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**'IN THE DARK'**  
**VOICES OF PARENTS IN**  
**MARGINALISED STEPFAMILIES:**  
**PERCEPTIONS**  
**AND**  
**EXPERIENCES OF THEIR**  
**PARENTING SUPPORT NEEDS**

ANN DAY

PhD

2011

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AND  
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PARENTING SUPPORT NEEDS**

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the requirements of the  
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## ABSTRACT

The fastest growing family type in the UK is the stepfamily with social parenting an increasingly normal practice. Parenting policy and practice, which has increased exponentially over the last two decades, has historically been modelled on the biological nuclear family model with marginalised families the main recipients. The possibility that parents in marginalised stepfamilies might have separate and discrete parenting support needs to biological parents seems to be overlooked in policy, practice and research. Rather, the historical legacy of deficit, dysfunction and a 'whiff' of poor parenting in marginalised stepfamilies lingers on. The focus of the research was to determine marginalised parents' perceptions and experiences of parenting in their stepfamily and their parenting support needs.

An interpretivist research paradigm with an inductive research strategy was utilised, based on a situated methodology, which was a pragmatic approach to gathering a sample of marginalised parents, who are often difficult to access. Theoretical sampling elicited fifteen parents from ten couples. The choice of loosely structured in-depth interviews enabled previously silent voices to be heard.

Thematic analysis of the data revealed accounts that were interwoven throughout with strong moral undertones which seemed to categorise their lives. The parenting issues were different and more complex than those they had encountered before. The parents adopted biological family identities, but these didn't fit with their social roles and often rendered them powerless in their relationships with stepchildren. This appeared to have a cumulative effect which impacted on the already fragile couple relationship.

Despite the parents easy articulation of the parenting issues there was a contrasting unease and ambivalence in discussing parenting support needs. Parenting support seemed to be an irrelevance that could be disregarded. Ultimately the moral significance of the parents marginalised class positions

appeared to be central to their lives, which has important implications for policy and practice.

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And finally to John who was with me every step of the way – I owe you so much, thank you.

## DECLARATION

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the School Ethics Committee / University Ethics Committee / Gateshead and South Tyneside Ethics Committee.

Name: Ann Day

Signature:

Date: 11<sup>th</sup> February 2013

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction and overview of the study	1
1.2 New families?	2
1.3 Marginalisation	5
Class	8
1.4 New nannies?	11
The behavioural approach or 'parent training'	13
The relationship approach	14
Defining parenting support	14
Parenting support: the reality	16
1.5 New ways?	19
1.6 New study	20
1.7 The pre-context of the study: positioning of self	21
1.8 New beginnings	21
1.9 The purpose of the research	24
1.10 Conclusion	24
1.11 Architecture of the thesis	25
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>RESEARCH DESIGN</b>	<b>28</b>
2.1 Introduction	28
2.2 The research problem: 'the intellectual puzzle'	29
Personal issues	30
Researcher stance: reflexivity	31
2.3 The research question	32
2.4 Research purposes	33
2.5 Research strategy and justification	33



<b>2.6 Ontological and epistemological considerations</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>2.7 Research paradigm / methodology: interpretivism</b>	<b>37</b>
Qualitative research practice: ‘a situated methodology’	41
<b>2.8 Data sources: method and approach</b>	<b>43</b>
a) Library study	43
b) Practice focused empirical study: qualitative interviewing and ethical considerations	44
Reciprocity	46
<b>2.9 Sample and recruitment</b>	<b>48</b>
Realities and Challenges	49
Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria	50
Complex stepfamilies	52
Parents	53
Children	53
Family composition	59
<b>2.10 Genograms and pen pictures of the stepfamilies</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>2.11 DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS</b>	<b>71</b>
Processes, procedures and influences on data collection	71
Children	73
Single and couple interviews	74
<b>2.13 Tensions</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>2.14 Respondent validation</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>2.15 Post interview</b>	<b>81</b>
Transcriptions	82
<b>2.16 Data analysis: analytic considerations and process</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>2.17 The issues of validity, reliability and generalisability</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>2.18 Conclusion</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW: A GENEALOGICAL PERSPECTIVE</b>	<b>94</b>

<b>3.1 Introduction</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>3.2 Pre-industrial revolution: familism</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>3.3 The 1780s to WW1: moralism and maternalism</b>	<b>97</b>
Public versus private spheres	98
Philanthropy and paternalism	99
Infant mortality	101
Suppressing revolution	102
<b>3.4 WWI to WWII: minds and bodies</b>	<b>102</b>
Patriarchy	102
Power and professionalism	104
<b>3.5 WWII to 1960s: the golden age of the family?</b>	<b>105</b>
‘Happy families’?	106
Parenting experts?	107
<b>3.6 The 1960s: uncoupling of sex and marriage</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>3.7 The 1970s to mid 1990s: the age of individualism</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>3.8 New directions: visible stepfamilies?</b>	<b>111</b>
The stepfamily taxonomy (Coleman and Ganong 1991)	111
Deficit comparison	111
Embracing complexity	112
Stress hypothesis	113
Socialization hypothesis	113
Biological discrimination hypothesis	115
Incomplete institution hypothesis	116
<b>3.9 Policy responses</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>3.10 Governmentality: problem families and parenting support needs</b>	<b>121</b>
Tensions	122
<b>3.11 Conclusion</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction: the age of evidence</b>	<b>125</b>

<b>4.2 Mid 1990s to present: social inclusion, social cohesion and communitarianism</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>4.3 Understanding contemporary relationships</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>4.4 Understanding contemporary families: the positive spin</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>4.5 Understanding contemporary families: the negative spin</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>4.6 Family practices and doing the proper thing</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>4.7 Understanding family change: life in stepfamilies</b>	<b>134</b>
<b>4.8 Parenting issues: the case for children</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>4.9 Psychological influences</b>	<b>138</b>
Type of stepfamily	138
Parental mental health problems	138
Parental life course patterns	139
Multiple family transitions	139
<b>4.10 Parent-child relationships</b>	<b>141</b>
Parenting styles	142
<b>4.11 Couple relationships</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>4.12 Sociological influences</b>	<b>144</b>
Parenting post separation / divorce	145
Co-parenting	146
Custodial parenting	146
Solo parenting	146
<b>4.13 Parenting in stepfamilies: 21<sup>st</sup> century reality</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>4.14 Policy and practice: the justification for parenting support</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>4.15 Parenting support versus parenting control: paradoxes and polarised policies</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>4.16 Marginalised parents and parenting support</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>4.17 Marginalised parents' views and parenting support</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>4.18 Policy tensions</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>4.19 Parenting support practice: theorisation and evidence</b>	<b>158</b>
Empirical research: the reality	159
Every parent matters?	161

<b>4.20 Progress?</b>	<b>162</b>
Strategic factors of what works	162
Aspects of delivery that work	163
Parents' views on a quality parenting support service	163
<b>4.21 Assessing parenting support need</b>	<b>164</b>
Parenting support assessment principles	168
<b>4.22 Conclusion</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	<b>174</b>
<hr/>	
<b>THE HURDLES: PARENTING ISSUES AND PRACTICES</b>	<b>174</b>
<hr/>	
<b>[UN]CLEAR FAMILIES, [UN]CLEAR ROLES</b>	<b>174</b>
<hr/>	
<b>5.1 Introduction</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>5.2 Transitions and adjustments: old histories versus new histories</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>5.3 Parenting styles</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>5.4 Coping</b>	<b>184</b>
Managing	184
Maladjustment	185
Medicalisation	187
Struggling	188
<b>5.5 [UN]CLEAR FAMILIES, [UN]CLEAR ROLES</b>	<b>189</b>
Introduction	189
<b>5.6 Gendered parenting roles and identities</b>	<b>191</b>
Mothering: responsibility versus powerlessness	193
Fathering: responsibility versus powerlessness	196
Abdication or responsibility?	200
Normalised adaptation to stepfamily identities	202
'Pathologised' adaptation to stepfamily identities	204
<b>5.7 Respectability: adopting a Foucaultian explanation</b>	<b>208</b>
Hierarchical observation or a 'disciplinary gaze'	208
Normalizing judgements	209

The examination or 'clinical gaze'.	210
<b>5.8 Understanding respectability</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>5.9 Conclusion</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	<b>216</b>
<hr/>	
<b>FRAGILE RESILIENCIES</b>	<b>216</b>
<hr/>	
<b>SILENT VOICES</b>	<b>216</b>
<hr/>	
<b>6.1 Introduction</b>	<b>216</b>
<b>6.2 Growing up in a stepfamily</b>	<b>216</b>
<b>6.3 Experience as a stepparent</b>	<b>219</b>
<b>6.4 Complexity of parents' relationship histories</b>	<b>221</b>
<b>6.5 The couple relationship</b>	<b>223</b>
Pulling apart and working together	225
<b>6.6 The juxtaposition of the stepmother and couple relationship</b>	<b>228</b>
<b>6.7 SILENT VOICES</b>	<b>236</b>
Introduction	236
<b>6.8 Internal couple dynamics and resources</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>6.9 Silent voices: stories lived and stories told</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>6.10 Conclusion</b>	<b>256</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7</b>	<b>257</b>
<hr/>	
<b>INTIMATIONS OF [IM]MORALITY</b>	<b>257</b>
<hr/>	
<b>PARENTING SUPPORT NEEDS</b>	<b>257</b>
<hr/>	
<b>7.1 Introduction</b>	<b>257</b>
<b>7.2 Creating moral reputations</b>	<b>257</b>
External influences: societal, institutional and legal	259
Media and myth	262
The inverse Cinderella law	264
<b>7.3 Creating immoral others</b>	<b>265</b>

Demonisation	268
<b>7.4 Caring and gendered moral rationalities</b>	<b>271</b>
<b>7.5 ‘IN THE DARK’: PARENTING SUPPORT NEEDS</b>	<b>277</b>
<b>7.6 Professional support</b>	<b>279</b>
<b>7.7 Non-professional support</b>	<b>285</b>
<b>7.8 Unpacking the puzzle</b>	<b>289</b>
Managing	289
Resistance to parenting support	290
<b>7.9 Class is dead?</b>	<b>292</b>
Emotional capital	296
<b>7.10 Conclusion</b>	<b>298</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8</b>	<b>300</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>300</b>
<b>8.1 Introduction</b>	<b>300</b>
<b>8.2 Reality check</b>	<b>301</b>
<b>8.3 Reframing the approach: implications for policy and practice</b>	<b>307</b>
Policy	308
Practice	310
Parents	312
Research	313
<b>8.4 Conclusion: coming full circle</b>	<b>314</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>317</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>348</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1: Participant information sheet</b>	<b>348</b>
<b>APPENDIX 2: Presentations</b>	<b>352</b>
Presentation given at Northumbria University Public Health and Primary Care Research Network - April 2006	352
Presentation given to Doctoral Group – June 2004	356

## **LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1	Key inclusion and exclusion criteria	44
Table 2	Summary of participants present at each interview event	55
Table 3	Summary of parent characteristics	57
Table 4	Characteristics of children in stepfamilies	58
Table 5	A summary of the thematic structure of the data	88

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1:	Becci and Bill's family	61
Figure 2:	Yvonne and Gordon's family	62
Figure 3:	Kate and Tom's family	63
Figure 4:	Susie and Pete's family	64
Figure 5:	Patrick and Tracy's family	65
Figure 6:	Joanne and Alan's family	66
Figure 7:	Tina and Fred's family	67
Figure 8:	Barbara and Paul's family	68
Figure 9:	Lindy and Steve's family	69
Figure 10:	Leanne and Tim's family	70
Figure 11:	The LUUUUTT model	251

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Yvonne: To be honest with you, I don't think I could ever be in a relationship again where they have, like, sort of... as a stepfamily. It's put me off for life. Seriously, it has. Because of all the problems and all, you know... Like as I say, the reflection time. I can look back now and see exactly what should have been done. What should have happened. But at the time, you just don't know, you've got no idea. **You're in the dark.**  
[emphasis added] [Interview 2a:134-9]

### 1.1 Introduction and overview of the study

The title of the thesis emanates from Yvonne, one of the marginalised parents in the study whose voice draws attention to the fact that despite being a biological mother of three children, she was 'in the dark' about the differences and difficulties involved in parenting in a stepfamily and sadly her stepfamily 'fractured'. Yvonne's statement clearly demonstrates her confusion, frustration and resignation of the complexities of parenting in a stepfamily. The hegemonic model of the biological, nuclear family predominates and is central to both United Kingdom [UK] parenting policy and parenting support practice, with a tokenistic 'nod' to different family forms, particularly the stepfamily. In this study a different dimension to previous stepfamily and parenting support research is presented. Historically, marginalised stepfamilies have been presented as dysfunctional with a 'whiff' of poor parenting, immorality and selfishness on the part of the parents, with a central focus on the detrimental effects of separation / divorce for the children. Whilst parenting support may appear to be a new profession, government's interest particularly in marginalised families has been a long-standing policy objective. Over the last two decades there has been a significant increase in policy and literature examining the vulnerabilities, and latterly the resilience of children post separation. However, there has been a gap in policy and literature exploring the realities of the rapidly increasing numbers of 'reformed',



particularly marginalised families and the parents' perceptions and experiences of these events. The aim of this study is to expose the normal, but potentially different realities and complexities parents face when parenting in marginalised stepfamilies and to determine their parenting support needs. The intention is to reduce the present gap in the knowledge base of parenting support needs for marginalised stepfamilies, and to gain new perspectives in order to contribute to knowledge creation to inform not only practice and policy, but more importantly to enable marginalised stepfamilies to manage the sometimes troublesome yet dynamic issues.

## **1.2 New families?**

Broadly, over the last three decades there has been a steady decline in the traditional biological family and a simultaneous increase in the diversity of contemporary family formations in the UK, with lone, step, same sex, adopted and assisted families all contributing to social change. Stepfamilies are formed when an adult with a child [or children] lives in a partnership with someone who is not the parent of their child [or children] (Social Trends 40, 2010). Whilst stepfamilies might appear to be a new family form, the fact is they are as old as civilisation itself and as such it is surprising that despite being one of the fastest growing family forms there has been a paucity of literature on parenting in stepfamilies. It is difficult to be precise about the increase in stepfamilies prior to the 2001 census, as stepfamily statistics were not officially allowed until then (Office for National Statistics [ONS], Social Trends 38, 2005). Indeed the term 'stepfamily' was not included in the Oxford English Dictionary until 1995 (Ferri and Smith 1998). However, the following statistics enable some understanding of contemporary family composition in 2009 in the UK.

Family forms:

- Married couple families with dependent children 63% in 2009 (ONS Social Trends 40: 2010).
- Co-habiting couple families with dependent children 13% in 2009 (ONS Social Trends 40: 2010).

- Lone parents with dependent children 24% in 2009 (ONS Social Trends 40: 2010). Interestingly over the last ten years this figure has remained fairly static with a less than 1% point increase in the proportion of households headed by a lone parent (ONS Social Trends 39: 2009). Moreover, only 2% of lone mothers are aged under 20 (Ayles and Panades 2005).
- Stepfamilies with dependent children 10% in 2001 (ONS 2005) with the following composition:
  - Stepfamilies with natural mother and stepfather [86%]
  - Stepfamilies with natural father and stepmother [10%]
  - Stepfamilies with both parents having stepchild/ren [4%] (ONS 2007)
- Estimates suggest that approximately 30% of mothers will spend some time in a stepfamily before they are 45 (Ermisch and Francesconi 2000).
- Children living in stepfamilies due to parental separation are more likely to experience another transition (Dunn 2002).

Moreover, with increasing numbers of parents separating or divorcing and then re-partnering, stepfamily numbers in terms of remarriages account for 38% of all marriages (ONS 2010), and with cohabitation statistics approximate at 2.2m unmarried couples it is unclear how many are stepfamilies. Whilst estimates vary and contradictions are rife it has been suggested that 24 million people in the UK have a parenting role (Parentline Plus 2008) and that about 18 million people in the UK form part of a stepfamily, either direct involvement or quasi kin (Lloyd 1999). There were predictions that by the year 2010 there would be more stepfamilies than biological families (National Stepfamily Association 1999). Whilst this has not occurred, in 2004 the Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC] pointed out that the fastest growing family type was the stepfamily and highlighted that the growth of social parenting rather than biological parenting was a new phenomenon. The report also highlighted that there were more unhappy families with data from parents born in 1970 demonstrating that 1 in 5 men and 1 in 4 women

reported unhappy relationships compared with just 1 in 30 for parents born in 1958 (ESRC 2004).

Thus whilst statistical trends on family life are important and play a part in contextualising the issues, they do not reveal the invisibility of stepfamilies in UK parenting policy and practice, nor the daily realities and complexities of the changes that are occurring in family formation and function. Family organisation, living arrangements and personal relationships are all impacted on when stepfamilies form (Walker 1999:33), but there is little information about what actually happens and how the parents manage the issues, particularly the parenting issues. One of the few studies that explored parental roles and family life in stepfamilies in any depth was Ferri and Smith's (1998) study, which concluded that whilst there were many similarities with traditional biological families, there were also significant differences with a particular focus on economic difficulties and greater indicators of stress amongst parents. Parenting support in stepfamilies, particularly preparation for the challenges and difficulties at the formation stage of the stepfamily, was highlighted as an important area for development (Ferri and Smith 1998), but to date little appears to have been achieved.

The creation of a stepfamily artificially accelerates the family life cycle by 'telescoping' the stages of partnership formation and the arrival of children, demanding a number of challenging adjustments. Stepfamilies need to have multi-positional beliefs about living arrangements, greater skills in conflict management and negotiation, and the confidence to celebrate the diversity of family life (Gorrell-Barnes *et al* 1998). It is interesting to note that in the few studies that have investigated parenting in stepfamilies, that marginalised stepfamilies appear to organise their lives around a typical biological family model, whereas middle class stepfamilies appear to explore more progressive models (Burgoyne and Clarke 1984; Ferri and Smith 1998; Simpson 1998; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003). Whilst this might be explained in terms of different levels of confidence (Gorrell-Barnes *et al* 1998), there appears to be a normative uncertainty around the role of parenting in stepfamilies which is managed in different ways (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards

and Gillies 2003). Some early research on stepfamilies suggested that they lacked established rituals and rules for behaving and appeared to recreate what they had before as in a biological family, as it was simpler to deal with than the reality of stepfamily life (Goldner 1982). However, this retreat from complexity and ambiguity is rarely successful as the reality of stepfamily life often contradicts that of previous experience of biological family life. Stepfamilies have generally been described not only as more stressful, but also a less cohesive family type and more susceptible to breakdown compared to biological first-married families (Haskey 1996; Ferri and Smith 1998; Dunn 2002). The potential for fragmentation or 'fractured families' is high and is associated with economic hardship and poor outcomes for children particularly for lone parents and families who reconstitute (Social Justice Policy Group 2006:9). Thus a 'double whammy' presents itself for stepfamilies who are struggling with more complex parenting issues and are marginalised.

### **1.3 Marginalisation**

There has been a tendency by successive governments to interpret economic disadvantage in families and communities simplistically in terms of parents passing on inter-generational social exclusion to their children, rather than structural issues such as inequalities of unemployment, poor housing and neighbourhoods creating challenging circumstances for parents. However, attempting to understand marginalisation utilising a single benchmark of material / economic disadvantage is a common mistake often made by professionals and processes (Bourdieu 1999:4-5). Marginalisation is a nebulous concept and difficult to define in tangible terms, rather it has multi-faceted interpretations which contribute to a much wider understanding than mere economic disadvantage. Bourdieu's seminal work over several decades helps unpack the issues.

Bourdieu's explanations focus on key facets or 'capitals' which interlink (Bourdieu 1999:4-5), and unless people have access to these core 'capitals' – economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals, then disadvantage is not only

economic, but importantly affects all aspects of their lives (Reay 2004). Exploring the 'capitals' in turn aids an understanding of marginalisation. Firstly, economic capital, which comes from wages / salaries or inherited wealth, determines prosperity and security and is obviously often severely limited for marginalised groups (Reay 2004; Gillies 2007:36; Crompton 2008:100).

Secondly, social capital is based on social networks between individuals, families and communities and for those with socio-economic advantage aids progress through life. For example, parents building up relationships with people who might be able to help in terms of careers for their children. This 'bridging' social capital which enables the development of useful social networks over time, is obviously a challenge for marginalised groups as their access to the 'right' social networks is limited. As such, there appears to be a belief that social capital is poor or non-existent amongst marginalised groups. However, while their 'bridging' social capital might be limited, importantly their 'bonding' social capital provides the means 'to get by' (Kearns and Parkinson 2001). Short term 'bonding' social capital as in helping family and friends with child care or lending small amounts of money until pay / benefit day are examples of 'bonding' social capital amongst marginalised groups. However, the deficit in 'bridging' social capital hinders marginalised people's accessibility to good jobs, which in turn not only impacts on their social and economic capital, but also their accessibility to the correct cultural capital.

Cultural capital works in conjunction with the other capitals and cannot be understood in isolation from them (Reay 2004). Cultural capital consists of two strands, formal and informal (Gillies 2007:36). Formal cultural capital is largely gained through education and links closely with symbolic capital, the latter presenting in the form of having the correct symbols, for example qualifications, good jobs, the correct 'taste' and style (Gillies 2007:36). Moreover, symbolic capital includes individual prestige and personal qualities such as authority, charisma, respect and reputation (Bourdieu 1985), which is often overlooked when discussing marginalised groups as they are thought by some not to demonstrate the 'correct' symbols.

Informal cultural capital includes the intangible concept of intuitively knowing through one's 'habitus' what the valuable commodities are, as opposed to not valuable. 'Lived practice' (Gillies 2007:35) or 'a feel for the game' (Kirk 2006:4) are phrases that help grasp the importance of Bourdieu's 'habitus'. For example, early experiences have particular weight as children are socialised into the class they are born into and become habituated not only to their surroundings and the way of doing things, but also the way of being treated and so sensitive to feelings of superiority or inferiority, being treated with respect or not. Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) highlighted that different mothering practices were clearly evident amongst different classes and by four years old daughters were already demonstrating different understandings of work and gender. As informal cultural capital is primarily transmitted through the family (Crompton 2008), children thus adopt the thinking, understanding, meanings, values and qualities from their families and as such provide the link for class trajectory (Reay 2004). Therefore, in the case of marginalised children, this generally means the continuation of the inter-generational transmission of inequalities and inequities. Bourdieu focused on the centrality of the mother in this process:

It is because the cultural capital that is effectively transmitted within the family itself depends not only on the quantity of cultural capital, itself accumulated by spending time, that the domestic group possess, but also on the usable time (particularly in the form of the mother's free time) available to it.

(Bourdieu 1986:253)

The interconnection of Bourdieu's 'capitals' continues and particularly with his concepts of cultural and symbolic capital, aids understanding of why marginalised groups are viewed by some as not having the 'correct' symbolic capital. For example, marginalised people are often vilified for their 'conspicuous consumption' with mega large plasma TV screens. Similarly, Skeggs (2005:965) eloquent description of the plight of young working class 'hen-partying' women portrayed as 'loud, white, excessive, drunk, fat, vulgar, [and] disgusting', embodies all the historical moral obsessions associated with the working class having the wrong symbolic capital. This vilification of 'chavs' is easily passed off exemplifying a total lack of understanding of the

realities of the complex interconnectedness of social, psychological and emotional pressures of living marginalised lives.

As such, marginalised parents are often blamed for their situation with structural issues of marginalisation viewed as embedded in individuals' behaviours. Reasonable moral citizens and good middle class parents are juxtaposed to the marginalised, who are the antithesis and destined to reproduce their poverty through their own behaviour (Gillies 2005). The reality of 'class', despite it being a 'contested concept' (Sayer 2005b:19), begins to be seen and is nowhere more evident than within normative benchmarks in policy, practice and society.

## **Class**

While many politicians, media and academics avoid the term 'class' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it continues to be very much a pervasive element in UK society. Euphemisms abound to denote lower socio-economic groups, yet it is difficult to ignore the fact that class rather than the politically favoured concept of individualisation remains central to understandings of society.

A 'class is dead' theory has been a key focus of many politically influential commentators' offerings over the last two decades. Whilst Giddens (1991,1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) focused on the emergence of individualisation and the disappearance of class in academic discourse, others welcomed the apparent re-emergence of class (Skeggs 1997, 2004, 2005; Reay 1998; Lawler 2000, 2005; Gillies 2005, 2007). Savage (2005) suggested that there have been three phases exploring working class identities since the end of WWII. The last one, post Thatcher's classless society, began in the early 1990s and had two strands. One strand assessed contemporary class identity in order to explore debates about the end of class, with the new categories of gender, race, age, sexuality and nationalism thought to have replaced classed identities (Savage 2005). The other strand focused on the emphasis on individualisation making class harder to see, but no less present (Lawler 2005), and consequently there has

been a revival of class particularly by feminist researchers as an important element in research on family and community (Savage 2005).

Beginning with the class is dead theory due to the individualisation thesis offers an interesting insight. While class was thought to have lost its importance as a central discourse, class divisions and inequality remained persistent. The individualisation group of commentators argued that although class continued as a classification, it was a 'zombie categor(y)', 'dead but still alive' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:203). Individualisation, choice and reflexivity made old traditional class structures defunct and no longer relevant in contemporary life (Giddens 1991,1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; 2002).

Individualisation is a concept which describes a structural, sociological transformation of social institutions and the relationship of the individual to society...freeing people from historically inscribed roles... Individualisation liberates people from traditional roles and constraints ... individuals are removed from status-based classes ... Social classes have been detraditionalised.

(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:202)

As individualisation depended on reflexivity, finding oneself and embarking on new ways of living, new self-identities could be reflexively created by individuals themselves, rather than relying on class and other group identities.

Individualisation means, first, the disembedding of the ways of life of industrial society (class, stratum, gender role, family), and second, the re-embedding of new ones, in which individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves.

(Beck 1998:33)

However, marginalised parents could not simply choose to become empowered through education, employment and self-actualisation as they did not have access to the necessary capitals and resources. Moreover, new settings and situations can cause individuals to feel uncomfortable and out of place. So, for example individuals from different classes who are brought together who otherwise would have nothing in common, co-exist but with often competing and conflicting views, which exacerbates the 'positional



suffering' or social suffering of marginalised people (Bourdieu 1999:3), as it emphasises the huge inequities between the advantaged classes and the disadvantaged (Crompton 2008:101). These inequities represent the 'struggles of the field', as they relate to:

structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analysed independently of the characteristics of their occupants  
(Bourdieu 1993:72).

Skeggs (1997:163) suggested that to be an individual is the result of privilege, yet those individuals and families who did not become responsible risk takers and embrace individualisation within the 'risk society' (Giddens 1998) and take up 'risky opportunities' (Beck 1992), could be held responsible for transmitting inequality and poverty through the generations. Class was seen as an irrelevance, rather than an outcome for families enmeshed in the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage and class processes. Key defining historical facts are often overlooked by policy, practice, media and society in their rush to malign marginalised groups. During the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, changes in the global economy decimated traditional heavy industries, which in the north east of England (the focus of my study) centred on shipbuilding and coal mining. Together with increasingly unstable labour markets, unemployment and disadvantage continued to take their toll on traditional working class communities in the area, with many experiencing second and third generation worklessness. However, despite these massive structural deficits, a particular feature of the biographies of north east marginalised families has remained the importance of kinship networks and identities (Mitchell and Green 2002).

This is the very antithesis to anti-class theory:

It is very difficult to work in a rich empirical way with class categories. You can only develop them on an objective income basis, or on structures of work and employment. You cannot relate them to how people live and think, eat, how they dress, love, organise their lives and so on. If you are interested in what is going

on in people's minds, and the kinds of lives they are leading, you have to get away from the old categories.

(Beck 2000:43)

As such, adopting myopic measures to assess 'marginalised' groups in terms of solely economic disadvantage, prevents a real understanding of the daily lived realities of 'la petite misère' or marginalised people who are the focus of my study, rather than 'la grande misère' who are those living in abject poverty (Bourdieu *et al* 1999:4-5). However, whilst many marginalised [step]families appear to be resilient and manage the challenges, they may be viewed as needing help and support 'in the difficult job of parenting' in order to prevent 'risks of family breakdown' (Home Office 1998:31).

#### **1.4 New nannies?**

All parents should receive support at certain points, and at key transitions such as birth and the first year of a child's life, with the greatest level of support and intervention for those who need it most, for example families living in challenging circumstances; and prevention: supporting parents from the start to reinforce positive parenting styles and early learning that underpin good outcomes for children.

(HM Treasury, DfES 2005:22)

From 1997 onwards under the advent of the New Labour government the private sphere of parenting increasingly came under the spotlight of public scrutiny. It was a central remit of Government to reduce inter-generational social exclusion amongst parents through parenting support. Parenting support was not new. The early incarnation of parenting support was known as parenting *education* and support, with the term 'education' interpreted as 'learning in the fullest sense, of growing in knowledge, skills, understanding and personal development' (Alexander 1997). Pugh, De'Ath and Smith (1994:66) were among the first to define parenting education and support:

A range of educational and supportive measures which help parents and prospective parents to understand their own social, emotional, psychological and physical needs and those of their children and enhances the relationship between them; and which

creates a supportive network of services within local communities and helps families to take advantage of them.  
(Pugh, De'Ath and Smith 1994:66)

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the term 'education' had disappeared. Scott (1998) made the important distinction between support for parents<sup>1</sup> and support for parenting<sup>2</sup> highlighting that it was the quality of the moment to moment parent behaviour that had a major influence on the child's wellbeing rather than their living conditions.

Behaviour modification techniques emerged in the 1960s and were seen to be effective in decreasing tantrums, self-destructive behaviour, oppositional behaviour, antisocial and immature behaviour (Barlow and Parsons 2002). Psychologists and psychiatrists were involved in one to one 'training' which demonstrated positive results in treating behavioural and emotional adjustment problems and also in preventing them (Barlow and Parsons 2002). By the 1970s it had been extended to group work (Rose 1974) and by the late 1980s / early 1990s group based parenting programmes facilitated by other parenting practitioners, became a routine way of working particularly for many health visitors.

However there were tensions as the behavioural approach was situated within a medicalised paradigm that framed parenting support as a clinical issue. Whilst this was appropriate for some families, the majority of families needed support and encouragement to feel confident in their own abilities, skills and resources, and at different times wanted ideas on how to manage a variety of diverse parenting and personal issues across the developmental spectrum. As a result, a diversity of provision emerged from a range of practitioners delivering parenting support which was developed from several theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> According to Scott (1998) support for parents could be defined as: supporting parents such as those living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, lone parents, those misusing drugs, those with learning disabilities and poor parents, as these issues made it harder to parent successfully.

<sup>2</sup> Support for parenting, that is if the above adversities are managed then parenting is adequate and support for parenting will be helpful.

bases (Einzig 1999:18). Behavioural, cognitive, Adlerian, psychodynamic, humanistic and attachment theory were amongst the theoretical underpinnings of parenting support (Smith 1996:15; Barlow 1998:94; Einzig 1999:18). Owing to this multi-dimensional base, the interventions and approaches of parenting support were not always easy to categorise (Smith 1996:6) and used without appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills could be maleficent. The position was compounded by the fact that the two main interventions, the behavioural approach, also known as 'parent training' and the relationship approach appeared to be at opposite ends of a continuum with a variety of others along the way.

### **The behavioural approach or 'parent training'**

One particular behavioural approach that was promoted widely in the UK was the American Webster-Stratton programme that demonstrated robust evaluation (Webster-Stratton and Taylor 1998, Scott 1998). This behavioural or social learning theory approach, emerged from a medical model and utilised behavioural modification approaches. Positioned at the prescriptive end of the continuum, with a base in cognitive behavioural therapy and Bavolek's (1990) work with 'dysfunctional' families (Lloyd 1999:17), it was targeted at parents and children who were seen to be high risk, such as parents with mental health problems and children with identified oppositional and conduct disorders or anti-social behaviour (Einzig 1999:22). The intended outcome of this approach was to change the child and parent's behaviour, with an emphasis on social learning techniques, including positive reinforcement, finding alternatives to punishment such as time out, loss of privileges, and the use of negotiation and contingency contracting (Barlow 1998:94). However, there was criticism of the behavioural approach as it could be used in abusive ways of control and rejection by parents who were unable to empathise with their children (Barlow and Stewart-Brown 2001). Moreover, children who conformed behaviourally might not be happy or healthy children (Barlow and Stewart-Brown 2001).

### **The relationship approach**

At the opposite end of the continuum was the relationship approach (Smith 1996:19), which contained an affective or 'feelings' element and encouraged parents to be sensitive and empathise with their children. It drew on an eclectic approach from the theories outlined above and focused on improving relationships with children through developing knowledge, understanding, skills attributes, self-awareness, increased self-confidence and self esteem, hopefully enabling parents to become more confident and competent (Smith 1996:6). The emphasis was on the process of warmth and support, rather than the product and was aimed at those parents and / or practitioners who were concerned, but without clinically defined problems.

However, whilst good enough parenting was generally viewed as realistic and attainable, rather than a perfect parent approach, there was criticism from some commentators who suggested that good enough parenting, with only good enough levels of discipline, expectation and responsiveness may only produce good enough children (Baumrind 1991,1993; Scarr 1993; Gutman, Brown and Akerman 2009). Furthermore, there were general concerns that parenting support across the board was utilising a generic, 'one size fits all approach', with neither the context of parenting taken into account, nor the temperament of the child (Utting 2008:13). Issues such as social, cultural, financial differences in parenting context needed to be considered (Einzig 1999). It is interesting to note that a 1994-95 survey of group based parenting programmes mostly facilitated by health visitors, psychologists, social workers and teachers, found that it was not 'dysfunctional' families from marginalised sections of the community that were accessing them, but the majority were accessed by middle class parents (Smith and Pugh 1996). Moreover, the latter viewed the practitioners as equals (Edwards, Ribbens, and Gillies 1999b).

### **Defining parenting support**

As such over the last twenty years, with so much variety of parenting support provision [and providers], there have been challenges in conceptualising and

defining parenting support. This has resulted in the broad nature of parenting support simplified by various experts within the parenting support domain thus:

Parenting support involves:

- supporting parents with effective parenting knowledge, understanding and skills which ultimately leads to beneficial outcomes for children
- positive parenting in the form of praise, encouragement, structured child-centred interaction associated with better physical and mental health with enhanced emotional, cognitive, social and behavioural functioning, which includes:
  - secure attachment
  - high self esteem, self efficacy and self worth
  - social and academic achievement with good socio-economic prospects
  - better family relationships

(Utting *et al* 1993; Audit Commission 1994; Pugh *et al* 1995; Utting 1995; Lloyd *et al* 1997; Ghate 2005; Barrett 2006; O'Connor and Scott 2007, Utting 2008).

The above aptly summarises the varied nature of parenting support and for the purposes of my study I have continued the broad, generic theme and adopted Utting's (2008) definition of parenting support:

Any activity or facility that provides parents and carers with information, advice or support in bringing up children and young people.

(Utting 2008:25)

Whilst there are multiple manifestations of parenting support for parents and families across the continuum of need it is not the purpose of my study to focus on parents with complex and multiple needs / clinically defined issues. Such parents undertake structured and intensive parenting support programmes based largely on the 'parent training' approach, for example Webster Stratton, Triple P, Parenting Positively, Strengthening Families, Family Intervention Projects and Family Nurse Partnership programmes to name but a few. Rather, my study is concerned with those parents who

access services, for example health visiting<sup>3</sup> / Sure Start services, for general advice and guidance which might include parenting support programmes based on the relationship approach, for example Positive Parenting, Fun and Families and the Solihull Approach.

### **Parenting support: the reality**

From 1997 a plethora of policy<sup>4</sup> focused on parenting support interconnected with a number of other policy strands with the intention of providing seamless support particularly for marginalised families (Henricson 2003). So, for example children in need, youth offending, public health, economic and employment policies were specifically targeted at marginalised groups in order to reduce inequalities, lift people out of ill health, poverty and social exclusion thereby reducing risk and enhancing protective resilience factors. Starting with the green paper 'Supporting Families' (Home Office 1998) the focus did not abate and continued gathering speed until the last New Labour green paper, 'Support for All' (Department of Children, Schools & Families (DCSF) 2010). Moreover, those not meeting 'their responsibilities' (HM Treasury, DfES 2005:3.4) were left in no doubt as to the flavour of conservative thinking:

... family life in Britain is changing such that adults and children today are increasingly faced with the challenges of dysfunctional, fractured or fatherless families. This is especially the case in the least advantaged sections of society but these trends also profoundly affect people across the socioeconomic spectrum.  
(Social Justice Policy Group 2006:9)

The proliferation of cross-departmental policies and monies under New Labour aimed not only to reduce poverty, but also to inculcate a desire for

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<sup>3</sup> Health visitors are qualified nurses and / or midwives who work within public health and primary care frameworks to assess the holistic needs, including parenting support needs, of families through partnership and collaboration. The practice context of the study generally, but not exclusively, focuses on health visiting due to the importance of their role historically and also due to my background in health visiting.

<sup>4</sup> (HM Treasury 2003, 2005, 2007; HM Government 2004; DH 2004a DfES /DH 2004, DfES 2006 DfES 2007 DfES 2008 Social Exclusion Task Force 2007, DH 2010)

education and other positive aspirations amongst marginalised families. Excellent parenting support initiatives such as Sure Start Children's Centres, Extended schools, The Family Nurse Partnership programme, Parents' Plans, Parenting and Children's Funds, the National Family and Parenting Institute [re-branded the Family and Parenting Institute], Parent Know-How with online and 'phone help-lines, the promotion of family friendly employment practices, working families' tax credits to name but a few emerged, provided by a myriad of multi-agency providers.

Not only did New Labour's record on supporting families appear to demonstrate a serious commitment to parenting support provision, but it also contributed to the 'professionalisation' of the parenting support 'industry'. Between 1995-2001 it was estimated that there was a 40% increase in parenting support services (Henricson *et al* 2001). A variety of practitioners emerged from health, social care, education, criminal justice, religious denominations, private and voluntary agencies (Pugh, De'Ath and Smith 1994; Smith 1996). Amongst practitioners who were hailed as parenting experts by New Labour, the Coalition Government [who succeeded New Labour in May 2010] and parenting support organisations were health visitors, who historically had provided a universal parenting support service available to all families. However, this service, under Government direction, has transmogrified over the years and the reality is now a targeted approach focusing on the marginalised, often socially excluded families and particularly the 'hard to reach' families who need more help. Meanwhile, higher socio-economic groups appear not to have intractable problems and for any parenting issues they may encounter supposedly have the education, ability / confidence and possibly finances to access various parenting support services, websites and help lines as and when required.

The Coalition Government in 2011 appear to be committed to parenting support with promises to maintain Sure Start Children's Centres, particularly for marginalised families with free 15 hours of nursery provision for two year olds from 2012-13 and new investment in 4,200 health visitors. However, with the Government's localism agenda the reality may be more problematic as



cash strapped local authorities with reduced budgets may have to make difficult decisions and reduce some aspects of parenting provision. Simultaneously, the Coalition Government appear to be continuing the New Labour approach of promoting the traditional married, biological family as the ideal family to bear the responsibility for bringing up children (Home Office 1998; DCSF 2010a). An allocation of £7.5 million per year between 2011-15 has been given for couple relationship support. Research evidence suggesting better physical, mental, educational and social outcomes for children brought up in biological families abounds (Utting, Bright and Henricson 1993; Utting 1995; Audit Commission 1994; Pugh, De'Ath and Smith 1996; Lloyd *et al* 1997; Morgan 1999). In contrast research evidence on stepfamilies has generally been focused on a child development perspective and has been problem oriented (Ferri and Smith 1998). Prominent in the literature is the focus on parental divorce or separation and the detrimental effects of this on the children's social, emotional and behavioural development (Wallerstein and Kelly 1980; Cockett and Tripp 1994; Utting 1995; Rodgers and Pryor 1998). Moreover, for 'broken' families who then go on to reconstitute there is a 'whiff' of 'demoralisation' (Gillies 2003) and a presumed 'parenting deficit' (Etzioni 1993:6). However, despite the deficit model, there has been an accumulating body of research demonstrating that the majority of children are resilient and cope reasonably well (Smart and Neale 1999; Smart, Neale and Wade 2001; Hetherington and Kelly 2002; Wade and Smart 2002).

Assumptions appear to have been made that marginalised families in different family forms need parenting support. The New Labour government's social exclusion agenda embraced not only the problem of welfare, but also social integration and moral regulation (Levitas 1998). Differences in terms of culture, ethnicity, gender and different family forms were barely addressed by parenting support initiatives set up to help families (Lloyd 1999:10; Henricson 2002; Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2003). It appears that a generic 'one size fits all' approach to parenting support was employed which may not be appropriate for all family types. Practitioners' effectiveness when working with stepfamilies may be compromised due to practice based on normative

dominant biological family stereotypical thinking, bias and myths (Jones 2003). Moreover, practitioners' assessments of 'good enough parenting' have been found to be based on a negative / 'pathologised' paradigm (Newman, Day and Warden 2005). Yet Ghate and Hazel's (2002:190) study of parenting in poor environments found that 46% of parents thought they were generally coping well, 52% were coping sometimes and sometimes not, 47% felt unsupported to some extent, 35% had never wished for support and only 2% reported hardly ever being able to cope. Consequently there is the potential for a lack of fit between the parenting support services provided and the actual parenting support needs of parents in marginalised stepfamilies who may have separate and discrete needs.

### **1.5 New ways?**

Despite an evolving evidence base in parenting support there are still areas that would benefit from further knowledge creation. One particular knowledge gap has been that of parents' views generally, but particularly with a dearth of voices from different family forms and different cultures. The ubiquitous presence of the biological British family is clearly evident. Despite the government's firm commitment to support parents and improve children's chances by reducing family breakdown and re-partnering, one important omission appears to be that of parents in marginalised stepfamilies on what they believe are their parenting support needs. In spite of some emergent understanding of parenting in stepfamilies from Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003), the majority of participants in their study were middle class with less than a third working class<sup>5</sup>. Consequently gaps still remain and it is my intention to build on extant theory and practice and focus on parents in marginalised stepfamilies within this study.

Furthermore, historically, research methodologies enabling parents' voices have struggled to gain credibility and generally been viewed as unscientific and usurped in favour of 'gold standard' approaches such as randomised

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<sup>5</sup> Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003) study focused on parents' and step-parents' perspectives of how they made sense of family and parenting in stepfamilies.

controlled trials [RCTs] and systematic reviews. Whilst there is no doubt that these approaches are generally empirically robust and have provided invaluable evidence (Barlow 1997; Barlow and Coren 2000; Barlow and Stewart-Brown 2001; Barlow and Parsons 2002; Newman, Day and Warden 2005; Katz *et al* 2007; Utting 2008), the voices of marginalised groups have rarely been heard. Consequently, although still a minority, there have been a growing number of studies that have departed from the normal approach (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003; Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe 2004; Barrett 2005; Ghate 2005), and given new insights into parents' views. For example, key points that have emerged are that: parents want parenting support to respect their expertise in their own lives and not to undermine their autonomy and to meet their own self defined needs, not what practitioners think they need or are able to provide (Ghate 2005).

## **1.6 New study**

The aim of this study is to add to the emerging new conceptual focus of different methodologies and methods based on qualitative approaches that will benefit the evidence base of parenting support. Understandings and experiences of parents in marginalised stepfamilies and more particularly their parenting support needs are clearly lacking in the literature thus necessitating new insights and generation of knowledge.

The focus of the study is two fold - to both review the literature and to elicit the voices of parents in marginalised stepfamilies in order to provide an account of their perceptions and experiences of their parenting support needs. The research design utilises an interpretivist approach which explores the lived realities of the parents in order to understand the meanings they ascribe to their lives in a stepfamily. The focus is on the everyday, ordinary private world of the marginalised stepfamily and more particularly the parents' world as it is contextualised against the backdrop of the very public world of parenting in contemporary society. The personal world of the family is an intimate institution with a language and discourse particular to that unit. In order to capture this and encourage a flow of conversation loosely structured,

in depth interviews with marginalised parents in ten stepfamilies were used to collect the data.

### **1.7 The pre-context of the study: positioning of self**

The genesis of the study emerged from the multi-dimensional influences of my personal and professional history, as a mother and later a stepmother, together with my professional background as a health visitor and later an academic. I, like Yvonne whose voice is heard in the title, felt I was 'in the dark', awash and at sea with a multitude of theory and practice of what works in a biological family, but with no knowledge of the different issues and solutions in a stepfamily. This is not a cathartic journey, but I need to lay bare my past history. Throughout I have used the first person as I cannot disregard my deep immersion and personal thoughts, feelings and emotions, '...the subjectivity of the researcher herself is part of research production' (Stanley 1987:56). For me the use of the third person suggests a formality, a holding back or suppression of one's 'self', almost a neutrality, which has the potential to impede reflexivity. This might be viewed by those with a more empiricist persuasion as beneficial in as much as it reduces the risk of bias.

Cognisant of this I have adopted a reflexive approach in the study with transparency of the audit trail where decisions made are evident, which is an important aspect of the methodological approach taken (Mason 2002:7). My intention is to attempt to truly represent the privileged insight I gained into the parents' world of parenting in a marginalised stepfamily and to do justice to their articulation of their parenting support needs. I hope to tell the story of the different but normal issues in stepfamilies, where there may not be a neat resolution.

### **1.8 New beginnings**

Throughout my sixteen years of health visiting in various geographical locations around the UK I gained a privileged, yet sobering insight, into different families and family formations. My experience was with marginalised

families the majority of whom were trying their best in very difficult circumstances to bring up their children to the best of their abilities with a small percentage of parents intentionally abusing their children. Even the so called 'hard to reach' families that I had contact with appeared to be turning their backs on the service, rather than disregarding their children's needs.

My 'training' had largely focused on giving information or educating parents and supporting them on parenting issues. The idea being that education leads to change. However, the reality was that as a health visitor I needed to build up a relationship and work in partnership sensitively with parents in order for them to gain confidence. Therapeutic interventions in highly sensitive private parenting and other personal issues take time to develop and require many different skills (Appleton and Cowley 2008). Parenting support needs, indeed any needs are personal and unique and cannot be neatly packaged. However, from the mid 1990s parenting support became more structured with the emergence of parenting programmes, parenting groups and more parenting practitioners, all of which did not appear to embrace diversity, rather a 'one size fits all' approach was adopted. The paradox created tensions for me in practice. On a practice level I found myself in the 'swampy lowlands'<sup>6</sup> of practice (Schön 1987:1), where there did not seem to be easy answers. Whilst some parents seemed to respond to generic parenting support, many did not, and increasingly it was stepfamilies who were struggling. I felt lost and ill-equipped to deal with the different issues presented to me, such as problems with stepchildren and non-resident partners. I experienced what can only be termed cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). I had no professional or personal models to direct me only a professional pressure to categorise them as 'problem families' and refer them onto other services, usually psychology or mental health teams. This led me to question whether generic parenting support was appropriate for different family types such as stepfamilies.

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<sup>6</sup> Schön (1983;1987) highlights the messy and unpredictable 'swampy lowlands' of practice where people and processes do not fit into neat compartments or the 'high hard ground' of theoretical frameworks.

In 1994 I left health visitor practice and for the next six years was project lead for a practice development project. The aim of the project was to provide a health promotion tool for health visitors and other parenting practitioners to use when working with families on parenting support issues. I researched, developed and then led with a team of four, the parenting support programme called **FamilyWise**<sup>7</sup>, which gained European recognition for innovation in Primary Care (World Health Organisation 2000). The topics included couples' relationships and parenting in stepfamilies. When searching and reviewing the literature on stepfamilies I was surprised at the paucity of information. Most of the literature focused on negative issues such as mental health problems for children, crime and delinquency with no inclusion of positive aspects. The themes emerging from consultation with the stepfamilies suggested that parents in stepfamilies had similar, but also different needs to those in biological nuclear families. Feedback from the practitioners, largely health visitors, suggested that they worked with the presented needs of the families. There was no suggestion that these were in any way different in stepfamilies or that health visitors felt ill equipped to deal with them. The binary opposition of the seeming invisibility of stepfamilies and their potential different parenting support needs evidenced by the paucity of information in policy, practice and literature contrasted markedly with the very visible and increasing representation of stepfamilies in the UK demographic statistics. In 2000 I entered academia and made the decision to explore, through a doctorate, the possible reasons for this paradox.

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<sup>7</sup> The concept behind the **FamilyWise** programme is simple, cartoon images without words, used to trigger parents' issues and needs rather than those of the practitioner. The research and development involved focus groups with parents and practitioners. **FamilyWise** comprises twenty three cartoon books on different aspects of parenting together with accompanying guides for practitioners. **FamilyWise** was bought by more than two hundred and fifty organisations from a multi-agency arena and two day workshops accompanied the programme to enable a wide range of parenting practitioners to use it when working with families and groups. The **FamilyWise** programme was adopted by the One Plus One Marriage and Partnership Research agency in 2000 who continue to sell it and provide accompanying workshops.

## **1.9 The purpose of the research**

The study has two strands, firstly a library study to elicit both an historical and contemporary understanding of marginalised stepfamilies, parenting support, policy and practice through the literature. Secondly, a practice focused empirical study to discover, describe and analyse the perceptions and experiences of a small sample of marginalised parents in stepfamilies regarding the nature of their parenting support needs. It is hoped that Yvonne's voice, and that of the other parents in the study, will contribute to a co-creation of new knowledge from previously relatively unknown practices of parenting in a marginalised stepfamily. The intention is that new knowledge will enable a better understanding of parenting in marginalised stepfamilies. Thus not only helping marginalised stepfamilies to understand and hopefully better manage the issues, but also contribute towards the development of practice for practitioners working with parents in marginalised stepfamilies to enable them to respond effectively to their needs. Moreover, dissemination of the research and its outcomes to a multi-agency arena including health, social care, education and the voluntary sector will hopefully contribute towards influencing the policy making process.

## **1.10 Conclusion**

Broadly, the private sphere of marginalised family life and parenting has never before been open to so much public and professional exposure. Yet there appears to be a myopia in policy and practice, which fails to recognise that different family forms may have different parenting support needs, which may not be responsive to the parenting support approaches based within the normative framework of the hegemonic biological family. The seeming invisibility of stepfamilies and their potential different parenting support needs evidenced by the paucity of information in policy, practice and the literature contrasts markedly with the very visible and increasing representation of stepfamilies in UK demographic statistics. In order to ameliorate the pain of separation and disruption for parents and children, the issues that marginalised parents in stepfamilies face need to be heard thus contributing

towards filling the gap in knowledge and in practice on parenting support needs in marginalised stepfamilies.

### **1.11 Architecture of the thesis**

The thesis consists of eight chapters thus:

**Chapter 1: Introduction and overview of the study** has, as outlined in the opening chapter, detailed the origins and contextualised the issues being explored in the study.

**Chapter 2: Research design** explains and justifies my qualitative approach. I demonstrate and explain the philosophical, theoretical and practical underpinnings within a systematic, logical and transparent framework. The rationale for the methodological choices I made and the methods of data generation, data collection and data analysis I selected are discussed and focus on two key strands - a library study and a practice focused empirical study.

**Chapter 3: Literature review: a genealogical perspective** is the first part of the library study and places emphasis on an historical perspective as a tool to inform and contextualise contemporary understandings of marginalised stepfamilies, parenting support, policy and practice. Utilising a loosely chronological / genealogical framework I demonstrate the multi-dimensional influences impacting marginalised [step]families based on the political ideology of the day. Several discourses which intertwine and maintain a central position in the literature are explored. Key historical periods are highlighted beginning with pre-industrialisation and then focusing on the emergence of parenting support from limited beginnings in the mid 19th century, then gathering pace throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Chapter 4: Literature review: a contemporary perspective** is the second part of the library study and continues the historical emphasis on the discourses underpinning marginalised [step]families, parenting support, policy and practice from the mid 1990s to present day. My review focuses on the



relative recent professionalisation of parenting support, highlighting complexities and inherent tensions. The focus is primarily UK literature examining the debates and methodological approaches taken, and highlights the continuing omission of stepfamilies and other different family types in the parenting support literature and policy. The discussion draws on the powerful influence of contemporary parenting policy and the implications for marginalised parents in the parenting support agenda.

**Chapters 5, 6 and 7: Findings and discussion** centres on the practice focused empirical study and highlights the voices of the parents in marginalised stepfamilies, with a detailed analysis of the findings and discussion which are combined. The three chapters present the themes from the data in pairs, two themes per chapter. The themes are interwoven with case studies to demonstrate and illustrate the themes thus:

- **Chapter 5:**

**The hurdles: parenting issues and practices** details the parenting issues and practices which the parents found challenging. The 'hurdles' were different to what the parents had experienced in previous families, whether as children or adults.

