

Disenfranchised grief in stepfamilies

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Abstract

This article explores the idea of disenfranchised grief in stepfamilies. It is suggested that many losses individuals in stepfamilies experience are often not recognised, articulated or sanctioned either within our culture or by stepfamily members themselves.

Examples where grief can be disenfranchised are given - focusing on *children* at the stepfamily formation stage, *all family members* at the post formation stage, and *couples* in relation to differing life experience.

Additionally the paradox of incorporating the past while also moving ahead is seen to be crucial in the resolution of grief for stepfamily members.

It is suggested that counsellors and educators alike become familiar with hidden losses stepfamily members may be experiencing so that they can help stepfamilies not only to survive but to reach their full potential.

Some time ago it was suggested to me by a friend that if all cars sported a bumper sticker outlining the major life losses the owner had suffered, or was currently suffering, perhaps there would be greater understanding and courtesy shown on our roads. I thought this an interesting idea, because of course in reality many losses are experienced privately and without observances which would allow others to know that someone is experiencing loss or grief.

Additionally, some grief is not socially recognised nor its expression sanctioned. This has been described as 'disenfranchised grief' (Doka, 1989). When grief is disenfranchised in this way, resolution of the associated losses is more difficult to achieve.

It is generally known that stepfamilies are 'born of loss'. Whether formed by separation and divorce, as most are today, or the death of a parent, more common in previous times, it is clear that loss in both cases is the precursor to stepfamily life. It is noteworthy that the loss experienced after separation is often expressed as anger, whereas the loss experienced after the death of a spouse is usually expressed as grief. However the complex feelings emanating from both divorce and death have their source in loss.

'Steop' is an old Teutonic word denoting bereavement, so a 'steopbairn' was a child who had lost a parent and gained a stepparent. As has been portrayed in many old folk tales the very gaining of a stepparent was often associated with loss and hardship.

"A Stepdame too I have, a cursed she, who rules my Henpeck'd Sire, and orders me".
(Dryden, 1697)

However, it appears to me that a lot of grief within stepfamilies today is not understood or sanctioned within our society; and that the associated losses are sometimes unable to be recognised, let alone articulated by stepfamily members. In a 'Making Stepfamilies Work' course for couples I co-facilitated recently, two men both approached me at the end of one session to say how difficult but helpful the segment on loss had been for them. As one man put it..."I had been thinking that the problems were all out there, now I know how much I haven't been dealing with grieving within myself'.

I would like then, for the duration of this article to focus on some of the areas where grief and loss are often 'disenfranchised' for stepfamily members. The examples I give will by no means be exhaustive but I hope will serve to illustrate the importance of recognising and articulating these losses. Their resolution is central in terms of stepfamily members moving on to co-create a new and 'good enough' family.

Often, a major stumbling block that prevents stepfamily members' expression of grief, relating to major personal, relational, familial and societal losses they have suffered, is 'pseudo mutuality'. Pseudo mutuality occurs when new family members attempt to experience and demonstrate a level of intimacy and cohesiveness that is not yet a reality.

These attempts to 'get on with the new family life', can ironically impede its progress by covertly disallowing expressions of discomfort with the new arrangements or feelings of loss associated with the past. Following my therapy sessions with her family, one young girl expressed her relief about being able to be more real in her stepfamily...."We are getting on better now that we don't have to put on that fake stuff'.

Formation stage

When a stepfamily is created it is a paradox that, along with hope for the new family, loss has and is still being experienced by family members, albeit in different ways. A primary task of the stepfamily is to integrate these losses while rebuilding a viable future.

Grief is the expression of a profound conflict between contradictory impulses - to consolidate all that is still valuable and important in the past, and preserve it from loss; and at the same time, to reestablish a meaningful pattern of relationships, in which the loss is accepted. (Marris in Martin, 1996)

During a stepfamily's formation both adults and children are dealing with the major grief tasks of both past preservation and future reestablishment. When this balancing act is skewed, for example if the past is not acknowledged in the rush to move ahead, or the past is clung to at the expense of the future, an important aspect of grief resolution in stepfamilies is disenfranchised.

In the initial phases of a stepfamily creation, children's grief can be largely unrecognised or completely denied by adults in the family. This can be due to a number of reasons:

- During a new courtship an otherwise caring and attentive parent may be somewhat preoccupied with their new partner. Caught up in the passion or interest of a new relationship, the parent may be unaware that their child/ren sense that they are no longer 'quite there' for them in the way they were. One eleven-year old boy who lived with his dad expressed his sense of loss when his father got involved in a new

relationship. He said these days his dad seemed to be "... always making gooey eyes at her and hasn't got time to do things with me the way he used to."

- At the beginning of a stepfamily, adults and children may have very different fantasies. While adults may wish for a new and happy family, children often still want their original family to be reunited. Children are more likely to be further back in the grieving process than their adult counterparts. It may be very painful for parents to recognise and affirm their children's sense of loss, as they often feel that this acknowledgement may signify that the stepfamily will fail.
- While separating adults are working their way through the complexity and sometimes conflictual process of legal, financial and emotional divorce from their ex-spouse, they can miss understanding the nature and extent of their children's feelings. It can be difficult for parents to tune in to their children's experiences of grief at a time when they are 'just coping' emotionally themselves.
- Children's grief is exacerbated by their sense of powerlessness. They have no say in their parents' separation (or death of a parent), where and who they will live with, their parents' choice of new partners and a myriad of other life changing decisions. Adults often don't realise the extent of the feelings of powerlessness experienced by their children.
- One of the worst 'hidden' types of grief for children is the one they have to bare when their biological parents continue a personal warfare against one another. The child's sense of distress is further heightened when they are asked to take sides in the battle, often thus effectively losing connectedness with one parent. Parents who are thus preoccupied are often quite unaware of the hidden grief this is causing their children. One child said "What Mum and Dad don't realise is that when they throw arrows at each other the arrows have to go through my body first".

