Reconstructing the Stepfamily: Old Myths, New Stories

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The American Family

- The majority of divorced adults remarry or cohabitate (Wilson & Clarke, 1992)
- 1/3 of all Americans are part of a stepfamily (due to divorce, remarriage, & children of single women who later marry (Jones, 2003)
- 30% of children live with parents who are remarried or cohabitating (Bumpass, Raley & Sweet, 1995)
Why Focus on Stepfamily Policy and Practice?

- Large in number
- High utilization of mental health services
- Higher divorce rate than first marriages
The Power of Narrative

• Embedded in and reflective of cultural norms and values
• “Dominant” stories represent normative cultural rules
• People feel obligated to conform
• Example: privileged value of biological parenthood
Myths of Stepfamilies

- Stepmother as the villain
  - One of every six fairy tales contains a cruel stepmother (Wald, 1981)
- Notions of instant family and instant love in a “blended family”
  - Brady Bunch, Eight is Enough
  - Unrealistic, high expectations
Language

- Attempts to identify terms to replace “step”
  - Blended, reconstituted, remarried
- “Stepchild” has been used to denote inferiority and neglect
  - Example: “the graphics division is the stepchild of the company”
- “Cinderella complex” is used to denote inferiority or victimization
Origins of Nuclear Family as Societal Norm

- Bartlett (1984)
- Ideology of divine or natural law: parental rights are at the heart of the social order
- Instrumentalism: biological parents are more likely than anyone else to do what is best for their children
- U.S. policies
Stepparents’ Rights and Responsibilities During Marriage

• Stepparents living with custodial parent have no legal status in relation to children
• No legal authority to discipline, authorize e.r. treatment, or sign a school report card
• Stepparent role functioning is critical to stability and satisfaction in remarriage (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984).
Stepparents’ Rights and Responsibilities After Marriage

- Almost all state laws terminate the stepparent-stepchild relationship
- North Dakota is only state requiring continued $ support of children
- In most states, stepparents have no legal rights to custody or visitation
Legal Proposals

- **English law:** Children Act of 1989
  - Stepparent married & living w/ child’s biological parent for 2 yrs can obtain a “residence order” - authority similar to parent

- **Continuing stepparent financial responsibilities post-marriage** (for a formulated time period)
Practitioner-Held Values & Biases

- Must recognize own stereotypes and negative attitudes about stepfamilies
- Study of counselors’ perceptions: stepparents and stepchildren viewed as less potent and well-adjusted than nuclear family counterparts (Bryan, Ganong, Coleman, & Bryan, 1985)
Reconstructing a New Family Story: Narrative Therapy

- Telling personal stories
- Deconstructing dominant cultural stories
- Practitioner as collaborator and joint investigator
The New Family Story

• Focus on telling their stories, but also identifying strengths and adaptive characteristics

• “Externalizing the problem”: clients separate themselves from the problem to be able to view it objectively, see how it has influenced their lives, and see it as changeable
Role Play
References


References (cont.)