in women.

18 The note of caution which I introduce should
    also be considered in terms of the limited
    nature of the data here. I discuss this further
    in Chapter Seven with reference to matters for
    further research.

CHAPTER SIX

MYTH AND MYTH CONSTRUCTION IN THE STEPFAMILY: AN ANALYSIS

> The myth is one of those snares of false
> objectivity into which the man who depends
> on ready-made valuations rushes headlong.
> (de Beauvoir, 1972, p290)

> A myth takes the form of a story that embodies
> certain ideas and at the same time offers a
> justification of those ideas.
> (Sykes, 1965, p323, emphasis in text)

INTRODUCTION

Sykes and de Beauvoir both highlight the role of myth
in the construction of ideas. Moreover, this thesis
indicates the particular effect which various
mythologies about the stepmother and second wife have
on stepfamily life. In addition it has examined the
process by which myths are constructed. In this
chapter I look more closely at the role of myth by
considering the form and construction of myth as a way
of making sense of the disjunction between various
ideals of family life and reality.

There are two ideals which are the concern of this
chapter. One such ideal is that of achieving a loving
relationship between parent and child and thus
stepparent and stepchild. Nevertheless, the
expectations placed on stepparents and which they place
upon themselves to love and care for their stepchildren
stand in opposition to the range of negative feelings
which stepparents may experience in their day to day
relationships. The prevalence of these negative
feelings is accepted by a range of 'experts' who assure
the stepparent, quite rightly, that they are reasonable
and acceptable. However, stepparents are cautioned
that such attitudes should be controlled - outwardly at

least. Burns is typical in this respect when she
states 'It is perfectly fine to <u>feel</u> negative about a
troublesome, difficult child, but your actions
shouldn't reflect your dislike' (1985, p195, emphasis
in text).

Maddox argues that the reason why stepparents
experience hostile feelings towards their stepchildren
is because the 'stepchild is a constant reminder of the
parent's sexual intercourse with a previous spouse'
(1975, p82). This may be part of the answer but sexual
jealousy was not acknowledged by any of the stepparents
in this study (1). Rather, more concrete examples of
hurt and rejection made their contributions to the
basis of stepparental angst. As I have outlined in
Chapter Four, stepparents' feelings on these matters
were very real and very tangible. Furthermore, the
myths which I discuss here were only constructed about
stepchildren with whom stepparents experienced
rejection.

A second ideal is that of achieving an amicable
relationship with a previous spouse/non-custodial
parent. The need to keep conflict out of such
relationships arises predominantly from a concern for
the welfare of the children of divorce. Again the role
of 'experts' play their part in defining the ideal.

Franks argues that to achieve an amicable relationship requires 'flexibility and great generosity, and an essentially child-centred approach' (1988, p105). Wallerstein and Kelly in a footnote remark about the benefits to children of counselling parents about the effects of parental hostility. They remark 'One encouraging result of the counselling intervention was the ability of some parents to refrain from continued criticism of the other spouse when they understood what an assault this represented on the child's own self-esteem....The youngsters' decreased trust in their parents after separation may have been related in part to each parent's attempt to undermine the other' (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, p28). The message therefore to stepparents is that an amicable relationship with their stepchildren is paramount if the stepchild's needs are to be met within the stepfamily.

However, these ideals are extremely difficult to achieve. I outline in this chapter the use of myth as a strategy to overcome the overcome the disjunction between ideal and reality. In particular, I consider myth as a coping mechanism. In addition, I discuss the process by which myths become constructed with special reference to the non-custodial parent. In so doing, I indicate how forms of contact with the non-

custodial partner are particularly conducive to the
construction of a mythology.

WHY MYTH?

Although I have indicated in Chapter One the general
reasons for considering myth as central to
understanding stepfamily life, I feel it appropriate
here to make some specific comments with regard to the
importance of myth in understanding stepparents' and
non-custodial parents' statements. Firstly, because of
their general nature in the study, the statements made
here about stepchildren and the non-custodial spouse
have a shared value. Moreover, there are indications
that such statements are reasonably common beyond the
scope of this study. In connection with negative views
of stepchildren, Maddox comments that 'Too many
stepparents live with an uneasy conscience. Who is
there to tell them that wicked thoughts and bad temper
are endemic among stepparents...'(1975, p79). Burns
has a chapter in her book entitled 'The wicked ex-wife'
which is suggestive of the generality of such
definitions (Burns, 1985, Chapter 5).

Secondly, these myths contain fundamental expressions
of attitude. In this connection, Kirk notes that myths
bear 'important messages about life in general and
life-within-society in particular' (1974, pp28/9) or in
this case, to paraphrase, life in a stepfamily. The
delineation of these perspectives within the context of
myth consequently enables us to analyse their specific
role.

Notwithstanding these reasons it should be noted that
the comments which individuals made about their
stepchildren and the non-custodial parent were <u>believed</u>
<u>to be true</u> by these individuals themselves. As Sykes
(1965) argues belief in the truth of the myth is all
important. He states 'The actual truth or falsity of
the story is irrelevant; what is important is that the
story and the ideas it embodies are accepted and
<u>believed</u> to be true (Sykes, 1965, p323, emphasis in
text). Backett correspondingly defines myth in the
context of the division of labour in the home as
requiring 'either minimal practical proof, or even no
substantive proof at all' (1982, p78). Nevertheless,
her respondents' belief that they had a fair division
of labour was important in the myth's role as a coping
mechanism.

These comments regarding belief in myth stand in
opposition to the comments I have made in Chapter Three
with regard to the myth of the wicked stepmother where
denial of the myth's truth is all important.
Nevertheless, this feature gives myth a very different
role in the stepfamily than that of the myth of the
wicked stepmother.   It is this role which I now wish
to further explore.

THE USE OF MYTH AS A COPING MECHANISM

I argued in Chapter Three that the pre-eminence of a
mythology of wickedness leads stepmothers to act in
certain ways and to acquire a consciousness of their
actions which will enable them to overcome any
ascription of wickedness upon themselves. In their
broadest sense these forms of action may be seen as
management strategies. In contrast to this development
of various management strategies as a means of
overcoming a mythology, I now wish to consider the use
of myth itself as a form of coping with the disjunction
between ideal and reality.

As I have commented the use of myth as a coping
mechanism has been noted by Backett (1982). Backett

argues that myth forms one framework within which
married couples deal with the various contradictions
and dilemmas which arise in the negotiation of parental
behaviour. Backett assigns the role of myth to a range
of assumptions which were expressed by couples to
support their belief in a fair division of labour
within the home (1982, p77 ff).

Backett draws attention to the legitimating aspect of
myth as a means of overcoming contradictions in
expectations of parental behaviour. The purpose of
legitimation in the context of a coping mechanism
cannot be underestimated.   In particular, legitimation
cannot be separated from inherent contradictions in
parenting stepchildren. I have argued in Chapter Four
that stepparents face various forms of rejection from
their stepchildren. When faced with such rejection
stepparents are left with uncertainty regarding their
stepchildren's feelings. Stepparents may also in turn
be rejecting of such stepchildren.

The experience of living with hostile emotions is
contrary to ideals of love within the family and sets
up conflictual elements both objectively and
subjectively. The effect on self-esteem and morale can
subsequently be devastating. Stepmothers tears were,
sadly, too frequently part of my fieldwork experience.

The dilemma therefore arises as to how such conflict between the ideals of love and the experience of hostility should be dealt with. An option open to the stepparent as a means of coping with this is through a process of objectification of that hostility and legitimation for it. Backett notes a similar process of objectification and legitimation among parents when she states 'The assumptions [of family life] were first objectified by respondents using them as legitimations in their accounts to me of family life' (1982, p10) (2).

The form in which the objectification of this conflict was achieved was simply by verbalising feelings and attitudes within the context of an account of stepchildren's behaviour. In this respect, as Berger and Luckmann state 'The common objectivations of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification' (1966, p51). In the course of making such statements stepparents would point out behaviour which the stepchild had exhibited or misdemeanours which the stepchild had committed. By so doing stepparents were building up an image of the child's character in such a way that their own attitudes and feelings would be justified (3). This point corresponds with that which Sykes makes in connection with myth that 'The story element will embody certain

beliefs that _justify_ these attitudes' (1965, p324,
emphasis in text)

There are two categories of myth which were prominent
in stepparents' accounts of their stepchildren:
Comparative Myths and Harsh Judgements. I shall discuss
each of these in order to more fully understand the
nature of myths surrounding stepchildren (4).

COMPARATIVE MYTHS

Myths of a comparative nature were of two types. Those
which made comparisons with the non-custodial parent
and those which made comparisons with the stepparent's
own children. I will deal with each of these in turn.

He's just like his father/She's just like her mother

Comparisons of stepchildren with the non-custodial
parent only arose in the case of divorce. The mores
which I have discussed in Chapter Five which relate to
widowhood and death generally mean that it would be
very difficult to make public such comments in a
justificatory way. Moreover, those stepparents who are
married to a divorced partner have met the previous

spouse and through their various relations in the past
have a stock of 'stories' which are readily available
for comparative purposes.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) note that resemblance to a
non-custodial parent was a common parental perception.
In particular, Wallerstein and Kelly argue 'Whereas in
a happy family such resemblance might earn the child
special favour, at this time [during divorce] the real
or fantasied resemblance was, for some of these
children a severe handicap. Such a child was sometimes
singled out as the representative of the departed
parent and made into a scapegoat' (1980, p101).

The focus of these myths was varied and would relate to
characteristics which were seen to have been exhibited
by the non-custodial parent and which had either been
exhibited by the stepchild or, indeed, might be so
exhibited in the future. Thus, comments ranged from
'His father could never hold a job and nor can he' to
'I think she might leave her own children one day just
like her mother has'.

Bad examples

Stepchildren who were seen to be 'bad examples' to
other children in the family were older than those

about whom the parent expressed anxiety. In addition,
it was usually same sex behaviour which was treated as
most worrisome. Fears from parents about the example
being set by stepchildren included attitudes to school
work and educational attainment, stepchildren's moral
standards and general behaviour.

HARSH JUDGEMENTS

Backett notes that parents use both personality and
physiological images to make sense of their children
(1982, p110 ff). Stepparents similarly use personality
and physiology to form their understandings of their
stepchildren. Nevertheless, whilst parents may talk
confidently about their own children's personality
traits from a knowledge which spans from birth, the
majority of harsh judgments which stepparents make with
regard to stepchildren emphasise the lack of knowledge
which stepparents feel they have. Thus, stepchildren
are defined as disloyal, secretive, purveyors of
untruths and bearers of malevolent tales about their
stepparents within which they portray themselves as a
modern day Cinderella or its male equivalent.

Comments such as 'He/She earns more than he/she says',
'He/she's a liar', 'You can guess what he/she's been
saying about me' and 'He/she's always keeping secrets'
were particularly common. Stepparents' expressions of
insecurity with regard to their stepchildren's true
feelings or thoughts can be seen in comments such as
'You can't tell by his/her face that he/she's lying'
and 'You can never be sure'.

Through the construction of myths of this kind,
stepparents were able to legitimate their own negative
feelings and actions towards their stepchildren.
Thus, one stepmother commented "I shall have to be at
home when he goes because he'll take anything that
isn't his to take". One stepfather remarked when
referring to his stepson's moral qualities "He isn't
safe near any children". For stepmothers, through its
justificatory power, this form of legitimation was
particularly important because it further denied the
myth of the wicked stepmother. In these ways,
therefore, these myths played a vital role as coping
strategies.

The range of myths which I have outlined reinforce the
social nature of stepparenting. Harsh judgements are
not confined to stepparents. Backett notes that
couples in her study presented 'alternative images' of

other couples' children which were certainly more
negative than those which were expressed by parents
themselves (1982, p103).   Backett argues that parents
themselves were unwilling to make such judgements about
their own children and would always qualify
unfavourable remarks by attributing problems or poor
behaviour to a stage or phase appropriate to the
child's development. These were signs of their
understanding of their child. Backett argues that this
need to 'understand' the child rather than taking the
child at face value, as friends may do, is a particular
hallmark of biological parenting. Nevertheless, the
need to 'understand' the stepchild was also primary to
stepparents and further indicates the ambiguous nature
of their role.   Neither full parent nor friend, the
stepparent's felt lack of understanding leads to the
insecurity outlined above.

With regard to comparative myths, those which make
comparisons with the non-custodial parent must be seen
in conjunction with the stepparent's negative attitudes
towards the non-custodial parent. To compare a child
with a loved parent is a very different matter to
comparing a child with a parent who is seen to be the
cause of upset or who is thought to behave
unreasonably.

Comparisons between stepchild-natural child are the
very stock of parental pride. They become problematic
however when they are used as Wallerstein and Kelly
(1980) above note to scapegoat a child or to define a
situation in which action is ultimately taken.

I now take up the issues of myths about non-custodial
parents in terms of the construction of myth. I also
consider the relationship between myth to individual
perception and action with special reference to the
myths which were constructed about the non-custodial
parent.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MYTH

The contents of the following discussion relate only to
those women in the study who were divorced or were
married to divorced men. The female centredness of the
discourse requires explanation lest I create a myth
which states that myth construction of the kind
indicated here is solely a female activity! Firstly,
the concerns which are exhibited here were primarily
those which women discussed. Secondly, the nature of
these concerns arises out of women's responsibility for
the domestic and childrearing sphere of family life.

It is for these reasons and not to sex-type
mythological construction that the data stresses the
female role.

The fact that this discussion is also linked to divorce
and not widowhood is also very important. The
construction of myths about the non-custodial parent of
the kind described here are only possible when the
parent is a physical presence in the lives of the
remarried. The discussion therefore illustrates one of
the distinctions between divorce versus mortality
generated stepfamilies. In so doing, whilst the theme
of the chapter is the construction of myth, the data
should also be viewed as descriptive of the
distinctiveness of divorce generated stepfamilies.

I argued in Chapter One that rather than taking divorce
and widowhood as all-encompassing terms, we should look
at the elements of each to consider their particular
effect on remarriage. In this connection, I noted that
access and maintenance are two aspects of divorce which
are worthy of special consideration. I now consider
these issues in terms of their role in the construction
of myths about the non-custodial parent. First of all,
however, their place in divorce law and policy should
be noted.

The overwhelming consideration in divorce law and
practice is the welfare of the child. As Maidment
states 'The child's welfare as a pre-condition to the
granting of a divorce reflects a modern belief that
while parents may choose divorce for themselves and
must face the consequences of their own decisions,
children need legal protection against their parents'
actions' (1984, p159). In this way, the notion of
access needs to be seen as a belief in the beneficial
effect to the child that continuing contact with both
parents brings.

In terms of maintenance, whilst there are distinctions
between issues arising in connection with the rights of
the ex-wife to maintenance and those connected to the
needs of the child 'All agree that the children should
be given priority when financial arrangements are being
considered' (Levin, 1984, p188)(5).

Nevertheless, whilst primacy is given to the child's
best interests, the practice of divorce is adversarial.
Solicitors are in consequence acting in the best
interests of their client and do so often in a hostile
way. Burgoyne, Ormrod and Richards argue that at times
the system may reflect the underlying reality of
intense hostility between the parents (1987, p82).
Nevertheless, the adversarial system can also give rise

to hostility and unresolved tensions which continue
post-divorce and into remarriage. These tensions and
their effects are fully described in the following
analysis where I will argue that they provide the
framework of palpability which makes the myth so
pervasive.

The child-centred approach of the law is reflected in
this discussion in the following ways. Firstly, issues
surrounding the child, in terms of maintenance and
access, are indicative of more general attitudes of the
responsibilities of parenthood. In turn, the
responsibilities of parenthood are the focus of the
myths. Secondly, the children themselves, through
access, have a major role in the construction of myths
about the non-custodial parent (6).

These factors are taken up more fully by considering
the construction of myth in terms of the following
categories: key events, forms of contact and images.

KEY EVENTS: THE MYTH TAKES SHAPE

Sykes (1965) argues that we need to distinguish between
the structuring of a situation and the shaping of a

myth. Situations are structured in terms of attitudes, beliefs and values. Shaping provides a coherent form for such attitudes, beliefs and values. The retelling of key events provides that shape.

In addition, Sykes stresses that the shaping of a myth also gives a story an emotive appeal. He notes, however, that 'although the appeal may be largely emotional, it is cast in at least a semblance of a rational form' (1965, p334). There is undoubtedly an emotive appeal in the key events recounted here. In particular they highlight the unreasonable nature of the non-custodial parent's actions. The myth's rationality lies in the justifications stepparents give for their attitudes.

In Frances' case both the non-custodial parent's behaviour was unreasonable and so was the timing. There was therefore a double injustice. The justification lies in the fact that Frances felt that she and George were already acting in a reasonable way. Frances made the following comments in connection with George's first wife, Linda's request for more maintenance:

> We got an affidavit on our wedding day
> would you believe from their mother

> suing George for maintenance for the
> two younger girls which we thought was
> very unfair because George and I were
> paying all their school fees and she had
> all their family allowance books and we
> felt the family allowance for the whole
> year was sufficient to finance the half
> holidays they had.

