

CHAPTER 4

The Truth about Cinderella

The first test: US child abuse reports

Our first attempt to measure the impact of step-relationships on the incidence of child abuse made use of a data archive maintained by the American Humane Association (AHA). This organization had assumed the role of central repository for legally mandated child abuse reports in most of the United States, and had a computer file containing tens of thousands of case reports. For each victimized child, the data included basic demographic facts about victim and (alleged) perpetrator, details of the nature of the abuse, the relationship between the victim and the persons *in loco parentis*, and whether the case had been ‘validated’ in some sort of follow-up investigation beyond the initial report.

To compute the age-specific rates of abuse of step-children *versus* others, we also needed data on the living arrangements of children in the population at large. This information was elusive. The US census of population did not distinguish among genetic, adoptive and step-parenthood, and all we could find were estimates based on limited surveys, which almost certainly exaggerated the prevalence of step-relationships because of some unrealistic assumptions that had been made to derive the estimates. But we used them anyway, since they made our comparisons ‘conservative’: an overestimation of the number of stepfamilies in the population should lead us to underestimate their maltreatment rates and make it more difficult to demonstrate an elevation. But the elevation of risk was dramatic none the less: according to our calculations, a child under three years of age who lived with one genetic parent and one step-parent in the United States in 1976 was about seven times more likely (the ‘odds ratio’ in epidemiological parlance) to become a validated child-abuse case in the AHA records than one who dwelt with two genetic parents.

There are a number of reasons to be cautious about interpreting this sort of comparison. One is the possibility of biased detection or reportage. Suppose that you lived next door to a child who exhibited recurrent, suspicious bruising, and that you (like everyone else) were familiar with the stereotype of step-parental cruelty. Isn’t it possible that your likelihood of assuming the worst and calling a child protection agency might be affected by knowing that the man in the house was a stepfather?

Biases of this sort could create the appearance of differential risk where none actually exists. However, there was strong evidence that this was not what was happening in the AHA data. We reasoned that as the severity of child abuse increases, up to the extreme of lethal battering, it should be increasingly unequivocal, so distortions due to biased detection and reportage should diminish. But as we made our abuse criteria increasingly stringent and narrowed the sample down to the most unmistakable cases, the over-representation of stepfamilies did not diminish. Quite the contrary, in fact. By the time we had reduced the cases under consideration from the full file of 87,789 validated maltreatment reports to the 279 fatal child-abuse cases, the estimated rates in step-parent-plus-genetic-parent households had grown to approximately *one hundred times* greater than in two-genetic-parent households.

There could be no doubt that the excess risk in stepfamilies was both genuine and huge. But whether it really had anything to do with step-relationship *per se* was not necessarily resolved. Perhaps living with a step-parent was associated with some other factor of more direct relevance.

One obvious candidate for such a ‘confounding’ factor is poverty. If step-parenthood is especially prevalent among the poor (which seemed plausible since marital stability was known to be correlated with income) and if the poor also have high rates of detected child abuse (which they do), then differentials of the sort we had observed might be expected even if step-parent and genetic-parent

homes were identically risky within any particular income level. But this initially plausible hypothesis was rejected, for it turned out that the distribution of family incomes in step-parent homes in the United States was virtually identical to that in two-genetic-parent homes. Low-income families were indeed over-represented in the AHA dataset, but the association between abuse and poverty was independent of (was ‘orthogonal’ to) the association between abuse and step-relationship.

Further research in Canada

We published our US results in a brief journal article in 1980 and, in greater detail in 1981, and we turned our attentions elsewhere. But we were never entirely happy with our initial study, for several reasons. The population-at-large estimates were questionable; the ‘abuse’ criteria were not necessarily consistent from state to state; and the data were inadequate for testing additional ‘confound’ hypotheses other than poverty. So a few years later, having moved back home to Canada, we decided to conduct a better controlled, smaller-scale, local study of the same issues.

The regional municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth, where we live, is the centre of Canada’s steel industry and home to almost half-a-million souls. The local child-protection agencies provided us with information about all cases severe enough to have warranted filing a report with the provincial child-abuse registry, and we surveyed the relevant population-at-large ourselves. About one in

every 3,000 Hamilton pre-schoolers residing with both genetic parents was reported to the Ontario child-abuse registry in 1983. The corresponding rate for those living with a step-parent plus a genetic parent was about one in seventy-five, hence forty times greater. This odds ratio was smaller than that which we had found for lethal abuse in the United States, but larger than that for all child abuse, perhaps because the case criterion in our Hamilton study was of intermediate severity.