Brainstorming or debriefing

Children's past history and feelings of loss need to be honoured. Time for children and their biological parent alone will be part of this honouring. This will enable children to more easily embrace the future and become part of the stepfamily at their own pace.

Post formation

The broadest definition of loss is "the difference between ones expectation and reality" when these don't coincide. This construction seems very apt for stepfamilies, where the myth of how the stepfamily will be, often based on a biological model, can clash headlong with the reality, especially early in the stepfamily's life. While family members can experience a profound sense of disappointment and loss, they often find it difficult to formulate or articulate this. Following are some examples:

Biological parents often feel a great sense of loss because their children and new partner are not seen to be forming a close and instant bond in the way they imagined. Even those biological parents who say they did not want or expect their new partner to 'parent' their child/ren, often experience disappointment at perceived lacks in the stepparent-stepchild relationship, especially early in the stepfamily's history.

- Stepparents often feel like an outsider, joining a pre-existing system of parent and child/ren. They can experience feelings of loss in the contrast between the closeness felt with their partner during the courtship phase, and the current struggle to be part of the new family. This sense of being an `outsider' is heightened because in a stepfamily the parent/child bond always predates the couple-bond.
- The residential parent may experience the loss of the freedom to parent their child/ren in the autonomous way they were able to in the single parent family stage. In this way, gaining another adult support person in the family can also represent a loss.
- The non-residential parent, as well as facing the loss of not living with their child/ren, can have this loss amplified by the guilt of living with and caring for someone else's children. In some instances where a parent has not had contact with their child/ren, sometimes for many years, being in a stepfamily reawakens unexpected feelings of loss and a need to reestablish the parent-child bond again.
- Children often lose their `special' position in the family when a stepfamily forms. They may have been replaced as the oldest, youngest or only child in the family, or the brightest or best at sport, etc. A form of grief that is often not well understood is that which a stepchild can feel when an `ours' baby is born to the new couple. Even when the half brother or sister is eagerly awaited, a stepchild usually experiences some sense of loss along with the gaining of a sibling. After all, the new baby has something precious that the stepchild can never have again - both biological parents living with and caring for them!
- Grandparents can withdraw from being part of the new family which creates a loss for the stepfamily, or they can be left out of the new family's arrangements causing them the loss of playing a meaningful role in their grandchildren's lives. The meaning of these losses is often underplayed within our culture.

The above examples illustrate just some of the losses that can represent unseen `disenfranchised grief' in stepfamilies. These losses need to be acknowledged, affirmed and articulated in ways that are helpful to those who are experiencing them.

Differing life experience

Other hidden forms of loss can occur when partners' life experiences don't match in some important way. For example:

- When a couple's readiness for moving ahead together is `out of sync'. Take the case of the couple where one had been out of their previous relationship for some years, while the other had only recently left. Although they felt great affection for one another and wanted to be together, the difference in their life stages meant there was an unacknowledged sadness around their `differing' needs and wishes about proceeding with the relationship.
- When one partner has children from a previous relationship and the other doesn't. This difference in parental status often represents an unspoken loss for both partners. The one with children can experience a sense of loss when the new partner and stepchildren do not form a close bond. (or even like one another). This is further exaggerated if the biological parents' previous partner has died, and there has been an expectation that the new stepparent will fill their shoes. As one new stepmother put it..."I knew when I married him it was a package deal. but I didn't know what was in the package until I opened it!"

On the other hand, for the partner who has not previously had children there is often a sense of loss about missing out on couple time 'just the two of us', prior to having children. One member in a group session described it thus...."We didn't have a courtship as a couple, you have to court the children".

These partners also miss out on important 'first time' experiences with their partner - for example, first wedding, first honeymoon, first home, first baby, all things that their partner has done before, with someone else. Paradoxically these feelings of loss can be heightened or even felt consciously for the first time if the couple have an 'ours baby'.

Throughout this article, I have elicited some of the losses stepfamily members can experience that are 'hidden', and are often suffered silently. This silence prevents the realisation of new relationships and new families. In my work as a therapist with stepfamilies I see one of the major tasks is to help clients get in touch with, express and integrate this disenfranchised grief.

I believe another effective way we can enfranchise, or set free, this grief is in group settings for stepfamily members like the 'Making Stepfamilies Work' course for couples. Under expert leadership, with others in similar situations, individuals can come to understand, and if they wish, express some of the grief they have felt or are feeling.

Importantly, within the course adult participants also learn in a variety of ways about how to be more in touch with losses and changes their children are experiencing. This is a very liberating experience for all concerned and paves the way for a deeper commitment to the current relationship and family.

On completion of a recent 'Making Stepfamilies Work' course three participants commented on the importance of working through issues relating to loss in the course:

" The course has made us talk about issues that we wouldn't normally discuss".

"It was like a journey, going back to the initial breakup and then new grouping and couple - often difficult personally but ultimately very satisfying and positive".

"Feel freed up about being in a stepfamily personally... about loss and family function".

Conclusion

I have suggested that a lot of grief adults and children bring to, and experience within stepfamilies is of a hidden and unsanctioned nature. This 'disenfranchised' grief makes expression of the associated losses, and therefore resolution difficult to achieve. It is crucial then, that both counsellors and educators are alert to grief and loss issues for individuals in stepfamilies and draw these out in ways that are helpful for family members. It is certainly true that rebuilding a stepfamily future goes hand in hand with incorporating the past.

References

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