Frances expresses disquiet at the injustice which she
felt with regard to the amount of maintenance which she
and George were being asked to contribute. Frances and
George were therefore on the receiving end of such
requests. The focus of unreasonable behaviour which
Meg saw with regard to her first husband James was also
related to maintenance. Nevertheless, in Meg's case
she was the one in receipt of maintenance and felt that
the amount she had been awarded was derisory. Meg also
expressed justification for her view point.

Meg had in fact been awarded £1 per child per year
maintenance on her divorce from James. She therefore
had recourse to look to James to contribute informally
to their children's upkeep. The justification which
Meg offers for her view indicates the continuing
responsibilities of parenthood - non-custodial as well
as custodial - and the fact that those with less moral

obligation to give the children money do so. Meg made
the following comments when referring to a recent
access visit her children, Julia and Virginia, had had
with their father:

> They [James, Julia and Virginia] went to
> London for the day and do you know he didn't
> give them any money. I know he took them on
> the river but you'd think he'd give them
> some spending money. I think it's strange.
> My own father gives them 10p each every
> week and always has done. And if he hasn't
> seen them for a few weeks he saves it up.
> But James. He gives them nothing.

Throughout the year of fieldwork, access and
maintenance were a constant source of friction for
Jane. These problems reached their peak at the major
holiday times of Christmas, Easter and Summer when
customary arrangements were delayed or in jeopardy. On
the latter two occasions particularly, May as non-
custodial parent was indicating that she could not have
her children for their customary visits.

Nevertheless, these problems need to be seen as a
continuation of past events where the issues of

maintenance, access and custody were already at the
fore. Jane's comments particularly illustrate the
incremental nature of the shaping of myth in terms of
key events. As Sykes notes 'The incidents used are
carefully selected and simplified, and many different
incidents may be fitted together into one composite
story in order to achieve a simple but comprehensive
account' (1965, p334). This process is clear in Jane's
account:

> I met Simon in the June, May/June, and
> didn't meet her [May] until the Christmas,
> and, oh yes, in that period of time all I
> heard about her, first of all that she was
> going for custody of Angela, then for all
> three. Was continually [her emphasis]
> asking for money, writing the most peculiar
> notes about how she wanted an insurance
> policy that was hers and if she died there'd
> be no money to bury her. The whole thing
> was just weird. And this continual thing
> from the children about how poor mummy had
> no money. When I finally met her, she was
> well and truly stuck up my nose. [laughs].

Jane also comments on a key event in her relationship
with May - their first meeting. The adversarial nature

of the divorce process is continued through the
adversarial position of first and second wife. Women's
investment in marriage as a primary form of identity
means that by virtue of their role of wife and ex-wife
there can be no question of friendly feelings or
emergent sisterhood. Divorce and remarriage set woman
against woman. Jane and May were both attending a
carol service in which James was taking part when they
first met. Jane describes their meeting in the
following way:

> After the service, she came up to Simon
> about something about the children and
> Simon said, "Oh, this is Jane", and I
> said "Hello" and she said "Hello" and
> carried on talking to Simon. It has
> subsequently been thrown at me by her
> about how cool and frosty I was about
> meeting her. Christ knows what she
> expected. In the first place I was
> hardly going to fling my arms round
> her and say "Hail fellow well met".

Jane and May were brought together for the first time
through their shared interest in James - Jane's stepson
and May's natural child. The shared nature of the
parenting role between stepparent and non-custodial
parent in itself gives rise to the opportunity for
misconceptions and hostility to arise. Frances'
remarks in connection with her stepdaughter Lucy
indicate her own sense of injustice:

> We got messages back [from Linda,
> Lucy's mother]. Poor old Lucy.
> We'd forced her to do this and
> forced her to do that. Her
> mother believed every word of
> it.

Frances' comments also remind us that as well as issues
surrounding children being one of the main foci of the
key events which shape myths, children are also the
reason why communication between parent, stepparent and
non-custodial parent continue. I now consider this in
more detail.

FORMS OF CONTACT: THE SHAPING OF THE MYTH IS REINFORCED

The role of key events in the construction of myth
provides the shaping of the story element within which
the myth is encompassed.   Nevertheless, the
construction of myths about the non-custodial parent is
reinforced by the lack of direct contact which either
the stepparent or custodial parent has with the non-
custodial parent.

Simon and Jane were the only individuals who had direct
contact with their former partner during the fieldwork
period.   I have noted in Chapter Five that the
relationship between Simon, Jane and Jane's first
husband Richard was amicable.   Moreover, as Jane's life
history (see Chapter Two) details, Jane was satisfied
with the divorce settlement and no recurrent arguments
existed.

It is in addition interesting to note that no myths of
the type described here were constructed about Richard
during the fieldwork period.   The factors of direct
contact and amicability are crucial in explaining this.
In all other cases, direct contact was either minimal
or non-existent.   Furthermore, there were in each case
continuing tensions about divorce settlements between

spouse and ex-spouse, although it should be added these
were of varying intensity.

In order to explore this more fully, it is important to
consider the reasons why indirect means of contact are
preferred to more direct forms. In so doing we will
see how the unresolved tensions of divorce continue to
shape the life experiences of the remarried.

DIRECT CONTACT

Although Simon and Jane had direct contact with both
their ex-partners during the fieldwork period, their
relationship with May, Simon's first wife, was
particularly acrimonious. Direct contact, in this
situation, therefore had inherent dangers as there was
always the possibility of expressions of animosity and
resultant argument. Wallerstein and Kelly note that
'Raw feelings of both marital partners tend to be
exacerbated by visits...The visit is an event
continually available for the replay of anger,
jealousy, love, mutual rejection and longing between
the divorcing adults' (1980, p125). The following
account illustrate the explosive nature of direct
contact clearly.

Simon's life history (see Chapter Two) details one of
the problems arising out of his divorce settlement in
terms of maintenance and property rights. In
particular, May felt that she had financial rights to a
barn which Simon's father had given to him during their
marriage. The barn had been the subject of legal
argument in which Simon had been successful.
Nevertheless, whilst the legal argument had been
concluded in Simon's favour, financial arrangements
continued to be a source of discord.

Simon's account of an incident which occurred whilst he
was attempting to make access arrangements with May is
an illustration of how direct communication can open up
the way for the release of these unresolved tensions.

Simon had telephoned May to arrange the children's
Easter visit. During the course of the conversation May
had told him that as Clive (May's boyfriend) was
unemployed and her own temporary job had finished, she
could not afford to have the children for a long period
over Easter. Simon reported that he responded to May's
statements in the following way:

> I wasn't trying to be nasty or awkward
> or anything. I just asked her why there
> was such a problem with getting work.

It's not as if we have an employment
problem round here. There's lots of
work. She [May] went mad. Started
shouting and screaming down the phone.
And then she put the phone down on me.
I really didn't want to upset her. I
really didn't. I was only asking out
of concern.

Simon then received a telephone call from Clive. Simon
reported its contents as follows:

He was shouting. Didn't I know
that I'd left May in a terrible
state. I said I did but I hadn't
meant to at all. I said I just
can't see what the problem is
with getting work. He [Clive]
said it wasn't a case of taking the
first thing that came along and he
wished we'd get off their backs.
God knows what he meant by that.
I'd had enough by then. I told him
to "fuck off" and put the phone down.

Simon had no further direct contact with May over the
next few weeks and I will detail below (see Indirect

Contact) the form communication took between Simon and May.

Meg did not have any direct contact with her first husband James. Her children would telephone their father when they wanted to see him and make the necessary arrangements. When James came to collect them, he would stay in the car outside. Meg's reasons for keeping any direct contact to the minimum can be located in her biography. Moreover, her remarks convey very strongly an awareness of the dangers that direct contact can lead to in terms of conflict:

> I don't like to have anything to do
> with him [James]. I think because
> communication between us was always
> difficult when we were married. He'd
> just get violent. I still shake now
> if I have to have anything to do with
> him. I think I'm still frightened of
> him. And I'll try to be out of the
> way when he comes. I don't go and
> look out of the window or anything.
> I'll go into the kitchen when he drops
> them off.

In addition to the potential for acrimony arising out
of direct contact, the non-validity of any relationship
may also be cited as a reason for having no contact
with the non-custodial parent.   In the following
remarks, Jane details the ways in which she will avoid
contact with May. Her final comments place the
legitimacy for her actions in the realm of
responsibility for marriage break-up. Although Jane
recognises the validity of Simon and May's continuing
relationship and responsibility for their children, at
the same time, she denies any validity to her own
relationship with May. Jane comments:

> When I know she's bringing the children
> back and I hear the car, I actually
> remove myself if I think she might come
> in. She very rarely does. I will
> consciously go out of my way not to
> see her. I mean she only lives up at
> Amster [a village three miles from their
> current home]. Not a million miles
> away and I mean I have actually bumped
> into her and just said "Hello" and walked
> on. I still maintain that their splitting
> up was nothing to do with me and as far as
> I'm concerned the less I have to do with
> her the better.

It is clear therefore that direct contact will either be undertaken at the risk of creating more damage to an already fragile relationship or at the risk of causing more bitterness and animosity. In addition, direct contact will be rejected on the grounds that it is not a legitimate action in the parents' present circumstances. The severing of the legal ties of marriage is reflected in the severing of direct contact. For these reasons, a more indirect means of contact will be viewed as achieving the same result without taking the same risks or acting in an illegitimate way. I now consider the ways in which indirect contact was achieved and maintained.

INDIRECT CONTACT

There are two forms of indirect contact which I shall detail here as the main forms of communication between custodial and non-custodial parent. These are sources of information and the transmission of messages. I will consider each of these in turn.

Sources of Information

The information which the stepparent and custodial
parent obtain about the previous spouse is particularly
important in terms of structuring a myth. The
information which is obtained contributes to the
formation of an image of the non-custodial parent's
lifestyle and concerns.

The main source of information about the non-custodial
parent was that which was passed on by children through
their own contact on access visits. Given the nature
of the information which is passed by children about
previous partners as second hand, its truth value may
be questionable. Nevertheless, knowledge gained in
this way is treated as largely unproblematic by the
custodial parent. Sources of information may be
unsolicited or solicited.

The information about a parent which is unsolicited
will arise in the course of conversation. I detail
below a conversation which occurred between Polly and
Simon during one of my fieldwork visits. The
importance of this conversation not only lies in its
illustrative value with regard to how information is
passed by children about parents. It also illustrates
the way the raising of these subjects by the children

themselves gives parents what may be termed a natural
opportunity to ask questions about the previous spouse
which does not make the child feel uncomfortable or
disloyal.

Polly had returned home from school and quite soon
after arriving at the house she asked if she could
telephone her mother. When she returned to the living
room after making the call, a conversation took
place.The conversation needs to be considered in two
parts. Firstly, it contains information which is
relatively inconsequential to Simon's present concerns.
This constitutes the major part of the conversation and
can be viewed as gaining information which is of
interest for its own sake. Nevertheless, the
direction and tenor of the conversation allows Simon to
ask, finally, about an issue which could have important
consequences on future access and maintenance
arrangements. Simon asks about the outcome of Clive's
search for employment:

> Polly: It _was_ Clive.[her emphasis]
>
> Simon: What do you mean "It was Clive"
>
> Polly: I thought I saw Clive today but he
>   didn't say hello.

Simon: Why not?

Polly: I don't know. He was at Barlows.
           Mummy and Clive do work for them
           sometimes.

Simon: They work for Barlows?

Polly: Yes. They get occasional work there.

Simon: Did Clive get that job?

Polly: I don't know. He still hasn't heard.

We can see that Simon was able to raise the issue of
Clive's employment within the context of a conversation
initiated by Polly. Meg had similar cause to follow up
a remark Virginia had made about her father. As can be
seen from the life history data contained in this
thesis, and as I noted in Chapter Five Meg particularly
felt that she had not received equitable treatment from
the legal outcome of her divorce. Specifically, she
felt that James could afford legal representation which
was superior to her own. In addition, in common with
Jane's life history account, Meg disputed the honesty
with which James presented his financial details to the
Courts. The information which Virginia gives her adds

further support to her view that James' financial
situation is far superior to that which he declared. I
witnessed the following conversation in this
connection:

>   Virginia: Dad lost £100 from his
>   pocket last weekend when we
>   were at the pub. It fell
>   out of his pocket.
>
>   Meg: £100? Where did he get that from?
>
>   Virginia: He got it from the horses
>   ['horses' is a euphemism for rent
>   of pasture land and stabling.]
>   He gets it every week.
>
>   Meg: (Comment addressed to CH)
>   I always knew he had an income.
>   I've just never been able to prove
>   it. Now this £100 from the horses
>   proves it.

In addition to children acting as sources of
information in this direct way, letters sent to
children can also convey knowledge about the non-
custodial parent. Louise's first husband, Jonathan,

does not have access to the children (see Louise's life
history in Chapter Two). His only form of contact is
letters and cards sent to them at birthdays and
Christmas. The contents of one letter raised a lot of
unanswered questions for Louise and illustrates the
ambiguity which partial information gives rise to.
Nevertheless, the contents of the letter were clear
about Jonathan's present situation.

During one of my visits I asked Louise whether she had
recently heard from Jonathan. She replied that Alex
had had a letter within which was enclosed a copy of a
university graduation programme and a photograph.
Louise showed me these documents. Jonathan had written
to Alex to tell him that he had received a university
degree. The graduation programme was enclosed as it
contained his name and the photograph was a momento of
the occasion. Nevertheless, the photograph pictured
Jonathan with a female friend.

This was of particular interest to Louise. She
wondered whether the woman with Jonathan in the
photograph was his girlfriend with whom she had heard
he was living (see below) or whether it was a more
casual acquaintance from the university. The letter
itself contained no mention of the woman at all. In
addition, Louise questioned Jonathan's motives in

sending a photograph in which he was pictured with
someone else. Specifically, Louise wondered whether
Jonathan was making a silent statement to her that he
had a girlfriend or whether there was a more innocuous
explanation for the photograph. To date these
questions have remained unanswered for Louise.

However, the contents of the letter itself, conveying
Jonathan's academic success, were sufficient to cause
Louise to comment "He's doing everything now that I
wanted him to do when we were married. Making
something of his life". In this way, the contents of
the letter directly contributed to her image of his
lifestyle and concerns which are discussed below.

In addition to children being important sources of
knowledge about a previous partner, friends and
relatives from the previous marriage also act in the
same role. Thus, Louise knew from a cousin that
Jonathan had a long standing girlfriend and had
obtained a job near to where she was currently living.

Similarly, Frances was able to give me an on-going and
detailed account of the key events in her first
husband's life who had been living in the United States
since his own remarriage. The wealth of detail Frances
was able to provide was gained from relatives and

friends from this marriage who formed an appropriate
network of contacts.

The depth of information which Frances had about her
husband Peter included knowledge of his separation from
his second wife and his decision to fight for custody
of his two daughters of that marriage, Charlotte and
Felicity.   Frances knew that Peter had taken
Charlotte and Felicity out of the United States in
order to avoid a court injunction giving custody to his
wife and that he had stayed in France before visiting
England and finally returning to America.

Frances expressed a certain sympathy towards Peter's
situation which in part needs to be explained in terms
of comparisons she made between her first husband and
her second husband. In particular, Frances stated that
Peter was her 'friend whereas I don't think George is'.
Nevertheless, her attitude needs also to be explained
in terms of the problems which Frances felt Peter's
second wife, Gwen, had caused for her son Julian. As I
noted in Chapter Five, Gwen had accused Julian of
sexually assaulting his half-sisters whilst he was
staying with the family in the United States. This
accusation had led to court action and Julian leaving
the United States.

The sympathy which Frances felt for Peter led her to
offer to be a character witness on Peter's behalf in
the divorce action. Frances particularly felt
aggrieved at the accusations which she had heard Gwen
had made about Peter. Frances commented on these as
follows:

> She [Gwen] has been saying all sorts
> of things about him [Peter]. She says
> he's beaten her up and been violent.
> I know he's not like that. He was never
> like that with me. He's not that sort of
> person. I know. I'm quite willing to say
> so too if he [Peter] wants me to. I'd vouch
> for him.

The form in which Frances made her offer of help to
Peter was by making this statement to a friend of
Peter's. As Frances commented 'I told Craig I'd vouch
for him [Peter] if he wanted me to'. I now consider
the transmission of messages in detail.

Transmission of Messages

In similarity to sources of information, children also
play an important role in the transmission of messages
between custodial and non-custodial parent. Collins

argues that using children as go-betweens between
stepparent and custodial parent should be avoided as
such a strategy involves 'depriving the children of
their own importance and individuality' (1988, p182).
In addition, using children as go-betweens between
custodial and non-custodial parent also places them in
a position of arbiter and gives them a responsibility
which may be equally unfair.

