

Another study came out that year that refuted these findings, but also differed in terms of how the research was conducted. Psychologist Judith Wallerstein reported her research finding that children of divorce experienced more mental health problems than children of nondivorced, married families. She found that these children sometimes suffered a “sleeping effect”; their difficulty emerged as adults—hence the phrase “adult children of divorce”—keeping us ever vigilant for some lurking form of damage that could pop up like a dormant cancer.

To judge between these two pieces of research, we need to look at how these psychologists collected their information.

Wallerstein's methods: She studied a *clinical* sample of young, white, upper-middle-class teenagers whose parents had been divorced and who sought treatment at a mental health center in Northern California.⁷ A clinical sample involves people who want help. They are a sample of folks who are, by definition, troubled. While a clinical sample can teach us much about the course of mental disturbances or adjustment problems, it cannot inform us about the prevalence or origins of a problem in the population, or reveal why some people end up doing well in the face of adversity while others do not. Wallerstein provided cases full of rich detail, but they were not *representative*. Her study has the strength of being *longitudinal* (that is, she tracked her subjects over time), but her evidence couldn't tell us whether these problems occur consistently in the population, or if they were due to selection bias. Children of divorce who are troubled are, by definition, the ones who seek therapy.

Hetherington's methods: Researchers obtained a population-based sample of stably married families with a four-year-old and followed them over time. It was a *prospective*, longitudinal study. *Prospective* means that the study started before any divorces happened. Using a series of observations, parental reports, and teacher reports, Hetherington tracked these children in their everyday lives. Some children's parents went on to divorce; others remained together. We can't do experiments where we randomly assign some children to divorced parents and others to married parents, but this gives us a quasi-experimental design that helps us evaluate the impact of divorce compared to no divorce. In the comparison, all the children started off the same in the sense that they weren't showing up in the study because they already had “problems.” Not only did this design allow researchers to compare children whose parents divorced versus those whose parents stayed together, it also enabled the researchers to see how children fared before the divorce versus how they were doing after the divorce. Hetherington had built-in comparisons.⁸

As research progressed, Hetherington learned more about divorce and children. Because she had detailed information about both kinds of families, she

divorce causes problems for adults or their children? Selection bias may explain some, but certainly not all, of today's divorces.

The case for divorce includes research on children as well as research on adults. In the first section below, "Resilient Children of Divorce," I show how the research on the impact of divorce on children teaches us two important lessons. First, most children of divorce do well. And second, children who remain in high-conflict families, where the parents have a distressed marriage, are at greater risk for problems. When parents divorce, children have already been subject to their distressed marriages, and that is what puts these children at greater risk for problems. In the second section—"Does Divorce Make You Happy?"—I discuss how research on the impact of divorce on adults follows a similar pattern: the consequences of a harsh or conflictual marriage exceed the consequences of divorce. In the third section, "Measuring Divorce's Impact with and without a Comparison Group," I show new evidence about how neutral the impact of divorce really is on children. At the same time, I remind you of the problems of research that fails to have a logical comparison group. As the research shows us, the case for divorce is straightforward. The consequences of remaining in a distressed marriage for children as well as for adults are myriad and long-lived. In those cases, perhaps the line shouldn't be "stay together for the kids," but "get divorced for the kids," not to mention for the health and well-being of the parents, on whom the children depend.

RESILIENT CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

In 1989, psychologist Mavis Hetherington presented her research at the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, showing that most children of divorce fare just as well as children from intact families. She had established a comparative rate of distress among children: while 10 percent of children in the general population have behavioral or school-related problems, 20–25 percent of children from divorced families have these problems (but about 80 percent of the children of divorce do not have such problems). Numerous research papers provided more detail and supported the finding in her research.

Hetherington reported on specific kinds of distress that parents and children experience with divorce. She found a "crisis period" of about two years surrounding the divorce. She learned that, depending on the timing of divorce, boys and girls have different responses: when boys have problems, they tend to "act out"; when girls have problems, they are more likely to become depressed. But what Hetherington saw overall was the *resilience* of children of divorce.⁶ Most children did fine. They were able to use personal resources and social networks in their family and community to cope.

have declined.¹ Meanwhile, the number of children involved in any given divorce has gone from 1.34 children to less than 1 child per divorce² because of the declining birthrate.

Increases in divorce have made it a fixture in family life—and a “problem” to be understood, interpreted, analyzed, and fixed.³ But what exactly is the problem? A better understanding of divorce—and divorce research—clarifies the case for divorce, and by extension informs us about life as it really is in contemporary families. The case for divorce asks: Are there some cases where divorce is a better outcome than remaining married? Three decades of research on the impact on adults and children points to yes.

RESEARCHING THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE

While discussion of research methods leaves some people cold or in wish of a nap, the consistent hallmark of the best research on the impact of divorce is that it makes a logical and reasonable comparison. Some studies do this. But some don't. It is as simple as this: if my now-divorced parents had been happily married, life would have been different, and a divorce would have been a big loss to them, me, my brothers, and the community. But that wasn't the case. They treated each other with contempt, led parallel lives, lived through their children (and also did a lot of good things). Then they were divorced.

The logical comparison for divorce versus not divorce in my own biography is a comparison between having unhappily married parents or divorced parents who moved on. My parents' post-divorce lives were up and down, but ultimately a lot more sensible for all involved, and (crucially) better than the life that preceded the divorce. Research that asks “compared to what?” is designed to do a what-if exercise—not just with one person's story—but with the stories of many.

When researchers carefully examine “divorce compared to what?” they are sometimes searching for *selection bias*—a particular kind of problem that shows there is something about the people who get divorced that happened before they got into the current situation that makes them more likely to divorce. Some attributes that existed before the marriage may affect who divorces. So when we compare divorced people to people who stayed married, the question is whether selection bias has influenced the results. There is selection bias if the divorced group was already different from the stably married group. For example, getting married at a younger age, living in poverty, and not having a college degree are all associated with divorce. Already we see that selection bias plays a role in divorce. But how have researchers answered the question about how or whether

