

Specific Dysfunctions of the Stepfamily

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Abstract

Made up from parents and children from a previous union or marriage, often completed by children of the new couple, the recomposed or reconstituted family is problematic under the aspect of family-specific functions, relationships and roles. Being exposed to numerous sources of conflict, it is marked by many functional difficulties, which can lead to rupture and failure. For this unit in diversity to stand the test of time, it is necessary for all the members to engage in an active and flexible involvement.

Keywords: *stepfamily, step parents, step children, biological parents, parental roles.*

Introduction

In the constellation of contemporary family types, the stepfamily, also known as the *varied family*¹ or the *mixed family*² is an option for those who have experienced life in the universe of a nuclear family which was disbanded, have went through the specific difficulties of a single-parent family, and wish to rebuild their lives. The foundation of this new family configuration is the new couple, often constructed by following feelings rather than rational decisions. Even if the attachment of the two partners is strong, they will face problems to which personal experience does not hold any answers, not because every family is unique but because the stepfamily often faces challenges not usually met in other forms of family life. Many a time, the expectations and dreams of the two partners will not be fulfilled, the obstacles met may seem insurmountable sometimes, and the price paid for the creation of unity in diversity might be considered too high. Sometimes, the inevitable happens: a stepfamily can also decompose, at other times is it assumed and life within it continues.

¹ Elisabeta Stănciulescu, *Sociologia educației familiale* (Iași: Polirom, 1997).

² Iolanda Mitrofan and Cristian Ciupercă, *Psihologia vieții de cuplu* (Bucharest: Sper, 2002).

Differences between the nuclear and stepfamily

A main difference is related to the structure of these two family types. The nuclear, conventional family is made up of two adults and their children who live and function together. A stepfamily contains an adult couple which is either married or cohabiting, in which one or both members of the couple might have children from a previous relationship and often children from the current relationship. This family can be formed after a divorce or the decease of one of the parents of a nuclear family or when a single parent marries or chooses a long-term partner. Depending on the way in which the children, following a divorce, have been given in custody to the biological parents, they can live with one of the natural parents and a step-parent, with his step-siblings, if that is the case, or they can live with a biological parent and occasionally with the other parent and his/her partner and, eventually, their child or children. If both parents have remarried or live inconsensual unions, children can often be part of two recomposed families at the same time.

These structural differences lead to the existence of other differences related to the fulfillment of its functions, the exercise of marital and parental roles, relationships between biological and step parents, as well as those between step-siblings. When a man and a woman start a family for the first time, the apparition of one or more children is something normal, something that gives purpose to the couple's life. The procreative function of the family is fulfilled and the two parents take care of the children and observe their education. Therefore, this family is focused on the fulfillment, more or less satisfactory, of the biological and sanitary, economic, moral/judicial and social functions. In the case of recomposed families, each of these functions dilates or contracts, with their fulfillment being determined by diverse variables. Because it is the outcome of the marriage between two adults, of which at least one has been through another marriage and is the parent of one or more children, the stepfamily is not primarily based on the reproductive function. The presence of children from the former marriage specifically nuances the fulfillment of the other family functions. It usually happens that the re-married parent offers more attention and material, financial and emotional resources to the hygiene, alimentation, health and education of his or her own children rather than the children of the partner, which affects the solidarity of the stepfamily. The functionality of the stepfamily also suffers from the fact that the new partner has no judicial status regarding the other partner's children and the step-child has no right to the inheritance of the step-parent, which legally, is not his parent.

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Another big difference between the nuclear and the stepfamily is the way it has formed and developed regarding the family life cycle. According to the model developed by the therapists Carter and McGoldrick,³ the stages of the family life cycle are the following: experience in the family of origin, the detachment of the young adult from the family of origin, the premarital stage, the formation of a family through marriage, the couple without children, the family with small children, families with teenagers, the children leaving home and the family in the late life stage.

In comparison with the formation of a family for the first time, in which all the aforementioned stages are present, if it does not dissolve due to divorce or the premature death of one of the partners, the formation of the stepfamily does not have the detachment of the children from the family of origin as a starting point, but their detachment from a life stage which follows a failed marriage. In the conventional family, the first child usually appears after a period of courting, falling in love, after the formation of the conjugal couple. Things are different in the case of the stepfamily, because at least one of the two partners already has children, with the parent-child unity therefore existing long before the conjugal partner. This fact completely changes the love story of the partners, as well as their family life. Because, most of the time, one of the two partners enters a family which used to be single-parent until the moment, he/she would have to integrate in an already formed family which has a certain history, specific functional rules, family myths and, by taking someone else's place, not everybody might agree.

