

# The new reality?

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A constant complaint has been that psychotherapists have not kept up with the problems that confront stepfamilies and not least that they have failed to imagine what a stepparent might be going through. One stepmother wrote,

We are likely, when faced with the difficulties of stepfamily life – rejecting stepchildren, unsupportive husbands, friends and too frequently even therapists who don't get what we are going through – to feel like failures and to internalize notions about stepmothers being cruel, uncaring, insensitive, and ignorant about children.<sup>1</sup>

It is a puzzling question as to why we continue to ignore stepparents.

I have been left, from all I have read about stepparents and stepchildren, with an overwhelming sense of the difficulties that families face when a marriage breaks up. Everyone is left with their confidence bruised and their hopes and ideals under scrutiny. When, out of this melting pot, new couples form bringing with them children from their previous marriages, then all hell may be let loose, as the re-constituted family settles down. Research evidence is optimistic that the majority of children do eventually get over the trauma of divorce, and while that may be the case, I want to suggest that relationships with stepparents may create conflict and dissonance in future relationships and we need to be mindful of the possibility of a stepparent transference in therapy.

In my book, *The Shadow of the Second Mother* (2015), I suggested that over the last 3,000 years it was common to find that children, whether rich or poor, were not brought up by their mother in their early years. It was only in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century that the focus on the nuclear family gripped the Western cultural imagination, and it is from this template that our psychological theories have been derived. The question I was asking then was what was the emotional effect of being fed by someone other than one's mother, and what was the nature of the attachment that was formed by these children whose earliest and most intimate experience had been at the breast or on the knee of someone who was not their mother. I found evidence from biography and autobiography that some children who had been wet nursed or had had nannies were deeply divided between the scarcely remembered attachment to their wet nurse/nanny and the

mother to whom they were supposed to be devoted. One result was that many felt they could never trust a close relationship again.<sup>2</sup>

I do not think that children who have stepparents suffer the same type of bereavement as those who have lost their primary attachment figure such as a wet nurse or nanny. Stepparents usually enter a child's life later and are seldom a child's primary caretaker in the earliest days. However in the research I have read it seems that all members of a family that breaks up have a painful journey, though it is undoubtedly the child or children who suffer the most. The ACE study that was set up in the US in 1985 to study the health of children suggested in a recent finding that the second highest trauma a young child could suffer was from the divorce of its parents and this trauma could continue to affect its health in later life.<sup>3</sup> One adult reflecting on her parents' divorce said 'Was I angry with them? No. I was too sad, too bewildered to be angry.'<sup>4</sup> The feeling of being 'too sad' to be angry when her parents divorced was corroborated by one woman I interviewed and now describe.

Miss C. was seven when her parents divorced. She remembered crying every day for a year and to this day she cannot put into words what exactly was making her so sad, but what seems clear is that she has suffered from a lifelong depression ever since. She stayed with her mother and her siblings and her father moved away and soon married again. Her parents did not fight or argue about custody of the children, indeed Miss C. said she has continued to be puzzled about what had gone wrong in the marriage, as her parents seemed to remain on friendly terms. Her inconsolable sadness found an expression in her hatred of the countryside where her father now lived. It was flat and seemed never to come to an end and this landscape has reflected her lifelong mood. Her misery was compounded by her physical revulsion of her stepmother who was kind and did her best to be friendly to Miss C. But Miss C. felt an inward nausea, above all, at her stepmother's smell; she dreaded the goodnight kiss or her stepmother sitting on her bed reading her a bedtime story. All these feelings, like her earlier unspeakable sadness, were without a language that could be articulated, let alone shared with her parents. She just knew something was wrong, or one might say, smelt wrong, about this relationship she was being asked to manage. When Miss C. grew up she did have a few affairs with men but her sadness remained uncomforted, and she preferred to live alone. In this solitary place, she believed, there was no fear of being reminded of her sadness, or more psychologically, we might say, she feels safer against the fear of being intruded upon by someone who smells wrong.