The Case for Divorce

Virginia E. Rutter

Frequently in public and academic debates about the costs and benefits of marriage and divorce, evidence about health or economic consequences is used to support various perspectives. The book *The Case for Marriage* is a familiar example of this, and so we consider here "The Case for Divorce." This chapter offers evidence about when divorce leads to health benefits, rather than to more often reported negative health consequences. In particular, research shows that there are negative health consequences to remaining in a distressed marriage. The chapter also offers advice about the three things any reader of marriage and divorce research should look out for when trying to understand how useful or generalizable the claims are. Readers should consider whether marital quality has been considered—and how it has been measured; whether domestic violence and other pathologies have been examined; and whether "selection effects," or forces that occurred prior to marriage and that don't have anything to do with the marriage or the divorce itself but that make people more likely to divorce, have been tested. Finally, the chapter asks how we can explicitly—rather than implicitly—express values and beliefs when talking about the case for divorce. Starting in 1880, when U.S. divorce statistics began to be recorded, the rate of divorce increased steadily for eighty years and then increased dramatically from 1960 to 1980.¹ By the end of that period, about half of all marriages ended in divorce. Since then, our 50 percent divorce rate has leveled off, and we haven't seen much change.²

Divorce policy has changed in that time. In the 1970s, there was a shift in divorce laws to allow unilateral divorce ("no-fault divorce") in the United States. Since that time, rates of wife's suicide, domestic violence, and spousal homicide

colleagues have found that happiness and depression are correlated, there's a big difference between them. Out of hundreds of correlational studies catalogued by Veenhoven in the World Database of Happiness, there are scarcely any gender differences in happiness. Nor does happiness have the major correlates to race or poverty that have been well established for depression.²⁰

All these differences suggest that "happiness" is measuring something psychologically different from "distress" or "depression." The societal implications are quite different between these two measures. Greenberg and colleagues have found that unhappy people are not usually functionally impaired, but that depression involves costs in terms of lost wages, productivity, and negative impact on children.²¹ The lesson of these studies is that what we measure, as well as whether we include a good comparison, will help us better understand when and how divorce has consequences.

MEASURING DIVORCE'S IMPACT WITH AND WITHOUT A COMPARISON GROUP

In April 2008 the questions about the impact of divorce and its costs continued to be alive and well. Two studies were released the very same week on the topic. These studies asked: What is the impact of divorce? A release from the Council on Contemporary Families was based on demographer Allen Li's research. The other paper, by economist Ben Scafidi, was released by the Institute for American Values. Li's paper pertained to the emotional impact of divorce on children, while Scafidi's paper addressed the economic impact of divorce across America.²²

The results in the two papers were completely divergent. Li asked: What is the impact of divorce on children? He found that divorce itself does not explain the differences between children with divorced and married parents. He did find differences between the two groups (on average)—just as researchers have been finding since the 1980s. With increasingly refined research techniques, however, Li was able to show that *selection bias*—or a case of improper comparisons—is what accounts for the differences.

Li's technique included testing for "fixed effects"—a statistical tool used in economics and biomedical research with longitudinal data. Fixed-effects models tell us if there are aspects of the individuals that are not measured explicitly but that account for results. The children in Li's study whose parents ended up divorcing were getting a different kind of parenting all along the way when compared with the children whose parents stayed married.

Meanwhile, Scafidi asked: What does divorce cost the general public? Hold on to your hats. By his calculations, divorce—plus single parenthood—costs taxpayers \$112 billion a year. To calculate this, he assumed that divorce and single

Why Marital Quality Matters

Marital quality makes a difference when we ask whether divorce is better than staying married. The benefits of marriage accrue only to people in happy and well-functioning marriages; the benefits of happy marriages are, indeed, robust. The same is not true for people in distressed marriages, and we save those marriages at our—and our partners’—peril. For example, studies on the “psychophysiology of marriage” show that when men and women are in distressed marriages—where they may experience contempt, criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling—their immune systems decline over time.¹⁷ These people are less healthy and less happy. Troubled marriages have immediate costs; they also have downstream health costs as the years of distress accumulate.

Research has demonstrated how high those costs are. Weissman used community mental health samples to assess the impact of marriage and marital distress on rates of major depression.¹⁸ While the study found that depression was reduced for people in happy marriages, depression for men and women in unhappy marriages was *twenty-five* times more likely than for people in happy marriages. Another study found that marital dissatisfaction a year earlier is associated with a 2.7 times greater depression risk for women and with an elevated rate of depression for men. Even more alarming is a study that showed that, among married women who were more depressed than average, by far the most common explanation was domestic violence. In my research, women who were victims of domestic violence—severe enough to have been injured in the past year—were different in their response to distress and divorce from those in nonviolent distressed marriages, likely because the problems domestic violence victims have to solve are different from the problems of those who are in distressed but nonviolent marriages. This suggests that clear research on divorce should always seek to identify victims of abuse because these cases follow a different story line.¹⁹

When researchers measure marital distress in terms of level of conflict, or they use multiple measures of distress and find high conflict and distress, they find that divorce is a relief to those couples. This parallels what Hetherington found for children—that divorce is better than living in a high-conflict family. It is easy enough to ask, “How was marital distress measured?” in order to learn whether a measure of general happiness that merely captures transient feelings of satisfaction was used, or whether a measure of serious distress or conflict, which tends to identify which couples are “candidates” for divorce, was used.

On Happiness

Other measures matter, too: My study and the Waite study both looked at the personal costs of divorcing. While Waite measured “happiness,” I measured “depression.” It matters how we measure “personal well-being.” While van Hemert and

What is the point? Should we throw up our hands and claim that research is merely a Rorschach test, a projective test that displays and reveals our deepest values and biases? For goodness' sake, no!

Instead, ask: "Divorce compared to what?" Were people who divorced compared to those who stayed in a happy marriage, or compared to those who stayed in a stressed-out marriage? One difference between Waite's study and mine was that I used a more stringent measure of marital distress. I was able to detect the people who were in seriously distressed marriages. (I also took severe domestic violence into account, and I measured depression rather than "happiness.") The contrast makes all the difference. When comparing how markedly unhappily married people fare compared to people who divorced, the divorcing people were less depressed, and the unhappily married people were more depressed. My additional statistical tests ("fixed effects," discussed below) confirmed that marital distress, not other factors, accounted for the differences between the unhappily married and divorced groups. In other words, what made the married people in distressed marriages more depressed was *being in a distressed marriage*, not their risk of depression.

Other longitudinal studies, including a study by Daniel Hawkins and Alan Booth,¹⁴ found similar results regarding marital distress: the more carefully marital distress was measured, the more pronounced were the psychological advantages of leaving over staying. Again, a better comparison between married and divorced people was accomplished by using a thoughtful measurement of marital quality. A study by Pamela Smock and her colleagues assessed the economic costs of divorcing and also used methods that took into account selection bias. Smock and her colleagues found that divorced women experience economic disadvantages but that some of that economic disadvantage would have existed even if they had remained married.¹⁵ With psychological distress, as with economic distress, people who divorced were different for reasons *other* than divorcing, not *because* of divorcing.