The odds ratio of abuse risk in Hamilton stepfamilies versus genetic-parent families was substantial for children of all ages, but it declined steadily from forty for pre-schoolers to about ten for teenaged victims. A similar trend had also been apparent in our US study, and we saw an important implication. Most of those who had written on stepfamily conflicts apparently believed that the problems are primarily created by obstreperous adolescents rejecting their custodial parents' new mates; but this could hardly be correct if the elevation of risk from step-parents was maximal for infants. Our hypothesis that the more basic problem is the adult's resentment of pseudo-parental obligation fits the facts much better.

Another consistent result from both studies was that excess risk in stepfamilies spanned the gamut of 'abuse' from baby batterings to sexual molestation of older children. This also reinforced our conviction that we were looking at what might be called a 'reverse assay' of parental love. A paucity of heartfelt, individualized concern for the welfare of a child in one's care would seem likely to raise the incidence of any sort of misuse.

Still another consistent result was that step-parent-hood's impact was statistically independent of poverty's additional effects. Family size, which we had not been able to assess in the US study, proved to be another independent risk factor. Maternal youth was yet another. Evolutionary theories of maternal investment had suggested to us that older mothers might be more selfless than younger. As menopause approaches, investing in the children you already have has less and less negative impact on your expected future reproduction. Evolved maternal psychologies might be expected to reflect this reliable feature of women's life histories. We therefore anticipated that abuse risk would decline steadily as a function of the mother's age at the child's birth, and this expectation was upheld. All in all, although several additional risk factors were identified, step-parent-hood held its place as the most important predictor, and its influence was scarcely diminished when the statistical impacts of all the other risk factors were controlled.

It warrants repeating that even severe child abuse is vulnerable to detection biases, but that these biases presumably shrink as the case criterion becomes more extreme. At the limit, we can be reasonably confident that child murders are usually detected and recorded. Admittedly, some failures to help a newborn live may escape detection and some deliberate smotherings may be successfully disguised as 'sudden infant deaths', but there is no reason to suppose that these are numerous, and in any event, the brutal assaultive homicides that are motivated by rage or hatred cannot be disguised in this

way. So after completing our study of registered child-abuse cases in Hamilton, we undertook analyses of homicides, using an official government archive containing data on all homicides known to Canadian police departments. Once again, just as we had found in the United States, the over-representation of step-parents as perpetrators of child murder in Canada proved to be even more extreme than their over-representation as perpetrators of nonlethal child abuse. As we reported in an article in *Science* in 1988, a co-residing step-parent was approximately seventy times more likely to kill a child under two years of age than was a co-residing genetic parent, and this odds ratio was still about fifteen for teenage victims.

The emerging cross-national evidence

We now know that the story in Great Britain is much the same as in North America: step-parents are hugely over-represented as perpetrators of registered child abuse and even more hugely as child murderers. According to a report produced by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, entitled *Child Abuse Trends in England & Wales 1983-1987*, thirty-two per cent of the 4,037 nationally registered victims of intentionally inflicted physical injuries in that five-year period lived with one natural parent and one substitute parent, whereas a random sample of children with the same age distribution from the population-at-large would have yielded only three per cent. Unlike the situation in

North America, stepfamilies in the United Kingdom tend to have slightly lower incomes than two-genetic-parent families, so that the excess of step-parents may in this case be partly an artifact of economic differences. However, when family income was controlled, children in stepfamilies remained nineteen times more likely to be registered as victims of non-accidental physical injuries inflicted by caretakers than were children from two-genetic-parent homes.

As for child murder, there was one relevant report dating from before we began our own research. In 1973, forensic psychiatrist P. D. Scott had summarized information on a sample of 'fatal battered-baby cases' perpetrated in anger by British men *in loco parentis*, and despite the fact that the victims averaged just fifteen months of age, fifteen of the twenty-nine killers – fifty-two per cent – were stepfathers. Scott did not attempt to convert these numbers to rates or odds ratios, but relevant population-at-large information can now be derived from a major study of a cohort born in 1970, and it turns out that fewer than one per cent of a sample of children with the same age distribution as the fatally battered babies would be expected to have had a stepfather. In this case, the odds ratio for this particular kind of lethal assault by stepfathers versus genetic fathers was approximately 150.

