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Are step-parents really mean: a view from pedagogy and evolutionary psychology

**Czy przybrani rodzice naprawdę są złośliwi: perspektywa
w pedagogice i psychologii ewolucyjnej**

Abstract

In many cultures there are stereotypes about the “cruelty” of step-parents towards their step-children. These stereotypes usually arise (1) from ambiguous roles of step-parents in the family, and (2) the predominantly negative attitude of children towards their biological parents re-marrying. In this paper, we discuss whether these stereotypes have any foothold in real life. We used the pedagogical approach and the approach of evolutionary psychology in our research. Our paper discusses in detail the existing stereotypes of step-parents. The goal is to determine whether children living with one biological parent and one step-parent actually live in unfavourable family conditions when compared to children living with both biological parents.

Furthermore, a detailed review of recent pedagogical research and research from evolutionary psychology about step-parents has contributed to the pedagogical evaluation of this problem in order to determine (a) why are the existing stereotypes of step-

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-parents and their relationships with their step-children a challenge for modern pedagogy? and (b) how can modern pedagogy respond to current problems?

Keywords: step-mother, step-father, child, family, pedagogy, evolutionary psychology, stereotypes.

Streszczenie

W wielu kulturach występuje stereotyp „okrucieństwa” przybranych rodziców wobec przybranych dzieci. Stereotyp ten ma źródło w (1) niejasnych rolach przybranych rodziców w rodzinie oraz w (2) przeważnie negatywnym stosunku dzieci do ponownych małżeństw zawieranych przez ich biologicznych rodziców. W tym artykule zastanawiamy się czy ten stereotyp znajduje jakiegokolwiek potwierdzenie w rzeczywistości. Stosujemy perspektywę pedagogiczną i perspektywę psychologii ewolucyjnej. W artykule szczegółowo omówiono stereotyp przybranego rodzica. Celem jest określenie czy dzieci mieszkające z jednym biologicznym rodzicem i jednym przybranym rodzicem rzeczywiście przebywają w niesprzyjającym otoczeniu rodzinnym, w porównaniu z dziećmi żyjącymi z parą biologicznych rodziców.

Przedstawiamy również szczegółowy przegląd aktualnych badań pedagogicznych, jak również badań w psychologii ewolucyjnej nad przybranymi rodzicami i to jak badania te wpłynęły na pedagogiczną ocenę tego problemu, aby określić (a) czemu istniejący stereotyp przybranego rodzica i ich związków z przybranymi dziećmi stanowi wyzwanie dla współczesnej pedagogiki i (b) jak współczesna pedagogika może odpowiedzieć na ten problem.

Słowa kluczowe: przybrana matka, przybrany ojciec, dziecko, rodzina, pedagogika, psychologia ewolucyjna, stereotyp.

Introduction

In numerous cultures there are stereotypes about the “cruelty” of a stepmother and/or stepfather towards their non-biological children, that usually arises from the ambiguity of their role in the family, and children’s negative attitudes towards their parent remarrying. This article aims to consider whether there is a scientific footing for those stereotypes. For this purpose, we will use two approaches: pedagogical and evolutionary psychological. In addition, the paper will analyze in detail the existing stereotypes of the stepmother and/or stepfather compared with their non-biological children with the aim to determine whether children living with one biological parent and one non-biological parent actually live in unfavourable family conditions (interrelationship) compared to children living with their biological parents. Also, a detailed review of recent educational and evolutionary-psychological studies on stepmothers and/or step-

fathers has largely contributed to the pedagogical evaluation of this problem in order to determine: a) why the existing stereotypes of stepmothers and/or stepfathers and their relation to their non-biological children represent a challenge of modern pedagogy, or b) in what way it can and should respond to the current problems, seeing that it is a science in the service of action.

Stereotypes of stepparents, stepmothers and stepfathers

Stereotypes are generalizations about a particular group of people, which attribute identical characteristics to almost all members of the group, regardless of actual variation among the members. Once formed stereotypes are extremely resistant to change following new information. The degree to which the resulting stereotype was based on experience and is reasonably accurate can be adaptive.

However, if due to the existing stereotypes we cannot see the difference within a certain group of people, that stereotype is then non-adaptive and unfair¹. Many cultures have stereotypes and negative attitudes about the cruelty of stepmothers and/or stepfathers, that most often occurred from the uncertainty of their role in the family, which is particularly influenced (nowadays) by the media discourse. It is not surprising that people tend to be highly suspicious of stepparents. For people who have never met a stepparent in real life, their knowledge about them may come from what they have heard or read. Wicked stepparents are not confined to fairy tales, books, and newspapers; they also appear in movies. Although there has been no research on movie portrayals of stepparents, it could be argued that movies such as *Wicked Stepmother* (1989), *The Stepfather* (1987), and its 1989 sequel *Stepfather 11: Make Room for Daddy* only serve to reinforce the negative images of stepparents². Within the stereotypical social context, stepmothers are frequently presented as evil, sometimes cruel, but also emotionally distant, which reflects the cultural beliefs³ that stepmothers are less gentle than biological mothers, and that they have less love for children⁴, but also that they are focused on the tangible benefits that they can “pull” from their spouse. The same goes for stepfathers when it comes to stereotypes, which is pointed out in the scientific study *Some Possible Implications of Negative Stepfather Stereotypes*. Two studies were conducted to investigate whether ambigu-

¹ E. Aronson, T.D. Wilson, R.M. Akert, *Socijalnapsihologija*, Mate. d. o. o., Zagreb 2005.

² S. Claxton-Oldfield, B. Butler, *Portrayal of stepparents in movie plot summaries*, “Psychological Reports”, June 1998, vol. 82, no. 3, p. 879.

³ Joseph Campbell, author of *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, notes that myths incorporated the tools that people used, and those tools are associated with power systems that are involved in the culture of their time. In the case of the trope of the evil stepparent, the myth has not been supplanted. Evidence shows otherwise. It is still alive for good reasons.

