

# THE STEPPARENT ROLE: POTENTIAL FOR DISTURBANCES IN FAMILY FUNCTIONING\*

IRENE FAST, Ph.D., and ALBERT C. CAIN, Ph.D.  
The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan

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*Stepparents' role-related difficulties in developing stable patterns of feeling, thinking and acting toward their stepchildren are discussed in terms of contradictory pressures on them to act as parent, nonparent, and stepparent; the sharing of role functions of parent with the previous parent in ways not clearly established in the society; weakened social mores (e.g. the incest taboo), and anomalies in role learning opportunities.*

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IF REFERENCES in the Readers Guide and the Psychological Abstracts are a fair indication, both popular and professional interest in marriage, parenthood and divorce has been at a high level during the past 10 years, but there has been little interest in the problems of families with "step" relationships. Numerically the group concerned is large. In 1948 there were approximately six million stepchildren in the United States, or, about 11 per cent of marriages were remarriages, and in approximately 15 per cent of these the wives had children under the age of 18 by a previous marriage.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of this paper is the unusual social role of the stepparent. The stepparent is selected, not because his problems are likely to be greater than those of his spouse or the stepchild, but because folklore tends to hold him the villain of the piece, and he is therefore perhaps most in need of sympathetic attention. Role theory is chosen as a model in order to highlight the relation of structural factors to interpersonal disturbances frequently found in families with step-relationships. Our aim is to show that organizational disturbance in step-families is inevitable, and that because the social structure of the family nor-

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mally provides a source of impulse control and regulation of interpersonal relationships, the nature of the disruption causes particular areas of family functioning to be especially vulnerable to disfunction. Examples of breakdown in interpersonal functioning are selected from a clinical population. These are meant to serve only as clarifying illustrations without implication either that vulnerability inevitably leads to breakdown or that the intensity or mode of disturbances necessarily would be the same in other clinical populations or in a non-clinical one.

The clinical observations are based on approximately 50 case records from both inpatient and outpatient child guidance settings. There were approximately three times as many families with stepfathers as with stepmothers and a few with both. Approximately half the previous marriages ended in death, and the other half in divorce. The primary patient in the majority of cases was a child. The length of contact varied from diagnostic evaluation to two years of inpatient treatment.

The role definition of stepparent in this society is both poorly articulated and implies contradictory functions as "parent," "stepparent," and "nonparent." Folk tradition describes the stepmother as wicked and cruel. Dictionaries define the term, stepmother, as implying unparent-like behavior<sup>11</sup> or neglect and deprivation of the stepchildren.<sup>2</sup> To enact that role is socially disapproved. Instead, the stepparent is encouraged to assume the role of parent. For this role enactment legal support is also offered, in the explication of the rights and duties entailed by the "in loco parentis" relationship.<sup>4</sup> But the stepparent cannot totally assume the role of father or mother;

he is also nonparent. In this society, where some of the most obvious role functions of the father are biological, financial and educational, a stepfather cannot assume responsibility for biological fatherhood, frequently shares financial obligations with the natural father, and almost invariably shares the socialization of the child either contemporaneously as the child divides his time between two homes, or temporally in the course of the two successive marriages.

Attempts at individual resolutions of pressures to be parent, notparent and stepparent were observed in the behavior of almost all stepparents. In a few cases a single role seemed to be expressed with the overemphasis of caricature, e.g., the "real daddy," the tormenting and depriving stepparent, or the nonparent (holding himself severely separate from the child or achieving the closeness of friend or pal rather than parent).

In most, however, the three roles seemed interwoven. A central unsettled question was "how much to be parent." Decisions about some easily identified questions such as the child's place of residence, financial responsibility for him, his use of a surname, could usually be made. But even these relatively public commitments sometimes failed to remain stable. Some were changed by external pressures, others were inappropriately made the child's responsibility. Still others were precariously dependent on the stepparent's mood, or the shifting fortunes of his intrapsychic or interpersonal struggles. More subtle parental relationships, less easily made explicit and less amenable to conscious decision, were even more difficult to stabilize: the maintenance of an appropriate generation barrier; the assumption of the rights

and responsibilities of discipline; mutuality with the child in work or play, the offer of the self as an object for identification.

Intrapsychic and interpersonal difficulties often appeared to augment problems based on stepparents' uncertainties about their appropriate roles as parents. Many stepparents were burdened with their wives' or husbands' hypersensitivity to their every act, tonal nuance, look, omission or suggestion of negative feeling. In the natural parents such over-awareness often expressed their own uneasy feelings that their children were only "part of a package deal" and not really wanted, or feelings of guilt toward the children for having "broken" their homes, deprived them of their natural parents, and provided them with stepparents. Stepparents' own feelings that the children were an encumbrance, an unwanted financial burden, a continuous unwelcome reminder of their spouses' previous marriages were sometimes strongly fended off as heinous no matter how strongly balanced by positive feelings. Some stepparents, afraid of being or seeming the traditionally evil stepparent, could not be adequately assertive in discipline. Still others were unable to treat as absurd the stepchild's fantasy-based complaints of overwork, neglect and deprivation.