It is interesting that Miss C. experienced her stepmother as smelling wrong, and this would seem to link to quite profound feelings of the biological strangeness of her stepmother. The idea of divorce creating new kinship structures, as mentioned in the previous chapter, raises the question about whether children can flourish in a divorced family as well as in a family where the attachment to a mother and father has not been broken. Researchers, such as Daly and Wilson (1998) who wrote a book called *The Truth About Cinderella*, suggested that from an evolutionary point of view parents are more likely to treat their natural children better than a child who does not have a genetic connection. In other words,

Miss C.'s physical revulsion when in the presence of her stepmother may have roots in a deeper fear about her safety, or in the words of Daly and Wilson, 'Having a stepparent has turned out to be the most powerful epidemiological risk factor for severe child maltreatment yet discovered.'<sup>5</sup> So one might say that the psychological truth about the Cinderella fairy story is that a child with a stepparent is more likely to be mistreated than the child who lives with its natural parents.

Now it is clear that Miss C. was never maltreated by her stepmother, but Daly and Wilson's work does help us to understand that the negative images we have of the stepmother and to a lesser extent the stepfather lie deeper than a cultural prejudice. They smell wrong because stepparents are not 'natural' parents in a biological sense and for this reason they will always be on a collision course with their stepchildren. Their stepchildren will seldom feel as viscerally attached to them as to their own parents. And in turn stepparents will never feel that their stepchildren are equal to their own children. In other words, the stepfamily is a fragile form of family life. This is supported by research on the much weaker affiliations between stepparents and their children. Not only do stepparents rate their role as stepparent as 'about as important as belonging to a voluntary association or having a hobby,'<sup>6</sup> but stepchildren will in turn feel less obligation to look after their stepparents in old age.

The fact that a stepparent can never be a 'natural' parent unleashes other psychological conflicts. Perhaps one of the most destructive factors in divorce can become centred around issues of money and inheritance, an all too familiar theme in Cinderella. One example I was given raised an interesting legal issue. Should a stepchild inherit his stepfather's favourite painting or was it rightfully the father's son who should have been left it? As the legal situation stands at the moment, both in the US and the UK, stepparents do not have legal rights or obligations over their stepchildren. At the moment a stepmother does not have any rights when a much loved stepchild is taken away because of the break-up of the marriage or partnership.<sup>7</sup> Similarly if a stepparent was to die intestate, their stepchildren would not be considered as part of their estate.<sup>8</sup> It will be interesting to see whether in time, and as stepfamilies become as familiar as monogamous marriages, the stepfamily will become a recognized legal institution, with certain well formulated rights and obligations towards stepchildren.

There is another psychological difficulty which stepfamilies encounter that centres around rivalry for attention and the uneasy rivalry for affection. Of course rivalry exists between parents and children and between parents and siblings, and problems of money and inheritance can become a major issue in any family. But following divorce and when stepparents are faced with their partner's children, a more open and extensive expression of rivalry seems to occur. A typical example will be a child who has lived alone with a parent for some years and who will naturally resent the arrival of a stepparent who demands attention. Stepparent and child will both be fighting for the exclusive love from this parent. Interestingly all the research evidence suggests that stepmothers have a worse time than stepfathers, as they are kicked in the shins by their stepchildren and exasperate their husbands with their demands that he should



control his unruly child. 'Stepmother and their stepchildren are probably the most serious losers in stepfamily relationships.'<sup>9</sup> As in the fairy stories, again stepfathers will have an easier time.

Rivalry can also have its flames fanned by a deserted husband or wife who can encourage dissension in the newly formed family. There are some horrifying accounts of the lengths deserted partners, usually wives, will go to as they seek revenge. The favoured method is to poison the children's affection towards the partner who has left and remarried.<sup>10</sup> But equally the fire can be stoked by the stepchildren themselves, especially if they are adolescent. They may, unconsciously, do their best to break up this new marriage in innumerable and subtle ways. They may insist that they always choose which TV programme to watch, or which restaurant to go to, and a helpless stepparent may find she or he is silenced in the face of a partner who is facing a conflict of loyalty between a new partner and a natural child.<sup>11</sup> In the many self-help books that have been written, there are painful examples of how to manage the rivalry that will be occasioned when a stepparent steps into the hallowed ground of a parent/child relationship, and stepparents will be counselled not to demand too much attention from their new spouse as the fight for who is loved best finds a resolution.<sup>12</sup>