⁴ S. Weaver, A mothering but not a mother role: A grounded theory study of the nonresidential stepmother, Doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri – Columbia 2000.

ous evidence of child abuse would lead undergraduate students to be more suspicious of stepfathers than of fathers. In Study 1, students responded to a written vignette in which a 15 year old girl mentions to a high school counsellor that her stepfather (or father) likes to tickle her unexpectedly at home. Imagining themselves as the counsellor at the girl's school, students rated the stepfather's behaviour as more suspicious than the same behaviour by a father. In addition, the tickling of the 15 year old girl was more likely to be regarded as inappropriate, disrespectful, unwanted, or possibly abusive when it was done by a stepfather rather than by a father. In Study 2, students responded to a written vignette describing a young boy's visit to a hospital after twisting his ankle and hitting his head in a soccer game. During the examination, bruises are revealed on the boy's back and arms, which the boy says he got playing soccer. Imagining themselves as the doctor at the hospital, students were no more likely to be suspicious of the bruises when the boy was believed to be from a stepfather family than from a biological family. It may be that the stereotype of stepfathers as being sexually abusive is stronger than the stereotype of stepfathers as being physically abusive⁵. But what is extremely important to look at from a pedagogical point of view, is whether children are included in a step-family⁶. Reality (accompanied by stereotypes) where stepmothers or stepfathers come and take the place of a former family member of the child and/or children is not easy. In such altered circumstances (often happening suddenly) it is not always clear exactly which functions to replace or take regarding the child, and to what extent they want or are able to take part in parenting, what their emotional or economic rights are etc. A child has trouble accepting a new person in the family, and sometimes considers that person to be threatening because it contributes to the change of already established family roles⁷. The child also has the impression that the new person in the family will get involved in all aspects of family life. As well as these negative stereotypes, the step-parent role and other step-family roles are

⁵ S. Claxton-Oldfield, B. Butler, *Portrayal of stepparents...*, op. cit., p. 879.

⁶ A number of different terms have been used to describe step-families, including repartnered families, remarried families, and blended families. A number of terms are also used to describe different step-family types. "Simple step-families" refers to families in which only one of the adults has children from a previous partnership. "Complex stepfamilies" refers to families in which both adults have children from previous partnerships. "Step-father families" are simple step-families with a mother, her children, and her partner. Similarly, "step-mother families" are simple step-families with a father, his children, and his partner. Step-families can be cohabiting or remarried. Children of either parent may be living in the household, all or part of the time. In complex step-families, children have stepsiblings. Some repartnered couples, also referred to as step-couples, go on to have a "mutual" child of their own (referred to in the Australian Census as "blended" families; ABS, 2003). The children in these families then gain a half-brother or half-sister. Hence, while there is evidence that the "step-" terms have some negative connotations, they allow us to talk about step-family relationships and provide step-family members with names for their step-relationships.

⁷ L. Nielsen, *Stepmothers: Why so much stress?*, "Journal of Divorce & Remarriage" 1999, vol. 30, pp. 115–148.

“non-institutionalised” and therefore lack established societal norms and expectations that could guide step-parents and children in how best to relate to each other⁸. The website *Stepcarefully for Stepfamilies* has an interesting division of stereotypes relating to the stepfamily, which we will use to complete our introductory section:

1. Stepparents start out with unrealistic expectations
2. Stepfamilies go through certain Stages (almost 100% of stepfamilies have travelled the same developmental path)
 - a) *the Dream Stage* – before the wedding when everything seems picture perfect- or like it will be soon
 - b) *the Discovery Stage* – soon after the wedding reality slaps in the face of stepparent and they see that the stepkids, the ex-spouses, the in-laws, and stepparents new mate are not what they were before
 - c) *the Decision Stage* – the point when every stepparenting couple chooses whether to give up and run away
 - d) *the Determination Stage* – here’s where the second “knuckle down”, group starts growing together
 - e) *the Development Stage* – the fights begin diminishing in frequency and in force
3. Stepparents forget to remember that this is a real family now⁹.

“Cinderella effect” and the educational relationship: child – stepparent

The most studies on the “Cinderella effect” were conducted in Canada and Australia. Given the fact that scientists do not have a lot of data to rely on while studying the “Cinderella effect”, five theories that try to explain it have emerged: (1) The Normative Theory, (2) The Resource Theory, (3) The Stress Theory, (4) Selection Factors (5) combining the insights from evolutionary psychology to pedagogical discourse. In the rest of the paper, we will focus on explaining the “Cinderella effect” by just combining insights from evolutionary psychology to pedagogical discourse. One of the main questions, certainly, is why does a child have such a hard time accepting or does not accept at all the new stepparent? In most cases, a child refuses a stepmother and/or stepfather due to a) losing the time spent together with the parent, and b) the attention of the biological parent who is now redirected to a partner. It is not always objectively so, but it should be considered that children’s feelings are turbulent while forming a new

⁸ A.J. Cherlin, F.F., Furstenburg, *Stepfamilies in the United States: A reconsideration*, “Annual Review of Sociology” 1994, vol. 20, pp. 359–381.

⁹ STEPcoach, *Stepfamily Stereotypes*, source: <http://step-carefully.blogspot.hr/2008/07/stepfamily-stereotypes.html> [access: 10.09.2016].

stepfamily. After the triad mother – father – child, divorce creates a dyad parent – child. This new dyad does not include the relationship between parents, and the parent – child relationship intensifies. When a parent remarries, with a new concept that is a triad, the child has an intense sense of loss that results in the rejection of the new parent. In addition, it is interesting to point out that children, sometimes for years, hope that their biological parents will reconnect i.e. achieve emotional and physical togetherness that will lead to the happiness of the whole family (most often children themselves). However, since their biological parents have remarried, the children's hopes were hardly feasible, if not impossible. What do children feel they need and have to do in such circumstances? Firstly, to consistently have to fight against a new family member (stepparent) because their ejection from the stepfamily opens up a space for the realization of reunification (of their biological parents). Furthermore, the problem also emerges when a stepparent wants to discipline a child. After the divorce, biological parents often allow a child too much, thinking that that they can in this way compensate for the resulting loss of family that, combined with disciplining the child, necessarily leads to a conflict. A resistance towards the stepparent most often occurs because of sudden changes in the existing family role: before the child had the benefits of being the youngest or the liability of being the oldest child and in the new family there are younger or older children, which also causes additional problems¹⁰. But children should not blame the entire set of said reactions since they, in their early childhood, have not got a complete emotional development which is why the child left to its own emotions is not capable of self-regulation of the same. Because of the above, the child does not even know how to behave differently from the way of his outside triggered emotions¹¹. Outdated, but still present, educational methods stop and slow down the emotional development, at the same time developing the child's mechanisms of repressing their own emotions in order to avoid punishment and rejection, which ultimately has a devastating effects on a child's sense of self and personal values, the ability of self-regulation and to his lifelong health. That is obvious from the example of today's generation of adults who have problems with inadequate reactions (depending on the situation), sudden outbursts or some other extreme, which is reflected in a reduced ability to experience their own emotions (such as anger or sadness), which can have far-reaching implications for the close relationship in emotional

