Book Review


In the United States, almost half of marriages end in divorce or separation and although remarriages frequently occur the failure rate exceeds that of first marriages. Remarriages that result in a stepparenting situation are accompanied by complex challenges and are often perceived as more challenging than biological childrearing. This book presents a psychoanalytic perspective on stepparenting, beginning with an introduction by Moisy Shopper on the many varieties of stepfathers and stepfather experiences. It is then divided into five main parts that include chapters by invited authors who often utilize clinical examples to illustrate theories and concepts by portraying experiences of children, biological parents, and stepparents.

In Part I (Developmental Considerations), Lora Tessman first discusses the meaning of stepfathers and then describes and presents clinical examples of five special components of the stepfathering process, such as helping the child to grieve and being available as a new identification figure for the child. Eugenio Rothe discusses factors likely to influence the relationship between the stepfather and stepson, such as the stepfather’s level of maturity, the mother, and the biological father. Rothe outlines several contributions of the stepfather to the psychological development of the stepson and uses case material to illustrate the role of the stepfather as a potential intruder or redeemer in the life of the stepson.

Steven Nickman describes various challenges to the ability of adoptive and stepparents to maintain emotional equilibrium. He gives examples of stressful aspects of both situations and the difficulties substitute parents encounter in tolerating painfully strong affect, primarily anxiety and depression. Ira Brenner expands on the complex relationships between the stepfather and his stepchildren. The stepfather often searches for legitimacy as a result of the vagueness and uncertainty of his position, often relating to the imbalance between responsibility and authority. Brenner suggests that this complex theme of legitimacy often gets overlooked in treatment and is an untapped opportunity. Brenda Solomon presents her personal story of gaining a middle-aged stepmom as a late adolescent and describes unique tensions and challenges in this situation. She uses personal examples and relevant
theories to comment on the interplay between the psychological development of late adolescence and the psychological disturbance of stepparents.

In another contribution to the book, Eugenio Rothe focuses on the psychological states of biological fathers after divorce and discusses sources of shame for the father as well as some immature defenses against shame. He presents case material to illustrate the origins, psychodynamic theories, treatment, and recovery from shame in a divorcing father. Gunther Perdigao addresses some of the challenges, conflicts, and emotional rewards a stepfather experiences when he joins a new but established family’s life. He describes how the new relationship may be divided into three phases: courtship, early marital, and long-term marital. He also describes some reactions of the child to a new stepfather and of the stepfather to the children.

In Part II (Clinical Dimensions), Robert Galatzer-Levy presents three case vignettes that briefly describe analytic experiences with three adolescent boys for whom stepfathers played a central developmental role. These vignettes suggest that the development of some children may be facilitated and enriched through experiences with the stepfather. Martin Silverman discusses and presents case histories of the stepdaughter-stepfather relationship, the problems and challenges they often face that affect the success of the relationship, and possible sources of these problems and challenges. Silverman emphasizes the need to delve into the psychology of loss and abandonment and to consider the psychology of adoption in order to better understand these problems between stepchildren and stepparents.

Jerome Blackman describes some dynamics that complicate or disturb new marital relationships where only one spouse previously had children. Blackman discusses the interpersonal and intrapsychic conflicts each spouse experiences, sources of these conflicts, and factors that affect the harmony of the relationship. Henry Friedman and Jamie Feldman address the factors that often interrupt a smooth transition and experience of stepfatherhood and the role of parental character problems on the formation of a stepparenting relationship. These authors primarily focus on naiveté as an important character trait and the potential damaging effects when either the stepfather or both parents bring naive expectations to the situation. They emphasize the critical role of maturity in the stepparent for contributing to success and the need for psychotherapists to be aware of this role.

In Part III (Incest), Moisy Shopper defines incest, emphasizes the complexities associated with the lack of a uniform definition of incest across the world, and discusses how laws, clergy, and culture have participated in creating the conditions that currently exist. Shopper discusses the most common situation of stepfather-stepdaughter incest and several contributing factors, and briefly mentions stepsibling incest and the relatively rare stepmother-stepson incest. Stanley Cath describes the psychological profile of tweens (i.e., 10–12 year-olds), discusses the complex concept of “reluctant but necessary rape,” and utilizes a clinical example involving incest between a tween and her older stepbrother to illustrate this concept. Cath