Nevertheless, regardless of any moral or ethical
question, the use of children in this way was symbolic
for parents of the ending of their own relationship.
It also reduced the opportunity for the new partner to
feel insecure and threatened by the continuing
relationship of the previously married.   Moreover,
there were further pragmatic reasons to be considered
as such a method of communication carried fewer
potential dangers of hostility and animosity being
expressed.

I noted above that following the incident between Simon
and May they made no direct contact to each other for
some weeks. However, Simon took the children on their
next customary visit to their mother on the assumption
that she would be there to receive them. On arriving
at May's house, Simon sent his son James in to check
that she would have them and to ask whether they could

stay for an extra day whilst he and the other children remained in the car outside. Whilst Simon could easily have gone to the house himself and left James in the car, his decision not to do so has to be seen in the context of their recent altercation. Accordingly James returned and also had a message from his mother to his father. Simon reported that May had said, through James, that the children could stay but:

> If I wasn't able to collect them could I
> give them enough bus fare so they could
> get home.

Simon and May were therefore able to avoid further risks of confrontation by avoiding face to face contact. Nevertheless, May was still able to raise the issue of financial responsibilities for the children. This time, however, without fear of repercussions.

Meg's annoyance at her husband's lack of financial contribution to their children's financial upkeep was slightly appeased by asking him to make contributions to particular events in the children's lives. However, Meg did not approach James directly about these matters but asked her children to act as carriers of these messages. One such one-off payment was arranged as follows. It is clear from Meg's comments that even

when children act as carriers of messages they also
transmit information about the non-custodial parent:

> Julia wants to go on the Youth Club holiday
> again this year. I told her I'd pay
> half and to ask her father for the other
> half. So when she went there she did.
> He said he would but he only had £60 on
> him. As she was leaving on Sunday she
> asked him again. He turned to Marilyn
> [James' girlfriend] and said "Have you
> got £20". Julia said she looked at him
> daggers but she gave it him.

In terms of more long term financial arrangements, Meg
takes a more prominent role. In this way she
acknowledges the importance of the request which is not
fitting for children to make on their own behalf.
Moreover, by taking a more active part the chances of
success are increased. The children themselves had
been particularly unsuccessful with regard to this
particular issue when they had previously raised it
themselves.

However, Meg does not contact James directly. The use
of a letter provided the means by which to accomplish
this without risking face to face confrontation.

Nevertheless, the letter is not posted. The children
take it on their next visit. In this way, the contents
of the letter will be received in a more favourable
light than may be the case if it had arrived through
the letter box unannounced. Meg's final comment
displays her attitude towards James:

> Virginia went to see her father this
> week-end. I sent a note with her saying
> that as the girls were older and wanting
> things could he consider giving them
> pocket money on a regular basis. Virginia
> came back with £4. £2 for each of them.
> He's promised to give them that every week.
> I must have touched his conscience.

Letter writing was also an alternative form of
communication between Simon and May in which financial
and access arrangements were sounded. The outcome can
be rather long winded and circulatory. Thus, Simon
wrote to May asking her if she could make a
contribution to the children's school trip to France
and May replied in writing that she had passed the
letter on to her boyfriend Clive.

Simon showed me the letter he had received from May in
which it stated that her reason for so doing was that

because she and Clive had joint financial arrangements
effectively 'you [Simon] are asking him for a
contribution also'. After I had read the letter, Simon
commented "What sort of relationship have they? Not
very close I don't think". The implications of the
letter had therefore created an image of May and
Clive's relationship for Simon which was not
necessarily a realistic one. This image serves to
bolster other images which have been developed about
May and her present life, the accuracy of which has to
be doubted given the nature of the sources of
information.

Clive finally replied that he did not feel he could
make a contribution to the children's school trip as he
did not feel his own financial position would
accommodate it. The effect of Clive's letter was to
create anger by Jane and Simon at his refusal. They
argued that with five children to keep their own
financial situation was not that comfortable either.
However, there was little they felt they could do about
the situation and therefore the use of a letter, by
Clive, was successful in avoiding what would probably
have been more direct antagonism.

Notwithstanding these comments, there is one final
point which I wish to make in connection with the use

of letters as carriers of messages. Whilst their more
positive aspects can be said to be the avoidance of
face-to-face conflict, in more negative terms any
conflict which arises from them becomes deposited with
the recipient of the letter. As there is no means of
offloading this conflict directly onto its perpetrator,
through a row for example, the letter also serves to
justify the negative attitudes and images of the myth.
The effect of a further letter from May to Simon
demonstrates this.

In addition to organising financial and access
arrangements, letter writing also provided a means
through which disputes regarding the children
themselves could be aired. One such dispute arose
between Simon and May with regard to James. Simon had
told James that he could not give him permission to
leave school at lunch times. A short while later,
Simon received a letter from May, stating that she
could not agree with Simon on this matter. The letter
contained her reasons, the nature of which were
sufficient to make Jane, as 'principal custodian'
(Burgoyne and Clark, 1984) of the children particularly
angry. The letter stated:

> I think James is responsible enough to have
> a lunch time pass. You must think so too as

> he is left in charge of the other children.
> ....Some elderly neighbours told me the other
> day what a nice boy he was.

Jane's reaction to the letter indicates her view that
although she is the person who undertakes the major
responsibility for the children's welfare and upkeep,
ultimately May, who has correspondingly been neglectful
of such parental duties, will receive the rewards of
Jane's endeavour. Jane's comments also reflect on the
perceptions of wickedness that stepmothers hold which
were discussed in Chapter Three:

> What's she [May] done to make him
> [James] a nice boy? It's me who does
> all the washing, cooking and cleaning.
> But if anything goes wrong it will be
> my fault.

Jane's comments indicate that an image of May is a
crucial reference point for her understanding of May's
character and concerns. It also provides a basis on
which response is legitimated. Key events and direct
and indirect sources of contact each contribute to the
shaping and structuring of a myth about the non-
custodial parent. Essentially, they provide the

substance of image formation. These images are the
subject of the next section.

IMAGES: THE MYTH'S CENTRAL VALUE

In a reference about the images which parents form
about children, Backett argues that there were 'two
main levels on which respondents constructed images of
their child' (1982, p18). These were abstract images
and grounded images. Abstract images were derived from
the social stock of knowledge about childhood generally
whereas grounded images arose from biographical
situations.

The images which were constructed about the divorced
spouse were also grounded in biographical situations as
I have outlined above. Moreover, abstract images which
I discuss here were derived from the social stock of
knowledge which pertains to parental responsibility.
Nevertheless, it is clear that there is an interplay
between the two. Thus, grounded images will be
supported by reference to more abstract concerns. Each
of the remarks by the women in the study outlined below
use biographical data to support their view of abstract
concerns. In addition, abstract images can also convey

the appearance of a stereotype when these images are
assigned to an individual.   This, in fact, then raises
certain problems if we want to understand the
particular relationship between grounded and abstract
images.

Sykes notes that a 'myth may contain a stereotype or
stereotypes which are in themselves 'ready-made'
structurisations of a situation' (1965, p324).   Given
that stereotypes are composite characterisations of a
particular class or group of people, they express
clearly social attitudes to the class or group in
either a negative or positive way as well as portraying
the corresponding attitudes and values of that group.
Unfortunately, it is not clear from the data here
whether the stereotype to which abstract images are
assigned influences an individual's perception of a
situation or whether situations themselves build up to
the formation of an image which fits a stereotype.
However, although Sykes states 'The subject of myth and
of the various elements that it contains is extremely
complex' (1965, p325) it is clear that a myth can
contain both a structuring of situations as they have
occurred and such ready-made structurations which the
stereotype conveys.

In addition, assumptions about parental responsibility provide a ready-made reference point for the structuring of attitudes towards the non-custodial parent and in this sense image formation is abstract. In particular, the images which were formed spoke of the more neglectful aspects of the non-custodial parents behaviour. Moreover, these were referenced in terms of the ideological requirements of what constitutes a good mother and a good father.

Jane's comments regarding May portray this clearly. In particular, in Jane's view May had contravened one of the most important expectations of motherhood that the children come first. May had put her own needs first. She had left her children. For Jane this is beyond understanding. The image therefore portrayed in itself is one of wickedness. Jane remarked:

> I never have been able to totally
> accept how she could have left the
> children. I can understand how she
> could have left Simon because I left
> my husband. I could understand that
> but I couldn't understand how she could
> have left the children.

The composite nature of biographical events and her
attitudes regarding May's behaviour ultimately led
Jane to define May as 'mad'. For Jane, this was the
only way that she could make sense of May's behaviour
which appeared to contravene all expectations of
acceptable behaviour.

Frances similarly held a rather negative view of
George's first wife, Linda. In a summary comment about
the various unkind acts which Frances attributed to
Linda, Frances' bases her attitude on the absence of
qualities which are generally admired. Nevertheless,
her views are tempered by a certain understanding of
Linda which arises from their positions as the wife and
ex-wife of George. Whilst the element of
competitiveness which I described in Chapter Five is
still present, it is moderated through experience.
Frances expressed her feelings in the following way:

> I don't like her [Linda]. I mean she's done
> it and she's said it [various unkind acts].
> She does strike me as very mean and very
> selfish. I still think she's
> rather mean actually. I still don't
> basically feel we're the same
> sort of people. Empathy yes. Sympathy no.

> I don't think she's a warm person.   I don't
> think so.

The image which both Meg and Louise have constructed
about their first husbands directly concerns their
neglect as providers for their children.   Their
comments illustrate how strongly the ties of
responsibility to children are perceived.   Divorce does
not sever the moral force of the obligation although it
may make it difficult to enforce.

In particular, the information which Meg and Louise
have obtained about their first husbands, James and
Jonathan, leads them to develop an image of these men
firstly as having deliberately evaded their financial
responsibility and secondly as being financially
comfortable.

Louise's comments indicate her justification for her
attitude.   Specifically, Louise feels that she is
entitled to apply for a maintenance order which was not
instituted at the time of divorce.   Louise explained
her attitude towards Jonathan in the following way:

> It's not as though I've harassed him.
> I've given him plenty of time to sort
> himself out financially.   I feel very

> angry. He's got off scott free all these
> years. He's got a good job now and he can
> help towards Belinda and Michael. Belinda
> wants to go to university. That means she'll
> need supporting for at least another nine years.

Meg has similar comments to make about James' financial
position:

> I wouldn't mind if he [James] was struggling
> like we were when we were in Ashley [their
> marital home] but he's not. He's very
> comfortably off.

Meg also decided to apply for an increase in
maintenance payments during the fieldwork year. There
can be no doubt that the construction of myths about
James and Jonathan were a contributory factor in the
decisions to take this course of action. The message
of the myth was clear. These men had evaded their
responsibilities and were well able to afford to fulfil
them. The evidence which had constructed and shaped
the myth arose from a variety of sources in which key
events and forms of contact played a major part. It
has to be argued, therefore, in agreement with Sykes
that 'Through these various elements myth has a very

considerable effect upon the way in which an individual perceives a given situation' (1965, p324).

Nevertheless, the myth cannot be seen as being the total answer to why individuals act as they do. The effect of myth on action has to be seen in terms of the wider concerns of the principal actors at the point in time that such action is taken.

MYTH AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO ACTION

In order to examine the place of myth in the total structure of decision making and process in stepfamily life, I wish to consider other salient factors which led both Meg and Louise to try to alter their existing maintenance arrangements.

There were two main factors which were important in Meg's case. Firstly, she had become particularly worried about the financial cost of her two daughters to her second husband Frank. Meg's feelings on this matter are directly related to those indicated in Chapter Five that in second wifehood nothing can be taken for granted. Frank's two children, Sandy and David, had left home. In consequence, Meg did not

feel that she was making a contribution to their
welfare which would balance the contribution which
Frank was making financially to her children. Thus,
the duties and obligations which Meg assigns
unproblematically to James become problematic when
assigned to Frank. Meg's attitude confirms those found
by Wallerstein and Kelly that 'Several women also felt
a sense of obligation at bringing dependent children
into the marriage' (1980, p287). Meg commented:

> I've really become very conscious since
> Sandy and David left that Frank's keeping
> my two. If their father would just send
> them so much a month towards clothes it
> would help. I've got the family allowance
> so that's £7 each I feel I can spend on
> them and Frank says to let him know if I
> need more but I don't like to. Frank
> doesn't mind but I do. He says he knew
> what he was taking on when we married and
> in a couple of years they will have both
> left but I think it's so unfair that he
> has to help keep them when their own
> father doesn't.

In addition, a second factor which needs to be
considered is Meg's own personal financial situation.

Meg had recently changed employment and this had
resulted in a decrease in wages.   Meg's comments show
that she attributes this directly as justification for
her decision to apply for an increase in maintenance.
Further justification comes in the form of Frank's
capacity to provide financial help through his ability
to work. Nevertheless, we should remember that the
fact that he does not work, and is perceived to be able
to, by implication suggests his lack of responsibility.
Meg commented:

> I've been in touch with the Court and
> asked them to send the back maintenance
> and also a form, if there is one, to
> apply for a variation. I earn less now
> and I think that's a good enough reason.
> Anyway, I don't see why the court can't
> make him [James] get a job. When we got
> divorced he said he'd got a depressive
> illness which prevented him getting work.
> He's well qualified.
> There's nothing stopping him finding
> something.

In Louise's case, there were two further factors which
made their contributions to her decision to apply for
maintenance. One of these was that, as I have

discussed in Chapter Five, she and Don were moving
house and any extra money would be welcome to help meet
their financial commitments. Secondly, Louise
expressed the same feelings as Meg of financial
responsibility for her own children. In particular,
Louise's feelings arise from her biographical
experience. By corollary, therefore, Jonathan, as the
children's natural father is also financially
responsible for them. Louise commented:

> I've always felt they [her children]
> were my responsibility. Not Don's.
> That's why I've always worked full-time.
> I don't want him [Don] to turn round
> to me one day and say "I've kept your
> kids". When it's happened to you once (7)
> you're careful to make sure you've got
> some independence.

It can be seen therefore that whilst myth is a very
potent force in shaping an individual's perception of a
situation, the myth itself is only one factor which
leads to courses of action. Consequently, I would
argue that the effect of myth and its relationship to
action has to be seen in terms of the total concerns of
the actor at that point in time.

As can be seen the construction of a myth has many elements. Key events, which form the substances of 'stories', give form to the myth. Within this 'story' values, attitudes and justifications are given. The values which are encompassed in the myths about the non-custodial parent relate primarily to the responsibilities of parenthood. The attitudes conveyed by stepparents and custodial parents is that these responsibilities have been evaded. Justifications arise through the use of key events and knowledge acquired about the non-custodial parent through various sources.

The strength of the myth's central message is the construction of an image about the non-custodial parent. This image is reinforced by the indirect nature of knowledge acquisition. Specifically, indirect methods are more conducive to supporting belief in the myth than denying it. This is due to the questionable nature of the information itself given its second hand value.

Finally, I must indicate that one cannot deny the process of selection and interpretation of key events and information by stepparents and custodial parents in the construction of a mythology. In particular, the adversarial nature of divorce and the list of

grievances and unresolved tensions which thereby arise
are also contributory factors to seeking out and
emphasising the more negative qualities in a non-
custodial parent.

CONCLUSION

I have illustrated in this chapter the pervasive nature
of the role of myth and myth construction in the
stepfamily. I have considered the use of myth as a
coping mechanism through the construction of a typology
of mythical statements. In so doing I have sought to
show how the construction of a myth about stepchildren
enables stepparents to legitimate their own feelings
and actions towards their stepchildren.

I have, moreover, argued that these myths highlight the
contradictions which stepparents face. These
contradictions relate to the various ideals of parental
love and the reality of day to day life where
'resentment at one time or another in varying degrees
seems to be more prevalent than love' (Noble, 1977,
p41).   The stepparental role is also one of
contradiction as the individual is neither full parent
nor detached friend and this is further highlighted.

I have also discussed the process by which myths about
the non-custodial parent are constructed. I have
argued that the use of key events enables stepparents
to convey the myth in story form. These key events are
selected from both direct and indirect contact with the
non-custodial spouse. I have further argued that
indirect contact, through children, joint acquaintances
and letters, is more prevalent and more preferred as
there is less risk of creating further antagonism to an
already delicate relationship.

I have also discussed the images of a non-custodial
parent which are implicit in the myth. I have argued
that the image conveys the sense of evaded parental
responsibility and is important in directing the
individual's perception of a situation.

Finally, I have discussed the place of myth in the
decision making process and I have argued that the role
of myth here needs to be located within the wider
concerns of the individual.

This chapter brings me to conclude my analysis on the
role of myth in the stepfamily. It remains for me to
draw some summary conclusions from the data which have
been presented in the foregoing chapters and to

indicate the implications for future research. These
are the concerns of the final chapter.

**NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX: MYTH AND MYTH CONSTRUCTION IN
THE STEPFAMILY**

1   See Chapter Four, Note 1, where I indicate
     that Sandy's mother-in-law Josie, was the focus
     of Meg's antipathy which, I would suggest adds
     further support to the argument that more
     concrete factors have a key role to play here.

2   Backett further notes 'They were then further
     objectified by my process of selection and
     systemisation in order to present this account'
     (1982, p10). I can only endorse this comment.

3   This is not to say that stepparents'
     justifications were not in themselves
     warranted. Stepchildren do not always
     act in the most reasonable of ways and
     this is a point which should not be lost sight of.

4   I have been deliberately obtuse here with regard
     to keeping the discussion general in order to
     protect the individuals concerned who made these
     statements from any repercussions within their own
     families.

NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX (CONTINUED)

5   See Land (1984) for a discussion on women and
maintenance.

6   See Chapter Four where children also take
action as go-betweens in their own right.

7   Louise here is referring to her first marriage
where she felt particularly belittled by her
husband Jonathan.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE EXPERIENCE OF STEPPARENTHOOD: CONCLUSIONS

> ...remarried couples, when they
> consider their own family lives,
> try to believe that, despite
> complications of various kinds,
> they are 'making a go of it'.
> (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984, p27)

INTRODUCTION

This thesis has been concerned to describe and to
analyse the lived reality of stepparenthood. I now
wish to draw some general conclusions from the data
presented here. In particular, I wish to consider the
place of the stepfamily and stepparenthood in terms of
wider notions of family life and parenting. I will do
so by considering the roles of stepmother and
stepfather in the context of stepfamilial mythologies.
This chapter will also include my comments on the
policy implications of this thesis and areas for future
research work.

THE STEPFAMILY: A VARIANT FORM OF FAMILY

The data presented in this thesis cannot be separated
from the location of the stepfamily in society both
temporally and spatially. In particular, the stepfamily
as a variant form of 'family' will also be subject to
the political ideas of 'familism' and the ideologies
and values of 'familialism' (Barrett and McIntosh,
1982, p26). In a society which emphasises the positive
benefits of family life, particularly in relation to

the needs of children, and which also uses the term
'family' as a positive and sought after value in a
variety of taken-for-granted ways, it is not surprising
that the remarried stress the need to 'make a go of it'
(Burgoyne and Clark, op cit).

The optimism which the couples in this study expressed
with regard to their expectations of stepparenthood
prior to family reconstitution can also be located in
the positive images of family life which we hold. The
desire to recreate 'normal' family life arises in part
from the strength of such imagery. Moreover, family
reconstitution presents itself as a solution to the
ambiguities of single parenthood and the more practical
problems of childcare and domestic responsibility.
The life histories in this thesis indicate the degree
of upheaval which divorce and bereavement give rise to
in this respect.

However, although the idealisation of family life
presents a goal to strive for, if not actually
realised, the stepfamily is presented with ambiguous
and contradictory images. On the one hand it holds a
jaundiced image of second best and yet on the other it
presents a face of 'normality' in the sense that the
family once again comprises two parents. Society can
heave a sigh of relief that the social problem of

single parenthood has been solved but the solution
would appear to be rather less than ideal. The
stepfamily is, in this way, very much hidden from
society.

The role of the stepparent is similarly ambiguous.
Neither full parent nor disinterested observer, the
stepparental role operates in a vacuum of normative
expectations. Rapoport, Rapoport and Strelitz sum this
up when they state 'The ambiguity of this situation
arises in part from a lack of consensus about exactly
what function the stepparent <u>should</u> fulfil <u>vis-a-vis</u>
the child, and in part from limitations in the extent
to which a stepparent <u>can</u> play the part of a natural
parent, no matter how much he or she may want or expect
to do so (1977, p111). The desire to be a 'full'
parent to their stepchildren forms part of the
optimistic imagery of stepfamily life. However the
contradictions which stepparents are presented with
limited the extent to which they were able to achieve
this.

Role ambiguity, therefore, forms part of the problem of
stepparenthood. In order to judge its more specific
relevance we need to consider its relationship to the
various contradictions of the stepmother and stepfather

roles.   I now wish to do this with special reference
to the place of mythology in stepfamily life.

THE MEANING OF MYTH IN STEPFAMILY LIFE

I have described two forms of myth in this thesis which
have opposing meanings in the lives of stepfamily
members. For heuristic reasons I will distinguish
between them in the following way. The myth of the
wicked stepmother is the first form of myth which I
described and because of its common availability to all
in society I will refer to it as a 'public' myth. The
second form of myth which I have presented is concerned
with the individual personalities within the
stepfamily. For these reasons I will refer to it as a
'private' myth.

In so doing, I am aware that these terms only broadly
signify the distinction and meaning of the myths
concerned and the place of the stepfamily in relation
to them. The comments I make here therefore need also
to take account of those of Morgan who states that 'the
family is not only an interesting or special case in
the attempts to relate the interpersonal and the
structural but ... it is the institution in society

which is centrally concerned with these
interconnections' (1985, p275).

In particular, it should be noted that each form of
myth operates both publically and privately. Moreover,
they do so separately and in combination and one should
not overlook their various interrelationships. In
addition, these terms tend to mask the social and
ideological nature of the myths. This is particularly
so with regard to the designation 'private' myth.
Nevertheless, I hope that some of these features will
be made more clear in the following discussion. I
specifically wish to consider in turn the meaning of
each of these myths with reference to the ideas, values
and beliefs which they contain and their place in the
stepfamily.

'Public' Mythologies of Wickedness

I have argued that the wicked stepmother myth is
essentially concerned with the ideological requirements
of motherhood. In particular, such a mythology
presents an opposing case and indicates the likely
repercussions of acting in ways which are discrepant to
the values of motherhood and beliefs in the needs of
children. As I noted in Chapter One, the myth
therefore indicates the contradictions inherent in the

role of stepmother (and indeed mother) and it is through this contradiction that the 'public' myth provides 'a kind of anticipatory socialisation for those involved in transitions' (Measor and Wood, 1984, p18).

The form in which the myth provides 'anticipatory socialisation' is by specifically telling stepmothers how not to act. This leads to a situation where stepmothers have to devise various management strategies to overcome its maligning message. The power of the myth in this context can be seen in its rigorous effectiveness. Stepmothers go to great lengths not to be seen to be acting 'wickedly'.

For the stepmother herself such management strategies result in a degree of powerlessness which is not experienced by natural mothers. Specifically, stepmothers act by proxy in relation to their stepchildren. The natural father becomes a go-between. Stepmothers also strive to be 'perfect' mothers and this also renders them powerless.

This powerlessness needs also to be situated with reference to the position of women in the family and notions of 'familialism' (Barrett and McIntosh, op cit). Essentially, the mother-wife is the focal point

of family values, the 'angel in the house'. The
stepmother and second wife, however, faces various
mythologies which define her status as rather less than
perfect and certainly rather less than angelic. To act
in ways which support the myth brings severe penalties.

When these features are considered in combination with
the ever present structures of domination and
subordination within the family we can appreciate the
extent of the stepmother's powerlessness. Backett
(1982) indicates that mothers hold power through their
greater knowledge of their children and the increased
legitimacy accrued thereby. This is denied the
stepmother. In the stepfamily, it is the natural
parent who has the legitimate role with regard to
children. Thus, the 'petty power' (Barrett and
McIntosh, 1982, p65) of the mother-wife becomes the
impotence of the stepmother-second wife.

There is no doubt that stepmothers certainly try to
fight back, to accrue some power and some control over
their own lives. But this is gained at the severe cost
of guilt and loss to their self-esteem. And, more
importantly, with the supreme risk of being defined <u>by
self</u> and others as malevolent. We can see, in these
terms therefore, the supreme importance to stepmothers

of the management strategies I described in Chapter
Three.

Importantly, the effectiveness of the mythology of
wickedness cannot be separated from various ideologies
of motherhood and the ambiguous nature of the 'step'
relationship. In the absence of any other normative
framework for stepmotherhood, the requirements of these
ideologies to put children and husband first, to be a
carer _of_ and not to be cared _for_, are the only form in
which stepmothers can make sense of their role.

The situation for stepfathers, however, is slightly
different. There can be no doubt that their position
too is anomalous and ambiguous. Like stepmothers they
have no automatic 'rights' attached to their status.
Nevertheless, they are able to take a role which does
not carry penalties for non-compliance. The 'public'
mythologies of stepfatherhood, as I have indicated, are
seemingly sufficiently ineffective that they can be
discounted. In addition, the father role itself is not
as well defined as that of the mother role, nor does it
carry such exacting standards. Whilst this imprecision
makes the father, and hence stepfather, role
'problematic' (Backett, 1982, p195), it also gives
stepfathers more freedom of choice. When located in
the structural power of family life this freedom means

that the role of stepfather is certainly less oppressive than that of stepmother even though on an experiential and individual level stepfathers may find their personal position exacting.

I would argue that when each of these features are taken into consideration, it is clear that the mythology of wickedness cannot be discounted from an understanding of the realities of stepmotherhood. Moreover, the countervailing themes of mythology and ideology for stepmothers create a further layer of ambiguity to an already undefined role. In comparison with stepfatherhood, stepmotherhood is doubly perjorative.

The familistic theme continues to be encompassed in the 'private' myths of the stepfamily. I would now like to discuss these in detail.

The Stepfamily's 'Private' Myths

I have indicated in this thesis that the stepparents in the study constructed various myths about their stepchildren and the non-custodial parent. The themes of parental responsibility formed the central message of these myths in a way which further highlights the contradictory nature of natural and social parenting.

The responsibilities of parenthood prioritise children's needs.   As Backett states 'the immediate needs of children were felt to be predominant in the everyday familial interactions' (1982, p33). Nevertheless, in the stepfamily the children's needs may be divergent to those of the stepparent and natural parent.   The more usual period in first marriages of time spent alone as a couple before the arrival of children is collapsed in stepfamily life.   Children are ever present and the couple relationship has to be negotiated in the context of children's needs. Ferri remarks on this when she comments 'it seems clear that the rewards and satisfactions which remarriage may bring to the adults involved do not automatically entail corresponding gains for the children: their developmental needs do not conveniently change in response to changes in their family situation' (1984, p119).

Whilst children's and stepparents' needs may diverge, the stepparent nevertheless undertakes the routine day to day physical, emotional and financial care of children.   At this level, the stepparent role is that of any parent.   Nevertheless, the notion of a return for their work is the antithesis of good parenthood. Although Rapoport, Rapoport and Strelitz comment that 'Reciprocity is of key importance in family relations',

they do so in a chapter which is concerned with setting
out the authors' biases (1977, p30). The place of
their comment in the context of their work is therefore
suggestive that such a view is not orthodox.

The 'private' myths of harsh judgements and comparisons
contain parental fears and worries which arise from the
contradictions of stepparental responsibilities. This
is further evidenced in the fact that stepparents feel
able to retell the myths without qualification. They
do not feel they have to soften the remarks they make
through comments regarding the stepchild's more
positive qualities in the way that Backett suggests
natural parents do (1982, p104). Their role,
therefore, as social parent enables them to construct
these myths. Nevertheless, the content of the myths,
the stepchild's behaviour, is the very stuff of natural
parental concern.

Notions of parental responsibility are also the focus
of myths constructed about the non-custodial parent.
As I have argued, the myths particularly state that the
non-custodial parent has evaded his or her duty with
regard to their children. In addition, the myths
relate to specific gender requirements of parenthood.
Thus, non-custodial mothers are criticised for their
lack of physical and emotional care of their children.

Non-custodial fathers are criticised for their
unwillingness to provide financial support. This in
itself is indicative of the degree to which the
stepparents in the study accepted and felt it
appropriate that parental expectations should be
understood as a gendered activity.

In similarity to the myths about stepchildren, the
myths constructed about the non-custodial parent
indicate the contradictory nature of post-divorce and
stepparental obligations towards stepchildren.   As
stepparents, the individuals in the study accepted the
obligations of parenthood. On the face of it,
therefore, stepparental obligation would render
ineffective the need for the non-custodial parent to
remain responsible.   However, as I have indicated this
was not the case. The fact that the non-custodial
parent no longer appeared to exercise their
responsibilities towards their children was a matter of
concern.

These myths therefore speak of the permanency of
parental obligation. Divorce and remarriage do not
terminate these. In addition, the myth also underlines
the non-responsibility of the stepparent. The
stepparent may be undertaking the responsibilities of
parenthood and be willing to do so, yet ultimately they

are not his or hers to take.   The stepparent is after
all a social parent.

Whilst the content of these myths is stepfamilial, they
hold a different place in the stepparents concerns than
the myth of wickedness. These 'private' myths enable
the stepparent to manage the various inconsistencies of
stepfamily life. In particular, they become
legitimations for action. In this sense they operate
in a way which is favourable and useful to the
stepparent.

Whilst the 'private' myths enable the stepparent to
manage stepfamily life, the 'public' myth needs to be
managed.   It operates as a constraint on action as
stepmothers have to devise strategies to overcome its
message. We can see, therefore, that although myths
point out the contradictions in the social order, the
myths of the stepfamily also have contradictory and
opposing effects. Nevertheless, there is a unity
between 'public' and 'private' myths. Ultimately,
through their various constituent elements these myths
play 'an important part in determining how an
individual will cognitively structure a particular
situation' (Sykes, 1965, p324).   I have shown, this
cognition resonates through the everyday melee of
stepfamily life.

This brings me to close my comments on the role of myth
in the stepfamily. It remains for me to indicate the
importance of this thesis in terms of its policy
implications and for future research work.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

the policy implications of this thesis are rather more
implicit than explicit. In part this arises because
the stepfamily is not regarded by society as a social
problem in the sense that, say, single-parent families
are. Indeed, as I have stated family reconstitution is
seen as solving the problem of the single parent as
'normal' family life is recreated. Nevertheless, work
on the stepfamily is not only of direct relevance to
individuals living in stepfamilies but also to a range
of professionals whose daily work brings them into
contact with stepchildren, stepmothers and stepfathers.
These professionals would include teachers, social
workers, legal and health professionals and those
concerned with therapy and counselling.

The stereotypifications and poor image of the
stepfamily lead many professionals to consider that
stepchildren particularly are faced with a rather less

than ideal family situation. The ramifications of
this are seen in terms of assessment of such children
where biases of this nature become evident. As Ferri
states 'The present [Ferri's] study's findings have
hinted that teachers have less than positive attitudes
towards parents in reconstituted families' (1984,
p120).

The poor image which such professionals hold can only
reinforce the various mythologies which confront those
living in stepfamilies. It will not be until we have a
greater understanding of, and a greater empathy for,
stepfamily members that such images can be rewritten.
In this broad sense I hope that this thesis will
contribute to a greater understanding of
stepparenthood.

In addition, there are some specific features which I
feel are of value to professionals working with
stepfamilies. In particular, the construction of
mythologies regarding the non-custodial parent arise
out of the problems of the divorce process. In
particular, the adversarial nature of divorce sets the
tone of opposition between ex-spouses. Moreover, the
essentially negative experience of the judicial process
which the individuals in this study described with
regard to their divorces leads to a situation where

unresolved conflicts continue to dominate post-divorce
relationships. The situation is therefore inherently
combative and explosive. I am aware that the divorce
court reconciliation services aim to ameliorate some of
these problems. Nevertheless, their facilities are not
available widely and the proportion of divorcing
couples they are able to deal with is inevitably small.
It is essential, therefore, that we recognise how these
structural features enhance the construction of
negative mythologies about an ex-partner. Such
mythologies only contribute to further strain in
already fragile relationships.

Nevertheless, a greater understanding of the stepfamily
can only be realised as more research work is carried
out. I would now like to indicate the areas of work
which I feel are important.

RESEARCH PROPOSALS

This study has concentrated on the roles of stepmother
and stepfather in a study of stepfamily life.
Nevertheless, it cannot claim to be exhaustive of all
the areas of work which needed to be undertaken. There

are three areas of work which I feel specifically need
further attention.

The first of these concerns work on stepchildren.
Ferri's (1984) work is the only British study on
stepchildren and is based on statistical analyses. The
methodological emphasis of the study in consequence
leaves the experiential and interactive realms of
stepchildhood unexplored. In particular, such work
would be a useful adjunct to the present study.

The second area of research I feel is important is work
related to stepfatherhood and the role of the second
husband. I have noted in this thesis that my findings
particularly with regard to being a second husband were
suggestive only. This situation needs rectifying if we
are to understand the stepfamily in all its meanings.

I have also noted in this thesis that the absence of a
mythology of wickedness is contradictory to images
presented of stepfathers in the media. The stepfather
as sexual abuser does not appear to have influenced
male action in the stepfamily in the ways that
stepmothers are affected by myths of wickedness.
Nevertheless, this is not to say that the stepfather
could not become the 'folk devil' of the future (Cohen,

1980). It is only through further research work that
the answers to these questions can be found.