More recent research has examined how the accumulation of marital transitions—a divorce, a cohabitation, a breakup, perhaps a remarriage—may be an additional important way to examine the impact of divorce. The approach is to examine "relationship trajectories." Sarah Meadows and her colleagues¹⁶ examined the consequence of such multiple transitions for women who started as single mothers, and found that for women who face continuous instability—rather than a single transition—their health was negatively affected. Such research allows for even more complexity, and requires that we compare higher levels of disruption with lower levels of disruption, including divorce.

predisruption effects—in other words, trouble in the family that preceded the divorce—postdisruption effects accumulated, too. Finally, the researchers found that children who grew up with married parents in distressed unions were more likely to experience psychological distress in later life, in contrast to their counterparts with nondistressed, stably married parents.

Starting with Hetherington in the 1980s, and following through Cherlin's parallel work in the 1990s, research designs that included comparison groups helped bring to light three points. First, using a population-based rather than a clinical sample provided a rate of distress among children of divorce that exemplified their *resilience*: approximately 80 percent were doing well versus 90 percent of children in the general population who were doing well. Second, difficulties—predisruption effects—found in longitudinal, prospective studies, indicated that children in families where their parents were headed for divorce were having troubles prior to the breakup. Postdisruption effects—and the cascade of negative life events—also played a role. Third, distressed marriages were harder on children than divorces. This last point foreshadowed the results in the studies of adults that I describe next.

DOES DIVORCE MAKE YOU HAPPY?

People who divorce do not go through such a costly and difficult process just to “feel good” or in some casual way to be happy. As you’ll see below, research shows us just how difficult living in a distressed marriage is. The research shows us that divorce makes people feel better in the same way that the cessation of pain or illness makes them feel better.

In 2002, Linda Waite, a demographer at the University of Chicago, and several of her colleagues, released a study titled “Does Divorce Make People Happy?” At the same time, I was completing research at the University of Washington for a paper that would be titled “The Case for Divorce: Under What Conditions Is Divorce Beneficial and for Whom?”¹³

Our results were completely divergent. We both asked: How does people’s level of well-being change when they divorce (versus when they stay married)? Both projects relied on the same data set; they both used a longitudinal design where all the people were married at the first time point, and some of them went on to divorce by the second time point. I found that adults who exited unhappy marriages were less depressed than those who stayed. According to Waite, there were no differences in happiness between those who stayed in their marriages and those who divorced.

was able to compare married families with divorced families. Sometimes the married families were extremely distressed; sometimes they were civil. Hetherington was able to analyze the well-being of children in extremely distressed married families versus children of divorce and children in harmoniously married families. By adding comparisons about the level of distress in all the families, she observed that children in harmonious married families fared better than children in divorced families *and* in distressed married families. Here's the punch line: The worst kind of family for a child to be raised in, in terms of mental health and behavior, was a *distressed married* family.⁹

Several key pieces of research extended Hetherington's results by using comparison groups and a prospective design. In 1991, demographer Andrew Cherlin and his colleagues wrote about longitudinal studies in Great Britain and the United States in the journal *Science*. The studies included data from parents, children, and teachers over time. At the first time point, age seven, all the children's parents were married. Over the study period, some went on to divorce, and some did not. Cherlin confirmed Hetherington's findings: While about 10 percent of children overall are at risk for adjustment and mental health problems, children of divorce are about 20–25 percent at risk for problems. Seventy-five to 80 percent of the children are fine.¹⁰

Cherlin also found that the difference between the children of divorce versus children in stable marriages existed *prior* to the divorce. These were *predisruption effects*, and here's how it makes sense: Parents who end up divorcing are different from parents who don't end up divorcing. They relate to each other differently; they relate to their children differently; and their children relate to them differently. Cherlin had identified selection bias, or a case of selection for who divorces.

In 1998, Cherlin and his colleagues offered an update on their continuing research.¹¹ Respondents analyzed in the 1991 study had gotten older, so he had more information. While the 1991 paper highlighted *predisruption* effects, this one reported that there were *postdisruption* effects (negative effects after the divorce) that accumulated and made life more difficult for children of divorce. Financial hardship and the loss of paternal involvement were key culprits. He called this phenomenon the “cascade of negative life events” and emphasized, as he had back in 1991, the importance of social and institutional supports for children in disrupted and remarried families.

A similar longitudinal study by Paul Amato and Juliana Sobolewski replicated these results in 2001.¹² They studied stably married, distressed but married, and divorced families over the course of seventeen years. They observed that grown children whose parents had divorced during their childhood had more adjustment problems. Although these adjustment problems were associated with

children of married parents. (Are 20 percent affected? Are 25 percent affected?) But they agree about the resilience of children in the face of divorce. Researchers may disagree about whether the impact of divorce is neutral, as Allen Li argues, or whether some of the impact of divorce is due to preexisting factors, or whether the relationship trajectory research is an important piece of the puzzle about the circumstances under which divorce is harder on children. Scientists agree, however, that comparing married families to divorced families without taking selection bias into account is a case of comparing apples to oranges and will get us nowhere in terms of helping families. As Rutter, Hawkins, and Hetherington all show, failing to take the quality of the marriages seriously is like ignoring the elephant in the room! The distressed marriage is where most people considering divorce start. And this distress is highly costly to the health and mental health of parents and their children.

If you are reading research on marriage and divorce—or listening to someone's conclusions about it—always remember to ask, “Did this study include a comparison group and take selection bias into account?” and “Did the researchers measure things—especially marital distress—carefully?”

When I ask these questions—and when I look at the role of divorce in U.S. history—I see a complicated story. Above all, I have discovered that there is a case for divorce. There are times and situations when divorce is beneficial to the people who divorce and to their children.