It seemed likely, both from the evidence of these baby batterings and from our evolution-minded hypothesis about step-parental reluctance and resentment, that excess risk from step-parents might be especially severe

with regard to angry outbursts. Little children *are* annoying, after all: they cry and soil themselves and sometimes refuse to be consoled. A caretaker with a heartfelt, individualized love for a squalling baby is motivated to tenderly alleviate its distress, but a caretaker who is simply playing the part without emotional commitment – and who might even prefer that the child had never been born – is apt to respond rather differently.

Filicides by genetic parents certainly occur. In absolute numbers, they actually exceed the cases perpetrated by step-parents, although the latter occur at much higher per capita rates. But the cases are not similar. The Home Office maintains a case-by-case data archive on homicides in England and Wales, similar to the Canadian archive mentioned above. Although the information in these archives is sparse, consisting solely of numerical codings of a number of standard variables, it still proves revealing as regards the characteristics of killings by genetic *versus* step-parents. Confining our inquiry to cases in which the victims were less than five years of age, in order to exclude all possibility of mutual combat or self-defence on the killer's part, we find a similar pattern in both countries: about eighty per cent of homicidal stepfathers are found to have battered, kicked or bludgeoned their victims to death, whereas the majority of those who killed their genetic offspring did so by less assaultive means. Moreover, in the course of seventeen years of Canadian data and fourteen years of British data, seventy-three of the 390 men who killed their own children did so in the context of a successfully

completed suicide, compared to just three of the 197 who killed stepchildren. There is also evidence that diagnosed psychiatric conditions are prevalent among those who kill their genetic children, but not among those who kill stepchildren. In summary, filicidal genetic parents of both sexes are often deeply depressed, are likely to kill the children while they sleep, and may even construe murder-suicide as a humane act of rescue from a cruel world, whereas homicidal step-parents are seldom suicidal and typically manifest their antipathy to their victims in the relative brutality of their lethal acts.

In recent years, diverse strands of evidence from a variety of countries have shown that step-parental mistreatment of children is widespread. In New South Wales, Australia, for example, stepfathers have been found to be even more extremely over-represented as the perpetrators of baby batterings than in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. In Finland, a 1996 report of a questionnaire study of 9,000 fifteen-year-olds indicated that 3.7 per cent of girls currently living with a stepfather claimed that he had abused them sexually, compared to 0.2 per cent of those living with their genetic fathers. (The only case of 'mother-son' sexual contact in this study, incidentally, involved a fifteen-year-old boy and his twenty-six-year-old stepmother; in contrast to the girls, all of whom found sexual contact with stepfathers or fathers aversive, 'the boy described the experience as positive'.) Korean schoolchildren living with either a stepfather or a stepmother claim to be beaten at very much higher rates than their two-genetic-

parent classmates. Recent studies in Hong Kong, Nigeria, Japan and Trinidad paint similar pictures.

It has also become clear that the hazards associated with being a stepchild are not a novel product of the modern age. Using historical archives from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the German anthropologist Eckart Voland has shown that Cinderella stories were more than mere fairy tales for European peasants. Voland found that the age-specific mortality of pre-modern Friesian children was elevated in the aftermath of the death of either parent and, more tellingly, that the risk of death was further elevated if the surviving parent remarried.

In the face-to-face societies of our ancestors, powerful central authority and social services beyond kin assistance were non-existent, and the situation for stepchildren was probably even worse than in peasant societies. According to one study of contemporary South American hunter-gatherers, the Ache of Paraguay, forty-three per cent of children brought up by a mother and stepfather died before their fifteenth birthdays, compared to nineteen per cent of those brought up by two genetic parents; apparently, deaths by assault and deaths due to deprivation of adequate care were both elevated. Hunter-gatherer societies provide our best model of the social circumstances in which the human animal evolved and to which our psyches are adapted. We hypothesize that it has been a general feature of such societies that stepchildren are variously disadvantaged – as they are among the Ache – and we know of no contrary evidence.