

Stepfamilies in Europe 1400-1800

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The history of the western European family has been an area of interest for social and cultural historians for several decades with the late medieval and early modern period central to debates about continuity and change in family life. An aspect of family life that has received little attention is the common experience of remarriage and living in a stepfamily. Stepfamilies are sometimes framed as a modern phenomenon but were, in fact, a common family structure in pre-modern Europe. Research to date on the family often implies stability and stasis for individuals in a nuclear family form without acknowledging how frequently family structure and relationships might have changed. Many people married more than once and this had an effect on their personal relationships and also those of their children and kin.

This edited collection addresses a significant gap in the history of the European family by considering the experience of what it describes as a 'ubiquitous' form of family life – the stepfamily. It builds on the work of demographic historians as a basis for understanding family structures. While acknowledging its initial conclusions as useful in highlighting the diverse nature of family structures, Lyndan Warner explains some of the problems with the demographic approach and how it can miss stepfamilies that are not always described in modern terms. By recognising the limitations of these sources and their interpretations, this collection aims to point to other potential sources to find stepfamilies and understand their experiences. The collection also builds on the work of gender historians who have extensively researched widowhood and remarriage by expanding the focus to consider the experience of living in a blended family and managing the process of change in the family across the life cycle. In her introduction, Warner sets out the suggestion that although individual experiences vary widely, there are two general patterns of remarriage that emerge over the time period covered by this volume. Widowers remarried more often and more rapidly than widows, thus creating more stepmothers in families than stepfathers. This is a major difference to 20th and 21st-century Europe where it is more common for a stepfather to enter a household. She also highlights the general trend of decline in remarriage, particularly for women, by c.1800. These two trends frame much of the investigation of the collection's individual chapters.

The collection aims to understand the constraints and possibilities facing adults and children in stepfamilies, and how they worked within laws and customs governing family life. The focus on legal sources is prominent in many chapters, as is the explanation of legal codes in different countries and regions. The book

broadens the scope of research on the stepfamily to consider the 'inclusive family', which includes illegitimate children if they were folded in to the family but not children in institutions, or fostered or adopted children. Chapters investigate inclusive families in a number of contexts including kinship networks, the effects of legal structures, the reality of experiences against popular expectations, the perspective and experience of the stepchild, sibling relationships, and living arrangements.

The collection's 11 chapters all introduce some of the experiences of stepfamilies in a variety of countries across the period c.1400–1800. Warner's concluding chapter identifies four main themes: the 'fears and disadvantages of children after parent's remarriage' that includes exploring the stereotype of the 'wicked step-parent', how marriage and stepfamilies were shaped by notions of vertical and horizontal kinship, regulation of inheritance and care of children, and living arrangements. The chapters are presented in a loosely chronological structure, rather than by theme, as a cross-cultural approach to the topic. Warner's introduction is a justification of sorts for why historians should consider this topic as an important one. Although increased divorce rates have been a feature of post-war European societies, demographic research on family structure suggests that numbers of stepfamilies in early modern Europe are similar to society in the 21st century (p. 4). The introduction also clarifies the variety of language used to describe the different relationships created by remarriage; a necessity when beginning to understand and find these families in historical records. Warner provides an effective overview of this sometimes problematic aspect of stepfamily research. Terminology was varied even within a language, for example early modern English variously used the terms 'step', 'in-law', or no term at all, to describe step-relations. A cross-cultural approach to the topic reveals the different descriptions of family relationships across languages and this explanation is necessary to set up the following chapters. This theme does not emerge as a major area of investigation and there remains work to be done to explore the origin and impact of these different linguistic terms.