**[Un]clear families, [un]clear roles** highlights the numerous contradictions and tensions that had to be navigated, or not, by the parents in their new [un]clear stepfamilies. New identities were particularly challenging as previous identities as 'mam' or 'dad' did not transfer easily to their new [un]clear parenting roles.

- **Chapter 6:**

**Fragile resiliencies** details the fragility of relationships not only between stepmothers and stepchildren, but also within the couple relationship, which had ramifications on the whole family.

**Silent voices** ensued with little or poor communication despite the magnitude of the problems and impacted on the parents' couple relationship as issues were not resolved.

- **Chapter 7:**

**Intimations of [im]morality** details the 'whiff' of immorality attached to the parents' lives and families and how they managed it in different, but always moral ways.

**'In the dark': parenting support needs** highlights and explains a key tension throughout the data, that is the parents inarticulacy of their parenting support needs despite their numerous parenting challenges.

### **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

A concluding chapter closes the conceptual circle of the research and focuses on my reflexive musings of the research study and the implications of my knowledge creation for policy, practice and future marginalised stepfamilies.

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCH DESIGN

Becci: You know, and I'm – I know she's not my daughter, sometimes I feel like I can't step in and say that. Do you know what I mean? I can't like turn around and go – I really want to go to her mam and say, "Please keep a closer eye on her. I know you've got another two kids and everything. And everything is like... You're going through a divorce but... But when she's coming down with scratches on her face and stuff like that – ask her how she's got them."

[Interview 1: 260-271]

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter explains and justifies the qualitative research design that I adopted in order to determine the parenting support needs of parents like Becci. I set out to demonstrate the philosophical, theoretical and practice foci of the research design, the methodological choices I made and the methods of data collection and analysis that I selected. Discussing the research design in a linear way could imply that each stage neatly fitted or interlinked with the next, particularly as elements needed to inform one another, but boundaries and interrelationships are 'blurred' (Crotty 1998:3) and interconnect and overlap. Explanations are exposed and contextualised against a background of tensions where decisions were based on practical and flexible solutions often required in the messy, but real world of practice. An audit trail of the decisions I made and / or amended, underpinned with a self-critical reflexivity is presented demonstrating transparency and rigour within the research design and process.

## 2.2 The research problem: 'the intellectual puzzle'<sup>8</sup>

The research problem was based on an intellectual puzzle comprising several key strands which were situated in both theory and practice. Firstly, the literature on stepfamilies predominantly focused on poor outcomes for children, the legacy of the fallout from the previous family break down[s]. Yet, in spite of the continuing increase in stepfamilies and the propensity for further family dissolution, the literature revealed little about the parenting issues and potential parenting support needs particularly in marginalised stepfamilies.

Secondly, considering the general inclusive approach to diversity in policy, particularly social exclusion policy over the last two decades, there was a tension in terms of parenting policy and practice. The plethora of policy and practice focusing on parenting support utilised the hegemonic biological nuclear family as the best practice model, with other family forms [lone parent, stepfamily, same sex, assisted, adoptive] barely mentioned other than epitomised as dysfunctional or receiving a tokenistic nod. Thus most of the knowledge, understanding and skills circulating in parenting support policy and practice appeared to be based on a model of family life that was diminishing in national statistics. Furthermore, there was a resounding silence of voices emanating from the parents themselves, particularly in marginalised diverse family forms.

As such, the intellectual puzzle facing me consisted of the following strands:

- what was going on in the literature, policy and practice?
- why was there such a paucity of parents' views?
- what were the parenting issues in stepfamilies?
- were the parenting issues the same or different compared to biological nuclear families?

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<sup>8</sup> Mason (2002:8). I was fortunate to gain a place on the ESRC funded residential qualitative research workshop at Durham University in 2007. One of the presenters was Professor Jennifer Mason from Manchester University who inspired me with her practical and realistic approach to the difficult issues of qualitative researching in practice.

- how were the issues managed?
- what were the parents perceptions and experiences of the issues?
- did the parents have parenting support needs?
- where did parents access support if required?

In order to ameliorate the increasing numbers and concomitant pain of further separation and disruption for parents, children and future stepfamilies, the issues that parents in marginalised stepfamilies experienced needed to be heard, thus contributing towards filling the gap both in practice and theoretical knowledge. Dissemination of the research and its outcomes to both the public and private multi-agency arena including health, social care, education and the voluntary sectors could potentially contribute towards improving practice, enabling practitioners working with parents in stepfamilies to respond more realistically and effectively to their needs. Moreover, dissemination could potentially influence the policy making process.

### **Personal issues**

Not only public, but also personal drivers and / or altruistic reasons should be stated as motives for research (Blaikie 2010:17). I could not deny my own self-interest in the study. From a professional / practice interest, the personal development of achieving a higher degree and also in terms of my personal private life. In 1993 after thirteen years of marriage, my husband left me, and our two children, to start a new life with a new partner ten years his junior. After being a parent in a biological family for six years I became a lone parent and over the next five years adjusted to the transition with support from family and friends. In 1998 I made the momentous decision to uproot my children from Yorkshire to the north east of England, so that my new partner and I could start a life together. The decision was not taken lightly as my partner had four boys whom he co-parented for 50% of the time. We had been managing a part time relationship at a distance for three years and trying to decide the best course for bringing our two families to live together. With my background in health visiting and my partner's in social work [child protection], we knew only too well the challenges, potential problems and difficulties of

blending two families. I attempted to find positive practical and theoretical help on how to manage the process, but there was very little available in the way of self-help books and as stated the research literature was problem oriented. In desperation I 'phoned what was the Stepfamily Association<sup>9</sup> helpline and explained that we were anxious about the potential challenges ahead. Rather than practical tips, I received only confirmation of how difficult life as a stepfamily was, including the person's own challenging experiences. When I asked what the positives of stepfamily life were, she replied, 'the children receive more presents from the extra family!'

Whilst my partner and I intellectualised and rationalised the possible issues nothing prepared us for the sheer hard work and unknown issues of parenting in a stepfamily. The solutions and practices we had used for parenting issues both in our practice and in our own biological families were often not appropriate in a stepfamily. Managing tensions and resentments, different approaches to discipline, co-parenting with non-resident partners were just some of the issues facing us. If it was so difficult for us with our middle class privileges and professional backgrounds how much more difficult might it be for marginalised stepfamilies who had competing structural issues of unemployment / low income, few educational qualifications, housing / neighbourhood difficulties?

### **Researcher stance: reflexivity**

Being immersed in a stepfamily I could not deny my 'insider knowledge' (Blaikie 2000:115), my understanding, empathy and potential for influencing the parents. Moreover, reflexivity was central to my approach in the research design, process and in terms of validity and reliability. 'Critical self scrutiny' or 'active reflexivity' (Mason 2002:7) was mandatory. However, some commentators from the empiricist school suggested that researcher reflexivity was tantamount to bias and contamination of the data and immoral on ethical grounds (Weiss 1994). Whilst other commentators agreed that some

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<sup>9</sup> The Stepfamily Association was re-branded and incorporated into Parentline Plus in 2000, thus obscuring any relationship to stepfamilies.

researchers used reflexivity as a euphemism for neglectful and sloppy approaches in the research process, they simultaneously warned against an 'anything goes mentality', rather the necessity to undertake systematic, rigorous and ethical research (Mason 2002:5; Seale *et al* 2007). Real self-awareness in the research process, together with participant data create constructions that make the most sense as:

The opening up and keeping open of possibilities is only possible because we find ourselves deeply interested in that which makes the question possible in the first place. To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the centre of our being.

(Gadamer 1975:266)

However, researcher reflexivity is a fine line (Dunbar *et al* 2003:135), with some reflexive accounts being criticised for being overly focused on personal tales and self-flagellation for mistakes made in the field. Thus I adopted a reflexive approach throughout the research process, which demonstrates both my enabling and disabling subjectivities or judgements, prejudices, attitudes, values, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, experiences and perceptions, and also act as a record of my audit trail and decisions made during the research process.

### **2.3 The research question**

Research questions contain concepts and categories, for example behaviours and attitudes that the researcher is interested in studying (Gobo 2004:417). They are the central tenet of the research design giving formal expression of the 'intellectual puzzle' and indicate the researcher's ontological and epistemological orientations (Mason 2002:19). My research question was: What are the parenting support needs as perceived and experienced by parents in marginalised stepfamilies?

I followed Blaikie's (2010:17,69) view that aims and objectives are not necessary in a research design, but research purposes help to define the scope of the study.

## **2.4 Research purposes**

1. To explore the parenting support needs of parents in marginalised stepfamilies.
2. To understand why the parents perceive and experience their parenting support needs as they do.
3. To describe the parents' views on what they think might have helped or would help.
4. To explain why other issues that the parents experience impact on their parenting support needs.
5. To contribute to practice knowledge.
6. To inform policy development.

As such, the research design was contextualised within a practice focused empirical perspective with relevance to parenting support practitioners, particularly health visitors.

## **2.5 Research strategy and justification**

In order to answer my research question I needed to adopt a research strategy so that 'a logic of enquiry' which provided a starting point and a series of steps by which 'what' and / or 'why' questions could be answered (Blaikie 2010:81). My research question and purposes reflected my orientation of not only personal, professional [practice], societal and political [policy] explanations, but also social explanations within a qualitative research methodology as an answer. In essence I was seeking answers from two key areas:

- a library study in order to elicit both an historical and contemporary understanding of marginalised stepfamilies, parenting support, policy and practice from the literature
- a practice focused empirical study to elicit the parents' meanings and interpretations of their perceptions and experiences of their parenting support needs



Consequently my approach did not lend itself to a deductive strategy where the researcher formulated theory, usually a hypothesis which came first before the research and analysis was undertaken, or as Mason (2002:124) stated 'moves from the general to the particular'. The research strategy that was appropriate to answer my research question was an inductive strategy, the aim of which was to describe 'social characteristics and the nature of networks of regularities in social life' (Blaikie 2010:83). The inductive research strategy began with data collection and analysis and proceeded to theory development and generalisations or 'from the particular to the general' (Mason 2002:180).

Due to the dearth of information on marginalised stepfamilies I aimed to undertake a loosely genealogical / chronological review of the literature, otherwise referred to as the library study, which would help contextualise and inform the practice focused empirical study. The latter would gain knowledge from the real world of the parents, their construction of reality and everyday concepts and meanings, which would enable me to contribute to new theory and practice knowledge. The social world perceived and experienced by the parents from the 'inside' would allow me to use 'thick descriptions' (Blaikie 2010:105) to describe and understand their lives from their perspective in a 'bottom up' approach. As such I hoped to discover their everyday tacit knowledge, meanings and understandings. The very framing of my question implied an approach which valued the parents' voices, but also enabled me, the researcher with a practice background, to be reflexive and importantly demonstrated 'sensitivity to context', a core principle of validity (Yardley 2008:243). In short my research strategy had to be systematic, rigorous, accountable, 'strategically conducted, yet flexible and contextual' (Mason 2002:7).

## **2.6 Ontological and epistemological considerations**

Whichever research strategy I adopted assumed a particular ontological and epistemological position (Blaikie 2010:92), the ramifications of which were important (Mason 2002:15). Mason's suggestion that one's ontological

position is so fundamental that it often occurs earlier in the thinking process than the identification of a topic (2002:14) was logical to me. With several different and competing versions of social reality it could be difficult to 'take a doctrinaire approach' (Mason (2002:15), but equally an eclectic approach was not possible. Rather 'active engagement' was the key. Mason's pragmatic approach to ontological perspectives was helpful. I believed that there were multiple social realities, for example each of the parents would have a different reality and understanding of their social world which existed independently of my own personal, practice, social and cultural understandings. However, I hoped to access it through their perceptions, experiences and understandings, which we would co-construct together. As such I acknowledged that whilst each parent would have different perceptions and experiences of their different realities, that this could not produce a definitive knowledge or certainty. Yet its very diversity would add to the richness of the data thereby demonstrating multiple realities with influences from different bio-psycho-socio-cultural-historico-politico fields. Again reflexivity would play an important part, both in terms of my observations, perceptions and experiences of the parents and my ontological perspective. Following from my ontological position, my epistemological position or theory of knowledge would be drawn from interconnected strands of what I believed constituted knowledge. That is:

- the library study of extant literature and policy which required an historical review and exploration to determine why the stepfamily as a family form was rarely discussed within positive frameworks of functioning families. Also, and interconnected with the latter an historical review of the evolution of parenting support policy and practice with a particular focus on marginalised [step]families in order to understand contemporary policy and practice development.
- the practice focused study of the parents' perceptions and experiences of their everyday lives as parents in a stepfamily co-constructed with me, taking cognisance of my reflexive

musings as a researcher, an academic, a health visitor, a woman, a biological parent and a parent in a stepfamily. The knowledge created would be unique in that it would be generated from the specific interactions between the parents and myself. It would be time and context specific and whilst there might be commonalities across the data set, each account would be different.

Maintaining consistency in combining ontological and epistemological perspectives was important, yet despite Blaikie's generally neat philosophical coherent taxonomies for designing social research, he conceded that 'research strategies are not watertight compartments' and can be 'modified' by researchers in the real world (Blaikie 2010:96). This pragmatic approach, together with that of other commentators (Mason 2002:16; Snape and Spencer 2003:20; Seale *et al* 2007:8), on the realities of research in practice was refreshing and heartening. I was more than aware, largely through my health visitor practice experience, that often in the real world, people and actions did not fit into neat little boxes, more often than not these were messy and contradictory. As Cowley (1995) stated, 'a routine visit is one that has passed', that is for a health visitor, practice situations are unpredictable, ambiguous or anomalous and can quickly shift from 'routine' to complex, and so certainty is an elusive concept. This was not a 'quick fix' solution to epistemological concerns embracing reliability and validity and consequently a detailed transparent audit trail was vital. Moreover, I was not seeking epistemological privilege as a parent in a stepfamily or an experienced health visitor. Whilst my personal experience might enable some insight into parenting issues in stepfamilies in terms of insider knowledge, and my practice background as a health visitor might give me similar knowledge of different socio-economic and cultural contexts to mine, that is where it ended. I could not claim that this would give validity to my research findings. Rather, by relaying in a transparent manner the parents' perceptions and understandings as closely as possible to their accounts, and acknowledging the synthesis, interconnection, complexities and contradictions of different views, and clearly delineating my own personal, researcher and practitioner

background, observations and theorisation, would enable an honest yet 'fallibilistic' (Seale 1999:6) account.

In summary, the central tenet of my ontological and epistemological assumptions and the methodological choices I made would enable me to learn from two key strands. That is, firstly the library study providing historical and contemporary literature on marginalised [step]families, parenting support policy and practice. Secondly the practice focused empirical study eliciting the parents 'meaningful components of the[ir] social world' (Mason 2002:14) and their multiple realities from the inside and from a bottom up approach co-constructed with me.

## **2.7 Research paradigm / methodology: interpretivism**

My epistemological stance had implications for my choice of methodology and the consequent route I would take to manage both the library study and the practice focused empirical study. As a result of the above research design decisions it was evident that positivism was not an applicable philosophy for my study. My research design and question did not lend itself to objective cause and effect arguments with variables producing a single truth, rather my philosophical views thus far supported an interpretivist approach.

Since the development of interpretivism, which adopted a constructionist epistemology (Blaikie 2007:179) as a reaction against positivism or 'foundationalist doctrines' (Hughes and Sharrock 1997:196), there has been much debate as to its 'exclusivity', but generally interpretivism has been integral to qualitative research. Broadly, interpretivism focuses on interpretation, observation, understanding of the social world that people create and reproduce through continuing their ways of doing things. Thus this approach would be suitable for both the library study and the practice focused empirical study. In terms of the former, focusing on an historical and contemporary review of the literature would help understandings of the evolution of marginalised [step]families, policy and practice. This would then inform and interconnect with the second part of the study, the practice

focused empirical study. The ultimate aim of which was to elicit the voices of parents in marginalised stepfamilies in order to understand the reality they made of their world as previously their voices had barely been heard. The parents would have their ideas about what was happening in their worlds which they would constantly reinterpret. Whilst this is known from the researcher's angle as the 'insider view' (Blaikie 2000:115), how could I really know about their experiences as we all experience and interpret things differently in different contexts? All I could attempt was to grasp some understanding rather than knowledge as in the positivist tradition.

The interpretivist journey by different thinkers - Kant, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer to name but a few, moved from a dialogue between 'parts and the whole, to the use of empathy, intuition and interpretation' (Blaikie 2007:179). The latter aspects particularly appealed to me as in order to explore the lived realities of a marginalised, complex group of parents, and understand the meanings and perceptions and differences of how they constituted their lives as parents in a stepfamily, I needed a sensitive, flexible methodological approach to hear their voices. In order to embrace these sensitivities, I was initially attracted to and explored interpretive phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches as an underpinning methodology. It was through studying and understanding the parents' world which they had created, reproduced and continued that they would hopefully begin to be understood. Interpretive phenomenology uses the way people exist in the world as a pathway for understanding the social, cultural, political and historical background in which those experiences occurred, which was particularly relevant within the socio-political context of stepfamilies. One was constantly adapting to one's situations, which Heidegger (1962), drawing on ontology, called 'being-in-the-world'. This 'being-in-the-world' was open to and inseparable from all that was going on around us and we made sense of it through speech and language, which had hidden meaning embedded in words with each individual's world being different. Heidegger's phenomenological approach appealed to me more than Husserl's phenomenological reduction of 'bracketing' or 'suspension of belief' in the outer world.

We put out of action the entire ontological commitment that belongs to the essence of the natural attitude, we place in brackets whatever it includes with respect to being.

(Husserl 1913:111)

The insistence on researchers suspending their beliefs was an anathema to me. How could I disregard my 'subjective lenses' (Van Maanen 1988) influencing my research? As an active participant in the research process and particularly as a parent in a biological and a stepfamily, a woman, a health visitor and an academic I brought with me experiences and preconceptions which contributed to my very being. I did not believe suspension was possible. As Heidegger (1962:191) stated, researchers need to examine their 'presuppositions' rather than suspending them.

Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us.

(Heidegger 1962:191)

Whilst this aspect of interpretive phenomenology was interesting, I found Gadamer's hermeneutics with a 'fusion of horizons' more appealing. The data generated by the participants were 'fused' with the researcher's experiences and preconceptions and with the 'horizons' of the literature to become a 'fusion of horizons' with 'co-constitution of the data' (Gadamer 1994). Whilst Gadamerian hermeneutics accepted as reality the constantly changing world in which people were participants, it was more interested in their 'shared meanings' as objective meanings, rather than their individual subjective meanings (Blaikie 2010:102), which I aimed to discover.

Although interpretive phenomenology seemed suited to both my ontological and epistemological position, I remained concerned about its possible artificiality, idealism and applicability within the real world of practice. I was cognisant of Mason's (2002:181) caveat against becoming too immersed in the 'lofty heights' or theorisation of research strategies at the expense of the actual processes of ideas development. The prescriptive strategies were a

concern to me as I believed they didn't fit with the troublesome yet dynamic, and fluid aspects of the real world and as such were a theoretical dead end. The potential for intellectual debate with underpinning philosophy to take precedence at the expense of just how to conduct and manage my research in practice was a very real issue for me and seemed a bit esoteric. Both in my personal and professional life I like to think that I have entered situations with an open and 'not knowing' flexible approach. Whilst this might sound arrogant and complacent I believe that 'technical rational'<sup>10</sup> approaches close down different ways of seeing and understanding reality. In contrast 'professional artistry'<sup>11</sup> approaches, whilst at times risky enable flexibility.

Qualitative researchers need to be able to think and act strategically in ways which combine intellectual, philosophical, technical and practical concerns rather than compartmentalizing these into separate boxes.

(Mason 1996:2)

And later:

I cannot emphasise strongly enough, however, that researchers should engage actively and critically with ideas which these approaches suggest, rather than assuming that they are required to adhere to a fixed position and then simply abide by its rules and conventions.

(Mason 2002:55)

Brechin and Sidell (2000:15) raised similar issues and suggested pragmatic solutions. For example, thinking about the parents and their possible issues and potential multiple causes and what might help, I was immediately grounded. By asking myself:

- how can I really know about the parents' experiences?
- in what sense is their experience a reality that can be grasped and understood by me?

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<sup>10</sup> 'Technical rational' approaches to practice rely on rigid, prescribed rules with formulaic procedures reducing risk (Fish and Coles 2000).

<sup>11</sup> 'Professional artistry' approaches enable innovative and creative ways with flexibility necessary and realistic (Fish and Coles 2000).

- my own experience of being a parent in a stepfamily is ephemeral, which I feel and interpret differently at different times and in different circumstances
- language is a way of accessing such understandings through co-construction of perceptions, understandings and meaning

The more pragmatic qualitative research approach appealed to me. I needed to understand why parents in marginalised stepfamilies did not appear to articulate their issues. I needed to understand their experiences. I knew only too well as a health visitor how theory in practice had to be adjusted and adapted to fit the contextual situation of families. As such I was drawn to the work of commentators who took a more pragmatic approach, rather than 'passively or unimaginatively following textbook recipes' (Mason 2002:2), as I believed their perspective on the real world was more credible (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Mason 2002; Silverman 1993; Seale *et al* 2007).

### **Qualitative research practice: 'a situated methodology'**

A situated methodological framework (Seale *et al* 2007:1-11) provided a guide to research practice which I found refreshing and suited my practical needs, for what was essentially a practice study. However, a caveat was that it could only provide a 'partial truth' (Seale *et al* 2007:7), but I believed this was true of any methodological framework. How could any approach gather the whole truth? It was not possible. Seale *et al* (2007:4) did not reject methodological rules and frameworks *per se*, rather that they should be regarded as provisional and contextual in research practice and made transparent through choices made or amended.

In their discussion Seale *et al* (2007:1-11) focused on the historical separation of the political, or external role and the procedural, or internal role of methodology as antithetical. They challenged the hard sciences for their insistence on methodological rules and the hypocrisy of then manipulating their data to prove their theories. Their criticism was not only levelled at quantitative methodologies, but also qualitative with laments over the 'arid'



principles and 'hyper-theorization' that appeared in many of the qualitative research books of the last two decades, at the expense of highlighting the 'craft skill' of doing qualitative research (Seale *et al* 2007:1-11). The myopic impracticality at times of attempting to apply generalised methodological rules to procedural elements in a top-down technical rational rule driven approach, rather than bottom-up, user-centred and context-dependent methodological routines and agreements was 'schizophrenic' (Seale *et al* 2007:9). They suggested:

A researcher-centred view of the place of methodological rules in guiding research behaviour and, on the other hand, encouraging methodologists to adapt methodology to the research situation.  
(Seale *et al* 2007:8)

For me this built upon Mason's (2002) practical, flexible and sensitive approach to qualitative research strategies and techniques. My focus was on the everyday, ordinary private world of the stepfamily and more particularly the parents' world as it was contextualised against the backdrop of the very public world of parenting in contemporary society. Fluidity in qualitative research practice was vital - where people's lives were not static and did not fit into neat compartments, but were often messy, ambiguous and complex.

The emphasis on the 'nitty-gritty' of research practice was inspiring and signalled to me that a methodologically reflective and transparent approach focusing on key decisions made for example method, sampling, recruitment, ethical issues, data collection, analysis and theorisation / concept development, could provide a pragmatic, yet transparent account of my 'situated methodology'. As Snape and Spencer (2004:21) concluded:

We are more interested in ensuring a suitable 'fit' between research methods used and the research questions posed than we are in the degree of philosophical coherence of the epistemological positions typically associated with different research methods.  
(Snape and Spencer 2004:21)

## 2.8 Data sources: method and approach

### a) Library study

As my ontological position focused on multiple social realities I believed that literature and policy texts were an important and 'relevant element of the social world' (Mason 2002:106) and as such they would be crucial to informing my study. Similarly, my epistemological stance clearly focused on the extant literature and policy as a key strand in producing knowledge. Thus I needed to select sources of literature and policy to review that could inform an understanding of parenting support needs in marginalised stepfamilies. I believed an historical perspective would help to contextualise contemporary understandings. Moreover, as an academic and a health visitor I was aware of the way in which certain discourses such as marginalised parents 'requiring' parenting support due to their 'parenting deficit' (Etzioni 1993:6), were strongly implicated in contemporary parenting support policy and practice. Therefore I decided to review the literature utilising not only a loosely chronological / genealogical approach, but also with a focus on the interplay between text, discourses and context. As Foucault (1981:101) stated:

...we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated on; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies.  
(Foucault 1981:101)

Therefore the literature I selected and reviewed needed to reflect 'discursive elements' of:

- the social history of marginalised [step]families
- policy / state interaction with particular reference to marginalised [step]families
- parenting support in practice

As such the library study would not only contextualise the research problem, but also inform the practice focused empirical study.

## **b) Practice focused empirical study: qualitative interviewing and ethical considerations**

Silverman (2006:114) warned against qualitative researchers myopia in only considering interviews as opposed to observation, textual analysis and audio and video recording. A caveat was that a 'reliance on interview data can allow phenomena to escape' (Silverman 2006:117). Drawing on other commentators' work (Kitzinger 2004; Rapley 2004), Silverman (2004:117) suggested that:

- interviews might not give direct access to the 'facts', rather attitudes and behaviour
- interviews offered indirect representations or 'accounts' of experiences rather than telling us directly about people's experiences

Taking a constructionist view, the interviewer and interviewee actively engage in constructing meaning and as such rather than this acting as a barrier to the true depiction of fact or experience, the researcher focused on how meaning was mutually constructed (Silverman 2004:118). As Kitzinger stated:

...what women say should not be taken as evidence of their experience, but only as a form of talk – a 'discourse', 'account' or 'repertoire' – which represents a culturally available way of packaging experience.

And:

...this approach is valuable insofar as it draws attention to the fact that experience is never 'raw', but is embedded in a social web of interpretation and re-interpretation.

(Kitzinger 2004:128)

Cognisant of these views, I required a sensitive method enabling previously 'silenced voices' to speak, giving them the opportunity to articulate issues that are rarely acknowledged (Rapley 2004:25). As a health visitor I had discovered the empowering effect of clients finding a voice and a listener, is enabling in itself. Moreover, from my epistemological focus I required the best method that would capture the contextual and situational realities of the

private, personal world of the stepfamily. The family is an intimate institution with a language and discourse particular to that unit. In order to capture the essence of this and encourage a flow of conversation, in the form of 'thick descriptions' (Rapley 2004:15), I decided that loosely structured in depth interviews would enable a greater freedom of expression for the parents and give me flexibility to explore their responses.

I was aware of the possibility of potentially emotional and intimate aspects of the parents' lives being recounted and a loosely structured approach appeared to be a more ethical, sensitive and enabling method than structured and semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, I was also aware that some parents might find their stories difficult to articulate in that they were possibly not used to being consulted on such intimate topics. Some parents might have spent years building up defence mechanisms in order not to have to deal with issues, which they might not even have acknowledged within themselves and / or might not have articulated before to each other. As such, I had a strategy for referral to therapeutic support services if parents wished it. Hopefully I provided a safe environment which helped to normalise issues for parents.

Some commentators suggested that no special skills are required in qualitative interviewing as the skills used are everyday conversational skills (Rapley 2004:21; Silverman 2006:112). Whilst these skills may appear simplistic, I would contend that great skill is involved in 'allow[ing] them space to talk' (Rapley 2004:25) and actually hearing what they are saying. As a health visitor I had accumulated a lot of face to face interviewing skills, and I would suggest that the interplay of interpersonal, communication and counselling skills is a fragile balancing act particularly with marginalised people. It is essential to develop a trusting relationship in what may often be a 'one off' contact.

I was more than aware from my health visitor practice that marginalised groups are often difficult to access and to expect more than one interview per couple was unrealistic. I aimed for respondent validation in order to enhance

the validity of my study, but was aware that this might be an elusive concept due to the realities of the parents' busy lives. However, I was fortunate to elicit respondent validation with six further interactions, hereafter referred to as 'second interview'.

### **Reciprocity**

The interview is about the respondent, not about the interviewer...  
It is usually enough for the interviewer to give business card  
information... along with the study's aims and sponsorship.  
(Weiss 1994:79)

Whilst this approach might be appropriate in structured or semi-structured interviews I would contest its appropriateness in loosely structured or unstructured interviews. Despite many positivist commentators advocating being passive and neutral, with reciprocity from the researcher not encouraged, I would argue it is not conducive to a relaxed and enabling situation for the participant. I could not remain neutral. Neutrality created a hierarchical relationship where the interviewee was treated as a research object (Oakley 1981). Interviewer neutrality was misleading, as to be neutral was not possible as the interviewer was an active participant (Rapley 2004:20). Neutrality had the effect of silencing the interviewee and prevented the more equal and sought after relationship of collaboration between the co-participants. I determined to be an active and engaged participant in the interview process.

'Cooperative work' and 'cooperative self-disclosure' are two types of interviewer conduct (Rapley 2004:22), which were in keeping with my methodology, method and my own personal and professional approach in life. Rapley (2004:23) also discussed 'intimate reciprocity' where the interviewer talks of their emotions, feelings and experiences. Whilst I had no intention to proactively do this, I was aware that I could not be so definitive. Adapting Cowley's (1995) analogy of 'a routine visit is one that has passed', I decided to follow Reinharz and Chase's (2002:288) suggestion of deciding: 'whether, when, and how much disclosure makes sense' within the situation.

As stated above my ontological position was based on the parents' multiple realities with reflexivity from the researcher an essential aspect of the epistemological process. What constitutes 'ethical consideration' within the multiple realities of the social world is a 'wicked issue', a messy and contested area, where the power of the researcher is often not questioned. The potential for a power imbalance as an academic, a researcher, a health visitor and a middle class woman needed to be balanced with my life as a parent in a stepfamily. I believed that my background should be visible and transparent.

Participant self-censoring or silencing due to various influences including differences in gender, class, profession and societal disapprobation is a common occurrence (Reinharz and Chase 2003:74-77). Cognisant of this I could not deny my background, history and my present realities. Establishing a relationship between the researcher and the participant was crucial, together with the participant being able to 'place' the researcher (Edwards 1993). Furthermore, researching family relationships is a very sensitive area (Brannen 1988; Edwards 1993) and I had found as a health visitor that shared experiences of sensitive areas often helped to normalise issues for parents and also contributed to their confidence building. I hoped this would be the case as an interviewer. I decided to inform the parents via the participant information sheet [appendix 1], reiterated again in a 'phone call and at the beginning of the interview, not only of my health visiting status, but also the fact I was a parent in a stepfamily. Whilst I am not a marginalised parent, I had experienced injustices as a lone parent and had gained an invaluable, albeit transitory [five years] insight into another life.

During the local research ethics committee meeting the transparency of my stepfamily background was raised as a potential bias, but I justified this with the above rationale of reciprocity and transparency and despite some conflicting views it was passed. Moreover, I cannot deny that I hoped my stepfamily status would help my accessibility into the families. Similarly, my openness as a health visitor made it easier to inform the parents of my obligations to a Nursing and Midwifery (NMC 2008) code of professional

ethics. Disclosure from parents that had the potential for risk, or significant harm to themselves or others, had to be shared with appropriate agencies. I clearly set this out in the participant information sheet [appendix 1] and again reiterated it at the beginning of the interview.

## **2.9 Sample and recruitment**

My sampling rationale focused on theoretical sampling. There are a myriad of different stepfamily combinations, so representative sampling was not appropriate as it would not be possible to achieve a 'microcosm' of marginalised stepfamilies who were representative of the total population (Mason 2002:125). Moreover, my ontological perspective focused on interpretive and theoretical explanations for understanding people's lives and experiences. Consequently sampling experiences and issues, rather than people per se were my focus (Mason 2002:123). Theoretical sampling was better suited to my research design as it was flexible and practical in the real world and to be rigid and fixed was not helpful as theoretical sampling:

...is a set of procedures where the researcher manipulates their data generation, analysis, theory and sampling activities *interactively* during the research process...

(Mason 2002:137)

Whilst this might suggest that rigorous sampling strategies were unimportant, the opposite is true. Mason (2002:120) vigorously supported the need for sampling and selection as vitally important strategic elements of qualitative research which had direct implications for generalisability. However, again, in order to prevent accusations of empirically shallow research, it was essential to aid credibility through a record of logical and systematic transparency of actions taken. Defining sampling units clearly, maintaining consistency of sampling rationale and highlighting variations such as negative and contradictory instances (Mason 2002:138;) and 'dialogue with field incidents, contingencies and discoveries' (Gobo 2004:417) were important aspects of transparency. The following begins to unpack some of these issues.

## **Realities and Challenges**

Planning the whole sampling strategy prior to the interviewing process was a mistake and not possible (Gobo 2004:406). Sampling needed to be faced in a practical way and the reality of this soon became evident. My original intention was to recruit twenty couples from complex stepfamilies<sup>12</sup>. My rationale for this had two strands. Firstly, whilst the statistics indicated that only 4% of stepfamilies were complex (ONS, Social Trends 40:2010), I believed from my health visiting experience that this figure was much higher. Secondly, as children in complex stepfamilies have more frequent and marked adjustment problems compared to simpler stepfamily formations (Dunn 2002), the parents potentially might have an abundance of parenting support issues.

Recruitment was a particularly frustrating period as I did not have easy access to marginalised parents in stepfamilies. I considered recruiting parents through advertising in Sure Start Children's Centres, but was aware of potential challenges, for example:

- I had few contacts in Sure Start services, which might potentially increase the time frame and yield few results
- the response to adverts is notoriously low
- the sample would be receiving more formal parenting support services
- the parents might feel obliged to report positive parenting support experiences
- the parents' accessibility of Sure Start services suggested a certain level of confidence
- in contrast the 'hard to reach' parents who do not generally attend such services might have greater parenting support needs and issues

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<sup>12</sup>Complex stepfamilies are where both parents bring children into the relationship.



I decided to use my networks. As a senior lecturer working on the health visitor programme at the time I was involved with student health visitors and their mentors in practice, and had developed good working relationships with both well experienced and relatively newly qualified health visitors. After talking to the health visitors informally about my research, several were willing to be involved in recruiting parents to the study. Participation in the study was to be negotiated in stages, firstly by the families' health visitor and secondly by me. In accordance with governance etiquette and formalities, and in the hope of obtaining more interested health visitors, I asked to discuss my study at the next health visitor professional meeting when the appropriate manager would be present.

The manager very clearly had tremendous power in the process and an agenda I was not privy to. Indeed in the first instance my efforts to interest health visitors in the recruitment process were thwarted by the manager, who mistakenly believed that the study did not have ethical clearance. Despite my explanation to the contrary, verbally and by letter, the manager apparently warned the health visitors against involvement. Consequently only seven health visitors were finally involved and some had a specific agenda around helping to recruit. For example one health visitor openly admitted after data collection that she had recruited families that she had become 'stuck' with, which raised ethical issues of using intermediaries in the recruitment process. However, this worked both ways as in a similar vein, one participant used the interview to her advantage as an opportunity to attempt to coerce me into help with re-housing for her daughter in law.

### **Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria**

As a key aspect of my research practice was focused on marginalised stepfamilies, they had to be living in disadvantage with neither parent in employment, or in receipt of low income and benefits. However, this inclusion criterion was largely superfluous. As a health visitor I was familiar with parents working in the black economy as a way of making ends meet and

keeping 'under the radar' of officialdom and generally these parents were receptive to health visitors who turned a 'blind eye' to such activities. With this in mind I asked health visitors to use their knowledge of families to make recruiting decisions. I did not want health visitors to actually ask about income as it might compromise their relationship, as income is often more difficult to ask about than sex (Weiss 1994:76). Moreover, the disadvantaged are a reluctant group of participants and notoriously difficult to access due to their heavy responsibilities and scepticism (Adler and Adler 2003:159).

Once a health visitor had received verbal agreement from the parents to participate in the study, the latter received a 'phone call from me explaining the study in more detail, the need for consent and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. I also sent the participant information sheet and consent forms in the post prior to the interview so that they would have the opportunity to look at them in detail.

In keeping with beneficence and cognisant of the sensitive topic of parenting, marginalised families, national literacy levels and my experience from the **FamilyWise** project, I had attempted to make my first participant information sheet draft user friendly. However, it did not adhere to the ethical guidelines and was dismissed. The finished version was accepted, but not an easy read [appendix 1]. Several parents had agreed verbally to be participants, but on receipt of several pages of official forms withdrew. Other commentators have highlighted the tensions of adhering to ethical committees' rigid guidelines in the pursuit of gaining ethical approval, but at the expense of alienating participants (Bryman 2008:123).

I was aware that some parents might feel an obligation to participate in order not to offend the health visitor (Kendall 1993) who had approached them initially to participate in the study. Equally women's capacity to resist and put 'invisible walls' around their private lives despite authoritative questioning from caring professionals has been documented (Edwards 1993:186). This may explain why some parents who had given a verbal agreement to participate didn't return 'phone messages I left. I decided not to leave more than two

messages as that could constitute coercion. Similarly some parents who had given verbal consent, were not in at the agreed time of the visit. Again, after two non-access visits I did not attempt more. One couple gave verbal consent, but on two occasions whilst opening the door to me, stated it wasn't convenient.

### **Complex stepfamilies**

The health visitors found it difficult to find not only complex stepfamilies, but any stepfamilies which was surprising. This raised the possibility that some parents might not share the fact that a partner had children from another relationship, particularly if they were non-resident, a finding reported by Walker *et al* (2010:15). Similarly, some health visitors might not document non-resident children despite the fact that they might visit and stay overnight. Consequently I revisited my sampling intentions – what was I actually aiming to discover? With my focus on the nature and understanding of the parents' perceptions and experiences of parenting in a stepfamily, their ability to be responsive and express their thoughts and articulate their issues was an important consideration. The complexity, or not, of their composition whilst important was not the central issue. The important aspect was that they were parents in marginalised stepfamilies with perceptions and experiences of their parenting support needs. Similarities, differences and contradictions in theoretical sampling were an important aspect of theory generation as:

...theoretical sampling is concerned with constructing a sample...which is meaningful theoretically, because it builds in certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop or test your theory and explanation.

(Mason 2002:124)

Whilst my supposition that there may well be more complex stepfamilies than officially recorded was already proving difficult to substantiate I had to be pragmatic. If any parents in complex stepfamilies were recruited it would be a bonus and by comparing their issues to parents in simpler stepfamilies would potentially give a better insight through comparison or contradiction of issues. The revised inclusion criteria included either one or both parents who already

had a child / children in the 0-16 age group from a former relationship and a child or children from their current relationship. The stepchildren could be resident or if non-resident, visit. The rationale for a child / children in the current relationship was that they would be known to the health visitor, as health visitors are informed of all new births.

### **Parents**

I stipulated that the parents had to have been together between six months and four years. This inclusion criterion was based on stepfamilies having some degree of stability, yet enough time for the romance phase to be over and for reality to have set in. I hoped to interview the parents as a couple, but I offered separate interviews if preferred, but nobody opted for this choice. I offered to interview at a time convenient to them, either at their house, or if they preferred a room at the local health centre, which I had negotiated with their health visitor. All the parents requested a home interview.

Parents could be recruited to the study whether they had received official parenting support as in Sure Start Children's Centres, nursery provision or parenting support from health visitors. The parents had to have been born in the UK or English speaking as I didn't want to complicate the context with interpreters. However, the NE is largely a mono-cultural area with only 3.8% (NHS NE Strategic Health Authority 2008) of people from different ethnic origins.

### **Children**

It was not my intention to recruit children to the study due to the recent increase in the child focused divorce literature. One stipulation was the exclusion of families with a child in need or on the child protection register as I did not want to 'muddy the waters' with such complications.

**Table 1: Key inclusion and exclusion criteria**

<b>INCLUSION / EXCLUSION</b>	
<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>
Parents unemployed or in receipt of low income and benefits	Children in need / Child Protection Register
One or both parents with child / children under 16	
Child from current relationship	
Stepchild / ren resident or visiting	
Parents together 6 months – 4 years, married or cohabiting	
Couple or single interviews	
Parenting support from Sure Start, nursery and / or health visitors	
Parents born in UK / English speaking	

I thought I had achieved my target sample as twenty couples initially gave verbal agreement to participate to the health visitors, but they did not for various reasons finally participate in the study and unfortunately with attrition I 'lost' ten couples. These realities of the real world extended the data collection time and in a bid to increase participants I attempted snowball sampling with the last few recruits. I also contacted by letter the parents I had interviewed earlier asking them if they knew of other parents who might be willing to be interviewed. Despite a few leads I did not acquire any more participants. The sample unit finally yielded fifteen individuals in total across the first and second interactions. At the first interview there were ten couples which comprised four couple and six single interviews [table 2]. I was also fortunate enough to undertake a second interaction through respondent validation which yielded eight individuals from six couples which comprised two couple and four single interviews [table 2].

**Table 2: Summary of participants present at each interview event**

	First interview				Follow up interview			
Parents	Single	Couple	Children present (number)	Others present (number)	Single	Couple	Children present (number)	Others present (number)
Becci Bill		✓ ✓	1		✓		1	
Yvonne Gordon	✓		1		✓		1	
Kate Tom		✓ ✓	1					
Susie Pete	✓		1			✓ ✓	1	
Tracy Patrick		✓ ✓	3			✓ ✓	4	
Joanne Alan	✓		1		✓		1	
Tina Fred	✓		1		✓		1	
Barbara Dave		✓ ✓	0					
Lindy Steve	✓		4	1 mother- in-law				
Leanne Tim	✓		2					

The final sample represented below [tables 3 and 4] demonstrates both the complexity and diversity of stepfamily life. Within the sample there were five

couples where one or both partners had remarried and five couples who were cohabiting. Seven parents had lived in a stepfamily as a child and six parents had lived in a stepfamily as a stepparent prior to the current relationship.

**Table 3: Summary of parent characteristics**

Parents	Bio-mother	Bio-father	Step-mother	Step-father	Married	Cohabiting	Lived in step-family as child	Lived in a stepfamily as step-parent prior to current relationship
Becci Bill	✓		✓		✓ ✓		✓	
Yvonne Gordon	✓		✓	✓		✓ ✓	✓	✓ ✓
Kate Tom	✓			✓	✓ ✓			✓
Susie Pete	✓		✓		✓ ✓			
Tracy Patrick	✓		✓	✓		✓ ✓	✓	
Joanne Alan	✓			✓		✓ ✓	✓	✓
Tina Fred	✓			✓	✓ ✓		✓ ✓	✓
Barbara Dave	✓			✓	✓ ✓			✓
Lindy Steve	✓			✓		✓ ✓	✓ ✓	
Leanne Tim	✓		✓	✓		✓ ✓		



**Table 4: Characteristics of children in stepfamilies**

Parents	Number of resident children per household	Ages (years unless specified)	Number of non-resident children who visit per household	Ages of non resident children (years unless specified)
Becci Bill	1	8 months and Becci pregnant at 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview	1	12
Yvonne Gordon	3	11 7 2 months	1 1 (Gordon's step-son)	6 16
Kate Tom	3	9 5 3 months		
Susie Pete	4	16 4 2 19 months	1	17
Tracy Patrick	7	12, 8, 8, 6, 3 18 months 4 months and new baby at 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview		
Joanne Alan	2	7 2		
Tina Fred	3	8 7 1 Tina pregnant at 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview		
Barbara Dave	2	10 3		
Lindy Steve	4	5 2½ 1 3 months		
Leanne Tim	2	4 18 months	1	7

### **Family composition**

The genograms [figures 1-10] and pen pictures below give an overview of the sample in their sometimes complex family formations, and help to place them and give some idea as to who is informing the study. Pseudonyms have been used throughout. More information on the stepfamilies is included in the case studies throughout chapters 5, 6, and 7.

## 2.10 Genograms and pen pictures of the stepfamilies

### Key

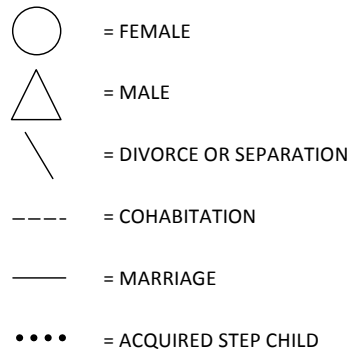


Figure 1: Becci and Bill's family

Figure 2: Yvonne and Gordon's family

Figure 3: Kate and Tom's family

Figure 4: Susie and Pete's family

Figure 5: Patrick and Tracy's family

Figure 6: Joanne and Alan's family

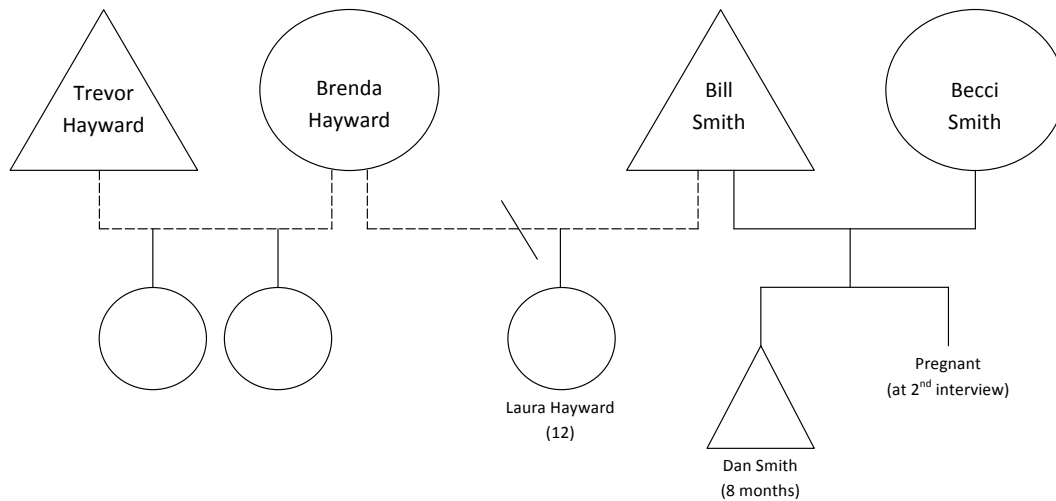
Figure 7: Tina and Fred's family

Figure 8: Barbara and Paul's family

Figure 9: Lindy and Steve's family

Figure 10: Leanne and Tim's family

**Figure1: Becci and Bill's family**

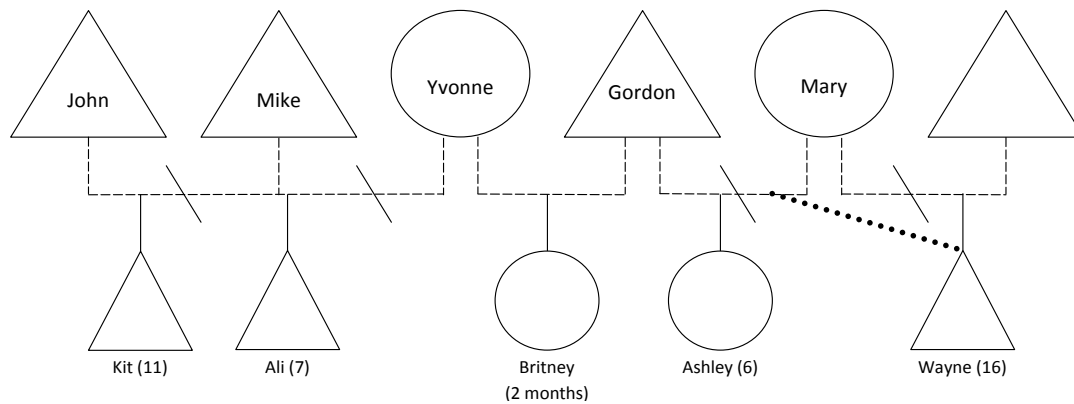


Becci had grown up in a stepfamily [mother and stepfather still together], but she didn't like her stepfather who she thought showed favouritism to his biological children. Becci had found that her experience as a child growing up in a stepfamily was negative and her anger with her stepfather was still clearly present. Becci was fourteen years younger than Bill when she met him and married him. They had recently had Dan.

Bill, by his own volition had had many relationships and had been a stepfather to a child in a previous relationship. He later had one biological child Laura, who now lived with her mother, stepfather, stepsiblings and half sibling, but this family was breaking up. He had previously never married and he felt that this was his first real commitment [through marriage] to Becci. Laura, who self-harmed occasionally, frequently came to stay with Bill and Becci.

At the time of the first interview Bill was suspended from work pending an inquiry. At the time of the second interview he was in prison serving a four year sentence.

**Figure 2: Yvonne and Gordon's family**

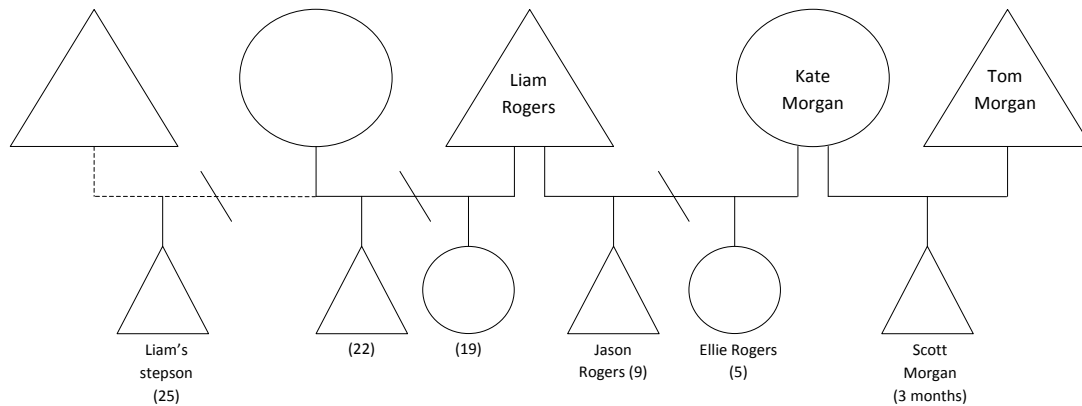


Yvonne presented as a confident young woman. She had been brought up in a stepfamily and spoke very positively about her experience. Her mother was still with her stepfather. Yvonne already had two children born within two different relationships when she met her present partner Gordon. Yvonne had a good relationship with each of her ex-partners and they played an active co-parenting role in their boys' lives. For example they accompanied Yvonne to parents' evenings, which for Yvonne was an important demonstration of the depth of their commitment as fathers. Yvonne was also proud that on these evenings the ex-partners and her new partner would all be in the house together with their children.

Yvonne had met Gordon, who had Ashley, a six year old biological daughter and Wayne a sixteen year old stepson. Gordon's kindness in continuing to act as a father figure to his stepson Wayne, was a particularly attractive aspect to Yvonne who felt that it demonstrated his commitment as a parent which was an important issue for her.

Gordon, who had some temporary work had moved into Yvonne's house when she became pregnant with Britney. This arrangement was particularly helpful for Gordon as he was finding it increasingly difficult to see his daughter and stepson and Yvonne was keen to be one big happy family.

**Figure 3 – Kate and Tom’s family**

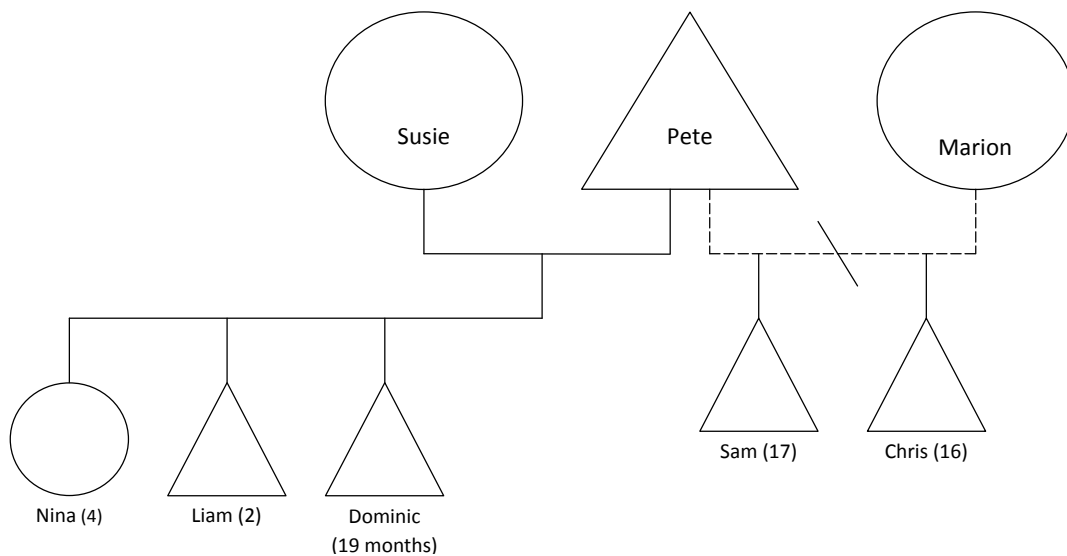


Kate’s parents divorced when she was an adult and her father, who she was very close to, had recently died. He had been very supportive when her first marriage ended and had provided a ‘father’ role to her children. Her father’s death had also coincided with discovering she was pregnant with Scott.