My comments with regard to further work on
stepfatherhood would support those of Cunningham-Burley
(1987) with regard to research on fatherhood generally.
Cunningham-Burley states 'A sensitive approach to
collecting data from men is needed to explore the
meaning and significance of the family' (1987, p104).
The meanings of stepfatherhood should similarly be
approached.

Finally, I feel that further work needs to be conducted
on the role of myth. I indicated in Chapter Two that
myth construction was not confined to stepchildren and
non-custodial parents but also involved the significant
others of wider stepfamily relationships. Moreover, if
we consider the work of Sykes (1965), Backett (1982)
and Measor and Woods (1984) it would appear that the
role of myth has an application well beyond the
stepfamily. Myth provides rationale and legitimation
for action, it shapes individual perception and so
feeds into action. A study of myth in other fields
would therefore add to our knowledge of this pervasive
form of knowledge construction.

A FINAL WORD

I have argued above that there is a need for greater
knowledge of, and a greater empathy for, the status of
stepparenthood.   Beset by negative images, it is
needful to emphasise the positive.   Such a philosophy
is encompassed in Ferri's work as she comments 'It is
vital ... that the picture of the stepfamily presented
in the media should not concentrate on its failures as
exemplified by the news stories headlining abuse and
cruelty by stepparents' (1984, p121).

The negative image encompassed in stepfamily
terminology has also been the subject of much needed
revision.   Thus, Mead comments 'We also need some new
kinship terms .... The word "stepmother", inappropriate
in the case of a divorce, has unfortunate implications
and is outmoded.   The hundreds of thousands of second
wives, struggling to give a good life to their
husbands' children, deserve a better term' (1975,
p124).

Whilst I agree wholeheartedly with the message,
nevertheless I do not believe that this is the only way
foward.   A change of terminology or a stress on the
positive will not unmask the underlying assumptions and

inequalities of stepfamily life. It will only add
further mystification to a family form steeped in
stereotypes and mythology. More importantly, we need
to critically examine each facet of stepfamily life, to
expose its contradictions. The knowledge gained
thereby is the only road to progress.

APPENDIX A

A STRANGER IN THE HOUSE: RESEARCHING THE STEPFAMILY

> ...of all the social worlds that
> sociologists study, the family is one
> of the hardest to observe. The idea of
> a sociologist sitting in on a family
> during the hurly-burly of the family
> meal, children's bedtimes, and the like,
> solemnly and silently recording it all in
> a corner of the living room, is obviously
> absurd; and clearly the kind of interaction
> that would be observed in such circumstances
> would bear little relation to what normally
> happens unobserved. About the only family
> life which a sociologist can study by
> direct participant observation is his or her
> own.
>
> (Goldthorpe, 1987, p1)

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to challenge Goldthorpe's
comments (op cit). Specifically, I wish to confront
Goldthorpe's notion that participant observation is not
a feasible methodological procedure in the context of
the family. On the face of it, therefore, this chapter
is concerned to detail the methodological process: the
approach used in this study. This is certainly a
primary aim and is written in the spirit of Bell and
Roberts' words when they comment 'If sociology is to be
more than a skilfully constructed device then the
research process should be less opaque and more open to
scrutiny (1984, p9, emphasis in text).

Nevertheless, such a process cannot be separated from
the role of the researcher herself. There is a growing
body of 'confessional accounts' (Burgess, 1984, p267)
which indicate the importance of reflection by the
researcher of his or her role from the earliest
beginnings of 'thinking about doing research' to the
production and dissemination of the product of these
labours. In the light of these, I do not think there
can be any doubt of the importance of such an exercise
in that 'they do highlight the principles, processes
and problems to which researchers need to be

sensitized' (Burgess. 1984, p10, my emphasis).   In this
way, I believe, they increase the potentiality of
academic excellence for which we all must strive.

This chapter therefore also takes account of the need
to write the researcher into the research process.
Indeed, given the direct association of the research
topic to my own biography this procedure is even more
pertinent. As a stepmother myself, I felt often that I
was indeed studying my own life.   This therefore forms
the second, but actually, the major theme of this
chapter.

The chapter is organised to take account of the
'methodological' issues of the study's focus, access,
role, data selection and data recording.   Nevertheless,
the emphasis is given to the personal in the analysis
of these topics.   The chapter therefore considers how
the status of being a stepmother both helped and
hindered in the field, how it raised certain special
problems and how these were dealt with.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE STEPFAMILY: WHY?

I commented in the Introduction to this thesis that
this research arose from the biographical detail that I
was a stepmother. Indeed, my initial submission to the
Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for funding
was to study stepmotherhood. The reasons which I gave
concerned gaps in the literature and as I wrote in 1984
the need to concentrate on the 'processual elements of
stepmotherhood in the context of ideologies of
motherhood'. Whilst my reasons were factually based,
there was a more subjective motive.

Stepmotherhood was, not surprisingly, an interest which
was close to my heart. I had personally found it a
very traumatic experience. It taxed me emotionally in
ways which I could never have anticipated. Very often
I had felt out of control.   To the extent that often I
would ask myself who was the child in the relationship?
Myself or my stepchildren?   Moreover, I never felt
that anyone really 'understood' my position.

These very personal experiences had led me to a
position which had a twin aim. Firstly, I wanted to
research stepmotherhood in order that its findings
would help other stepmothers. Secondly, I wanted the

research to engender an understanding of stepmotherhood
in others. Such aims are reminiscent of Hammersley's
initial career ambitions which he states were 'all in
the realm of changing the world dramatically!' (1984,
p42). However, as is clear from the very title of
this thesis, the focus of the research underwent some
change from initial inception to final report.

The process by which this change was evinced indicates
the interplay of biographical blindness and
intellectual development. It also indicates the
importance of the supervisor in PhD thesis
construction. In the dialogue which passes between
supervisor and student many suggestions and ideas are
put forward and discussed. Some are discounted,
unheard or put to the back of one's mind for future
reference. Others start one on a path of significant
discovery. I wish to consider two of these which were
important in directing the course by which the thesis
would evolve. They were each connected with reviewing
the literature.

The first suggestion which my supervisor made in this
connection was to read a study by Coffield, Robinson
and Sarsby (1980). Coffield et al had conducted
participant observation in the family and the published
work contained an account of this. My reading of this

marked a turning point in my thoughts about the form in
which the study could be conducted. I had previously
discounted any possibility of being able to conduct
participant observation within the stepfamily.
Indeed, I would previously have agreed with Goldthorpe
(op cit) that such an approach was impossible.
Nevertheless, Coffield, Robinson and Sarsby's success
was a clear sign to me of the possibility of this form
of research.

The second turning point arose again through
supervisor-student discussion and is particularly
indicative of the blindness to which biography and
preference can lead. In the course of discussion
regarding the various ways I might approach the study
of stepmotherhood my supervisor suggested that as there
was a 'lot of work on motherhood' it might be
worthwhile to consider stepfatherhood as well. Such
an approach would therefore allow me to take account of
the interactive nature of stepfamily life.

His comments certainly gave me pause for thought. As a
member of the male sex and without the dubious honour
of being a stepparent he indeed had the status of a
detachment which could never be mine. I had never
until that point considered including stepfathers at
all. I held his comments in mind unwilling to let go

of my total commitment to stepmothers. Nevertheless, a
reading of the literature, as I have indicated in
Chapter One, suggested that there were significant gaps
in the knowledge of fatherhood and stepfatherhood.
The consideration became a possibility.

The incremental steps which I was taking towards
reorientation however cannot be divorced from the more
practical considerations of gaining access to possible
participants. Whilst the frame of reference with which
I regarded the study was undergoing change, in tandem I
was also concerned with finding willing individuals who
would agree to become the 'objects' of study.

The requirements of completing a thesis inevitably has
a time component. This is perhaps more pertinent in
todays climate with the emphasis by the ESRC on
'completion rates'. The need for the possibility of
completion within the four year time limit meant that
although the fine details of how the research would be
conducted were still unresolved, I nevertheless had to
get underway my arrangements for access. In January
1985, therefore, the second term of my postgraduate
studentship, I started access negotiations. I would
now like to consider these with special reference to
the personal.

ACCESS

There are numerous examples in the sociological
literature where a special characteristic of the
researcher was a key factor in obtaining access.
Anderson (1923) had previously been a hobo; Delamont
was an 'old girl' of the same school as the
headmistress with whom she was negotiating access
(1984, p25).   Nevertheless, access is not a once and
for all activity. It is an ongoing and permanent
feature of the research process. As Spencer (1982)
indicates access involves negotiation to the research
location, to individuals and to documents. In order to
take account of this I wish to refer to two distinct
stages of access negotiation which are important to
this discussion. I will term these introductory access
and initial access.

Introductory Access

In using the term introductory access I am concerned to
describe the process of negotiating entry to the group
or individuals who are the focus of research where such
groups or individuals are the responsibility of various
gatekeepers.   This stage was particularly important in
this research as there exists no 'independent' or

easily accessible listing of stepfamilies from which to draw research participants. It was therefore necessary to make my initial approaches to the National Stepfamily Association, Cruse and Gingerbread as groups concerned with the remarried, the bereaved and the divorced and separated respectively. I hoped that these groups would be willing to forward a letter to their members on my behalf as a means of contacting stepfamilies who may be willing to take part. In this respect my personal situation and status was one factor that influenced the tenor of negotiation and the final outcome.

The purpose of my enquiries to Cruse and Gingerbread were primarily to gain access to past members who had remarried or were cohabiting. Nevertheless, the organisational structures of Stepfamily, Gingerbread and Cruse widely vary. Stepfamily was a relatively new organisation and had only been founded in 1983. It was run by the Secretary from her home. Gingerbread is largely based on self-help among members and the structure of Cruse emphases 'professional volunteers. As a consequence, there are significant class and power differences between these group's ruling hierarchies and as I will illustrate these structural factors were perhaps as significant as the effect of more biographical aspects of access negotiations. In

particular, as I wish to show, I was submitted to a
series of checks regarding the purpose of the research
and my suitability to discuss sensitive issues which
were reflective of both biographical and structural
features.

My first contacts with Stepfamily were made by letter.
As I was still at the stage of thinking that the
research would only include stepmothers this was the
basis on which I wrote to them in January 1985.
Nevertheless, I was a member of the organisation and
also a stepmother. I made both of these facts clear in
the letter I wrote:

> As a member of Stepfamily and as a
> stepmother myself I am undertaking a
> study of stepmotherhood at the
> University of Warwick where I am a
> postgraduate student.
>
> I am particularly interested in
> stepmothers' actual experiences and
> feelings about their daily lives. I am
> therefore writing to enquire whether
> you would be able to help me contact
> members of Stepfamily who are stepmothers.

In reply to this letter I was invited to meet the
Secretary of Stepfamily at her home in Cambridge.   Our
meeting consisted of lunch at the local pub where the
dialogue focussed on our own experiences of stepfamily
life.   The atmosphere was convivial and accepting.   As
the secretary had to return to work that afternoon, she
invited me to the Stepfamily office where I was left
alone to look through files for any information which I
felt may be of relevance.   This factor is I think
particularly illustrative of a new and young
organisation eager to enlist support.

The tenor of my negotiation with the organisation
Stepfamily was directly related to my personal
biography and its relationship to the organisations own
aims.   In particular, the Secretary had commented that
"There can't be enough research on the stepfamily".
Moreover, my position as a stepmother in their view
provided automatic assurance of sensitivity.   "You know
what it's like" was the framework within which our
dialogue took place.   Nevertheless, membership of
Stepfamily was a crucial factor in the degree of access
the Secretary was willing to give me.   Although a
relatively new organisation, Stepfamily had created a
lot of interest and had consequently received many
requests for assistance with various researches and
television projects.   The Secretary commented on this

and remarked that "We've decided because of the amount
of requests we now get, only to put members' requests
in the newsletter". I was fortunate that I fulfilled
each and every criteria.

In the light of these comments, therefore, my request
for a letter to be sent to members was refused on the
grounds that it would be "too time consuming for such a
small organisation". Nevertheless, the secretary did
agree to insert an "open" letter in the Stepfamily
newsletter. This was worded to emphasise the fact that
I was also a stepmother and therefore to make the
letter more personal. I hoped that this fact would
improve my chances of a successful response. Given the
national nature of Stepfamily it was also appropriate
to indicate the areas which were within travelling
distance. The letter was as follows:

> Stepfamily have been very kind in
> agreeing to enclose this letter in
> their Newsletter and I write to
> enquire whether you would be able to
> help me.
>
> As well as being a stepmother to two
> children aged 10 and 15, I am also a
> postgraduate student at the University

of Warwick undertaking a PhD thesis on
the stepfamily. My study is particularly
concerned with aspects of stepmotherhood
and the aim of my work is to develop a
wider understanding of the issues involved
in being a stepmother.

The most important part of my work concerns
stepmothers' actual experiences and feelings
about their daily lives. It is therefore
essential for me to talk to stepmothers and
their partners and it is in this connection
that I am calling on your help. If you are
a full-time stepmother and live in any of the
following areas - West Midlands, East
Midlands, Warwickshire, Leicestershire,
Oxfordshire, Shropshire - and both yourself
and your partner would be interested in
this study I would be very pleased to hear
from you. I would of course stress that all
information used in my study will be treated
in the strictest confidence. I look forward
to hearing from you and thank you in advance
for your interest and kind attention.
(Name and University address given)

I received seven replies to this letter, sufficiently
few to indicate the need to pursue other avenues of
possible access.

My contacts with Cruse can be directly contrasted to
those with Stepfamily in the sense of the importance of
insider status. Following a telephone call to Cruse to
introduce myself and the research, I was asked to
submit an outline of the research proposal in writing.
This was duly sent. The contents of the letter are
indicative of the stage of my thinking with regard to
the focus of the research and were as follows:

> I am writing to enquire whether your
> organisation would be able to help me.
> I am a postgraduate student at the
> University of Warwick undertaking a
> PhD thesis on stepmotherhood.   The most
> important part of my work concerns
> stepmothers' actual experiences and
> feelings about their daily lives.
> As I am interested in contacting
> stepmothers who are married to the
> previously bereaved I felt it appropriate
> to contact Cruse.

In particular, I wondered whether you
would be willing to forward a letter to
your past members who may now have
remarried. I will, of course, guarantee
complete confidentiality in every respect.
In addition, I would, of course, be very
pleased to discuss any aspects of the
research with you.

In response to this letter I received an invitation to
discuss my plans with the local Chairperson at her
home. The content of this discussion was less to do
with the research aims and more to do with the need for
sensitivity in discussing personal issues with the
bereaved. The Chairperson also discussed her own
experience of bereavement and I felt particularly that
I was 'on trial'. There was no doubt in my mind that
such sensitivity in dealing with these issues was an
important factor for deciding access and in consequence
the purpose of the meeting was to appraise my skills in
this respect. "Unless you've been bereaved, you can't
really understand" was a comment made to me by the
Chairperson which encapsulates the initial focus of our
meeting and which stands in direct contrast to the
tenor of negotiation with the organisation Stepfamily.

My request for a mailing to past members was directly
refused on the grounds of members' rights of privacy.
In the course of discussion, I also suggested that they
may be willing to insert an 'advert' in their
newsletter. This was at first treated with caution by
the Chairperson, seemingly to require the approval of
significant others. In particular, the Chairperson
said she had to "check with others on the committee".
Nevertheless, it was in fact accepted with little
problem.

The 'advert' was duly inserted in two issues of the
Cruse newsletter for March and April 1986. Its wording
indicates the difficulties I was experiencing with
regard to access to the remarried. By asking for
contact with single fathers I hoped that I would also
pick up those about to be remarried. Nevertheless, the
reorientation of the study which I have discussed above
was also beginning to be incorporated in the access
process. The 'advert' was as follows:

Calling All Fathers

Can You Help Me?

I wonder if you could help me? I
am a research student at the University

of Warwick undertaking a PhD thesis on
the stepfamily and as part of my work I
would very much like to talk to male
members of Cruse about their experiences
of single parenthood. I would stress
that all information will be treated in
the strictest confidence. If you feel
you could spare me a little of your time
or if you would like more information,
please contact me as follows.
(Name and University address printed)

I was also invited to attend Cruse meetings. As these
would coincide with the publication of the newsletter
containing my 'advert', the Chairperson suggested that
she would announce my presence as "this may help you
get a better response". However, despite these very
kind and committed attempts to facilitate my research,
I only received one reply to my request.

My negotiations with Gingerbread can in fact be
directly compared with those I experienced with Cruse.
In particular, my approach to Gingerbread appeared at
first the most fruitful. I telephoned them to
introduce my research and was invited to call into
their offices to discuss it further with the branch
secretary. Our meeting was friendly and informal. The

branch secretary agreed more than willingly to mail my
letter to both current and past male members in order
that I could make indirect contact with stepmothers and
I supplied them with the appropriate letters, stamps
and stamped addressed envelopes. These were forwarded
to twelve couples and the main body of the text was
worded as follows:

> I am a postgraduate student at the
> University of Warwick undertaking a
> PhD thesis on the stepfamily. My
> study is particularly concerned to
> develop a wider understanding of the
> issues involved in being a stepparent.
>
> The most important part of my work
> concerns stepparents' actual experiences
> and feelings about their daily lives. It
> is, therefore, essential for me to talk to
> both partners in a stepfamily and it is
> in this connection that I am calling on
> your help. I would, of course, stress
> that all information used in my study
> will be treated in the strictest
> confidence.