¹⁰ G. Buljan-Flander, A. Karlović, *Odgajam li dobro svojedijete*, Marko M. usluge d. o. o., Zagreb 2004.

¹¹ M. Bell, C. Wolfe, *Emotion and Cognition: An Intricately Bound Developmental Process*, "Child Development" 2004, vol. 75, no. 2, pp. 366–370; N. Eisenberg, C. Champion, Y. Ma, *Emotion-Related Regulation: An Emerging Construct*, "Merrill-Palmer Quarterly" 2004, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 236–259; R.A. Thompson, *The Development of the Person: Social Understanding, Relationships, Self, Conscience*, [in:] N. Eisenberg, *Handbook of Child Psychology (Sixth Edition), Volume 3: Social, Emotional, and Personality Development*, Wiley and Sons, Hoboken, NJ 2006; L. Barrett at all, *The Experience of Emotion*, "Annual Review of Psychology" 2007, vol. 58, pp. 373–403.

relationships¹². Relations in stepfamilies are interwoven with various problems that cause, in both children and stepparents, a series of events that are visible in the behaviour of the form. For example, Nadler said in his study *The psychological stress of a stepmother* that among them, more than among the biological mothers of children, feelings of intense anger are present¹³, or the frequent occurrence of depression that occurs due to tangled family relationships¹⁴. Furthermore, considering a whole pedagogical approach to the relationship between a stepmother and stepchildren, it should be stressed that there are no precise instructions for developing their healthy and complete mutual relations¹⁵ and which are the factors that significantly contribute to a positive adjustment of being a stepmother¹⁶. The reason for this is that most studies on stepfamilies show more positive results when it comes to the stepfathers, than stepmothers. Scientific studies indicate more difficulties in terms of their adjustment to parenthood, and caring for stepchildren. According to numerous studies, stepfathers are much better adapted to new roles in the family, but are more inclined to conflicts than stepmothers are¹⁷. Seeing that the pedagogical discourse recognized quality parenting as a key protective, that is, risk factor in child's development, mutual quality interaction is extremely important. Specifically, family interactions help adopt the standards, system(s) of values, and attitudes that the child is learning, based on which it also expresses various forms of behaviour in the family environment and new life situations. Studies on parenthood are not in favour of stepmothers because they have determined, for instance, that the lives of children with stepmothers proved to be one of the risk factors in the development of addiction in adolescence¹⁸. This is certainly connected with the substitu-

¹² Unknown Author, *Emocionalni razvoj djeteta*, Centar: Prirodnoroditeljstvo, source: <http://prirodnoroditeljstvo.com/emocionalni-razvoj-djeteta> [access: 10.09.2016].

¹³ J.H. Nadler, *The psychological stress of a stepmother*, "Dissertation Abstracts International" 1976, vol. 37, (5367-B), (UMI No. 77-6308).

¹⁴ D.N. Shapiro, A.J. Stewart, *Parenting Stress, Perceived Child Regard, and Depressive Symptoms among Stepmothers and Biological Mothers*, "Family Relations" 2011, vol. 60, no. 5, pp. 533–544.

¹⁵ V. King, *When Children Have Two Mothers: Relationships With Nonresident Mothers, Stepmothers, and Fathers*, "Journal of Marriage and Family" 2007, vol. 69, no. 5, pp. 1178–1193.

¹⁶ J.D. Lejeune, *A study of positive coping strategies in stepmothers*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Union Institute and University 1998.

¹⁷ W. MacDonald, A. DeMaris, *Parenting stepchildren and biological children: The effects of stepparent's gender and new biological children*, "Journal of Family" 1996, vol. 17, pp. 5–25.; J. Whiting, D.R. Smith, T. Bamett, E. Grafsky, *Overcoming the Cinderella myth: A mixed methods study of successful stepmothers*, "Journal of Divorce & Remarriage" 2007, vol. 47, no. 1–2, 95–109; E.B. Visher, J.S. Visher, *Stepfamilies: A guide to working with stepparents and stepchildren*, Bruner/Mazel, New York 1979; D.S. Quick, P.C. McKenry, B.M. Newman, *Stepmothers and their adolescent children: Adjustment to new family roles*, [in:] K. Pasley, M. Ihinger-Tallman, *Issues in research, theory, practice with stepfamilies*, Greenwood, Westport, CT 1994.

¹⁸ C. Cartwright, *Step-family living and parent-child relationships: An exploratory investigation*, "Journal of Family Studies" 2005, vol. 11, pp. 267–283.

tion elements i.e. forced (artificial) compensating or buying love through material goods. We definitely have to emphasize that the existing cultural stereotypes of a stepmother being “evil or cruel”, are followed by the stereotypes of *instant love* towards children¹⁹. The stereotype of instant love means that remarrying creates an *instant family*, which sets the expectations for stepparents that they must, based on the principle of automatism, love their stepchildren, and vice versa. Becoming a stepparent should come gradually, which takes a lot of patience and time, because it does not happen “overnight”. All these phenomena are simultaneously monitored by the cultural idealization of motherhood that promotes intense expectations that the stepmother, just like a biological mother, should assimilate as quickly as possible to the family and as quickly as possible (preferably immediately) love their stepchildren²⁰. Stepmothers are also expected to be more involved in parenting, which puts them under increased pressure, which benefits neither the children, nor themselves. Furthermore, some studies point out the fact that the arrival of a stepfather in the household significantly improves the economic opportunities that improve the quality of the material standard. Since the entering of a stepfather into the family means that now there are two people that financially and emotionally care for children, it is assumed that it reduces the level of the problem for the children. However, studies consistently indicate that children in stepfamilies exhibit more problems that are visible through the challenging behaviour, poor grades, and relationships with peers than children who live in families with two biological parents or in single-parent families²¹. In any case, the authors conclude that remarrying generally does not improve the situation of children²². Although most of stepparent have a positive attitude about the formation of stepfamilies, studies show that children are not nearly as enthusiastic and often have negative views on the matter.