NOTES

1. See Ruggles (1997).
2. See Heuveline (2005).
3. Discussed by Stevenson and Wolfers (2006).
4. Reported by Cowen (2007).
5. See Coltrane and Adams (2003).
6. See Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1997).
7. See Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1988).
8. A complete, accessible review of Hetherington's longitudinal research is in Hetherington and Kelly (2002).
9. See Hetherington (1999).
10. Cherlin et al. (1991).
11. Cherlin et al. (1998).
12. Amato and Sobolewski (2001).
13. See Waite et al. (2002); Rutter (2004).

parenthood cause poverty. In other words, he neglected the notion that selection bias could play a role in who ends up as a single parent or who gets divorced. In a 2002 report, historian Stephanie Coontz and economist Nancy Folbre examined the problems with assuming that divorce and single parenthood cause poverty by taking into account selection bias.²³ While there is a correlation between single parenthood and poverty, the correlation does not mean that single parenthood causes poverty. Causation is complex and challenging to establish, but the evidence that causality flows in the other direction—that poverty often causes or precedes single parenthood—is to many analysts a lot stronger. As Stevenson and Wolfers point out, Scafidi neglected comparisons in another way as well: while some women end up losing financially following divorce, others actually gain.²⁴ Scafidi did not include these economic gains in his equations.

The results were divergent because of their fundamental differences in thinking about “what causes what?” While Li’s article asks, “divorce compared to what?” Scafidi did not assess the costs of divorce relative to, for example, remaining in a distressed, tumultuous, or violent family situation. Scafidi didn’t test the premise that divorce (and single parenthood) causes economic problems. He assumed that it did.

Meanwhile, other researchers continue to find that selection bias accounts for some if not all the differences between children whose parents divorce and children whose parents remain married to each other. For example, in 2007 Fomby and Cherlin found that the characteristics of the mother that precede the divorce helped explain the reduced cognitive outcomes for children of divorce.²⁵ In their study, they also found that postdisruption effects of the divorce, rather than just selection bias or predisruption effects, also were associated with behavioral problems sometimes seen in children of divorce. Just as research on relationship trajectories may help us better understand how and when divorce is difficult on adults, this same promising line of research may further explain the postdisruption effects of divorce on children. It turns out that children exposed to multiple transitions—a divorce, then a cohabitation and breakup, then perhaps another marriage—may be at elevated risk relative to children exposed to only one transition. In a 2007 study that focused on single parents, Osborne and McLanahan²⁶ found that the accumulation of a mother’s relationship transitions leads to hardship for her children.

LESSONS LEARNED

Divorce researchers who use comparison groups and control for selection bias, who measure marital quality carefully, and who take domestic violence into account may still disagree about just how different children of divorce are from

Stepfamilies as They Really Are

Neither Cinderella nor the Brady Bunch

Marilyn Coleman and Lawrence Ganong

Consider this: "She was beat like a red-headed stepchild." "Software is the stepchild of the computer industry." These quotations support the widely believed notion that stepfamilies are bad for children: Stepmothers are wicked and uncaring; stepfathers are abusive. The flip side is that stepfamilies are like the Brady Bunch, who never met a family problem they couldn't solve in thirty minutes or less in the 1970s situation comedy. A recent national survey reported that more than half of respondents under age thirty had a close step-relationship (stepparent, stepchild, step-sibling), so it is likely that you are either in a stepfamily or know someone who is. Despite their prevalence, stepfamilies and stepfamily members continue to be seen in these stereotypical extremes (Cinderella, Brady Bunch). In this chapter we present research on stepfamilies as they really are. We share research about stepfamily relationships and how parents' remarriages affect children. We examine what is known about stepfamilies formed by gay and lesbian couples, and we look at unmarried (cohabiting) couples as well as married ones.

STEPFAMILIES AS THEY REALLY ARE

Americans have the highest rates of marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the industrialized world. Cohabitation, while not as frequent in the United States as in some European nations, is also a common experience. As a result of these trends, there are large numbers of stepfamilies in the United States. In a 2011

interesting to see how the legal system deals with the dissolution of these unions and their children. To date, however, much of the available research on stepfamilies focuses on opposite-sex couples.

Stepfamilies are also formed later in life because of increasing numbers of formerly married older adults who are on the dating and marriage market due to longer life spans and the continued high level of divorce in the United States. Although there are many reasons why remarriage is not an attractive option for older adults, many do remarry. But growing numbers of healthy older adults also are in cohabiting relationships, committed unions that may or may not be sharing residences. Some older stepfamilies, of course, are long-term unions of couples that re-partnered when they were much younger. Consequently, the number of older stepfamilies is the largest it has ever been.

Men remarry in old age more often than do women, and older women with adequate finances are the least likely to remarry. Older women who were previously in marriages where they did most of the household work and caregiving of other family members may be unwilling to take on those responsibilities again. Although often interested in a partner to spend time with, they do not want the obligations associated with marriage.

As the baby boomers move into old age, rates of cohabitation likely will increase, as will LAT couples. LAT, or living apart together, refers to those who are in committed relationships but who live in their own, separate homes. The baby boomers were the first age group to separate sex from marriage in large numbers (thanks in part to the invention of the birth control pill) and to cohabit in high numbers. These behaviors will likely carry over into old age. If the thought of widowed or divorced grandparents becoming sexually active is startling, keep in mind that re-partnering in old age has some significant benefits, especially for older men. Older divorced or widowed men who don't re-partner are more likely to become isolated and depressed.

SOME STEPFAMILY HISTORY

Although the study of stepfamilies did not really begin until the final quarter of the twentieth century, stepfamilies have always been rather common. Life spans were fairly short until well into the twentieth century, so parents of young children often died while children were still in the home—women died in childbirth, men were killed in work accidents and wars, and diseases were not well understood or effectively treated. Parents who lost a spouse were motivated to remarry quickly because replacing the deceased parent was necessary for family survival. Widowers who worked on farms or in factories had no time to care for

the household from previous relationships. Some simple and complex stepfamilies also contain children born to the remarried (or cohabiting) union, so there truly are children who are his, hers, and "ours." Some stepchildren end up with full, half-, and step-siblings spread across several households.

The number of stepfamily structural combinations seems almost endless with full, half-, and step-siblings spread across several households. Some of the complexity may lead to confusion about stepfamilies and stigma on the part of those who live in far less complicated families. We often stigmatize that which we do not well understand.

WHO LIVES IN STEPFAMILIES?