> If you would be willing to take part
> in my study or would like to hear more
> about it, please write to me using the
> stamped addressed envelope.

I received no replies to this letter and despite the
fact that follow-up letters were also sent, with
substantially the same content, I never received any
response.

My contacts with Gingerbread highlight the various
rationales which gatekeepers use in allowing access to
their membership. Gingerbread provided me with the
access I sought with relative ease. Yet I was neither
a member of their organisation nor was I researching a
subject of immediate concern to their membership.   I
have no explanation for this except to say that the
Branch Secretary had friends who were stepparents and
possibly felt the research was worthwhile in its own
right.   Indeed, she tried very hard to persuade them to
take part in the study but without avail.

In total I had eight replies to my various attempts to
obtain contact with stepfamilies who would be willing
to take part in the research. Whilst there could be a
host of reasons to explain non-response generally, it
appears that the direct relevance of the research was

an important feature. Thus members of Stepfamily had
responded whilst those who were currently members of
other organisations did not.

Notwithstanding these general comments, my first
meeting with the individuals who had written to me, and
indeed their letters, indicated some of the more
personal aspects of their own response. Given the
emphasis I had put on my own biographical details in
the 'open' letter in the Stepfamily newsletter, I would
like to consider these in order to illustrate its
effect in eliciting their response. As this is very
much a two-way process, in addition, I indicate my role
in selecting the individuals who took part in the
study.

Initial Access

I use the term initial access to denote the first
stages of contact which I made directly with the
families who took part in the study. As I have
indicated above, the design of the research was under
consideration at the same time as I was arranging
introductory access. The poor response rate which I
received was a major factor in delineating the research
and therefore has to be seen in conjunction with my

changing orientation with regard to including stepfathers.

Of the eight replies I had received, I did not receive a reply from one stepparent to my initial and follow-up letters offering to visit to "discuss the research in more detail". Of the remaining seven, five were families where both partners were stepparents, one was a stepmother whose husband had recently died and one was a stepfather and natural mother. These factors confirmed my decision to include stepfathers more fully than I had initially envisaged. The five stepfamilies where both partners were stepparents provided me with what I felt was a unique opportunity to have some form of unity to the study in the sense that all the individuals were both natural and stepparents. Their varying lengths of marriage from one to six years and the varying ages of children, from two years to adulthood, together with the reasons for remarriage, also I felt would give me comparative data. The recently bereaved stepmother and the stepfather family provided me with useful pilot data but in the circumstances were not included in the main body of the research. Whilst I was able to glean these details from the initial letters which I had received, final decisions were in fact made after I had visited each

family in order to gain an initial commitment from
these couples to the research study.

My decision to visit each family to discuss the
research in more detail gave me some insights into
their own motivations for initially contacting me.
Nevertheless, there is no easy answer to the question
of to what degree the fact that I was a stepmother
influenced their decision. A willingness to
participate in a research project stems from a
complexity of motives which range from a wish to help a
'good cause' to receiving some sort of gain from the
participation. Each person was asked why they had
offered their assistance in this respect. Without
exception all had seen their participation as
furthering the cause of the stepfamily. Each felt
their contribution would negate the poor image that
stepfamilies face. One stepfather particularly
commented "I want people to know that there are
successful stepfamilies".

There were, however, more personal reasons for taking
part. The research offered a form of contact with
another stepparent. In particular, another
stepmother. One stepmother's words reflect the need
for contact which arises out of a sense of isolation.
They also indicate the need for security in that

contact. Being a stepmother was not enough. However, combined with living in her old home town was. "I don't know anyone in a stepfamily. Then I saw your address and you only live down the road from where I used to live".

The nature of the research, the status of the researcher as an 'expert' in a particular field combined with my own biographical details meant that I was seen as a resource for a sympathetic ear. This was the basis on which another stepmother sought contact. Before we had even met she saw me as a source of support and this indicates the parallels between research of this kind and the counselling situation. All families had experienced problems and difficulties in their relationships with their stepchildren which particularly related to antipathetic feelings and prior to our first meeting this stepmother was anxious and worried about her situation. She had thought of telephoning me "for a chat" but had not felt able to at that time. A face to face meeting was necessary to close this social distance.

As far as the stepfathers in the study were concerned, it is a little more difficult to assess their personal motives for agreeing to take part in the research. As I have indicated my initial open letters were primarily

addressed to stepmothers and one would therefore expect
stepmothers to be the ones who would express most
interest. Thus it is no surprise that in all cases it
was they rather than the stepfathers who replied. One
letter particularly indicated that the prime response
came from each woman. "I have spoken to my husband
about this and we are agreeable ....". One
stepfather's comments indicate why stepfathers were
agreeable and this stems from a husband's wish to help
his wife. "My wife wanted to do it and I agreed for
her".

I would suggest that due to the focus of the open
letters stepfathers felt that their role was one of
support to their wives rather than one of equal
importance. Nevertheless, research on grandfatherhood
indicates the peripheral role which men generally see
is theirs to familial research. As Cunningham-Burley
comments 'The grandfathers ... treated the interviews
very differently [to grandmothers]. They laughed and
joked, came and went, and tended to be somewhat
peripheral to the proceedings' (1987, p93).
Stepfathers' role on the periphery of family life is
further reflected in the fact that, as this thesis
indicates, stepfathers generally did not see their role
as problematic in the way that stepmothers did. As
one stepfather commented "what's there to say?".

Notwithstanding these factors, during my first visit to
the five families which I had singled out as likely
prospects, I felt it was necessary to stress that I
wanted to include stepfathers as well as stepmothers in
the study. I also stressed that I would want to visit
each couple "regularly for twelve months in order that
I can take account of any changes which occur in this
time". These remarks were taken by each individual
very much at their face value. Each couple felt that
it was a good idea to study change as they had already
experienced many changes in their careers as
stepparents up to that time.

In addition, I remarked that the research would involve
some taped interviews but that in the main it would
consist of me visiting "just for a chat". I felt it
important to signal the kind of role I would be taking
but these nebulous terms were also quite deliberate.
Although, as I have indicated my plans were to take a
participant observation role in the stepfamily, such a
role could only be carried out with the willingness and
acceptance of the families concerned. The personal
nature of social research as a relationship between
researcher and researched not only reflects on issues
of dominance and subordination, stranger or friend and
gender, in on-going research of this nature it also
reflects on the more interpersonal factors of social

life. Ultimately, this becomes whether the researcher
is a welcome intrusion in the stepfamily or an
unwelcome one. I will return to this issue later.

I left each couple to discuss my proposal and said that
I would telephone them the following week to find out
whether they would be willing to take part. For my own
part, I had been treated with a warmth and a welcome
which calmed my extremely nervous interior. I never
slept a wink the night before my first visits! I felt
both empathy and sympathy for each family and could
only wait even more nervously before I telephoned to
find out whether they would be willing to take me on!
Fortunately, they all agreed.

I had reachedthe stage where the actual fieldwork was
arranged and finalised. It was now a case of actually
carrying it out. I would like to detail my fieldwork
experiences with special reference to my role of
participant observation in the stepfamily. In
particular, I wish to illustrate the strategies I used
to enable me to accomplish a participant observer role
in the stepfamily, the implications of the role in
terms of developing relationships and the response of
the stepfamilies involved to being the subjects of such
a research role.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION IN THE STEPFAMILY

I noted above that my intentions with regard to
participant observation in the stepfamily were
expressed in rather nebulous terms at my first meeting
with the individuals concerned. Essentially, I argued
that the success or non-success of the role depended
very much on the degree of willingness each family
exhibited. Nevertheless, this is not to say that I did
not take a particularly conscious role in terms of
enhancing the possibility of the enterprise in this
respect.

Specifically, I reasoned that I would not be able to
undertake a role in the stepfamily which was
constructed in terms of me 'sitting in a corner
silently recording' (Goldthorpe, op cit). Moreover,
Coffield, Robinson and Sarsby indicated that 'Initially
for us, the research relationship was easier to handle
if there was a mutually acceptable reason for the
visit' (1980, p12). Coffield et al were able to do
this because of their material advantage over the
research participants. Lifts in cars and the taking of
photographs were areas where their presence was
gratefully accepted. In my own situation, my study
couples were in a far more materially advantageous

position than I. To find a 'mutually acceptable'
reason for my visits could not therefore be located in
these terms.

Coffield et al, nevertheless, make a further comment
which also formed part of my thinking with regard to
research strategies. They remark 'There was an unease
in our relationship because, although our families knew
about 'surveys', the idea of long-term anthropological
fieldwork was unfamiliar to them' (Coffield, Robinson
and Sarsby, 1980, p13). My own feeling was that if I
commenced the fieldwork with unstructured interviews
(see Appendix B) this would have three benefits.
Firstly, it would enable me to collect background data
about each individual which would be helpful through
the fieldwork. Secondly, it would give me a mutually
understood role in the stepfamily in the early stages
of the fieldwork. This would also allay some of my own
nervousness as I would have a defined and preplanned
objective to my visit. Thirdly, it would allow each of
us to develop a relationship and to get to know each
other within a structured situation which had some
shared understandings.

On the whole, this strategy worked exceedingly well.
The 'interviews' gave a purpose to the visit for both
myself and each stepparent. In addition, I was given

cups of tea and invited to stay for meals as part of
the social process of hospitality. I was introduced to
children and visitors and generally made to feel 'at
home'. I was therefore able to extend upon these
growing features of my relationship with each couple as
I completed the unstructured interviews and began to
visit 'for a chat'.

Nevertheless, there was still unease about the method
of research which I felt and which was exhibited by
some of the stepparents. My own unease stems from the
nervousness I felt which I have outlined. For the
first three months of fieldwork, my most anxious
concern was the need for continuing access. My field
notes after every visit record the comment 'Thank
goodness they have agreed to see me next time'. On one
occasion, on my second visit to this family, one
stepchild asked me how often I visited the other study
families. Whilst such a comment is indicative of the
interest which the study families took in each other
and to which I will return, the response from his
stepfather gave me grave concern. I replied that my
visits were usually fortnightly. The stepfather
responded "You're not coming here again that soon are
you?". Whilst I hastily rearranged my mental diary to
comply with this felt overload on his part, I also
suffered much anguish. Was I going to lose access? I

did not but I feel his comment indicates the extent to
which we can expect others to 'fit in' with the
sociological enterprise.   As Bulmer states
'Sociologists do not command obedience like military
strategists; they are rather like supplicants dependent
upon their respondents' good will' (1977,p8).

In addition, comments from stepparents indicated that
my role did not seem to bear any relation to the
research enterprise. In particular, they would ask me
"Are you getting what you want?. This can be compared
to the "Was that alright?" which often followed a taped
interview. In one case it was not until one stepmother
had started to take sociology at night school that she
had some deeper understanding of my role. This was the
year after the fieldwork had ended. During the period
that she was studying 'methodology' she thus said to me
accusingly "Now I know what you were doing when you
were visiting us". Notwithstanding these comments,
there was at times an indication that the study
families themselves felt that I had shared part of
their lives and concerns. One stepmother, on the day
that she heard that her house purchase had been
finalised, turned to me and said "You've really lived
through this with us haven't you".

Whilst these issues indicate both the consciousness
with which I constructed my initial role in the
stepfamily and the generalised lack of understanding
which the individuals in the study had of my purpose,
it nevertheless does not take account of wider features
which had their effect on the kinds of relationships
which I developed with each family. In particular,
aspects of my biography were important in this process
as I illustrate.

BIOGRAPHIC COMMONALITY

Although my initial fieldwork was designed to provide a
basis from which I could develop a more participating
role in the stepfamily, the sharing of experiences both
including and beyond stepfamily life were also
important features in the development of each
individual and familial relationship. Finch (1984)
notes how important the shared aspects of her biography
were for her research participants in putting them at
ease during the interview.   In addition to gender
identification, Finch makes special reference to the
fact that when she was interviewing clergy wives she
also shared this status. This factor gave an assurance
of confidentiality and allayed suspicion to the extent

that clergy wives 'became warm and eager to talk to me
after the simple discovery that I was one of them'
(1984, p79). I would like to extend on this issue by
analysing the extent to which the multifarious aspects
of biography were influential in developing
relationships.

The research process, in terms of listening to accounts
of people's lives and thereby giving them a sense of
importance is not often met with in the hurly burly of
everyday life. It creates a special relationship which
may only otherwise be encountered in a counselling
situation. In common with Finch (op cit) I found that
there was a shared identification with stepmothers
which promoted the development of a relationship with
them. It was from this basis of mutuality that I felt
most able to build my relationship with the whole
family. Such mutuality does not only lie within the
realms of empathy and sympathy however. The myriad of
tasks which are assigned to female domestic labour were
crucial to the development of my role as participant
observer within a family setting. Helping to prepare a
family meal, clearing away, washing up were all ways I
could participate in gender acceptable and unobtrusive
ways.

In addition to gender, however, other aspects of
biography were important in building relationships
during the fieldwork. In this respect an analysis of
the ways in which my personal history corresponded with
the research stepfamilies illustrates how these
features also promoted the development of
relationships. The antecedents to remarriage was a
major factor in this. Nevertheless, shared interests
and hobbies were also relevant.

As in my own case, the Beauchamp's remarriage was the
result of divorce on both sides. In addition to
stepparenthood, therefore, there was common experience
on which to base our association. It was with the
Beauchamp's that participation was greatest. I ate
meals, watched television, stayed overnight and had
joint family outings. The Beauchamp's visited my home
on two occasions, Jane and I went shopping together and
Simon on one occasion took my stepchildren and his own
children/stepchildren to Alton Towers for the day. The
Beauchamp's home and my own were undergoing renovation
and this also became an area of joint mutual interest.
Moreover, Simon's business was connected with such work
and on one occasion my husband and I used the services
of his company for necessary work to our property.

The Fielding's marriage was also the result of divorce
on both sides and I participated in their lives in many
ways.   I regularly stayed for lunch and joined in the
particularistic events of rural life, such as visiting
the travelling library. Outside interests also
contributed to the development of our relationship.
For example, my dogs accompanied me on some of my
visits to the Fielding's and Frances and I would take
them for a walk with her own dog.

The Williams' remarriage was the result of both
divorce and widowhood. Again, I ate regularly with
Don and Louise Williams, we visited the pub together
and they invited my husband and I to join them for a
meal one evening at a local restaurant. My
participation with them was full at the level of couple
to couple, but less so with regard to the cross family
involvement which was the case with the Beauchamp's.
In this way participation most closely paralleled the
relationship I developed with the Fieldings.

With regard to the level of participation I was able to
accomplish with the Tylers, whose marriage was also the
result of both divorce and widowhood, I was able to
build a close relationship with Meg. We spent many
hours together talking over a cup of tea and often one
or both of her children would join us. On the birth of

my baby, Meg and the children visited my home.
However, I was less able to obtain that degree of
involvement with Frank. I rarely saw them together as a
couple and often Frank would be absent from the home
when I visited.

I felt that Frank saw the purpose of the research as
directly relevant to Meg and his own comments from our
first interview suggested that he saw little relevance
in the research to his own situation. Thus, he
commented "I don't know what all the fuss is about", "I
never had any problems". For my own part, in
accordance with my general philosophy, I never tried to
force the issue of his non-inclusion but accepted his
right to decide the degree to which he felt he wanted
to be part of the research.

The Holmes' marriage was the result of widowhood on
both sides. Their domestic routines and lives were
also areas where I was least able, of all families in
the study, to obtain a high degree of participation.
In particular, my visits mainly comprised of chatting
in the living room and I certainly did not have the
freedom of access to the house which I experienced with
the other families. Towards the end of the fieldwork,
Susan and Henry appeared more relaxed about my visits
and began to welcome me into other parts of the house.

It is possible that had the fieldwork continued
participation would have increased. Nevertheless,
compared to the amount of participation I experienced
with the other families in the study, I would have to
describe my fieldwork with Henry and Susan as being
limited in this respect.

I have indicated, using the factor of divorce as a
major characteristic, that wide ranging biographical
details influence the extent to which one achieves a
participant or observer role (see Gold, 1958, Schwartz
and Schwartz, 1955) in the daily lives of the research
families. This is, of course, not the only issue.
Questions of individual personality, family lifestyles
and the varied dispositions each family would have to
incorporating a 'stranger' into their private lives are
also important factors in delineating the nature of
relationships built up during the fieldwork.
Nevertheless, I would argue that this biographical
matching enables both the researched and the researcher
to feel more at ease in each other's company. By
reducing social distance it thus accelerates the level
of participation and observation which can be achieved
in the most private of domains - the home.