Kate had previously been married to Liam who was ‘quite a bit older’ than Kate. Kate had been stepmother to Liam’s two non-resident children and his stepson from a previous relationship. The children came to stay frequently and Kate did a lot to parent them as Liam ‘didn’t have a clue’. Liam had a habit of having affairs and finally left the marriage for a new partner.

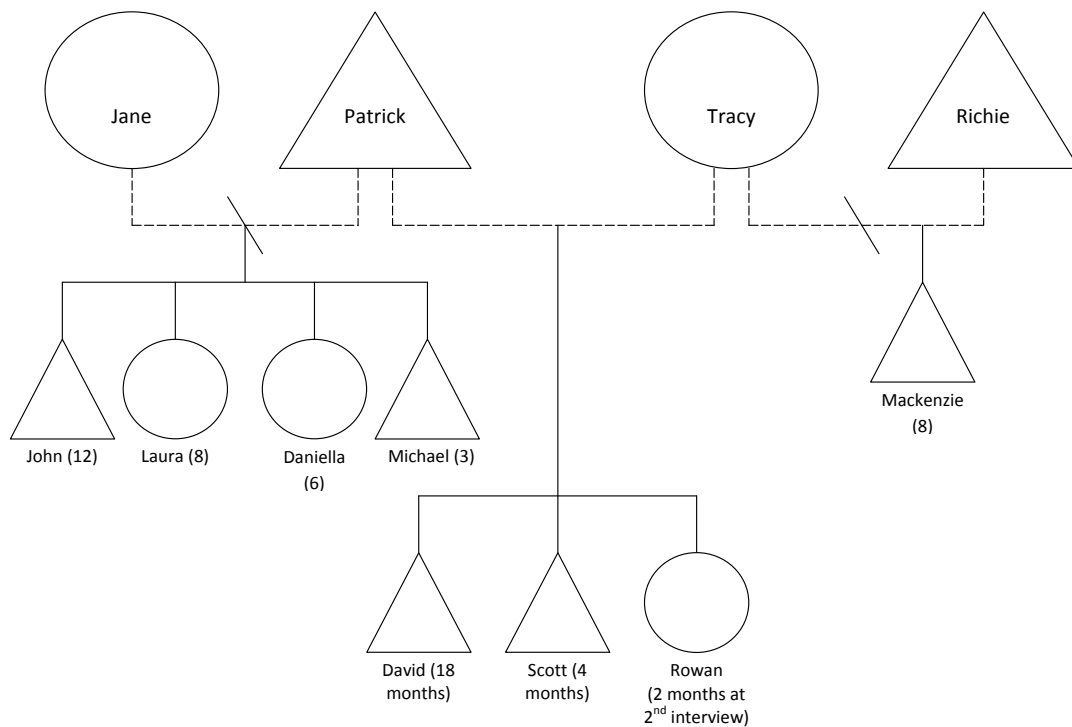
Tom, Kate’s new partner and father of Scott had lived at home with his parents until he had moved in with Kate. He was finding the transition from single man to father of three children quite difficult. Tom was unemployed and as Kate had a part time job Tom became the main carer on the days she was in work.

**Figure 4 Susie and Pete's family**



Susie was only eighteen when she left home and no longer had any contact with her parents, only her sister. Susie met Pete and fell in love with him and her move into Pete's home 'just sort of happened'. Pete's ex-partner and mother to his two children had some kind of mental health problem with a suggestion of alcohol misuse and had left the family home. Pete had been managing Sam and Chris as a lone parent until Susie agreed to move in and help him out. So Susie became a stepmother at eighteen and found it a struggle, constantly plaguing herself as to whether she could have been a better stepmother. Susie and Pete had been married for several years and had three children together. Pete was currently in work doing driving jobs.

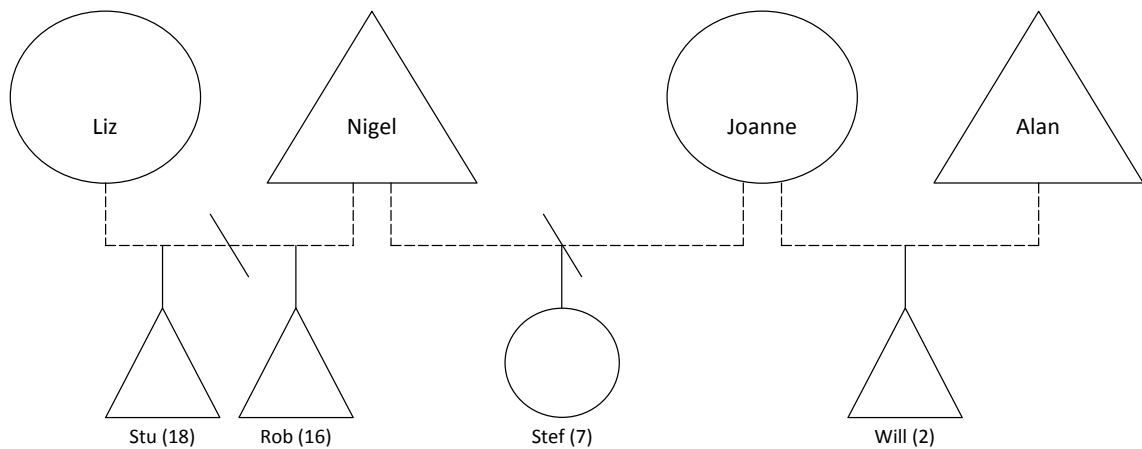
**Figure 5 Patrick and Tracy's family**



Patrick and Tracy, parents of seven children at the first interview and eight at the second interview were the largest family in the study. They were a complex stepfamily, with both parents bringing children into the relationship, and then having three children between them. Patrick had increasingly taken over most of the parenting in his previous relationship with Jane as she became dependent on alcohol. He was supported by his mother with whom he had a very close relationship. Patrick had been an only child and his mother had been a lone parent. Patrick and Tracy had been given residence of Patrick's children and managed to be re-housed across the street from Patrick's mother who helped a lot with the children. Tracy was from a large stepfamily, her mother was still together with her stepfather. Tracy now had an amicable relationship with her ex-partner and father of Mackenzie. At the time of the first interview Patrick was undertaking a computer course and at the time of the second interview he had a job with computers two days a week.



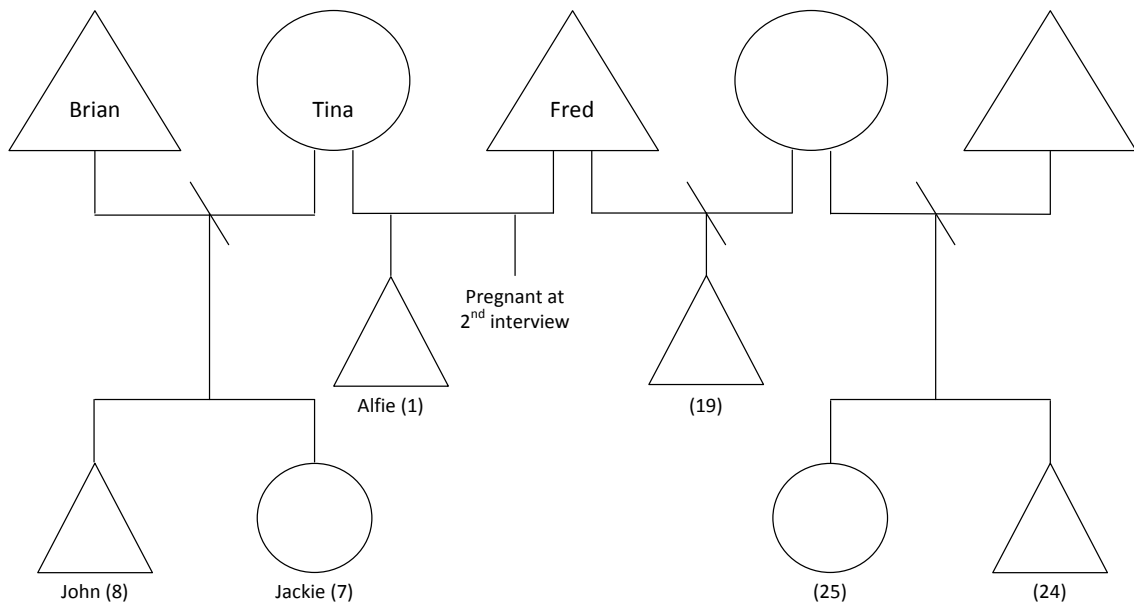
**Figure 6 Joanne and Alan's family**



Joanne had lived with Nigel with whom she had Stef. The relationship had always been turbulent and despite several separations and reunions with each other Joanne had finally left Nigel. Prior to her relationship with Alan she had been a lone parent and received a lot of help and support from her parents [now divorced] during that time. Due to her parents' care of Stef, Joanne had managed to work a part time job which she still maintained, which she said gave her some independence, confidence and a bit of money.

Joanne then met Alan with whom she had her second child, two year old Will. Alan's mother had died when he was seven years old and he had gone to live with his aunt [his mother's sister] who had been 'unable to have children'. However, Alan's aunt went on to have two children and Alan felt that he was pushed out and not treated as kindly as he had been prior to his cousins' arrival. At the time of the interviews he was finding Stef's behaviour difficult. Stef saw a lot of her father and stayed over at his house where there were 'no rules'. While Joanne realised Stef had to have a relationship with her father, she found the continuous interactions with him difficult.

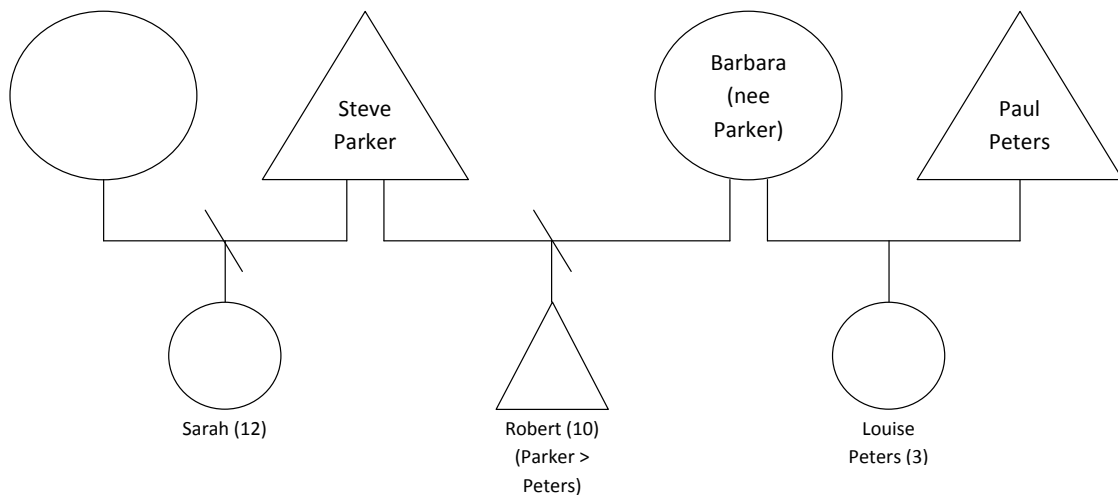
**Figure 7: Tina and Fred's family**



Tina was much younger than Fred who had been married twice before and had three grown up children. Fred was away from home quite a lot on driving jobs and Tina found parenting on her own difficult. Tina's parents and aunt lived locally and helped out as much as they could with the children. Tina had attended the local Sure Start Children's Centre who had encouraged her to undertake maths and literacy courses. Tina had enjoyed these, particularly the social interaction and having some respite from Alfie.

John and Jackie didn't see much of their father. His visits were irregular and often despite having made arrangements to see his children, he failed to arrive. John in particular found this difficult and his behaviour after his father's failed visits was difficult for Tina to manage.

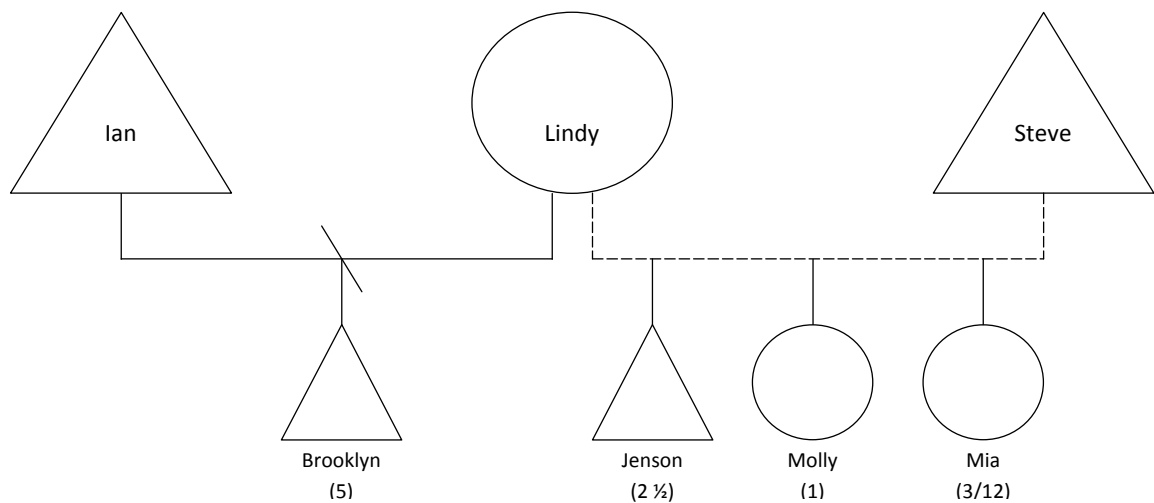
**Figure 8: Barbara and Paul's family**



Barbara was in a relationship with Steve when she became pregnant with Robert. Barbara thought it important that they marry. Her marriage to Steve was difficult. Steve already had a daughter and Barbara became a stepmother at a young age. Barbara fled with Robert from the relationship when Robert was a baby as Steve began to mistreat her. After a while as a lone parent she met Paul and they married and had Louise together. Paul was 'like a big brother' to Robert, playing football with him and generally 'messing about'. When Barbara was pregnant with Louise, Paul was worried in case he wouldn't love his biological child as much as his stepson.

Barbara worked a few hours a week as a volunteer at the local Sure Start Children's Centre. Paul was four years younger and had lived at home with his parents and brother until he moved in with Barbara. Paul had occasional driving jobs.

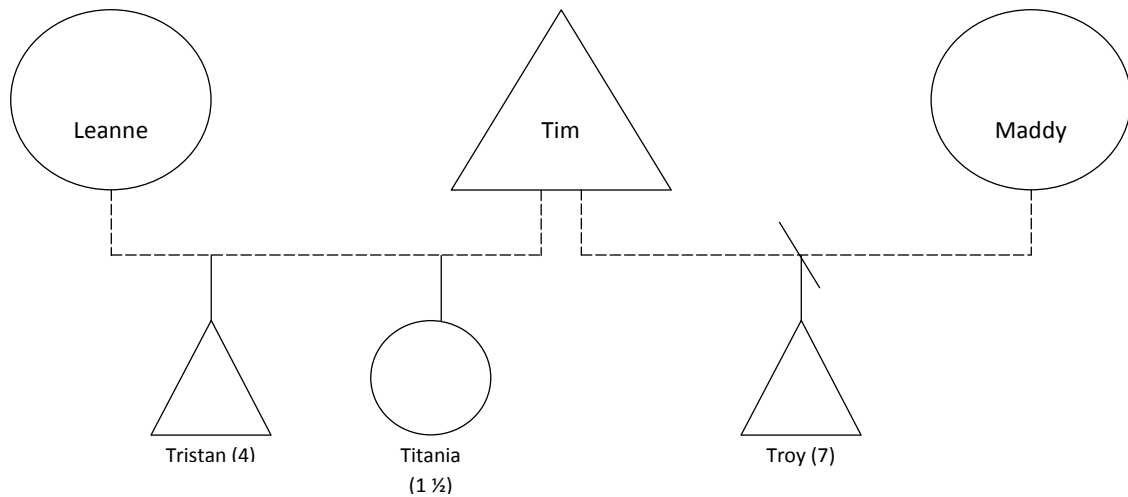
**Figure 9: Lindy and Steve's family**



Lindy had been brought up in a stepfamily as had Steve and their families were closely interconnected. Lindy's father now lived with Steve's mother. Lindy had a difficult and acrimonious relationship with her previous partner, Ian and father of Brooklyn, which continued and prior to the interview Ian had poured a can of paint over Steve and Lindy's car. In spite of this Ian still saw Brooklyn regularly.

Lindy and Steve lived with their four children in a small two bedroomed, third floor flat and Lindy was desperate to be re-housed. Their employment status was not revealed.

**Figure 10 – Leanne and Tim’s family**



Leanne had left home at a young age and had a poor relationship with her mother. Leanne had moved in with Tim who already had a child to Maddy. Maddy was quite an intrusive presence in Leanne and Tim’s relationship and they co-parented Troy at least 50% of the time. Tristan had recently started at the same school as Troy attended and so Leanne saw her stepson and Maddy almost every day. Leanne didn’t find this easy as Troy frequently asked if he could stay at their house when he wasn’t due to. His mother, Maddy also often asked if he could stay as she was developing a new relationship. Leanne did not have much contact with her mother and was reliant on Tim’s mother to help with the children. Leanne and Tim were hoping to get married the following May. Tim worked for a carpenter.

## 2.11 Data Collection And Data Analysis

Susie: People distinguish all the time that you're not a family. We had that happening. So although we were trying very much just to be a family, to be, you know, that yes they had a mam living somewhere else, but also they've got a mam here and they've got their dad here and we were trying in every sense to be a family. But people, like your [Pete's] family and school as well, distinguish between you, you know, you are dad and I'm not, you know I'm not their mam.

[Interview 4a: 949-955]

In order to enable and encourage parents like Susie to articulate their perceptions and experiences of being a parent in a marginalised stepfamily, data needed to be collected sensitively. The following focuses on the data collection and analysis processes, with my reflexive musings on the experiences delivered with a 'critical self scrutiny' Mason (2002:7). Active reflexivity and 'dialogue with field incidents, contingencies and discoveries' (Gobo 2004:417) are a key aspect of good research practice and enhance validity. Furthermore, I demonstrate the breadth and depth of the data analysis process alongside transparency, which again enhances validity and demonstrates rigour.

### **Processes, procedures and influences on data collection**

The process of generating data was similar across the interviews. Generally after an initial 'warm up' conversation I gained a 'feel' for the parents and hopefully they gained a 'feel' for me. I re-explained the nature of the study, the confidentiality and anonymity issues and the consent form including withdrawal from the study, all of which I had initially discussed on the 'phone. I apologised for the formality of the forms and explained the rationale underpinning this. I checked whether they were still comfortable and willing to take part and explained that the process could be stopped at any time, through the interview or afterwards and then I obtained written consent.

I began the interviews by asking the parents who was in their stepfamily, partly as an icebreaker, but also in order to formulate the genograms. There were various tensions for me, for example wanting to locate myself as a

sensitive and interested researcher, listening and responding to whatever was given to me, yet being schooled in the 'established' models of positivist issues of 'good and bad' interview practice (Silverman 2006:113), where for example a list of prompts is essential. I concurred and compiled an aide-mémoire, but in the event I didn't refer to it. Whilst I had not used a loosely structured interview style before in a research setting, I soon realised that my usual approach to interacting with parents as a health visitor was 'loosely structured'. That is, while I might have a formal framework / protocol to work through I used my own idiosyncratic style to work as closely as possible in a partnership approach so as not to alienate parents.

As the interviews progressed I became more comfortable in using my usual style and approach, but sometimes there were aspects that I felt I could improve upon. For example, I realised early in the interview process that the notion of an 'interview' to the parents meant a formal, organised, structured set of questions. I explained that instead I wanted them 'to tell their story of what it was like to be a parent in a stepfamily'. I aimed to create a non-threatening atmosphere and in the majority of interviews [apart from Lindy's below] the parents, after an initial hesitation and awkwardness, soon relaxed into their stories and appeared to feel safe, enabled by the loosely structured interview approach.

I was open and honest and answered questions asked of me by the parents which in turn enabled their 'silent voices' to be heard. In terms of the research relationship I cannot deny that I felt a closer affinity and invested my personal identity into some interviews more than others. There were similarities between some of the mothers and myself, as I like many of them had been a single parent and was now a parent in a stepfamily experiencing very similar parenting issues. But there were also differences – I was a middle class woman, a researcher and a health visitor.

## **Children**

Practical considerations had to be managed, for example where to sit without redesigning the parents' home, which was reminiscent of health visiting. On most occasions babies and / or young children were present [table 2:55] and presented challenges about where to place the digital recorder which looked like a mobile 'phone and consequently was very inviting to young children. While in five of the interviews the children were of an age where they frequently wanted attention, this was not generally a hindrance or divergence. Moreover, none of the children were old enough [table 4:58] to cognitively process what was being said and consequently the parents did not appear inhibited by the presence of children and often disclosed sensitive personal information. Indeed Yvonne cried at times during her interviews. As a health visitor I was used to managing these types of interactions with parents when children were present. I had paper and crayons with me as a way of diverting the children's attention if the parents were too pre-occupied to respond to the children's needs. Leanne's son was quite demanding of his mother's attention, but she and he seemed happy for me to supervise drawing tasks and his behaviour did not seem to impact on Leanne's flow during the interview.

In contrast Lindy's interview was problematic. It was the only one where the presence of others impacted on the interview. Lindy's flat was small and all four children were present with Brooklyn and Jensen running around and generally trying to attract Lindy's attention. Lindy presented as a quiet young mother, with little confidence and didn't relax throughout the interview and obviously felt ill at ease. Whether this was due to my interview style, me sitting on the floor [the only space], Brooklyn shouting so loudly that some of the interview was inaudible, or the fact that her 'mother in law', Audrey, was present was difficult to say, but I suspect the latter. Audrey appeared to view the interview as an opportunity to press for help with re-housing and attempted on several occasions to make the point that the flat was too small for such a big family. Lindy's responses were short and despite my use of open-ended questions and statements it was difficult to extrapolate her views.



The presence of a third person can 'undermine the validity' (Boeije 2004:3) of data in an interview context, and I made the decision that ethically it was not appropriate for me to expect Lindy to disclose sensitive / personal issues about her parenting support needs with Audrey present, and so I drew the interview to a close.

### **Single and couple interviews**

Apart from Lindy, the mothers appeared to want to talk about personal and sensitive issues in their stepfamily and four commented on how helpful it was to talk. It would have been interesting to know if the mothers were gatekeeping access to their partners, both in single interviews where their partners were not present and the ten interviews that I lost through attrition. Joint interviews are associated with a low response rate (Arskey 1996). For example, one mother agreed that she and her partner would participate, only to withdraw before the interview with the reason that her partner 'didn't feel it right to be talking about private things to somebody he didn't know', a finding also highlighted by other commentators (Walker et al 2010). Similar issues particularly with reference to accessing working class men and stepfathers in particular, have been suggested by others (Brannen 1988; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003). Whilst this was frustrating it reflected the women's responsibility for, and power over, family life.

There are differences of opinion in the literature as to whether responses to questions are different if it is a joint interview compared with a single interview (Seale, Chatteris-Black, Dumelow *et al* 2008). Arksey's (1996) discussion of the social research literature on joint interviews indicated that they were qualitatively different from single interviews, the former being less well understood. Seymour, Dix and Eardley (1995) stated that a joint interview is produced through a jointly constructed response and a single interview is literally an individual construction. Whereas Seale, Chatteris-Black, Dumelow *et al* (2008) simply suggested that a joint interview is one interviewer with two respondents.

Seymour, Dix and Eardley (1995) suggested that sensitive issues and personal disclosure is facilitated better through single interviews. However, Morris (2001) found no difference and suggested in a single interview one partner might infer views of the other partner which can't be corroborated. Moreover, the interviewer in a couple interview gains a more rounded view of the relationship or a 'jointness' (Morris 2001). Yet it has been suggested that when two people are present in an interview their concentration might not be as good as when they are on their own and also they might want to avoid dissension (Huby and Dix 1992). Certainly Mason (1988) highlighted the general belief that joint interviews produce more consensual data. Boeije (2004) similarly suggested that respondents might avoid criticising the spouse and also may be reticent to share information that was critical of oneself.

Gender appears to be an important issue when considering self disclosure in joint and single interviews. Coates (2004) summary of the literature found [contrary to popular belief] that women did not necessarily talk more than men, rather that men demonstrated significant quantitative dominance in a variety of mixed sex settings. In contrast Seale, Chatteris-Black, Dumelow *et al's* (2008) study found that women's perspectives were more prominent in joint interviews and suggested that in order to discover men's experiences about fatherhood that single interviews might be better (Seale, Chatteris-Black, Dumelow *et al* 2008:115). However, as the latter stated the topic of their interviews was child health and pregnancy and as such it was not unexpected that women had more to say.

Throughout my study I have followed Seale, Chatteris-Black, Dumelow *et al's* (2008) philosophy, where they do not claim or assume that either joint or single interviews are more valid than another, rather the important factor is what the researcher does with the data. I return to this issue of validity below [2.17]. In my study the couple interviews presented differently to the single interviews, partly by virtue of two people being present, but also due to the dynamics between the couple, each one being different. Two couples [Becci and Bill, Kate and Tom], whilst very different in personality, presented as couples in tension with each other. With Becci and Bill there appeared to be

power and control issues. Arskey's (1996) review of the literature suggested that women may feel intimidated, particularly by men who speak on behalf of the couple. However, while Bill attempted this approach, Becci often interrupted Bill before he had finished his sentence and she didn't present as a woman who was inhibited by her husband. They were both very open about the pressures on their relationship caused by Bill's stepdaughter. While Becci's focus was on both the financial pressures of Laura and her difficult adolescent behaviour, for Bill it was purely the financial aspect, with blame being focused on the CSA. Overt conflict during a joint interview is the exception rather than the rule (Jordan et al 1992). It has also been suggested that individuals use a joint interview to legitimate or justify their actions (Radley and Billig 1996), and I had a strong feeling that this was the case for Becci. However, it was interesting to note that at the second interview with only Becci present her views were exactly the same.

In contrast Kate and Tom were more respectful of each other's statements, to the point where Tom frequently echoed or repeated what Kate had said about parenting in a stepfamily. However, when it came to discussion of the impact of parenting on the couple relationship I had the strong impression that Tom was using the interview to convey his views that he and Kate really needed some protected couple time. Joint interviews have been found to be a better medium for enabling men to disclose sensitive issues, than single interviews with a stranger (Seymour, Dix, and Eardley 1995).

Other couples [Susie and Pete, Barbara and Dave, Patrick and Tracy] displayed different couple dynamics. For example Barbara appeared to be the dominant partner and almost adopted a 'mother' role with Dave, but despite this both Barbara and Dave and Patrick and Tracy demonstrated agreement and were united in their opinions or 'rhetorical practices of jointness' (Arksey 1996), on parenting in a stepfamily. Susie and Pete in contrast had different opinions, but still managed to convey a united front as they respectfully listened to each other's views and agreed to differ.

## 2.13 Tensions

Issues of recruitment, access to stepfamilies and temporal pressures have been highlighted and this was a particularly frustrating part of the study. The number of 'no access' visits was increasing and I began to grasp the reality of deviating from 'idealistic rules and statements of ethical practice' (Ryen 2004: 219). The following gives an indication of some of the tensions I experienced.

I had arranged to visit a mother and I was unaware that the health visitor had been trying to contact me to inform me that the mother's daughter had been in hospital and the mother wished to cancel the visit. I arrived at her flat and introduced myself and was immediately made aware of the issue. I offered to return another time, but I felt anxious about the mother who presented as tired, emotional and close to tears. I automatically reacted as I would with anybody 'in need' and was invited in. The initial interaction was focused on her concerns over her daughter's health. I used my professional judgement as a health visitor (Appleton and Cowley 2003, 2004, 2008) and prioritised her needs over the interview agenda and encouraged her to talk through the multitude of issues. She appeared very tired and obviously at a low ebb, but she offered to do the interview. I suggested a return visit, but she appeared to want to talk about her problems with her stepson and she turned to me for advice. This presented as a dilemma for me as I slipped in and out of health visitor mode into researcher mode. I realised that I had made an immediate choice / decision and whether that was ethical or not 'depends on the judgement of what it takes to be ethically correct or not' (Ryen 2004:225). The messiness of trying to apply the rhetoric and theoretical ethical perspectives to the multiple realities of practice was difficult. I had to rely on my instincts as an experienced practitioner and my rationale of beneficence. I asked for permission to share with her health visitor her concerns over her daughter who had been in hospital, and reassured her that I would not discuss anything from the recorded interview. The health visitor was not her concern, rather her anxiety and concern over confidentiality was that her partner's family might discover her disclosure about her stepfamily problems. Whilst I had explained to her the nature of confidentiality, the ethical code and

the process of anonymity and confidentiality in storage, transcription and dissemination I realised that I had used the unhelpful phrase 'published in journals'. The mother thought I meant the local newspaper, 'The Journal'. I apologised for my error and several times offered to delete the recording. At the end of the interview I again reiterated my offer, and explained that if she wanted to renege, to contact me. However, she said she had found it 'good to talk' and if it could 'help others it was worthwhile'.

The reality of reciprocity which I aimed for in the interviews came to the fore on one occasion and made me question my apparent reciprocity. I had 'phoned one of the parents from home to make an appointment to see her and her husband. I was on holiday from work and left a message saying I would 'get back to her'. I did not leave my number. However, she must have retrieved my number and 'phoned me back to arrange an appointment. I was not prepared for the discomfort and feeling of intrusion and invasion of privacy that I felt. How must parents feel when I invaded their private, personal space? Other commentators have raised the challenges, sensitivities, caution and vulnerability of both the researcher and participants in the public / private / personal conundrum (Edwards and Ribbens 1998: Mauthner 1998). Researching a publicly invisible relationship, which is often the case with stepfamilies, in the private world, where private and personal issues are exposed and the researcher is located between each world, 'is not without its costs' (Mauthner 1998:42).

Another tension that concerned me was safeguarding issues. On three occasions I felt uncomfortable with the lack of child safety [garden gate opening straight out onto a pavement and road where cars and the local bus travelled; asthma medication in reach of an active toddler; and finally one house so cold that it had to be well below the recommended temperature]. On each occasion I reflected on my role as a researcher who happened to also be a health visitor. How could I separate the two? I couldn't. Being a health visitor was part of my identity. I reverted to my health visitor skills of intuitive, yet rational professional judgement (Appleton and Cowley 2003, 2004, 2008), which whilst viewed by some as an oxymoron, involved taking

risks. As a health visitor for sixteen years, practising in disadvantaged settings I considered myself to be a 'critical practitioner' (Barnett 1997:105) where:

Professionals have the duty to profess. But professing in a post-modern age calls for the capacity to be open to multiple discourses and to engage, albeit critically, with them.

(Barnett 1997:143-4)

As such, I decided that on balance, in the chaotic lives of trying to manage stepfamily life on a minimal income, the children were not 'at risk'.

## **2.14 Respondent validation**

At the end of the interview I asked the parents if they would be happy for me to return to check out with them my interpretation and understanding of their accounts and the main themes of their interview. I was only too aware of the power I had in the research process generally, and more specifically I was interpreting the parents' perceptions and experiences. My plan was that after data analysis I would renegotiate access for a second visit for respondent validation of their themes. I explained that I would telephone them to ask if they were happy for me to send a CD of the recorded interview by special delivery requiring a signature, before my visit. All the parents agreed to this at the time, and several months later I was successful in re-visiting six of the parents. Some parents had moved and seemed temporarily to be lost in the system, some didn't return my calls, or after agreeing to my return were not in at the agreed time. In two cases the husbands [Tom and Paul], who had been present at the interview, agreed to tell their wives [Kate and Barbara] and contact me, but then in a reversal of roles they seemed to be the 'gatekeepers' and no further visits occurred. Perhaps one factor that conspired against me re-accessing the parents was Brannen's (1988) finding that respondents are more likely to acquiesce to a 'one-off' interview as that gives more security than follow up interviews.

However, whilst this was another frustrating period, there was a positive. The six that I returned to were happy for me to record the interaction as I was anxious that I would not be able to record everything on paper. Moreover, I was concerned that it would be intrusive and potentially create a barrier to good conversational flow. In the event the second interactions generated a rich source of further data as the parents had generally had eventful lives with one partner in prison, one separated, one working as a part-time teaching assistant, one with another child, one pregnant and the final one – seemingly status quo. Mindful of literacy issues and complex theoretical constructs I made a conscious decision not to disadvantage them with whole reams of my analyses, rather I gave them a list of their general themes in bullet points to use as a catalyst for discussion. The general themes were largely validated with only minor adjustments. I was cognisant of Skeggs (1994:86) findings that her respondents '[couldn't] understand a bloody word it says'.

In Susie's first interview this situation was reversed, as it was I who struggled to understand the essence of what she was saying at times. The first few times of listening to her interview I felt despondent. But the more I listened to her story, the more I began to pick up rich threads of data that I was then able to interweave together to present a coherent set of themes. During respondent validation I discussed my interpretation of her interview with her and she began to look visibly relieved as she reported that after listening to her transcript, she had been embarrassed about her 'garbled stuff'. Moreover, she reported that my interpretation helped her see what she had been trying to articulate.

Whilst my approach to respondent validation could be criticised as a tokenistic attempt, it was my response to a situated reality that worked in terms of not alienating the parents. Some commentators have highlighted reservations about the usefulness of respondent validation, but do concede the usefulness of creating more data (Bloor 1997:45; Bryman 2008:377). I could not assert that the parents' accounts were epistemologically privileged as respondent validation is rife with control issues such as disagreement of findings (Mason 2002:193). As Abrams (1984:8 cited in Silverman 2006:293) suggested,

'overt respondent validation is only possible if the results of the analysis are compatible with the self-image of the respondents'.

However, the opportunistic data collection of respondent validation did present further challenges. In terms of temporal issues I couldn't keep returning for respondent validation and as all parents had agreed with my interpretations they said they were happy for me to interpret their views a second time. Whilst this was not perfect, in terms of the pragmatics of 'a situated methodology' it was realistic. In return for sharing their rich perceptions and experiences and their time [on average 1.5 hours] with me, I sent a letter of thanks including a small gift token for 'Boots'. This had always been my intention, but I had not informed the local ethics committee or the parents in case I was accused of coercion.

## **2.15 Post interview**

After most interviews I drove away from the house and parked in another place where I could cogitate / ruminate. This was a habit I had developed whilst practising as a health visitor, particularly after challenging interactions. The need for reflection on action (Schon 1983:62) has always been an important facet of my practice. I made notes in my notebook in order to maintain the essence of my thoughts, perceptions and feelings. Notes included initial impressions of the parents and their stepfamily situation. The notes were a summary and varied between different interviews.

As soon as was feasible I listened to the full interview carefully and made notes. Picking up intonation, silences, remembering were there had been significant issues, for example a hostile look or a smile from one partner to another [Becci and Bill], signs of nervousness for example Kate constantly patting Scott's back. There was a particular surreal moment when Yvonne was recounting sensitive, personal and difficult issues and the window cleaner was behind her, with the window open, and I asked her if she would like to take a break, but she declined.



## **Transcriptions**

An experienced transcriber transcribed a verbatim record of each interview. Anonymity was maintained with R1= respondent 1, R2= respondent 2 and I=interviewer. Where the transcriber could not decipher words a \_\_\_ was made and short pauses indicated as ... in the transcription. On receipt of the transcription I then carefully checked that the audio version and the written words matched up, and simultaneously replaced R1, R2 and other names apart from mine with pseudonyms to keep the data real. Hard copies of transcriptions were kept in a locked drawer at work and electronic documents password protected both at home and work. I corrected any errors and I also inserted words where the transcriber had left gaps, but where I understood what had been said.

The transcripts were coded in a simple numerical scale 1-10 in chronological order, with second interviews coded 1a, 2b etc. Each interview had a colour code, which followed the mnemonic Richard Of York Gained Battle In Vain and then brown, purple and finally lilac and I inserted page and line numbers. The colour codes enabled quick and simple identification of the stepfamily in the data extract at the coding and thematic stages.

I also annotated the transcripts with my notes and ideas that I had made immediate post interview looking for patterns, meanings, contradictions and I jotted these down in the margins as potential codes. Some of these, for example power and control stayed as codes, whilst others, for example the moral code, omnipresent in the literature and policy started as a consistent code and finally became a theme - intimations of [im]morality.

### **2.16 Data analysis: analytic considerations and process**

Whilst there appeared to be literature explaining how to manage qualitative data analysis, there was a paucity of literature explaining the 'intellectual processes' involved in 'generating findings' (Spencer, Ritchie, O'Connor 2003:200). What follows is a detailed account of the technical processes I conducted to achieve analysis of the data and explains the decisions I made

with accompanying rationale, so as to make the data analysis process transparent. This is part of a two pronged approach with a discussion on my reflexivity in the following section (2.17).

My theoretical interests required detailed analysis of particular aspects of the data, and so a theoretical thematic analysis fitted neatly. Amongst qualitative commentators there were semantic differences in describing thematic analysis as a qualitative analytic 'method' (Braun and Clarke 2006) or 'tool' (Boyatzis 1998), yet there was generic agreement as to its flexibility and theoretical grounding. As such, thematic analysis is:

... a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns [themes] within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data in [rich] detail.

(Braun and Clarke 2006)

I initially considered using the NVIVO computer software package, but I viewed it at best as possibly facilitative, but ultimately a cumbersome approach to organising my data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996:172). I decided to take the manual route of building my own filing system for reducing, organising and analysing the data.

I was influenced and encouraged in the data analysis process by commentators who identified practical contexts of interpretation and adopted 'pragmatic' approaches to analysis. My approach to data analysis was eclectically informed by the work of Mason (2002), Spencer, Ritchie and O'Connor (2003) and Braun and Clarke (2006), who broke down the processes into specific stages and the latter two had devised their own models. These approaches were consistent with my ontological and epistemological perspectives and consequently influenced my approach to data analysis. Ontologically I needed to be clear about the phenomena my indexing categories / codes represented or constituted instances of (Mason 2002:154). So, for example my ontological perspective of multiple realities [bio-psycho-socio-cultural-historico-politico] meant that my indexing codes should represent aspects of these influences. Elements that I needed to

extract from the data included parents' perceptions, attitudes, understandings, behaviours, experiences and practices and generally how they made sense of their world. Moreover, my epistemological assumptions reflected not only knowledge emanating from the parents [practice focused empirical study], but also from the literature and policy [library study] and potentially these would be reflected in the titles of the final themes. As such I adopted a combination of literal, interpretive and reflexive indexing codes with a particular emphasis on the latter two approaches (Mason 2002:149).

In order to apply concepts to the data I utilised cross-sectional coding which 'involves devising a consistent system for indexing the whole of a data set according to a set of common principles' (Mason 2002:150). This was a practical way of finding thematic data where for example parents' thoughts on their stepchildren did not generally follow a sequential pattern, as with the example of Susie above. Whilst this enabled me to use the same 'lens' to explore patterns and themes across my data set (Mason 2002:165), I also needed to look at discrete parts of my data. For example, there were key themes that were common across the data set, but for some parents one of these themes might be of much more significance in terms of its impact on their everyday lives as a stepfamily. Consequently, I also used non cross-sectional organisation, which being particularly suited to theoretical sampling enabled me to look at specific parts of the data (Mason 2002: 165-167). As a result my data organisation was guided by both: a) cross sectional data indexing in order to devise my categories cross sectionally across the whole of the data set and b) non-cross-sectional in order to build particular case studies and thus explanations based on two alternative ways of data organisation (Mason 2002: 165-167). As Mason (2002: 165-168) stated one does not necessarily have to do case study research to be able to identify contexts within the data for analytical purposes to produce explanations of processes or practices. Consequently in chapters 5, 6, and 7 the data are presented interwoven with case studies to illustrate, exemplify and explain the centrality of certain themes.

I had underestimated how long the analysis period would take. I had amassed field notes and hundreds of pages of seemingly, in some places, unyielding data, but simultaneously some initial themes appeared to be sprouting forth, for example problems with stepchildren. Before I could organize the data I needed to gain an overview of the data and then interpret them in order to generate themes or concepts. There were clearly two overarching meta themes: stepfamily life and stepfamily relationships.

During this stage I kept my research question and research purposes literally pinned to the wall of my study, to remind myself of the focus and possible leads. Simultaneously I continued reading the literature, cognisant of key themes for example morality, and looking for these theoretical leads in the parents' data and my notes. Whilst some commentators viewed this as useful (Strauss and Corbin 1990), Charmaz (2008:104) cautioned that it might 'bring premature closure to your analysis', which I was cognisant of.

I scrutinised the transcripts line by line repeatedly reading the entire data set and detected a series of recurring themes throughout. I bracketed them in the text and then I devised an indexing [categorizing, coding] system, making a file for each theme on the computer and collated the appropriate data extracts that demonstrated that theme under each theme with definitions. For example, collated under the theme 'demonisation / vilification' were literal explanations of competition with a non-resident parent; interpretive patterns representing hints of sexual abuse and from a reflexive aspect, both my encouraging and sympathetic responses and those that seemed to close issues down. Moreover, contradictions and oppositions were also coded, for example powerlessness and responsibility became themes.

I continually read and re-read the data and initially an index with thirty-five themes developed which was quite messy in places, where sometimes I had several themes within one paragraph. Whilst it was aided with the different colour codes of the interviews, the page and line numbers I needed a more coherent system.

Moreover, there were superfluous data which were distracting me away from the main themes. I began to refine the themes into 'sub' themes and 'main' themes. The main themes were coded 1-7 thus:

1. parenting in a stepfamily
2. identity
3. fragile resiliencies
4. silent voices
5. moral code
6. PS needs
7. miscellaneous

I then moved the sub themes into the main themes and coded them 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and so on. Moving the sub themes into main themes and discarding the superfluous themes was a continuous iterative movement across the data, checking and re-checking the fit. In this stage I kept quite a lot of the surrounding data in order to contextualise it (Bryman 2001), but not so much that it became unwieldy. At times it was messy as one paragraph of data could potentially read 1.5, 2.3, 5.1. Moreover, many data were coded more than once as some of the [sub]themes interconnected across different themes. So, for example 'couple relationship' was in the 'silent voices' theme as well as in the 'fragile resiliencies' theme. In order for me to see the relationships between the data more easily, I devised a thematic structure of the data in a matrix format [table 5:88]. Each main theme and its [sub]themes were placed on one chart. Furthermore, within the themes there were wide ranges and dimensions of the data, which needed further refining and so where appropriate I refined the issues and aspects of the main themes. So, for example a [sub]theme of 'creating new histories' in the theme of 'fragile resiliencies' contained different dimensions to the same [sub]theme in the theme of 'identity'. As I continued to refine the data what became even more apparent was that the themes were not discrete units, rather they presented as interconnected and interrelated pervasive links each one interdependent on one or more other[s]. For example the moral code was a constant throughout all the themes.

Whilst I had underestimated how labour intensive the data organisation stage was, I began to really understand the terms 'immersion in the data' or 'assigning meaning' process (Spencer, Ritchie and O'Connor 2003:222). The more I listened to, read and re-read the data I moved from moments of despair, when the process felt tedious and technical and at times nothing seemed to 'emerge', to elation when I began to see patterns across the data set and there was an occasional 'eureka' moment.

I followed Mason's (2002:160) advice and had a 'trial run'. I wrote a paper and gave some presentations [appendix 2] on the moral code theme, that helped me develop a more insightful understanding of not only its pervasiveness across the different data sets, but also in the literature and policy and ultimately helped me to contextualise the theme.

Moreover, on occasions there were key expressions / terms used by the parents that reminded me of the essence of their sentiments. For example Tracy's use of 'the hurdles' synthesised for me the theme of having to cope with and get over / through the parenting issues. As such, from the initial thirty-five themes I reduced them down to the following six themes:

1. the hurdles: parenting issues and practices
2. [un]clear families, [un]clear roles
3. fragile resiliencies
4. silent voices
5. intimations of [im]morality
6. parenting support

The following table summarises the analytic process:

**Table 5: A summary of the thematic structure of the data**

<b>META THEMES</b>	<b>THEMES</b>	<b>ISSUES / ASPECTS</b>	<b>DIMENSIONS / RANGES</b>	
<b>STEPFAMILY LIFE and STEPFAMILY RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>I. The Hurdles: Parenting Issues and Practices</b>	1. Transitions and adjustments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Old Histories</li> <li>∠ New Histories</li> </ul>	
		2. Parenting styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Authoritative</li> <li>∠ Laissez-faire</li> </ul>	
		3. Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Maladjustment</li> <li>∠ Medicalisation</li> <li>∠ Struggling</li> <li>∠ Managing</li> </ul>	
		<b>II. [Un]clear Families, [Un]clear Roles</b>	1. Gendered Parenting Roles and Identities (Mothering and Fathering)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Responsibility</li> <li>∠ Powerlessness</li> <li>∠ Abdication</li> <li>∠ Responsibility</li> <li>∠ Normalised</li> <li>∠ Pathologised</li> </ul>
			2. Respectability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Disciplinary Gaze</li> <li>∠ Normalised Judgements</li> <li>∠ Clinical Gaze</li> </ul>
		<b>III. Fragile Resiliencies</b>	1. Growing up in a Stepfamily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Favouritism</li> <li>∠ Resentment</li> <li>∠ Demon</li> <li>∠ Victim</li> </ul>
			2. Experience as a Step-parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ The Ties that Bind</li> <li>∠ Responsibilities</li> </ul>
			3. Complexity of Parent's Relationship Histories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Old Partners</li> <li>∠ New Children</li> </ul>
			4. The Couple Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Pulling Apart</li> <li>∠ Working Together</li> </ul>
	5. The Juxtaposition of the Stepmother and Couple Relationship		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Responsibility</li> <li>∠ Powerlessness</li> </ul>	

META THEMES	THEMES	ISSUES / ASPECTS	DIMENSIONS / RANGES	
<b>STEPFAMILY LIFE and STEPFAMILY RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>IV. Silent Voices</b>	1. Internal Couple Dynamics and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Romance</li> <li>∠ Reality</li> <li>∠ Power Struggles</li> <li>— Independence</li> <li>— Reconciliation</li> <li>— Mutual Respect and Love</li> </ul>	
		2. Stories Lived and Stories Told	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Stories Lived</li> <li>— Unknown Stories</li> <li>— Untold Stories</li> <li>— Unheard Stories</li> <li>— Untellable Stories</li> <li>— Stories Told</li> </ul>	
		<b>V. Intimations of [Im]morality</b>	1. Creating Moral Reputations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ External Influences</li> <li>∠ Internal Influences</li> </ul>
			2. Creating Immoral Others	— Inverse Cinderella Law
			3. Caring and Gendered Moral Rationalities	— Demonisation
		<b>VI. In the Dark: Parenting Support Needs</b>	1. Professional Support	— Unhelpful
		2. Non-professional Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∠ Family</li> <li>∠ Talking to Others</li> </ul>	
		3. Managing	— Respectability	
		4. Class	— Morality	
		5. Resistance	— Inequalities	



## **2.17 The issues of validity, reliability and generalisability**

Throughout the research design and process I have aimed to make a 'convincing argument' through 'a detailed, contextual and multi-layered discussion' (Mason 2002:175). One of the thorny issues for qualitative researchers has always been ensuring validity, reliability and in some cases generalisability. My approach to confirming validity has been based on a systematic and transparent audit trail with reflexivity central to that process. For example the detailed explanation of just how I undertook the technical aspect of the data analysis process. However, a key factor remains - how the data is interpreted by the researcher (Seale, Chatteris-Black, Dumelow *et al's* 2008).

### **Foundations for my interpretation of the data: 'active reflexivity'**

The processes of interpreting the data and transforming private lives into public theories are key to assessing the validity of the theories (Mauthner and Doucet (1998). Throughout this chapter [and continuing throughout the study] I have highlighted the messy issues of the research / practice interface with 'active reflexivity' (Mason 2002:7).

This is based on the belief that a researcher cannot be neutral, or objective, or detached, from the knowledge and evidence they are generating. Instead, they should seek to understand their role in that process. Indeed, the very act of asking oneself difficult questions in the research process is part of the activity of reflexivity.

(Mason 2002:7)

By its very nature a situated methodology deals with theory production which is socially, culturally and historically situated resulting in 'situated knowledges' (Mauthner and Doucet 1998). These knowledges emanated not only from the parents, but also from me. In 'interpret[ing] the worlds and understandings of the [o]ther' (Ribbens and Edwards 1998:3), the interpretation is dependent on the researcher's reflexivity with the knowledge that research / practice boundaries can be blurred. As highlighted above and below I have been open and honest about the challenges within the data collection and analysis

process. Interpreting the data is a complex, troublesome, yet dynamic process. It is not a static process, rather ongoing. There were some parents who I identified with more closely than others. Some I was more sympathetic to, while with others I did not feel a close affinity. Whether this is viewed as bias depends on whether one is coming from an objective, positivist position or an interpretivist standpoint. Moreover, I made my subjectivity transparent, despite attempts within the Local Research Ethics Committee's process to silence my transparency.

At this point it is helpful to reiterate that my interpretations are situated within my ontological and epistemological perspectives which focus on:

- the library study of the literature and policy
- the practice study
  - the parents perceptions and experiences of their parenting support needs co-constructed with me
  - my reflexivity as a researcher, an academic, a health visitor, a woman, a biological parent and a parent in a stepfamily

Thus I co-created with the parents 'situated knowledges' where each of the parents' voices was accepted within the context in which it was given, that is time and context specific. I do not believe that they gave me a skewed version of events, rather an open and honest interpretation of their perceptions and experiences of parenting in their stepfamilies, which were complex and sometimes contradicted. Fundamentally I believed their stories. However, alongside this is the awareness that their voices are infused with my knowledges – my interpretation, doubtless with overlaps and seams. I am more than aware of the power I have as a researcher interpreting the voices of a powerless marginalised group, but in interpreting previously silent and private voices into public knowledge I have attempted to be transparent and honest within my personal reflexive accounts (Ribbens and Edwards 1998).

As such, throughout the research design I have signalled core principles enabling validity, reliability and rigour which are summarised here:

- The research design was founded on a firm philosophical, theoretical and methodological base, with decisions made openly articulated with corresponding reflexive rationale.
- A 'situated methodology' and method embraced the various 'sensitivities' and realities of the parents and their contexts in keeping with Mason's (2002:138) call for active searching of negative cases and contradictions.
- Practicalities and challenges of working through gatekeepers were exposed.
- The choice of theoretical sampling enabled the reality of the diversity of stepfamily formation to be included in all its manifestations.
- Loosely structured interviews to enable sensitivity to context where some parents would be encouraged to share personal stepfamily issues.
- A detailed account of the technical aspects of data analysis together with my reflexivity highlights the transparency of the process.
- Respondent validation with those parents who would oblige.
- My personal and practice background were exposed which gave me an empathic insight and understanding of some of the possible issues.

As highlighted with my sampling approach I did not aim for representational generalisation, but rather theoretical generalisation:

...which draws theoretical propositions, principles or statements from the findings of a study for more general application.

(Lewis and Ritchie 2003:264)

As such my findings could not be viewed as generalisable and could not be exactly represented in any other context, but hopefully they might inform other research studies and contribute to policy and practice.

## 2.18 Conclusion

The chapter has detailed my qualitative research design and the rationale for the choices I made. The utilisation of an interpretivist approach focused on a two part study consisting of a library study and a practice focused empirical study. The rationale underpinning the library study, [which begins in the following chapter and continues onto chapter four], was to provide an historical perspective of the literature on marginalised [step]families, policy and practice, which would inform contemporary understandings and moreover interconnect with the second part of the study, the practice focused empirical study. The aim of the latter was to elicit the voices of parents in marginalised stepfamilies in order to understand the reality they made of their world as previously their voices had barely been heard. The practice focused study was based on a real world situated methodology, which has been justified and strengthened with my epistemological and ontological beliefs laid bare. The choice of loosely structured interviews was a sensitive method of gathering rich data from a marginalised sample of parents in stepfamilies. Thematic analysis of the data elicited six main themes of parenting issues and practices in the stepfamilies.

