

Step-parental investment in what?

By now, you may be thinking that the puzzle is not why step-relationships are difficult, but why they usually work out reasonably well. Why do they even exist?

The theories and evidence that we have reviewed can easily be read as implying that natural selection should have equipped any parentally investing creature with psychological defences against becoming an investing step-parent. Indeed, this was essentially the logic that motivated Harry Power's mountain-bluebird study, described near the outset of Chapter 3, and the results largely supported his prediction that replacement mates

would not help rear their predecessors' young. However, this result is by no means universal. In fact, there was already quite a lot of evidence contrary to Power's prediction long before he ever conducted his research, as ornithologist Sievert Rohwer has pointed out.

If a peregrine falcon of either sex loses its mate while young are still dependent, a replacement mate is likely to appear quickly, and it will routinely behave in a fashion that looks just like the efforts of a genetic parent. Many other bird species do likewise. However, there are other birds that typically behave as Power reported, ignoring the young in the nest, and there are still others that kill them. What explains the differences? Rohwer suggested that the particular ecological and social circumstances of different species determine the costs and benefits of the alternatives and hence which evolves to be typical in any given case. In certain contexts – such as in populations in which parents routinely divorce and disperse after nesting failures (as many do), or when re-nesting within the same season is impossible anyway – infanticide will not help the killer re-nest sooner, and is therefore of little or no use; so ignoring or adopting young may then be favoured. Where selection appears to have favoured adopting one's predecessor's young as one's own is where breeding territories or mates are scarce, and are retained for a long time once they have been acquired. In these circumstances, step-parental investment is evidently the price paid for future breeding opportunities with the genetic parent. What has yet to be investigated is whether peregrines and other step-

parenting birds still exhibit something less than a genetic parent's commitment, as they might be shown to do in a context such as defending the young against a predator who also represents a threat to the parent's own life.

Essentially the same argument has been invoked to explain observations of step-parental investment in other animals besides birds. In the tiny anemone fish, for example, suitable breeding sites are scarce and un-mated adults of both sexes are numerous, so if one member of a monogamous pair loses its mate, a new suitor finds step-parenting an acceptable courtship expense. Male baboons are sometimes solicitous towards particular infants that they could not possibly have sired, and this behaviour, too, has been interpreted as courtship effort, with the payoff coming in the form of an increased chance to sire the mother's next baby.

The human case seems to us analogous. Step-parents are primarily replacement mates, and only secondarily replacement parents. They assume their pseudo-parental obligations in the context of a web of reciprocities with the genetic parent, who is likely to recognize more or less explicitly that the new mate's tolerance and investment constitute benefits bestowed on the genetic parent and the child, entitling the step-parent to reciprocal considerations. And once having opted in to this situation, why shouldn't a reasonably well-appreciated step-parent be kindly, and even affectionate? After all, violent hostility is episodic and amicableness is frequent even among non-relatives. People thrive by the maintenance of networks of reciprocity and by establishing reputations

that will make them attractive exchange partners, with the result that the desire to be generous and humane, and to be seen as generous and humane, is as human and as functional as more conflictual motives. There is thus no great conundrum in the fact that people treat their stepchildren for the most part quite tolerantly, nor even in their accepting some share of the costs of raising those children. But the fact of such investment cannot be taken to imply that step-parents will often come to feel the same sort of love and commitment as is ordinarily felt by genetic parents.