PARTICIPATION: HAVE I INFLUENCED YOU?

The notion of the researcher's influence in data
collection is encompassed in ideas of contaminating the
field. The myth of objectivity to which this gives
rise has been successfully attacked by Oakley when she
asserted that 'the mythology of 'hygienic' research
with its accompanying mystification of the researcher
and the researched as objective instruments of data
production [should] be replaced by the recognition that
personal involvement is more than dangerous bias - it
is the condition under which people come to know each
other and to admit others into their lives' (1981(b),
p58). A reading of Bowles' (1983) work would moreover
suggest that objectivity has almost become a dirty
word. Thus Bowles states 'Feminist academics have been
attacking the God Objectivity ever since we entered the
fray, but He is still very much with us, and will be
for some time (1983, p36).

This acknowledgement of the importance of the
subjective is indeed the theme of this chapter.
Nevertheless, I wish to indicate through the use of two
case studies the problematic elements of the
subjective. In so doing I hope to draw attention to the
difficulties which the oppositional nature of a debate

on objectivity and subjectivity belies. In particular,
I wish to consider the external and the internal
pressures to 'participate' in the lives of the study
families as forms in which these problematic elements
arise.

External Pressures: A Case Study

Oakley (1981(b) discusses the two-way process of
interviewing and argues that the mutual trust which is
built up during the exchange and answer of questions
about each other's lives is essential to on-going
research. On many occasions I was asked 'What do you
think?' 'What did you do?'. Aside from methodological
questions of influencing the field of enquiry,
throughout the research I never came to terms with the
responsibility such questions gave me. I was always
concerned that any advice I might give could cause
damage to already fragile relationships. Nevertheless,
in long term research of this nature the issue is
impossible to avoid.

Moreover, as I have indicated above, the exchange of
relationships which built up over time meant that my
own life was subject to direct observation. The study
families got to know me probably as well as I got to
know them. They knew of my major stepfamilial concerns

and would often ask me questions about my home life.
They had the opportunity to see me at home, albeit on
far fewer occasions than I had the privilege of seeing
them. Thus, questions would sometimes not be
necessary. Direct scrutiny gave its own answers.

Whatever one's decision with regard to answering
questions, at times one is put in a position where it
is impossible not to become involved. As Gans
illustrates 'the fieldworker is under pressure from
those he studies to involve himself' (1982, p55). I
had however always tried to avoid showing my viewpoint
when it came to questions where husband and wife
disagreed. To keep access to both sides, I felt, meant
not taking either side. As Gans further comments in
this connection neutrality is important if one does not
want to 'risk being rejecting by opposing groups'
(1982, p54). When such situations arose I therefore
had a set of stock phrases which were non-committal.
Comments such as 'I don't really know' or 'It wasn't
the same for me' usually enabled me to sidestep the
question. However, as I wish to indicate one is only
allowed to appear neutral for so long.

Towards the end of the fieldwork, Louise told me that
Alex, her son, had been offered work for the school
holidays. However, Louise did not want him to accept

it. Alex had just taken his 'O' levels and was
planning to take up an apprenticeship with a local
company in the Autumn. "He should have a rest before
he starts work properly. Don wants him to take it but
I think he should have a rest, don't you?". I nodded
in reply and Louise's conversation continued on another
subject.

I thought no more of this particular piece of
information until Louise, Don and I sat together for
lunch. Don brought up the subject of YTS schemes and
the level of conversation was of a very general nature
regarding these. The conversation was as follows:

> Don: Don't you think they [school
> leavers] should take up these
> schemes if they're offered them?
>
> CH: Yes. If they've nothing else to do.

Don immediately turned to Louise and said "See
Christina agrees with me". Don then added to me "Alex
has been offered a YTS for the summer. Louise doesn't
want him to do it but I do".

My mind went back to my earlier conversation with
Louise and I realised that the work Louise had
mentioned was also on a YTS scheme. I had the distinct
feeling that Don had engineered the conversation to
gain support for his own view and I had neatly fallen
into the trap. I was extremely embarrassed as I knew I
had indicated tacit agreement to Louise when she had
been talking to me previously. What was she now
thinking? Don was joyful he had support; Louise was
aggrieved at the outcome.

Don and Louise continued to argue over whether Alex
should accept the work. I remained silent, racking my
brains for some solution to my dilemma. There was
none. I had stated a position and was held to it.

Fortunately, this event did not jeopardise my
relationship with Louise. Thankfully, she realised
that Don had placed me in such a position and commented
that "He was always playing games". Nevertheless, it
brings home forcibly the view that the researched are
not passive objects but active subjects with their own
control and power.

Internal Pressures: A Case Study

In addition to a felt outward pressure to 'participate'
more fully than I would have preferred, I also, at
times, experienced an inner pressure to speak my
thoughts. Gans refers to this as an 'internal tug of
war' and notes that this is experienced at its greatest
when the subject of conversation was relevant to topics
he was studying (1982, p54). For me the importance of
the personal was crucial here. The times when this
desire to speak out was at its strongest was when two
features combined. Namely when I was faced with a
research situation which had parallels with my own
personal life experiences and which also conflicted
with my political views of female/male relations.

The following summary from my field notes illustrates
this. It describes how the desire to become personally
involved builds up during the course of an incident.
The decisive point at which one does finally become so
involved is the result of one key comment.

I arrived one afternoon at the Beauchamp's to be
greeted at the door by Simon. I was surprised to see
him there as he was usually at work at that time. I
followed Simon into the kitchen and was introduced to a
woman who had just entered from the lounge. "This is

Joanne. A friend of ours" Simon remarked. Simon
crossed the room and he and Joanne stood on the far
side talking in a low whisper. I heard Joanne say
"Call the doctor. She needs a doctor" and as their
conversation continued I comprehended that Jane was the
subject of their discussion. Simon's presence that
afternoon and the snippets of conversation I could hear
led me to the conclusion that some key event had
happened in which Jane was the central character. As
their conversation continued I realised that Simon and
Joanne were concerned about Jane's mental state.

This bare fact was enough for me to feel the first
flutters of anger and injustice. I knew Jane had been
taking tranquillisers but I did not feel she was
mentally ill. My own assessment considered that her
problems arose from her position as a stepmother, not
the result of neurosis. This judgement on my part
arose from a viewpoint which considers particularly
noxious the labelling of women's outburts of anger to
be signs of psychological disturbance. I experienced
very deeply a tug of war between the desire to act as a
fellow step-parent and woman and to speak out, or to
act as a silent observer. The latter position took
precedence for the time being.

Joanne left and Simon began to make some tea. As he
did so he explained a little of the afternoon's events.

"She [Jane] tried to cut her wrists. I had to hit her.
I had to get her to calm down"

My mind pictured a scene of anger, recrimination and
frustration which I envisaged led Jane to this act of
self-violence. A sense of anger arose again at the
thought of Simon, for whatever reason, hitting Jane.
I was clearly prejudiced to Simon's actions and
considered them in the context of an abuse of male
power. Notwithstanding, I made no comment beyond "Is
she alright now?". Simon reiterated that Jane "needs
to see a doctor. I'm sure she's mentally ill". I
quelled the desire to contradict him.

We went through to the sitting room. Jane was sitting
in an armchair. Her eyes were red and swollen. On
both a personal level, and in terms of any
distinguishable research role, I felt inadequate. I did
not know what to say or do. I sat down, said "hello"
and waited to see what would happen. Simon poured the
tea and handed it round. The atmosphere was tense and
very awkward. Simon told Jane that he had explained to
me what had happened. Jane began to cry, saying how
"awful" she felt.

Jane described a series of incidents regarding the
previous days events where she had missed Simon at the
children's parents' evening at school, had arrived home
late and felt the burdens of domestic work. It reminded
me of similar thoughts and similar experiences. Simon
made various conciliatory remarks such as he
"understood" and that Jane "tried to do too much".
Jane's reaction to this was that he "didn't understand"
and "there was too much to do".

What does one do when sitting between a couple who are
in the middle of an emotional turmoil? I felt I could
no longer sit there in my silence. I had become part
of a relationship with Jane and Simon which placed
demands on me which were both social and moral. There
was also a sense of expectation on their part that I
could or would act as a conciliator. This particularly
came from Jeremy who indicated a need for someone to
sort the situation out for him. "I don't know what to
do" he said several times to both Jane and I as they
began to talk about what had happened. "What do you
think Jane should do?" was a more direct request for my
involvement.

I was able to resist succumbing to these various
overtures for my involvement. However, Simon made one
remark which signalled the point at which I began to

take a more active part in events. Simon told Jane
that he thought she was "selfish". I was extremely
disturbed at his viewpoint. The comment registered as
a reflection of male chauvinism. Further, I strongly
felt his view would be destructive to Jane's self-
esteem. Nevertheless, I was aware of the fragile path
I was treading. I was not a marriage guidance
counsellor and clearly did not want to make matters
worse. Also I did not want to be seen to be taking
Jane's part to the detriment of my future relationship
with Simon. I was still ultimately conscious that I
was there to carry out research and I wanted to
continue to do so.

However, the words were said. I told Simon that I did
not see Jane's views as "selfish" but as expressions
of deep seated needs. I knew as I said it I had
changed irrevocably their situation. Jane rallied.
She had found support.

When one knows that one has, by word or deed, changed
the field of enquiry, the point of responsibility lies
in assessing that change. Jane became more assertive
of her right to have needs and wants. My comments had
lessened the guilt. On one occasion she told me that
she had refused to attend a family christening as she
wanted the afternoon to herself. Simon had taken the

children alone.   "I had a wonderful time in the garden"
Jane remarked.

There can be no doubt that the challenge to his views
which had been presented to Simon was to make his life
more difficult at these times. With regard to the
christening Simon observed that he felt "let down" by
Jane's decision to stay at home. "It was a family
occasion and she should have been there" he said.

My remarks had an effect over which ultimately I had no
control. The question of subjectivity therefore
becomes a moral question.   I had access to their lives
and concerns to which I gave a reflection which goes
beyond the bounds of friendly relationships. We do not
usually rush home after visiting a friend and write
down everything that has happened, reflect on it,
reread it at regular intervals and try to link the
'data' with other notes we have previously made. Yet I
had done all these things in connection with each
individual in the study in the normal pursuit of
research. My analysis of the Beauchamp's relationship
must therefore also be seen in conjunction with the
comments I have already made. Moreover, I was
extremely conscious of the likely effect my words would
have. In the light of all these comments the question

remains: What right had I to 'influence' the
Beauchamp's life in this way?

The question of influence can also be extended to less
introspective aspects of the research process.
Specifically, it was significant that the major changes
which I experienced in my own life were matched by
changes in the research families. The question arises,
therefore, to what extent were my decisions influential
in the lives of each family. A secondary issue also
arose during the fieldwork which is related to this
question. This is the use of biographical change as a
research tool.

There were two major events in my life during the
course of the fieldwork which brought these issues to
the fore. The first was in relation to house purchase.
At the start of the fieldwork, I was living with my
husband in his former marital home. Nevertheless, in
October 1985 we bought a house at auction and moved
into it in January 1986. The second event was becoming
a mother. I became pregnant in November 1985, a fact
which I 'announced' to the study families in January
1986.

I now wish to consider the likely effect that these factors had on the lives of the stepparents in the study.

CHANGES

My household removal was well known to all the study couples and they each took a lively interest in the rigours of buying and selling. During this time I would be asked on each visit for an up to date report on events which I always furnished.

The subject of the study couples feelings about their own accommodation had been raised on one of my first visits with each couple and well before my own intended removal. The response I had, which is indicated in Chapter Five, was that overall all the study families were quite content with their homes and had no intention of moving. I was therefore extremely surprised when in January 1986 I arrived at the Williams' home to find a 'For Sale' board outside.

The first question to myself, and later to them, was "Had the fact that I was moving house been at all influential in their decision?" They both replied

quite categorically that it had not. They were moving because Don would be retiring in a few years and this was their last opportunity to take on a bigger mortgage and so move to a larger house.

George and Frances and Henry and Susan also purchased new property during the fieldwork year. The property George and Frances bought was primarily for investment purposes. They lived in tied accommodation and the cottage they purchased was immediately rented to provide an additional income. Henry and Susan moved to a new district altogether where many families from their church lived. Both couples stated that these were the reasons for their moves and circumstances in my life had not been influential in their decision making.

However, despite the disclaimers, there was a level at which events in my life were used as a checking out process for the feasibility of a similar course of action. This probing came in the form of questions. Thus, Louise asked me what my stepchildren thought of moving house and whether I preferred my new home to my old one. Similarly, Susan asked me how well my stepchildren had settled into their new home. All individuals expressed interest at the likely success or otherwise of our venture.

I have no direct feedback on the way the answers to these questions may have been influential with regard to moving house. Indeed, prima facie the statements of the couples themselves deny any influence. Nevertheless, one clear example of the way events in my life were used came with the announcement of my pregnancy.

Before I told Henry and Susan I was expecting a baby, I knew that they too were hoping to have a child. At that particular time they were waiting for a hospital appointment to consider a reversal of Henry's vasectomy. Although they had made the decision for themselves, they were experiencing difficulty persuading Henry's two daughters, Amanda and Karen, to accept the prospect of a new baby. This was causing Susan great concern.

One of the first questions Susan asked me when I told her I was pregnant was "What do your stepchildren think?". I told her that they were very pleased. Later, Susan told me that she had told Amanda and Karen my news."What did they say?" I asked. Susan grimaced and replied:

> "They said "She's got stepchildren
> hasn't she. What do they think?"

> I told them that they were pleased but
> Karen said she wasn't convinced and Amanda
> said she wouldn't like it."

Susan had used events in my life as an example to her
stepchildren in the hope that it would evince some
change in attitude on their part.

One can never be sure of the extent to which one's
actions influence others. Indeed, some would argue
that concern with the concept of influence is a
mistaken one. In particular, Collins indicates through
the use of the notion 'participant comprehension' that
'observer effect does not arise' (1984, p66).
Principally, Collins argues in this respect that as
native competence is the desirable aim this should lead
the researcher to a position where he can '<u>share</u> a way
of life and should therefore experience it in similar
ways' (1984, p65, emphasis in text). By implication,
therefore, the problem of influence does not arise as
it is an ever present feature of social life. The
researcher as 'native' will only be as influential or
non-influential as any other 'native' with whom the
researched have contact in their day to day lives.

Notwithstanding these comments, the use of my life as
an example to others indicates the lack of legitimacy

which stepmothers experience and which I have indicated
in Chapter Five. In this way, therefore, situations
arising from biographical change can provide an
important insight into the meanings of stepfamily life
in a spontaneous way and one which may not arise
through question and answer techniques as I wish to
further indicate.

Biography: An alternative approach to question and answer

As I have argued in Chapter Five the decision to have a
child in a remarriage is a significantly different
decision making process from that of first marriages.
It can also be a very sensitive subject both between
the couple and between the couple and their children.
Because of its sensitive nature, I had not directly
raised questions regarding individual attitudes to
having children. As a researcher I ultimately walk
away from the situation. The 'researched' cannot. For
these reasons, I was waiting for the 'right moment'
before raising questions about this issue. The
announcement of my own pregnancy provided an element of
spontaneity which drew varied and at times surprising
reactions. This aspect of surprise served to

challenge certain incorrect assumptions I unwisely
held.

George and Frances already had a child from their
marriage, Luke, age 3. As they were both in their
forties, with six adult children between them in
addition to Luke, I did not expect there to be any
lingering maternal or paternal feelings. Quite
wrongly, I had thought any questions regarding the
likelihood of further children would be irrelevant.

George and Frances expressed their congratulations to
me when I told them my news. They asked me the usual
questions regarding whether I hoped it would be a boy
or a girl and when it was due. No more was said at
that moment. However, over lunch that day Frances
turned to George and asked him if he would like to
foster a baby. George was evidently as surprised by
the question as I was. Their ensuing discussion gave
me greater insight into their personal feelings about
parenthood which I do not believe would have been
disclosed through direct questioning.

George: No I find it a strain
           keeping a jolly appearance for Luke.
           I couldn't cope with anymore.

Frances: You wouldn't have to keep a jolly
           appearance. A baby doesn't make the
           same demands as a three year old.

George continued to raise objections and as Frances
tried to countermand each one, the tears rose in her
eyes and began to trickle down her face. It was an
undeniably important issue for her and apart from the
distress I felt at her anguish it alerted me to
reassess comments she had made in the past regarding
childbearing. I could no longer take her feelings on
the matter for granted. In this instance, my
biography had served as a check on assumption in a way
that I doubt more formal question and answer approaches
would have elicited.

Whilst this discussion has concentrated on specific
features of biography it is important to consider the
more generalised aspect of gender relations as I
indicate.