Throughout the chapter I demonstrated my reflexive musings on my experiences with a 'critical self scrutiny' Mason (2002:7), which detail the challenges I faced and exemplifies both rigour in the research process and enhances validity. As such, I have been open and honest within my 'fallibilistic' (Seale 1999:6) account producing explanations that enable the messy issues of the real world to be transparent.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW: A GENEALOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Bill: You know if you think of the stepfamily situation it's like you're brought up with kiddie's stories about wicked stepmums and all this type of thing. I think people get conditioned that way, especially kids.

[Interview 1: 12-14]

#### 3.1 Introduction

As Bill's quote above demonstrates, historical perspectives, even in the form of fairy tales, can have a powerful influence. This chapter presents the first part of the library study [the second part follows in chapter four] and as such places emphasis on an historical review of the literature in order to inform not only contemporary theoretical, but also practice understandings, which will interconnect and inform the practice focused empirical project.

Utilising a loosely chronological / genealogical model I demonstrate the multi-dimensional influences impacting marginalised [step]families based on political ideology from pre-industrialisation, then exploring the industrial age through the World Wars [WW I and II] and post WW II and onto the mid 1990s. Within the historical periods outlined I focus on the following key areas:

- a brief social history of marginalised [step]families
- policy / state interaction with particular reference to marginalised [step]families
- parenting support in practice

A clear understanding of the drivers influencing the development of not only parenting support policy, but also practice and the concomitant impact on marginalised [step]families emerges throughout. Several discourses which interconnect will be highlighted exposing a central discourse of

governmentality. Foucault's studies in governmentality explained the concept thus:

...government has as its purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, etc.; and the means that the government uses to attain these ends are themselves all in some sense immanent to the population; it is the population itself on which government will act either directly through large-scale campaigns, or indirectly through technique that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people, the stimulation of birth rates, the directing of the flow of population into certain regions or activities, etc.; ... [the population] is also the object in the hands of the government, aware, vis-à-vis the government, of what it wants, but ignorant of what is being done to it.

(Foucault 1991:100)

Viewing the interplay between text, discourses and context, interwoven strands focusing on transitions in family form and function and the development of the concept of parenting support will unfold, demonstrating the evolution of the professionalisation of parenting.

For ease of presentation I have presented the politico-socio-cultural ideologies and discourses in a linear fashion and within discrete time frames. However, the reality is that they overlap, interconnect and criss-cross backwards and forwards into different chronological periods and should not be viewed in such a synchronized fashion or as an evolutionary history. For example, interwoven strands focusing on the interplay between context and governmentality with its inherent tensions and its different manifestations generally in the form of maternalism, familism, moralism and individualism, but also with occasional glimpses of imperialism, paternalism, medicalism and welfarism flow throughout the chronology of the literature review.

### **3.2 Pre-industrial revolution: familism**

The stepfamily was a normal occurrence due to the fragility of life, high mortality rates [childbirth, disease and war] which meant a short life span. Remarriage after death of a spouse was a common pragmatic occurrence.

Parenting support in the form of step-parenting was seen as a duty in Renaissance England [1530-1680] (Collins 1999). Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century families generally lived in small agrarian rural hamlets and villages. The pre-industrialised family form focused on the patriarchal family structure without distinction between familial, social and economic functions (Arensburg and Kimball 1968). Contrary to popular opinion such families were not private, self-contained, institutions (Aries 1973:345), rather their role was seen in terms of serfdom and their productivity towards the local landlord's food production or providing necessary military manpower at times of war. Collins (1999) commenting on 16<sup>th</sup> century publications on the family, suggested that the transmogrification of the family from a private to a public institution began in the Renaissance and not in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, other myths were dispelled such as families living in extended families, low social mobility, arranged marriages and the subordination of women commonplace. Rather there was a 'rough and ready' equality between men and women in the 'masses' (Szreter 2006).

Between 1576-1834 financial help for the impotent or deserving poor came from parishes empowered by the State in the form of the old Poor Law (Nutt 2006). Whilst the Poor Law took over fifty years to embed, it eventually 'provided a universal social security system', supporting different groups of marginalised people from orphans, young people leaving home, the aged and importantly did not vilify unmarried mothers (Szreter 2006). Despite these apparent charitable supportive actions commentators analysed the underpinning motives of State aid as pragmatic. For example, focusing on France in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, Donzelot (1979:9-12) highlighted the potential for the 'impoverishment of the nation' due to the huge infant mortality rate, as 'ninety per cent of these 'forces' died before having been made useful to the state'. It was essential to provide support to:

sav(e) these bastard children for eventual service in national endeavours such as colonization, the militia, and the navy, for which they would be perfectly suited owing to their lack of constricting ties.

(Donzelot 1979:9-12)

The social fabric of the day was changing (Collins 1999) with disruption of established domestic family and parenting arrangements threatened. Intimations of 'dysfunction' in stepfamilies began to emerge in the Renaissance. Despite Renaissance commentators advocating a continuation of the biological parent support role for step-parents, with an implied moral code based on Christian values, conflicts arose over inheritance, with affiliation to 'blood' kin rather than 'honorary' kin being paramount (Collins 1999). A contemporary proverb at the time was: 'He that marries a widow and three children, marries four thieves' (Ray 1670, cited in Manser 2006:624). Thus stepfathers were seen as saviours for saving the poor fatherless families, but stepmothers were vilified for their sexual allure which caused men to sometimes dispose of their wealth in unconventional ways (Collins 1999). The apparent tensions exposed the complexities of relationships within stepfamilies and together with a demonisation of stepmothers who exploited stepfathers, suggested an underlying discourse of familism and the superiority of the biological family.

### **3.3 The 1780s to WW1: moralism and maternalism**

With the continuation of high mortality rates, step-parenting with its grudges and feuds over inheritance had not abated. Demonisation of the stepfamily continued, amply demonstrated by the folklorists Brothers Grimm who in 1812 published the infamous fairy tales for the first time<sup>13</sup>. The sentiments of the tales reflect the socio-cultural beliefs of the time. Myths, such as Hansel and Gretel and Cinderella, recounted tales of failure, neglect, abandonment with devious and immoral behaviour, particularly by the step members of the family. In the original oral tradition of fairy tales the biological mother was the evil character, but Wilhelm Grimm transferred this role to the stepmother (Warner 2009). The literate middle and upper classes approved of the fairy tale, which was viewed as the harbinger of universal wisdom (Warner 2009). This discourse, passed onto children, provided a powerful social construction

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<sup>13</sup> As one of the best-known fairy tales, Cinderella has over three hundred and forty variations and can be traced back in oral traditions as far as ancient Roman times and ninth century China (Noy 1991:350).



of the stepfamily as different, dubious and marginal, which continues in present day (Jones 2003).

### **Public versus private spheres**

Industrialisation and urbanisation were developing and exerted major influences on family form and function. With the need for mobile large-scale cheap labour in centralised urban locations, the family, as in parents and their children became a useful labour commodity and so began the movement of small family units to different geographical locations. Some sociological commentators viewed industrialisation as being responsible for the demise of extended families and its consequent role in undermining communities (Thompson 1963). In contrast several commentators posited that the nuclear family was the norm until the industrial revolution, but with industrialisation and the move to industrial centres, small nuclear family units started living with relatives in overcrowded accommodation for pragmatic reasons such as high rent, low wages, sickness, periods of unemployment (Szreter 2006).

Parsons (1956) functionalist view of the family focused on the positive aspects of industrialisation and its fit with the nuclear family. Economic differentiation with multiple occupations and incomes, which is central to industrialised societies, would be incompatible with the extended family as conflicts might arise. However, small nuclear family units were viewed as more manageable and flexible within industrial economies, with more ability to be mobile and move for work without obligations to the extended family (Parsons 1956). Moreover, Parsons described the necessity for efficiency in the workplace or public sphere, which needed different values to those that characterised family life or the private sphere. As such a clear demarcation between roles within the workplace and those in the household were necessary. Consequently gendered role segregation at home, usually a male bread winner and female home keeper, was compatible with industrialisation and freed up the male breadwinner to be efficient in the workplace and enabled the woman to focus on caring for the home and parenting children. Thus the

nuclear family was viewed in functionalist accounts as natural and a desirable aspect of social evolution (Gillies 2003).

Some, mainly government and landed gentry, feared that the effect of industrialisation might weaken the sense of responsibility that working people should look after their own and a consequent moral decline in family and community life might occur. Law and order, social cohesion and general morality within society could be threatened (Gillies 2003) due to the lessening of traditional normative extended kinship obligations in industrial societies, as there was little to be gained and reciprocity within working families diminished (Goode 1963). 'Neither couple nor kinfolk have many rights in respect to the other, and so the reciprocal obligations are few' (Goode 1963:8). However, simultaneously in the upper classes extended family obligations continued as they were viewed as vital in maintaining power and influence and probably finances, thus constituting an early form of social capital (Goode 1963).

### **Philanthropy and paternalism**

Under the Poor Law Act of 1601 many parishes had struggled to recover money from errant fathers for maintenance of their offspring (Evans 2006). The Act was replaced in 1834 with the Poor Law Amendment Act, and under the new legislation unmarried mothers could only receive help if they entered the workhouse. The ensuing stigmatisation of unmarried mothers epitomised the harsher regime of the 1834 Act compared to its predecessor (Szreter 2006), and together with campaigns waged throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century by State and the upper classes promoting marriage amongst marginalised groups, highlighted their effort to combat the financial and moral costs of 'bastards and whores'.

Support for the marginalised and socially excluded was now largely dependent on philanthropy and paternalism from privileged benefactors and industrialists who often initiated public health programmes which were then adopted and adapted by government [first Public Health Act 1848].

Preventing and reducing the impact of epidemics through cleaner water and sewerage helped reduce sickness and mortality. Some benefactors, for example Cadbury and Bourneville, built housing and 'model' villages for their workers in order to ameliorate the appalling overcrowded living conditions of the workers. This pragmatic altruism enabled healthy workers and ensured healthy business with reduced sickness rates. Moralising rules and restrictions on how families should live were commonplace, epitomised with 'support' from 'lady collectors and visitors', who from the 1860s collected not only rents, but ensured that cleanliness and hygiene were paramount (Symonds and Kelly 2003:83).

Donzelot (1979/1997:32) focused on the French philanthropists in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century whose aim was to moralise the behaviour of the poorer classes and encourage the restoration of family life. Donzelot (1997:32) cited the following text from a publication of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in 1847:

Men placed at the head of business and government know how urgent it is to diminish and restrict not only the costs of policing and judicial action occasioned by the excesses that the depraved classes indulge in, but also all the expenses for the almshouses and hospitals that result from the mutual abandonment of fathers, wives, and children who should have helped one another as members of the same family, but who, not being united by any social tie, become strangers to one another. The task at hand is not only a social necessity and a highly moral endeavour; it is also an excellent piece of business, an obvious and immense saving for the state... When a man and woman of the people live in disorder, they often have neither hearth nor home. They are only at ease where vice and crime reign free. But on the contrary, once a man and a woman of the people, illicitly joined together, are married, they desert the filthy rooms that were their only refuge and set up their home.

(Resolution of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences,  
published in the Annales de la charite, vol 2 1847)

As such, despite apparent altruism, a clear underlying discourse ensuring the continuation of the physical and moral health of the workforce and marriage was paramount.

## **Infant mortality**

Despite public health improvements the infant mortality rate, officially recorded since 1877 was increasing and created a problem in terms of a future workforce and fighting force. The transition of infant mortality from a biological problem up until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to a social problem in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is interesting (Armstrong 1986:213). Whilst the infant mortality rate data had been available for decades the creation of a specific category for infants suggested the social awareness and recognition of the infant as a unique entity (Armstrong 1986:213). Furthermore, Armstrong (1986:214), in contrast to Collins (1999) suggested that this was the point when 'the domestic was brought from the private into the public domain'. The 'invention of infant mortality' enabled a reconstruction of 'domestic life and gave maternity and motherhood a new status and a new meaning' (Armstrong 1986:214). The infant mortality rate provided a justification for parenting support or surveillance of mothering in poor families or as Finch (1993) termed it the 'classing gaze'.

... infant mortality ..., had become the point on which was articulated the conceptualisation of the social, the surveillance of the new welfare schemes, the analysis of home life and hygiene and the evaluation of motherhood.

(Armstrong 1986:213-214)

The foundations for parenting support practice were thus laid. Impoverished and feckless mothers needed to be educated on nutrition and hygiene and made to be more responsible for the physical health of their families. The 'ignorance of mothers' (Davin 1978:15) was the cause of epidemics, not poor living and working conditions. The health visitor profession began tentatively in 1867 as the Ladies Sanitary Reform Association with middle class women 'sanitary inspectors' visiting marginalised homes in Manchester and Salford. The private sphere of the home was becoming embedded in the public sphere of state authority (Symonds 1991). In 1896 the health visitor Association was created (health visitorA 1996) with the principle remit 'to teach working class mothers to better their children's chances of survival'. The State's interest in the quality of the population provided justification for social interventions in the

management of the poor population through the quasi official policy of supporting mothering [parenting] in the form of health visitor practice.

### **Suppressing revolution**

From the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to post WW1 not only public health policies, but a raft of family friendly welfare policies in the form of housing, education, maternal and child health and national insurance emerged. Living and working conditions slowly began to improve which impacted on marginalised families. The three key themes of family policy during this period were: reducing poverty and increasing family wellbeing; increasing fertility and population growth and reducing birth control (Gauthier 1996:13). Physical efficiency of individuals, families and the nation was central to success and maintaining military and political power of the empire. Unrest, rioting, unemployment, poverty, hunger and destitution weakened not only the individual, but national efficiency (Kelly and Symonds 2003:18). Almost 35% of conscripts for the Boer war had been physically malnourished and unfit for service (Hardy 2001:40). The very fabric of society focused on good mothering [parenting], which was viewed not only as the basis of physical development, but also the moral and behavioural development of children and thereby society, with mothers blamed for any failures (Lewis 1986:110). Thus underpinning and interconnected discourses of imperialism, maternalism and moralism focused on supporting mothering [parenting] and were an important aspect of the political ideology of late Victorian England.

## **3.4 WWI to WWII: minds and bodies**

### **Patriarchy**

With the tremendous devastation of men's lives in WW1 transitions in family life and composition occurred. Stepfamily and lone parent families continued to exist, but this was generally a period of 'the indissoluble family' (Neale 2000). The gendered pattern of parenting, with fathers as breadwinners and mothers as child-carers continued but was less secure. During the war women had experienced new freedoms, such as employment, which

culminated in the franchise for women over thirty (Kelly and Symonds 2003:24). Divorce peaked in 1919-20 compared to earlier statistics (Fox Harding 1996:53), but it was only accessible to the middle and upper classes, not the working classes due to the expense. However, even for the affluent it could still be difficult, particularly for a woman without financial means, as to divorce meant she lost her children due to a legal precept – ‘father-right’ or as Smart (1989) suggested a device to continue the sanctity of marriage, so the patriarchal family still retained a firm base. With post-war disillusionment and the potential for revolt by the masses there was a concerted effort by Government to strengthen families and society. Liberal welfare policies continued with ‘Homes fit for Heroes’. State involvement was transparent:

If a healthy race is to be reared, it can be reared only in healthy homes; if drink and crime are to be successfully combated, decent sanitary houses must be provided; if ‘unrest’ is to be converted to contentment, the provision of good houses may prove one of the most potent agents in the conversion.

(The King’s speech reported in The Times 1919, cited in Burnett 1986:219)

The welfare of children remained a concern of the State and the Notification of Births Acts (1907, 1915) enabled health visitors to visit all homes where a new birth had occurred (health visitorA 1996:12). health visitor numbers increased as did the surveillance of families (Kelly and Symonds 2003:28). The Local Government Act 1929 enabled the development of health visiting into a universal service visiting affluent as well as marginalised families (Lewis 1980), which inevitably marked a further intrusion by the state into private family life. Whilst some mothers may have found this form of parenting support helpful, those who did not conform could be blamed for any failings in the family (Lewis 1986:110). Parenting support in the form of ‘Well baby’ clinics were set up in the community shortly after the war and were primarily aimed at marginalised families who could not afford doctors’ fees (health visitorA 1996:25). By the late 1930s a baby’s chance of survival had increased four times compared with the rate at the beginning of the century (Humphries and Gordon 1993:55). However, privations continued with a period of tremendous hardship and poverty for families epitomised by the

General strike of 1926 and the great depression of the late 20s / early 30s. Record levels of unemployment and post war despondency were a catalyst for unrest exemplified by the Jarrow march of 1936. The fear of moral degeneracy of individuals, families and society (Kelly and Symonds 2003:24) continued and had to be managed.

### **Power and professionalism**

Whilst the emphasis on the physical health and efficiency of individuals and society continued, there was a new focus on mental and emotional efficiency underpinned with social and moral overtones. Psychology and psychiatry had gained currency as new professions, particularly in terms of helping the mental illnesses of those returning from war (Kelly and Symonds 2003:24), and helping them to re-adjust into family life and society. These influences transferred to parenting support practice encouraged by male medical and psychiatric professionals. This transference of medical and clinical theories, operationalised by health visitors, often challenged traditional ways of mothering<sup>14</sup> (Kelly and Symonds 2003:31). 'Spare the rod and ruin the child' was the maxim espoused in order to prevent social deviancy. Parenting support focused not only on principles of behavioural psychology promulgated by people such as [Frederick] Truby King, but also on child development which needed surveillance. Medicalisation was asserting its grip, motherhood had become a science (Kelly and Symonds 2003:31) and maternal instinct was denigrated in favour of expert medical or quasi medical [health visitor] advice. Governmentality in the form of policies, including education policies, focused on child health and continued during the inter war years. The State's responsibility for children or 'the politics of child health' (Mayall 1996:25), provided a firm foundation for the realignment of not only the physical efficiency discourse, but now social, emotional and moral attributes of

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<sup>14</sup> For example, by the 1930s strict routines of sleeping and feeding, no dummies, letting the child cry were advocated by health visitors, but the latter were under scrutiny. Parenting support in the form of 'well baby' clinics, which were well attended by many families who used them in preference to paying doctors' fees (Lewis 1986:22), were criticised by doctors for their 'unscientific' approach.

individuals, families and society which could be legitimately policed by health visitors under the guise of parenting support.

### **3.5 WWII to 1960s: the golden age of the family?**

...the nuclear family came under threat as domestic lives were fragmented, spouses separated from each other and from their children, sexual liaisons and marriages contracted with speed and women invited into a hitherto closed labour market.

(Neale 2000)

WWII had been a liberating time for many women with work and independence providing new freedoms. A social revolution could be said to have occurred in the 1940s, rather than as is often suggested in the 1960s (Shorter 1975:161). Illegitimate births increased to 7% of live births in 1943 and 10% in 1945 (Bortolaia Silva 1996:19). An increase in the divorce rate from 1.6% in 1937 to 7.1% in 1950 (Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce 1956:369) epitomised the problems occurring in the previously 'indissoluble families' in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, some mothers continued to work despite the end of the war and there was concern about their 'latch key' children becoming delinquent (Neale 2000). The welfare of children as victims of divorce became a focus (Smart and Neale 1999:177), with concern about parents' selfish individualism and the risk of destabilising family life. The Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce (1956:372) commented thus:

The assertion of one's own individuality as a right and to pursue one's personal satisfaction reckless of the consequences to others...

and:

There is a tendency to take the duties and responsibilities of marriage less seriously than formerly.

(The Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce  
1956:372)



As such the 1950s 'golden age' of the family appears to be a myth as families were re-grouping and /or forming after massive societal and family upheaval. The normative family was a social construction. Single parents existed, and either lived as 'widowed' or with their parents (Williams 2004:18). The idealisation of the family and its loss has a long history in England, with historico-socio-cultural changes constantly minimised in popular discourse in favour of family change due to a lack of moral restraint (Smart and Neale 1999:25).

### **'Happy families'?**

Acknowledgement of the adjustments needed for women to return to home and hearth and settling into family life was incorporated into mothering [parenting] support and influenced by people such as Winnicott (1964), who in his radio addresses spoke of the need for mothers to stay at home and care for their children and be 'good enough mothers'. The importance of the maternal role was emphasised through the introduction of concepts such as maternal deprivation (Bowlby 1953), and the potential for psychological / emotional harm caused to children when the main carer, implication of mother was absent. Secure attachment to this consistent care giver was fundamental to a child's healthy emotional development, particularly in the first year (Bowlby 1969). Thus a discourse of the matriarchal family was beginning to take hold but in co-existence still with patriarchal power. Women's rights over children, property and divorce were increasing (Lewis 1984:xi) and together with the beginning of the companionate family ideology women could aspire to personal fulfilment (Neale 2000). This was to be achieved through not only the mothering role, but also through housekeeping, part time work, understanding marriage companion and exciting sexual partner (Neale 2000). However, this quasi-egalitarian role did not appear to re-stabilise the enduring patriarchal family as there were other tensions.

The rate of 'pathologically disturbed' (Riley 1983:196) or unmarried mothers, was increasing together with easier divorce processes due to divorce reforms, such as desertion becoming grounds for divorce. In 1937 the grounds for

divorce were changed and in 1949 Legal Aid for those on low incomes was granted, which together with different family formations and juvenile delinquency signalled apparent moral decline and degeneration. However, whilst divorce appeared easier it was the stigma that was more difficult for many people to manage (Neale 2000).

These moral issues, coupled with the exposure of the poor physical health of many marginalised children and mothers seen in wartime evacuation from city slums to rural areas (Kelly and Symonds 2003:46), led to the emphasis on not only the physical health of society with the development of the NHS, but also the welfare state, with the welfare or social efficiency (Dean 1999) of children, families and society paramount.

### **Parenting experts?**

The profile of health visitors and their numbers increased (Kelly and Symonds 2003:48) as the education of mothers in child-care continued. The Jameson report (MoH 1956: xii) highlighted the 'mental hygiene' of children as an important remit for health visitors and defined their duties as:

...teaching and guiding individuals and families to become physically and mentally healthier by their own efforts, to accept the family responsibilities and to fit into the community of which they are a part.

(MoH 1956 cited in health  
visitorA 1996:47)

The duties were based on the health visitors' normative and subjective judgement and demonstrated the shift to overt universal surveillance of not only the physical, but now the mental, social and emotional wellbeing of children and families. Social cohesion was under threat and some marginalised families had the potential for risk as they were fragile and vulnerable to family breakdown, crime and disorder. Thus, a discourse of the problem family was constructed in contrast to the normative, usually middle class family represented not only in policy, legal and professional discourses,

but now also through television and the media. The former were thought to need help and parenting support in the form of welfare to mould them into upright citizens.

### **3.6 The 1960s: uncoupling of sex and marriage**

From the 1960s to the mid 1970s the concept of the idealised nuclear family became increasingly challenged. Traditional family values were in tension with 'the unlinking of coitus and "lifelong" monogamy' (Shorter 1975:161). The transition particularly for women from one sexual partner to several before marriage became more commonplace (Shorter 1975:164).

England's illegitimacy rate doubled from 10 births per 1000 unmarried women in 1950 to 20 per 1000 in 1965 (Shorter 1975:112). However, contrary to popular opinion, during the 1960s divorce only increased slowly, social stigma was still rife and by 1968 was only 3.7 per 1000 marriages, exactly comparable with the 1946-50 post war rates. As outlined [p.28] liberation, particularly for women occurred firstly during WWII and again in the 60s. The happy family façade was losing its allure and with the arrival of the contraceptive pill in 1961 new possibilities were opening up for women. Initially it was only available to married women, but by 1967 it became officially available to other women if they could persuade doctors, many of whom were judgemental. In a similar vein the Abortion Act (1967) liberated women from the tyranny of back street abortions and / or numerous pregnancies.

Marriage was losing its allure for some and began to be viewed not as an institution or a socially sanctioned set of rights and obligations between spouses (Neale 2000), but as a personal relationship with the potential for personal fulfilment. The prescribed roles within the marriage of male breadwinner and female carer roles were increasingly being debated, particularly by feminists. A perceptible shift towards a permissive society with government responding to popular views of society on private and personal morality issues was evident. The normative influence on family life was

loosening its grip as more and more families looked for their own private practical solutions to problems (Beck 1992:116). 'Broken' marriages and divorce occurred, but as matrimonial fault was the grounds for divorce it had been difficult for many fathers to continue a relationship with their children after divorce. The courts generally believed that fathers should have a clean break and move on and remarry, and the divorced mother's best trajectory was to remarry. The stepfather could adopt the role of father, both financially and as parent, and then the reconstituted family could operate as a normal biological family. Fathers should support the family they were living with, including stepchildren, rather than the first family. The rationale for this was clear in that they wouldn't be able to pay for two families and they were more likely to pay for the one they were living with (Smart and Neale 1999:178; Neale 2000). Thus legal processes hindered non-resident fathers' abilities to keep contact with their children and consequently their role became increasingly marginalised (Walker 1992). Statistics detailing the loss, or tailing off of contact from non-resident fathers with their children following divorce, estimated that 47% failed to maintain contact beyond two years (Eekelaar and Clive 1977).

In response to societal pressure the Divorce Reform Act (1969) was passed with a key change being a demotion of the importance of matrimonial fault which led to a lessening of the stigmatisation of divorce and signalled a new beginning for many. Divorce and remarriage increased rapidly (Robinson 1980), but so too did cohabitation. The Divorce Reform Act (1969) was passed on the rationale that if divorce was made easier then people would go on to remarry thus providing legitimate children in their new marriage (Smart and Neale 1999), but men were leaving their families, by-passing divorce and 'living in sin' (Neale 2000:6). Thus it appeared to some that the moral fabric of society was at stake and needed to be contained.

### **3.7 The 1970s to mid 1990s: the age of individualism**

For policy makers the aspiration of re-moulding the family back to the biological, married model proved elusive. Official statistics demonstrated that

marriage was decreasing from 400,000 per year between 1965-75, but fell further to below 300,000 by the mid 90s (ONS 1998). Between 1969-1991 divorce had risen from 4.1 per 1000 marriages to 13.4, with approximately 1 in 3 marriages ending in divorce, and 40% of all families being lone or stepparent households (ONS 1998). Co-habitation was increasing from 5% of first time brides in the late 60s to 50% in the late 80s (Allan and Crow 2001:29). Cohabitation was viewed as riskier than marriage with cohabiting parents twice as likely to separate than married parents (Haskey 1999) and 'second passage two parent families' were breaking down within five years (Fergusson 1987:29). One third of all marriages were re-marriages (Marriage and Divorce Statistics 1994). However, these were estimates as official statistics pre 1991 looked at household composition, rather than family composition. Household definitions did not take account of children who for example might live with a lone mother, but also spend time within a stepfamily. There were other anomalies with about 25% of children in lone parent families actually born to co-habiting parents (Bumpass, Sweet and Cherlin 1991). Moreover, it was estimated that between 7-10% of children under 16 were living in a family, married or cohabiting, which included a stepparent (Burgoyne 1983). By 1991 the General Household Survey began to include information from men on step relationships, rather than just from women as previously. However, as stated above it was not until the 2001 census that identification of stepfamilies was allowed (ONS Social Trends 38, 2005).

Whilst statistical inconsistency did not aid the view that stepfamilies were a highly complex family unit, neither did definitional variations with their different composition and complexities (Ganong and Coleman 1994:4). Burgoyne and Clark (1984) posited that there were a possible 26 permutations of stepfamily; Batchelor, Dimmock and Smith (1994) 16; Booth and Dunn (1994) 72. Some authors included quasi-kin, whilst others did not. However, the change in family form cannot be viewed in isolation as the landscape of the employment market changed dramatically from the 1970s onwards. Cyclical phases of mass unemployment, particularly for men in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations in industrial manufacturing became the norm (Rodger 2003:52).

The role of men as earners and women as carers began to change with more families dependent on welfare.

### **3.8 New directions: visible stepfamilies?**

With the changing societal scene of divorce, lone parenthood, co-habitation and / or re-marriage, stepfamilies and step-parenting finally became an object of interest within the research world. There had been criticism of both the lack of general interest in the changes occurring in the family and the paucity of empirical evidence up to the 1990s (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995:150). In terms of stepfamilies particularly, omission of conceptual and theoretical frameworks was apparent (Utting 1995; Feri and Smith 1998) and research was characterised by the 'whoozle effect', where generalisations are made from very little evidence (Ganong and Coleman 1994:16). Furthermore, it is probably fair to say that outcomes were different depending on the authors' subjectivities and where their research had been conducted geographically (Hetherington 1989; Burgoyne and Clarke 1984; Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley 1987). Much of the early pre 1990s research on stepfamilies came from the United States (US) and as such may not have been representative in other geographical contexts such as the UK. However, Coleman and Ganong's (1991) US taxonomy of the stepfamily research prior to 1990, focusing particularly on the effects on children is a good example of the 'pathologised' approach, with findings taken from generally small clinical groups that were prevalent at the time. Stepfamilies were classified within a variety of negative models as set out below, which focused on harmism and appear to be disparate single entities, but in reality interconnected and overlapped.

#### **The stepfamily taxonomy (Coleman and Ganong 1991)**

##### ***Deficit comparison***

The majority of research studies utilised positivist methodologies which emphasised only the deficit comparison paradigm, that is outcomes generally focused on poor self-esteem and other psychological variables for stepchildren as they were deficient in comparison to children in biological

families. The constant juxtaposition, with a few exceptions, with biological families meant that stepfamilies always fared worse (Visher and Visher 1985; Coleman and Ganong 1991; Ganong and Coleman 1994:xii; Ferri and Smith 1998). Some commentators posited that one reason for the consistency of negative findings in outcomes for stepfamilies pre 1990 was due to research being undertaken largely by clinicians, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers (Ganong and Coleman 1994:13). Thus:

[some clinical investigators] ...make unwarranted generalizations about the experience of children in divorcing families as a whole: for such children are not a unified group, and those whom they see are likely to have suffered more than many others.

(Gorell Barnes *et al*  
1998:6)

### ***Embracing complexity***

In contrast some commentators conceded that expectations for stepfamilies and their children were less clear than those for biological parents (Visher and Visher 1985; Coleman and Ganong 1991; Ferri and Smith 1998). Whilst acknowledging the problem oriented perspective in their research, they also attempted to understand the different processes, norms and dynamics and suggested the need for practitioners to draw on the strengths of stepfamily life and build on those when working with stepfamilies, rather than focus on negative elements. Thus these commentators were instrumental in conceptualising stepfamilies as functioning differently yet within a *normative-adaptive paradigm* (Visher and Visher 1979,1985; Ferri 1984; Coleman and Ganong 1990, 1991).

As Ferri (1984:121) stated:

Until we stop trying to force stepfamilies into the normative framework which has relevance only for the 'biological' nuclear family we will not achieve the flexibility of values that such families need in order to fulfil their childrearing, socialising role.

(Ferri 1984:121)

### ***Stress hypothesis***

The transitions associated with stepfamilies were stressful and negatively affected the psychological, emotional, social, and academic development of children causing stress. Findings targeted a child development perspective with childhood, adolescence and early adulthood critical times, highlighting that children in stepfamilies did less well on educational attainment and social and psychological adjustment than children in biological families (Ferri 1984; Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale *et al* 1991; Ferri and Smith 1998; Rodgers and Pryor 1998). For example, Wallerstein's US studies made harrowing reading in terms of both the short and long term detrimental emotional effects on children (Wallerstein and Kelly 1980; Wallerstein 1985). But UK commentators criticised the approach taken, that is clinical families, higher than average incomes, quotes focused on half of the sample who fared less well and a total preoccupation with divorce rather than other life factors (Gorell Barnes *et al* 1998:15). For example, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that less than 10% of children in the US had support from the extended family after divorce. Yet in the UK the role of the extended family, particularly grandparents and to a lesser extent other people within the child's social milieu, was found to be important and that predictions for children could shift if observed over time (Gorell Barnes *et al* 1998:4-6). In Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) study of sixty families, for every post-divorce family interviewed on or after divorce whose children later had problems, there were as many families whose children were resilient and flourishing, an important factor being the quality of parenting pre-divorce (Neale and Smart 2001). Further stress in the form of economic disadvantage within stepfamilies was found to be high affecting the wellbeing and success of the stepfamily (Ferri 1984). However, it was often the previous experiences of the parents that were the cause of poverty, for example marginalised educational, occupational and social backgrounds such as early partnership and parenthood themselves, rather than being in a stepfamily per se (Ferri and Smith 1998:59).

### ***Socialization hypothesis***

The main theme of the socialization hypothesis was that the foundation for individuals' values, attitudes and beliefs formed in childhood were disrupted in



stepfamilies causing inadequate socialization. Consequently stepchildren lacked established societal norms for role performance and were more likely to be socially marginalised by twenty one due to poorer academic performance, leaving home early and early parenthood compared to children who had been brought up by a single divorced parent (Kiernan 1992). The latter point was crucial as it indicated that within the hierarchy of family forms, the stepfamily caused more harm to children than any other family form. However, socialization was not a one off process, but on-going and whilst there might be some disruption at crisis points as with any family, many stepfamilies managed this. Similarly, divorce was not a discrete event, but a *process* with different people reacting in different ways, which affected their adjustment [or not] post divorce (Ganong and Coleman 1994:27). The many transition points in marriage, divorce and re-marriage that parents and children experienced meant that outcomes depended on the point of time chosen for the research focus (Hetherington 1989). Trajectories needed to be explored as 'the vast majority of children of divorced couples were adjusting reasonably well six years after divorce' (Hetherington and Kelly 2002:159). For example, conflict and marital stress before parental break-up was found to have more adverse outcomes than the death of a parent, suggesting that the problems started *before* the stepfamily formation (Ferri 1984; Kiernan 1992). Viewing stepfamily trajectories and indeed any family trajectory, not as a static scene, but as a shifting scene with various developmental processes and outcomes along the way was helpful. Papernow's (1993:382-385) developmental model of the different stages stepfamilies pass through highlighted not only the reality of the challenges facing stepfamilies, but also that managing these had the potential for positive outcomes:

- fantasy - based on unrealistic dreams and expectations.
- immersion – a reality check of everyday life.
- awareness – identification that fantasies are exactly that and not based on reality.
- mobilisation – confrontation and discussion of differences and construction of agreed management to effect fundamental change.

- action – ‘going into business together’ with generation of new family rituals and developing a new history together.
- contact – beginning of real intimacy and attachment.
- resolution – family norms established.

***Biological discrimination hypothesis***

This approach focused on family dysfunction caused by abusive stepfathers and wicked stepmothers and the consequent harm to children. Emotional and motivational aspects of parenting were thought to be lacking for step-parents due to the lack of genetic links (Flinn 1988). It was thought by some to be an evolutionary anomaly to want to benefit another’s children over one’s own, as ‘stepchildren have negative utility’ (Morgan 1995:162). Yet adoption was different as:

[adoption] ..., as with marriage, non-kin relations are brought into the **moral orbit of kin altruism**.  
 [emphasis added] (Morgan 1995:161)

The underpinning connotation of poor morality or amoral behaviour was a strong influence that lingered around stepfamilies. In order to increase awareness and understanding of the stepfamily, these myths were exposed and the reality discussed. So for example, Visher and Visher (1985), suggested that the following myths were just that, ‘myths’

- stepmothers are wicked
- there is instant love and instant adjustment in a stepfamily
- stepfamilies are a return to the biological family pattern

Moreover, there were different structural characteristics between stepfamilies and biological families that needed to be recognised, acknowledged and managed (Visher and Visher 1985). For example,

- a stepfamily was born of loss
- all members of a stepfamily had ‘tribal rites’ from their previous families
- the biological parent-child relationships were older than the new couple relationship

- a biological parent was usually present in actuality or memory
- children were often members of two households
- there was little or no legal relationship between step-parents and stepchildren

The way these issues were managed was an important element not only for the adjustment of the stepfamily, but also for the adjustment of non-resident parents in their post separation lives. Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) taxonomy of post divorce couples segregated their behaviour into the following, which are self-explanatory:

- dissolved duos
- perfect pals
- co-operative colleagues
- angry associates
- fiery foes

The continuation of negatives thus embraced not only the children, but the parents and more importantly the institution of the stepfamily.

### ***Incomplete institution hypothesis***

Cherlin (1978, 1996:380-8) suggested that a stepfamily was an abstract institutional entity which was not complete due to uncertainties and absence of guidelines about roles and norms in stepfamilies. Together with a lack of established societal norms for role performance there was also an absence of institutional and social support for dealing with problems exacerbating stress within the family. For example, school systems were not organised to accept a step-parent's authority. Also, remarriages were considered less stable than first marriages due to the complex dynamics in re-formed families causing more stress and hence dissolution (Haskey 1996). Important UK studies of stepfamilies reinforced these findings and also highlighted the invisibility of stepfamilies in policy (Burgoyne and Clark 1982,1984; Ferri 1984). These commentators posited that this was due to a perception that the biggest

problem in stepfamilies was roles and relationships, which were generally considered to be a private family affair rather than a public issue.

Moreover, stepfamilies worked from a biological family model and considered themselves to be just ordinary families (Burgoyne and Clarke 1984). They parented as mother and father, with stepfathers often abdicating their responsibilities for their non-resident children and becoming new dads in the stepfamily. This was the era where the legal precept of a 'clean break' divorce was encouraged. However, there were tensions as the role of step-parents appeared to be unclear and ambiguous (De'Ath 1992; Burgoyne and Clarke 1984) and disruptions from non-resident parents were troublesome and viewed as affecting the stability of the new family. The respectability element of presenting as a biological family was an important aspect, particularly in working class families, but not so much in middle class stepfamilies (Burgoyne and Clarke 1984). The latter adopted a 'progressive' family model that did not conform to a biological model. Rather they were self-assured in their difference and did not attempt to conform to societal norms as they were cognisant of the fact that:

'Making a go of it' involves recognising the 'historical changes' and, on occasion, challenging the institutional contradictions which bear most heavily upon remarried parents and their children.

(Burgoyne and Clarke 1984:204)

Despite this 'coming out' of the research, it appeared to do little to help demystify stepfamilies, rather it emphasised their difference. With continuing high rates of divorce, 'broken' families persisted, with some families reconstituting several times as the re-divorce rate increased 1:2 as opposed to 1:3 for first marriages (De'Ath 1992:5). Children were viewed as being in danger of emotional damage as they potentially could be born out of wedlock, living with single mothers or living in stepfamilies where child abuse occurred. Breakdown and 'demoralisation' (Gillies 2003) were key themes. The apparent 'parenting deficit' (Etzioni 1993:6) needed policy action to bring parents into line.

### 3.9 Policy responses

A raft of policy emerged with the abolition of illegitimacy in 1987; the Children Act (1989); the Child Support Act (1991); and the Family Law Act (1996) with no fault divorce. Whilst the explicit aim was the welfare of children, implicitly the family and parenting were the central foci (Smart and Neale 1999:30). Continuing attachment to biological parents was viewed as giving better outcomes for children (Walker 1993; Cockett and Tripp 1994). Divorce had been reconfigured as an issue between parents, rather than previously an issue between husband and wife (Smart 2004a). Thus:

In uncoupling the legal status of parenthood from the legal status of marriage, parenthood has begun to supersede marriage as the bedrock of the family and as the central mechanism for the regulation of family life.

(Neale 2000)

This key shift in policy terms has continued to present day. Co-parenting post divorce became a new concept with parental responsibilities retained by both biological parents. So, after divorce biological fathers were actively encouraged to have contact with their children. The Children Act favoured the biological father, but if not married he did not get automatic parental responsibility unless his name was on the birth certificate. Marriage was still promoted as the most stable institution for children. In conjunction, the previous emphasis on financial responsibility for children from the social father, was changed with the Child Support Act, to the biological father. Thus priority had been given to the biological father to be responsible financially for his first family. The new model of the biological family had been recast as a 'binuclear' family spread across two households (Neale 2000), with fatherhood gaining eminence (Burgess 1998). Indeed the term 'parenting' began to be used routinely in policy as a method of including fathers and their responsibilities in bringing up children.

Several implicit aims of the family policy impacted on the stepfamily and demonstrated the lag between policy and the reality of family life and parenting. The prioritisation of first families and biological parenting was

evident. The 'clean break' divorce was now discouraged and the identification of divorce as a social problem was promulgated alongside challenging the popular understanding of divorce as a solution to private problems (Smart and Neale 1999:176). The Family Law Act (1996) with its varied ideological positions on marriage, divorce and child rearing meant that it was impossible to produce a compromise that would satisfy all of them, as a standard model of family life did not exist (Finch 2003:29). As such while the Family Law Act (1996) enabled individualisation for husbands and wives it simultaneously put in place measures to regulate them as parents (Lewis 2003:76).

The above policies had huge implications for the stepfamily and its continued invisibility as a recognised family unit in policy was prominent by its absence. The omission of the word 'stepfamily', 'reformed', 'blended' 'reconstituted' or any other terminology for the stepfamily was anomalous. In contrast lone parents and biological parents were highlighted, but this was not without its problems. Rather than unified and unifying policies there were competing interests. Ambiguities and contradictions were inherent in right wing family policy of the 1980s and 1990s and whilst the rhetoric of the traditionalist family approach might have been espoused, this was not followed through in financial practice (Fox Harding 2000:1-6). The Children Act (1989) gave expanded parental responsibility, but the Child Support Act (1991) in many instances left lone mothers financially and emotionally vulnerable (Fox Harding 2000:1-6). Moreover, there could be an added financial burden for stepfathers if biological fathers abdicated their financial responsibility and stepfathers were left supporting two families, their own non-resident children and their stepfamily.

Moreover, step-parents 'rights' were often out of kilter with their responsibilities (Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy 1999a). A particular issue was the difficulty in acquiring parental responsibility for a stepparent as applying through the Courts for a residence order was a tortuous process and only lasted for the duration of the order. The incongruities and tensions in terms of everyday children's experiences and family life in their stepfamily appeared to be ignored by policy and practice in an effort to maintain the

biological parents' responsibility (Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy 1999a).

Children need [biological] parents and children need [social] families, but both their needs and wishes are invoked in legislation.  
(Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy 1999a:99)

Another area that seemed to have been omitted in policy and practice was that of the general management and the skills required to negotiate post divorce parenting. For optimal functioning new parental roles and responsibilities in stepfamilies needed to be negotiated requiring emotional, psychological and practical changes which often brought new complexities as 'new forms of old relationships' had to be integrated (Walker 1999: 41). The contradictions in 'being separate and yet being connected' (Smart and Neale 1999:67) were apparent. As Mason (1996) stated, the main ingredient was attentiveness to the other parent and of course the children, which might not be within the social code of the parents. The Children Act (1989) assumed that:

cooperation and ongoing negotiation is possible as well as desirable and furthermore represents an overt disregard for situations ...  
(Edwards , Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy 1999a)

As such, the thrust of policy discourse was of a re-emphasis on the patriarchal rights of the biological father (Smart 1997), but that power needed to be dispersed across households in order to take cognisance of the reality of the social family (Neale and Smart 1997). Furthermore, policy was driven by narrow, political, economic and professional concerns from particular sections of the middle class (Smart 1997). A 'back to basics' campaign focused on the biological family with the stepfamily portrayed as a 'partial' or 'pretend' family (Simpson 1998:x). The underpinning manipulation of the family was amply summarised thus:

[The] aim of policies should be to facilitate flexibility in family life, rather than to shape it into a particular form. It is a proper role for the state to ensure that people have maximum opportunity to work

out their own relationships as they wish, to suit the circumstances of their own lives. It is not the proper role of governments to presume that certain outcomes would be more desirable than others.

(Finch 1997:13)

Thus a discourse of re-shaping the family and parenting away from the 'broken' family back to the biological family and marriage was evident throughout policy and practice. The focus was very definitely on governmentality through parenting *education* and supporting marginalised families [biological, step and lone] in order to achieve a more stable and moral society.

### **3.10 Governmentality: problem families and parenting support needs**

Policy in the form of the Children Act (1989) enabled more overt and covert surveillance of families from a wider range of practitioners. The Children Act (1989) was viewed as a balance between family support and coercive child protection interventions (Fox Harding 1997). Whilst child abuse was obviously not new, the discourses around it were (Saraga 1993:47). Children had the potential to be at risk in marginalised, 'dysfunctional' and problem families. The latter was a crucial interlinking point as in the late 1980s child abuse, particularly sexual abuse became a scandal in the UK and neatly fitted the ideological representation of the breakdown of the family (Kelly and Symonds 2003:64) and the increase in different family forms with abusive stepfathers and wicked stepmothers. Action needed to be taken. The NHS and Community Care Act (HMSO 1990) enabled the overt surveillance of individuals, families and communities through health needs assessment. health visitors' and others' surveillance work became much more prominent and could more easily be justified.



## **Tensions**

With the assessment of families' health and social needs, which incorporated parenting support needs, now more explicitly situated within a framework of risk, there were ramifications for marginalised different families. The latter continued to be framed in anachronistic interpretations of 'dysfunction', constantly plagued by spurious or exaggerated overt representations in the media as the hegemony of the biological family subjugated other family forms. The targeting of families most in need increasingly became the norm for parenting support practitioners as the reality of diminishing resources meant that universality was difficult to achieve. To help prioritise the neediest families and to demonstrate measurable outcomes, health visitors were supplied with health needs assessment tools in various formats. The latter were generally subjective and not evidence based (Appleton 1997; Appleton and Cowley 2008). Within my own Trust a vulnerability wheel was produced with different needs compartmentalised into different segments of the wheel. Needs appeared to have been amalgamated into disparate bundles, which was an anathema to those of us working with families as we knew that needs overlapped and interconnected with each other. For example many needs are created by external influences over which the individual and family has little or no control. Needs are not separate, discrete or static entities, rather they shift and change depending on what is happening within the family. Professional judgement was used to determine need (Appleton 1995) in partnership with families, not a paper exercise which many health visitors found intrusive in interactions with parents and ineffective and unacceptable to some parents (Cowley and Houston 2003; Mitcheson and Cowley 2003; Appleton and Cowley 2004; Cowley, Mitcheson and Houston 2004).

Commentators suggested that the focus on structured health needs assessments by Trusts was akin to the medicalisation of health visitor (Cowley, Mitcheson and Houston 2004) and were disempowering to both clients and health visitors (Mitcheson and Cowley 2003). However, the health needs assessments suited the conservative ideology of the day which was focused on an individualism discourse and measurable outcomes of

effectiveness. Individuals were encouraged to be more proactive and take more responsibility for their own and their family's health. The multi-dimensional influences on health and general inequalities in health caused by structural issues were 'dumbed down'. A 'blame culture' developed focused on marginalised families who apparently did not help themselves.

### **3.11 Conclusion**

This chapter, forming the first part of the library study, has focused on an historical / genealogical exploration and discussion of the literature on marginalised [step]families, parenting policy and practice. A clearer understanding of several issues has emerged. The underlying discourse of immorality pervades the literature on stepfamilies which begins to inform an understanding of why the voices of parents in marginalised stepfamilies have not previously been heard. Moreover, the findings from this chapter help contextualise how and why parenting support policy and practice has developed. From limited beginnings pre industrial revolution to a steady development throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries there was an insidious attempt by different governments and some aspects of society and media, to maintain the biological and married family form. The parents' function, but particularly the mother's was viewed as the key to rearing healthy and moral children. However, in spite of quite a firm hold on the family by government up to the first half of the 20th century, the last few decades proved to be more turbulent. An unprecedented period of change in family form and function occurred with decreasing marriage, increasing divorce rates, increasing cohabitation, lone mothers and stepfamilies, all of which were explained in highly negative terms. A number of discourses were key throughout the political ideology of the time amongst which maternalism, moralism, and individualism were particularly forceful. A manouering of reconstituted families whether lone parent, cohabiting, remarried or stepfamilies, was attempted through different policies most notably the Children Act (1989) and the Child Support Act (1991), back to the ideal of the biological family. But the reality was that increasingly it was a biological family with differences, where a

parent, commonly the father was non-resident and co-parenting from a distance.

Therefore whilst attempts at moulding the family through marriage for life, could no longer be relied on to ameliorate pressing moral problems, parenting could be used to regulate and encourage families to act in moral ways. As the following chapter highlights, by the mid 1990s governmentality in the form of overt parenting support was beginning to gain momentum as the new approach by government to deal with recalcitrant families. health visitors or 'agents of the state' (Curtis 1993) and increasingly other parenting practitioners remained the medium through which families could be observed and coerced into better parenting.

## CHAPTER 4

### LITERATURE REVIEW: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

Paul: We got engaged and Robert [stepson] wanted to call me dad. And we said, "Call me dad when we get married." And I got knocked over that year. And I got, like, put under a van. And, you know, you sort of think back and you think, "Life's too short." I said, "Here – if you want to call me dad, you call me dad, son." I said, "You know, you call me what you want." And he does now, like. But, I said, "You call me what you want." You know, and that was it. And I never told anybody and it was the mother's day – we all went for a meal. And Robert, for the first time, said, "Dad." And my mam was there. And I never looked at her, Barbara [wife] never looked at her... I just got the plate, sat back down, and he just kept calling me dad all the time.

Barbara: I could call him dad \_\_\_\_\_. But when I was with his mam in the beginning and I had to say, "Robert, go and get your dad" or something, I found it very hard saying that. Because you're aware of other people's opinions. It was difficult that way.

[Interview 8:937-950]

#### 4.1 Introduction: the age of evidence

The quote above highlights issues of discomfort with family difference and the ensuing moral implications, which are a key focus of this chapter. A myopic focus on essentially demographic and statistical findings with largely clinical interpretations pre 1990s hampered research into what actually occurred in stepfamilies. Concern about the poor quality of stepfamily research led to improvements with methodological and conceptual developments. Over the last two decades an influential driver in research, policy and practice has been the need for evidence. A robust defence in the form of underpinning reliability in various forms, often preceded with statistics, has been the order of the day. Consequently it has been difficult for research, policy and practice to ignore the evidence of changing family forms. As a result there has been a concerted effort in the aforementioned areas to attempt to interpret, explain and manage the issues in their own unique ways. Broadly two main research strands have enabled a more informed understanding of the multi-dimensional

issues impacting and affecting children in stepfamilies, and in some studies parents. Contributions from psychological and sociological commentators have provided realistic and credible knowledge development. Their foci were directed not only into the effects on children of the parents' separation process, but also life in a stepfamily context. The psychological methodological approaches focused on longitudinal studies, literature reviews and meta-analyses. Utilising conceptual risk and resiliency perspectives were helpful in contributing clear differentiations between just which children were fragile [affected] and which were resilient. In an alternative vein the sociological school used largely qualitative methods with different conceptual approaches focused on subjective experiences of change. Combined, the refreshing new foci in the last decade have been revealing and importantly, as the children themselves have generally been participants in the research process, the findings have carried more resonance. Prior research recorded parents' views of what their children had experienced, but latterly the voices of children have been heard as they are 'active social agents' (Wade and Smart 2002).

However, gaps, with a few notable exceptions, appear to remain in terms of knowledge transfer into the arena of parenting support, policy and practice. The effectiveness of generic parenting support, policy and practice is explored and again demonstrates the multi-dimensional influences impacting marginalised [step]families based on the political ideology of New Labour and latterly the coalition government. This potentially has serious repercussions as the lacunae mean that policy continues to be made with what appears to be little attention given to different family forms. This 'oversight' and the ensuing implications for practitioners means that potentially a continued 'one size fits all' model is applied to different family forms, resulting in possibly inappropriate parenting support for families struggling with the realities and challenges of stepfamily life. Furthermore, the interconnections of parenting support policy and practice with several discourses in the form of principally social inclusion and social cohesion are clearly displayed, again exposing an underpinning discourse of governmentality.

This second part of the library study gives an overview and theoretical justification of the main literature through the last few years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to present day. Again the review of the literature acts to inform contemporary theoretical and practice understandings and thus interconnects with the practice focused empirical study.

As with chapter three the structure will focus sequentially on:

- a contemporary overview of marginalised [step]families
- policy / state interaction with particular reference to marginalised [step]families
- parenting support in practice

#### **4.2 Mid 1990s to present: social inclusion, social cohesion and communitarianism<sup>15</sup>**

Family research is only gradually waking up from its drowsy fixation on the nucleus of the family.