There are other interesting parallels with Miss C. and the view that Daly and Wilson bring to the stepparenting conflict. In Chapter 6, I briefly looked at an account I had been given by a colleague of the breakdown of a therapy. I am now wondering whether the texture of this therapy may have revoked something like Miss C's sense that her stepmother smelt wrong. Could this metaphor of smell be another way of describing why the therapy with the businessman ended when he began to express discomfort over the session times and the physical layout of the room. In Daly and Wilson's work they suggest an inevitable genetic dissonance between parenting and stepparenting, and so we could imagine this businessman might have been getting in touch with a memory of the feelings he had when he encountered his stepmother. His stepmother looked wrong, and he was beginning to have the same feelings about his therapist's room. This is a conflict that naturally occurs between a stepmother and her stepchild because she can never, biologically or psychologically, take the place of the mother. There is always something that smells wrong or looks wrong or feels wrong; in the words of Gerhardt (2010), '[s]mells provide basic information about what is safe and familiar, and what is not. The sense of smell is thought to be the foundation of our mammalian emotional systems in the brain.'<sup>13</sup>

In the second case that I cite in Chapter 7, of the woman who described the breakdown of a second therapy that she had sought after the death of her lover, she had wondered why she felt so angry with her therapist and came to realize that both the therapist and the stepmother spoke a 'foreign' language. That is to say neither of them spoke English as their first language. The foreign mother tongue linked the therapist to the stepmother and reminded this woman of her unhappiness and anger when her mother died and was replaced by a stepmother. What may have augmented the tension was that this second therapist

was also a step-therapist in comparison to the first therapist. Here again, I want to suggest, there was a breakdown in the therapy because of a complicated transference that linked the therapist to the stepmother and possibly the previous therapist. This transference had the feeling that the language was wrong. In these three cases, Miss C. expressed her anger and dismay with her stepmother through the metaphor of smell, the businessman through the metaphor of his therapist's room looking wrong, and the woman I interviewed expressed her distress through the metaphor of her therapist speaking a foreign language.

All these metaphors suggest that an undiagnosed stepparent transference can evoke visceral feelings that something is wrong. There is almost universal agreement between researchers that children are traumatized by divorce, so it would be unsurprising if this trauma and the arrival of stepparents was not a major feature of therapy from time to time.

Most research suggests that the majority of children do recover from their bewildered sadness following a divorce, and that they do catch up emotionally with more securely attached children a bit later in life.<sup>14</sup> It is only the bottom twenty-five per cent of children who are left struggling with self-defeating strategies in later life and what is significant about this group is that they are the ones who came from a dysfunctional family in the first place and before the divorce took place. Yet as in all attempts to make a definitive statement about the effect of divorce on children, even those who are confident in the long-term resilience of most children do acknowledge that children of divorce do less well at school, may have health issues throughout their life and tend to leave home early.<sup>15</sup> And a Finnish research found that depression and violent death in men was associated with divorce and separation.<sup>16</sup> It was small comfort to a woman, whose parents had divorced when she was twelve, to be told she was lucky because now she would have two mothers.

I was twelve and at boarding school, desperately miserable about what was going on at home, especially the brand new stepmother who'd arrived in dad's house. The school matron caught me crying and I confided this to her. Do you know what she said? She said 'you are really lucky to have two mothers.'<sup>17</sup>

I met one person, Mr A., who thought he was lucky to have two mothers, which is interesting in itself, especially in light of the research that suggests that boys may be more permanently damaged by divorce than girls, such as in the Finnish study quoted above. Mr A.'s parents divorced when he was seven and his stepparents had been 'brilliant.' His parents he described as 'introverted intellectuals' who seemed to argue the whole time. When they separated there was an equitable agreement that Mr A. should be shared between them. He was an only child. He stayed four nights with his mother and three with his father. In the beginning it was a difficult and lonely time for Mr A. He missed his friends at the weekend and was concerned about his sad mother. Things changed for him when both his

parents found new partners and he suddenly found himself with a 'brilliant stepfather' who loved playing football and doing other sporting activities with Mr A. unlike his father. They became 'best friends.' Equally his stepmother was much less anxious than his own mother. She had time to cook delicious meals and read him stories and was altogether a much more lively and engaging person. In conclusion Mr A. was thankful that his parents had separated and that he had had an experience of being alongside life enhancing stepparents.