Stepfamilies are formed by individuals from every social class, from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and across the life span. However, the chances of being in a stepfamily are somewhat greater for Americans who are young, black, and do not have a college degree. These days, young adults have more step-relatives than older adults do because of their parents' generation's high divorce rate and because increasing numbers of never-married parents later partnered with someone other than the parent of their child. Sixty percent of the black adults interviewed in the Pew survey indicated that they had at least one step-relative, compared to 46 percent of Latino/as and 39 percent of white adults. Americans who never attended college or had some college credits were similar to each other in their likelihood of having a step-relative (45–47 percent). Of those with a college degree, 33 percent had a step-relative.³

While much imagery and myths about stepfamilies invoke heterosexual unions, stepfamilies are headed by gay and lesbian parents as well as heterosexual couples. Most stepfamilies headed by gay men were formed in similar ways as heterosexual stepfamilies, in that children were born to a married couple, the father came out as gay, was divorced from the child's mother, and formed a new union with another man. In the past, most lesbian stepfamilies also were formed when one partner brought children from a previous heterosexual union to the family. Recently, however, growing numbers of lesbian couples have used various means of assisted reproduction so that one partner bears a child; although they usually consider these children as belonging to both partners, the nonbiological parent, like a stepparent in a heterosexual union, lacks legal recognition as a parent in most states. If a lesbian stepfamily dissolves, the partner who did not give birth to the child usually has no legal access to the child. This is true of those couples who used an assisted reproductive technique as well as those who brought children from a previous relationship to the marriage. As gay and lesbian legal marriages become increasingly common in the United States, it will be

but there are other explanations—stepparents may be supporting their biological children living elsewhere as well as stepchildren they live with, many stepfamilies experience greater poverty, or nonresidential bioparents may be sending child support to residential stepchildren, giving a stepparent less need to provide resources.

It is perhaps not surprising, considering the stereotyping of stepfamilies, that they have sometimes elected to hide their stepfamily status (like the Brady Bunch did in the old TV show). Stepfamilies have hidden their status in multiple ways, including having all members of the stepfamily use the same last name (sometimes legally, often not), having stepchildren call the stepparent “mom” or “dad,” and generally presenting themselves as a nuclear family to outsiders. When all parents agree to it, stepparents may legally adopt their stepchildren in an effort to change their family/relationship status and therefore avoid the “step” stigma. In fact, stepparent adoptions of stepchildren lead all other types of adoptions in the United States. For a child to be adopted by a stepparent, however, a biological parent has to give up all claims and rights to the child; in some states, the name of the parent is actually changed on the child’s birth certificate.

Clinicians and researchers have attempted to de-stigmatize stepfamilies by calling them *blended*, *reconstituted*, or *reformed*. The problem with some of these attempts is the lack of family labels or names for the various members of the stepfamilies. The designations *stepmother*, *stepfather*, and *stepchild* are usually understood in our culture, but introducing a stepmother as “my blended mother” or a stepfather as “my reconstituted father” sounds ridiculous. We believe that these attempts to hide stepfamily status reflect a rather simplistic understanding of family diversity.

What are the truths about stepfamilies as they really are? It is good to start with a definition of whom we are writing about. We define stepfamilies as families in which at least one adult has either biological or adopted children from a previous relationship. Within this simple definition lies a huge amount of diversity and complexity. Some of this diversity is structural (i.e., Which adult in the household is a stepparent? Are there step-siblings in the family?), and some of it is related to social and cultural variability—stepfamilies are from all walks of life.

Some scholars refer to the concepts of *stepfamily* and *stepfamily household* as if they were interchangeable, but they are not always the same. The membership of many stepfamilies extends beyond a single household, and consequently many stepfamily members do not live in the same household as other family members, at least not all the time. “Simple” stepfamilies are households consisting of a stepparent (usually a stepfather), a biological parent (usually a mother), and the parents’ children from earlier unions. Researchers consider a stepfamily household to be “blended” or “complex” when each adult brings children to

Pew Center national poll, 42 percent of all respondents and 52 percent of those younger than age thirty reported that they had a close step-relative (i.e., a stepparent, stepchild, step-sibling).¹

Despite the prevalence of stepfamilies, with stereotypes about wicked information about dysfunctional nature of stepfamilies, and unloved, neglected stepchildren. But on about the dysfunctional nature of stepfamilies, and unloved, neglected stepchildren. But on stepmothers, abusive stepfathers, and unloved, neglected stepchildren. But on the other hand, some people see remarriages as "recreating" the nuclear family, and they expect new stepparents to serve as substitutes for absent biological parents ("Isn't it great that you have a new daddy now?").

CINDERELLA, THE BRADY BUNCH, AND OTHER STEPFAMILY STEREOTYPES

Nearly all cultures have a version of the Cinderella story, and many of the centuries-old fairy tales featuring stepfamilies were Grimm indeed (pun intended). The story of Cinderella has been traced back to ninth-century China, and other age-old fairy tales, such as Hansel and Gretel and Snow White, featured wicked stepmothers. The plot is similar in these tales—a child's mother dies, the father remarries a woman who is jealous of her stepdaughter and is cruel and/or murderous toward her. A question seldom raised is why the biological father was so hapless in these stories, but it is certainly no wonder that people have often opted to hide their stepfamily status—nobody wants to be the wicked "stepmonster," the neglected and unloved stepchild, or the weak bioparent from these widely known fairy tales.

Current versions of tales featuring wicked stepparents are offered by some evolutionary psychologists. Daly and Wilson, for example, have argued that stepmothers truly are mean because they want to privilege their own children, so they are more likely to abuse or neglect their stepchildren.² These two scholars also have indicated, however, that it is stepfathers rather than stepmothers who are most likely to abuse stepchildren. And, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the family member most likely to abuse children is the biological mother and not the stepmother or stepfather. Daly and Wilson have been accused of using Darwinian explanations to marginalize and stigmatize stepparents, similar to how Darwinian explanations have previously been used to target gays and lesbians, people of color, and Jews.

Stepparents also may invest fewer material goods and resources in their stepchildren than parents invest in their children. Again, evolutionary arguments are given for why stepparents spend less on stepchildren than parents do on children,

- parent to talk about things that happened in the previous family in front of a stepparent, which contributes to children's feelings of loss. Some stepparents who have taken their stepchild to the doctor have been embarrassed about not knowing whether a child has had vaccines or what allergies she or he might have. These feelings of awkwardness sometimes interfere with feelings of family cohesiveness that seem to come naturally to first-married families.
6. The lack of institutionalization of stepfamilies is often confusing and uncomfortable for stepfamily members. Stepfamilies do not have a legal structure or a history that gives them a set of rules and traditions to follow. In the absence of norms to guide behaviors, some stepparents and their spouses try to act immediately as if they were a first-marriage unit. This works well only when stepchildren are so young they do not remember when their biological parents were together or when older stepchildren are willing to have the stepparent functionally replace their absent parent. If stepchildren are not willing to follow this "first-marriage family model," then problems are more likely to arise. For instance, most stepchildren call their stepparent by their first names; remarried couples trying to emulate a first-marriage family, however, may insist on a stepchild calling the stepparent "mom" or "dad," a request often met with resistance. Some stepparents try to avoid uncomfortable ambiguity by having the stepparent adopt the stepchild. This, of course, is feasible only if the biological parent is willing to give up all rights to the child, and if the child accepts this adoption.