(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995:147)

The changes in patterns of personal relationships, family living and parenting galvanised a renewed interest in the family by researchers, providing new insights and new conceptual understandings. However, a polarisation of views based on traditionalist and pragmatic viewpoints (Millar 2001) has been central to the debates. The traditionalists focused on the demise of traditional family life and the new scene of amoral and selfish behaviour of individuals and advocated a return to the values of marriage and the biological family. Right wing and populist commentators managed this with demographic evidence demonstrating the demise of the family and the ensuing moral disorder in society (Morgan 1995; Philips 1999). However, this approach lacked robust and accurate analysis and conceptual frameworks for *why* these changes were occurring. In contrast the pragmatists held a new, but

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<sup>15</sup> Communitarianism focuses on the responsibility of the individual and the importance of the family in upholding community life.

positive conceptualisation of changing family forms with the 'democratisation and egalitarianism' concept (Gillies 2003:7), which focused on understanding family practices and doing family in more egalitarian ways.

### **4.3 Understanding contemporary relationships**

Firstly, an understanding of what was happening in intimate relationships is essential in grasping the family and parenting context in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sociological commentators focused on personal relationships or 'the transformation of intimacy' and focused on the quality of relationships rather than the relationship per se (Giddens1992). Central components of what Giddens termed a 'pure relationship' were communication, negotiation and generally a mutuality of expectations that may not be a relationship for life. The traditions of duty and obligation were no longer the central focus, rather fluidity and negotiation as in 'confluent love'. Giddens explained the latter two concepts thus:

... a social relationship [which] is entered into for its own sake, for that which can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.

(Giddens 1992:58)

and:

Confluent love is active, contingent love, and therefore jars with the 'for-ever', 'one-and-only' qualities of the romantic love complex.

(Giddens1992:61)

The obvious departure from the traditional romantic love of earlier periods is clear. Rather confluent love recognised that romantic love does not last forever and that the pure relationship is negotiated on a basis where people decide how they want to live together and how they wish to manage that, for example in terms of collaboration and communication. As such it was in total opposition to the patriarchal power relations of times past with traditional heterosexual marriage, rather it was based on egalitarian principles.

If orthodox marriage is not yet widely seen as just one lifestyle among others, as in fact it has become, this is partly the result of institutional lag...

(Giddens 1992:154)

Whilst Giddens' concepts helped explain contemporary relationships there were glitches in his argument. Giddens' oversight of socio-economic difference, together with ethnicity and religion, suggested the need for some acknowledgement of inequities of choice for some sections of society (Smart and Neale 1999:12). The pure relationship and confluent love are not open to all, as some groups are constrained by normative expectations of traditional marriage. Moreover, Giddens' minimalist discussion of children within the pure relationship left unanswered questions (Smart and Neale 1999:12). The end of confluent love ignored the impact of having children and the difficult decisions to leave a relationship and become financially independent, particularly for mothers. Furthermore, Giddens appeared to ignore the co-parenting issues post 1989 Children Act (Smart and Neale 1999:13). However, these were addressed in more detail later when Giddens (1998:94) suggested that the concept of care of children should be paramount. Sustaining relationships post separation needed to be based on democratic notions of shared responsibility for childcare which could be organised through parenting contracts. The contradiction between collaboration, communication and formal equality of the pure relationship and confluent love to entering into a parenting contract post separation was not lost on some commentators. Sevenhuijsen (2002) highlighted the contractual arrangements securing the relationship and responsibilities, rather than 'connectedness and lived ties' of confluent love. Moreover, Giddens' concern for the effect of divorce on children highlighted his concern for social exclusion, as children in one parent families would suffer not only economically, but from inadequate parenting and lack of social ties (Sevenhuijsen 2002). Whilst the validity of the omissions and contradictions is clear, it is worth giving support to Giddens' argument in as much as he encouraged debate about different ways of 'doing relationships'.



#### **4.4 Understanding contemporary families: the positive spin**

In contrast Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) included children in their discussion of individualisation. In a similar vein to Giddens, individualisation was concerned with happiness, mutual respect and satisfaction gained through communication, negotiation and collaboration in intimate relationships. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) highlighted the importance of individualisation in understanding the democratisation of both gender relations and the family in contemporary relationships (Williams 2004:20). Moreover, women's increased participation in the labour market had 'eroded the [traditional] model [of male bread winner and female carer] at the level of behaviour and even more at the level of prescription' (Lewis 2002:51). The individualisation thesis argued that whilst families were becoming more fragile due to personal fulfilment / self actualisation and the need for pure relationships which led to a lack of permanence in family lives, simultaneously along with fragility in the couple relationship came continuity with the love for the child (Smart and Neale 1999:17). Children could become the focus of a post separation / divorce life:

Only someone equating marriage with sex, loving and living together can make the mistake that divorce means the end of marriage. If one concentrates on problems of material support, on the children and on a long common biography, divorce is quite obviously not even the legal end of marriage, but transforms itself into a new phase of post-marital separation marriage.

(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995:147)

In support of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's placement of children high on parents' agenda, Williams (2004:20) highlighted the Institute for Public Policy Research [IPPR] findings from a survey asking parents in their 20s and 30s what gave them most happiness. Both men and women gave 'my children' a much higher rating than 'my relationship'.

## 4.5 Understanding contemporary families: the negative spin

However, for the traditionalists the changes in the traditional family structure continued to cause alarm as they were viewed as synonymous with moral decline and degeneration in society (Morgan 1995; Phillips 1999). Patricia Morgan, the right wing commentator was scathing of methods to normalise the stepfamily and warned with reference to Cherlin, that non-acceptance of the reality of amoral behaviour was often:

put down to poverty, stereotyping, or statistical error, the step-parent role being 'incompletely institutionalised' – so that step-parents do not know what they are supposed to do - or to society not accepting the equal validity of all family forms.

(Morgan 1995:166)

Morgan (1995) was instrumental in fuelling the popular discourse of '[T]he breaking of the modern family' (Morgan 1995:1). Her exposé berated the family and fiscal policy of the 1980s favouring lone parent unemployed families above married employed families that had thus allowed 'the disengagement of men from family life' (Morgan 1995:3) and promulgated 'free-roaming parenting' (Morgan 1995:167). Moreover:

The 'children of divorce' are downwardly mobile. They are less likely to marry, more likely to divorce if they do marry and, in the case of females, more likely to become lone parents in their turn.

(Morgan 1995:46)

Whilst there are obvious flaws in producing aggregates, those with a right wing persuasion were surely satisfied. The panacea of course was marriage, otherwise:

... we may find that the human cost of the continued erosion of the family becomes socially, politically, and morally unacceptable.

(Morgan 1995:190)

Her diatribe, particularly against lone parents and stepfamilies or 'the underclass' made depressing reading and played into the hands of the right wing anti-welfarists and moral absolutists in Government, media, clergy and

society, who berated the selfish individualism and abdication of responsibility of those, generally men, whose actions were a threat to the sanctity of marriage and the institution of family. Consequently the Family Law Act (1996) legislation instituted by the conservatives lost the opportunity to reform the adversarial divorce process, as the emphasis was on saving marriages for the sake of the children (Walker 2003). Poor commitment and selfish individualism of some parents, the implication being marginalised and welfare dependent, caused broken families. Yet simultaneously and paradoxically the right wing political discourse of the 1980s and 90s had focused on individuals who were seen to be in charge of their own destinies – those who chose to help themselves would benefit. Whilst familism was central to Thatcherism (Simpson 1998:ix), only pure first time marriage and families were acceptable, marriage into different family forms was considered as dangerous:

Mothers may remarry, or associate on a regular or intermittent basis, with one or a succession of men. However, in reality as in folklore, step-relationships are far more dangerous than the corresponding genetic relationships. Child abuse specialists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson claim that: “The presence of a step-parent is the best epidemiological predictor of child abuse risk yet discovered”.

(Morgan 1995:156)

#### **4.6 Family practices and doing the proper thing**

In spite of such harrowing accounts other commentators proffered more pragmatic accounts of family change. David Morgan’s (1996:188-200) reconceptualisation of ‘the family’ to ‘family practices’ was helpful in that it framed the family in a different, more contemporary way, acknowledging that there was not a single homogenous unit, rather a multiplicity of different family forms and diversity with many positive elements. Moreover, family practices focused on the everydayness of lived experiences, with negotiations with important family members living across different households. As such, the family was viewed not as a static unit with fixed roles and expectations and never changing, but as a shifting scene with fluidity perceived as normal rather than dysfunctional. Fragility was acknowledged, but so too was

resilience with people managing their own social worlds either through their usual practices or through modifying and adapting to new and different ways.

We may say that family practices are to do with those relationships and activities that are constructed as being to do with family matters.

(Morgan 1996:192)

Thus commitment and hard work continued across households post separation / divorce. This was a key element as the popular discourse of individualisation and amoral behaviour of absconding fathers centred on abandoning their children in pursuit of their own selfish desires. Focusing on continuities of relationships, rather than discontinuities was of central importance, as it was discontinuities in care and relationships with children that was hazardous, rather than diversity of family life per se (Walker 1999:42). Several commentators highlighted commitment and connectedness persisting as a central focus of family practice as the ethic of care (Finch 1989; Finch and Mason 1993; Smart and Neale 1997, Smart and Neale 1999; Williams 2004). The ethic of care was interconnected with moral obligations which were viewed as the essence of family practices. 'Doing' family was seen to be a more realistic way of understanding the family with all its complexities and diversity as people negotiated the right thing to do when faced with challenges. Williams (2004) reporting on the Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA) research on parenting and partnering stated:

... [the research] finds people to be energetic moral actors, embedded in webs of valued personal relationships, working to sustain the commitments that matter to them ... the choices people make – when considering how to juggle parenthood with work, or whether to remarry after divorce, for example - are morally informed responses to changes in their circumstances, rather than simple expressions of individual choice or lifestyle. When faced with dilemmas, people draw on repertoires of values about care and commitment in order to work out what, in practice, would be the 'proper thing to do'.

(Williams 2004:46)

#### **4.7 Understanding family change: life in stepfamilies**

The concepts of continuity and enduring relationships were helpful in providing new ways of thinking about and understanding the contemporary family, but there remained a paucity of discussion about parenting and daily experiences within stepfamilies. However, enlightening new longitudinal studies following trajectories advocated by Hetherington (1989), started from the premise that divorce / separation is not a one off event, but a process with various transitions along the way (Rodgers and Pryor 1998; Dunn 2002; Wade and Smart 2002). Disruptions and / or conflict prior to the end of a partnership generally occur and together with further transitions along the way, for example moving accommodation and becoming a lone parent family, are part of a changing landscape that affects many children. Consequently more insightful understandings of some of the trajectories that parents and children experience emerged.

One longitudinal survey was Ferri and Smith's (1998) study exploring parental roles and family life in stepfamilies. Data were collected from the 1991 survey of the 1958 National Child Development Study [of which I am a participant], and were compared with data from an earlier study that had examined parental roles and family life in first families (Ferri and Smith 1996). The findings demonstrated that there were many similarities in stepfamilies with traditional nuclear families. Patterns of parental employment, family activities and maternal and paternal involvement in child care and child rearing presented much less variation between stepfamilies and first families than there was within each family type.

However, there were also significant differences focusing on economic difficulties with more socio-economic marginalisation in stepfamilies, who on average had more children spread across a wider age range. Whilst there were more dual earner households in stepfamilies, their income was generally lower than those in first families. This reflected a tendency to have lower status jobs as a result of their poorer academic qualifications, highlighting their previous experiences and characteristics, as in parenthood, relationship

breakdown and stepfamily formation all before age 33. Economic disadvantage obviously presented a threat to the 'wellbeing and success' of the new family (Ferri and Smith 1998:58).

One surprise from the findings was that both biological and stepfathers were more involved with the children compared to Ferri's (1984) study, which found that stepfathers had little involvement with children. However, paradoxically more involvement from step-parents, usually the stepfather, led to more stress between the couple about how the children should be reared. Moreover, this was compounded if they were a complex<sup>16</sup> stepfamily and if they went onto have a child together. Rather than stabilising the family, a new baby had the potential to cause greater stress (Ferri and Smith 1998:60). The authors concluded that there was a need for support for parenting in stepfamilies, particularly preparation for the challenges and difficulties at the formation of the stepfamily (Ferri and Smith 1998:60).

#### **4.8 Parenting issues: the case for children**

Whilst it is not the remit of this study to explore in detail the issues for children, it is important to note the main points that emerged from the literature. Due to the paucity of literature focusing on parenting issues, an insight into children's issues might inform a conceptualisation and understanding of parents' issues as the two are so closely interlinked and enmeshed. Whilst a focus on child development [physical, emotional, social and behavioural], within a social problem / harmism paradigm with implications for future wellbeing continued, changes also occurred. A shift from the average prevalence of children's problems following parents' separation, to individual differences in children's responses was a refreshing departure (Amato and Keith 1991). An embryonic understanding of influencing factors in children's lives and which particular children were vulnerable or resilient began to emerge. The risk factors appeared to range from broad distal influences such as living in disadvantage to proximal

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<sup>16</sup> Complex stepfamilies are where both parents bring children into the relationship.

influences such as those resources [or not] within the family (Dunn 2004). This model based on Oliver, Smith and Barker's (1998) paper was adopted by the Treasury in 2005 in order to explain parenting in marginalised families. The Treasury defined distal as demographic variables such as income, marital status or age of mother, whilst proximal variables focused on outcomes such as a lack of priority for buying toys and books. The inherent danger in this simplistic approach was in viewing good parenting as a technique, rather than a relationship (Clarke 2006) and clearly exemplified government's myopic understanding of the complex and multi-dimensional variables affecting parenting.

Whilst other studies continued to report findings negatively, some were balanced with more positive elements which could be grasped and explored in more detail in further research. One such was Rodgers and Pryor's (1998) review of 200 research papers, international, but mainly UK over several decades, which revealed 'the usual suspects', that is that children of separated parents had a higher probability of:

- living in poverty
- behavioural problems
- poorer academic achievement
- leaving school / home early
- early sexual activity, teenage pregnancy, teenage parent
- depressive symptoms, drug and alcohol misuse and other anti-social behaviour

However, there was no simple or direct relationship between parental separation and children's adjustment; it could not be assumed that the parents' separation was the underlying cause of the poor outcomes. Rather, factors that influenced outcomes were:

- financial hardship which could limit educational achievement
- family conflict before, during and after separation could contribute to behavioural problems

- the ability of parents to 'recover' or manage the separation affected children's ability to adjust
- multiple changes in family structure increased the probability of poor outcomes
- the quality of contact with the non resident parent could improve outcomes

Moreover, some myths were dispelled such as:

- the absence of a parent was not the most influential factor of separation for a child's development
- a child's age when separation occurred was not in itself important
- boys were not more adversely affected than girls
- whilst short term distress was common at the time of separation, this usually diminished and it was only a minority of children who experienced adverse outcomes. However, those children had nearly twice the probability of experiencing specific poor outcomes in the long term compared to children in intact families

Also, Rodgers and Pryor's (1998) review examined findings for children from stepfamilies and found that they did not fare as well as those from intact families and sometimes not as well as those from lone parent families, particularly for older children, but young children fared better. However, with multiple transitions all children were more affected. However, a caveat is that the review examined papers over several decades with many contextualised in different periods preceding the 1990s.

As such, a developing body of knowledge focusing on general stepfamily issues with some specific findings for children was gathering pace. Meanwhile, two particular approaches, from the psychological and sociological schools were instrumental in expanding the knowledge base even further.



## **4.9 Psychological influences**

The psychological school suggested the need for longitudinal, intergenerational research studies looking at trajectories (Dunn 2004). Firstly, taking the psychological approach, Dunn's<sup>17</sup> (2002) literature review of community studies acknowledged the small amount of research exploring 'normal' rather than psychopathological disturbance in children when their parents separate. As evidenced above key challenges and risks for children in stepfamilies and their parents have been acknowledged along with the likelihood of adjustment problems (Dunn 2002). However, average differences were found to be small and individual differences great (Dunn 2002). Dunn highlighted Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis and Pryor and Rodgers (2001) overview of their research findings, and proffered several suggestions that contributed to an understanding of which children were particularly susceptible to family transitions, and also the influencing factors that acted to make them resilient or fragile as follows.

### **Type of stepfamily**

The variety of differences in the way children arrive in stepfamilies were important and needed to be considered. For example, after a period of living in a lone parent family for several years or conversely having been in several stepfamilies previously. Moreover, Dunn (2002) suggested that the diversity of stepfamily needed to be acknowledged and recognised. For example, children in complex stepfamilies had more frequent and marked adjustment problems compared to simple<sup>18</sup> stepfamilies.

### **Parental mental health problems**

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<sup>17</sup> Much of Dunn's research focused on the Avon Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood (ALSPAC), a study of almost 14,000 families where women had given birth between April 1991 and December 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Simple stepfamilies where there are only children from one parent.

Rates of depression were twice as high for women in stepfamily situations compared with rates for women in intact non-stepfamilies (O'Connor *et al* 1999). Rates were higher for men in stepfamilies compared with men in families in which the children were biologically related (Deater-Deckard *et al* 1998). Parental mental health problems are known to be a key risk factor for children's adjustment due to a reduced capacity to parent consistently, positively and maintain good communication (Waylen and Stewart-Brown 2008).

### **Parental life course patterns**

Parents' life histories could not be ignored. Women who had an unhappy childhood, teenage pregnancy, leaving home early and a series of cohabiting relationships, had an increased likelihood of forming partnerships with men who had had similar experiences (Dunn 2004). This echoed Dunn, Davies and O'Connor's (2000) earlier work on assortative mating for antisocial behaviour, for depression and for education. These adverse circumstances had the potential to impact on the parent-child relationship in terms of less affectionate relationships (Dunn 2001).

### **Multiple family transitions**

As highlighted above stepfamilies were less stable than biological families with several transitions associated with more problems for children such as:

- offending (Fergusson, Horwood and Lynskey 1992)
- disruptive school behaviour (Kurdeck, Fine and Sinclair 1995)
- poor educational outcomes, lower self esteem, lower levels of happiness (Cockett and Tripp 1994)
- couple relationship difficulties in adult life (Amato and Keith 1991)

Views differed in the reasons for these outcomes (Pryor and Rodgers 2001:69-71) with some commentators disputing that multiple transitions were

so damaging. Flowerdew and Neale's (2003)<sup>19</sup> study raised an important point in that some children do not manage 'general' transitions well, such as through nursery, primary, secondary and college education and stepfamilies per se should not be implicated. A myopic approach to viewing transitions only through the lens of parental separation did not reveal a complete picture (Flowerdew and Neale 2003:3). The changes that young people experienced when parents separated were different to the usual suppositions. For young people, the 'sphere of family life after divorce' was not such a central aspect of their life. Rather other aspects of change were more important such as issues related to school, friendship, death, illness, sexuality, unemployment, financial hardship, housing. The research suggested that if risk and resiliency factors were to be understood in totality, it was necessary to look at other factors in children and young people's lives, as they were developing their own identities and did not want their challenges to be understood only in terms of their parents' lives (Flowerdew and Neale 2003).

Moreover, some research suggested positive elements of managing difficult experiences such as children's increased sense of independence, competence and self-awareness (Rodgers and Pryor 2001; Flowerdew and Neale 2003). Also, insight into what helped or hindered children and young people with new parental figures was illuminating. For example, whether there was one new partner or several was not a central point, rather it was important that they were 'nice' and 'not in your face'. Furthermore, it was helpful if only one parent was re-partnering at any one time as the pace of change was important (Flowerdew and Neale 2003). The latter factor linked to Giddens (1992) concept of 'psychological travelling time' or the time taken to come to terms with each major life change. De'Ath (1992) found two years to be the average period for stepfamily members to adapt (Flowerdew and Neale 2003). However, much depended on the quality of the parent-child relationships.

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<sup>19</sup> The sociological study was based on the CAVA study between 1997-1999 exploring the experiences of 117 children living in post divorce families.

#### 4.10 Parent-child relationships

Forming stepfamilies often involved multiple transitions of house, school and geographical area. These 'social stresses' together with economic and possibly parental mental health problems were mediated through the quality of the social relationships within the stepfamily and particularly the parent-child relationship (Dunn *et al* 1998). If the latter relationship was not good with lack of warmth, empathy, understanding and positivity, and if the couple relationship was difficult there was potential for adjustment problems (Dunn *et al* 2001). However, a caveat was that these issues occurred in any family, not just stepfamilies and some children were just difficult.

In contrast where relationships between biological children and their parents was good and communication was easy, children appeared to be able to manage the transitions comfortably (Flowerdew and Neale 2003). Not only was the quality of family relationships key in aiding transitions, but also the children's linked lives, beyond their families in wider community relationships were important. These were often relationships in which family relationships were embedded, for example the importance of grandparents was a major factor in aiding transitions for young people (Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001). Another important factor for the child's adjustment was the quality of the non-resident, usually the father's relationship with the child, rather than the quantity of contact (Amato and Gilbreth 1999). Maintaining a relationship with the child post separation could be difficult, particularly in terms of discipline and control, but authoritative<sup>20</sup> parenting with warmth, support and involvement were vital elements in a non-resident partner's relationship with their child. Moreover, children whose fathers gave economic support were found to have better adjustment, academic achievement and good health (Amato and Gilbreth 1999). Despite the high profile in the media and government of absconding fathers who have little or no contact and do not support their children financially, some studies found that two out of three

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<sup>20</sup> Authoritative parenting combines warmth, affection and encouragement of children's independence with boundary setting and firm but moderate discipline (Baumrind 1966).

non-resident fathers paid maintenance and that seven out of ten had regular contact with their children (Lewis 2000). However, in contrast there were links between non-resident fathers with low incomes from manual employment, unemployment, limited housing and low father-child contact. Moreover, around 60% of fathers who rarely or never saw their children stated that it was disputes with ex-partners that hindered the process (Simpson, Jessop and McCarthy 2003:206). Some fathers abdicated parenting due to practical, financial and emotional difficulties (Simpson, McCarthy and Walker 1995).

The centrality of biological relatedness was also found to be important with more positive relationships with biological children than with stepchildren (Dunn *et al* 2001) and with more problems in complex stepfamilies. Even in stable stepfamilies step-parents remained less involved, more distant and had less rapport with stepchildren (Hetherington, Henderson and Reiss 1999). Daly and Wilson (1998) suggested that this was a factor in explaining the increased risk of child abuse, but this was disputed by Coleman (1994) and Dunn (2002) who suggested the risk affected only a minority of stepfamilies.

### **Parenting styles**

Some commentators suggested that following stepfamily formation authoritative parenting and positive aspects of the parent-child relationship decreased (Amato and Keith 1991). Increased authoritarian parenting<sup>21</sup> by both biological mothers and step-parents over time was associated with increased behavioural problems (Bray 1999). The importance of not focusing on parenting *per se*, but rather focusing on a relationship approach to understand what happens within families was important (Dunn 2004). Whilst the proximal issues of parenting had generally been viewed as the influencing factor in children's responses to parental separation, Dunn suggested that it was the dyadic relationship between parent and child, with each contributing to the quality [or not] of the relationship that was important. Negativity from stepdaughters over time has been found to make it increasingly problematic

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<sup>21</sup> Authoritarian parenting – little warmth and respect for children's individuality with demands on children and firm discipline (Baumrind 1966).

for stepfathers who had initially been pre-disposed to their stepchildren (Hetherington and Clingempeel 1992).

#### **4.11 Couple relationships**

The absence of the couple relationship in much of the parenting support literature was interesting. The quality of the parents' relationship was clearly associated with differences in children's adjustment. Those children who directly observed couple conflict were distressed by it. Also, the indirect result of parents' conflict might impact children with parents less patient, less consistent, less emotionally present (Dunn 2002). Conflict between non-resident fathers and their ex-partners could be particularly damaging for the child. Dunn (2004) highlighted the different experiences and reactions to parental conflict between siblings in the same family, and posited that there was greater variance within than between families (O'Connor *et al* 2001). Whilst causal influence was not clearly established, positive relationships between mother and stepfather were linked to poorer parent-stepchild relationships. However, it was also recognised that there might be other processes contributing to family relationships that differ to intact families, such as negative behaviour towards stepfathers due to resentment (Dunn *et al* 1999). Despite a focus on strengthening marriage and reducing breakdown in 'Supporting Families' (Home Office 1998), the paper remained a green paper. Couples' relationships had not been particularly recognised in family policy<sup>22</sup> apart from a brief flurry post 2007 (Walker *et al* 2010; Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010; DCSF 2010). Policy began to acknowledge the need to support couple relationships in all their diversity of family formation in order to promote good outcomes for children:

An effective family policy must start with supporting strong couple relationships and stable, positive relationships within family.

(DCSF 2007:23)

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<sup>22</sup> Apart from a brief flirtation with couple relationships in 'Supporting Families (Home Office 1998), the paper remained a Green paper. It was thought that couple relationships were too sensitive an area for Government to become involved. However, by 2007 New Labour began to acknowledge the need to support parenting through the couple relationship.

Walker *et al's* (2010) study commissioned by New Labour<sup>23</sup> explored the issues and situations causing stress in couples particularly those with children, the aim being to enhance family life and reduce potential risk for children associated with parental separation.

Therefore, the knowledge base of what was happening in stepfamilies, with a glimpse into some of the possible parenting support issues was developing. But there appeared to be a lag between the conceptual development of these two issues. The shift from an all encompassing, negative conceptualisation of harm for all children involved in separation / divorce and stepfamily formation was enlightening, but there were still many unanswered questions. However, these were aided by the development of more insightful knowledge of parenting in stepfamilies from various empirical research projects within the sociological school.

#### **4.12 Sociological influences**

Unless we can bring back into our vision of families the contours and flux of real life as it is experienced, we risk formulating policies, programmes and laws that bear little relationship to everyday life.  
(Wade and Smart 2002:10)

A key emphasis from the sociological school was that there was not one generic single family type that experienced divorce / separation in the same way. Indeed the focus on divorce could detract from the more important aspect of understandings of different experiences and the lived reality of family life and transitions. It was the quality of relationships within families that was important, not whether they were a 'broken', one parent or stepfamily (Wade and Smart 2002). There were multifarious differences depending on culture, socio-economic class, gender, religion and ethnicity.

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<sup>23</sup> The conservatives also emphasised the couple relationship, with a particular emphasis on married couples as an important precursor to good outcomes for children (The Centre for Social Justice 2010).

An informative study that gained insight and understanding on parenting issues post divorce was Smart and Neale's (1999). Patterns of parenting and parental relationships post separation were found to be not fixed, but fluid and subject to negotiation and re-negotiation along with the shifting scene of life. Smart and Neale's (1999) study was based on in depth qualitative interviews between 1994-96, with a sample of 60 parents with only one parent from each family recently separated / divorced. Data analysis utilised a grounded theory approach. Again whilst the focus was not solely on stepfamilies, the findings were still influential as it explored how and why different patterns of parenting arose initially, how they were experienced by parents and which factors gave rise to changes. The study charted qualitative changes in relationships between separated parents, the parents and children and determined if traditional patterns of parenting were changing along with processes of moral reasoning (Smart and Neale 1999:42).

### **Parenting post separation / divorce**

To re-cap, the clean break of the post 1969 Divorce Reform Act, where the 'good' parent, generally the mother, gained the children, whilst the morally reprehensible father lost parental rights, changed with the 1989 Children Act which required the needs of the child to be paramount and thus co-parenting across households emerged. This 'social code' on divorce was the 'antithesis of the old norms governing divorce' (Smart 2004a:404). A propensity for tension was evident [and remains] as those operating in the old policy framework of vilification of the 'bad' parent was not helpful with the newer policy of co-operative shared parenting. Changing roles and responsibilities had to be negotiated focusing on the children which might impact on parents' identities (Smart 2004b). Key issues connected with responsibility and identity emerged from the study, such as how parents saw themselves and how they managed their changing parental identities over time. Change was inevitable: 'we regard it as essential to recognize the significance of this new trajectory of the self' (Smart and Neale 1999:67). Generally mothers tended to see themselves as responsible and more adept at childcare than their



partners when they had been in intact families. Smart and Neale (1999) developed a typology of different post divorce parenting based on parental care and parental authority:

### **Co-parenting**

- both parents had active involvement in their children's lives. Parental responsibilities were shared on a time share basis and not on tasks, which provided a more egalitarian, less gendered pattern of parenting
- the children had a close relationship with both parents
- each parent had a committed continuous relationship with the non-resident parent based on responsibilities for the good of the child
- new partners did not see themselves and neither did the children view them as parents, so they had limited involvement with the children

This type of parenting needed tremendous strength and emotional energy, with constant juggling of different people's needs and was prone to fragility.

### **Custodial parenting**

- responsibilities of both parents were demarcated along gender lines. Children lived with one parent and visited the other
- continuity of care and stability of living environment was thus provided
- a parallel form of parenting operated
- changes in ways of mothering and fathering were required
- new partners were still not perceived as parents, but they were more likely to adopt some parenting responsibilities

### **Solo parenting**

- some parents, largely fathers abdicated parenting due to practical, financial and emotional difficulties (Simpson, McCarthy and Walker 1995)

- the quality of the relationship with the non-resident parent and / or the children was highly conflictual, possibly with violence / abuse

As a result a vignette into what had actually been happening post separation and in the stepfamily was helpful. A handful of studies gave some useful insight into issues for parents, which took cognisance of divorce / separation not being a one off discrete event with dire consequences for children, but a process which needed to be worked at and negotiated over time. Whilst there are always shifting parameters in parenting, whatever the family form, those in stepfamilies may well be more complex.

#### **4.13 Parenting in stepfamilies: 21<sup>st</sup> century reality**

The most notable research exploring parents in stepfamilies to date has been Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003) study which focused on parents' and step-parents' perspectives of how they made sense of 'family' and parenting within and across households (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:18). The focus on stepfamilies was part of a large ESRC project exploring resident and non resident parents' and step-parents' understandings and experiences of parenting in stepfamilies. Their constructionist approach to researching parenting, step-parenting and making families was one of the first British in depth sociological studies since Burgoyne and Clarke's (1984) study 15 years earlier.

However, some caveats need to be noted. Firstly, the main sample consisted of 46 individuals from 23 step clusters with common family identities, but it was predominately a middle class sample with 29 middle class, 4 upwardly mobile and only 13 working class individuals. Secondly, the sample was accessed through snowballing with both researchers' informal social networks and participants' networks. Data collection techniques demonstrated a good grasp of different methods to collect sensitive data. For example, individual in depth interviews, using an open ended exploratory approach for the major part of the interview and then specific questions to gain perceptions 'of more public norms, images and policies around stepfamilies' (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:18). Vignettes highlighting some of the dilemmas

which stepfamilies might experience were used to elicit responses and any possible direct experience of the highlighted situations. Both deductive and inductive analyses were used with the former focused on a comparison of responses to the specific questions, whilst the latter was in the form of thematic analysis taken from the themes obtained from the 'narrative tales' (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 1999:128).

The themes highlighted a focus on gendered images of moral responsibility as an important aspect of step-parenting. The need for parents to affirm their moral identities in the face of potentially being viewed as placing their children at risk through re-partnering or non-residence was important. Men found it easier to by-pass responsibility and accountability for children without impacting on their moral identity. In contrast women viewed themselves as responsible for making the family work and thus were subject to judgement and accountability (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 1999:17). Caring, authority and material provision in parenting were of central importance in making the stepfamily work. Together with the moral responsibility for the children, commitment and investment of time were key aspects even under changing circumstances. Moreover, the couples' 'romantic love' could be subordinated for the sake of the children who were prioritised before the couple relationship. Furthermore, despite their own experiences of family change, stepfamilies viewed their family as an important unit involving commitment and togetherness which was dependable and long lasting and in contrast to Smart and Neale's (1999) study found that:

Family practices were framed by a set of long standing ideas about the nature of family life, rather than around negotiating fluidity and diversity.

(Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 1999:130)

Despite the emphasis on family as sites of obligation and commitment the parents' rejection of the term 'stepfamily' was marked amongst working class families. Burgoyne and Clarke (1984) confirmed the same with working class families, but not with the 'progressive' middle class families. In Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003:131) study, middle class parents and step-parents viewed biology as important in parent-child relationships. In

contrast parents in working class families viewed biology as largely irrelevant to parenting relationships and that it could be harmful to see relationships in stepfamilies as different from other family relationships. As a result of this particular finding, which wasn't developed in Burgoyne and Clarke's study, Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies found that 'class' was implicated in patterns of parenting in as much as working class parents in stepfamilies were more focused on parenting as a social practice compared to middle class parents in stepfamilies. The latter emphasised the importance of biological parenthood across households. The authors posited that this might be due to traditional patterns of inheritance and legitimacy amongst higher socio-economic groups, whereas working class families were traditionally economically insecure. As such an emphasis on social parenting might be a pragmatic approach where men are not in a good position to provide materially for their families, but are able to act as a father (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:133). However, with less than a third of the sample working class parents, the results should be treated with caution. Finally, the authors raised the possibility that broader public concerns about:

... stepfamilies may be constituted as a categorical site for playing out more general worries about the nature of family life, coupledness and parent-child relations in contemporary society.

(Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 1999:129).

The quote succinctly captures the concern of government and various right wing commentators in the media and some sections of society. Despite the above sterling work from psychological and sociological researchers, which has been informative in gaining an understanding of some of the parenting issues in stepfamilies, gaps remained. Parents' perceptions and experiences of parenting in marginalised [step]families and their parenting support issues were still largely unknown. The omission presented a serious gap in an otherwise expanding area of research and played into the hands of policy makers, and those waiting in the wings, forming new policy and practice for dysfunctional parents (Lexmond and Reeves 2009).

#### **4.14 Policy and practice: the justification for parenting support**

Since 1997, the Government has recognised that supporting mothers and fathers in their respective roles as parents is an important means of improving children's life chances. The Government's strategy starts from the enduring Beveridge principle: that the family is the bedrock of society and that it is in the interests of society to help parents meet their responsibilities.

(HM Treasury, DfES 2005:3.4)

The fallout tainting the rest of society from those parents who did not meet their responsibilities highlighted the continuing moral dimension implicit in not only the right wing 'Fractured Families' paper (Social Justice Policy Group 2006), but also across Government. Marginalisation, 'dysfunction, dissolution and 'dad-lessness' (Social Justice Policy Group 2006:9) provided a neat political construction of parents needing parenting support. Families were held up as comprising errant fathers, teenage parents, single mothers, divorced couples, co-habiting couples and reconstituted families. Their 'parenting deficit' (Etzioni 1993:6) was given a high priority by Government as they needed rescuing, particularly as they had the potential for further breakdown. 'Support for Parents' (HM Treasury, DfES 2005) amply demonstrated the Government's concern for parenting, but as usual parents were encapsulated within an homogenous group, with the term stepfamily barely appearing. Policies on diversity and tailoring services to personal need to encourage realistic and effective outcomes appeared to bypass families who weren't based on the normative biological family model.

As discussed in chapter one, parenting support services were provided by a myriad of agencies within the public, voluntary and private sectors, the aim being to support parents with effective parenting knowledge, understanding and skills. Parenting support would enable social inclusion and cohesion, leading to safer communities with more active community participation and strong social capital and of course reduced social costs (Ghate 2005). In totality this would help reduce / prevent parenting practices that were based on harsh and inconsistent discipline and where lack of involvement led to emotional and behavioural problems in childhood and adolescence. The latter were predictors of an increased risk of depression, alcohol and drugs misuse, psycho-social problems affecting relationships, work, delinquency

and criminal behaviour (Repetti, Taylor and Seeman 2002) leading to crime and disorder in communities. Conversely, some studies demonstrated that in otherwise difficult family or environmental conditions good, stable, warm relationships between children and one or both parents could protect them against risk (Losel and Bender 2003). As such, support and help in the difficult job of parenting was a central remit of government.

#### **4.15 Parenting support versus parenting control: paradoxes and polarised policies**

The primary responsibility for a family's success or failure will always lie with parents. But government can make a difference to the chances of success through the support it provides to parents and children and the way it provides it.

(Miliband and Hughes, DCSF 2008:1)

As evidenced above New Labour's record on supporting families appeared to demonstrate a serious commitment, but the reality was that parenting support gave a quick fix solution to urgent social problems as children were 'human capital' and investing in them was part of the 'social investment state' (Giddens 1998:17).

It is important that 'children get a good start in life' as they are the citizens, workers, parents and leaders of the future.

(HM Treasury 2004:2.11)

The first chink in the seemingly altruistic, humanistic approach of New Labour was the Crime and Disorder policies (Home Office, Social Exclusion Unit 1999, Home Office 2003, Home Office, Social Exclusion Unit 2006, Social Exclusion Unit Task Force 2007). On first examination the intention of these policies appeared to aid safer communities and foster social inclusion, and cohesion, social capital and communitarianism, but the policies were underpinned with economic efficiency and social morality, expounded by Etzioni (1994,1997) and Putnam (1993). Whilst consumerism and individuals' rights became more important, not enough was being done to encourage individuals' social responsibilities which was thought to be causing an erosion

of social order. The focus of the above policies would help protect families and communities against selfish individualism and thereby provide a safety network that a more disparate society could not do (Henricson 2003). Social capital in the form of informal support from friends, family and neighbours was thought to be deficient in disadvantaged areas in comparison to 'middle Englanders'.

Thus, the continuation and strengthening of governmentality through the state's principal role of preserving the safety of its citizens was translated into its family policy through parenting support. Underlying political discourses of regulation and re-stabilisation of family and society through parenting support were clear. The latter 'lessen(ed) the likelihood of delinquent development in children' (Henricson 2003:5) and reduced the high incidence of insecure parent-child attachment (Barrett 2006). As such, the Crime and Disorder policies mandated for parents of offending youths to attend parenting programmes under a varied assortment of 'sticks' - parenting orders, agreed behaviour contracts [ABCs], anti-social behaviour orders [ASBOs] all under the umbrella of the 'Respect' agenda (Home Office 2003; Home Office Social Exclusion Unit 2006, Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Unit Task Force 2007). Combining a supportive approach with compulsion was thought by some commentators to be inappropriate and 'overly punitive' and in danger of breaching legal and human rights (Henricson, Coleman and Roker 2000:326; Henricson and Bainham, 2005:81-83). Despite initial scepticism and resentment from parents and some commentators, early evaluation demonstrated that ultimately some parents found the parenting support beneficial (Ghate and Ramella 2002). However, claims that the early evaluation was based on voluntary attendance by parents, rather than compulsory attendance affected the legitimacy of the evaluation (Holt 2010).

#### **4.16 Marginalised parents and parenting support**

As highlighted in chapter one marginalisation has a much wider meaning than solely economic disadvantage. Exploring a more holistic interpretation of 'marginalisation' enhances understanding of the lives of marginalised

[step]families. Drawing from Bourdieu *et al*'s (1999) collection of case studies of marginalised people eloquently demonstrates marginalised groups 'struggles of the field', both economically and morally. Bourdieu's portrayal of different classes needs to be understood in terms of their different 'social practices' (Gillies 2007:35) as there was:

A complex and multi-layered representation capable of articulating the same realities but in terms that are different and, sometimes, irreconcilable,

(Bourdieu 1999:3)

Bourdieu's central thesis on understanding class and its ramifications centred on the conceptual trinity of 'field' or one's external environment, 'habitus' and 'capitals' (Devine and Savage 2005:13). 'Habitus' related to embodied dispositions, meaning 'the internalised form of class condition and of the conditioning it entails' (Bourdieu 1979:101). Habitus is of particular importance when considering the parents in my study as it helps an understanding of the much maligned inter-generational transmission of marginalisation. Habitus is not developed through conscious learning, but rather through subconscious ways as young children develop and become socialised into their milieu of what is the right and wrong way of doing things. This helps an understanding of why different classes align themselves with their class, not necessarily consciously often unconsciously, but it enables them to feel more 'comfortable' with people like themselves as:

The habitus tends to ensure its own constancy and its defence against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information, if exposed to it accidentally or by force, and by avoiding exposure to such information ...

(Bourdieu 1990:60-610)

The latter supports the findings [above] of why parents living in disadvantaged areas have been happy with their neighbourhood (Ghate and Hazel 2002; Seaman *et al* 2006).



A key concept of Bourdieu's focused on the four areas of 'capitals' [social, economic, symbolic and cultural] which interlinked. In terms of social capital, the striking paradox and irony was that whilst the proliferation of polarised policies was attempting to encourage more social capital amongst marginalised communities as it was thought to be lacking, research demonstrated that social capital in the form of parenting support was indeed strong amongst marginalised families, but in contrast had the potential to be deficient amongst middle class families. As part of an ESRC research study on families and social capital Edwards and Gillies (2004, 2005) explored support in parenting and parenting practices. They utilized a mixed method approach with a survey of 112 parents of 8-12 year old children and in depth interviews with 36 parents across 27 households. Parenting support resources were conceptualised in terms of social, economic, cultural, emotional and environmental capital. Their findings highlighted that social capital in parenting support was alive and well. Family and friends were used as sources of help, advice, material, practical and emotional support. Professional parenting support was not seen as a normative need other than the usual 'institutionalised' health and education necessary appointments and assessments. Indeed amongst working class parents parenting support in the form of parenting classes and / or programmes were viewed as intrusive and undermined parents' confidence and expertise in their abilities. However, there were marked class differences with:

Working class parents (were) often embedded in dense and intensive networks of family and friends who provided the practical help and emotional support that enabled reciprocal day-to-day survival, while middle class parents were more likely to build relationships that preserved and accumulated their relative social advantage and neutralized ongoing obligation.

(Edwards and Gillies 2005:25)

So, parenting support amongst working class parents was based on reciprocity and negotiated on a transitory everyday basis. In contrast social capital amongst middle class parents was again based on reciprocity, but invested and saved for future use which 'contains the seed of individualized social fracture' (Edwards and Gillies 2005:24). The paradox is clear. A key

justification for policy was that there was a lack of social capital in marginalised communities, yet it appeared that middle Englanders were the ones at risk.

#### **4.17 Marginalised parents' views and parenting support**

The quality of the home learning environment is higher for young children from families in professional social groups than it is for families in lower socio-economic groups. And experience of multiple, overlapping problems – such as poverty, poor quality housing, long term health difficulties and debt, is associated with harsher and more punitive parenting styles and relationship breakdown between parents.

(HM Government DCSF and DH 2010:13)

Whilst Government highlighted problems associated with living and parenting in disadvantaged areas (HM Government DCSF and DH 2010:14), many parents in these areas viewed the problems differently. Interesting evidence emerged from Ghate and Hazel's (2002) nationally representative study of disadvantaged parents. The study consisted of a survey of 1750 marginalised parents of children under 17, and in depth qualitative follow up interviews with 40 of the parents in particularly stressful situations. Despite living in some of the most deprived areas of the country [dirty, crime ridden, dangerous] around 75% of parents described their community as generally friendly and stable and even in the very poorest areas over 50% stated that their neighbourhood was a good place to bring up a family. Moreover, as highlighted above 46% of parents stated they were generally coping well with parenting, 52% were coping sometimes and sometimes not, and only 2% reported hardly ever being able to cope (Ghate and Hazel 2002:190). Whilst most parents had good networks of social support, 47% felt unsupported to some extent and 35% had never wished for support. Similar findings were also reported by Seaman *et al* (2006). Whilst it was noted that 10% of respondents were living in stepfamilies, which was higher than in the general population (6%), there was little else noted pertaining to stepfamilies per se (Ghate and Hazel 2002:31).

#### 4.18 Policy tensions

Parenting support as a policy to achieve family cohesion and community moral harmony for marginalised families was driven by evidence that socially excluded groups demonstrated a relatively high incidence of insecure parent-child attachment (Barrett 2006). However, Katz *et al* (2007) reviewed Ghate and Hazel's (2002) data and found no clear causal relationship, rather parents living in disadvantage demonstrated 'good enough' parenting. Recently evidence has suggested that disadvantage may have less influence than expected. Gutman, Brown and Akerman's (2009) literature review included an analysis of the data from the ALSPAC study and found that family income was not a significant predictor of parenting behaviours. Living in disadvantage had less influence than expected. Rather it was other background characteristics and behaviours that influenced parenting, such as good maternal mental health and social networks. Similarly an analysis utilising longitudinal data on children and their families from pregnancy to three years, found that parents deteriorating health, particularly mental health was strongly associated with a decline in parenting standards (Waylen and Stewart-Brown 2008). Improving health led to positive changes in parenting. However, a reduction in financial circumstances was linked only with a modest reduction in the quality of parenting, and improving income was not associated with better quality parenting (Waylen and Stewart-Brown 2008). The authors concluded that whilst lifting parents out of poverty was beneficial in itself, it was unlikely to achieve significant improvements in parenting. As such poverty per se should not be regarded as 'a single or direct cause' of parenting problems (Utting 2008:101).

The multi-dimensional risk factors impacting marginalised parents had different effects depending on internal factors such as personal temperament, beliefs and relationships, as well as external factors such as housing, neighbourhood and levels of social support (Utting 2008:98). Risk and resiliency factors were an important consideration as in contrast those parents

with an external locus of control<sup>24</sup> (Rotter 1966) had the potential to be more exposed in terms of their parenting. Consequently, couched in rhetoric, Government stated that parenting support should be based on:

Progressive universalism – those with high risk and low protective factors receive more intensive support and those with lower levels of need receive a lighter touch appropriate to their needs.  
(HMTreasury, DfES 2005:22)

The transparency of targeted parenting support for marginalised families living in challenging circumstances was now clear, but paraded under the euphemism of 'progressive universalism'. Whilst this might appear to be a pragmatic view of managing limited resources, some commentators recognising that most parents have parenting support needs at some time, advocated parenting support should comprise a balanced service of universal services as a preventative approach and targeted services for children in need (Henricson and Jordan 2007). However, understanding 'the determinants of parenting' was vital in directing which parents should be targeted and how they could be supported (Gutman, Brown and Akerman 2009:33, 40).

At the close of the New Labour government there appeared to be a realignment of their family policy to incorporate different family practices (DCSF 2010). Furthermore, it was finally acknowledged that a 'one size fits all' approach to parenting support might be inappropriate (Cabinet Office / DCSF 2008; DCSF 2010), so tailored, flexible and holistic services provided by health visitors and midwives were advocated for the 'hard to reach', the 2-3% of socially excluded families who experienced multiple problems.

As such, whilst the apparent altruism of Government appeared to reflect care and support, the socio-political landscape was being shaped with a focus on family and societal change, crime, collapsing communities and a myriad of other contemporary ills including mental health for both children and adults.

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<sup>24</sup> People with an external locus of control do not feel that they can control events, whereas those with an internal locus of control believe that they do have some control.

Supposed interconnected policies appeared somewhat in tension and could be open to the criticism of ‘nannying’ and increasing intrusion into the private sphere of family life. Moreover, the specific targeting of marginalised families living in disadvantage could be viewed as coercive rather than supportive, both of which suggested a heavy duty governmentality of some parents and parenting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A palpable shift from a covert to a more overt blamism gradually occurred during the first decade of the new millennium. Conformism and regulation of parenting was prioritised over tackling the structural and contextual causes of unemployment, poor housing, poor education and sink estates rife with drug and substance misuse (Squires 2006). Obvious profound social need such as mental health issues, learning difficulties, addictions, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder appeared to be disregarded (Squires 2006). With the coalition government formed in May 2010, essentially the political message has remained one of blamism with stringent fiscal policies particularly affecting marginalised families. Rather than supporting marginalised parents the coalition government appears to be alienating and further excluding them as they continue to struggle against the challenges of inequalities. Whilst the drive against fractured families, social fragmentation and poor parenting remain key concerns of the coalition government they would do well to further investigate the efficacy of the parenting support being delivered.

#### **4.19 Parenting support practice: theorisation and evidence**

Owing to the rapid ‘professionalisation’ and diversity of parenting support from varied professional and non-professional groups since the mid 1990s it was necessary to have commonality of definitions, not only for parents and parenting support, but particularly for outcomes. Whilst evidence of effectiveness emerged, it was and remains a slow process. What constitutes evidence of effective parenting support remains a contested area (Utting 2008:49). Broadly, there have been two periods of activity to develop theory and provide evidence: the mid 1990s to the early noughties and then a more concerted effort in the last few years.

With any evolving practice there is initially a paucity of research on the effectiveness of such activity (Smith 1996:96; Barlow 1997; Lloyd 1999:8; Grimshaw and McGuire 1998:2). The typical approach had been simple pre and post intervention evaluations from parents (Pugh, De'Ath and Smith 1994:33; Smith 1996:91; Smith and Pugh 1996; Barlow 1998:89; Grimshaw and McGuire 1998:2; Lloyd 1999:20; Newman and Roberts 1999:40). Whilst many authors suggested that self reported satisfaction of parenting support programmes was high, there were exhortations for empirical evidence and the overriding need for evidence based practice of the long term impact of parenting support (Pugh, De'Ath and Smith 1994:33; Smith 1996:91; Smith and Pugh 1996; Barlow 1997; Barlow 1998:89; Grimshaw and McGuire 1998:2; Oakley, Rajan and Turner 1998; Lloyd 1999:20; Newman and Roberts 1999:40). Obvious ethical considerations of beneficence were rife, as previous innovative practice in child welfare had been thought to be beneficial. For example children of 'deficient' parents being shipped off to Australia, disabled children incarcerated in hospitals and parents not being allowed to stay with children in hospital have now been seen to be misguided parenting support practices (Newman and Roberts 1999:42). Interventions needed to be embedded in empowerment rather than deficit or coercive models and which respected family and cultural diversity (Smith and Pugh 1996), an ideal still proving to be elusive.

### **Empirical research: the reality**

The majority of parenting support evidence has typically been aligned with meta analyses and systematic reviews of randomised controlled trials [RCTs]. Those studies that gained recognition and credibility were generally undertaken within a clinical medical / psychological context. The first systematic review of published literature between 1970-1996 explored different facets of parenting support (Barlow 1997). Only quantitative studies which had used rigorous methodological designs, generally RCTs were included. The results demonstrated that group based parent training programmes, all with the exception of one based on the behavioural approach, improved the behaviour of young children compared with the no

treatment or waiting list control groups. However, long term follow up was limited to three years and whilst the findings demonstrated that parent-training programmes were effective, Barlow (1997) also discovered that in a number of the studies between 25-45 % of parents continued to report problems with their children's behaviour. This was a key challenge to proving effectiveness. The behavioural skills taught to address specific problems which manifest in age-related ways were often context specific and did not contribute to a life cycle approach to supporting parents (Einzig 1999:25).

Similarly, a systematic review of RCTs of group based parent training programmes for improving emotional and behavioural adjustment in 0-3 year olds (Barlow and Parsons 2002), showed that whilst parenting programmes could be effective in improving the mental health of this age group, there was insufficient evidence about long term benefit (Barlow and Coren 2002). Another issue was the variety of outcomes with different foci such as outcomes for children of different ages, outcomes for parents, outcomes for families. For example, improved maternal psycho-social health in the short term, reduction in anxiety, depression and improved self esteem (Barlow and Coren 2000); improved behaviour problems in 3-10 yr olds (Barlow and Stewart-Brown 2001). The key problem was that family contexts and practices are different and shift over time requiring different methodological approaches.

Whilst the rigorous systematic reviews were informative, due to their stringent criteria some of the more inclusive reviews involving users were excluded due to 'unscientific' inclusion of material (Ghate 2001, Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe 2004). While RCTs gave information about the outcomes of participants who were assessed on outcomes with standardised measures, there was also a requirement for a more flexible approach to both process and outcome evaluation, but within an agreed framework (Lloyd 1999:24; Smith 1996:100; Grimshaw and McGuire 1998:60). As a result, some commentators highlighted the importance and richness of qualitative findings in terms of the factors that influence success (Newman and Roberts 1999), and that parents' perceptions and experiences were crucial in determining the

success of a parenting support programme (Barnes and Freude-Lagevardi 2002; Ghate and Hazel 2002). Thus the omission of parents' views was exposed.