Mr A. thought that his parents' divorce had liberated his parents, but by the end of our interview I was less sure whether the good relationships he had had with his stepparents had helped him to manage close relationships in his adult life. The belief that divorce can liberate men and women was certainly well argued in J.S. Mill's (1866) persuasive essay on *The Subjection of Women*. In this essay he set out his beliefs that once women were liberated from the shackles of a marriage in which they had no legal or civil rights, men and women would find themselves at last on a more equal footing and as a consequence marriages might become happier.<sup>18</sup> Mr A. seemed to agree with Mill and he felt that divorce had liberated his entire family. Both his parents were happier in their second marriages and he had gained two helpful surrogate parents to whom he was devoted.

Mr A.'s experience of his parents' liberation is by no means unique even though he was the only stepchild I interviewed who felt this way. Margaret Robinson (1991), quoted in the previous chapter, was writing from the position of being a stepmother, and she believed that shared parenting not only can give some respite but also can 'bring greater objectivity.'<sup>19</sup> A more recent and thoughtful book on the difficulties of being a stepparent, *Stepmonster*, was written by Wednesday Martin (2015), who was quite openly addressing the problems she had faced in the early years of being a stepmother. At the same time she interviewed many other stepmothers in her pursuit of the wish to help them through the early years of a remarriage. By the end of the book she confidently wrote, 'after about five years, remarriages with children are actually stronger, happier, and more likely to last than first marriages.'<sup>20</sup> One important characteristic of such a strong second marriage was emphasized in Church's (2004) research in which she found that the successful stepmother does not see herself in maternal competition with the mother of her stepchildren but as an aunt. She quoted from one woman who said she saw herself as 'a close aunt, a close relative . . . The love and the relationship is there . . . I feel that keeps it clean and clear. So nobody gets confused and nobody has to get jealous.'<sup>21</sup> This idea of the stepmother seeing herself as an aunt was corroborated by one man I interviewed who had had in fact two stepmothers. What distinguished his second stepmother was that she did not try to be the perfect mother to her stepchildren. They came and went as they pleased and he felt that she always had an open door. What needs to be noted here however is that this man and his siblings were grown up and not dependent upon a stepmother for their care. Nevertheless he spoke warmly about his second stepmother and he felt she was open-hearted and accepting and they continue to this day to have a good relationship.



It seems clear that most stepmothers do find happiness in their stepfamilies, and most stepchildren find a way of accommodation to the new circumstances, yet I found that the stepchildren I talked to found it difficult to be totally accepting of their stepparents. Stepparents seemed to remain a thorn in their side, though some were more painful thorns than others. In contrast most stepmothers I interviewed were more positive about their experience and most felt that they had strong and enduring relationships with their stepchildren. These two points of view may be confounded at first if we go back to Mr A. I did not doubt his belief that he felt he had benefited from his parents' second marriages. It was only later and on reflection that I privately questioned Mr A.'s optimism. I had not asked him about his present life and he only mentioned in passing that he had had three failed marriages. He seemed unwilling to talk about these relationships and this left me with the impression that there was a subterranean pain that was only partially glimpsed when he told me that he had had six children with whom he had minimum contact. I was left with the sense that in his heart he was still the sad and lonely child of seven who had felt cast adrift when his parents parted. It had been good that in his childhood he no longer had to hear his parents arguing and this was followed by kind stepparents, but in spite of all this his three marriages and his attenuated relationship with his six children spoke of an extensive hurt following his parents' divorce. He was, I think, communicating that his own confidence had foundered and that he did not know how best to manage difficulties. **This must be one of the most painful things to acknowledge as a stepparent; you can be as good a stepparent as any parent, but too often it is still not enough to heal the previous wounds.**