New family forms are, without further notice, stressful for many children because they often have to move to another district or city, adapt to new people in the household, new rules, create new routines, make new friends and “lose”

¹⁹ M. Dainton, *Myths and misconceptions of the stepmother identity*, “Family Relations” 1993, vol. 42, pp. 93–98; N.V. Benokraitis, *Marriages and Families: Changes, Choices, and Constraints (4th Edition)*, Prentice Hall, USA 2002.

²⁰ L.A. Kurdek, M.A. Fine, *Cognitive correlates of satisfaction for mothers and stepfathers in stepfather families*, “Journal of Marriage and the Family” 1991, vol. 53, pp. 565–573.

²¹ E.M. Hetherington, *Coping with marital transitions: A family systems perspective*, “Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development” 1992, vol. 57, no. 2/3, pp. 1–14; E. Hetherington, K. Jodl, *Stepfamilies as settings for child development*, [in:] A. Booth, J. Dunn, *Stepfamilies: Who benefits? Who does not?*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ 1994; P.R. Amato, *The Implications of Research on Children in Stepfamilies*, [in:] A. Booth, J. Dunn, *Stepfamilies....*, op. cit.

²² W. MacDonald, A. DeMaris, *Parenting stepchildren....*, op. cit., pp. 5–25; J. Whiting, D.R. Smith, T. Bamett, E. Grafsky, *Overcoming the Cinderella myth: A mixed methods study of successful stepmothers*, “Journal of Divorce & Remarriage” 2007, vol. 47, no. 1–2, pp. 95–109.

their old friends, change schools, class and teachers and so on²³. For all these reasons the relationship between stepparents and stepchildren are strained because children (especially from single-parent families) are used to much higher degree of autonomy, which is why they often react to a stepparent with hostility when the stepparent demonstrates authority. Furthermore, stepchildren have an intense feeling of jealousy because they feel that they have to share their biological parents²⁴. Also, children experience a conflict of loyalty and for fear of being emotionally closer with stepparents; they feel that it means betraying their biological parents, with whom they do not live²⁵. Santrock and Sitter (1987) found that the attempts of stepmothers to establish good relations with their stepchildren did not significantly improve their interrelationship, because children often behave as if they do not exist (ignore them), exclude the feelings of mutual support and deliberately physically avoid them. Some researchers however, because of the aforementioned, point to the fact that the stepmother's is more a complex and demanding than the role of a stepfather, which, in long-term, significantly affects the quality of life of a stepmother and her stepfamily²⁶. In fact, in the past the role of a stepmother was solely to physically replace the child's biological mother, who died, but with time the role of a stepmother multiplied and became much more demanding. Seeing that stereotypes about stepmothers still exist (and are not favourable by either educational or evolutionary psychological studies) and that the number of stepfamilies keeps increasing²⁷, and predictions are that stepfamilies are the families of the future²⁸, this problem requires a serious pedagogical approach with a long-term aim (through specific teaching methods) towards the attitudes which consist of three components: (a) emotional, made from type of emotions associated with the attitude, (b) cognitive, which includes beliefs or thoughts, and (c) behavioural, referring to the behaviour of others²⁹. The reason for that also lies in the fact that, despite the increased number of studies in the field of pedagogy carried out with stepfami-

²³ E.M. Hetherington, J. Kelly, *For better or for worse: Divorce reconsidered*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2002.

²⁴ P.R. Amato, *The Implications of Research on Children in Stepfamilies*, [in:] A. Booth, J. Dunn, *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, N.J. 1994; E.M. Hetherington, J. Kelly, *For better...*, op. cit.

²⁵ P.R. Amato, *The Implications of Research...*, op. cit.

²⁶ M. Crosbie-Burnett, *Application of family stress theory to remarriage: A model for assessing and helping stepfamilies*, "Family Relations" 1989, vol. 38, pp. 323–331; S. Weaver, A mothering but not a mother role: A grounded theory study of the nonresidential stepmother, Doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri – Columbia 2000.

²⁷ R. Parke, *Fatherhood*. Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. 1996.

²⁸ F. Frank Furstenberg Jr., A.J. Cherlin, *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1991; P.C. Glick, *Remarried families, stepfamilies, and stepchildren (a brief demographic profile)*, "Family Relations" 1989, vol. 38, pp. 24–27.

²⁹ E. Aronson, T.D. Wilson, R.M. Akert, *Socijalna psihologija*, Mate. d. o. o., Zagreb 2005.

lies, there are only a few studies which argue about changing the stepmother stereotype³⁰. It is clear that these changes in the family require a new social, and even cultural, adjustment of stepparenting. Also, the fact that so far it has not been precisely pedagogically determined (except in the domain of the Guidelines) how to develop the relationship between the stepparent and the child³¹, it indicates the need of establishing a more positive opinion towards stepparenting, because those people certainly face many difficulties³², but also professionally invest a greater effort towards the children living in changed family circumstances.

The “Cinderella effect” from the perspective of evolutionary psychology

Martin Daly and Margo Wilson examined the relationship between children and stepparents in families consisting of a child, a biological parent and a non-biological parent. They then compared the results with the relationships that exist between parents and children in families where both parents are the biological parents of the child. This article will concentrate on the results relating to: a) the discrimination of children that does not involve abuse, b) forms of child abuse without death, and c) child abuse resulting in death. Results relating to discrimination against children that does not involve abuse indicate that the relationship between parents and their non-biological children is very complex and interwoven with a series of difficulties. In fact, 53% men and 25% women living with spouses and their children confirmed that they had positive parenting feelings toward their stepchildren, which also indicates that 47% stepfathers and 75% stepmothers did not have a quality relationship with their stepchildren³³. Furthermore, the study results suggest that children from a current marriage

³⁰ M. Adler, A. Petch & J. Tweedie, *Parental Choice and Educational Policy*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1989; M. Fine, F.D. Fincham, *The role of theories in family science*, [in:] M. Fine, F.D. Fincham, *Handbook of Family Theories: A Content-Based Approach*, Routledge, New York 2013.