### **Every parent matters?**

Whilst policy rhetoric suggested that 'every parent matters' (DfES 2007) in parenting support development, the inclusion of marginalised parents' views from diverse backgrounds was tardy, with evidence that parents were not included or involvement was tokenistic (Grimshaw and McGuire 1998). Historically differences in terms of culture, ethnicity, gender and non-biological parenting were barely addressed by the parenting support initiatives set up to help them (Lloyd 1999:10). The lack of recognition that families exhibit the diversity of society itself meant that many families' parenting support needs were potentially not being met. There was a desperate need to ask what works for whom, where, when, how and why before an understanding of parenting support and its effectiveness could progress. Urgent answers to the following issues were vital:

- users' perspectives of parenting support (Grimshaw and McGuire 1998:50; Lloyd 1999:11; Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe 2004) and the short term and long term outcomes wanted by parents (Grimshaw and McGuire 1998:50)
- the needs of different parents: lone, step, adoptive and foster, gay and lesbian, parents and children from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and children and parents with disabilities (Lloyd 1999:10; Henricson 2002; Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2003); the parenting support needs of fathers, younger parents and older children (Lloyd 1999:11)
- process issues such as barriers to access and participant attrition (Grimshaw and McGuire 1998:32; Henricson and Jordan 2007; O'Connor and Scott 2007; Utting 2008:113)
- what actually works in parenting support (Einzig 1999; Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe 2004; Stewart-Brown 2005; Henricson and Jordan 2007)



## 4.20 Progress?

Consequently there has been a flurry of research activity over the last few years in an attempt to plug the above gaps. Various reviews have contributed and a more informed picture of what works, or does not, in parenting support has emerged (Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe 2004; Ghate 2004; Newman *et al* 2005; Barrett 2007; Waylen and Stewart-Brown 2008; Utting 2008; Gutman, Brown and Akerman 2009). Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe's (2004) more enlightened review of the international evidence on parenting support, commissioned by the DfES departed from the normal approach to literature reviews. It explored what works; what was promising; what did not work and what was unknown. The review covered over 2,000 potential relevant books, journals and reports, both published and 'grey'. Included in the review was complementary or softer evidence drawn from an analysis of process issues and users' experiences, together with practice wisdom from experienced practitioners as well as outcome measures. Moreover, Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe (2004) attempted to make the review more accessible to busy policy makers and service planners and stated that few studies focused their findings on the ramifications for policy and practice. They were candid about their approach:

...(which) very much reflects the state of the literature, which could be conceptualised as having reached a half-way house on the way to 'science'

(Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe 2004:24).

A summary of the main findings included:

### **Strategic factors of what works**

- early intervention with brief, focused interventions, but late intervention was better than nothing and longer duration of intervention was necessary for serious problems
- universal open access services, but it was noted that more evaluation was needed to determine effectiveness
- targeted restricted access for complex types of parenting problems

- services with a theoretical base and with measurable objectives of how they could be attained

### **Aspects of delivery that work**

- services with 1:1 and group work; programmes that used manuals
- home delivery and group settings
- delivered by trained and skilled practitioners
- services with child care facilities, easily accessible - geographically and temporal and non-stigmatising
- relational factors such as trusted local practitioners, building rapport with parents first, with user feedback incorporated into the service and disseminated to parents
- attention to cultural and contextual issues for example parents' personal circumstances and diversity

### **Parents' views on a quality parenting support service**

- accessibility when needed, not several months later.
- extended service hours
- parenting support that is informative
- a parenting support service that respects their expertise in their own lives and does not undermine their autonomy
- a parenting support service that meets parents' own self defined needs, not what practitioners think they need or are able to provide

The conclusion reached was that many gaps remained. For example, the literature only reported diversity in terms of inclusion of fathers and black and Asian parents. No reference was made to stepfamilies or other different family formations or practices as parents were included in an homogenous group in the inclusion criteria.

A critique of the National Evaluation of Sure Start [NESS] (2005) from 1999-2001 on behalf of the Family and Parenting Institute (Barrett 2005) provided

some interesting insight into the potential for flaws in the evaluation process. The NESS evaluations of early interventions<sup>25</sup> produced little evidence of positive findings, apart from a few benefits for less marginalised families, and of more concern appeared to have some negative impact. Barrett (2007) explained this through such factors as parents possibly feeling more empowered due to Sure Start interventions which enabled them to feel more confident and demand better services. However, Barrett's main focus of criticism was the methodology of evaluations and the nature of the findings, their validity and implications for policy. Whilst she suggested that RCTs had an important role to play in giving robust, empirical findings, they provided evidence on the effects of parenting support on homogenised populations and 'central tendencies'. National evaluation methodologies might not be sensitive to local variations. Knowledge about heterogeneous effects were needed, such as collecting information about how parenting support interventions had to be adapted for particular parents. There was also the need for additional evaluations that more specifically addressed the situation and needs of individual families in order that commonalities and differences between parents were known, so that practitioners in collaboration with parents could adapt services. It was suggested that a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches would enable this to happen (Barrett 2007:19). This realistic, enlightening and insightful critique was welcomed by those service providers and practitioners who worked with the daily reality of local variations, but yet again policy hindered development with requirements for official needs assessments.

#### **4.21 Assessing parenting support need**

In order to determine parenting support needs local authorities were asked to:

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<sup>25</sup> A later NESS (2008) report suggested more consistent benefits.

...undertake a needs assessment by analysing appropriate data and through the involvement of parents, children and young people and those involved in commissioning and delivering support, as appropriate.

(DfES 2006:19)

For 75% of Local Authorities [LAs] involvement meant a one-off consultation with parents, 'and LAs were more than twice as likely to consult with providers than with children and young people' (Klett-Davies, Skaliotis and Wollny 2009:35). Furthermore, needs were defined as:

...whatever is missing and has to be provided if the gap between the current situation and desired outcome is to be reduced or closed.

(DfES 2007:3)

Historically assessing need is known to be a contested concept (Cowley *et al* 1995, 1996; Cowley 2008:2-7) not aided by different foci used by a variety of disciplines, for example epidemiologists, economists, policy makers and sociologists<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, due to the continued professionalisation of parenting support from a burgeoning group of multi-disciplinary practitioners and the development of the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners [NAPP]<sup>27</sup> in 2007, there was a pressing need to define and clarify the

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<sup>26</sup> Bradshaw's (1972) taxonomy of need is particularly helpful in understanding a sociological explanation of need. For example, normative need is defined by policy / practitioner perception based on the premise that someone deviates from the normal [majority] standard. Felt needs are identified by users of services rather than professionals, but as people do not always perceive themselves to be in need, they do not always know what services are available. Expressed needs are felt needs which are articulated. However, users will often use a service because it is all that is available, even though it doesn't meet their needs adequately. Conversely just because people don't use a service doesn't mean there isn't a need or demand. The Inverse Care Law (Tudor Hart 1971), suggested that those with the greatest needs access services the least.

<sup>27</sup> NAPP supported the training of parenting practitioners including social workers, clinical psychologists, community safety officers, youth justice workers [the latter clearly highlighting the 'crime' agenda of the Respect Action Plan] (Cabinet Office SEU 2006). However, NAPP did provide a benchmark for good practice in that national occupational standards for practitioners working with parents were developed producing competencies. However, it ceased to exist in 2010 and its functions were transferred to the Children's Workforce Development Council.

meaning of parenting support needs. For many service providers and practitioners this was a new area of provision.

Utting's (2008) literature review of parenting services highlighted that the range of parenting support needs that had to be considered was complex. As with earlier attempts at demonstrating effectiveness, conceptual difficulties arose when assessing parents' needs for beneficial outcomes to children. Needs assessments combined with surveys and consultation feedback gave different results to indices of deprivation which indicated areas of disadvantage, but conclusions as to these being indicative of parenting support needs were limited. In support of Ghate *et al's* (2005) work, Utting (2008) focused on the lack of bespoke indicators that could help local areas assess aggregate parenting needs and plan parenting support services more effectively, and confirmed the need to develop a bespoke 'Poor Parenting Environments Index' that would take account of health, educational achievement and the local environment to give a better indication of parenting problems (Utting 2008:151).

However, more fundamental was the lack of understanding of the basic practice process underpinning needs assessment and the lack of theorisation (France and Utting 2005; Kellet and Apps 2009). Newman, Day and Warden's (2005) review of the literature and interviews with practitioners to examine practitioners' assessments of 'good enough parenting', found that assessment in practice was based on a negative or pathologised paradigm, rather than celebrating and acknowledging helpful parenting. Potentially this was a particular problem for different family formations as policy and practice encouraged adaptation to the norm with practitioners practising within the normative biological family model. A lack of knowledge of stepfamily structures, development and dynamics could cause poor practice. Practitioners might view problematic stepfamily interactions as pathological rather than normative (Visher and Visher 1996). Practitioners' effectiveness when assessing parenting support needs of stepfamilies could therefore be compromised due to stereotypical bias and myths (Jones 2003), reinforcing myths within stepfamilies if they themselves shared the myths, or if they failed

to recognise them (Coleman and Ganong 1985). Anecdotal evidence of practitioner bias stronger with stepfamilies than other family types was found to occur (Visher and Visher 1996). Furthermore, if stepfamilies felt marginalised and stigmatised due to society's treatment of them they might create self-fulfilling prophecies or standards that were impossible to meet (Jones 2003). The procedural emphasis on formal guidelines and assessment schedules focusing on high parental standards was not helpful (Newman, Day and Warden 2005). Formal assessment tools in health visitor practice had been found to be subjective, normatively defined and generally ineffective (Appleton 1997) and unacceptable to many practitioners and parents (Cowley and Houston 2003; Mitcheson and Cowley 2003).

Similar findings emerged from a qualitative study (Kellet and Apps 2009) which explored how a range of 54 practitioners comprising: health visitors n=16, family support workers n=14, paediatricians n=10 and teachers n=14, assessed parenting and parenting support need and their understanding of 'good enough' and 'risky' parenting. Findings highlighted that whilst practitioners informally and formally observed and collected information on parenting capacity, assessment used both subjective and objective criteria and judgement. Diversity was recognised predominantly in socio-economic and ethnic difference and not family type, which was not always easy for practitioners to assess. For example discipline in a West Indian family might be very different to that in a white British family. Perceived social class difference also impacted on practitioners' assessment of parenting support need. Training in diversity and parenting issues were identified as areas for development as they had no formal way as in supervision, frameworks, tools to help them make sense of the impact of diversity on parenting (Kellet and Apps 2009). Furthermore, whilst fluidity and flexibility was a common theme when assessing parenting, practitioners held a wide range of beliefs with little evidence of effectiveness and theoretical frameworks. When assessing 'good enough parenting', decisions were generally based on basic care and safety, love and affection, putting children's needs first, providing routine and consistent care and acknowledgement and use of services when difficulties arose. Risky parenting was considered to be putting self before the child, lack

of parental control and responsibility and lack of routine and order. It was concluded that the role of 'gut instinct' was important, and that more should be done to enable practitioners to fine tune it to detect subtle messages of need (Kellet and Apps 2009).

### **Parenting support assessment principles**

'Gut instinct' or professional judgement was also found to be an important element in health visitor's practice (Appleton 1996), whose long history of assessing need has been highlighted. Indeed much work has been done by health visitor academics to discover the manner in which health visitors determine which families are 'needy' and which are not and how they conceptualise need. Cowley's, and colleagues extensive work<sup>28</sup> over almost two decades has contributed greatly to theorising the process issues that health visitors go through when assessing need. The sensitivity of the process of assessing parenting support need and the skills required to work in collaboration with parents, particularly those who might be antagonistic towards practitioner intervention, appears to have been overlooked in the majority of parenting support research. Appleton and Cowley's (2008) insightful assessment principles, were identified as critical attributes and inherent when assessing need in health visitor practice (Appleton and Cowley 2007, 2008; Cowley 2008). Some of these have been identified such as assessment influenced by personal values and life experience. However, other key principles of assessing need (Appleton and Cowley 2007, 2008) highlighted that health visitors often found it difficult to articulate the process as the assessment process was holistic, multifactorial and integrated and not seen in isolation. Consequently, needs assessments could not be focused on one area of need. So, for example, if practitioners focused specifically on parenting support need to the detriment of other more crucial needs such as couple relationship problems, successful outcomes might be limited. Moreover, the nature of assessment needed to be ongoing as needs are not

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<sup>28</sup>(Houston and Cowley 2002; Cowley and Houston 2003; Appleton and Cowley 2003; Mitcheson and Cowley 2003; Cowley and Houston 2004; Appleton and Cowley 2004; Cowley, Mitcheson and Houston 2004; Appleton and Cowley 2007; Appleton and Cowley 2008).

static, but shift and change over time with transitory or prolonged crises. So, prioritising parenting support as the presenting nature of need, which is often mandated by service providers, might mean that parents have unmet needs. Potentially this was unhelpful in the long term as parents may not be able to transfer skills to manage later aspects of child development (Einzig 1999). Furthermore, when assessing need health visitors worked through several therapeutic intervention processes simultaneously such as processing knowledge, with key interpersonal skills an intrinsic part of the sensitive engagement process (Appleton and Cowley 2007), which were often omitted in official guidance. Engagement with parents was vital:

... not in the proactive nature of the enquiry but in the ability of the health visitor to convey a caring interested stance rather than a judgemental and inquisitorial attitude.

(Cowley 2000:17)

The importance of developing a good relationship based on collaboration and partnership when working with parents on parenting support needs cannot be overestimated if successful outcomes are to be achieved. However, other commentators issued a caveat:

There is... good evidence that popularity of services with parents does not necessarily equate with effectiveness in improving outcomes for children and young people. Planners should bear this in mind when taking account of needs and preferences.

(Utting 2008:59)

It is apparent from the latter sentiments that there continues to be ongoing debate about what constitutes evidence to determine the effectiveness of parenting support. A central tenet that is often overlooked by the parenting support industry is parents' and children's perceptions and experiences of their everyday realities and that their parenting support needs are the crucial element. These will not be determined with tokenistic attempts, but rather real engagement in a very sensitive area of private family life. Parenting support policy and practice would do well to learn from the wealth of experience within the health visitor profession in terms of knowledge, understanding and skills when working with parents.



## 4.22 Conclusion

Clearly family form and parenting in marginalised [step]families has been of particular interest to government over the last few centuries and has increasingly become a huge political area of interest from the mid 1990s to present day. Declining marriage rates, increased divorce rates, increased lone parents and stepfamilies have all contributed to a fear of declining moral standards in society. As such this chapter has further developed the historic theme of discomfort within policy, practice and some elements of society and media of the changing scene of different family practices.

The machinations of contradictory policies have meant that all marginalised families and parents have been subsumed under generic titles that do not recognise diversity and difference. Parenting support has increased exponentially in significance and used as a method of keeping marginalised families in check. The individualisation / 'broken Britain' ethos has gathered pace with a total focus on marginalised groups and their individual parenting deficits rather than the structural factors causing their marginalisation such as poverty, social isolation and poor parental mental health. The affluent middle class groups, as always, are generally not on the radar screen. Meanwhile, the growing visibility of marginalised parents in policy reflects the overarching framework of governmentality potentially affecting / influencing marginalised [step]families, particularly in the form of moralism and maternalism. These have been paraded under euphemisms of social inclusion, social cohesion, communitarianism and latterly the 'big society' which feed neatly into the crime agenda. In total the two chapters of the library study have provided a contextualisation and understanding of not only marginalised [step]families, but also the evolution of parenting support policy and practice. This second chapter has provided a conceptual framework focused particularly on parenting support policy and practice as a means of ensuring marginalised parents conform. The double whammy of being marginalised parents in stepfamilies is clear.

Whilst better evidence has emerged over the last few years to demonstrate the effectiveness [or not] of parenting support, there has remained an emphasis on quantitative methodological approaches largely in the form of RCTs and systematic reviews. Whilst acknowledging there is a place for these, a handful of qualitative approaches have begun to emerge that have given a glimpse into the lives of marginalised parents. However, there remains a largely untapped wealth of knowledge and experience from marginalised parents in [step]families, whose voices have not yet been heard. The following three chapters explore the findings and discuss the meanings from some of the previously silent voices of parents in marginalised stepfamilies.

## CHAPTERS 5, 6 and 7

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### Introduction and overview

The following introduction explains and gives an overview for chapters 5, 6, and 7. The three chapters comprise the findings and discussion from the practice focused empirical study and are informed by the findings from the library study. Each chapter presents and discusses two themes [highlighted below] per chapter. The themes are interwoven with short case studies to demonstrate and illustrate the themes. The case studies are presented with a clear heading, such as, Yvonne's story. The genograms and pen portraits of each stepfamily presented in chapter two [61-70] may help in identifying the sometimes complex family formations. Furthermore, to aid clarity each parents' quotations are presented with their interview number and line numbers thus [Interview 1:20-26], with [Interview 1a] denoting the second interview.

Whilst the representations of the parents vary, eight exhibited five themes with some parents having a much stronger affiliation with one or more theme[s] than another. Moreover, the themes were multi-layered with several sub-themes within each and so demonstrate the often close relationship between seemingly oppositional sentiments such as resentment for a stepchild, yet a simultaneous caring moral responsibility for them. The sub-themes like the themes interweave throughout and should not be viewed as disparate, discrete elements, but ultimately contribute to the 'intellectual puzzle' (Mason 2002:8).

My focus throughout the three chapters is on the 'storied' nature of the parents' accounts so as to gain some understanding of their issues. The interviews were not sequential, organised narratives, rather messy and incoherent in places. Contradictions are apparent both within interviews and across the data set and will be highlighted in keeping with Mason's (2002:138) directive that it enhances rigour. These are the parents' voices where the

stories told are the result of their constructions which may be different to their lived stories. This is not to claim that the parents are inherently deceitful, rather what is achieved by its use. In chapters 6 and 7 this becomes particularly clear with the parents' silent voices.

My continuing reference to mothers rather than parents is because I reflect the findings from the data. Throughout there is a greater emphasis on the mothers' voices as they are consistently more prominent than the fathers. The former were very firmly grounded in parenting whereas the fathers were on the periphery, demonstrating clear gendered parenting practices for the parents in my study.

The following three chapters present and discuss two themes thus:

**Chapter 5** details the **'hurdles': the parenting issues and practices** which the parents found challenging. The 'hurdles' were different to what they had experienced in previous families, whether as children or adults. Numerous contradictions and tensions had to be navigated [or not] in their new **[un]clear families with [un]clear roles**. New identities were particularly challenging as previous identities as 'mam' or 'dad' did not transfer easily to their new [un]clear parenting roles.

**Chapter 6** builds on the confusion surrounding new identities and roles and highlights the **fragile resiliencies** within the family relationships, particularly the stepmother – stepchild relationship, with some stepmothers more vulnerable to the sensitivities of this relationship. Inevitably if the issues weren't addressed they spilled over and affected the couple relationship. Different parents had different understandings, but these were seemingly not shared within the couple relationship rendering **silent voices**.

**Chapter 7** focuses on the **intimations of [im]morality** within the parents' lives that they managed in different ways. Most parents demonstrated a strong moral code in opposition to the political, societal and media representation of them as immoral. Their need to present as moral families ultimately contributed to their reticence in articulating their **parenting support needs** and again added to the silent voices discourse.

# **CHAPTER 5**

## **THE HURDLES: PARENTING ISSUES AND PRACTICES**

### **AND**

## **[UN]CLEAR FAMILIES, [UN]CLEAR ROLES**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Parenting in any family whatever the family type is usually challenging, physically and emotionally draining. Parenting is a process, never static, always changing along with the child's development. The issues which parents face are multi-dimensional and influenced by complex interpersonal patterns which range from normal to problematised and occasionally abnormal / pathologised responses. In biological families parents and children generally develop responses over time, a privilege that is not afforded to stepfamilies where the challenges are often immediate. Children with difficult temperaments are less able to adjust to marital transitions (Hetherington, Bridges and Isabella 1998). Moreover, stepparent-stepchild relationships are not only dictated by stepchild behaviour and characteristics, but also step-parenting practices. Papernow (1993) highlighted the problem for resident biological parents caught in the middle of disharmony between their partner [the stepparent] and child and furthermore the stepparent feeling excluded.

For all parents in my study there was a sense of floundering as former biological parenting roles and practices were thrown into flux. New roles and identities were unclear. Previous certainties of parenting gave way to unpredictability and uncertainty of how to manage the issues. The ongoing struggle to manage parenting was something the families didn't appear to have thought about.

Whilst there was an implied need to succeed this time, there did not appear to be strategies in place for managing the emerging, yet normal and troublesome non-fixed situations. As such, strategies for managing differed depending on the parents understanding, knowledge and skills. Most of the parents had previously been in biological families or lone parents, but three mothers and two fathers had also been step-parents [Table 3:57] However, what had worked in their earlier, seemingly simpler lives, whether as children, or as adults did not appear to transfer to the stepfamily. All the parents reported that parenting issues in the stepfamily were different and of a different magnitude and tested their reserves and usual coping strategies. Feelings of guilt and anger with the potential for conflict within stepfamily relationships were rife.

## **5.2 Transitions and adjustments: old histories versus new histories**

### **Joanne's story:**

Joanne was in her early thirties and had lived with Alan for three years, with whom she had her second child, two year old Will. Prior to her relationship with Alan she had been a lone parent, mother to Stef, now seven years old. During her period as a lone parent she had help and support from her parents [now divorced], which had enabled her to have a part-time job. The latter had been essential in Joanne's estimation as her ex-partner Nigel did not give any financial maintenance. This, together with having to leave her 'nice house' had resulted in a continuous battle of recriminations over six years, which becomes apparent as Joanne's story unfolds.

Joanne: ... And then the one thing about Alan [partner] is, I've found, I don't know if it was because he had had very little to do with children – he seemed as if he wanted to discipline her from day one. And I kept on saying, "No. Excuse me. What are you doing? That's not your job. Excuse me. You could be out the door any minute and don't you discipline my child." And I'm still to this day struggling to get it through to him. He keeps, you know... We'll maybe go out with a few friends and he will get himself a bit upset, he'll have a couple of drinks and he's, "It really hurts me, you know,

it breaks my heart. I love her so much.” And I’m like, “I know you do. Back off.” “What?” I’m like, “Back off, you’re not her dad. She’s at a very, very, very awkward age. She, one of these days, will turn round and say “Who do you think you are? Don’t talk to me like that. You’re not my dad. My dad tells me what to do, not you.”” And I said, “Believe me, the day will come, sooner or later.” I said, “I have difficulty with her moods.” And I said, “And I’m her mother.” But I said, “Have you never noticed how I handle her? If she’s working herself, “Fine, that’s fine.” Walk away. Don’t snap at her. Don’t try to lecture her. Don’t point the finger. Don’t give her... You go, “Oh – that’s the way you want to play it!” And you’re like a big huffy kid. So you’re just as bad as her in one respect because you are sort of playing into her hands. So she’s sitting there, going, “Nah-nah-nah.””

[Interview 6:502- 522]

Tensions around discipline for Joanne and Alan as parents and stepparents have been found by other commentators (Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010:23). Ambiguity in the stepfather role, not helped by mothers’ hesitancy and general ‘not knowingness’<sup>29</sup> about the parenting role they wanted for their new partner is common (Coleman *et al* 2001). Mothers often developed very close peer type relationships with their children if they had a lone parent period pre-stepfamily formation, which could cause problems within the new stepfamily (Coleman *et al* 2001). The tensions highlight the problems for both biological mothers and fathers in understanding, participating and adjusting to changed parental identities and parenting post divorce / separation (Smart and Neale 1999: 45-66). Contact with non-resident parents brought complexities and associated tensions:

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<sup>29</sup> I first coined the phrase ‘not knowingness’ as a subtheme meaning a feeling of ineptitude or impotence, which even the most confident parents expressed, whilst the less confident were left struggling to understand and make meaning of the situation. I later discovered ‘not-knowing’ (Anderson and Goolishian 1988) is a phrase derived from couple and family therapy. It means the therapist takes a ‘not knowing’ stance when working with clients meaning that the therapist puts aside her knowledge, understandings, explanations and interpretations formed from prior experiences, so that she has a genuine ‘not knowing’ approach (Anderson and Goolishian 1992:28). Adapting this concept to the parents in my study helps an understanding that their prior perceptions, experiences and understandings genuinely did not help them to understand what was going on.

**Joanne's story continued:**

Joanne struggled with the upheaval as household routines and general status quo were upset when Stef returned from time with her non-resident father. Stef's post visit readjustment was viewed as troublesome with Stef displaying difficult behaviour, rather than her struggling to manage the transition between houses, parents and significant others. The effect of Stef's behaviour was spilling over into the couple relationship.

Joanne: And then of course she [Stef] comes back home, and then you find that she is very huffy and she is bad tempered. Sometimes you can't even look at her and she sits in the corner and goes, "Ooohhh." With a big lip on. It can cause complications because obviously Alan has had very little to do with children as a whole. So he's finding it very difficult. He, there are days where he can't even look at her and she won't have anything to do with him. I don't know if it's the age thing. She is going through a very much – a daddy phase at the moment. The sun shines out of daddy and he is the bees knees and he can't do anything wrong. But I think basically that's because he has no discipline at home.

[Interview 6: 59-69]

Joanne also used the post visit behavioural problems as a conduit to demonise the ex-partner and re-ignite her bitterness.

Joanne: And now he's [Nigel] got the lot. So I'm a bit bitter. I'm not frightened to admit that I'm bitter. I'm going through a bit of a mortgage wrangle at the moment. I'm entitled to half the equity, he's – I wouldn't say he was refusing to give me it, but he's saying that he's got nothing to give. It's causing complications between me and my partner. And basically we're just at a point now where I have said, "Fine. I'm going to sign it over to him." I'm going to sign it over because at the end of the day that makes me the bigger person. Because I'm standing up and saying I am better than you, because I don't need that. Because I've got my family. I've got my two children, who are absolutely fabulous. I love them to pieces and I wouldn't wish harm on anything. And I said, "I've got a wonderful partner who's now giving me what I need. He gives me the love and the attention. I don't need your money. I don't need that. Because I've got more than money can ever buy anyway."

[Interview 6:286 -300]

Again, Alan was also embroiled in the issues:



Joanne: He [Alan] doesn't like him [Nigel]. He's told me point blank that he would like nothing better than to punch his lights out. But I suppose in a lot of senses that can come from any kind of **secondary relationship** and stuff. He gets on with him to the point where he tolerates him. He sees what it does to me and you can see he grits his teeth and his fists are clenched and he's very uneasy whilst he's around – because he comes round here quite a lot when he picks Stef up. And I think if Alan's home, I think he prefers to be home when he knows that Nigel's coming, but he's not unduly worried when he's not here.

[emphasis added]  
649]

[Interview 6:640-

Not only does Joanne's comment 'secondary relationship and stuff' emphasise her perception of the stepfamily as second best, but clearly exemplifies the continuing presence of the past. Joanne's account contained long soliloquies which appeared to be a cathartic experience focused on her relationship with her ex-partner, who still seemed to be psychologically present in her present relationship (Visher and Visher 1996). After six years separation she appeared not to have processed the dissolution of her old relationship which affected the dynamics of her current relationship (Hetherington and Kelly 2002). Certain narratives, particularly negative ones can become compelling, validating and comforting for some individuals (Bernstein 2006).

Whilst similar issues to Joanne's were found with other parents, there were also contrasting examples. For example, there were different degrees of contact with non-resident parents and some parents reported positive relations. Yvonne had good relationships with her children's two non-resident fathers [who accompanied her to parents' evenings], and Tracy reported good relationships 'now' with her ex-partner, which Tracy neatly referred to as 'the hurdles' that they had 'overcome' [Interview 5:954]. However, they were the only ones and they were simultaneously supporting their new partners with acrimonious relationships with ex-partners. Conflict between ex-partners was the norm (Smart and Neale 1999:56; Walker 2008), with silent toleration not in evidence (Walker 1992). For the rest of the parents tensions were rife, with

six families enabling continuities across households grudgingly; two families [Susie and Pete; Patrick and Tracy] had occasional contact with the non-resident mothers through the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service [CAFCASS] and one family [Barbara and Dave] totally replacing the non-resident father, thus causing dis-continuities of parenting. Despite the Children Act (1989) and Child Support Act (1991) demanding continuities as essential for children, the 'continuities which straddle the households' brought in their wake not only economic, but also social and emotional connections (Simpson 1998:33).

Whilst numerous examples of behavioural issues were given by all the parents as a stark statement of fact, there was rarely any attempt at explanation of what they potentially represented – upset, anger, jealousy, frustration and resentment. Whilst age specific attention seeking behaviour and temper tantrums were common, there were also occasional maladaptive episodes of stealing [Yvonne, Becci, Leanne's stepchildren], cutting [Becci's stepdaughter], and promiscuous behaviour [Becci's stepdaughter]. The tangible episodes were visible, easy to label as difficult behaviour and were a main cause of upset and disharmony in the stepfamilies. Similarly, stepchildren arriving to stay with a non-resident parent and their settling in, or adaptation to a different household, with the consequent behaviour was equally seen as disruptive [Becci, Yvonne and Leanne's stepchildren]. Moreover, the ramifications cascaded throughout the family with disruption for resident children when a stepsibling arrived and left and was again viewed as difficult behaviour rather than everyone regrouping and readjusting.

Separate lives were not possible with children needing contact with non-resident parents. The adaptation and adjustment to new histories occurred simultaneously with managing the old histories. These 'more intricate things' [Barbara, Interview 8:2146] were managed in different ways, but a general discomfort was a common thread throughout the interviews.

**Joanne's story continued:**

After three years in a stepfamily Joanne appeared to have a revelation about the impact on Stef. Through talking about the issues she was beginning to understand the ramifications.

Joanne: ...It's, I mean it's a hard for people to sort of go into a stepfamily. You know, you never know, in a way, as you know yourself, you never know how the outcome is going to be. Is it going to be good? Is it going to be bad? Is it going to be indifferent? I'm just thinking that it's just as hard for the kids as well, because obviously you've got to try and think of it from the kid's point of view. That, you know, somebody has come into their life and they are like, you know...

[Interview 6:1329-1335]

At the beginning of new stepfamily formation chaos is rife (Pasley *et al* 1996). Children's behaviour has been found to temporarily deteriorate along with poorer biological mother child relationships and increased authoritarian parenting by both biological mothers and step-parents (Bray 1999), but after two years improves (Hetherington and Clingempeel 1992). The timing is rife for conflict as everybody struggles to manage the transitions often in different ways. Yvonne's story encapsulates many of the issues.

**Yvonne's story:**

Yvonne's two children, Kit eleven years old and Ali seven years old, were born within two different relationships. Yvonne had a good relationship with each of her ex-partners and they played an active co-parenting role in their boys' lives. Yvonne had met Gordon, who had Ashley, a six year old biological daughter and Wayne a sixteen year old stepson. Gordon had an acrimonious relationship with his ex-partner. Yvonne struggled to understand the adjustments needed for the integration of her old family with the new family.

Yvonne: Because I said to Gordon [partner], "You can't constantly let Ashley [Yvonne's stepdaughter] have her own way. And being a parent, being a good dad doesn't constantly mean saying yes." And I feel as if that was what was missing, really, when she was

coming over. She was wanting her own way and Gordon was shouting at the lads [Yvonne's biological children] they weren't letting her have her own way. And I found it was getting, like, really unfair.

[Interview 2: 56-62]

Yvonne's frustration, helplessness and disappointment in a shared construct of parenting / family life and of not being united with her partner is almost palpable and later this developed into a feeling of injustice. Gordon's shouting suggested a similar frustration and incomprehension. Yvonne's insight came retrospectively, a year after the dissolution of her stepfamily. She berated herself for not being more aware of the cause of the children's behaviour at the time. However, through her 'self-flagellation' Yvonne's insight into the underlying reasons is revealing.

Yvonne: ... I've talked to them [biological children] about it. You know, they were extremely unhappy with the situation. And I asked them "Why did you not come and tell mam?" And it was, well, you know... The impression I got from my eldest son was, "Well, would it have mattered?" And you know, "Who are we?" And you know, just little children getting, like, sort of, you know... Thing-eeed along, along with my life. And I think that's like a thing that I missed completely, you know? How were my children feeling? How were they adapting to the situation? How were they coping with the situation? I think, you know, if you're too busy and you're too wrapped up with your new partner, with their new family, you tend to forget about your own.

[Interview 2a:93-103]

And in terms of the issues for her stepdaughter she went on to report:

Yvonne [crying] ... I think, looking back obviously my children were doing things to, you know, sort of like, "I do matter." And I think, you know, Ashley [stepdaughter] was doing that as well. She was trying to find her place in this unit that we had.

[Interview 2a:148-151]

Yvonne eloquently highlighted the 'hurdles' for her of 'trying to work together as a family and not actually having an idea what we were doing' [Interview 2a:703-704], and despite the birth of their child, Yvonne and Gordon separated.

The behavioural issues were not acknowledged by the parents as possibly being due to issues of transition, adjustment and general evolution and development of the new [step]family, alongside grieving for losses associated with the old family and traditions (Visher and Visher 1985). The focus was on managing the new life which might begin to explain why the children were generally not discussed as ‘troubled souls’ with their behaviour representing their ‘silent voices’. The evolution of the stepfamily represented new beginnings and hope for the future. Complexities in the form of children’s behaviour and the fallout on the couples’ relationship presented as a potential threat to that hope, which was not aided by contrasting parenting styles between some couples.

### **5.3 Parenting styles**

Parenting styles with inconsistency between the couple were an issue for seven couples as differences between their parenting had not been adjusted. The focus was particularly on a lack of consensus on how a child / children should be managed. The change of rules or accommodation of different ways of parenting was a constant theme and created tension for five stepfamilies. Whilst there may be difference between parents in parenting styles in biological families and indeed between children’s reactions, the ramifications appeared more complex in stepfamilies with problems articulated with real frustration by both biological and stepmothers. Agreement on parenting roles between couples has been found to lead to better family functioning, happier couple satisfaction and generally less conflict (Bray and Kelly 1998). Moreover, step-parents supporting biological parents in a united front with both parents agreeing on aspects of discipline has been found to be important to family functioning (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:80-103). Joanne’s story neatly conveys the issues.

**Joanne’s story continued:**

Ann: So how do you manage the differences in parenting between you and Alan?

Joanne: With difficulty. Very much with difficulty. I'm still very much having a... It's finding a middle ground, I think, where we can both agree. It's just this discipline thing. That we tend to battle on slightly different sides and I will not, I will not step in if he's disciplining her. That's one thing I've always said. If he is disciplining I will walk out – whether I agree with what he's doing or not. I'll walk away.

Ann: Right, how do you find that if you don't agree with what he's doing?

Joanne: The one thing I've always held in my mind from past experiences, from listening to, like, health visitors and stuff like, just watching programmes on child psychology things and all the rest of it – the one thing not to do is beat each other up. Especially in front of them. Because if one of the parents is disciplining the child, regardless of the situation, and the other one disagrees the child is going to think, "Yippee – I've got a ball to play here." So the one thing I won't do is allow her to see me going, "You're wrong – leave her alone." Because then she'll be notching up the points.

[Interview 6: 622- 640]

There were also complications from the non-resident father:

Joanne: I would say that my main problem is that he [biological father] has different ways of bringing her up. Even when I've said that she has to have a bed time, she has to have specific meals, you know, make sure that you are keeping her clean. And he just, he doesn't really. So it causes a lot of complications.

[Interview 6: 55-  
59]

So not only were Joanne and Alan's parenting styles different and conflicted – hers was authoritative whilst his was authoritarian, but Nigel seemed to adopt a laissez-faire approach<sup>30</sup>. So Stef saw and heard different parenting messages.

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<sup>30</sup> Laissez-faire [also known as permissive] means children allowed to do what they want with little emphasis on their expectations (Baumrind 1966).

While, most of the parents suggested they adopted a parenting approach based on an authoritative, positive parenting style with structure, consistency, boundaries and discipline central to that approach (Baumrind 1966), in practice it was not quite so definitional or specific. Some parents gave contradictory accounts that suggested a vacillation between authoritative, authoritarian and laissez-faire approaches with inconsistency being normal. It was as if they were attempting anything in order to manage the situation.

## 5.4 Coping

The parents' parenting styles had implications for how they managed and coped with different issues. Whilst there were similarities in the parents' responses there were also differences with a variety of coping mechanisms amongst them.

Some families clearly were able to manage complex circumstances, for example Patrick and Tracy.

### Managing

#### **Patrick and Tracy's story:**

Patrick and Tracy, parents of seven children [eight at the second interview] aged three months to thirteen were different to the rest of the parents. They were a complex stepfamily [both parents bringing children into the relationship and then having three children between them]. Due to Patrick's ex-partner's problem with alcohol misuse, Patrick had over the years taken over most of the parenting and cooking.

Tracy: Where we'll just say that we're all in a new family now – we are going to do things differently. Our way, this is our family and this is the way that we are going to do it. And they've all just took to that.

Patrick: It's sort of like that we've ignored everything...

Tracy: Everything that's been done.

Patrick: \_\_\_ everything.

Ann: So it's like a new slate?

Tracy: A new start.

Patrick: We said that when we moved into this house it was a totally new, fresh slate.

[Interview 5: 1636-1645]

Patrick and Tracy were the only couple to articulate a united front with a 'no nonsense' approach to parenting. Patrick and Tracy adopted a behavioural training approach to parenting encouraged by the CAFCASS team. They had worked out the best course of managing the issues in the most practical way possible - order from chaos. Patrick intimated that chaos had been the situation with the children when he had lived with their mother. The children were now 'trained' and had 'little missions' [Interview 5:180]. Whilst a superficial observation might suggest a lack of emotion and warmth in this approach, it appeared to be a pragmatic way of dealing with a situation that could easily have degenerated into mayhem. The combination of a united front, rather than dissension and a strict adherence to positive parenting techniques enabled them to manage parenting in their large stepfamily. There was little accommodation for sensitivities to change, rather a stoical, pragmatic approach to creating a new history by just 'getting on with things'.

However, other parents managed issues differently depending on their knowledge, understanding and skills. As demonstrated below their responses and actions ranged along a continuum from 'maladjustment' [a possible clinician's term] to medicalisation, to struggling.

### **Maladjustment**

#### **Becci and Bill's story.**

Bill had a 14 year old daughter, Laura. Laura lived with her mother, stepfather, stepsiblings and half sibling, but this family was breaking up. Becci was fourteen years younger than Bill. They had recently married and



had Dan. Becci had grown up in a stepfamily and had struggled with her stepfather's favouritism of his biological children. Yet she appeared not to have learnt from her own experiences. She was open and honest in her resentment of Laura [stepdaughter], who she viewed as a drain on the family finances. Becci focused her anger on Laura, who was currently exhibiting attention seeking behaviour with cutting and promiscuous behaviour.

Becci: I think you'll find, like I say, in a family that didn't have stepchildren you wouldn't feel like negative emotions. You wouldn't feel, like jealousy. I think. Or resentment. Or you wouldn't feel like you know, feel like you've got **outsiders** and stuff like that. You just wouldn't have them because they just wouldn't exist. You know, and it does bring – when you have got step kids – it does bring, in some form or another, even if you are the step kids you do end up with negative emotions that you wouldn't have if you had the mam, the dad and the kid. You know? As soon as there is a step kid you can't help it, but they do come in.

[emphasis added]

[Interview 1:967-976]

Restricted or closed communication systems are a common feature in low income families where 'tough terms' were exactly that as there may well be no other vocabulary available (Simpson 1999:48). In contrast Barbara and Paul did not use such tough terms, rather they sought medical help.

## Medicalisation

### **Barbara and Paul's story:**

Barbara was in a relationship with Steve when she became pregnant with Robert. Barbara thought it important that they marry. Her marriage to Steve was difficult. Steve already had a daughter and Barbara became a stepmother at a young age. Barbara fled with Robert from the relationship when Robert was a baby as Steve began to mistreat her. After a while as a lone parent she met Paul and they married and had Louise together. Barbara tried to manage the parenting issues by pretending they were a 'normal' biological family.

Barbara: One day he [biological son] came home – he came – had he lashed out at school that day? He started talking about this “devil” in his tummy. He wanted to just hurt someone, stab someone – I can't remember. And he drew a picture of himself with a little devil in his tummy. I freaked out. Not to him – I didn't freak out at him – I thought in my mind. I rang the GP straight away, explained to the receptionist. She got me in then. I took him in. I said, “I'm really worried because...” And I took the picture with me, that he'd drawn. And they referred him to the child and family unit.

[Interview 8:1117-1125]

Barbara [and Tina] had struggled to grasp the basis of their problems which presented as depression. Simultaneously their children were displaying difficult behaviour and so they sought help from the GP. In Barbara's case the situation escalated with a variety of different agencies - health, education, social services and Sure Start being contacted to help the family manage Robert's difficult behavioural problems. It was some time before the situation was seen to be a family problem.

The medicalisation of often normal aspects of stepfamily adjustment can exacerbate an already tense situation. Behavioural problems in stepfamilies, as highlighted in the library study, have been a common occurrence in the past, with social and psychological adjustment a prominent aspect (Ferri 1984; Amato and Keith 1991; Cherlin *et al*, 1991, Ferri and Smith 1998; Rodgers and Pryor 1998). However, not all families turned to medical

alternatives, some found a course that was right from them, but often not without a struggle as Susie's story demonstrates.

## Struggling

### **Susie's story:**

Susie was eighteen when she met Pete and moved in with him and became stepmother to Sam and Chris. Pete had been managing as a lone parent as Pete's ex-partner and mother to his two children had some kind of mental health problem with a suggestion of alcohol misuse and had left the family home. Susie and Pete had been married for several years and had three children together.

Susie: Sometimes the boys [stepsons] would be upset and I have really tried very hard to be open about talking about their mam. And being positive but realistic about it in my eyes how I see things. Because I do think they have integrity but I do also look at the time and reflect, I worry over or have worried about if I have been unfair. My husband will say to me no you can't. You can't do that. You've done... You have tried to explain in the best way that you can why she's not at the end of the phone. She mustn't be in there today, you know.

[Interview 4:204-211]

Susie's struggle with not knowing how to manage the complexities of stepfamily life, such as the non-resident mother's inconsistent contact, and whether she could have managed it better continued to plague her and were a constant in her interviews.

A key feature of parenting in all the parents' accounts which left them floundering was the interplay and balance between the above parenting issues and the challenges they engendered. Immediate transference to stable family life did not occur and love for stepchildren wasn't always easy. Stepfamily adjustment takes time to develop moving through several different stages involving disorganisation, turbulence and finally stabilization (Hetherington and Kelly 2002:179). Erosion of parents' emotional and physical reserves with the potential for dissolution was high.

Parenting in any family - biological, lone, stepfamily, same sex, adopted and assisted has varied challenges. However, the difference between many of the parenting issues and practices facing parents in my study appeared to be due to the fact that they were not one family, rather they were two families trying to live together as one. All the parents adopted or attempted parenting based on the traditional biological family model of one mother and one father. However, the stark reality of non-resident children and non-resident partners in the background, often hindered the new stepfamilies' hopes and aspirations. The paradox of living as a biological family when the reality was a social family was an important influential factor appearing to affect the stepfamily success. The development of the stepfamily as a pseudo biological family created complexities, as it was impossible to recreate a first time biological family within a stepfamily (Pasley *et al* 1996). New parenting scripts had to be created.

## **5.5 [UN]CLEAR FAMILIES<sup>31</sup>, [UN]CLEAR ROLES**

### **Introduction**

Clearly, all parents wanted their new start with their new family to work. The parents without exception attempted to create a new family identity firmly based on a biological model. The emphasis on not identifying as a stepfamily has been cited by other commentators exploring stepfamilies (Ribbens Edwards, McCarthy and Gillies 2003). Even those who had previous experience of being in a stepfamily as a child and / or adult attempted to present as a biological family. The adoption of biological family models<sup>32</sup> and identities within social families might appear a simple and easy solution, yet the reality revealed by the parents indicated continuous challenges and tensions not aided by their clear gendered roles. All of the parents went to great lengths to present and be seen as a normal family within 'a neat and

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<sup>31</sup> 'Unclear' family – whilst Simpson (1998:xiii) denies being the originator of this excellent phrase, he gives possible instigators as Carolyn, Grassick and Marr, all from the early 1990s.

<sup>32</sup> Biological family model or parenting based on a heterosexual, co-residential couple and their biological children in a traditional nuclear family, who may be married or not.

seamless co-resident grouping' (Simpson 1998:43). They used the following different phrases to classify their normal family status:

- 'a family'
- 'a normal family'
- 'a working family'
- 'just a family'
- 'the average family'
- 'a proper family'

Kate and Tom are a good representation of the 'normal family'.

**Kate and Tom's story:**

Kate had two children from a previous relationship where her partner had continued to have relationships with other women during their time together. He finally left and Kate became a single parent. Her lack of confidence was palpable. Kate met Tom and they had Scott. Tom had lived at home with his parents until he had moved in with Kate. He was finding the transition from single man to father of three children quite difficult. Tom was unemployed and as Kate had a part time job Tom became the main carer on the days she was in work.

Tom: And I think the kids seem to like me, don't they?

Kate: Well, they do. They call him dad.

Tom: They call me dad.

Kate: Voluntarily. I mean I haven't asked them to. They call him dad.

[Interview 3:106-112]

And later:

Ann: ...if she calls you dad, what does she call her father?

Kate: Dad.

Tom: Dad. It must be a little bit confusing, but...

Kate: It is. If they are explaining something they'll say, "my real dad." And sometimes they'll say, "Dad." Like they'll say, "my real dad." And sometimes about Tom they'll say, "Dad" or sometimes they'll say, "step dad." But very rarely do I hear them say step dad.  
[Interview 3: 665-668]

Nomenclature seemed to be a crucial part of the initiation of the stepparent into the family and generally reinforced and confirmed their identity as a family. Most parents encouraged the titles 'mam' or 'dad', particularly those with a close affinity to their stepchildren. Little attention was paid to the possible confusion caused for the children in terms of acknowledging their non-resident parent. Moreover, confusion for the step-parents was also apparent as the transition to stepparent could be rapid with little realisation of the magnitude of the role. Consequently the new roles didn't evolve, rather they were a sudden initiation. Compared with the normal nine months gestation into parenthood and then a corresponding development of the parental role alongside the child's development, the rapidity of the entry into step-parenthood roles was phenomenal. It is of little surprise that some step-parents were unsure of their roles and discovered them to be difficult. Some step-parents had no previous experience of parenting or parenting a child of a different gender to their own. Or, they might not have encountered the developmental point at which their stepchildren had reached. Along with new identities came problems with the new roles as there was a 'not knowingness' about how to adapt and manage issues which previously hadn't arisen. Issues with seeming responsibility yet an absence of concomitant power were central to the parents' accounts. Despite these messy issues, it was evident that most mothers and fathers were working at being a family, but in different ways.

## **5.6 Gendered parenting roles and identities**

The experience amongst the majority of parents [with the exception of Patrick and Tracy] was one of traditional gendered parenting roles following a

biological model. Almost two decades ago Robinson and Smith (1993:217) asserted that:

...step-families are leading the way in redefining gender roles in families because the traditional role expectations for men and for women are not workable in the step-family context.  
(Robinson and Smith 1993:217)

However, this was not the case in my study. The women were clearly grounded in caring and responsible for rearing the children on a daily basis. Social norms around mothering appear to be natural (Smart 1996), but as discussed mothering is politically and socially constructed. Mothers are discursively viewed as the gatekeepers of family respectability. The underpinning socio-historic discourse of good mothering equals respectability, moral goodness, responsibility and commitment, had a strong resonance with the marginalised mothers in my study who also had the double whammy of being in 'broken' families.

In Foucaultian terms biological mothering in a biological family is the normative position against which other types of mothering and families (lone, step, same sex) are measured, and as Smart (1996:47) highlighted it is a symbiotic relationship – you cannot have one without the other. Marginalisation is not only economic, but also social. For the mothers in my study respectability through caring and responsibility for family and presenting as a good traditional family was an important aspect of managing daily life.

Meanwhile the men provided for the family. Eight fathers had some kind of work, usually temporary and sporadic and not always 'official'. Amongst the fathers [biological and step] Patrick appeared to be the only one who played a large part in parenting the children, which contrasts with other commentators (Ferri and Smith 1998). Whilst the other fathers were involved and active, it was largely an 'ascribed'<sup>33</sup> role rather than an 'achieved'<sup>34</sup> role. Whether the

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<sup>33</sup> Ascribed fatherhood is situated within a genetic biological framework, with traditional gendered parenting the norm and little input into parenting from the father who defers to the mother whether biological or step.

gendered parenting roles based on a traditional biological family model had been discussed or just accepted was not clear, but they did not transfer easily to the stepfamily.

### **Mothering<sup>35</sup>: responsibility versus powerlessness**

#### **Yvonne's story continued:**

Yvonne: ... say for instance Ashley – she's got her own mam. Gordon's her dad. Who am I? You know? What role do I have to play in the children's lives? You know, you get classed as a stepmam. But you're not really a stepmam to her. You don't know what you are. I still don't know to this day who I was and what role I was trying to play in his children's lives. I think more clearly for his [step]son. I was more, sort of, a friend really. And probably that's how the relationship worked. When the children are younger you can't be friends with them. You don't sit down and have a chat with them, you know? When they're really young. So you've got no idea of what your place is in that relationship. You've got boundaries almost to the extent where, well, if I love her, this that and the other, what's her own mam going to think? Is her own mam going to be pushed out? You're constantly always aware. And you're always thinking. What should I do and what I shouldn't do? You've just to – as I say Ann, you've got no idea of what role you're supposed to be playing because you've got no idea of what you're supposed to do. You know?

[Interview 2a:818-835]

The confusion of having the identity of a mother, yet the role and function being ambiguous, left most of the stepmothers confused [Yvonne, Becci, Susie and Leanne], which is consistent with other commentators (Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010:23). How far the role of stepmother extended, and where the boundaries were appeared to change. For some stepmothers they had pseudo power, where sometimes they had a full parental role and

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<sup>34</sup> Achieved fatherhood is a more contemporary concept where fathers actively engage in parenting.

<sup>35</sup> Whilst I adopt the term 'mothering' it is often used in the literature interchangeably with motherhood, but there are distinctions. The latter implies a legal connection between mother and child but not necessarily derived from biology and is a social construction. Mothering is disconnected from biology, but is connected to the activity of caring (Silva1996:2).



along with that, power, whilst at other times there was no acknowledgement of their role from both within the family and from external others. Different degrees of dissonance affected them as they struggled to make sense of the situation. Their stories appeared to be a cathartic journey as they recounted the contradictions and tensions in attempting to manage their new identities and roles as responsible mothers.

The contradictions and confusion inherent in this led to frustration, resentment and generally a confused sense of identity exemplified by Yvonne.

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Yvonne: You just don't understand what role you have got in raising stepchildren. You just really don't understand. And I know, looking back, I didn't. I didn't know what my limits were. What I should do. What I shouldn't do. Because it's not just all of that you've got going on. You've got your stepchildren as well, sort of resenting the fact that, you know, "You don't belong to me."

[Interview 2a:800-806]

Having responsibility for parenting within the family gave the mothers control and power, an important element for them. Responsibility for the children and partner was a central aspect of the mothers' identity. Yet the paradox of being seen as responsible for parenting, yet the power aligned to the role of 'mam' being diminished at times was disabling.

Other step-parents gave similar accounts to Yvonne, and Susie discussed the concept of graded responsibility whereby the intangible, total and overwhelming responsibility of having a biological child was not the same as the responsibility she felt for her stepchildren which was a more tangible, materialistic provision. As such, responsibility and caring for the children was a central, if not ambiguous role for the stepmothers in my study. Diminution of power and control in parenting roles that had previously been a given affected some parents' identity and had the propensity to erode confidence and caused particular problems when disciplining stepchildren.

Yvonne's explanation highlights only too clearly the unconditional love and innate intuition underpinning interactions between a biological parent and child.

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Yvonne: Because, you know, if your children are naughty you don't think twice about telling them off. When you've got stepchildren there, you at first think, "Have I got the right? What is my role in telling...?" You know? "How do I do it? Do I do it in a softer way than I would my own children." You have all of these obstacles in your mind before you can even open your mouth and say, "Blumin' shut up or something." You've got all of this going on in your mind. While, you know, you've got nothing when it comes to your own children. Because it is a natural process for you to raise your children.

[Interview 2a:793-802]

In contrast, with stepchildren the sensitivities and differences imply an artificiality or contemplation process involved. Susie highlighted history as an important factor in being instinctive with biological children, whereas with stepchildren step-parents had not been privy to that history. In terms of discipline it has been found that biological mothers controlling discipline with their partners' support was an important factor in stepfamily success (Coleman *et al* 2001). Moreover, step-parents developing a relationship and maintaining it rather than being disciplinarian, particularly in the early years of stepfamily formation has been found to be more successful (Ganong *et al* 1999). More recently Smart (2004) discovered that step-parents might be moving to a more tenuous position, more an adjunct or friend to the children, hinted at by Yvonne above. However, this may be a feature of middle class stepfamilies with gradations in marginalised families as Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003:80-103) found that marginalised step-parents in their study automatically acquired responsibility and authority to parent stepchildren, as the children were viewed as dependent, needing guidance, constraint and discipline. The social reality of living in disadvantaged areas meant that parents' priority was inculcating their children with practical

survival skills (Gillies 2005a; 2007). Navigating the hardships of daily life meant managing to stay out of trouble, something Becci and Yvonne worked hard at with their stepchildren [below].

### **Fathering: responsibility versus powerlessness**

Despite the mothers' hard work, they wanted more support from both their partners and the non-resident fathers, particularly with discipline. It was as if their partners didn't want to be authoritative, grasp the complex issues, see it as their parenting role, or didn't have the skills to manage the intricacies, which left Becci and Yvonne feeling angry and hurt, and Leanne rejected.