Psychologically one might say that Mr A.'s three marriages seemed to reflect an internalized model of parents who were ill equipped to sort out their differences. **Or put another way he had repeated a model of how to sort out conflict. You walk out.** This early impression was not effaced by the remarriage of his parents and his good relationship with his stepparents. I found myself wondering, if Mr A. was to come into therapy today, how I might imagine that his stepparents would feature? In the first place I would be much more alert to the probability that feelings about both sets of parents and stepparents were intertwined and split. I could, for instance, imagine that the early days of therapy might be characterized as 'brilliant,' as though I was a stepparent, livening up his life. In this honeymoon period I might be imagined as helping him to leave behind forever his distressed feelings about his sad mother and angry feelings about his disappointing father. As the therapy deepened in significance, however, we might get to the lonely little boy who felt neglected by his arguing parents. His disappointment and rage and distress may then come to the fore. At this moment he might begin to question the foundations of therapy, he might begin to feel angry and that I was not to be trusted, that I 'smelt' wrong and that I was just out to upset him. What might come crashing down was our 'brilliant' beginning as it began to show cracks. At that moment he might walk out, unless of course I could find a way of helping him to see that his 'brilliant' stepparents had helped him and were

extremely important but had not been able to reach the sad and lonely little boy whom now we were facing.

I hope in this imagined example I have made clear that the fragility of the 'brilliant' stepparent transference needs to be acknowledged as life enhancing; but if and when other emotions began to surface, Mr A. would have needed help to face a deeper wound. He needed to find a way of accepting that his parents' love for each other had failed and this had left him feeling wounded and ignored. What I hope to have illustrated is that in the case of Mr A. his stepparents were an important presence in his life and furthermore I would have expected that they would have been there in the therapy. It would only have been when the therapy deepened and other emotions began to surface that the stepparent transference would have needed to be peeled back to allow the more painful feelings about his parents to reach the light of day. It needs to be noted that in my speculation I am imagining that in the first instance I would be confronted with a stepparent transference and only later would our relationship reveal the more heartbroken little boy. This is in contrast to the two cases I have already mentioned, where the stepparent transference only appears later in the therapy.

I was left quite disquieted when I thought about Mr A.'s six children with whom he had lost contact, and this then led me to wonder whether divorce has liberated men and women as J.S. Mill so passionately believed would be the case. Our divorce laws have relieved men and women from enduring a living hell together when the relationship breaks down, but has it liberated our children? If, as I believe, an indelible footprint is left in the psyche of children whose families have broken up, have we been too sanguine that children will get over their family break-up? It seems to me that we may have not taken sufficient account of the circular effect of divorce upon children. Or put another way, the imprint of divorce can leave children with a model that relational difficulties are best dealt with by divorce and so the divorce solution augments and re-enforces itself.

The repeating pattern of divorce finds a good explanation in the idea that patterns of malfunctioning can be repeated in the next generation if they remain unrecognized: 'In every nursery there are ghosts. They are visitors from the unremembered past of the parents; the uninvited guests at the christening.'<sup>22</sup> Fraiberg's wonderful image emerged from her understanding of the way neglected or abused children could become neglecting and abusing parents, if they were not helped to recognize that they were repeating the pattern of their own suffering upon their children. If, as now seems to be the case, a new kinship system of stepfamilies is emerging, we need to consider the idea that there may be unrecognized repercussions upon the psyche of children of divorce if the unremembered past of stepparents is not taken into consideration. At the very least, divorce creates a split in the child's psyche, and the anger and disappointment with a mother or father can be projected onto an 'evil' stepmother or stepfather, or in the case of Mr A. above, onto 'brilliant' stepparents and denigrated parents.