The chapters all share themes that are explored in different contexts and most reflect on the four themes identified by Warner in the conclusion, but some chapters naturally focus more heavily on one or two themes. The issue of how stepfamilies maintained and managed the horizontal ties created by remarriage despite legal and cultural frameworks that prioritised vertical ties of lineage is the primary focus of chapters by Alexandra Guerson and Dana Wessell Lightfoot (chapter two), Anna Bellavitis (chapter four), and Lyndan Warner (chapter 13). Guerson and Lightfoot's chapter uses notarial archives (registers with contracts relating to remarriage and inheritance) to reconstruct families in the Jewish communities of late medieval Girona not usually indicated by the terminology of 'step' family. Focusing on a time of persecution for this community shows them using stepfamily networks and relationships as a way of surviving and protecting themselves, even though remarriage was discouraged in law and literature. The chapter by Bellavitis on middling sort stepfamilies in early modern Venice considers the attitudes and roles of individuals and the court system around stepfamily networks. Using wills provides a glimpse of the emotional bonds between parents, children, and siblings and compares the treatment of stepchildren and illegitimate children. Families in these records appear generally inclusive with magistrates who considered cases on an individual basis and were guided by practicality. The penultimate chapter of the volume by Warner also brings together this theme through an analysis of a variety of visual sources. She considers how families wished to be seen and identifies that by c.1800 horizontal ties were given more prominence over lineage. Stepmothers were increasingly depicted as the sole mother figure, rather than coexisting in visual representations with the women who occupied the role of mother and wife before them.

A number of chapters outline how the stereotype of the cruel step-parent, often stepmother, was dealt with within legal codes and how it was informed by complicated family structures. Tim Stretton's work (chapter six) explains the legal context around step-parenting in early modern England and why the stepfather is 'near invisible' in popular culture. He demonstrates that the picture of legal rules around stepmothers was not straightforward, as aspects of conflict remained that explain the grounds for hostility against them, but records also provide evidence for the unfairness of the stereotype. He also references the change from vertical ties and lineage to a preference for horizontal ties and emotional bonds from c.1400–1800, which meant that stepmothers had more power over husbands to influence them over specific children. Sebastiaan Roes's chapter (chapter seven) on visual depictions of riddles and puzzles about stepfamilies in the early

modern Netherlands also looks at matrimonial and inheritance law. He further demonstrates the variety of arrangements that could be made in the different legal codes of the country and shows the diversity of ways of dealing with complicated family structures, in law and in popular culture. Cornelia Niekus Moore (chapter eight) investigates the stereotype of cruel step-parents in early modern Germany by analysing the funeral sermons of twice married men. By considering a range of social classes and religious confessions, she also complicates the picture of family life in the past and focuses on inheritance and primogeniture as a source of tension in stepfamilies.

The chapters which focus on areas of conflict and confusion in stepfamilies are complemented by essays that consider the importance of co-residence as a way of forging stepfamily ties. These ties were often a method of family survival and an explanation as to why remarriage was necessary for many. Grace E. Coolidge's chapter (chapter five) considers the 'virtual stepfamilies' found in the nobility of early modern Spain. This concept stretches the definition of a stepfamily to highlight the connections of obligations and responsibility that bonded illegitimate children and their legitimate siblings, with co-residence as a key theme in maintaining or damaging these bonds. Two chapters on the later period covered by the volume add evidence to the argument for the increasing focus on horizontal kin bonds in families. Margareth Lanzinger's chapter (chapter ten) on the gendered challenges of widowhood in late 18th-century Austria shows that remarriage was a strategy for economic success and survival. Investigation into marriage dispensation records reveals that co-residence could create strong horizontal ties that underpinned connections between step-relations. Sylvie Perrier's research (chapter 11) on 18th-century France also reveals the significance of co-residence in the gendered experiences of widowhood, remarriage and stepfamilies. Despite the existing patriarchal model that prioritised vertical ties in law, families made the horizontal ties of their blended families fit into these systems by bringing step-relations into their families through marriage and baptism.

