

UNACKNOWLEDGED CHANGE: STEPFAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA

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This paper documents the experience of the Stepfamily Association of Vic in working with stepfamilies. It raises some questions which I trust you may find useful, whether your interest is in social policy, research, family practice, or if you are here because you are in a family.

The main part of the paper explores issues relating to the lack of recognition and support many stepfamilies experience as part of everyday life. It argues that stepfamilies occupy an ambivalent position in society which is disempowering for them, and ignores the positive contribution they have to make in a changing society.

The final part of the paper explores what the Stepfamily Association believes needs to happen for this picture to change.

1. Lack of recognition and support - an experience of ambivalence.

When someone (with authority) describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing (Rich in Meemeduma, 1993:163)

This quote describes the everyday experience of the thousands of people in stepfamilies who have consulted the Stepfamily Association of Victoria over the last 18 years. From its early days as a self help and support group, through dozens of education courses, to 1997/98 when more than 700 requests (Stepfamily Association of Vic., 1998) for service were responded to, the Association commonly encounters a sense of social isolation, bewilderment and a belief by service users that they were the only ones experiencing such a difficulty, that it is somehow their fault that their stepfamily is not all plain sailing like the Brady Bunch, or that deep down they really might be that wicked stepmother or cruel stepfather.

Their sense of relief is often enormous - just to know that an organisation such as the Association is really there, to hear that many other people do share similar experiences, that there is basic information, together with opportunities for support, education and counselling. Affirming, normalising and empowering - simple, basic activities in service delivery around Australia. Yet it seems (from the experience of the Association) that for people in stepfamilies, acknowledgment can be hard to come by.

This raises a question. How is it that a group of people - which I will argue represents one in every five Australian families - can feel so isolated and disempowered in this country? In many ways these experiences just outlined share much in common with those of cultural minorities such as migrant and indigenous communities, even though the majority of those who consult the Association belong to the dominant Australian culture. The difference seems to be - they don't belong to the dominant family culture.

Belonging, but not belonging, is one aspect of the ambivalent status that stepfamilies are accorded in Australian society. I want to explore several other aspects of this ambivalence which stepfamilies experience.

1.1 Invisibility

a. Statistical discounting Everybody knows someone in a stepfamily, but few show up in official statistics. Stepfamilies were numerically discounted by not being counted at all in the Census until 1986. Many are still hidden under the guise of couple families, seemingly no different from nuclear families. The A.B.S. counts 7% of couple families with dependent children as step or blended families, or 4% of all couple families. (A.B.S. 1997)

Two aspects of these numbers are striking.

(1) 7% becomes 4%. The statistics imply that stepfamilies vanish by definition when children are no longer dependent.

(2) 7% only counts as stepfamilies those where children live-in. Couple families where stepchildren visit are totally discounted by A.B.S. figures.

According to the Association's background paper on statistics (Martin, 1998), which combines A.B.S. data, and A.I.F.S. research on the number of men and women who repartner, up to an extra 15% of couple families could be stepfamilies. Conservatively, this gives a total of 20% or one in five families being a stepfamily.

This raises a further question. Why the discrepancy between 'official' figures and reality, and does it matter? According to Hartley and McDonald (A.I.F.S. 1994:8), the discrepancy is because A.B.S. measures not families, but household families.

They do not refer to families as people usually define them - that is, a group of people related by blood and/or strong emotional ties irrespective of where they live. (ibid)

A.B.S. figures thus provide a snapshot of people living in the same house, but are silent on issues of family functioning and relationships (ibid).

So what are we to say (in the commonly experienced situation) to the woman who rings because she's at her wits end. With no children herself, she blissfully married a man whose children from his first marriage visit (the situation in 87% of the time: A.B.S. 1997). They plan children together, she doesn't hate his kids, but the dynamics of the visits are such that she spends half her time dreading the next visit, or recovering - neither a recipe for intimacy. She feels stuck, and that the couple are drifting apart. He sees it as her problem adjusting to his kids.

Are they a stepfamily or aren't they? It feels real enough to them, and the dynamics are enough to put their relationship at risk, if they continue without positive change. The children don't live there, but they certainly have an impact on family dynamics.

Does it matter? Well, do A.B.S. definitions and numbers influence research and social policy? If they do as Hartley and McDonald believe (ibid:12), perhaps we are beginning to see some structural causes for the lack of recognition and support which stepfamilies experience.