REMARRIAGE AND STEPFAMILY RESEARCH

The early stepfamily research was rather unsophisticated. For instance, data were collected from anyone who lived in a stepfamily—biological parents, stepchildren, stepparents, stepsiblings—and then analyzed together as though everyone—parents, stepparents, children—experienced stepfamilies similarly. The wide variety of stepfamilies usually was ignored, and samples often included only white and middle-class individuals.

The perspective of most early researchers was what we have referred to as a *deficit comparison* approach.⁷ Deficit comparison studies are primarily cross-sectional comparisons of stepchildren to children in two-parent, first-marriage families, although the studies sometimes include children living with a single parent or children whose parents are divorced but not remarried. The prevailing assumption in these deficit comparison studies is that stepchildren will fare more poorly on outcome measures when compared to children living with both of their biological parents.

an infant or for young children and needed immediate child-rearing help. Widows with young children often would end up poverty stricken after their spouses died, with no viable options other than remarriage. Post-bereavement stepfamilies, therefore, were quite common.

Not until the last quarter of the twentieth century, when divorce passed bereavement as the leading "cause" of remarriage, were societal concerns about stepfamilies raised. Remarriage following divorce became viewed as a social and familial problem rather than as a solution to a problem, as was true when remarriage followed bereavement. Because remarriage was viewed as a problem, clinicians took notice of stepfamilies before researchers did. As a result, early knowledge about stepfamilies was problem oriented because it came out of clinical practice with stepfamilies having difficulties adapting to their new family structure. Research-based knowledge about stepfamilies was minimal, and as late as 1979, only eleven studies on remarriage and stepfamily living had been conducted, including dissertations and master's theses. These studies were based on data from only about 600 stepfamily members.

It is little wonder that Andrew Cherlin wrote in 1978 that stepfamilies formed after remarriage were "incomplete institutions" lacking formal societal supports and guidelines for family roles and behaviors.⁴ Cherlin noted that English had no words to describe some stepfamily relationships (e.g., what are stepfathers and fathers to each other?), suggesting that the lack of terminology made it difficult for stepfamily members to imagine the existence of such relationships. The absence of formal institutional support meant that stepfamily members experienced greater stress because they lacked aids to help them figure out how to be a family. In the absence of such norms, many assumed that stepfamilies were reconstituted versions of first-marriage families. The TV show from the early 1970s, *The Brady Bunch*, was an example of a reconstituted version of a first-marriage family. Fondness for this simplistic version of stepfamilies was evident by the numerous *Brady Bunch* remakes that appeared in the 1990s and 2000s.

HOW STEPFAMILIES DIFFER FROM FIRST-MARRIED FAMILIES

While clinical perspectives on stepfamilies typically focused more on problems rather than strengths, important information flowed from their experiences working with stepfamilies. In particular, they developed a greater understanding of the differences between first-married families and stepfamilies. A grasp of these differences can be helpful in understanding some of the adaptations and

adjustments that face stepfamily members in the beginning phases of stepfamily life. The following are some of those differences.

1. Unlike first-married families, stepfamilies are usually preceded by several types of losses. How these losses are handled have implications for the success of the stepfamily. When remarriage (or re-partnering without marriage) follows the death of a partner or a parent, grieving accompanies that loss of a loved one. People grieve at different rates, so some family members may be ready to move on with their lives and possibly into new relationships much sooner than other family members. In divorce, too, there is grieving—for the end of the marriage, for the loss of the family as it had been known, for the time lost with nonresidential parents—and this grieving also is not done at the same rate by all family members. For example, what anthropologist Paul Bohannon referred to as the “emotional” divorce, that period when one or both members of the couple have given up on a no longer satisfying marriage, typically occurs much sooner (sometimes years sooner) for one member of the divorced couple than the other.⁵ Because parents often do not keep their children apprised of their crumbling relationship (which is mostly a good thing!), children may be surprised by the ending of their parents’ marriage and thus have had less time to grieve and accommodate to the changes of their previous family. Adults who ended a marriage often enter a remarriage seeing it as a second chance at happiness, but children may resent the remarriage and the stepparent, and they are not likely to view the remarriage as a second chance at happiness.
2. In remarriages, the parent-child relationship predates the marriage. This may seem like a minor point, but it is not. Remarriages begin with the closest emotional ties being between the parent and the child rather than between the members of the couple. In first marriages, the couple has some time to adjust to each other, develop rituals, and settle into a life together before children arrive. In remarriage, there is no such adjustment period. The children are already there, they may be resentful or still grieving over losses, and they may have different ideas than the stepparent about family rituals, rules, and roles. Nearly everything about everyday family life has to be negotiated, which may seem really difficult and stressful. Renowned stepfamily therapist Patricia Papernow calls this negotiating process establishing a *middle ground*, a necessary step in stepfamily development.⁶ The middle ground is that area where everyone in the family can agree. Papernow says that too much middle ground leads to boredom, perhaps, with routine (seldom a problem in stepfamilies). However, establishing such middle ground makes

- life much easier. Having to negotiate such everyday activities as what time you will eat dinner, what you will eat for dinner, where you will eat dinner, and who has to be present at dinner can be exhausting and stressful. As family and household behaviors become more routine (more middle ground), there is more emotional space for stepfamily members to bond.
3. Children in stepfamilies often are members of two households because of widespread legal preferences for joint physical custody. This increasingly means a constant coming and going of children into and out of the household, which is difficult for some family members to adjust to. When children are members of two households, it represents more than moving back and forth between those households, however. It means that the family in one household cannot plan a family vacation without checking with the child's parent in the other household. It may mean that a parent can't afford to provide a biological child with dance lessons because a stepchild in the other household needs braces. These boundaries are physical (e.g., different households in different communities), but they are also emotional, and they represent abstractions such as power and control. If the divorced couple is unable to civilly and effectively communicate, the child is caught in the middle, carrying messages from one household to the other ("Tell your dad he needs to pay his child support") and back ("Tell your mother that I am picking you up early next Friday"), a position that most children deeply resent.
 4. Unlike the relationship between parents and their children, there are no (or few) legal ties between a stepparent and a stepchild. This matters very little unless the family re-divorces. When the stepfamily splits up, the stepparent generally no longer has rights (or responsibilities) regarding the stepchild. Even for stepfamilies that have shared a household for years, in some cases stepfamily members have not been allowed to visit other stepfamily members in the hospital's intensive care unit because they are not considered "immediate family." Schools have become more aware that stepparents may lack legal ties to a child, but that they may be important family members. This is evidenced by the change in recent years of most school forms. Newer school forms are now more likely to have more than two lines for students to list their parents, avoiding the child's dilemma (and guilt) of deciding which parents they should list.
 5. Unlike first-married families, stepfamily members do not share a history. The stepparent will not know things such as that their stepchild slept with a pink plush rabbit until they were five, or fell off a horse when they were seven and are deathly afraid of horses. In this example, the lack of history can account for a child's puzzling hostility toward a stepparent's attempt to get the stepchild on a horse while on vacation. It may feel awkward for children and their