However, their partners could be helpful in other ways. For example practical issues of securing money for the children from non-resident partners was difficult for Kate [and Joanne], but their partners acted as mediators in encouraging the non-resident fathers to pay CSA or unofficial payments, as with Tom:

#### **Kate and Tom's story continued**

Tom: I didn't – well I did lose my temper but not in front of the kids. I wouldn't do it then. He [non-resident father] dropped them off, and I just got into his car actually and he hasn't been fair with money and stuff. He's – it's embarrassing. I think even his own mam is embarrassed. And I just had a little word in his ear. Mind you – he's paid up. He's been giving us money ever since, hasn't he?

[Interview 3:731-736]

Moreover, there were other issues to contend with. On separation mothers relinquish some of the responsibility, control and power to their ex-partner who might not have been interested or capable, or allowed to be involved in parenting during their partnership (Smart and Neale 1999: 50). Not only problems for mothers, but also for fathers in adjusting to post separation parenting have been well documented (Smart and Neale 1999:45-66; Smart 2004b). Whilst fathers didn't articulate the issues as volubly as mothers, the

mothers as gatekeepers to the family often voiced their interpretation of their partners' issues. Yvonne is a case in point:

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Gordon's acrimonious relationship with his ex-partner meant that there was minimal communication between them and he wasn't always aware of how Ashely was feeling, so Yvonne was teaching Gordon some parenting tips:

Yvonne: And it's like it's hard for me really because I'm here for all the children and I'm also trying to teach Gordon [partner] as well – and I know it sounds silly teaching a dad how to be a dad. But that's what I feel as if, you know... That I have to be constantly, you know? Sort of like, "She seems a bit down, we'll give her a cuddle and reassure her and things like that."

[Interview 2: 159-164]

Several mothers had the added responsibility of teaching their partners parenting skills as they were unable to benefit from the post-separation communication that fathers rely on from their ex-partners to convey the children's emotional needs (Smart and Neale 1999:85). However, in part this may be due to mothers ensuring that all the children receive good fathering (May 2003), but may also be due to mothers maintaining control and power within the couple dyad as with Barbara.

**Barbara and Paul's story continued:**

Barbara... But a problem that I noticed from sitting and watching was in the beginning Paul [husband] was trying his best to be Robert's friend. He would buy him a toy, he would muck about with him. He was like a big brother to him. So when it came to discipline, even now Robert doesn't have respect for Paul. I can sit and count to five and he'll stop doing what he's doing. I'll say, "Get to your room. I'll count to five." And he'll be in his room before I get to five. That respect is there. But even to this day with Paul, it's not.

[Interview 8: 352-359]

Barbara appeared to have taken over the parenting role or possibly never allowed Paul to have it and admitted that she preferred to control the domestic issues.

However, Paul's impotence in the parenting role highlights the dilemma for some step-parents in finding the correct balance between a parent and friend identity and was also alluded to by Becci, Yvonne and Susie. Developing relationships with stepchildren can be a difficult task and step-parents look for strategies such as 'affinity seeking' and 'affinity maintaining' behaviour (Ganong *et al* 1999). There was a similar issue for non-resident fathers, who also experienced problems with their new identities highlighted by Bill.

**Becci and Bill's story:**

Bill is a good example of being torn between wanting to financially support his biological, non-resident daughter Laura and wanting to keep his new wife happy. Finances were very tight since Bill had been suspended from work pending an inquiry. Becci appeared to struggle to accept this reality.

Bill: ... but she [Becci] feels resentful of Laura's mam because of the maintenance thing. I can see why, because she thinks...

Becci: That's because I've been to the CSA and they said that she's only supposed to be getting £34 a week, and she's getting £50. Plus, I'm thinking we're spending a lot of money on petrol and Tyne tunnel fares as well. And we're paying more for Laura than what we actually should be. But he's happy doing that, and we're also planning to have another child. And I'm thinking, "Hang on. We're going to have another one – that's two children. That means that that £50 should definitely be reduced more." And it won't be. I know it won't be.

Bill: Well, it will be in that respect because I've got to weigh up the pros and cons. You see, I just want an easy life. I mean, I got my fingers really badly burnt with the CSA. I'm a sitting target for the CSA. You know? And they've taken – they're ruthless. They are ruthless. You're probably aware. They are ruthless. And they'll take you to the cleaners, and that's what I'm trying to get through to her.

Becci: I know that. I know that.

Bill: It's currently £200 a month. And when, if another bairn really comes along – then I've got to reconsider it and Laura's only got three more years of CSA maintenance left.

Becci: Well, it goes up to 18.

Bill: And anyway \_\_\_ going to college it just got \_\_\_. So it's coming to the back of that anyway. And her mother is going to have to understand that when another baby comes along, it is going to get cut to about £150 or something. You know, but it is going to get cut. But I mean, I just want an easy life really. I mean, we've got a good relationship down here – and I want no interruptions. **External interruptions.**

[emphasis added]

[Interview 1:753-779]

The extract exemplifies only too clearly the tensions of trying to maintain responsibility, but with attenuated control when attempting to parent post separation. Sustaining relationships with non-resident children in low income families, and the potential for 'precarious or severed relationships' is transparent (Simpson 1998:47). It was a difficult tight rope for the fathers to walk as any indulgence of their non-resident children whether material provision, time or reduced discipline was problematic and viewed with what seemed to be jealousy by their partners and had the potential to lead to a competition between stepmother and stepchild [below]. The absence of understanding from Becci about the need for Bill to maintain or even spoil his non-resident child was common (Smart 2001:108).

Bill, Gordon and Paul presented as having challenges in adjusting to new parenting identities as a non-resident father and / or stepfather and either performed it poorly, abdicated the fathering role or had it removed from them by their current and /or ex-partners. Where co-parenting or parallel parenting<sup>36</sup> wasn't attained, ex-partners could then dispense with the non-resident father enabling dis-continuities of biological parenting (Simpson 1998:50). New social 'dads' had replaced Bill and Gordon and together with

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<sup>36</sup> Parallel parenting is taking care of one's children, but with minimal contact between ex-partners, or using a third party to communicate (Bernstein 2006).

difficult relationships with their ex-partners meant limited opportunity to co-parent. As demonstrated by Bill and Gordon, for non-resident marginalised fathers to be actively engaged with their children they had to be both resourceful and resilient. Child support payments often didn't enable travel costs and treats for non-resident children thus endangering contact. The potential for complexity, confusion and ambiguity in the father role<sup>37</sup> is understandable when considering the different roles that are open to fathers. Tensions for parents 'between being separate and yet being connected' through the commonality of children could be difficult to manage (Smart and Neale 1999:67).

### **Abdication or responsibility?**

The constraints and conflicts in attempting to maintain responsibility and some power and control in parenting could be difficult. The reality demonstrated that 65% of fathers who pay child support saw their children at least once a week. In contrast 28% fathers who did not pay never saw their child and less than a third saw them several times a week or more (Ermisch, Iacovou and Skew 2010). The abdication of parenting roles due to practical, financial and emotional difficulties (Simpson, McCarthy and Walker 1995), rather than feckless fathers abandoning their children is rarely acknowledged by policy, the media and right wing commentators. Giddens' (1998:94) notions of individualized rights and responsibilities advocated the need for parenting contracts post separation, as sustaining relationships and shared responsibility for children were paramount. Without such contractual obligations of duty and responsibility there was potential for 'inadequate parenting and lack of social ties' causing suffering for children (Giddens 1998:94).

However, other commentators suggested that rather than viewing contracts between parents as key, a focus on caring, connectedness and the ties that embed and bind families together were the crucial elements (Sevenhuijsen

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<sup>37</sup> Equally this occurred to a certain extent in my study with Patrick and Pete's non-resident mothers.

1998; Smart and Neale 1999; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003; May 2008). It was not duty or obligations that guided individuals through moral dilemmas, but rather situated questions of responsibility as in what was the best way to express one's caring responsibility (Sevenhuijsen 1998:56).

The relational ontology whereby individuals could exist because they were members of networks of care and responsibility for good or bad, was anathema to Giddens individualisation thesis, where duty and obligation were necessary to counter 'a society of atomistic, self-governed individuals' (Sevenhuijsen 2002:131). In contrast Finch and Mason (1993:95,166) posited that responsibility was a process of negotiation leading to giving and receiving, with both independence and interdependence central. Responsibilities were created rather than automatically present in specific relationships and were not determined by fixed rules, rather they were fluid and more akin to guidelines. Responsibility was grounded in everyday human practices and developed over time in contrast to duty and obligation which implied a sense of fixed rules (Finch and Mason 1993:95,166).

In my study, as with Walker, McCarthy and Simpson' study (2004), responsibility rather than abdication was the central tenet. Despite the hindrance of old and new partners there was no evidence of willingly reducing contact, rather wanting more. The longer established parents appeared to have found a balance in managing the parenting scripts, which were based on relationships and interdependencies, with mothers balancing the intricacies of different forms of care: for partners, for children [both biological and step] and for the relations between these. However, the turmoil for some in attempting to manage this was difficult. The newly adopted identities and roles came without instructions and the ensuing sense of floundering was confusing and debilitating. Thus the paradox for the parents presented as wanting to be just 'a normal family', whilst simultaneously trying to manage the differences of the realities of living within two different real world contexts, one the private and the other the public. The challenge of the public reality was easier for some parents than for others.



## **Normalised adaptation to stepfamily identities**

Susie responded to the realities and challenges of stepfamily life within a normalised paradigm, seemingly understanding and managing despite the difficulties.

### **Susie's story continued:**

For several years Susie had lived with the confusing reality of being a stepmother and was honest about the challenges of being a stepfamily. Susie was only eighteen when she left home and became a stepmother to Pete's two boys after their mother left. She and Pete had been married for several years and had three children together, and while Pete helped her with the parenting [during the second interview he changed Dominic's nappy and supervised his lunch], Susie felt that she was the main carer. Susie spoke candidly throughout the interviews about the weight of responsibility of becoming a stepmother and acquiring the main parenting role. She had little understanding of parenting and found herself struggling with doubts and concerns as to whether she was a 'good enough' stepmother. This was a key focus in her accounts and she was very sensitive to what others thought about her.

Susie: They [local community] were always looking... You know, there has been, there has been issues. We have had social services come when I moved in and the social security office. And people saying, just causing trouble. People that I didn't even know. It was like, they are not her children. And I remember at the time it was horrendous for two years. It was awful. But then, once I had Nina [biological daughter], I got accepted into the community. So there was something there. They didn't just... I mean, now it's not – but it was almost as if I had now won rights to being a mum because I had my daughter. And that they will accept me now ...

[Interview 4:1024-1033]

And later:

Susie: Well I wouldn't have minded explaining if the response I was going to get was positive. I didn't care less, these are my kids. This is my family as I see it. And I don't have any issues with that – I just want to be the best that I can and get on with everything. So that wouldn't have bothered me. It was just the fact that that made it different for people. It made it... and it still does make it different for people. That the boys are not mine. And we only have... and it's like, oh, you're not their mam. It's like, no I'm not. It's like, oh,

right. And then you think well... But that doesn't matter because you know me. You've seen me. I've seen you ten years ago – I see you all the time at the corner shop. But it changes things for people. And I can't say... I can't speak for what they might be thinking. But most of the reactions of people who have suddenly found out that I am not Sam and Chris' mam has been like a real shock ...

[Interview 4: 1447-1460]

The perception and experience of societal disapprobation manifested through stigmatisation, alienation and judgemental views left Susie with a feeling that she was under surveillance from the local community. The infringement of the [biological] family onto the stepfamily was a potential threat to self-esteem, sense of self worth and identity, which had affected Susie. What was particularly difficult for Susie was that despite trying to be the best stepmother she could be, she was not accepted by the local community until she became a biological mother. Disbelief and a sense of moral injustice that she was treated this way were prominent in her accounts. Susie felt confused at the general lack of acknowledgement and recognition of her role by external others.

#### **Susie's story continued:**

Susie: And, being a parent, just to have that kind of acknowledgement really, that that's – you know, **you're not the parent but you are a parent.** And not negative. That it's actually a good thing. And that, you know, I'm not some home breaker. No, because people don't know how you come together, you know.

[emphasis added]  
4:1563-1567]

[Interview

Despite the challenges Susie had developed a pragmatism and resilience in managing the different, but normal issues of stepfamily identity in her family that was 'working' [Interview 4: 974] and lived within its parameters. She was open and honest about her stepfamily status.

### **'Pathologised' adaptation to stepfamily identities**

In contrast to Susie, Barbara and Paul became enmeshed in secrets and lies, the latter exemplified with Barbara and Paul's mis-management of the different identities of stepfamily life which proved too onerous for them.

#### **Barbara and Paul's story continued:**

Barbara: When the health visitor rang and said about the stepfamily thing – I was thinking, "I'm not a stepfamily." I honestly thought, "I'm not. Eee, yes, I am." I never...

Ann: So you don't think of yourself as a stepfamily?

Barbara: No, I don't think of myself as a stepfamily.

Ann: Paul, do you?

Paul: No.

Ann: So, how do you think of yourself? What name would you give?

Barbara: A family. A family. And Robert and Louise [half siblings] are brother and sister. And we're mam and dad.

[Interview 8: 705-714]

Barbara's determination to airbrush out her previous family life demonstrates the difficulty in [mis]managing the stepfamily identity. Barbara attempted to re-invent her family within a normative biological model, but it was vulnerable to the reality and contradictions of being a stepfamily. However, as well as being Louise's father Barbara was determined that Paul should be Robert's father too. The responsibility for Paul to become Robert's dad was superficially appropriated to Robert, but the adult moral undertones are clearly evident.

Paul: Robert actually was – well, Robert was very keen for me to be his dad. Robert kept asking all the time – "When can Paul be my dad? When can I call him...?" Do you know what I mean? And it was actually us saying, "Oh, not yet. Not yet. Not yet." But...

Barbara: It was when we got engaged wasn't it?

Paul: We got engaged...

Barbara: But then we never called Paul 'Dad' in front of... Er, dad (Paul's father). Whenever Robert called Paul "Dad" in front of his parents, we used to cringe. Didn't we? I know I did.

[Interview 8:126-134]

Barbara's sensitivity to the morality of her situation continued.

Barbara: Paul's family are a very close knit family. And my mother in law, Audrey, they're her boys. I think she found it hard, me coming in, being older than Paul. I'm three, four years older than Paul is. Plus a divorcee. Plus with a child. I mean she's very... She goes to church a lot.

Paul: My mam's very religious.

[Interview 8:168-173]

Barbara was determined to 'be classed as a proper family' [Interview 8:1755]. As Robert's non-resident father still had parental responsibility Barbara and Paul attempted to affirm progeny, but had to compromise with 'social' progeny. They had sought quasi legal advice and been told that they couldn't legally change Robert's name, but for a small fee could have a legal letter stating his surname was now Peters, rather than Parker. Whilst this could be construed as the solicitor acknowledging their difference and finding a workable solution, another interpretation is rather more cynical as this pseudo legal document seemed to be an appeasement.

Barbara: It's with Robert again, with the surname thing. We had to go and see a solicitor and we had to pay £60 to have this bit of paper saying his surname was now known as this.

Paul: But I'll tell you what, the £60 was worth it. Because Robert is absolutely... My mam baked a cake with Robert Peters on, didn't she?

Ann: So was this a big thing for Robert?

Barbara: It was. It used to be important to him. What I used to say to him is, "You know what, you're really..." I was Parker as well, until I got married and that was the one part of getting married that made me think "I can't do this." But, I did love Paul to bits. But the

thoughts of... One of the main reasons why I married my ex-husband was I didn't want to have a different surname to my child. Ironically. So I wanted to become Parker so I'd be the same as him, because I was pregnant when I got married. But then in the end it was – what I ended being was that I had a separate surname to him. And at the beginning I used to say to Robert, "You're really special. Oh that's Parker – you're really special. Aren't you? I wish I was Parker." We used to do that all the time with him.

[Interview 8: 1595 – 1612]

Following the pseudo-legalistic surname change for Robert, not only did he have a cake, but also a £40 Newcastle strip with his new surname emblazoned on the back. However, the inherent contradictions between fantasy and reality were rife and difficult to manage. The problem with denying the past was that Barbara and Paul were finding that confronting the present was problematical. Paul explained about having to go to see the manager of Robert's football team as he was organising insurance documents for the team. Paul had never corrected people when they had called him by his stepson's surname. However, now that Robert had the same surname as his stepfather Paul thought that it was necessary for the insurance documents to have the correct details.

Paul: The documents and everything – change his name to Peters. "Well, why?" "Well, my name is Peters." "Never. Never." You know? For years they thought... And I just said to Barbara, I said, "I ain't going to go into it – you know, I haven't got to explain to anybody." So it was like, "Oh, aye, no bother." I had two names – Mr Peters and Mr Parker. You know, I've never signed anything as Mr Parker, but as far as everybody else, they just presumed. Because it's the norm, isn't it?

[Interview 8: 473-480]

The contradictions and complications continued.

Paul: I think in a stepfamily you've got to be open. You've got to be open in any relationship, but in a stepfamily you've got to be very open with the child.

Barbara: You see, there's one thing that I've got in my mind. I don't know what I'm going to do. Is for Louise – because we've not really talked that much about the past and things. She could get to quite an age without knowing about Steve (Robert's father). She

might presume that Robert is Paul's...

Paul: Well he is.

[Interview 8: 244-252]

The strenuous effort to dis-identify (Skeggs 1997:82) as a stepfamily and the need to be identified as a biological family was a disabling factor for this stepfamily. Resistance to a stepfamily identity caused a lack of fit with reality. A refusal to inhabit a category does not necessarily mean it can be abandoned (Skeggs 1997:166). Barbara suffered from depression and Robert had behavioural problems. The family was referred to the Child and Adolescent Health Service [CAMHS].

Barbara's reference to 'a proper family' [Interview 8:1755] and Paul's 'Because it's the norm, isn't it?' [Interview 8:480] may well be the key to understanding why some marginalised stepfamilies adopted biological family identities.

A social norm is that kind of guide for action which is supported by social sanctions, negative ones providing penalties for infraction, positive ones providing rewards for exemplary compliance. The significance of these rewards and penalties is not meant to lie in their intrinsic, substantive worth but in what they proclaim about the moral status of the actor.

(Goffman 1971:124)

Thus a breach of the social norm [biological families] had the potential for 'spoiled identity' or 'undesired differentness' (Goffman 1963:5), a stigmatised position with potential threats to self-esteem and social exclusion. However, one could be cleansed by presenting as a good family and so make a claim for a valid social identity in the face of a moral digression (May 2008), hopefully leading to respectability and inclusion as a group member. Exploring Barbara's and others position through a Foucaultian lens reveals interesting interpretations.

## **5.7 Respectability: adopting a Foucaultian explanation**

Barbara's attitudes and general sense of self-identity demonstrated her awareness of other people's judgements. She could appear to have selfishly put herself first [a deviancy discourse], consequently she worked hard to present as respectable, the key being a reputation as 'a proper family' and a good mother. Thus far the parents' voices suggest that the discourses of maternalism and moralism were powerful in their attempt to regulate and re-stabilise marginalised [step]family life. Adopting Foucault's concept of 'disciplinary power' as exercised by parenting policy, practice, society and media and its ramifications on parents in marginalised stepfamilies offers some insight. Disciplinary power is 'a modest, suspicious power' that gradually invaded major structures such as working class housing estates, prisons, schools, hospitals and was successful due to the simplicity of its instruments – hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and the examination (Foucault 1977:170).

### **Hierarchical observation or a 'disciplinary gaze'**

Firstly, exploring hierarchical observation by adopting Foucault's (1977:171) example of the power of surveillance from others [in a military camp] is striking in so far as the parents felt compelled to behave well due to the surveillance:

'each gaze would form a part of the overall functioning of power'  
[and with a] 'network of gazes that supervised one another'  
(Foucault 1977:171)

Taking the housing estates literally, the planning and architecture of the houses and flats where the parents lived were old, post war housing stock and in some instances in very poor states of disrepair, with others in terraced rows dating back to the Victorian period. The parents' homes were surrounded on all four sides and for two families in flats, six sides [above and below]. Overt surveillance on them as with Susie was easily performed. Several mothers other than Barbara were aware and concerned about local people's views [Yvonne, Kate, Susie, Tracy, Leanne]. Similarly, there was

also covert surveillance, 'a specific mechanism in the disciplinary power' through people and practices (Foucault 1977:175). This insidious method of maintaining disciplinary power can be exemplified with Barbara and Paul's concern about Robert's different surname, as it could become known that they weren't 'a proper family'. Barbara particularly could not live with this difference and hence the name change. Covert surveillance is an influential aspect of disciplinary power which maintains 'the norm'.

### **Normalizing judgements**

Secondly, 'non-observance' (Foucault 1977:178) of normative behaviour was punishable and disciplinary punishment had to be 'corrective' (Foucault 1977:179), but simultaneously gave rewards for good behaviour, otherwise people would be demoted to the 'shameful class' (Foucault 1977:182). The power of normalisation imposed a constant pressure to conform, '[s]o that they might all be like one another' (Foucault 1977:182) and not noticed:

The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*.

(Foucault 1977:183)

Normalizing judgements did not operate simply by differentiating parents, rather by specifying certain ways of behaving, not by hierarchical means, not by homogenizing, rather through the binary opposition of permitted and forbidden. As with surveillance, normalization was powerful leading to conformity, 'the power of normalization imposes homogeneity' (Foucault 1977:184), thereby emphasising individual differences which by their very nature demonstrated non-conformity. Thus through 'subtle coercion' (Foucault 1977:137) of attitudes, discipline and self-regulation were maintained and could produce 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1977:138). Social regulation was achieved willingly by Barbara who wanted to be seen as respectable. Adherence to the normative biological family model meant acceptance. The power of normalisation imposed homogeneity and prevented social exclusion. A very real concern for working class women is to be seen as 'respectable'



(Skeggs 1997:1). Their ontological security is more likely to be in 'fitting in', rather than being an individual and standing out (Skeggs 1997:163). Belongingness is an important element with shared social norms that convey respectability. Categories have real effects on the lives of working class women with exclusion the most fundamental marker of class (Skeggs 2004). Transferring this concept to all the parents in my study aids an understanding of why they dis-identified with their stepfamily status and presented as 'a normal [biological] family'.

### **The examination or 'clinical gaze'.**

Thirdly, an infraction of the norm led to condemnation. The examination combined both the hierarchical observation and the normalizing judgement to produce the clinical gaze whereby individuals were classified and 'punished' (Foucault 1977:184). Thus sadly for Barbara, despite all her attempts to normalise, her family became 'pathologised' / medicalised with input from CAMHS, and framed through a 'clinical gaze' within a deficit paradigm (Jones 2003).

As such, the power of hierarchical observation or a 'disciplinary gaze' from others, both external and significant was a strong influence on the parents and enabled the process towards self-regulation and normalisation. The parents adopted the conduct, habits and attitudes of a [pseudo]biological family, and so the normalizing judgement of others appeared to be successful. The power of normalization generally imposed homogeneity. However, the penalty for not normalizing was non-acceptance / exclusion through the examination or 'clinical gaze'.

## **5.8 Understanding respectability**

Thus far a continuous thread has been the adoption of biological parenting practices, identities and roles within marginalised social [step]families. The central tenet of the following discussion is an attempt to further understand why the parents were so intent to maintain biological identities when the

oppositional context of social stepfamily life brought the lived realities and complexities such as non-resident parents and stepchildren to the fore.

Firstly, at a basic level it could be viewed as pragmatism. The complexities for parents working in albeit pseudo biological co-parenting or parallel models across different families, with separateness yet connectedness essential, might help explain why in their new and different [step]families they continued to operate in a biological nuclear family model. The latter was dominant and normal, any other approach might further complicate the current situation. The intrusion of their old histories onto their new histories was messy. Biological parenting was a known entity. Knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence in biological parenting was a feature of their previous lives, even amongst those parents brought up in stepfamilies [below]. Parents have been found to adopt the same models of parenting and parenting practices that they grew up with (Steedman 1986). It was what they knew, 'continuity in an uncertain world' (Williams 2004:18).

Secondly, the parents were clearly living with daily economic survival a major preoccupation. For mothers, most of whom had had a period as a lone mother, not only economic, but social and emotional vulnerability might have been a feature driving their desire to regain some sense of identity, credibility and security. Commentators exploring lone motherhood suggested that socio-economic difference had a significant effect on the experiences of these mothers (Duncan and Edwards 1999; May 2004, 2005, 2006; Duncan 2005, 2006). Transferring this concept across to mothers in my study enables a more coherent understanding of the issues. Low self-esteem, poor self-confidence, poor self-efficacy<sup>38</sup> and an external locus of control are all common aspects for many marginalised mothers, which are exacerbated by lone motherhood. With the potential for loss of respectability post separation some lone mothers may well seize the opportunity to 'display' family (Finch 2007) identity in the form of a father figure and partner. Similarly for men struggling to see their children post separation, the opportunity of a mother

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<sup>38</sup> Self-efficacy is to have a belief in one's ability to succeed.

figure to help parent as well as acquiring a partner might also play a part. Thus to be viewed as a family, might be thought a slightly better pragmatic and respectable alternative to lone parent life. As such, these considerations are important, particularly in different social locations and structural contexts (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Duncan 2005; Gillies 2005b; May 2006).

Thirdly, focusing on the issues above, the pervasive element of socio-economic marginalisation as an intrinsic factor is crucial when considering different perceptions and experiences of parenting. Respectability as a good [pseudo-biological] family was central to the parents marginalised lives. In spite of the vicissitudes of life, their caring and parenting practices appeared good observing through my middle class, professional lens, which is not generally thought by policy, media and some commentators to be a value associated with marginalised parents. Differences between parenting practices of marginalized and middle class mothers are frequently compared and contrasted (Gillies 2007). As such, marginalisation as a concept helps explain the fragile interdependence of the parents' and family identity demonstrated through respectability as a normal family. The mothers particularly put a lot of energy into creating respectability through displaying good parenting. It was their *raison d'être* and crucial to their identity and sense of self. These findings have been highlighted by other commenters (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003), but are worthy of further exploration. While middle class families have been found to adopt social parenting practices in the stepfamily, the opposite to working class families, they adopt biological parenting practices not within the social family, rather they maintain a co-parenting role across families with fathers parenting non-resident children (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:131). The genealogical relationship appeared to provide distinctive elements in making commitments to kin, particularly the family of origin (Finch and Mason 1993:169). Co-parenting and 'continuity', rather than 'replacement' might be due to traditional patterns of inheritance and legitimacy amongst higher socio-economic groups (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:133). Moreover, middle class fathers have traditionally been economically secure and to some extent in a position to provide materially for both families. As such a disparity occurs between marginalised parents in stepfamilies adopting

biological family practices within their social family and reduced co-parenting or parallel parenting of biological non-resident children, due to emotional and economic difficulties. Whereas middle class parents in stepfamilies adopt social family practices within the social family, but prioritise co-parenting of biological non-resident children (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:131). I would suggest that the latter requires a certain amount of good communication skills, self confidence, self esteem and an internal locus of control, attributes which may or may not always be present in some marginalised parents.

Gillies (2007) research exploring working class experiences of parenting has given a much needed deeper insight into marginalised mothers [lone, biological and stepfamilies] experiences of parenting. However, a caveat is necessary when discussing differences in parenting practices between classes as perceptions and interpretations of parenting are viewed through political, societal, cultural and biomedical discourses. Thus differences such as class and inequalities are profound leading to discrimination for one group but not the other (Gillies 2007). Using middle class stepfamilies as a benchmark when describing marginalised stepfamilies' parenting practices continues the historical, discursive normative position and renders a different way of doing family as problematic. Alternatively appreciating the values being eschewed by marginalised stepfamilies does highlight profound differences and might begin to illuminate the rationale underpinning marginalised stepfamilies' motives. However, further caveats are necessary as categories are not homogenous units, for example the only commonality between these parents is their stepfamily status and within the stepfamily category there will be differences as in my study.

Skeggs (1997) instrumental work exploring how marginalised women managed their lives revealed interesting insights. Their marginalised positions were central to their trajectories and understandings of self, but their identities were produced through dis-identification and dissimulation of their class and demonstrated how the judgement of others was central to their actions (Skeggs 1997:15). The women were never free from these

judgements, both real and imaginary, that positioned them as inferior and different (Skeggs 1997:90). The 'recognition of the judgement of others and awareness of social norms' (Skeggs 1997:123) was an important aspect of their identity. Their marginalisation was enacted and made real in their lives through different processes, barriers and boundaries and psychological responses (Charmaz 2006).

Barbara and Paul's potential for shame was never far away, it hovered around. In order to feel shame one needs to be aware of ethical and moral issues. Shame is insidious and is one of the ways marginalised women recognise, regulate and control themselves (Skeggs 1997:123). Shame involves a feeling of inadequacy even when there are no specific failures and emanates from a commonality of values and occurs when one feels disrespect from others (Sayer 2005a). Shame is a private reflexive emotion as it involves an evaluation of the self, by the self which may be largely unarticulated and exist below our level of awareness and so difficult to get in touch with, but it still blights lives (Sayer 2000a). Whilst their dis-identifications of marginalisation were not spoken about by the women, it was constantly present and their efforts to conceal it actually produced it through negating it (Skeggs 1997:74). Barbara and Paul's negation of stepfamily identity actually highlighted it even more forcefully when they did eventually 'come out'.

Therefore, in my study the concept of marginalisation is key to understanding the lives of the parents in the stepfamilies. Whilst it generally wasn't spoken about in an overt manner, covert actions in the form of displaying and functioning as a respectable [pseudo]biological family were central. Their constant juxtaposition to middle class parents, some of whom were confident in their display of family practices (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003) helps explain the fragility of the interdependence of their identity through respectability.

## 5.9 Conclusion

As such, the adoption of biological parenting practices and identities in the lives of the stepfamilies created obvious challenges. The most difficult being the lack of fit between the public persona of the pseudo-biological [step]family yet the messiness of the private realities, with the presence of non-resident parents and stepchildren hovering and intruding. Thus the evolution of the stepfamily was not a seamless transition, rather complicated and without a neat resolution. Despite the challenges of re-creating a family, respectability was a vital component in maintaining a good sense of self and managing 'shameful recognitions' (Skeggs 1997:123) of not only their marginalised status, but also the fact they were not a 'proper' family, which some parents managed better than others. Demonstrating responsibility and respectability was an integral part of their identities and thus their responses.

However, as detailed in the next chapter, at times this could be a fragile balance. The challenges of parenting in a stepfamily were not restricted to parenting issues and identities, but fundamentally grounded in key relationships. The latter specifically focused not only on the stepparent, principally the stepmother relationship with the stepchildren, but also the intimate couple relationship, both of which appeared to be fragile and vulnerable.

# **CHAPTER 6**

## **FRAGILE RESILIENCIES AND SILENT VOICES**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In spite of the public image of a normal biological family, the families' private lives revealed different realities. Despite an apparently strong desire on the part of the couples to make the relationship work, it was susceptible to numerous challenges and threats emanating from some aspect of one or both partners' previous histories and lives. The complexity of the parents' relationship histories centred on issues related to ex-partners and stepchildren. Whilst many of these issues were reported within a normalised context there were however issues which some individuals and couples contextualised within troublesome paradigms. The past played a large part in contributing to stress and disruption in the present and highlighted the fragility of the edifice upon which not only the stepfamily was built, but fundamentally the couple relationship. However, whilst this was a common finding across the data set [apart from Patrick and Tracy], some parents gave little acknowledgement of the centrality, impact and ramifications of their old histories on their current relationships. Even if the parents had experience of life in a stepfamily, either as a child and / or a stepparent, it was as if they wanted to erase the past, rather than learn from it. Hence their voices were 'silent'.

### **6.2 Growing up in a stepfamily**

In my study nine parents had experienced life as a child in a stepfamily [table 3:48] in often quite complex family formations. Whilst this might be thought to be helpful, enabling a better understanding of some of the issues this was not the case, as exemplified by Becci.

**Becci and Bill's story continued:**

Becci had grown up in a stepfamily and had struggled with her stepfather's favouritism of his biological children.

Becci: Growing up in that family was quite negative because there was blatant favouritism... And Eric [Becci's stepfather] used to come down really, really hard on me and my brother because we weren't his, whereas my mam was quite fair with all of us.

[Interview 1:68-72]

And later:

Ann: So looking back, would you say that experience has had a positive effect on you now in later life?

Becci: I had a ... It made me have a more cautious effect. Because of the reason I put me foot down and I thought, right, I'm not going to go out with someone who has got another kid. I don't really want to go into a relationship. I don't want, you know, I don't want any children that I have to grow up in that environment. So it made me quite cautious. And that, but I also thought because I was very aware of the favouritism thing that's gone on, I've tried really hard not to allow it to come into when he was born. Not to allow it to come into here. You know what I mean. I tried to treat them equal and stuff like that.

[Interview 1: 1642-1653]

Yet she appeared not to have learnt from her own experiences.

Becci: But because of that, when he [Dan] was first born and I was struggling a bit for stuff for him – I used to think it was favouritism. Because I used to think, "Hold on, you're [Bill] spending more on your daughter than you are on your son." And to me, when you're a new mother and especially hormonal it looks to her, I was thinking, "You're spending about £70 a week on Laura" and he [son] wasn't even getting £5 spent on him. It really, really used to bug me.

Bill: But we've made up for it now. We've spent plenty money on him.

Becci: Yeah, I suppose. But now it's like that I've come to terms with it. But at the same time it's still in the back of my mind – I'm thinking, "If we have another kid, then Laura is still going to be favourite on the financial aspect because she's still going to be financially getting more stuff than what those two would."

[Interview 1:779-792]



Despite having experienced favouritism, inequity and bias as a child growing up in a stepfamily, Becci both lives it in the present and repeats it as a stepparent. Laura had been exhibiting attention seeking behaviour with cutting and promiscuous behaviour and so Bill was trying to see her more often.

Becci: I think it's really, really hard to go out with somebody that's already got kids. It's so hard, if you haven't got them – I can understand if someone has got kids and someone else has got kids and they go out with each other because they've both got to tolerate each other's kids. And it's a little bit easier. But if you haven't got kids and you go out with someone else who has got them, it's really, really hard because you go into that relationship thinking, 'our joint money is now going towards maintenance for her, to his ex'. And you start resenting it. You think 'I can't afford to buy him [Dan, the baby] clothes because she's got the money.' Do you know what I mean? And you do ... And when the kid [Laura, stepdaughter] comes you think, 'You're the reason why I've got no money. And if you didn't exist, I would be happy'. And you feel a bit resentful for that.

[Interview 1:1111-1123]

The contradictions are rife and exemplify Becci's resentment towards her stepdaughter viewing her as the cause of their financial hardship, rather than Bill's misdemeanours at work resulting in suspension. Becci appeared to struggle to accept the reality of the situation with Bill having an ex-partner and child to support and focused her anger onto them.

Becci: Yeah and I look at her [Brenda, Bill's ex-partner] and I think, "Little witch – was with him for three weeks and fell pregnant." Do you know what I mean? Totally, like, you know... And that's it – she had all the... He bought her everything – you know what I mean? Because at the time he had money then and so she was getting everything off him. She's getting all of his money off him. Laura [stepdaughter] has everything she's ever wanted in life. And now I've got the crappy end. Do you know what I mean?

[Interview 1:793-800]

Finances are a common area of couple conflict in stepfamilies (Coleman *et al* 2001; Halford, Nicholson and Sanders 2007). Mothers' perceptions of equity

or inequity have been considered to be an important link to the quality of couples' relationships (Hetherington, Henderson and Reiss 1999).

Yvonne was the only one who implied that growing up in a stepfamily had been an insightful rather than a hindering experience. The remaining parents gave examples and recounted incidents and key events in their childhoods, which represented a sense of disappointment as with Becci above. Issues were described such as overt or covert demonstrations of preferential treatment or bias usually from fathers towards biological children. Moreover, within this context were three instances of violence towards biological mothers. The stepparent, usually a stepfather was demonised and seen as the cause of the problems, whilst the biological mother was viewed not exactly as a passive observer, but more as a helpless victim. While none of the mothers divulged domestic violence issues in their couple relationship, there were insinuations of helplessness as with Becci above. Again this resonates with the inequity of power and control issues and has been found to be a key area of couple relationship difficulties (Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010:6)<sup>39</sup>.

### 6.3 Experience as a stepparent

Six parents had had experiences of being a stepparent previously, but Bill was the only one to talk about favouritism towards his biological child, rather than a more equal approach.

#### **Bill and Becci's story continued:**

Bill: I did have a previous relationship with a lass who had a baby, I'm sorry a child, that was a year older than Laura at the time. And at the time Laura was three and her bairn was four. And on reflection, what I think about now, I did used to find

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<sup>39</sup> Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield (2010) findings came from a secondary analysis of a data set. The initial data were collected between 2002-2003 with the aim of investigating people's experiences of relationship breakdown and their attitudes towards seeking support (Ayles and Panades 2005).

myself coming down harder on him than I did on Laura. And it was partly because Laura was a year younger. And we went on holiday and I found myself being biased towards my child as against him. And I think to myself – I wasn't nasty with him, but I was less tolerant of him than I was of mine, you know?

[Interview 1:1823-1831]

However, the other parents who recounted their experiences were all women who did not have children at the time and were supporting their partners with their children. Yvonne, Kate and Barbara, gave positive accounts of step-parenting as adults, as with Kate below.

**Kate and Tom's story continued:**

Kate: ... And I find it... I think, you know, I had his [ex-husband's] children sleeping and it really, really, annoys me and I feel very bitter. The fact that he can't have his own children.

Tom: I think it is – it's annoying. It's annoying and it's sad.

Kate: But at the same time I feel very pleased with myself because obviously, as a stepmother, I must have done something right.

Tom: Yeah, because they still come and see you, don't they? Aye, which is nice.

Kate: They still keep in touch – they still phone.

Tom: They still come and see Kate and they have nothing to do with him [biological father]. Well, they're grown up and they know what he's like, don't they? Yeah, when he [Scott] was born – they came around didn't they? They brought presents and everything – it was great.

[Interview 3:879 - 891]

Despite Kate's resentment that her ex-husband did not give much help with their children, a situation also found by other commentators (Walker *et al* 2010:64)<sup>40</sup>, she gained satisfaction from the ties that bind, that is the

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<sup>40</sup> Walker *et al*'s (2010) study commissioned by the New Labour government explored the issues and situations causing stress in couples particularly those with children. The aim being to enhance family life and reduce potential risk for children.

continuing relationships with quasi relatives from past relationships. Children who had become part of a family when their parent, usually father, lived with another partner often kept in contact with the stepmother, even when there was no longer a couple relationship connectedness and the relationship had ended. These relationships were important to the stepmothers and viewed as positive with a moral implication that they had passed on good values, a sign that the stepmothers had parented well. Moreover, the contact was not about fixed rules, duty or obligation, but seemed to be a voluntary and flexible arrangement suggesting a sense of the children's responsibility created over time (Finch and Mason 1993:166-169). Thus their previous histories and lives did have some positive elements, but generally the experiences didn't appear to give them insight into their present relationship.

#### **6.4 Complexity of parents' relationship histories**

The complexity of the parents' relationship histories inevitably impacted on the present relationship, yet in some ways their histories didn't seem to prepare them for what lay ahead with the past often discounted in a flippant manner. Insecurities emanating from the ex-partners' presence in the current relationship were a strong feature in seven interviews, which presented in a variety of ways, again along a continuum from normal to more problematised. The responses presented as resentment, jealousy and vilification of ex-partners. Resentment of a partner's ex-partner was common (Coleman *et al* 2001), and particularly for the women this resentment appeared to be based on jealousy and / or fear of them rekindling their old relationship or generally the partner leaving the relationship. These insecurities were particularly transparent in Leanne, Becci and Kate's accounts and had a detrimental effect on their current relationship, here exemplified by Kate.

##### **Kate and Tom's story continued:**

Kate's insecurities and lack of confidence seemed to emanate from her previous husband leaving her and going off with another woman and there is

a sense that history might repeat itself.

Kate: I worry – I still worry that he'll [Tom] leave us.

Tom: Oh, I'll not.

Kate: No, I know you say that. But I haven't got – I don't do it so much now, but when we first got together... Well, I told you, if the kids like, if we've had a really bad day with the kids being naughty and stuff, I used to panic thinking, "He's not going to be able to handle it, he's going to leave."

Ann: And were you able to talk to Tom about that?

Kate: Oh, yeah. I used to tell him, didn't I? But, when you've already had somebody leave you once, and it was the father of your children, you think, well, there's nothing to stop your new partner leaving you. Because they're not even his kids anyway, so you're thinking... Although we've got Scott together anyway, but he could still walk away at any time. And I just think, you know, when the kids have had a really, they've been really trying or whatever. Obviously I just think, "Oh God, he's going to leave. He's going to get sick."

[Interview 3:1323-1338]

Kate's insecurities of Tom leaving her are transferred onto her children's behaviour, but there is also a hint that the child they've had together might offer some security for the relationship. A particular issue for Tom was trying to achieve couple time alone with Kate, which she appeared to resist.

Tom:... But I think we need a couple of weekends away, don't we. On our own.

Kate: You see, as well, the health visitor pointed it out...

Tom: The health visitor pointed that out, we've got together and it's been... We've never had time to ourselves.

Kate: We've never had couple time because I've had two kids.

Ann: It is difficult with children, but thought to be important.

Tom: Very important. Well, we need to get... We need to spend more time together – maybe one weekend a month. It would be nice, wouldn't it?

Kate: Yeah, but how can we do it though?

[Interview 3:1459-1469]

Again, the children are used as the reason that the couple can't have time away, despite offers from grandparents to look after the children. However, a big issue for Kate is that it meant splitting up the children, with her two children from her previous relationship going to her mother and the baby going to Tom's mother. Kate's vision of 'a family' was spoilt:

Kate: Because, I don't want to be unfair to Scott's grandparents, but at the same time, all three of them are my children. And I don't want to single one of them out and the other two are thinking that it's not fair. I mean Tom's parents are brilliant with my two – they buy them birthday presents, they buy them Christmas presents. They are brilliant with them. And I can understand if they're grandparents. But I don't want my other two to feel excluded.

[Interview 3: 160-166]

The couple dyad in stepfamilies is particularly susceptible as generally there has been little child free time to develop common ground and mutual understanding (Pacey 2005). Whether the couple managed the different challenges depended to a large extent on the stability of the relationship and their communication skills. The most difficult part appeared to be maintaining stability through the normal, but often troublesome different stages of couple relationship development alongside the evolution of the stepfamily.

## **6.5 The couple relationship**

For the mothers coming together as a couple had been based on certain entry criteria. Responsibility for children was a key criterion particularly interlinked with the age of the children, which is consistent with other commentators (Walker *et al* 2010:12). Indeed Walker *et al* (2010:16) found that generally 'repeat players' made considered decisions pre-formation of the stepfamily as with Becci:

**Becci and Bill's story continued:**

For Becci becoming involved with Bill was quite a considered decision. Laura's older age was important, together with the fact that she wasn't going to be fully resident. Moreover Becci wasn't the first girlfriend since Bill's break up with Laura's mother and hence couldn't be held morally accountable.

Becci: And it was about three weeks into the relationship when he said. 'I'm going to pick my daughter up.' And I was like, 'Oh right.' And honestly I thought that I would end it now. I didn't really want to go out with someone who had another kid. And then I was talking to my mam and she said, 'Well how old is she? Are you the first one after he has broken up with her?' and I wasn't and she was a little bit older and I thought that he hasn't got her all of the time, so, ... But I think if he had Laura more than two days a week I don't think I would have went out with him. I don't think I would have bothered, because I don't ... I didn't want to take on the responsibility of somebody else's kid. And I didn't want to take on the responsibility of a baby either, but she was older.

These considerations were an important part of the decision making process for the women. However, parents' accounts of coming together varied. As above, Patrick and Tracy were the only couple to present a united front in terms of their parenting approaches, and again here they are the exception, with their interpretation of being cautious the most extreme.

**Patrick and Tracy's story continued:**

Ann: ...Patrick said that at the beginning you took it slowly with the children – can I ask, sort of how you managed that? And how long it took to ...

Tracy: Well, it was a while. Because I didn't want to meet the children straightaway, like within a week of seeing Patrick. Because I thought, "Well, what if it doesn't last? It's pointless them being introduced to..." And it was the same with Patrick – I wouldn't let Patrick see Mackenzie until me and Patrick we're in like a stable kind of relationship. We knew, as soon as we met we clicked. That was it, we knew we were going to get married. It was just one of those things. But we just took it slowly. It was about, how many weeks after? After us meeting? I mean I met his mam before I met the children, didn't I? It was like four, or five weeks after before we met the kids.

Patrick and Tracy's account does corroborate other reports which state that the coming together was not planned, it just happened (Smith 2003). Moreover, the emphasis on Tracy meeting Patrick's mother before his children epitomises the importance of family ties in the north east.

None of the parents gave any intimation that the children's views were taken into account, which differs with other commentators' findings (Walker *et al* 2010:15). Moreover, the mothers in my study suggested that they had been unprepared for the challenges ahead. Whilst challenges are a normal part of any couple relationship the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the issues involving children appeared to be a key hindrance affecting the couple relationship. How they managed them can best be summarised within the binary opposition of pulling apart and working together.

### **Pulling apart and working together**

Generally conflicting needs as both partners and parents were obviously difficult to reconcile at times. Whilst pulling apart highlighted dissonance and questionable commitment towards the relationship, working together signified a united front in dealing with the issues. It was not a simple division of some couples falling into one camp and others falling into another. Rather a vacillation between the two, and depending on the couple dynamics, could be a fairly constant vacillation, particularly evident in four couples, which Becci and Bill encapsulate neatly:

#### **Becci and Bill's story continued:**

With Bill and Becci pulling apart and working together underpinned the whole of their interview. As highlighted above, Becci's resentment, frustration and anger were based on the lack of money, the cause being Child Support payments and other monies for Laura.

Becci: ... I've told her [Laura, stepdaughter] off once and I've had



Bill jump down me saying, "What are you telling her off for?"

Bill: What was that for?

Becci: When she turned around – I can't remember what it was for – and she went, "Well I can't think of anything else that it doesn't cost money to do." And she's had a dig at me before for buying him some clothes – "Well are you wasting your money on him again?" And she'll say that – she doesn't mean to be nasty, it's just the teenager in her coming out. And I know she doesn't mean to be nasty. But I'll tell her off for her cheek. I say, "Don't start cheeking me up." And he'll go, "Here, don't have a go at her." Do you know what I mean? And I think, "Don't undermine me in front of her."

[Interview 1:339-350]

Whilst finances and Laura appeared to be a constant undercurrent in Becci's communication, there were several contradictions as demonstrated here:

Becci: Well, I've stopped doing that [giving Laura chores] because she doesn't do them properly. But she told me, which I think is quite funny and I like her for it, I told her to vacuum up once and she just did the centre of the carpet. And I said to her, "You've got to do the rest." And she went, "Oh no." And I said, "Well why did you not do it?" She went, "I don't want to do it properly." And I said, "Is that so I don't ask you again?" And she went, "Yeah." I was like... And I just thought it was brilliant – I was like, "Right. Whatever."

[Interview 1: 432-439]

Becci and Bill's communication was permeated throughout with complex and sophisticated subtle interactions which appeared to be based on power and control issues within the relationship. When Bill doesn't appear to hear her voice Becci tries another approach demonstrating the different resources within her repertoire, which she used in an attempt to make her point, as follows:

Becci: ... I wouldn't feel like every time I've seen her [Laura] thinking, "You're the reason why we've got no money." Do you know what I mean? It does, it's really such a bad thing. I feel guilty for thinking it.

Bill: Because with all due respect to you, you shouldn't feel like

that.

Becci: I know, but it's like I say, I have spoken to a lot of people who are in my situation and they all feel like that. And like I say, I've got a good friend that is in my situation and it has bothered her so much that she actually split up with her partner. It's got to the point where it's got that bad, she's had to split up with him. Because it's just she can't cope with it. She can't cope with the financial – it's financial favouritism. It's not emotional favouritism, but it feels like financial favouritism, and she can't cope with that. Where I've accepted it. And I know my negative emotions and feelings are my problem. It's just like, because I never felt like that until I had him [Dan, biological son]. Never felt like that until I had him, you know...?

[Interview 1: 919-934]

Becci changed from victim into martyr mode very quickly as a way of regrouping and moving from ceding power to regaining it. But Bill didn't seem to hear her, so Becci attempted a different strategy by depersonalising the issues and transferring them to a 'good friend'. The thinly veiled threat of separation was transferred, and Becci's approach changed into a gentler, more emotive tone. As demonstrated throughout Becci's accounts, the overt resentment for CSA payments necessary for Laura and Bill's ex-partner was also presented in subtle and covert messages at other times with threats and warnings to their relationship. Similarly, several times in the interview Bill highlighted his 'Casanova' streak and his ability to attract women seemingly as a warning to Becci.

The resources that Becci and Bill used are some of the most sensitive and dangerous within the dynamic of couple relationships. Not all stepmothers demonstrated such harsh and abrupt approaches as Becci, but it does raise key issues within couple relationships in stepfamilies. Both economic disadvantage in stepfamilies attempting to balance the financial needs of generally more children is common (Ferri and Smith 1998), and this resonates with the inequity of power and control issues which has been found to be a key area of couple relationship difficulties (Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010:6).

## 6.6 The juxtaposition of the stepmother and couple relationship

Whilst all couples apart from Patrick and Tracy described normal aspects of both pulling apart and working together, it was pulling apart that was particularly evident when there were crises or transitions leading to friction within the dyad. The friction for six couples was focused on a stepchild with the parents facing a variety of challenges that impacted on their couple relationship.

Yvonne as a mother and stepmother is a good representation of the mothers generally as she demonstrated how she constructed, dealt with and attempted to mediate the challenges and tensions as a stepmother and biological mother and their impact on the couple relationship. Yvonne's story highlights some key issues which contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of not only the stepmother-stepchild relationship, but also the biological child-parent relationship and their interrelationship within the couple dyad.

### **Yvonne's story continued:**

Yvonne's two older children, Kit eleven and Ali seven had different fathers. Yvonne had a good relationship with each of her ex-partners, who saw the boys regularly. Yvonne emphasised their commitment exemplified through them going to parents' evenings with her. In fact Yvonne on occasions had all three fathers of her three children in the house at the same time, when meeting to go to events at school. Yvonne's latest partner Gordon, was a non-resident father to six year old Ashley, and non-resident stepfather to sixteen year old Wayne. One of the attractions for Yvonne was Gordon's kindness in parenting his stepson from his previous relationship. Britney was born within a few months of Gordon moving in with Yvonne and very soon Yvonne's image of one big happy family was crumbling.

Yvonne: So I felt as if really, when she [Ashley] was coming over it was just like we didn't exist – me and my... And I really felt that it was a big divider between me and my family and him and his. Instead of like, being together.

Feelings of being an outsider are common (Visher and Visher 1996) and Yvonne attempted to make sense of the challenges of step-parenting within the context of the interplay between two different sets of private family and parenting practices and experiences coming together and integrating into one family. What was demonstrated was the practical realities of mismanaging those differences and the ambiguities and dilemmas that ensued.

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Ann: So how do you find life in a stepfamily?

Yvonne: I think it's got its good points and its also really got its bad points. I think the hardest thing that me and my partner have had to deal with is, sort of, when his daughter comes to stay and when his stepson – it's like a change of house rules. And I think that's been the hardest part really – is trying to sort of get them to be how I've trained my children, sort of thing. I mean, we've nearly split up over it a couple of times because of the situation being really that bad.

[Interview 2:30-37]

And again:

Yvonne: And that's been the really hardest part, you know? ... It's not having, sort of, being united really. You know, me and Gordon not being united and saying, "These are the rules, this is the way it's going to happen." Obviously because he's got his way of bringing up his daughter and I've got my way of bringing up my boys, and as I say, the hardest part is getting it together. And getting it to actually work, you know...

[Interview 2: 49-55]

As evidenced above the complexities involved in being a stepmother to a child or children begin to unpack some of the issues impacting the couple relationship. The 'not knowingness' of where the boundaries lay in terms of power and control, particularly with regards to discipline were troublesome.