³¹ M. Coleman, L. Ganong, M. Fine, *Reinvestigating Remarriage: Another Decade of Progress*, “Journal of Marriage and Family” 2000, vol. 62, no. 4, pp. 1288–1307.

³² Research has documented many difficulties associated with becoming a stepmother that include role ambiguity, boundary ambiguity, role strain, experiences of divided loyalty, combating stereotypes, difficulties in developing relationships with stepchildren, strained relationships with ex-spouses, and financial strain (A. Bernstein, *Women in stepfamilies: The fairy godmother, the wicked witch, and Cinderella reconstructed*, [in:] M. Mirkin, *Women in context through the life cycle*, Guilford Press, New York 1994; J.M. Bradley, *Finding their way: An exploration of stepmother role identity and discovery*, Doctoral dissertation, Wright Institute 2005).

³³ M. Daly, M. Wilson, *Is the “Cinderella Effect” Controversial?: A Case Study of Evolution-Minded Research and Critiques Thereof*, [in:] C. Crawford, D. Krebs, *Foundations of Evolutionary Psychology*. LEA, New York 2008.

reduce the likelihood of divorce³⁴, while children from previous marriages increase the likelihood of divorce³⁵, and that the wife will be a victim of abuse, and possibly killed. Furthermore, it is certainly important to stress the fact that stepchildren receive significantly less funding for health and dental care³⁶, for study³⁷, and for food from their stepparents, in relation to children living with both biological parents³⁸. Also, stepchildren often subject to accidental injuries because stepparents pay less attention to them in relation to their biological children³⁹. Also, stepchildren are often subject to accidental injuries because stepparents pay less attention to them in relation to their biological children⁴⁰. Stepparents showed significantly less interest in the education of their stepchildren in relation to their biological children. The study indicates that stepfathers spend less time with stepchildren. Researchers evaluate their interaction with the children as tense⁴¹. The second group of results brought by Margo and Wilson refers to forms of child abuse not resulting in death. Results collected from the centres for social welfare show that stepparent households, and stepparents when it comes to cases of child abuse without deaths and sexual abuse of children are represented in disproportionately large numbers in relation to the general population⁴². The results obtained from studies conducted with victims of abuse indicate that stepchildren have more often been victims of physical and sexual abuse than children living with both biological parents⁴³. Moreover, interviews conducted with homeless adolescents show that quite a number of them run away from home, and it was because they were living with a stepparent and that they were often victims of abuse⁴⁴. These results were further corroborated by Corby, who pointed out that the risk of child abuse with stepparents is significantly higher than with biological parents. Even 32% physical abuse of children, 15% neglected children and 36% children that have been victims of emotional abuse

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ G.S. Becker, E.M. Landes, R.T. Michael, *An economic analysis of marital instability*, "Journal of Political Economy" 1977, vol. 85, pp. 1141–1187.

³⁶ A. Case, C. Paxon, *Mothers and others: who invests in children's health?*, "Journal of Health Economics" 2001, vol. 20, pp. 301–328.

³⁷ K. Zvoch, *Family type and investment in education: a comparison of genetic and stepparent families*, "Evolution & Human Behavior" 1999, vol. 20, pp. 453–464.

³⁸ A. Case, I-F. Lin, S. McLanahan, *How hungry is the selfish gene?*, "Economic Journal" 2000, vol. 110, pp. 781–804.

³⁹ J. Wadsworth, I. Burnell, B. Taylor, N. Butler, *Family type and accidents in preschool children*, "Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health" 1983, vol. 37, pp. 100–104.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ M. Daly, M. Wilson, *Is the "Cinderella Effect" Controversial?: A Case Study of Evolution-Minded Research and Critiques Thereof*, [in:] C. Crawford, D. Krebs, *Foundations of Evolutionary Psychology*. LEA, New York 2008.

⁴² M. Daly, M. Wilson, *Is the "Cinderella Effect"...*, op. cit.

⁴³ K. Kim, B. Ko, *An incidence survey of battered children in two elementary schools of Seoul*, "Child Abuse & Neglect" 1990, vol. 14, pp. 273–276.

⁴⁴ M. Daly, M. Wilson, *Is the "Cinderella Effect"...*, op. cit.

lived with one biological parent and one stepparent. The most common was a family in which the child lived with his mother and stepfather. Corby pointed out that children from stepfamilies were under significantly higher risk of sexual abuse compared to children living with their biological parents⁴⁵. A third set of results brought to us by Margo and Wilson refers to a form of child abuse resulting in death. Based on the results of studies carried out in Australia, Canada, Sweden, England and Wales it is clear that stepchildren are more often victims of abuse resulting in death, than children who have grown up with their biological parents. The probability that the stepchildren will be abused with a fatal outcome compared to children living with their biological parents is more than 100 times greater⁴⁶.

In Australia, more precisely in the state of New South Wales, two similar studies have been conducted. The first, which was conducted between 1968 and 1981 showed that 11 fathers and 18 stepfather abused children under the age of one, which resulted in the death⁴⁷. Another study conducted between 1989 and 1993 showed that the same crime was committed by 11 fathers and 12 stepfathers. In interpreting these results, we need to take into account the fact that during the investigations, less than 0.5% children lived with a stepfather⁴⁸.

According to a study conducted in Canada between 1974 and 1990, consisting of the population of children up to 5 years old, the results suggested that with children living with their fathers the frequency of abuse resulting in death was 2.6 deaths per one million years of childhood (child years), while with children living with a stepfather, the frequency of abuse resulting in death was 321.6 deaths per one million years of childhood. If we considered the absolute figures, we would get results that confirmed that in the groups of children living with fathers there are 74 deaths per 28.3 million years of childhood, while in groups of children living with stepfathers there are 55 deaths per 0:17 million years of childhood⁴⁹.