When it comes to exercising conjugal and parental roles, there are a few similarities with the nuclear family but also major differences, because in the complicated equation of the new family there are either physical or symbolic presences such as biological parents, step-parents, children from previous marriages, common children, as well as members of the extended family such as grandparents and other relatives from each side. Because of the fact that at least one of the two partners has been married before, he/she carries experience from the previous relationship, experience which he applies in the new marriage. This fact implies both benefits and risks, because the current situation implies a new conjugal configuration, which requires its own recipe for success, not a model which has already led to failure. Unlike in the nuclear family, in the stepfamily, parental roles do not exclusively belong to the new couple, but to the old spouses as well.

³ Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, *The Expanded Family Life Cycle. Individual, Family and Social Perspectives* (Boston: Allyn&Bacon, 1999), 2-5.

Most second marriages are not as romantic as the first one, a reason being the solitude the spouses have gone through, with all the frustrations it implies, economic hardships, the wish to have a mother or father for the child, and all of them stem from the loss suffered by the ex-spouses, as well as their children, which often implies the formation of a new family nucleus of a profound intimacy. People that often take part in a stepfamily are not psycho-emotionally healed, the trauma still being present in their thoughts and feelings. Unrealistic expectations regarding the new family, seen as a life-buoy, can intensify the feelings of loss even harder, therefore being a risk-factor for the new family's cohesion.

Specific difficulties. The step-parent/step-children relationship

Although every family is confronted with diverse challenges which may affect the family climate or even its integrity, in the stepfamily there are often specific difficulties which cannot be solved by the same model used in a conventional family, constituted for the first time. Without having a catastrophic view regarding this type of family, we believe that relationships which are established between its members are much more complex, more unusual and more difficult than those in a conventional family, mainly because the starting point is usually made up of unrealistic expectations which end up as unfulfilled expectations which cause great suffering to the respective family.

In the case of the stepfamily, we do not talk about a *real* decomposition of the previous family, because even if it has broken up, the biological bonds between mother, father and child never truly disappear. The fact that divorced parents live a new couple life, it does not mean the end of the first family, because between the two ex-spouses there are still some common links which hold as purpose the raising and education of the children who are affected by their break up. The child keeps on having two biological parents, even if in some cases the relations with one of them does not exist anymore, but he is forced by the remarriage of one or both parents to enter a new family where there is no lineage between the child and the step-parent.

Life in a stepfamily implies the adaptation to numerous changes in a short time span, moving in a new home and a new residential area, the integration of everyone in the new family, financial arrangements, the labor of adopting suffered by the new partner, the interference of the ex-spouse and the creation of new habits and rules of life. Some families manage to defeat all the crises, becoming stronger and more united while others lose themselves on this tedious road.

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One of the most important experts in the field of stepfamily problems, Patricia Papernow,⁴ considers that this type of family goes through three great development stages: the *early* stage, the *middle* stage and the *late* stage.

In the first stage we have a *fantasy* period because both have their own wishes and expectations regarding the new family, followed by a stage described as a confrontation with reality, the *immersion* stage, which creates shock and confusion, and finally, the *awareness* stage where an understanding of family rules and roles takes place.

The *middle* stage contains two sub-stages, one regarding the *mobilization* of all family members to solve the major misunderstandings, and the *action* stage, characterized by the practice of what each one has taken up.

The third stage contains two sub-stages as well, the *contact* stage, which implies action in order to solve household problems, clarifying the role of the step-parent, and a sub-stage of *resolution*, of a consolidated family where security has been established.

The stepfamily is not a homogenous reality. Therefore, some children have never had contact with their biological parents, while others keep strong bonds with them; some step-parents play the role of the parent, while others only the role of the spouse; some children appreciate the presence and implication of the step-parent, while others are rebellious. For some, the step-parent is the first paternal figure in their whole life, while others were to participate to the succession of more partners of their parents⁵.

The presence of children from a previous relationship, or even more, causes tension and conflicts which threaten the stability of the remarried couple. The step-parent's relationship with the child is a problematic one and it depends on the evolution of the newly-formed family. The great difficulty is caused by the fact that his roles and behavioral patterns *are quite confusing and ambiguously defined. Should he be authoritarian or understanding? Nobody knows well what they should do. That is why, many step-parents try more roles and conduit patterns until they find the just position.*⁶

The most common form of stepfamily is made up of a mother and a step-father, mostly because, after a divorce, the child is given in custody to the mother, but also because divorced fathers form new couples more often. The mother in this

⁴ Patricia Papernow, in Elena Bonchiș, eds., *Familia și rolul ei în educarea copilului* (Iași: Polirom, 2011), 28.