The social reality that confronts every child of divorce is that they have to find a way of integrating two sets of families with their different stories and heritage



and in turn our psychological theories have also to find a way of thinking about the new configuration of family life and its effects upon the psyche. For instance, if we go back to the Oedipus myth, when he came to the cross roads, it was not a simple cross roads; there were other metaphorical roads that led to the point where Laius pushed him out of the way and Oedipus killed him. Oedipus had already experienced the anxiety of a father who wanted him dead, a mother who colluded with her husband and abandoned him, a shepherd who had saved his life and finally a man and woman who looked after him and would have him believe that they were his real parents. These were some of the social and emotional forces in the dramatic life of Oedipus as imagined by Sophocles.<sup>23</sup> But if we use Sophocles' drama as a metaphoric description of the complicated threads that can make up a life where parents have parted with their child, we have a delicate task to unravel the social reality and its pressures from the way these experiences are configured in fantasy and the unconscious. Oedipus' search for the truth needs the support of a society that will tell things as they are. Mr A. in his three marriages seemed to have been searching for a vanishing dream of a constant loving presence, but he stood at a cross road, split between his loyalty to his 'brilliant' stepparents and his disappointing parents. There was no one to tell him the truth that divorce can split the psyche as one tries to master where one's true parents lie, and instead he inflicted his traumatic search upon the next generation, his six children.

So what I am suggesting is that we need to take stepparents as serious contributors to the psychological and social life of a child, but now we need to add that stepparents will be bringing their own intergenerational history to their step-family. This adds enormous complexity to the family situation but it might also help us to understand why children of divorce are more likely to divorce in adult life. Unfortunately it is not uncommon to find that many stepparents are not up to the job. They may have grown up in dysfunctional families that left them with a long-lasting fear of close relationships. They may have found conflict too stressful to manage and it was this that precipitated them to leave their first marriage. Their second marriage may prove to be no better if they have not had the opportunity to reflect upon their contribution to their marital difficulties. It is in this way that divorce repeats itself across the generations.<sup>24</sup>

I interviewed Mrs L. who had married a divorced man when she was in her early twenties. He brought to the marriage a five-year-old daughter who lived with her mother but spent weekends and some holidays with her father and Mrs L. Mrs L. as a young and expectant bride was in a difficult position. She was in love with her husband and the last thing she wanted at weekends was a child of five who hated her and got in the way of the precious time she so much desired with her husband. This difficulty is familiar to many women who have been in the same position as Mrs L. when they marry a man who already has a child. Mrs L. was a naturally kind woman who loved children but this situation was beyond anything she had imagined. She had not expected to be kicked in the shins and told 'You're not my mother so I am not going to do what you want!'

Now at a distance of twenty years there were several things that Mrs L. could reflect upon. She had never asked herself why her husband's first marriage had failed and why five years later her marriage to him also failed. She realized now that his own deprived and violent upbringing had left him with little internal impression of a loving and kind relationship. The abusive behaviour he had known in childhood had left him with an unsatisfied longing for a maternal figure who would soothe his pain, and Mrs L. had imagined that she could woo him and heal his wounds. The inevitable disappointment he experienced when his needs were not perfectly met left him angry with Mrs L. and she discovered too late, and after she had had his two daughters, that she could not change him.

I think that Mrs L.'s experience illustrates several things about the burden that a stepmother can carry. Her stepdaughter was already a troubled child who had witnessed her father's violent behaviour towards her mother. This would have distorted the child's feelings towards her stepmother and when she kicked Mrs L. in the shins she may well have been venting some of her distressed and angry feelings towards her father that she would have been too frightened to have acknowledged. There was another difficulty Mrs L. brought to this marriage. She had come from an intact family in which conflicts had been managed and sorted out, so she was ill equipped to manage a dysfunctional man and a distressed stepdaughter. The model she had internalized was that a good enough family could sort out its problems. In her marriage she discovered she was always working against the grain, as it were. **She imagined difficulties could be thought about and discussed rather than acted out with abusive behaviour, but her husband had only known the resolution of family difficulties through violence.**