A research carried out in Sweden in 2000 indicates that per a million parents – child pairs, there were 3.8 children dying from abuse resulting in death compared to 31.7 children who died from abuse resulting in death per one million pairs of stepfamilies⁵⁰.

A study conducted in England and Wales from 1977 to 1990 confirms that in the said period 117 children who lived with stepfathers died from abuse. Interpretation of these results should take into account the fact that less than 1% of the total number of children who were surveyed in this period lived with his stepfather. That means that when you take into account the number of children

⁴⁵ B. Corby, *Child Abuse: Towards a Knowledge Base*, Open University Press, Berkshire 2006.

⁴⁶ M. Daly, M. Wilson, *Is the "Cinderella Effect"...*, op. cit.

⁴⁷ A. Wallace, *Homicide: the social reality*, New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics & Research, Sydney 1986.

⁴⁸ H. Strang, *Children as victims of homicide*, "Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice" no. 53, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra 1996.

⁴⁹ M. Daly, M. Wilson, *Is the "Cinderella Effect"...*, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

killed by the father or stepfather, and when we add the proportion of children living with their fathers and their biological parents, we can conclude that the risk of abuse resulting in death is more than 100 times higher for children with a stepfather than with a biological father⁵¹.

Before we start explaining these phenomena, it is necessary to point out two elements arising from those studies. The first tells us that we can see that in cases of child abuse resulting in death only stepfathers were highlighted. The reason for this is that the above studies were conducted in the paediatric population up to five years of age. At such an early age, a rather small number of children do not live with their biological mothers, which is why the studies do not mention the comparison between mothers and stepmothers. Despite the absence of more data, we must emphasize three scientific studies that indicated that the incidence of physical abuse of stepchildren with stepmothers at a similar level as with stepfathers⁵². Secondly, from all these results we can conclude that children living in stepfamilies are under a significantly greater risk of discrimination, various forms of harassment and abuse resulting in death compared to children living with both biological parents.

How to explain the mentioned fact arising from the above research review? From the evolutionary perspective, it does not seem difficult. Parents invest a lot of resources in their children. By that, we mean the material resources, and the time and attention that parents devote to children. The Centre for Economic Research and Business made a report in 2014 on the costs of raising a child from birth to 21 years of age in the UK. According to the report, the overall costs of raising a child amounted to £227.266, which makes 28% the average income per year spent on bringing up a child⁵³. Parker and Wang (2013), reported the results of the Pew Research Centre analysis of long-term data on time use. The results show that in 2011 the average mother spent 14 hours a week caring for children, while fathers spend 7 hours a week, which represents a significant increase compared to 1965, when the mothers spent an average of 10 hours a week caring for children while fathers spent 2.5 hours per week⁵⁴. The mentioned data already shows that mothers typically invest more than fathers (initial investment is

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² M. Daly, M. Wilson, *Abuse and neglect of children in evolutionary perspective*, [in:] R.D. Alexander, D.W. Tinkle, *Natural selection and social behavior*, Chiron, NY 1981; S.J. Creighton, S. Noyes, *Child abuse trends in England and Wales 1983–1987*, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, London 1989; K. Kim, B. Ko, *An incidence survey...*, op. cit., pp. 273–276.

⁵³ Unknown Author, *Cost of a child hits £227,266*, “Centre for Economics and Business Research”, January 2014, source: <https://www.cebr.com/reports/cost-of-raising-a-child-hits-227266-with-families-feeling-the-impact-of-benefit-cuts/> [access: 10.09.2016].

⁵⁴ K. Parker, W. Wang, *Modern Parenthood: Roles of Moms and Dads Converge as They Balance Work and Family*, “Social and Demographic Trends”, March 2013, source: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/03/14/modern-parenthood-roles-of-moms-and-dads-converge-as-they-balance-work-and-family/> [access: 10.09.2016].

higher in women than in men), but from the evolutionary perspective, we need to go one step further. The man's initial investment in the offspring is sex resulting in pregnancy. The same goes for women. But that investment in offspring has only just begun for women, it continues with nine months of pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and intensive care for a newborn. This difference in the initial investment is of key importance for further investment in offspring. Given that women initially invest much more in offspring than males, in case of sudden infant death, they lose much more than men because of the amount of effort. Children also grow slowly and depend on their parents for a long time, which requires intensive care for them, which is why natural selection went in the direction of intensive investment in the offspring. For example, taking into account our ancestors, we can see that those who took care of their offspring have a much higher reproductive success than people who did not.

The above explains why parents invest in their biological children, but we still have to answer the question why invest in their stepchildren? One explanation is that the concern for stepchildren does not necessarily have to be part of parental investment but can also be a part of a reproductive effort⁵⁵. Pairs are generally formed for a longer period. This means that, if during the process of wooing, a potential partner has a child with a previous partner, reproductive effort in order to win the potential partner would include caring for his offspring. In that way, the suitor would show the ability and the desire for a long-term and significant investment in a potential partner that would increase the chances that the courtship will end successfully, thus potentially increasing their reproductive success. If the partner has a child from a previous relationship, it is possible that the newly formed bond could also result in an offspring. In this way we can explain why it is profitable for parents to invest in stepchildren. It can be observed through the reproductive efforts, not as a part of parental investment⁵⁶.

Based on the above we believe that it is possible to conclude that parental care will be biased towards the biological descendants because, in that way, parents potentially increase their reproductive success. Evolutionary speaking, in the short-term, investing in stepchildren increases the reproductive success of parents and it allows them access to a new partner, but in the long run it reduces reproductive success because, by caring for stepchildren, parents divert a significant portion of their resources to other people's offspring, which could easily direct in further reproduction or care for their own offspring. From the evolutionary position, this kind of observation provides a part of the explanation why stepchildren are at greater risk of discrimination, various forms of abuse or even the risk of potential violent death compared to children living with their biological parents. It is important to stress that studies and explanations given in this part of the paper do not relate to the children living with adoptive parents.