⁵ Denyse Côté and Marie-Blanche Tahon, *Familleet Fragmentation* (Ottawa: Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 2000), 80.

⁶ Petru Iluș, *Sociopsihologia și antropologia familiei* (Iași: Polirom, 2005), 189.

couple is also a step-parent to the children of her new partner, whether they have been given in the custody of his ex-wife. She has direct and indirect parental responsibilities, even if she is a *long distance step-mother*,⁷ assuming her motherly role when the children visit her, during weekends or holiday, emotionally involving herself and contributing financially to their care.

The apparition of a new masculine figure, a pseudo-paternal one, the step-father, which is neither *parent nor friend*,⁸ in a previous single-parent family, creates an unclear lineage and is perceived by the children as an intruder who has no right to discipline them because he is not their real father. Usually, this father has his own children who remained with their mother, a situation which causes him confusing feelings and moral dilemmas. His children can also have a step-father. Caught in the middle between his biological and step-children, between the requirements of the current and ex-spouse, competing with the step-father of his own children, he faces hardships that he could have not foreseen. The mother also struggles physically and psychologically to create harmony between her current husband and her children, between herself and his children, between her ex-husband and their children. The children also find it hard to face these complicated family structures created by adults who fight for authority, manifest subjectivity, talk badly about one another, have contradictory beliefs regarding what is good or not regarding their education, and “there is no surprise that many abandon the family or get significant psycho-emotional scars”.⁹

Regarding the recomposed families in which a woman joins a man with children, often motherless or with a mother that did not gain custody because of severe physical or mental health problems, addictions or imprisonment, studies show that women are more inclined to compromise for the benefit of the husband’s children.¹⁰

If fairytales such as Snow White and Cinderella managed to consolidate the social stereotype of the step-mother: devious, rough, ruthless, merciless, that rejects, mistreats, neglects or abandons her step-children but not her biological ones, if she has any, reality is much more complex. A big number of step-mothers try to substitute biological mothers, being willing to ensure the physical and psychological wellbeing of their step-children, with their discipline, thinking they will be loved and appreciated by them. This conduit brings them great disappointments, studies showing that “the phenomenon according to which the

⁷ Martine Segalen, *Sociologia familiei* (Iași: Polirom, 2011), 176.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Iluț, *Sociopsihologia și antropologia familiei*, 193.

¹⁰ Côté and Tahon, *Familleet Fragmentation*, 56.

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harder the mother tries to be more amiable, understanding and warm towards her stepchildren, the more they treat her with greater suspicion and even hostility, judging that everything she does is for the sole purpose of giving the impression that she successfully replaces their real mother.”¹¹ Other stepmothers play the role of a different kind of mother compared to their biological one, therefore imposing another maternal model, another family life philosophy. Their behavior generates frustration and defensive reactions from her children, conflicts with their biological mother, having the father put in a referee position and the deterioration of the conjugal relationship. Mothers who do not want to take up the position of the biological mother try to act as some sort of friends to the children, wanting to win their affection, not to instill discipline in them. Neither this behavior, a confident and advisory-like type, marked by indulgence and absence of discipline is beneficial to the evolution of the new family, the step-mother being an adult who must be respected. On the other hand, there are situations in which the stepmother can be as young as some stepchildren, her position and role being a source of suspicion and conflict for them and not of respect. Everything gets more complicated when the father and his young wife have children the age of his grandchildren, a fact that can activate oedipal complexes.

The relationship between the stepchildren of both partners is a lot more complex than that between their own children because the difficulties come from both directions. It is possible for them to not be aggressive towards one another, children can be impolite, can manifest hostility, they are afraid of a change of rules within the family, the step-parent may manifest a tough authority based on punishment and the only authority that the child may recognize is that of the natural parent. Children can suffer as a result of the parents' divorce or after the decease of a natural parent, they do not want to share the remaining parent with another person because they lose the exclusive relationship they had in the single-parent family, they can be loyal to the parent who is not with them anymore, they might compete with the step-parent for the attention and love of their mother or father. They can be impolite because they “do not know how to talk to an adult who is not their parent nor their relative because they had not been taught how to do it.”¹² The step-parent may also feel threatened by these children, he/she may consider them spoiled and difficult and might even be jealous of them, not understanding the difference between parental and conjugal love. If he or she

¹¹ Iluș, *Sociopsihologia și antropologia familiei*, 191.