As well as considering bonds created through co-residence as found in legal sources, the remaining two chapters focus in more depth on emotional bonds in families through analysis of personal source material. Anu Lahtinen's work (chapter three) on late medieval and early modern Sweden considers the impact of inheritance disputes and economic relations but also the interplay of the emotional bonds between parents and children caught between stepfamilies. For well-documented, wealthier families, letters show that despite the legal disputes remarriage often caused, positive stepfamily relationships also existed. She concludes that stepfamilies could not merge successfully into cohesive units because of the legal avenues to solidify 'traditions of bilateral kinship' but that stepfamily life was not always solely defined by conflict. Gabriella Erdélyi's chapter (chapter nine) looks for emotional connections in stepfamilies in 17th-century Hungary. Through a study of autobiographical writings and letters she uncovers the experience of being both a step-parent and stepchild. She also shows that studying personal source material enables stepfamilies to be seen from a different perspective from legal sources that emphasised vertical kinship ties, therefore exposing conflict among families connected through the horizontal ties of marriage. Her case of a complicated marriage between half-siblings also reveals the significance of horizontal kinship ties for some individuals.

As a whole, this collection adds a great deal to the field of family history. It illuminates the diversity in family experiences across the different classes, religions and cultures of early modern Europe. Stepfamilies are not always obvious in historical records and the sheer range of family types and experiences means that this can be a difficult topic to research or to compare from different cultural perspectives. But the experience of managing and living in an 'inclusive family' of some kind was so common, it is important to do this work, piece together the diverse range of experiences, and compare and contrast them by gender, social status, religion and geographical location. Living in stepfamily was certainly a gendered experience and this is the clearest comparison that emerges in the volume as the actions, both actual and perceived, of stepmothers and stepfathers are explored in many chapters. The volume considers the question, 'why would people remarry?' which is one that has already been considered in historiography on widowhood and courtship, but complicates the picture by highlighting different challenges faced by early modern families after the decision to remarry had been made. It sheds light on a range of legal codes that had a significant impact on family life and decisions about family structures, largely centred on inheritance. It considers the range of reasons for the 'wicked stepmother' trope and analysis of different source types allows a more

cohesive look at this enduring stereotype. The importance of horizontal family ties is a key theme and is set against a backdrop of legal systems that valued vertical ties and patrilineal authority. Understanding how stepfamilies negotiated and influenced these systems is a crucial part of understanding early modern kinship. Generally, the volume argues for change over the period to a society that valued the emotional bonds between horizontal kin but suggests that families always had ways to circumvent legal restrictions if necessary and to bring horizontal ties into a vertical lineage, for example through the marriage of stepchildren.

The nature of the collection, as it is made up of short case studies from a wide range of countries and source types, means it is not always clear how representative these examples are, although Warner does effectively find links between the diverse findings and fits them into broader patterns. There are the beginnings of conclusions about how legal attitudes and sources actually reflect everyday life. More research could be done here, perhaps utilising history of emotions theory to contextualise these sources. The experience of the stepchild considered by various authors is mostly accessed through legal sources which is problematic, as much research on childhood is when surviving source material is from the perspective of adults. Further links between surviving personal sources by children with legal records has the potential to reveal much about the lives of early modern children. The concept of the 'inclusive' family is very broad, so sometimes links are drawn across quite different family experiences, for example, the situations of illegitimate children compared to legitimate stepchildren. The nature of this concept, which comprises any family type more complex than the nuclear family, inevitably leads to research where boundaries are blurred. Further research comparing the ways in which stepfamilies, blended families, and inclusive families in their various forms could be structured and understood faces the challenge of linking the extraordinarily diverse range of individual experiences in ways which both understand individual choices and broader cultural understandings.

In conclusion, this collection is an excellent overview of work already done in the field of stepfamily history and offers a necessary addition to the complicated picture of family life in early modern Europe. Warner effectively situates the research alongside broader trends and individual chapters outline elements of stepfamily life in specific countries and regions. As Warner identifies in her conclusion, there is scope for many more detailed and in-depth studies from different cultural, geographical, and historiographical perspectives. Many authors identified that there is a discrepancy between attitudes found in literature and legal codes that viewed remarriage suspiciously and often negatively, but that this is not always reflected in reality. Only by uncovering the experiences of stepfamilies who can be identified in historical records can we begin to understand the lived experience of the early modern family. The volume's aims of presenting cross-cultural, geographical and religious comparisons to 'begin to see the continuities and changes' of family life opens up new perspectives on family history and shows that, as an area of investigation, there is much more fruitful work to be done.

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