Here we get a glimpse of how intergenerational experiences get repeated in the next generation, unwittingly and unconsciously. I am sure Mrs L.'s husband will have started out his second marriage with hope, but the tragedy was that in spite of the healing forces of Mrs L.'s natural love for children and for her husband she was not able to contain his disrupting behaviour when he was distressed and angry. The legacy of this unhappy marriage has left marks on all who were involved. Mrs L.'s husband lives on his own, cut off from his children, and one suspects profoundly depressed. Mrs L. has had her confidence severely knocked and now she doubts her own capacity to choose a man who would be loving and kind. Her stepdaughter, with whom she now has a friendly but attenuated relationship, has never settled down and remains single. Finally we could speculate that the turmoil of Mrs L.'s failed marriage will have been carried over onto her two daughters and we might expect that they will have a hard journey to find a man whom they can trust.

Mrs L. is only one case but I think **it does raise a question as to whether, if we became more active in thinking about divorce and stepparenting, we could encourage our children to think about their potential partner in a more psychologically sophisticated way. There used to be a cliché that was told to men, look at your future mother-in-law for you will see how your wife will be in years to come.**

Today, in the new kinship system of remarriage we are seeing, we may need to say to our children, look at your partner's previous marriages/relationships, and ask what went wrong before you marry. We are more sure nowadays that the early relationships of childhood cloud our feelings and perceptions. Early difficulties in childhood will affect future relationships and Mrs L.'s husband was a good case in point. He had known violence in his childhood and had been put into care, so that as a young man his longing for a good and loving relationship will have been hard to achieve. It is for this reason that the greater knowledge we have about our future partner's past relationships will alert us to the conflicts we may encounter.

In spite of all the reassuring research that I have read that children recover from divorce, I am still left with the thought that children are the least considered when it comes to marriage break-up and yet they are the ones who are hurt the most by divorce. I now find myself in a quandary. I have come to the conclusion that step-parents are a much discounted and neglected group in our psychological thinking and we need to give them more of our psychological time, as they seem to be an important part of the family structures of today. It is only by turning to self-help books that one gets any idea of how painful the early days of a remarriage with children, whether your own, your partners,' or both, will be. Stepparents, in these books, are screaming out that it is a living hell in the early days and it was the realization that I had not thought about them in my therapeutic practice that prompted me to start this book and I hope that all I have written will show that I have appreciated how painful the task of stepparenting can be as new affiliations and loyalties are forged.

## Notes

1 Martin (2015) p. 24.

2 Coles (2015).

3 <https://acestoohigh.com>.

4 Leach (2014).

5 Daly and Wilson (1998 p. 7). Dickens (1850) provides a description of the risk factor of a stepfather in his portrait of Mr Murdstone in *David Copperfield*. 'If I have an obstinate horse or dog to deal with . . . I beat him . . . I make him wince, and smart. I say to myself "I'll conquer that fellow"; and if it were to cost him all the blood he had I should do it.' And he terrifies David into submission (pp. 48–49).

6 White (1994) p. 111.

7 *Guardian Family* (16 April 2016). The article was called 'My stepson who I loved – and lost.' It concerned a young stepmother whose marriage broke up after five years, but during that time she had grown to love her stepson who was three when she first met him. As she says, 'In a split second, any rights I had to love you were taken away.'

8 White (1994) p. 111.

9 Zill (1994) p. 131.

10 LeBey (2005).

11 Martin (2015).

12 Bray and Kelly (1998).

13 Gerhardt (2010) p. 59.

- 14 Wallerstein, Lewis and Blakeslee (2002).
- 15 Bray and Kelly (1998), Gorell Barnes et al. (1998), Hetherington and Kelly (2002), Martin (2015), Wallerstein et al. (2002).
- 16 Quoted in Leach (2014) p. xviii.
- 17 Leach (2014) p. xviii.
- 18 Mill (1869).
- 19 Robinson (1991) p. 147.
- 20 Martin (2015) p. 249.
- 21 Church (2004) p. 257.
- 22 Fraiberg (1987) p. 100.
- 23 Sophocles (1962).
- 24 Bray and Kelly (1998).

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