These study designs are essentially snapshots of family life, offering little consideration of the personal histories of the individuals that led them into living in stepfamilies, or single-parent households, or first-marriage families. A variety of topics have been studied with this deficit approach (e.g., children's self-esteem, externalizing behaviors such as getting in trouble, and grade point averages) and consistently found that, on average, stepchildren did not fare as well as children in first-marriage families, but they were similar to children living with never-married or divorced single parents. Although the developmental and behavioral differences generally were very small among these groups of children, some researchers and the general public have tended to perceive these findings as large and absolute—that *all* stepchildren do less well on all measures of well-being than do children whose parents are still married, which simply is not true. In fact, most stepchildren function well, and their development is not damaged permanently by their parents' re-partnering.

Researchers have become more sophisticated about comparing family structures, and most research on stepchildren has followed the trend toward research designs that follow changes in families over time, pay greater attention to family process variables (such as relationship quality, everyday talk, and relationships with non-household kin), and involve more nuanced theorizing about stepfamily effects on children. For example, fewer researchers look only at family structure as the sole, or even main, explanation for children's and adults' well-being. More structural variables are also being included, such as the number of marital (or partner) transitions, the current and past marital statuses of parents and stepparents, and the presence of non-household stepfamily members.

In addition, some scholars have moved from a deficit comparison model to a *normative adaptive* approach that assumes that divorce and remarriage are often normal lifestyle choices rather than the result of personal psychopathology or maladaptive interpersonal or social problems. In using a normative adaptive approach, some researchers conduct longitudinal studies so that they can follow individuals and their families over time and across family transitions, yielding a more complete picture of the contexts in which stepfamilies live. Conducting research this way is like taking videos rather than still photos of stepfamily interactions. In addition, more normative adaptive researchers are using qualitative methods that involve in-depth conversations with stepfamily members to understand their experiences living in stepfamilies more holistically than is possible from questionnaires in anonymous surveys. We have found that some notable stepfamily researchers have never actually talked to any members of a stepfamily. They study stepfamilies using large data sets collected by other people, or they collect their own data using survey questionnaires. While large data sets are a valuable and informative research tool, using multiple methods that include observations or interaction with stepfamily members has deepened and made

more reliable our understanding of the diversity as well as the resources within stepfamilies.

Normative adaptive perspectives include the study of resilience in stepfamilies. For instance, researchers have investigated stepchildren who are doing well in stepfamilies to see how they and their families differ from those that are struggling, as a way to determine what individual, interpersonal, and social factors contribute to successful adaptations. These studies also examine the context of successful stepfamily relationships as well as how stepfamily members build and maintain positive relationships.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM RESEARCH ON STEPFAMILIES?

Over the past four decades, stepfamily scholarship has gone from less than a dozen studies to thousands of studies based on data from tens of thousands of stepfamily members from around the world. So what has been learned from the explosion of stepfamily research over the past three decades? Here is what we have learned:

1. "If-then" statements, as is true of most research, are necessary in drawing conclusions from the study of stepfamilies. For example, "If a child gains a stepparent when younger and *if* the remarriage lasts during most of the years that the child still lives at home, *then* the relationship is likely to resemble that between a biological parent and child." "If the stepparent invests in activities that the stepchild enjoys (as opposed to the stepparent engaging in activities they think the stepchild *should* enjoy, *then* the relationship will more likely resemble that between a biological parent and child." "If the child is close to all of their parents (biological and step-), *then* they will likely experience greater well-being."
2. Remarriages are less stable than first marriages, ending in divorce somewhat more frequently. Reasons for higher divorce rates for remarried couples include financial problems, issues involving raising children from prior unions, and what have been called *selection factors*. This latter point means that divorced individuals probably have different attitudes about divorce as a potential solution to marital problems than do never-divorced individuals. They know they can cope with a marital breakup, so divorce holds less fear for them, and they see fewer barriers to ending a marriage.
3. Remarriages tend to be more egalitarian than first marriages. This is primarily because women want more power and control in remarriage than they had in their previous marriage. Women who have been divorced and on their own, effectively managing their income and their children, are reluctant to

- c. Some stepchildren (often adolescents) accept their stepparents into the family, but with ambivalence. They really are not interested in having another adult telling them what to do. It is developmentally appropriate for adolescents to begin disengaging from their families, and if the remarried partners are trying to make things "feel like a family" and force an adolescent to take part in stepfamily activities, conflicts may develop. Stepchildren who accept their stepparent with ambivalence do not invest much energy in developing a relationship with him or her. Some stepchildren may feel they have little in common with their stepparent and see the stepparent as an unnecessary family member. Ambivalence is a common characteristic of nearly all step-relationships, though its extent is variable.
- d. A fourth pattern consists of stepchildren who either become more or less accepting of the stepparent over time. Stepparents who keep engaging in affinity development with their stepchildren often will eventually win them over. Stepchildren, as they mature and become less self-focused, may begin to appreciate that the stepparent makes their parent happy. These new insights may lead to greater acceptance of the stepparent. On the other hand, stepparents (mostly stepfathers) who "courted" the stepchild along with the stepchild's mother sometimes quit engaging in those behaviors after the remarriage. In these circumstances, stepchildren observe that the stepfather was nice—took them to movies, out to eat—until the remarriage and then everything changed. Other stepchildren indicate that despite spending considerable effort being nice to a stepparent (often a nonresidential stepmother), the stepparent continually rebuffs them or is rude. Even if she makes the father happy, the relationship between the stepchild and stepmother is soured.
- e. A fifth pattern is stepchildren who disliked and rejected the stepparent from the start. Many reasons were given for this. Some blamed their nonresidential stepmother for the distant relationship that they had with their father. Some thought the stepparent moved into a disciplinary role too quickly and resented taking direction from the stepparent. Others saw the stepparent as taking away from the quality of their parent's lives (e.g., stepfathers who did not contribute financially to the household or who were alcoholics who treated their mothers poorly; stepmothers who interfered with or were jealous of the relationship between the stepchild and their parent).
- f. Stepchildren who coexisted with their stepparent (usually a stepparent acquired after the stepchild was an adult or nearly an adult). Sometimes coexisting relationships were the norm because the parent had been

married multiple times and the stepchild assumed that the relationship would not last long enough to bother investing time in it.