The stepparent's capacity to assume the role of parent did not depend only on his own willingness and ability. The reciprocal acceptance of himself in that role by spouse and child was essential. In Parson's <sup>7</sup> terms, "the success of ego's action is contingent on alter's re-action." Some children's repudiation of the stepparent as parent was extreme. No gift was accepted. Every punishment was treated as an attack. No identification

was made with the stepparent's goals, values or personal characteristics. Every forced accommodation to the stepparent was responded to as though he were an intruder or occupying army. Sibling groups sometimes treated any single child's deviation from total rejection of the stepparent as traitorous to both the displaced parent and to themselves. The natural parent, spouse of the stepparent, usually intensely wished the stepparent to assume the role of parent. But this wish was not unambivalent. Indirect expressions of the wish to maintain exclusive control occurred, for example, in a mother's assumption of more than her share of disciplinary and financial responsibility for the child, or a father's performance of duties more typically the mother's in our society in relation to school and clinic.

The uncertainties about appropriate role behavior, related intrapsychic conflicts and problems due to failures in reciprocal role behavior by other family members found a variety of manifestations. Three seemed particularly prevalent. The first, a denial of any problems, usually occurred early in any clinical contact. It was the statement that the stepparent treated the child as his own, i.e., was completely "parent," an assertion rigidly, even belligerently maintained, usually supported by the spouse during the joint interview and often stated so persuasively that no further clinical inquiry was attempted despite overwhelming evidence of its falsity. A second was the stepparent's development of an acute hypersensitivity to every event as "proof" that he was, or was not, seen as "parent." In addition to the tensions this created for the stepparent himself, a particularly heavy burden was placed on the child whose every act was

weighted with such significance that spontaneity and decisive action became difficult. Finally, and perhaps most damaging to the stepchild, was the parents' united focus on the child as the source of all marital dissension and threat to the marriage itself. It is not difficult to see the probable contribution to this outcome of the child's actual wish to separate parent and stepparent, the fact that the difficult step relationships would not exist at all were it not for the child, and the negative feelings of both marital partners toward the child as reminder of the natural parent's previous spouse.

Whatever the reasons for the stepparent's behavior, his particular pattern of role functioning must affect the role enactment of every other family member. To the extent that the stepparent does not appropriately carry out the role functions of parent, the complementary roles and relationships of the natural parent and of the children will also suffer. As he does function as parent his idiosyncratic enactment of that role also forces modifications in all familial relationships. In either case, then, both the dyadic relationships involving the stepparent and all the other relationships among family members will be modified. As a stepfather behaved as nonparent an intense mother-son bond, not appropriately tempered by a father-son relationship, prevented a boy's adequate individuation. A boy's highly sexualized tie to a sister was used as replacement for an emotionally distant stepmother. A fiercely female mother-daughter competition occurred for a man whose disparate roles as husband to one and father to the other were not adequately defined. When the stepparent did function as parent, subtle role changes also occurred. One adolescent focused on

her mother's role changes from woman-about-town to housewife, and more especially, from mother of herself to wife of the intruding stepfather. Sometimes too, a painful but healthy separation between natural parent and child became evident as each developed his appropriately different relationship to the stepparent.

But however strong the stepparent's determination to be parent, however skillful his efforts, he cannot succeed totally. Furthermore, social norms make it inappropriate for him to attempt to completely assume the parent role. They require that he gracefully accede to the parental rights of another, to be nonparent; to share residential, educational, and financial decisions regarding the child with a living parent, or perhaps to accept the moral and religious legacy of a dead one.

Perhaps the most steady reminder that the "stepparent" is also "nonparent" occurs in divorce. The activity of the natural parent, the child's visits with him, the spouse's continued relation with him force awareness and require decisions. But where the natural parent has died, his influence as parent is by no means lost, though sometimes less easily recognized. In some families where the death of one parent terminated the previous marriage, constant unfavorable comparison between stepparent and the overidealized image of the dead parent occurred. One boy's potent identification with his dead parent as worthless and destructive prevented a confidence-giving identification with the stepparent. Other children maintained the relationship with the dead parent in firm beliefs in his continued living existence as a wandering ghost, a benign helper or a vengeful and still powerful punisher.