¹² Christie Hartman, *Bărbatul divorțat. Cum să afli dacă e bun pentru tine* (Bucharest: Trei, 2008), 168.

complains to the partner, this fact may intensify hostility of the child, who is not ready to enter a new parental relationship. The parent may feel continuously bothered by the educational attempts of the step-parent and may react through critical remarks and the child will feel the ambivalence. The child might even ally himself / herself with the biological parent against the step-parent, fighting for power and authority within the family. When building the stepparent-child relationship, the child's age has an important role. The younger ones, under the age of 9, are more likely to adapt, because their emotional needs are not that complex as those of the grown-up children, being more easily conquered by an adult who plays with them, taking them for a walk, offering them attention. These strategies, though, do not bear fruit when applied to preteens or teenagers, who deal with identity crises and have other needs, often engaging in conflicts with the stepparent. To the typical adolescence problems, adding the day by day inherent stress within the stepfamily, results that teenagers within a stepfamily are more likely to pass scarcely through this period of their evolution, compared with the teenagers from intact families. Their rebellious and independent manifestations could interfere with the step-parent's authoritarian inclination, especially if, in the previous single-parent family, the teenager retrieved and assumed a parental role, replacing the absent parent in what concerns raising the younger brothers, also fulfilling some household tasks, even bringing income. Some studies show that the young members from recomposed families tend to manifest modern attitudes regarding family life. They engage earlier their in their sexual lives, leave the parental house, are more open to new ways of living together with another person, but they hesitate to procreate.¹³

One delicate issue is naming the step-parent; the child does not know how to address him/her, often encountering difficulties in calling the step-parents "mother" or "father", so he prefers to call them by their name. Of course, the situations are diverse, and in one of them the children grow feelings of love regarding their step-parents, calling them "mother" or "father", because the step-parent showed responsibility to the child and care and affection while growing up and during their education, especially if the biological parents were careless or even absent from their lives. Other children prefer to call the step-parent by their names, but this ambiguous practice does not set clear limits between the child and adult, because their relationship is not a friendly one, but an "equal-to-equal" sort.

Despite all the problems that occur within the step-parent-child relationship, some psychoanalysis-oriented authors consider that it is much better for a child to

¹³ Côté and Tahon, *Famille et Fragmentation*, 92.

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have more “mothers” and “fathers” than none.¹⁴ They must know they have but a single biological mother or father, known or unknown to them, but after the age of 3, they need more than a single-gendered adult to take care of them. “For the child’s unconscious mind, the presence of an adult is necessary in order to prevent a total intimate relationship with his parent.” This new partner allows him to go through the Oedipus complex, in case the child did not experience it with his biological parents, or to revive a new alternative of this complex, together with its well-known “love-hate” affective conflicts, contradicting and referring differently to the two adults who are, at the same time, role models and rivals for him.¹⁵

In the case in which the new family has been recomposed after a divorce, numerous problems can occur in the case of the parent who won the custody of the child. In the case in which the father remarried, first of all, the mother may grow jealous feelings regarding the current wife and her child’s affection, “blood of her blood”, for the new woman of the family/in the father’s life. Second, the new wife can feel eclipsed by the biological mother of the child, when her husband and his family bring the biological mother in the spotlight precisely for this reason. Sometimes the husband’s parents maintain a good relationship with the biological mother of their grandchild and their father, as though the current wife would not even exist and in some cases refusing to invite her to various activities, not giving her any attention and ignoring her children.¹⁶ This loyalty towards the former wife, manifested as hostility regarding the actual wife, can exacerbate when the husband ignores family issues instead of solving them, and when he does not support his wife when it comes to conflicts with relatives.

In specialty literature¹⁷ there are, mainly, 5 explicative models regarding children adaptation in recomposed families, focused on family composition, family processes, an ecological lecture of adaptation, family trajectory and family resources. The first model emphasizes the biological and structural specificity of the blended family and considers that the intact bi-parental family is considered the best environment when it comes to the children’s evolution. Thus, children from recomposed families are more likely to be disadvantaged, even if in the absence of a biological link, the child grew feelings of attachment. However, it is claimed that it is preferable for a child to grow with two parents, even if one of

¹⁴ Françoise Dolto and Inès Angelino, *Când părinții se despart. Cum să prevenim suferințele copiilor* (Bucharest: Trei, 2007), 76-85.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 76.

¹⁶ Hartman, *Bărbatul divorțat. Cum să afli dacă e bun pentru tine*, 214.