4. Stepchildren can be close to both a mother and stepmother and to both a father and stepfather. In fact, there is evidence that stepchildren develop better when they get along with and are close to all of the parents and step-parents who are raising them. Clinicians have long pointed out the damage to children when placed in the middle of loyalty binds between parents, or between a parent and a stepparent, or between their two step-households, and researchers' findings have supported the notion that allowing children to bond with all of the adults in their lives is helpful to their development. Of course, some stepchildren are close to only one parent, and some do not get along with any of their parents or stepparents.

There are all types of stepfamilies—some are happy and satisfying, some are grim and stressful. Most stepfamilies, like most other family forms, fall somewhere between these extremes. In the past few years, family researchers have learned a lot about how stepfamily members relate to each other, but many questions remain to be answered, such as how do gay and lesbian couples experience stepfamily life? Do interracial stepfamilies have distinct resources or challenges that same-race stepfamilies do not? How will our aging population experience stepfamily issues—including caregiving responsibilities—which are increasingly prevalent? Our understanding of stepfamilies is growing, and both the questions and answers about them are better when the varieties of experiences are recognized by researchers, practitioners, and even by stepfamily members themselves. Sociologist Judith Stacey has called stepfamilies “brave new families,” and we have long contended that learning about stepfamily resilience processes yields valuable lessons that can be helpful to members of all family forms.

NOTES

1. Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends (2011).
2. Daly and Wilson (1998).
3. Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends (2011).
4. Cherlin (1978).
5. Bohannon (1984).
6. Papernow (1987).
7. Ganong and Coleman (2004).
8. Ganong, Coleman, and Jamison (2011).

give up that hard-earned control. Men in remarriages seem to be more willing to share power with their wives, and when they do so, remarriages are more satisfying for both partners.

4. Even though stepchildren tend to do slightly less well, on average, than children in continuously married families on a number of dimensions of well-being, these differences often relate to factors that have less to do with stepfamily dynamics than with more general issues. For instance, conflict between the children's biological parents, household and family stressors, poverty, the experience of multiple family transitions, and even genetic factors such as mental illness and addiction are found to be more relevant than parents' marital status in many studies of stepchildren.

5. The relationship between stepchildren and stepparents is heavily influenced by the stepchild's judgments about the contributions the stepparent is making (or has made) to the family. These judgments generally are affected somewhat by input from the stepchild's biological parents and by other kin (e.g., siblings and grandparents), but other factors are also important. Other contributing factors include the stepchildren's ages when the relationship between their parent and the parent's partner began, the amount of time the stepparent and stepchild have spent together (heavily determined by custody arrangements), and the gender of the stepchild and stepparent. It may be especially important to stepchildren that the stepfather bring financial resources to the household rather than reducing resources. To many stepchildren, a stepfather who does not financially contribute to the household is merely taking away valuable time with their mother.

6. Stepparent-stepchild relationships generally work best when stepparents support the parent rather than taking parental roles, especially disciplinary roles. Over time, stepparents may become more like parents to stepchildren, but for this to happen, the stepparent has to do a great deal of what is called *affinity building* (i.e., engaging with the stepchild in activities that the stepchild enjoys). In response to these efforts, stepchildren need to engage in relationship-building actions with the stepparent as well. In one study, stepfathers who were observed making efforts at the dinner table day after day to connect with stepchildren who ignored their efforts eventually gave up. Although it is painful to stepparents to try to bond with a stepchild who responds with rudeness or disinterest, they should not give up. The stepchild may eventually succumb to a stepparent's efforts if they believe that the stepparent is sincere. Some children may not be able to begin bonding with their stepparent until they have finished grieving for their previous family.

7. Stepmothers, especially nonresidential ones, have a more difficult time than do stepfathers. Residential stepmothers may be forced to engage in parenting

- behaviors simply because they are there with the stepchildren day in and day out. Most stepmothers do not share a residence with stepchildren full-time, however, and those who do not spend much time with their stepchildren struggle with determining what roles they should take. Some have even wondered if they should be in the home when the stepchildren visit, because the children often make it clear they are there only to see their father. Following old-fashioned gender scripts, sometimes more traditional fathers push the care of their children onto the stepmother, assuming that she will enjoy the "mothering" role and that his children will accept her in that role. Stepmothers and stepchildren, however, seldom feel that way. Some non-residential stepmothers have described their positions as "mothering but not a mother" or as "an additional mother." Because the role of mother is such a powerful one, most stepmothers are very careful to avoid encroaching on the biological mother's territory, even though in describing what they do with and for their stepchildren, they are defining mothering behaviors. The role that a stepmother is able to take with her stepchildren, however, is basically determined by the biological mother. If she does not like the stepmother, the children are likely to engage in such behaviors as refusing to eat anything the stepmother cooks, ignoring her, or making fun of her.
8. A number of patterns typify how stepparent-stepchild relationships develop and are maintained.⁸ Given the complexity of stepfamilies, it should not be surprising that there are many types of step-relationships.
 - a. Stepchildren who were raised by a stepparent from infancy are likely to accept that stepparent as a parent. The stepparent may be a replacement for a deceased parent or for one who has abandoned the child, or the stepparent may be an additional (third) parent with all the pluses and minuses of a biological parent. Stepchildren representing this pattern often do not remember a time when the stepparent was not a part of their family. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the stepchildren do not also have a relationship with their nonresidential parent: some children have positive relations with more than two parent figures.
 - b. Some stepchildren like their stepparent from the beginning (but do not necessarily accept them as a parent or parent-figure). These relationships usually develop quickly and form around shared interests, similar personalities, or common values. These stepchildren notice early on that the stepparent treats their parent well and also does not put the stepchild in a loyalty bind by trying to replace their biological parent. Stepparents who are accepted from the beginning usually are accepted because they engage in a great deal of affinity-developing behavior.