GENDER RELATIONS IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research process, in terms of listening to accounts
of people's lives and thereby giving them a sense of
importance is not often met with in the hurly burly of
everyday life. It creates a special relationship which
may only otherwise be encountered in a counselling
situation.   Finch (1984) notes the ease by which a
female interviewer can draw out the most personal
information from female interviewees. In particular,
Finch argues that 'However effective a male interviewer
might be at getting women interviewees to talk, there
is still necessarily an additional dimension when the
interviewer is also a woman, because both parties share
a subordinate structural position by virtue of their
gender (1984, p76).

I can only agree with Finch's comments. Within my own
experience there are understandings which pass from
woman to woman which may not be matched in interviews
with women conducted by men. Such understandings are
expressed in terms of "You know what I mean" and "You
know what men are like". Nevertheless, I would like to
extend on Finch's discussion by considering the ease
which the interviewer herself feels when conducting
interviews with women. Gender identification is a two-

way process. Apart from a heightened consciousness of
what was being said, very often my 'interviews' with
stepmothers differed little from more familiar
situations of listening to a girlfriend who was
confiding in me. There was an intimacy and taken-for-
granted quality to the interaction which did not exist
when I talked to stepfathers. Indeed, whilst I could
listen to stepmothers discuss and even criticise their
husbands in an almost cosy way, this was not the case
when husbands were less than kind about their wives.
In these instances I would feel particularly perturbed
with the content of the conversation as if I were
committing an act of betrayal through the very fact of
listening. Nevertheless, the cosiness of gender
identification also makes it more important to render
the familiar strange.

My fieldnotes contain an incident which I feel is
indicative of this and read as follows: "Jane told me
that she felt so frustrated and angry with Simon at the
weekend that she "rammed him with a wheelbarrow". An
act of violence from female to male yet my field notes
are without comment. This stands in opposition to my
comments above with regard to violence from male to
female. In this latter instance I certainly did not
feel any sense that Simon was being abused. Or Jane was
an abuser. Whilst the process of gender identification

was clear to me in this instance, the example heightens
one's consciousness of the issue.

Although I have been concerned with the rather more
subjective aspects of the relationship of biography to
the research process, biography also had a more
concrete part in the collection of data as I discuss.

DATA RECORDING

The recording of participant observation data has been
discussed by Schatzman and Strauss (1973). In
particular, they argue that data should be recorded in
'distinct "packages" of material according to whether
they constitute "Observational Notes" (ON),
"Theoretical Notes" (TN) or "Methodological Notes" (MN)
(1973, p99). My own system of data recording was very
similar to this, in that I kept separate records of the
same incident. In particular, to take account of the
personal, my notes were organised in the following way.

My first set of notes consisted of "Descriptive
Data"(DD): where I was, who was there, what they were
doing. An example from my field notes illustrates this
clearly:

DD: Beautiful sunny day. Meg was doing
the washing in the kitchen. The
washing machine had been pulled
into the centre of the room so
that the hose could be attached to
the taps. I could hear David
moving about upstairs.

My second set of notes were more directly relevant to
Schatzman and Strauss' category 'Observational Notes'
where I recorded 'events experienced principally
through watching and listening. They contain as little
interpretation as possible and are as reliable as the
observer can construct them' (1973, p100). An extract
from my field notes indicates this:

ON: The wedding cake had arrived and
Meg was none too pleased with it.
An aunt of Sandy's had made it and
consequently Meg felt she could not
say anything to her about it as she
would have if it had "been bought
in a shop". She commented very
specifically on what she felt was
wrong with it "It's got no
decoration on it. No bells or rings
or birds. All it's got is a cheap

> looking champagne glass with
> Christmas ribbon hanging out of
> it". She then added "What will
> people think. They'll think I don't
> care".

My notes which correspond to these Observational Notes
are relevant to Schatzman and Strauss' (op cit)
categorisation 'Theoretical Notes'. These are defined
as 'self-conscious, controlled attempts to derive
meaning from any one or several observation notes'
(Schatzman and Strauss, 1973, p101). The relevant
entry is therefore as follows:

> TN: I think Meg's feelings about
> the cake signify that she thinks
> she will be seen as failing Sandy.
> This can be linked to her feelings
> about Sandy's pregnancy. This could
> also be seen as a sign of Meg's
> failure as a stepmother as an outward
> sign of lack of care. Perhaps why
> they wish for Sandy to get married.
> At least then there would be less
> stigma.

The fourth type of note which I recorded was of a
personal nature in that it recorded my subjective
feelings with regard to my role in the interaction
between researcher and researched. My reasons for
including this 'Personal Data' (PD) was, as the theme
of this chapter illustrates, to analyse its effect on
the research process and corresponds to Burgess'
comments that 'researchers would then have the
materials to conduct research on themselves' (1984,
p267). The 'Personal Data' corresponding to the field
notes above was as follows:

> PD: When Meg talked to me about
>   her feelings about the wedding
>   it made me warm to her and feel
>   sorry for her. I wanted to
>   reach out and touch her. To make
>   it better for her.

The process of recording data in this manner was
important to building up a comprehensive and systematic
record of the fieldwork. Nevertheless, whilst these
records are as exact as possible as Hammersley
indicates there is a reliance on 'on the spot'
interpretations (1984, p54). The need therefore for
ongoing analysis becomes important.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of data was an on-going process which is
evidenced in the 'Theoretical Notes' which I kept. In
this way I would refer back to incidents, as in the
case of Meg above, or I would cross-reference events in
terms of similarities and dissimilarities with other
couples in the study. Nevertheless, the process of
writing-up the data was the key place where various
disparate ideas came to fruition and where I wish to
make my final comments with regard to the personal.

Hammersley's report of writing-up research indicates
'the considerable role pragmatic considerations play in
shaping the scope and perhaps the actual content of
analysis' (1984, p61). Pragmatic considerations
arising out of the personal were also relevant to the
process of writing-up this thesis. In particular, I
had a new baby who did not (and still does not!) seem
to recognise the need for sleep. The writing-up
process was therefore very much a fragmented one and
consisted of a quantity of rough draft chapters spread
over a time period of eighteen months.

My early drafts were an important part of analysis in
that they brought together key ideas in a relatively

unstructured and variable way. For example, some drafts concentrated on individuals or couples as their focus and some drafts took major themes, such as stepparent-stepchild relationships, as primary. These drafts also represented the dialogue between researcher and supervisor in that they would be returned to me with suitable commentary. Moreover, it was through this dialogue that the theme of myth, as an organising feature of this thesis, first arose.

In particular, the early drafts returned to me would frequently contain the comments 'Is this a myth?' or 'Myth seems important here'. This dialogue, through the use of draft chapters, was a crucial stage in the organisation of this thesis. A more systematic application of these comments, together with the relevant review of the literature, indicated the significance of the theoretical structuring of myth, as this thesis bears testimony. The role of the supervisor combined with the personal were therefore significant features in this process.

CONCLUSION

I have been concerned in this chapter to detail the process by which this study was undertaken. It therefore needs to be seen as an integral part of the study itself. I have primarily argued that the role of the personal cannot be separated from the methods of study used. In particular, I have focussed on the use of biography as an important feature in access, role, data collection and analysis. In so doing, biography as a changing feature has been emphasised.

APPENDIX B

AIDES MEMOIRS

The aides memoirs presented here were used in
conjunction with taped interviews carried out at the
beginning of the fieldwork period and formed the basis
of the life history data presented in Chapter Two.

The interviews conducted were unstructured in the sense
that they were flexible and allowed the individuals in
the study to focus on features of their biography which
were important to them. Nevertheless, as Burgess
points out 'the researcher has to establish a framework
within which the interview can be conducted' (1982,
p107). The aides memoirs were therefore designed to
give that structure.

Aides memoirs B(i) and B(ii) were used with every
individual in the study. Aides memoir B(iii) was used
with the divorced participants. Aides memoir B(iv) was
used with the previous bereaved participants.

APPENDIX B(i)

AIDE MEMOIR: BECOMING A STEPPARENT

1   Images of stepfamily life

           initial attitude to prospect of becoming
           a stepparent.
           perceived differences between natural
           parenthood and stepparenthood.
           role of stepparent - what is ideal?

2   Stepchildren

           first meeting with stepchildren.
           importance of children in decision to
           marry/cohabit.
           feelings about own stepchildren.
           discipline/difficulties/problems

AIDE MEMOIR: BECOMING A STEPPARENT (CONTINUED)

3   Public Face

how do you explain your family situation
to people outside the stepfamily.

4   Future

plans for future/any changes planned

5   Division of labour

child care functions - which tasks
undertaken.
has this changed?

6   Extended Family

frequency of contact - with whom
aid from extended family (who)
attitudes to extended family
relationships

APPENDIX B(ii)

AIDE MEMOIR: FROM CHILDHOOD TO FIRST MARRIAGE

1   Childhood

         where born/when
         brother/sisters - number
         parents - occupation
         education

2   Employment

         type of employment

3   First Marriage

         how long married
         what were the good things? bad things?
         interests in common
         children

APPENDIX B(iii)

AIDE MEMOIR: THE EXPERIENCE OF DIVORCE

1   Factors leading to divorce

            feelings at the time
            worst thing

2   Children's attitudes

            their reaction/feelings
            did they express any wish to live
            with the other parent

3   Legal process

            how soon did divorce proceedings
            begin.
            any disputes
            how were finances arranged
            custody

AIDE MEMOIR: THE EXPERIENCE OF DIVORCE (CONTINUED)

4   Attitudes of others

         reactions of family/friends
         any help from family/friends/
         neighbours

6   Single Parenthood

         most difficult parts
         anything better on own
         social life
         children's attitudes

7   Contact with ex-spouse during marriage
         breakdown

         any/form/problems

APPENDIX B(iv)

AIDE MEMOIR: THE EXPERIENCE OF WIDOWHOOD

1   <u>Bereavement</u>

            feelings at the time
            worst thing

2   <u>Children's attitudes</u>

            how did they react

3   <u>Attitudes of others</u>

            reactions of family/friends
            any help from family/friends/
            neighbours

4   <u>Single parenthood</u>

            difficult parts
            anything better as single parent
            social life
            children's attitudes

APPENDIX C

STEPFAMILY TREES

The stepfamily trees contained in this Appendix
represent a presentation device. They are included to
allow the reader an easy reference to the various
relationships of the individuals who took part in the
study.   They therefore include the names of
individuals who cohabit with an ex-spouse in addition
to the more formalised arrangements of marriage.   They
also, for the same reason, include the more extended
stepfamily relationships of stepchildren's parent's in-
law.

The stepfamily trees are arranged in the following
order:

Appendix C(i)   Beauchamp
Appendix C(ii)   Fielding
Appendix C(iii)   Holmes
Appendix C(iv)   Tyler
Appendix C(v)   Williams

APPENDIX G(i)

STEPFAMILY TREE : THE BEAUCHAMPS.

```
RICHARD      divorced      JANE           married          SIMON      divorced      MAY          CLIVE
               1983                          1984                        1983
   |------------------------|            |------------------------------|--------------------------|
   |                        |            |                     |                    |
  JOE                   HARRIETT       JAMES               POLLY               ANGELA
  born                    born          born                born                 born
  1971                    1973          1970                1972                 1976
```
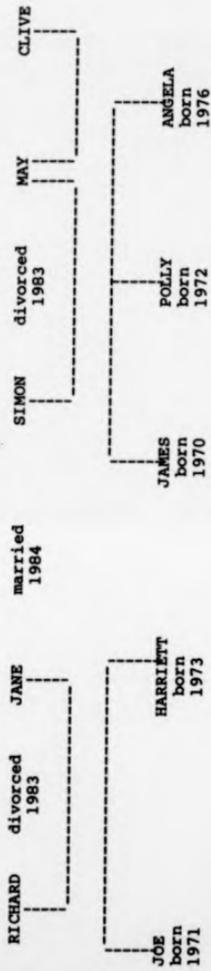
APPENDIX C (11)

STEPFAMILY TREE : THE FIELDINGS
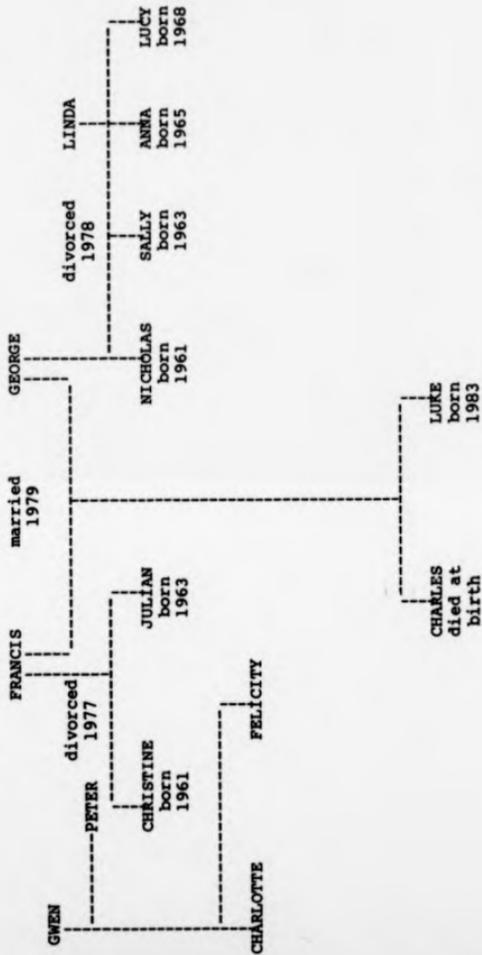
APPENDIX C (iii)

<u>STEPFAMILY TREE : THE HOLMES</u>
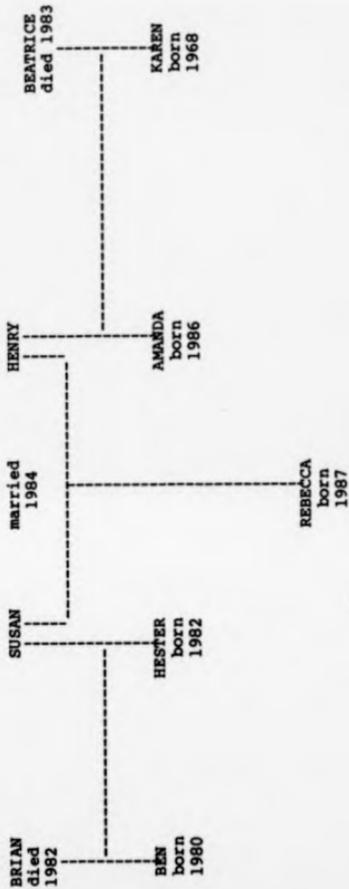
APPENDIX G (iv)

STEPFAMILY TREE : THE TYLERS
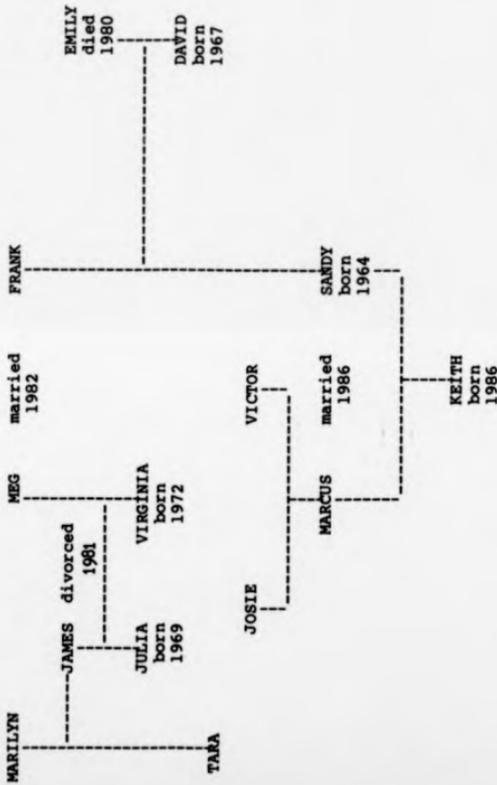
APPENDIX C (v)

STEPFAMILY TREE : THE WILLIAMS

JONATHON — divorced 1978 — LOUISE — married 1979 — DON — JACQUI died 1977

ALEX born 1970 — BELINDA born 1973 — MICHEAL born 1976

JASON born 1965 — JIMMY born 1965 — CLIVE born 1965
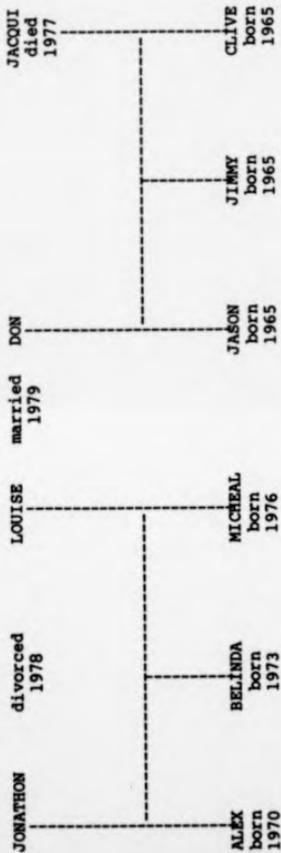
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