¹⁷ Marie-Chirstine Sainte- Jacques, *Séparation, monoparentalité et recomposition familiale. Bilan d’une réalité complexe et pistes d’action* (Laval: Presses Université Laval, 2004), 72-77.

them is a step-parent. The second model focuses on the functions, relationships and roles within a family, on the children's interaction with the other members of the family, on the consequences of the conjugal conflicts between the current spouses regarding the ways of raising the children and their education and also on the influence of the ex-spouses. The ecologist model takes into account the child's individual characteristics, family and scholastic environment but also the larger context in which the child activates. The fourth model analyzes adaptability, starting with the separation from the biological parents, the transition through the single-parent episode, the engaging episode into the stepfamily, the way in which all these transitions developed and the difficulties that occurred in assuming all the changes mentioned above. The last model analyzes the family resources, the way in which these manage to be shared between the actual spouses and their biological children and step-children, drawing attention upon the step-children's limited financial resources and poverty risk.

Step-siblings

Many a time, in a stepfamily, both spouses have children from one or more than one previous marriages. One of the main difficulties that a stepfamily encounters, especially in its beginnings, is the brotherly feeling between individuals who do not share the same genes. But genes, even if they are important, they do not necessarily mean everything. Rivalry between step-brothers is normal, but through "daily means of communication, discussions, games, common activities, by together sharing experience, fraternal relationships can be cultivated."¹⁸ Each family has its peculiarities, and of course "many children cannot stand their step-sibling's company and are not able to overcome the initial aversion. Others reach a sort of a cold amiable relationship, but never overcome it."¹⁹ Rivalries within the new brotherly hierarchies arise from numerous sources: age differences between children, gender differences, the sharing of household responsibilities, of territory and of financial and material resources.

If the new couple expects attachment between these children, disappointment would immediately appear. You cannot ask, for example, a 3 years old girl to love the same age boy, who suddenly appeared in her and her father's life. Living with her mother and spending time with the father only during visits, she would feel abandoned and jealous of this intruder. She would never understand why her father

¹⁸ Jeffrey Kluger, *Frați și surori. Cum ne influențează viața legăturile fraterne* (Bucharest: Litera, 2013), 140.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

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raises another child he sees every day, and not her. She might think that her father abandoned her because she is a girl and he wanted a boy. Numerous adults believe that it is sufficient to tell children the truth to make everything normal. Children are in different stages of evolution and understanding and they need, depending on how the oedipal crisis is suffered, their own version of what happened and what happens in their families.

“The affinities that are born among step-brothers and step-sisters are far from being an easy thing. They cannot be considered as friends because they did not choose this situation and still they have to get along in many ways.”²⁰ In order to grow the feelings of fraternity between step-siblings, partaking in the childhood crucial moments together is essential. This implies that they would grow together, receive the same education and share intimate events within the family.

Advantages of the stepfamily

Even if they are less bonded than nuclear families, because “they have incongruent individual and marital life cycles”²¹ with a higher stress level, recomposed families are a better solution to loneliness or single-parent families. It is important for the spouses to consolidate their couple relationship and to be involved in raising their children as a team. It is also important for the biological parent to exercise the dominant role, to establish a set of internal rules within the household, including the distribution of domestic chores. Although life in a stepfamily is full of difficulties, it is a school of life with a complexity never seen in an ordinary family, and we can say, more or less seriously, that if it does not kill you, it makes you stronger. According to Carr,²² involved adults can develop a solid relationship in time, a more pragmatic and less romantic one, focused on the optimal management of conflicts, on an equal distribution of household tasks and on the responsibilities regarding raising and educating children. Children belonging to a decomposed family go through experiences which make them more adaptable to difficult situations; they can relate with step-brothers and step-parents, learn about sharing their territory, their toys, their free time, sharing their holidays with persons with whom they do not share the same blood ties and who are yet a constant presence in their lives. Between step-brothers, a strong friendship relationship may occur, one which might continue later in adult life.

²⁰ Marcel Rufo, Christine Schilte, *Frați și surori sau Iubire și rivalitate. Explicațiile unui pedopsihiatru* (Bucharest: Philobia, 2015), 216.

²¹ Bonchiș, *Familia și rolul ei în educarea copilului*, 372.

²² *Ibidem*, 379.

Conclusion

Usually, a stepfamily means a better couple relationship than the previous one, an improvement of the economic situation, a better education for children, new siblings, new rules, new values, new models of behaviour. If the involved members prove to be flexible, creative and tolerant, the stepfamily may turn out to be a viable solution for those who experience the suffering of a family breakdown, single-parent difficulties or loneliness.

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