⁵⁵ M. Daly, M. Wilson, *Is the "Cinderella Effect" ...*, op. cit.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

The “Cinderella effect” in the context of educational challenges

The question of why the “Cinderella effect” can be considered a problem and/or challenge for pedagogy as a science remains open. Although all studies, cited so far in this paper, conducted on step-parenting show mostly negative results in relation to children and clearly let you know that the children from stepfamilies live in unfavourable conditions compared to children living with their biological parents, pedagogy still has some room to act. The biggest problem of the existing stereotypes about stepparenting, which as we have seen has directly been confirmed through these scientific studies (in pedagogy or evolutionary psychology) is exactly the *image of a child* resulting from the relationship a stepparent and child. The child is still considered to be passive, vulnerable and powerless⁵⁷ and/or as a victim, regardless of its age, which in a way reinforces the understanding about the negative role of stepparents since their actions are evaluated through the prism of the existing stereotypes. Furthermore, the “Cinderella effect” can be considered a challenge for pedagogy also because the approach to parenting (burdened by stereotypes) is sometimes extremely *exhausting* for stepparents, but also for the children. It is important to comment on the special difficulties that stepmothers face. While the research discussed above is relevant to stepmothers, it is important to note that women in this role experience greater levels of stress than stepfathers, and children living mainly in stepmother families tend to have more adjustment difficulties than those living in stepfather families⁵⁸. Stepparents are therefore often faced with the fact that their remarriage causes reinforced emotions with their partners, ex-partners, children and grandparents, which is why they live under increasing pressure and stress, and also because of not being accepted by children who are considering them as rivals or who openly express their hostility. Stepparents should not be “made saints” and the children should not be “demonized”. Children suffer due to the loss of family and believe they will reach the reunification with their biological parents. Children also mourn for the loss of time and attention they used to receive from biological parents when they find a new partner. It is hard for a child to go through all these processes, and it means that the child should be given complete attention in an educational manner. In the mentioned situations, it often happens that parents are too lenient toward a child after a divorce, which is evidenced by *permissive or compliant parenting styles* (*laissez faire*) in which

⁵⁷ B. Kušević, *Kultura intenzivnoga majčinstva kao izazov za suvremenu pedagogiju*, [in:] M. Ljubetić, S. Zrilić, *Pedagogija i kultura*, Hrvatsko pedagoškijsko društvo, Zagreb 2012.

⁵⁸ E.M. Hetherington, J. Kelly, *For better or for worse: Divorce reconsidered*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2002.

the main educational objectives are contained in meeting of all the child's requests or desires⁵⁹. The parent-child relationship in the prominent parental style is based on the great emotional sensitivity of parents toward the child (they wish to compensate the child for the loss), too much freedom and independence without setting clear limits and rules, which, in the long term encourages impulsiveness, poor control and aggressive behaviour when meeting with the limits⁶⁰. For example, a divorced mother with a child marries a partner who has or does not have children. If the mother experiences difficulties in child raising, it can be assumed that she will ask the stepfather to react. If the stepfather intervenes before establishing an emotional bond with the child, which requires about two years, he will make a mistake because the child can reject him for, e.g. disciplining. In such cases, the stepfather should back down and leave the responsibility of parenting to the biological father⁶¹.

In such circumstances, a number of external, but also internal conflicts affecting the family atmosphere happen. Stepparents enter the stepfamily as an outsider to the parent – child relationship and face significant challenges as they attempt to build relationships with children. Some stepparent – child relationships are troubled, while others become comfortable or close. Researchers and stepfamily therapists have concluded that it works best if stepparents can initially refrain from taking on a parenting role and spend time establishing a supportive relationship with their stepchildren. This can be more difficult for stepmothers to achieve as they often feel pressure to take on a parenting role for the children⁶². For example, if stepparents try to make up to the children what they have lost, children could see it as a competition with the biological parent, and if they accept what they were offered it could be perceived as disloyalty to the biological parent. Moreover, we must consider the fact that parental strategy may vary with the biological parents or stepparents to a significant extent due to the character of the person, experience, situational factors and so on⁶³. The “Cinderella effect” can be considered a challenge for pedagogy due to possible

⁵⁹ N. Hasan, T.G. Power, *Optimism and pessimism in children: A study of parenting correlates*, “International Journal of Behavioral Development” 2002, vol. 26, pp. 185–191; N. Pećnik, B. Starc, *Roditeljstvo u najboljem interesu djeteta i podrška roditeljima najmlađe djece*, Ured UNICEF-a za Hrvatsku, Zagreb 2010.

⁶⁰ S.A. Johnson, *The relationship of parenting with adolescent problem behaviors and healthy development: An application of a motivational model of development*. Doctoral dissertation, Portland State University, Portland, OR 2004; E. Skinner, S. Johnson, T. Snyder, *Six Dimensions of Parenting: A Motivational Model*. Parenting: science and practice, “Lawrence Erlbaum Associates” 2005, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 175–235.

⁶¹ G. Buljan-Flander, A. Karlović, *Odgajam li dobro svojedijete*, Marko M. usluge d. o. o., Zagreb 2004.

⁶² C. Cartwright, *Step-parenting*, “Australian Institute of Family Studies”, 2016, source: <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/families-policy-and-law/11-step-parenting> [access: 10.06.2016].