Whether the natural parent is dead or alive, the child maintains a contemporary relationship to him. The stepparent shares that parental role with the previous parent. He is both "parent" and "nonparent." In some families bitter competition between the stepparent and the previous parent replaced the sharing of rights and responsibilities. Seemingly endless internal ruminations or acrimonious discussion occurred about the child's preference for one over the other; the other parent's spoiling of the child; his relative adequacy in living up to financial obligations; his relative "goodness" as a parent. In some families, particularly those in which embittering divorce proceedings had ended the previous marriage, the couple of the present marriage united in an uncompromising denunciation of the natural parent. In others a withdrawal occurred from any relationship with him. Sometimes the child functioned as go-between, made decisions in relation to the adults for which he was ill equipped, and inevitably was burdened with a frightening degree of power.

Further, because roles and role functions are interlocking networks, rather than simple aggregates of behaviors and relationships,<sup>6</sup> the sharing of any role aspect with another person must affect all other aspects of role functioning. While family members probably could not have formulated this characteristic of role functions in the abstract, they illustrated it very concretely in their behavior. Frequently a stepfather's right to obedience was perceived to increase as he assumed greater financial responsibility. A child's, "You are not my real (biological) mother," denied the stepparent's right to obedience. More subtly, an adolescent felt that repudiation of

any identification with her stepfather's values was contingent on her refusing any gifts from him.

The enactment of a special role also has implications for the strength of broader social mores, to the extent that these are sanctions applied to occupants of particular roles. The incest taboo is one of these. In this society sexual relationships between father and daughter are strongly prohibited. Implications for stepparents are less clear: in 1940, 26 states permitted stepfather-daughter marriage; the remainder did not. No clear-cut taboo exists for the situation of "nonparent." As the stepparent is all three of these, the impact of the taboo is weakened. As it loses strength, the roles reciprocally dependent on it are also diffused.

It was our impression that the absence of clear sanctions against sexual relationships between stepparents and children intensified normal difficulties in channeling sexual impulses of family members. In some cases mothers "saw" potential incest in every intimacy between stepfather and child. In others highly sexualized fondling, hugging, and kissing between stepfather and daughter alternated with horrified and embarrassed avoidance of any intimacy. And in a few, overt sexual relationships occurred. The effects were those anticipated<sup>8</sup> though not invariably observed<sup>3, 9</sup> by others: pressures toward the breakdown of generation barriers, the abrogation of the primary husband-wife bond, and a blurring of the differential relationships of stepfather as husband and father.

Finally, roles are learned. In the normal course of the establishment of a family, marriage follows courtship, and the birth of children follows a period of

marital adjustment. In a marriage in which at least one partner has children from the very beginning, a number of role-learning opportunities ordinarily offered the natural parent are not available. Reciprocal marital role relationships between husband and wife are not worked out prior to the assumption of parental roles. Husband and wife cannot gradually acquire their particular parental role functions beginning early in their relationship with the first casual talk of establishing a family. There is no opportunity to establish a primary husband-wife bond prior to the birth of children. And parents have no time to gradually establish a generation barrier between themselves and their offspring.

It was our impression that the premarital relationship of the stepparent to family members as acquaintance, friend and fiance of the natural parent interfered with his establishing appropriate differential relationships as spouse and parent, and with his function as authority figure. The working out of marital and parental problems simultaneously seemed to encourage the inappropriate involvement of the children in marital dissension. The natural parent's prior relationship to the child, often pathologically intensified during and after the dissolution of the previous marriage made a primary husband-wife bond more difficult to establish, a difficulty often increased by the mother's guilt about taking away from the child the status of "man of the house," and by the child's terror of desertion by his only remaining parent.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Some inevitable modifications in the role structure of the family due to the

step relationship have been indicated, related areas of vulnerability to interpersonal disturbance noted and illustrations provided of kinds of malfunctioning that were found to occur in a clinical population in cases where the weakening of family role structure did lead to interpersonal disturbances.

The strong tendency in the major professions dealing with interpersonal relationships to use a health-illness model in understanding behavior makes it tempting to see the stepfamily in terms of pathology. Inevitably then, the "cure" for its disturbance will be sought in the best possible approximation of the normative pattern of the nuclear family in this society. We think this is a tactical error. If our analysis is generally correct, attempts to reproduce the nuclear family in the step situation are doomed to failure in any case. More important, an alternative framework is both available and promising of more heuristic formulation of questions. That is, the stepfamily can be conceptualized as a structural variation of importance equal to the Kibbutz pattern in Israel<sup>10</sup>; the working-class family pattern in France<sup>5</sup>; the urban, rural, nuclear extended family structures in this country. From this organizational point of view, then, potentially soluble problems can be formulated concerning, for example, patterns of transition from one marriage to another, processes in the integration of two sibling groups in a single family, or the appropriate allocation of individual and joint functions of the two same-sex parents. Since the stepfamily is likely to be an increasingly common pattern of family organization, the resolution of such problems might well warrant our considerable effort.

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