And do stepchildren and stepparents magically disappear when children are no longer dependent? What is the experience of these later life-stage families? Do they cease being stepfamilies - just by definition?

The Association believes strongly that family focussed research and social policy needs to be based on the reality of lived experience, to take account of relationships dynamics, and to take account of families at all stages of the life cycle. If based on the structure of family households, without including multiple-household families (McDonald, 1993), they risk being irrelevant, and worse, discriminatory and harmful to a large and growing section of Australian families.

It is interesting to note that apart from the A.B.S. definition, a widely accepted definition of a stepfamily (eg Whelan and Kelly 1986, Visser and Visser 1979, quoted in Martin, 1996) is

any family, legal or de facto, formed when one or both partners has a child or children from previous relationships, who either live in or visit.

b. Invisibility and identity The ultimate invisibility is invisibility to oneself, as my starting quote suggested. Many stepfamilies don't identify as stepfamilies, like in the example just described where stepchildren visit. Many service providers - still working from a 'nuclear family' model - don't identify them either. When this is combined with traditional role expectations, the stage is set for conflict and shattered expectations.

Imagine welcoming a stranger into your home and having them suddenly discipline your child, without having built a positive connection with your child first - do you foresee the problems? Or at the other end of the continuum, your welcome stranger 'takes over' the nurturing role. You may welcome some support, but imagine how you might feel if you were the child or teenager. A take over bid (even if welcomed by the adult) invites a reaction from the kids.

1.2. Dominance of the 'nuclear family' as reference point

Many authors have noted that the nuclear family forms the dominant reference point for much family research and social policy in Australia, and is used as a point of comparison for the 'adequacy' of the stepfamily form. (eg, Gerrard and Howden 1994, McDonald 1993, Martin 1996).

When community, professionals and stepfamily members themselves critique the stepfamily as dysfunctional (from the lens of a nuclear family), perhaps it is small wonder that stepfamilies can feel that they are failing, and that they don't clearly identify their issues as stepfamily issues. (Gerrard and Howden 1994:4) Feeling ambivalence about whether to identify as a stepfamily is certainly understandable.

At an individual level, we could understand that in our society, most people have grown up in nuclear or sole parent families, and these then form their dominant reference points, for their own beliefs about 'family'. How then are they to understand a family form of which they have had little experience, except through negative stereotyping, myth and fairytale. Not only is there a lack of community support and recognition of stepfamilies needs: stepfamily members themselves can be caught in this cultural bind.

1.3. Lack of role clarity

Roles in stepfamilies are never clear at the beginning, and always need to be negotiated. The confusing social context just outlined forms the landscape which stepfamilies are invited to explore. What is your role as a new adult member of a family, where a teenager informs you that you don't belong and never will? This question presents as a central focus in thousands of variations.

Complex public policy considerations abound in attempting to balance the needs of first and second families. Legal status and responsibilities of stepfamily relationships are often not clear. Financial and relationship issues are often in tension, and blur in practice. This issue is only touched on, as it could be the subject of an entire paper.

1.4. The place of the stepfamily in family research and family policy.

Some issues regarding definition of 'family' have already been noted. Although much academic work, and many professional and popular books now document stepfamily realities, it is still not uncommon to see references, even in Family Matters, to 'the family' as ending with separation or divorce and single parenthood - a kind of 'flat earth' approach to relationships which implies that further ventures are destined to fall off the face of the earth.

It is interesting to look at government funding for resourcing stepfamilies as an expression of social policy. One major effort to my knowledge is a resource package of video and booklet for stepfamilies, developed by the West Australian government as one of a series of resources for people in different forms of family.

The only other initiative I am aware of is a recent tender by the Child Support Agency for a neat 'one size fits all' educational package on stepfamily issues, whose purpose is to enhance compliance with Child Support orders.

While I believe any education on stepfamily realities is potentially a good thing, the very fact of this initiative stands like an island in an ocean of the absence of government recognition and preventive, supportive response to stepfamilies' needs in Australia.

I should mention that the Association is pleased to be receiving ongoing Commonwealth government funding for preventive intervention of \$30,000 per year, to finish in June 1999. There is a budget promise of continuation funding, but as we all know, that's no certainty. There does seem to be a serious funding and social policy imbalance when a sub-group of 20% of Australian families receives just this much recognition and support.