⁶³ M. Deković, Z. Rabotek-Šatić, *Roditeljski odgojni postupci i odnosi adolescenata s vršnjacima*, “Društvena istraživanja” 1997, vol. 6, no. 4–5, pp. 427–445.

destigmatisation of stepparents (more often stepmother) despite the fact that, most of the studies confirmed some of the stereotypes. Also, the “Cinderella effect” can be considered a challenge for pedagogy if we refer to the scientific reports and studies that confirm the significant degree of child abuse (physical and mental), but also a large number of abuses which, unfortunately, ends up fatally for children by the hand of the stepparents. Ultimately, the “Cinderella effect” can be considered a challenge for modern pedagogy due to the change of the perspective, which refers to the fact that pedagogy should also pay attention to the position of stepparents towards stepchildren (i.e. try to look at the situation from their point of view). Rather, it is necessary to try and give a concrete pedagogical response on how to be a successful stepparent in spite of all the existing stereotypes, but also to prominent scientific facts in this article. Finally, the doctoral dissertation *The myth of the Stepmonster: a qualitative exploration of the stepmother experience and a complex stepfamily system*, written by Ashley B. Womack, points to the same fact, in which the author not only destigmatizes the position of stepmothers but skilfully speaks about their relationship with biological mothers. Womack concludes that the current study has yielded rich, in-depth information about the lived experiences of stepmothers from complex stepfamily systems. Womack’s results demonstrate the value of qualitative 117 methods for addressing unrepresented subjects in research and clinical practice. Further, her study can help empower women through garnering a richer understanding of their role as stepmother and normalizing the experience through research. There is significance in adding to the existing literature so that academia and clinical practice might expand their knowledge base to include an accurate portrayal of stepmothers. Womack’s study is one attempt to give voice to an under-researched and prevalent role in the stepfamily system⁶⁴.

Instead of a Conclusion: educational strategies for stepchildren and stepparents and/or how to successfully solve the “Cinderella effect”

Taking into account our current educational and evolutionary-psychological perspective on which we have based our analysis, instead of a conclusion, we will try to offer a pedagogical strategy for stepchildren and stepparents, i.e. stepfamilies with the purpose of successfully resolving the “Cinderella effect”. First of all, it is necessary to:

1. Prepare for the stepparent role – detailed gathering of information about people (character, temperament, habits, things they like/dislike,

⁶⁴ A.B. Womack, *The myth of the stepmonster: a qualitative exploration of the stepmother experience in a complex stepfamily system*. Doctoral dissertation, Texas A & M University-Commerce 2014.

style, favourite dishes, movies, entrenched habits and so on) before forming the new stepfamily, can contribute significantly to avoiding the bad relations between stepparents and children, but can also affect the overall family dynamics in a way that all members will be able to position their role. Also, a person gaining the stepparent role, needs to become aware that there are great gaps between a stepfamily in the past and present. In the past, stepfamilies were created out of necessity (economic or social) and due to duty, usually without freely choosing a partner, that was often accompanied by the lack of emotion. Today that is different; creating stepfamilies is a matter of personal and free choice of the individual in such a way that it wants to share a life with someone, it is accepted. However, as we have seen from our previous analysis we cannot deny that there are still many stereotypes (the evil stepmother/stepfather, instant love, physical or sexual violence, etc.) when it comes to stepparents, which has been evidenced by a series of studies which we have previously stated with positive or negative conclusions. Stepparents need to be aware of that. In that way, pedagogical programmes for supporting children who are members of stepfamilies would be desirable, and those programs could also help stepparents prepare for their new roles.

2. **Develop a parenting plan** – from the first day in a stepfamily, stepparents should display courtesy and respect towards children. If they fail to demonstrate them, they will hardly be able to create any detailed plan of stepparenting. A stepparent, in a new situation, assumes a role that used to belong to someone else. There is no ideal or completely accurate pedagogical plan for stepparenting. It should be based solely on the best interests of the children and stepparents, that is stepfamilies as a whole, at the same time not neglecting the former spouses (biological parents) who should be involved in the correspondence (if the circumstances allow it). The fact that every stepfamily is unique and there is no “normal” or “perfect” teaching plans or how to be a parent should be taken into consideration.
3. **Take time to process each transition and make sure that big changes are communicated first adult-to-adult, and then presented to the children** – given the complexity of the situation, evolutionary psychologists and educators must observe the stepfamilies from multiple perspectives. The basic perspective goes through children who suffer greatly, going through the development of their parents, a new marriage and coming into contact with a stepfamily situations; therefore, they require a lot of attention, patience and any new situations should be introduced gradually. Children suffer a great risk if their biological parents are in a conflict, so every child needs time to adapt. A study conducted at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development on 200 stepfamilies points to three differences: newly traditional stepfamilies, matriarchal stepfamilies and romantic stepfamilies. A conducted study proved that newly traditional

stepfamilies were the most successful because all the scenarios were first communicated among former and future partners and then presented to the children, and after that, solid relationships were formed, relationships that were not nurturing only marriage and marital relations but focused intensely on the education of children as well.

4. **Limit your expectations and do not allow ultimatums** – the same, previously mentioned study indicated that matriarchal stepfamilies function well, except regarding the parenting issues because of the imposition of high expectations, but also due to setting various types of ultimatums. Conflicts would emerge when the parenting role was forced, and when partners and children were given unreasonable requests. It is therefore necessary to be aware of the situational factors of all members of stepfamilies, but also of their emotional restrictions in certain situations, so that the expectations could be set as realistically as possible. Accordant to the above mentioned study, romantic stepfamilies have the highest rate of divorce, mainly because of setting unrealistic expectations. Stepparents want to immediately create the perfect family atmosphere, thus putting taking care of stepchildren and their possible negative reactions to sudden changes on the back burner. They do not want to accept that those reactions are in fact normal reactions to stressful situations and that children have difficulty dealing with the new circumstances.
5. **Do not expect to fall in love with your partner's children overnight** – Stepparents will always share their partners with their children. They can often feel unready to take on the parenting role, seeing that they have not gone through the natural transition into parenthood, but it was imposed to them, regardless of if they wanted it or not, and that should be taken into consideration. Stepparents should also be aware of the fact that children are not adults, and that they often do not know how to react properly emotionally, or even to cope with difficult life challenges (jealousy, internal conflicts affecting the family atmosphere, rivalry with a stepparent, sense of disloyalty toward the biological parent and so on.). Love, relationship and trust are built, and it takes a lot of patience from both sides.
6. **Find ways to experience "real life" together** – it is important to discuss the finances of a stepfamily and their redistribution prior to marriage, so that they would not represent additional sources of stress. It is necessary to build a strong marital bond because it will be use to all members of the stepfamily, it is also important to build a parenting plan that will include the fact that stepparents have a secondary role in parenting, at least for the first few years. It is necessary to take enough time to adjust, and to transition to a stepfamily. Cooperation with psychotherapists who are specially trained in the dynamics of stepfamilies is desirable.

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