2 What needs to happen?

2.1. Acknowledge stepfamily realities.

Stepfamilies are nothing new. They have been around since times of fairy tale and myth. The major changes are that they have increased in numbers, and that until recently they were mainly created after a relationship ended through the death of a partner - from war, from childbirth, from illness - not divorce.

Much is now known about stepfamilies. I won't elaborate on ways stepfamilies differ from other family forms. These are well documented in many texts. Theoretical understandings of stepfamilies as a unique family form are broadly espoused, yet in practice stepfamily members often continue to struggle in a fog of uncertainty about

appropriate norms and roles, their confusion amplified by ambiguous messages both from within (beliefs) and from without (social myths). (Martin 1996:17,18)

This sense of confusion and struggle seems widespread. As I move around welfare agencies in Melbourne in my roles as Executive Officer of the Association, and as a social work educator at La Trobe university, many professionals report disproportionate numbers of stepfamilies in their client population, and that staff often find it very challenging to work with stepfamily issues. For example,

- ❖ a conflict resolution agency in Melbourne reports 50% of its client group are stepfamilies.
- ❖ a pioneering counsellor with stepfamilies shared that many of her colleagues found stepfamilies 'too hard' to work with.

More questions emerge. Why is this so, and what does it say about what stepfamilies need to succeed?

This is a challenge to us all - researchers, social policy makers, practitioners, academics. What questions are we asking? What questions do we need to be asking? Are our questions, our research, our policy, our practice assisting to acknowledge stepfamily realities? More vigorous debate is needed about stepfamily identity, needs and potential.

In the words of Messinger (1984:219) speaking of stepfamilies in the United States,

[A] stepfamily culture has emerged and is full grown... We understand this theoretically, but socially, legally and culturally it has not become clear how to legitimise and institutionalise a family formed from parts of two previous families.

2.2 Explore stepfamilies' potential

At a direct service level, the Association's experience, together with anecdotal and qualitative research evidence suggest that many stepfamilies have internalised disqualifying perspectives, but that they have the potential to be viable, rewarding families provided they are viewed appropriately through a stepfamily lens, revealing their complexities, unique dynamics and creative potential (Gerrard and Howden, 1994:4.5).

In addition, Gerrard and Howden (ibid) assert that the stepfamily can represent

an open and socially responsive family which challenges some of the negative aspects of the patriarchal family ... Overall there is often increased potential for equality and democratisation to occur within the stepfamily.

2.3 Create networks of resources

The Association's ongoing preventive educational and support work with stepfamilies, and a recent statewide professional training workshop demonstrate roles for Stepfamily Associations and for empowered professionals, in enhancing stepfamily viability and success.

I believe that this early intervention approach, coupled with increased community supports and enlightened family policy has the potential to achieve lasting positive change.

Unacknowledged Change, Steve Martin, Stepfamily Association of Victoria, 1998

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The Association is committed to the formation of a national association to enhance the development and availability of resources for stepfamilies, and would welcome expressions of interest in achieving this objective.

Conclusion

Is it terrible that 50 % of stepfamilies break down? Or, is it a tribute to their resilience that only 7% more break up than in first marriages (A.B.S. 1997), given the complex needs they are faced with, the lack of social recognition and support, and lack of readily available understanding from professionals?

What are effective ways of recognising and supporting stepfamilies through research and family policy?

How should we define families - by structure, by function, by geography, by dynamics?

With one in three marriages a remarriage, 43% divorce rate for first marriages, and 50% for second and subsequent (A.B.S. 1997), the need for alternative, empowering understandings of stepfamilies is urgent. So also is more vigorous debate about stepfamily identity, needs and potential; the formation of appropriate community supports, and acknowledgment by governments through clear family policy.

I believe that the development of a national association for stepfamilies is necessary to achieve these goals. Ambivalence will not quickly wither in the face of conflicting policy imperatives. A strong advocacy role, as in the U.S. and the U.K. will be important to reclaim reality from myth, provide accurate information for members and community alike, and work for change at social, political and legal levels.

The Stepfamily Association of Victoria looks forward to developing partnerships which respond creatively to the needs of Australian stepfamilies, at policy, practice and research levels.

It is heartening to be at such a conference and to share this session with two other presenters focussing on stepfamily issues. Three out of some 200 papers, plus associated topics in other sessions is a lot better than none, but the place of stepfamilies on family policy and research agendas still has some way to go. I look forward to reading and hearing of your conversations, articles and conference presentations, projects and programs which pick up and develop some of these issues.

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