All the stepmothers attempted to be positive in the first instance and integrate and accommodate their stepchildren into the family, but for some [Becci, Yvonne and Leanne] this became more difficult as resentments and jealousies began to accumulate. The issues often began with an insidious onset that was barely perceptible and left these three stepmothers feeling guilty, but the issues soon escalated leaving them fragile, as over time what developed appeared to be almost a competition with the stepchildren for control and power. For stepchildren loyalty issues to biological parents have been found to be a common cause of disharmony (Coleman and Ganong 1987). All the stepmothers attempted to understand and manage these issues, for example by rationalising the caring role of the fathers for their biological children, particularly as they were trying their best in difficult circumstances to co-parent. However, this exacerbated the situation and focused on the seeming impotence of the fathers to manage their children better. A common pattern in new relationships is the biological parent doing little to help foster good relationships between the stepparent and child (Ganong *et al* 1999). The ensuing resentment by the stepmothers appeared to lead on to some form of demonisation of the stepchildren. The 'child of divorce' (Bernstein 2006) paradigm was used as the focus for all that was not right. However, paradoxically and simultaneously the stepmothers still cared for the children in a responsible moral manner. It is interesting to note that in the literature it is generally stepmothers rather than stepfathers that face the more difficult challenges with stepchildren (Stanley, Markman and Whitton 2002). In my study I would suggest this was due to the gendered pattern of parenting. The parents had not agreed the rules, boundaries or discipline issues of what was acceptable and what wasn't, a common issue in stepfamily couple conflict (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 1999; Stanley, Markman and Whitton 2002). This begins to reflect the ambiguities for the parents with oppositional factors at play, wanting to be one big happy family with equality and sameness, yet exhibiting difference. Family norms, influences and values have been found to play an important role in relationship stability (Walker *et al* 2010:23). Inevitably the interconnectedness of the issues of the relationship between the stepmothers and stepchildren affected the quality of the couple relationship (Pasley *et al* 1996; Walker *et al*

2010:16). However, if the couple relationship was robust it could withstand the spillover from the children. Sadly this was not the case for Yvonne.

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Exploring Yvonne's account from the outset the immediate focus was on the stepchildren and the resulting effect on the stepfamily and the couple relationship. A key issue that Yvonne focused on was her good parenting being undermined by the corrupt behaviour of the stepchildren. Her attempts at moulding the stepchildren and partner into her idea of good behaviour had been challenging and had a serious spillover effect on the couple relationship. The central dilemma for Yvonne was how to embed the two families into one happy family. Yvonne had an image of what her stepfamily should look like and her attempts to embed or mesh the two families into one were being eroded. Equality and equity were central to Yvonne's concept of family and she worked hard to achieve it for her stepchildren, yet discovered that Gordon didn't reciprocate. There was no agreement on what were the rules, boundaries and discipline issues. The reality Yvonne experienced was diminishing control and power, with exclusion and marginalisation for her children and herself when the stepchildren were at the house. The challenge for Yvonne was in attempting to implement 'sameness' and despite aiming for this amongst the children the problem was that they were not the same. They came from different backgrounds with different influences and histories and their behaviour was different.

Yvonne: But I'm really conscious of making sure that she [stepdaughter] would never grow up feeling that she got treated differently, you know? She... I'm always aware that they are treated exactly the same way. But I mean, as I say, it was extremely hard to actually do that.

[Interview 2: 617-620]

The tension for Yvonne extended into her parenting role with the mothering aspect not the same as with a biological child. The love for Ashley was conditional and contingent upon being appreciated, unlike the love for her

children which was unconditional. Thus the discrepancy in equity presented an interesting conundrum:

Yvonne: ... I am sort of, like his little girl, I looked after her. I'm the one that sort of does the practical things like making sure she's in the bath. You know, go and wash her, get her pyjamas on, make her tea and all that. And I sort like, I do all of that and it's daddy who still gets all the cuddles and the kisses. You know, and daddy is great, and he's fantastic you know. And even though I try to do things like just mine and Ashley's time – we'll maybe bake some buns or something – just silly trivial things. I'll go upstairs and sort out make-up for her. I guess I enjoy just doing that with Ashley and you know we'll sit and kiss and cuddle and you know, she gets plenty of love from me. But it's daddy who's, you know, who's her absolute hero really. And I think regardless of how much you do try, I think you're always going to be sort like – no, you're there. You're always just going to be there. You're not going to sort of pass this boundary.

[Interview 2:314-327]

The jealousy and resentment began to expose the cracks. The mothering role had to be worked at, it didn't come easily and it was performed to demonstrate her love and commitment to Gordon.

Yvonne: And what you do for them isn't necessarily out of unconditional love, it's out of, like, sort of, love and commitment towards your partner as well...

[Interview 2a:698-700]

But this was not reciprocated by Gordon who did not appear to know the unwritten rules.

Yvonne: And I support him fully if he tells my lads off if they've been naughty. I don't interfere. I sort of give him that support. And I felt as if he wasn't giving me that at all.

[Interview 2:410-412]

Yvonne's idealised notion of a happy family life was thwarted, which created a sense of powerlessness for her and began to make her feel resentful of how much she contributed to parenting her stepchildren for little reward. The parenting issues, particularly Ashley's difficult behaviour became the focus for

Yvonne's frustration, resentment and anger with Gordon's impotence in not dealing with the issues only exacerbating the situation. A battle for power and control ensued between Yvonne and Ashley. Yvonne recounted a story of not being able to sit in the front of the car as Gordon was unable to persuade Ashley to move into the back.

Yvonne: ...I wanted to scream "Will you just do what you're told." And resentment. As much as I love Ashley, I felt as if I was really starting to dislike her as a person. And I could see how manipulative she really is – and I had to battle with it in my mind. "You know, she's only a child. She can't really be like that."

[Interview 2: 518-522]

The ensuing resistance from Ashley and Gordon resulted in continuous battles for power and control within the triad. The impotence and powerlessness Yvonne felt as a mother and a partner impacted on the couple relationship. The underlying problems within the couple relationship of not only power and control issues, but also poor communication, emotional illiteracy, an inability / unwillingness to accommodate each other were transferred onto the stepchildren. This was managed for several months until there had been a crunch point where Yvonne had asked Gordon to leave as she felt the relationship was no longer viable. Despite being heavily pregnant with their child Yvonne had become frustrated with Gordon's inability to see the issues and his seeming abdication from the role of responsible parent. Yvonne tried to make sense of her dashed hopes and expectations and she attempted to negotiate a shared understanding in order to manage the reality of the situation.

Yvonne: And I also sat and explained to him [Gordon] how much power she [Ashley] really had over a lot of us because we were allowing her to have that much power, you know? And I don't think he could see anything bad really. Not that his daughter is bad – I'm not saying that – but he couldn't see anything at all wrong. He thought the situation sort of lay with me. Sort of constantly having a go and he couldn't see how things were on my side. You know?

[Interview 2:654-660]

The crisis had enabled some communication and negotiation and temporarily



galvanised both parents into action. Gordon had highlighted to Yvonne some key areas where her shortcomings as a parent lay. This had been enlightening for Yvonne who had previously thought of herself and her parenting as good. However, she acquiesced and accepted that there was truth in Gordon's points. This working together had been refreshing and helpful and enabled them to live as a family for a short while. However, despite a temporary reprieve with Gordon seemingly adhering to Yvonne's parenting style with his daughter, the situation soon reverted to the previous model of pulling apart rather than compromise and the relationship ended. At the time of the second interview, Yvonne had reflected on her experiences and had arrived at some realisation that the tensions in the stepfamily were rooted in the couple relationship and their inability to manage the differences.

Yvonne: That was the most frustrating and annoying thing. To the extent where I really resented his daughter. But, looking back now, it was nothing to do with his daughter. It was to do with the way that he was raising her in the way that he was totally divided against me. He was going to do this to his daughter regardless of what I'd done to my children. We're totally different. You know, parent skills. Totally different opposites. And we couldn't get together and, sort of, say, "Well, this is the way forward." It just didn't ever happen.

[Interview 2a:158-165]

The shifting and troublesome, yet normal dynamics within stepfamily life and parenting practices had been too complex for the parents to manage. Their poor communication, emotional illiteracy and general couple relationship problems had been manifested through the stepchildren's behaviour problems. Restricted or closed communication systems are a common feature in low income families where 'tough terms' were exactly that as there may well be no other vocabulary available (Simpson 1999:48). Moreover, Yvonne and Gordon's problems or causes of relationship problems are commonly reported (Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010:29) and act as a smoke screen concealing more fundamental problems in the couple

relationship<sup>41</sup>. Simultaneously negotiating stepparent-stepchild relationships whilst developing a couple relationship isn't easy (Coleman *et al* 2001). Whilst the following was written with a focus on first time parents I would suggest that it also applies to a stepfamily, but is magnified many times:

Children make a difference to the partnerships between their parents that can strengthen both the partnership and the adults within it. The parental couple introduces a difference into the lives of children that can encourage their growth as secure and autonomous social beings. However, none of this is guaranteed. There are intrinsic difficulties in holding together partnering and parenting relationships in some kind of creative juxtaposition. This is because the intrusion – for that is how it may at first be experienced – of a third party has destructive as well as creative potential. Third parties challenge assumptions of exclusivity and proprietorship in relationships, they may threaten isolation and evoke powerful feelings of envy, jealousy and rage.

(Clulow 1996:183)

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Yvonne and Gordon's couple dyad was under pressure as it had to manage different triangular relationships. Yvonne and Gordon's crisis or crunch time had been the catalyst for change and adaptation into a jointly constructed more accommodating couple relationship, but despite attempts they had been unable to manage the transition, and so the stepchildren had become the scapegoats for the couple's relationship problems. The need to maintain good parent-child relationships as well as a healthy couple relationship is central to good stepfamily development and continuity, but unfortunately in my study the couples appeared to focus on the children at the expense of their couple relationship<sup>42</sup>.

Yvonne: It's not until you're actually in that situation where you're absolutely screaming because of how bad it is, that support – you

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<sup>41</sup> As a health visitor I had completed both the One Plus One 'Brief Encounters' relationship intervention programme and the 'train the trainers' course. I frequently found that a child's behaviour was the presenting problem in families where the couple relationship was the central problem.

<sup>42</sup> It is interesting to note that in the focus groups for the **FAMILYWISE** book on stepfamilies, the parents [in stepfamilies] similarly did not highlight the importance of 'couple time'. Rather the focus was on the children's needs.

do need support. You know, you do need somebody sort of saying, "Yeah, it's okay for you to feel that way. Yes, it's perfectly natural. Yes, this, that and the other." You know, there is a way out of it. You know, you don't have to split up. You can work together. You can sort the situation and this problem out.

[Interview  
2a:558-564]

As such not only relationships with stepchildren, but also the couple relationship can best be described as a 'fragile resiliency'. The couples' perceptions and experiences suggested that the normal crunch points within the couple relationship were not managed well which threatened the stability of the relationship. The main contributing factors appeared to stem from two key relationships, the stepmother-stepchild relationship and its inter-relationship with the couple relationship. The catalyst for disharmony was usually the parenting issues, with the resulting tensions providing a destabilising force. In seven families the fragility of the stepfamily was evident with cracks apparent, with the remaining three seemingly resilient. There did not appear to be a correlation with the length of time the stepfamily had been established. Despite the obviously profound issues affecting family harmony, there appeared to be 'silent voices' within the couple relationship, with either one or both individuals doing little to enable better communication and thus better relationships.

## **6.7 SILENT VOICES**

### **Introduction**

The oxymoron 'silent voices'<sup>43</sup> encapsulates a contradiction in terms and aids an understanding of what was happening within the couples' relationships. The couples' current relationship was an opportunity to succeed this time – to get it right, not to have another failure, but the challenges of life impacting the

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<sup>43</sup> I originally thought that I had coined this phrase and later found that it had been used by Mauthner (1998) whose work I had read many years earlier.

stepfamily were very difficult at times. As discussed above there were pressures from significant others as in the biological family [parents and children], the stepfamily [step-parents and stepchildren] and the extended families [biological and step]. These significant others were either unilaterally, or more often combining, consciously or subconsciously in affecting the dynamics of the relationships within the stepfamily which inevitably impacted on the couple relationship. Whether the couple managed these intrusions depended to a large extent on their communication skills and emotional literacy.

## **6.8 Internal couple dynamics and resources**

As evidenced above, the tensions between non-resident parents needing and wanting to co-parent or parallel parent their children brought with it the challenges of managing ex-partners. Whilst new partners appeared generally supportive, ensuing resentments often accumulated and if not addressed caused severe disruption and dysfunction within the couple relationship. For Leanne and Tim, a strong feature of their relationship was the ex-partner's psychological presence in their relationship together with the stepson's difficult behaviour and Leanne's frustration with wanting to protect her own progeny (Coleman *et al* 2001).

### **Leanne's story:**

Leanne was a young mother who presented as lacking confidence. She had left home at a young age and had a poor relationship with her mother. Leanne had moved in with Tim, who already had a seven year old son Troy, to Maddy. Leanne and Tim had two children together, Tristan four and Titania eighteen months old. Maddy was quite an intrusive presence in Leanne and Tim's relationship and they co-parented Troy at least 50% of the time. Tristan had recently started at the same school as Troy attended and so Leanne saw her stepson and Maddy almost every day. Leanne didn't find this easy as Troy frequently asked if he could stay at their house when he wasn't due to. At times during the interview Leanne presented as a child herself as

demonstrated below:

Leanne: I don't know, he [Troy] tries to blame everything on Tristan. And I won't have it. You know, if that's because Tristan's mine. And sometimes it is, but sometimes it's different. Because if Troy hits and like, really, really hurts Tristan and I'm really mad because he's hurt him, and I'll not speak to him for ages for, like, doing it. And I'm thinking, "Like, go to bed and sit there." I would do the same with Tristan though, as well. If Tristan... But it's just because Troy is a drama queen. He screams and he screams. And Tristan just has a little cry and that's it. He shuts up. Tim thinks I've tried to murder Troy or something – I've tried to kill him. But I haven't. I've just done the same – put him on the bed. And sometimes I've found that Troy tries to tell lies to try and get me into trouble as well. I've heard him doing it. And I've went really off it because I... He's been sitting there and he's been saying, "Leanne says I can't do this and that's why I'm crying." Or, "She's taken this off me and I haven't done nothing."

[Interview 10:611-626]

Observing Leanne's frustration the biological issue of wanting to protect one's own progeny might help explain her response (Coleman *et al* 2001). But her parenting response to her stepson, also founded on her biological parenting experiences, was not effective. Leanne had struggled for some time to manage her stepson's behaviour whilst simultaneously trying to cope with anxiety over her daughter, who had undergone a series of operations for cardiac problems and was showing indications of developmental delay. Moreover, Leanne was trying to balance and manage the need for Tim to see his son with what she felt was the manipulative behaviour of Tim's ex-partner Maddy, 'dumping' Troy whilst she developed a new couple relationship. Due to Leanne's insecurities Maddy was also a 'threat' for Leanne.

Leanne: To be honest they [Tim and Maddy] don't have much contact. I mean, I'm the one who does all the contact and stuff. Just purely because he's never been able to talk to her without arguing. Like, she always tries to argue. I mean she's come to the school sometimes trying to argue with him. In front of Troy. So he just, like, tries to... I mean, he will speak to her if he needed to.

Ann: How do you find that? That responsibility of being in the middle – the go-between, really? Aren't you? Talking...

Leanne: I'd rather it was like that because she was trying to split us up and everything.

Ann: She was trying to split you up?

Leanne: She was ringing him up. She did used to have his mobile number and she was ringing him up all the time. Like, through the night and everything. So I said, "Right then, I'll sort it all out." And we nearly broke up loads of times because of her.

[Interview 10:122-136]

Not surprisingly these tensions put pressure on the couple relationship, but the focus on the children was easier.

Leanne: Because Tim [partner] says that we argue over the kids, but when I sit and think it's only on a weekend or when Troy [stepson] is here. And like I said before, I'm not saying it's all Troy, but that's when all the arguments, the friction, the shouting, the crying, everything starts.

Ann: And what has Tim said about it happening on those weekends?

Leanne: I honestly haven't spoken about it. Because he'll say that it's not just Troy, and I know it's not just Troy, but... It's when he's here. And I think those two [son and stepson] just don't get on. It's like everyone looks if I'm shouting at him [Troy, stepson]. I feel like they don't notice if I shout at Tristan [biological son], but they notice if I shout at Troy.

[Interview 10: 689-700]

Leanne's 'internal voices'<sup>44</sup> of disquiet about the couple relationship weren't articulated to Tim, rather they remained unspoken words, thus rendering 'silent voices' within the couple relationship. Leanne's position was particularly fragile as she didn't have much contact with her mother and was reliant on Tim's mother to help with the children. Her vulnerability is transparent:

Leanne:... I mean I remember once when I was pregnant with Titania and me and Tim were just arguing all the time. And we all sat down – like me, Tim, his mam and his sister. And his mam and

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<sup>44</sup> 'Internal voices' refer to those inner conversations one has with oneself.

sister were just saying to me all these things – that I treat him [Troy] different, Troy knows it, it's your fault why he's like this. And I was like, "I don't know how it's my fault like."

[Interview 10:877-882]

And later...

Leanne: ...the family do carry on saying that I'm the wicked stepmother.

[Interview 10:929]

Whilst Leanne attempted to laugh at this comment her resilience was fragile. Despite her perseverance with coping with Troy's behaviour there was also a palpable resentment that she didn't feel able to voice her disquiet. Again, the culture of the family in the north east is one of close-knit units and strong affiliation. The extended family is an important aspect of family life, particularly in terms of help with caring for children.

Leanne: Because I think it's hard to, like, be able to talk to somebody because you're afraid they're going to go and tell people. And obviously you don't, you've got all this to say but you don't want to... You don't want anyone else to know.

[Interview 10:1296-1299]

Rather than supporting, the extended family were eroding Leanne's confidence, thus again affecting the dynamics within the couple relationship, which again rendered silent voices. The feeling of being observed by the extended family was viewed by Leanne as a strong influence in feeling that she was at fault with the parenting issues she was struggling to cope with. Leanne was seen to be the cause of Troy's difficult behaviour by her 'in-laws' and her partner.

Similar issues have been confirmed by other commentators (Clulow 1993:15; Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010:122). Susie also reported that her issues as a stepmother were not heard by her 'in-laws'.

**Susie's story continued:**

Susie's sister-in-law, missed, or chose to avoid, the issue of the stepfamily

and instead focused on the issue of teenagers in general.

Susie:... and there was nowhere to go with this feeling of this isn't working out. You know and this isn't OK. The kids are... I'm not dealing with it very well and really not quite sure where to go with this teenager who is... And I remember phoning up his [Pete, husband] sister and saying, you know I'm not really... I think it is because I'm not his mum and he's really lashing out at me. And I remember her saying it's because, you know, teenage years. It's just the teenage angst. It will be nothing to do with that.

[Interview 4:332-339]

Susie's reticence in voicing her parenting support needs with Pete's extended family was also due to her feeling that they were not recognised as a real family.

Susie: You know, with me being here and looking after the boys. I don't think it was... I mean I don't think his family think that it's very real, [to Pete] do they? They haven't thought that. Sandra [sister-in-law] hasn't thought it's very real. Her family is very real – it's the husband, wife and the children. And we weren't... We just don't fit that at all.

[Interview 4: 1368-1372]

These responses all contributed to a sense of isolation, of being seen as different and as outsiders and of a feeling of discomfort in voicing concerns with parenting issues within the family. Whether couples' relationships could withstand the pressures of significant others depended on the solidity of their relationship and their resources. For Leanne and Tim it was a fragile balancing act.

**Leanne's story continued:**

Leanne: Because for Tim they're all his children. But he doesn't understand because they're all his children, if you know what I mean. But they're not all my children. Like Troy isn't mine and there's nothing I can do about that, so... But he doesn't... I said, "Well what would you feel like if it was the other way around?" "I would treat a kid exactly the same as my own." I said, "You don't know that." I said, "It's hard." Because you feel so much love for your own children but you still feel love for, like, the other one as well. But it's not as much.



As illustrated above some parents like Yvonne used more intricate, elaborate and sensitive approaches in an attempt to get their voices heard, but it was an emotional tightrope. Partner insecurity within the stepfamily couple relationship is particularly high (Pacey 2005). Whilst many studies have demonstrated the effects of stepfamily formation impacting on children, there has been a paucity of research on the interconnectedness of stepfamily breakdown with couple relationships and issues with stepchildren. Yet what is known is that dissolution of a reformed family is more common and happens more quickly than a biological family (Haskey 1996). The quality of the couple relationship is key as to whether it can withstand the complexities of parenting in stepfamilies and the dynamic processes involved in couple relationships need to be understood. The findings from Walker *et al's* (2010) study confirmed findings from other studies and contributed to an informed evidence base of better understanding of couple issues. Key issues that emerged (Walker *et al* 2010:93), enable a better understanding of what was potentially occurring with the parents in my study, which include:

- a lack of clarity between partners about their expectations of the relationship and family life
- consequent disappointment when life did not live up to expectations
- understanding, managing and being flexible were important indicators for couples who needed to adapt at key transitional stages
- protected couple time for open, honest communication
- the need to resolve tensions and conflict rather than ignore them

I would suggest that while the above are necessary for happy and fulfilling healthy couple relationships, actually operationalising them could be difficult for many couples and particularly the marginalised couples in my study. That is not to suggest defeatism, rather a realistic and pragmatic appraisal of key factors hindering them. Economic and emotional issues particularly appeared to play a large part in my study. Moreover, poor communication, power and control issues between the couple are barriers to relationship fulfilment and

have been found to be common in couples' relationship support (Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010:33; Walker *et al* 2010:46). Whether Leanne chose not to verbalise the issues that mattered as she was a conflict avoider, or didn't have the skills and confidence to verbalise them or was afraid of losing Tim's emotional and economic security were all possibilities. However, despite the problems in my study, Walker *et al*'s (2010:49) study discovered that over 87% of parents [separated, planning to separate or still together] indicated that they did not argue about stepchildren. The latter is interesting and begins to give potential clues as to the problem of 'silent voices'.

Managing troublesome times requires a certain amount of confidence and resiliency which not only has the potential to affect the couple relationship, but also the parent / child relationship and general stepfamily dynamics. Emotional illiteracy, immaturity, sensitivity, compromise, generosity (Gorrell Barnes *et al* 1998) may be issues for some couples who do not have the skills, or are afraid to confront and discuss the issues. Mismanagement was disabling for everybody and hindered positive stepfamily wellbeing and contributed to fragile resiliencies, ultimately obstructing the couple from seeing and understanding what was actually going on within their relationship. What appeared to happen was that the more tangible issues, particularly troublesome parenting issues and non-resident parents interference, became the acceptable focus for couple disharmony, rather than the more difficult and sensitive intricacies of the couple relationship. Whilst it is difficult to assess conflict avoidance I would suggest that in my study it definitely played a part. The risk of speaking out was too dangerous. It was difficult enough to raise sensitive and delicate issues about the stepchildren. Not liking a stepchild or viewing the child as troublesome was a delicate area and had to be handled carefully. Adapting Bernstein's (2006) 'child of divorce' paradigm<sup>45</sup> to the parents in my study enables a clearer understanding. For example, everybody has problems with 'the kids', it is expected, especially in stepfamilies where relationships between stepparents and stepchildren have

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<sup>45</sup> Bernstein (2006) referred to the 'child of divorce' model as a self-fulfilling prophecy to explain the negative outcomes for some children when their parents post divorce communication is acrimonious.

been found to be the most challenging (Hetherington and Clingempeel 1992). The script is pre-written and instituting a 'child of divorce' paradigm fits neatly, but unfortunately this becomes 'the building blocks for constructing limiting personal narratives' (Bernstein 2006:68). The latter is a crucial point. It was much easier to blame the children than think the un-thinkable, that is that there were problems in the couple relationship. Thus the internal voices one has with oneself are better remaining silent as in silent voices. Leanne's silent voices were not only operationalised with her partner, but also, and due to her partner's family. However, other possibilities for Leanne, Becci, Kate and to some extent Yvonne's silent voices might well be due to other issues.

As highlighted above some of the parents in my study lacked confidence and self-esteem was low. Although none of the parents spoke about sexual conflicts, it is common for them to be mirrored in insecurities and anxieties about stepfamily life (Pacey 2005). Conflict during the day can result in 'asexuality at night' (Clulow 1996:21) in any form of intimate relationship. The women's fear of losing a partner and their emotional and economic security may well have been a strong motivating factor in not communicating. Whilst conflict is normal it is how it is managed and whether the couple have the skills, competence and confidence to manage the issues that are important (Clulow 1996:20). Certainly the majority of parents in my study did not appear to resolve underlying tensions within their couple relationship which enabled escalation, as with Yvonne and Gordon.

Clearly the nature of couple relationships is multi-dimensional. The development of a couple relationship has been compared to the different developmental stages which a child passes through, with underlying issues of nurturance, power, independence and autonomy being addressed [or not] by the couple (Clulow 2001). An understanding of the developmental stages that the couple relationship passes through aids our understanding of what might have been happening with the parents in my study. Whilst there are several different models of the different stages of couple relationships they generally have the following stages in common (Kovacs 1983:183-210)

**Romance** is when the couple fall in love and are besotted with each other. Information gathering is prominent with similarities emphasised and differences minimised. Feelings of stability and shared expectations are common which enables individuals to make a commitment to each other.

**Reality** is when the complex, but normal issues of life begin to intrude. The couple attempt to compromise, accommodate difference and adopt many different strategies in an effort to maintain harmony. This may involve conflict avoidance, conscious and unconscious denial, distortion and lying. One partner may want to coerce the other back into the romance stage of 'oneness'. However, the need to recognise the movement from dependence on the other partner to independence as normal, rather than the relationship being over is important.

**Power struggles** involving conflict, power and control are common elements in this stage when the dynamics of dependency versus independence are being played out. The need to be attached and the need to be separate from each other, encompassing fears of loss or rejection are common. Conflict is normal, but the crucial point is whether it is managed effectively.

**Finding oneself** is a time of personal growth when individuals realise that the other partner can't fulfil all their needs and that they must find their own fulfilment. The management of this stage is important as some people will leave the relationship, but if communication and emotional literacy are present this is the time for real relationship development and commitment.

**Reconciliation** is based on the understanding that the need for independence is normal and not threatening. Renunciation, sacrifice and tolerance / understanding of disillusion may be necessary. The individuals realise they are fully accepted and accepting. The issues have changed from a basis in nurturance, power and independence to the need for intimacy between separate individuals.

***Mutual respect and love*** indicates the couple have moved from being in love to loving each other, that is movement through dependence to independence and finally to interdependence. There is mutual acceptance, increased autonomy, better and more direct communication and more collaboration and intimacy.

The stages ideally progress in an orderly, systematic and predictable manner over time (Kovacs 1983), with the recycling of the stages when crises and transitions occur. Other commentators have posited that there are two distinct groups of couples, those with a developmental perspective and those with a non-developmental perspective (Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010:117-119). The former have a more realistic view based on change being a normal aspect of relationships, where one can learn about oneself and one's partner and relationships in general. This group invest in their relationship and work at it, overcoming difficulties (Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010:117-119). I would suggest that this group have an internal locus of control, with good self esteem and confidence, something that was absent for some of the parents in my study, who using Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield's (2010) definition had a non-developmental perspective. Their locus of control was external rendering them more insecure and unwilling to confront the issues, thus subjugating their own needs. It is clear that couple relationships can be both dynamic and troublesome which is normal. However, the dissonance between the troublesome private lives lived by the parents and the public stories of happy families they demonstrated could be difficult for some of them to reconcile and manage, thus adding to the tension in an already fraught and stressful situation.

Clearly, communication is central to healthy couple relationships. Most couples' relationship programmes focus on building and further developing communication skills. Yet despite the higher level of breakdown amongst parents in stepfamilies there has been little research on their communication patterns (Halford, Nicholson and Sanders 2007). Interesting findings emerged from an Australian study exploring communication in stepfamily and first time marrying couples (Halford, Nicholson and Sanders 2007). Using

self report measures and observation measures of couple communication on a topic on which they had disagreed, stepfamily couples demonstrated less positive discussions than first time couples, but surprisingly also had much lower rates of negative communication. Furthermore, stepfamily couples were more likely to withdraw from couple discussion. Halford, Nicholson and Sanders (2007) posited that low rates of positive discussion, low negativity and high withdrawal might reflect avoidance of difficult problem issues. Moreover, it was suggested that the experience of previous stressful and destructive conflict of divorce / separation issues might cause the avoidance of sensitive stepfamily issues (Halford, Nicholson and Sanders 2007). However, the sample was recruited through media adverts for participation in a couples' relationship education programme, which as the authors suggested could imply educated couples less satisfied with their relationship than some of the underrepresented minority groups (Halford, Nicholson and Sanders 2007). In spite of this it does suggest that stepfamily couples might be working hard to avoid conflict and thus reduce their negative communication, thereby hindering the necessary development of much needed communication skills for healthy discussion, and instead rendering silent voices.

## **6.9 Silent voices: stories lived and stories told**

Exploring the above issues through the lens of systemic family therapy reveals further dimensions of what might be happening within the couple relationship and enables a more in depth understanding of the silent voices. Broadly, 'people are meaning-making creatures' (Bernstein 2006). Communication is used to make meaning and we need to manage the meanings in our social worlds in order to understand and make sense of them and live our lives with dignity and respect (Pearce Associates 1999:7). We are both the product and we produce the communication by which we live (Pearce Associates 1999:11). However, we do not manage our meanings in isolation, rather communication enables us to manage our meanings in coordination with other people (Pearce Associates 1999:7). Patterns of

communication become institutionalised not only between families, friends, communities and organisations, but also between couples (Barnett Pearce and Pearce 1998:1). Utilising concepts of social constructionism Pearce developed the theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning [CMM] (Pearce 1976). CMM is a communication theory that fits neatly with my ontological perspective and within an interpretivist paradigm as it helps to make sense of our social world and our place in it (Pearce Associates 1999:7; Barnett Pearce and Pearce 1998). Fundamentally, CMM is a process that focuses on patterns of communication in which we take part and explores the complexity of meanings in specific situations using a variety of models that help identify 'untold stories' (Barnett Pearce 2007:96). CMM is built on the following key concepts:

**Coordination** is the process in conversation in which we co-construct our 'stories lived', which are the co-constructed stories that are enacted in coordination with one another, and 'stories told' which are the stories used to make meaning of our lives. In order for this to work we act in such a way that we draw out the episodes that we want or need and then exclude the episodes that we hate or fear. Moreover, coordination is the way we fit our actions into those of other people to produce patterns which we might not necessarily be in agreement with, or indeed be patterns that we like or want, but we still do it. For example, drawing from Leanne's account above I would suggest that her 'stories lived' focused on her anxieties and vulnerabilities of her couple relationship. However, her focus in 'stories told' was on her stepson's difficult behaviour, the non-resident mother's unreasonable expectations and finally the lack of support from her 'in-laws'. Yet she enabled, probably through her anxiety, her in-laws to use her problems with her stepson as a smokescreen to build a picture of herself as a victim.

**The management of meaning or coherence** is the process whereby we tell ourselves and others stories in order to interpret the world around us. As we tell stories about ourselves, individually and collectively we gain coherence. We tell ourselves stories that are not only coherent with each other, but are consistent enough with the episodes in which we live to make them

understandable. As a result a powerful driver for the development of our relationships is the inherent tension between our stories lived and our stories told. This tension is the central focus in couple relationships as whilst it is the source of dynamic times, it also produces troublesome times. If the gap between the stories lived and the stories told becomes too big, action has to be taken. We either re-author our stories or change our actions (Barnett Pearce 2007:211). Moreover, the tension between stories lived and stories told is affected by the way in which we tell the story, that is the 'storytelling' is a mediator of the tension between the two (Barnett Pearce 2007:231). So, for example the different ways in which our story telling helps us to make meaning of our lives has different consequences. If we tell stories that treat reality as a fixed concept so that we present the stories as correct descriptions of a static and unchanging reality then there is a discrepancy. In contrast, if reality is fluid there will be inconsistencies between our stories lived and our stories told due to the multiple realities of our social worlds. As such the creative power of language is important in that it creates one image of reality, and inhibits other realities. That is, in interpreting one reality – our stories told, we prevent ourselves from understanding other possible realities – our stories lived.

One particular framework that systemic therapists use as a heuristic<sup>46</sup> is the LUUUUTT<sup>47</sup> model. The acronym is explained in the model below and demonstrates the complexities of storytelling (Barnett Pearce 2007:210)<sup>48</sup>. It

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<sup>46</sup> A heuristic meaning that it serves to find out or discover something.

<sup>47</sup> The LUUUUTT model originally coined by Barnett Pearce and Pearce (1998) and then adapted to LUUUUTT with 'untellable stories' added (Fisher-Yoshida and Wasserman 2004).

<sup>48</sup> An interesting similar model by Czarniawska (2004:40) examined the narratives that structured relationships in organizations and found significant differences between work stories and organizational stories. I include it as the analogy aids understanding of what happens in couple relationships. Work stories were the messy, complex, often unfinished and unpolished stories told in part, often assuming the tacit knowledge of the listener. In contrast the organizational stories were organised, polished presentations often with elements of political / commercial interest. The work stories gave a better description and understanding than the organizational story. The former indicated that an organization was messy and included lots of different voices. In contrast the organizational story suggested

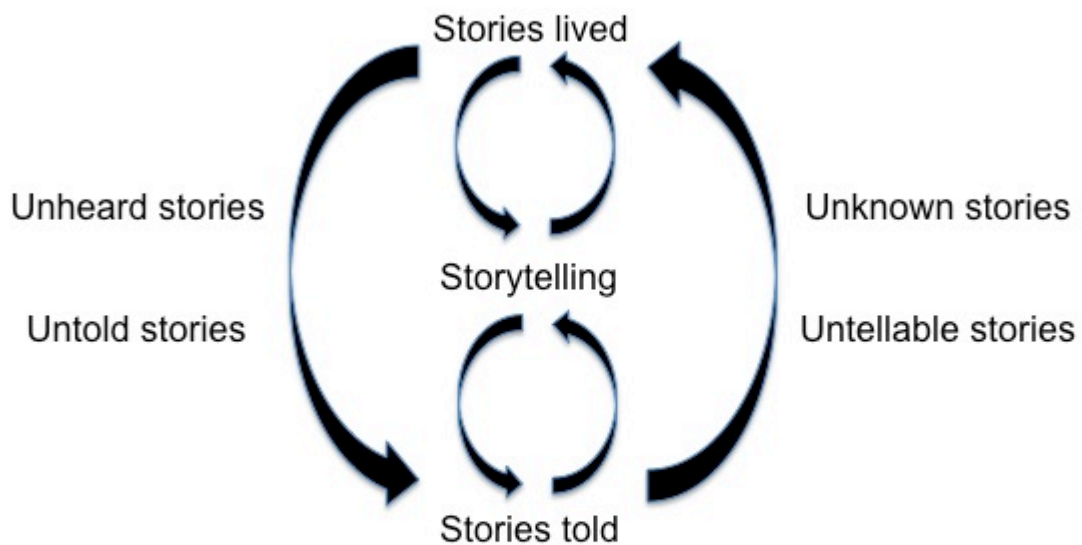


is a continually reflexive loop rather than a linear process (Pearce Associates 1999:68).

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that people were working together in a group to give a consensus story as in a mission statement. Put together there was an obvious tension.

Figure 11. The LUUUUTT model



1. Stories **L**ived are the stories that we co-construct with others.
2. **U**nknown stories are the stories we are not [currently] able to tell.
3. **U**ntold stories are what we could tell, but choose not to [at least to some people].
4. **U**nheard stories have been told, but not to the important people that matter.
5. **U**ntellable stories are too difficult to tell to anyone.
6. Stories **T**old are the explanations that we use in conversations to make sense of the stories lived. Whilst we feel we ought to align the two, they can't be identical and consequently the gap or the tension between the two 'provides the dynamic for much of our lives' (Pearce Associates 1999:58).
7. Story **T**elling is the central feature of the model in that it is about how the story is told, that is in such a way as to make things that have happened in our lives coherent, rather than the content as in the other stages. The manner of the storytelling is important as it enables certain features, for example to be a victim or to be a hero. Furthermore, we rarely tell the whole story or all the stories (Barnett Pearce 2007:228).

Applying the model to the parents' accounts demonstrates more insightful, complex influences of the realities of their 'stories told', particularly the reality of the couple relationship which was simultaneously at play with the 'stories lived' affecting the dynamics between the couple. The tension or the dissonance between the two stories was the potential trigger for the fragile resiliencies and the silent voices within the couple relationship. Exploring Yvonne's story [below] through the LUUUUTT model in tandem with the stages of couple relationships model helps exemplify the issues. Furthermore, it aids an understanding of the complexity of couples' relationships and the multi-dimensional knowledge, understanding and skills needed for the relationship to survive within stepfamilies.

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Yvonne: I think when you first get together in your relationship and you're like, "Ah, I'll meet your children" and everything is lovey-dovey. I just think now, looking back, "Bloody hell." Do you know what I mean? Really you've got to seriously think about what you're doing.

[Interview 2a:268-271]

Yvonne and Gordon's co-constructed **stories lived** focused on them meeting, falling in love and while in the **romance** stage Yvonne had become pregnant with Britney. However, the **reality** of attempting to maintain the intense closeness and dependence of the early stages of the couple relationship and simultaneously develop the newly formed stepfamily together with having a baby was not sustainable. The cracks began to appear:

Yvonne: I think just like the hussle-bussle of having a new born baby. I think, sort of, he [Gordon] backed off away out of... I think it was just a case of it was too much. And then he started going out with his friends. And I think he just got a taste of freedom, really. And that's what brought the relationship down. He didn't really want to be here.

[Interview 2a:283-287]

Yvonne did not tell me these **unknown stories** until the second interview

several months later. This was perhaps because she was not ready or possibly unwilling to recognise another reality, that her couple relationship was the root cause of the problems. It was psychologically and emotionally easier to transfer the causes to the children's behaviour which were troublesome.

So, the **stories told** to me at the first interview focused on the difficulty of parenting the stepchildren, but with an acknowledgement that this was putting pressure on the couple. Yvonne focused on Gordon's children's [biological daughter and stepson from another relationship] difficult behaviour, which became the source of Yvonne's disquiet for all that was not right between Yvonne and Gordon, and together with stepfamily formation and the birth of the baby caused huge pressures.

Yvonne: But, the way I felt was that, yeah – fair enough – he's your stepson but he's nothing to me and he's coming over and doing what he wanted. Making a right mess, sort of, basically doing anything. And like, stealing from me and my family.

[Interview 2: 242-245]

The focus continued on the children, but the **untold story** was one of **power struggles** ostensibly over the children, but in reality I would suggest between Yvonne and Gordon.

Yvonne: I had voiced these [behaviour] rules, but Gordon wasn't backing me up on them whatsoever when it came to Ashley. He was with my boys. But he wasn't with his own daughter. And I found that absolutely the most annoying thing in the world.

[Interview 2: 480-483]

Yvonne's romantic image of a happy family life was crumbling. The couple relationship was not the unifying 'oneness' or stabilising force that Yvonne had hoped it would be. The only thing that the two families had in common was the baby. Again at the time of the second interview:

Yvonne: She [the baby] united the children I would say. More so than me and Gordon really. The children had, you know, a lovely baby sister. Who they all love. And that was sort of the connection

from one family to the other. But, you know, that shouldn't really have been the case. You know, the connection should have naturally been happening anyway. But it wasn't.

[Interview 2a:748-752]

Disbelief, pride, hopelessness, fear of being on her own again could all have contributed to Yvonne not voicing her real concerns. She wanted to prevent the realisation of the *lived story*. Meanwhile Gordon was wanting more independence and was *finding himself*.

Yvonne: But then it was just a case of he was wanting his life, you know? He was going out drinking. Stopping out until half past 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. You know, we had a baby together – to me that's not a committed relationship. That's him just taking the absolute Mick, do you know what I mean?

[Interview 2a:206-210]

The tension between the *stories lived* and the *stories told* became too great for Yvonne and chaos ensued. Yvonne attempted various strategies in order to regain her vision of a committed relationship and happy family life. The crunch point came with Yvonne telling Gordon the *unheard stories* – she asked him to leave. The suggestion of separation / divorce is a common attempt to bring the more independent partner back into the position of the early relationship (Kovacs 1983: 146).

Yvonne: To the point where I had to ask Gordon to leave because the situation was really in a terrible way, really. And we sat down and we had a good talk. And I think that's what we needed really, at the end of the day. But I mean this is like months of building up to this. Where we could have done with the support and somewhere to go and say, "Look, we're at loggerheads here. We can't actually move forward because of the situation and my situation." But we sat this one day, as I say on the morning, I had asked him to leave, and we had a really good talk in the afternoon. And things have improved greatly since that chat that we had.

[Interview 2: 61-70]

There was an attempt at *reconciliation* which brought a temporary reprieve.

Ann: Can I ask how you feel that has affected your relationship as a couple? That, heart to heart, that...

Yvonne: It's definitely brought us a lot closer together. I feel happier now, sort of, if I say no to his daughter, she still goes up to him and says... She ignores the fact that I've said no and she goes up to see daddy. But Gordon doesn't say yes to her now. He says, "Yvonne said no." He gives me that support and I feel now as if we're having a relationship. I feel as if there is a future for us.

[Interview 2: 439-446]

However, when **untold stories** are finally told and developed to the people that matter 'the stories powerfully affect the episodes that occur' (Barnett Pearce 2007:213). Sadly **mutual respect and love** were not attained:

Yvonne: I butted him out, Ann. I kicked him out. I'd had enough by then. Because of just the abuse and the crap that was coming along with him was dragging me down. It was dragging my children down. And I gave him what for, you know.

Yvonne: I do think you still have to have that basic love and commitment towards each other in order for everything to pan out.

Ann: So are you saying it was perhaps your couple relationship that was floundering a bit and not just the children's behaviour?

Yvonne: Definitely.

[Interview 2a:944-952]

Yvonne's **story telling** throughout focused on her respectability and good moral character and doing the right thing for her children. She did not present as a victim in pursuit of sympathy, rather a heroine in pursuit of admiration, that is she had got through in spite of the vicissitudes of life. Both Yvonne's **stories told** and her **story telling** were parts of her creation of her multiple realities within the social world in which she lived (Pearce and Pearce 1998:10). However, despite Yvonne's apparent insight into her couple relationship, her story fundamentally remained one of parenting pressures in stepfamily life causing couple relationship problems, rather than problems within the couple relationship itself. Similar findings have emerged from other studies (Walker *et al* 2010:72), which found that both parents and step-parents felt that support should be focused on the children and nurturing the new family.

## 6.10 Conclusion

Unpacking the fragile resiliencies amongst the parents begins to expose vulnerabilities, particularly amongst the mothers. A key issue appeared to be the couple relationship, but this was not articulated, rather the 'child of divorce' (Bernstein 2006) discourse was the focus. Exploring the theory of couple relationship development alongside the theory of how people coordinate meanings and the multiple realities in their lives aids an understanding of what might be happening in the couple relationships, which inevitably impacted the stepfamily dynamics and development. The 'stories lived' were not told [silent voices] apart from a fleeting insight from Yvonne. Whether this was because they were too difficult to tell in emotional literacy terms, or whether it was due to concern from the resulting fallout is unknown. However, what is known is that the 'stories told' were more acceptable, but the dissonance between the two doubtless impacted on their fragile resiliencies.

While the theoretical framework in this chapter resides in the couple relationship and its interrelatedness with how the parents managed the multiple realities in their lives [stories lived and stories told], it is difficult to separate out from the intrinsic issue of marginalisation. Knowing that the repercussions of couple disharmony could potentially end in separation, with loss of economic and emotional security, may well have been a strong driver influencing the denial or diminution of problems in the relationship, both to self and others. Otherwise their efforts to appear not only respectable, but more importantly moral would be thwarted. The following chapter explores the parents need to display morality and the ramifications of this on their [non]articulacy or 'silent voices' of their parenting support needs.

## CHAPTER 7

# INTIMATIONS OF [IM]MORALITY AND PARENTING SUPPORT NEEDS

### 7.1 Introduction

Thus far respectability has played an important role in attempting to understand marginalised stepfamilies parenting practices, roles, identities, resiliencies and silent voices. However, interconnected and of a higher domain than respectability was morality or a strong moral code, which was a powerful influence in the parents' lives. Other commentators on stepfamily life have described similar findings (Smart and Neale 1999; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2000; 2003). Presenting as a moral person was central to the parents' accounts with intrinsic factors denoting altruism, goodness and above all good parenting. It was the mothers particularly who gave moral accounts, referencing their parenting based on a firm moral code with children's needs paramount. Unravelling the influences behind this aids some understanding of the parents' unwillingness to articulate their parenting support needs.

### 7.2 Creating moral reputations

#### **Yvonne's story continued:**

Obvious complications arose for Yvonne in conveying a moral self and helps an understanding of why her accounts were full of exemplars of moral behaviour.

Yvonne: My sons are to my two previous marriages, so she's like my third sort of child, you know? With three different dads. I'm terrible me. But you know, how certain circumstances create ...

[Interview 2:17-19]



Yvonne clearly sets out her [im]moral baseline and in the second interview:

Yvonne: I think it's been, you know, I think really to be honest with you, Ann, the reason why I stuck so long in my relationship with Gordon is the stigma attached, do you know what I mean? To like, "Oh, she's on her own – with three kids to three different men." It sounds absolutely terrible – but I mean I was married to two of them. And Abby was an accident thankfully.

[Interview 2a:410-415]

Yvonne's intimation that being in a stepfamily was preferable to that of being a lone parent is interesting and gives not only more insight into why there were silent voices, but also why the stepfamilies presented as biological families. Having a partner gave a semblance of normality and morality which could not be claimed as a lone parent.

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Yvonne had to work harder than many to present within a normative moral framework.

Yvonne: He's eleven, Kit [older son]. And he's extremely intelligent. We have, like, our Catholic faith. We go to church on a Saturday. I teach my kids right from wrong. Like, the way Ali [younger son] is going on with the kids is pinching dust caps off people's cars. Now, my son [Ali] was caught with somebody stealing off an old man's car. And my eldest then told me what went on. I frogmarched Ali around there, and knocked on the guy's door, I made Ali apologise and I said, "He'll wash your car for you as punishment. I live at number 102 – if you see my child doing anything and you come and tell me." And he turned around two days later when he saw me in the street and he went, "When I saw you at my door I was expecting you to have an argument with me for telling your child off." And I was like, I couldn't believe – do you know what I mean? And he couldn't believe that I had actually gone around there and made Ali apologise and I was prepared to make Ali do his punishment and wash the poor old guy's car. Even though Ali hadn't actually stolen them. I am the type of person that will do that and to be, just, sort of judged – as you say – it is really, sort of, frustrating because my children haven't been dragged up, you know? They've had the best of what I could give them, not monetary things but, you know, attention.

[Interview 2a: 497-515]

Again, a binary opposition is presented – there cannot be morality without immorality and so in reparation for her son’s misdemeanours, Yvonne takes the morally correct action. While not exactly exonerating him, she and by implication her family, are seen to be good, respectable people. The emphasis on good behaviour as in attending church and her son being intelligent aid the building of Yvonne’s moral reputation.

### **External influences: societal, institutional and legal**

The parents were well aware that external others and occasionally significant others viewed their families as not as good as other [biological] families, and all recounted incidents where they had experienced stigmatisation with a ‘whiff’ of moral deviance. As a result not only new identities were constructed, but also new reputations in order to convey morality. As if in deference to this, all the parents made reference to external bodies who viewed them discursively with intimations of immorality due to their stepfamily status. The negative intimations or ‘vibes’ emanated from several different external influences as Tracy indicates.

Patrick and Tracy’s story continued:

Tracy: If they [people outside the family] ask me how many kids I’ve got I don’t say, “Well, I’ve got three boys of my own and I’ve got four stepchildren.” I say, “I’ve got seven children.” And then if I know them and we get into the subject I will tell them yes, that they are not all mine.

[Interview 5:1022-1025]

Most of the parents did not mention their stepfamily status, as Paul said: ‘I don’t think people talk about it’ [Interview 8:1552]. There was a feeling amongst the parents that the stepfamily generally wasn’t spoken about in positive terms, as they perceived that they would be viewed or judged differently to the normal biological family. However, reality intervened again as an important distinction to the normal family was parents often having

different surnames to the children. As demonstrated with Barbara and Paul [above] some coped with this in different ways, and for some there was a feeling of shock, indignation and injustice, whilst for others like Kate and Tom there was resignation.

**Kate and Tom's story continued:**

Kate had married her former partner who made tokenistic gestures at seeing the children and still had parental responsibility. Kate felt that it was impossible to acquire parental responsibility for Tom with her ex-husbands' consent, or by applying to Court for a Residence Order, which was a tortuous process.

Kate: And I'll tell you something else I absolutely hate. I hate, especially now I've remarried, I hate my two having a different surname to the three of us. I really, really...

Tom: It's a shame.

Kate: I mean the kids have asked, but obviously their father won't let them. And we've said, "You know, you can make your own minds up when you're older. If you want to change your name then, you can." But I find it quite embarrassing as well. To like, like at the doctors the other week. I can't remember what had happened, but you see they either automatically assume I'm still Mrs Rogers – and like Jason's teacher at school still calls me Mrs Rogers. Because they obviously still assume that I'm still Mrs Rogers somewhere along the line. But I'm not. But then if people know my surname then they think those two are Morgan as well. And I just really hate it.

[Interview 3: 426-439]

In contrast Bill's story was slightly different.

**Bill and Becci's story continued:**

As a non-resident father, Bill similarly expressed his feeling of discomfort around a different surname for Laura. Bill had not married Laura's mother and consequently did not have parental responsibility as Laura was born before December 2003 when parental responsibility was allowed for parents

registering the birth together.

Bill: Brenda changed her [Laura's] surname to his [stepfather's] surname so she could be part of the family. Because they all had that surname and she would have had my surname. Now that really hurt me, but because I was her biological father and we weren't married, I didn't have any say in the matter.

[Interview 1:1181-1185]

The discrepancies continued with quasi-legal documentation. Susie [and Paul married to Barbara] were both step-parents who had married their partners and in both cases were very involved committed stepparents. The non-resident parents had become estranged, yet Susie and Paul couldn't sign forms to give consent for their stepchildren as stepparents 'rights' were out of kilter with their responsibilities (Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy 1999). Susie highlighted the contradiction in terms.

**Susie's story continued:**

Susie: Because they have like "guardian of" and "parent of", you know. And that in itself is kind of recognition that families are not all just parents. But parent seems to be applicable to parent, not step parent ...

[Interview 4:1659-1661]

She continued:

Susie: I wasn't recognised as being significant...

[Interview 4:420]

Susie's frustration and anger were clear:

Susie: And yet I'm here, living with them 24/7 now – and the school is not acknowledging me...like parents' evenings and stuff, you know. I'll go to parents' evenings and they would talk to you [husband]. And it was like, 'hello, I'm here!'

[Interview 4:721-724]

The contradictions and tensions in terms of everyday experiences and realities in stepfamily life were ignored by policy and practice in an effort to maintain the biological parents responsibility. Yet the logistics of this could be complicated with Pete for example often away on 'driving jobs'. Thus the legal quagmire of rights and responsibilities bypassed stepparents rendering them invisible and their voices silent. The discursive backdrop with a 'whiff' of immorality was perpetuated in all aspects of their lives, leading to perceptions and experiences of societal disapprobation with stigmatisation, alienation and non-acceptance common.

### **Media and myth**

Six parents used examples from the media and mythology to illustrate their perceptions of stigmatisation. Barbara and Paul were influenced by the media.

#### **Barbara and Paul's story continued:**

Paul: When the murder ... Do you know what I mean? The stepfather, the stepdad was accused. And, how many times does a kid go missing and all of a sudden it's either the stepmam or the stepdad?

Barbara: The wicked stepmother in stories.

Paul: And I think that's a massive problem in the media – because people keep thinking these stepfamilies are so evil and...

[Interview 8:792-797]

Paul a stepfather, cited the high profile case in the media of Sian Jenkins and the murder of Billie Jo his foster daughter to highlight his discomfort with the media's association of the stepfather as bad. Paul's misunderstanding, Sian Jenkins was the *foster* parent not the stepparent, was interesting and helps an understanding of Paul and Barbara's dogged determination to hide their stepfamily status.

Fundamentally the parents believed that the media's portrayal of stepfamilies was negative and that stepfamily dynamics were viewed as dysfunctional, which led to a negative impact on society's understanding of stepfamilies that conspired against them. Moreover, there was a firm belief that the problem focused portrayal highlighting resentments between family members was misleading as there were strengths and positives of stepfamily life as previously highlighted. These findings have been confirmed by other commentators (Ganong and Coleman 1997).

Similarly, however irrational, fairy tales in the form of stepfamily mythology where usually the stepmother was seen to be wicked still seemed able to influence the parents' thinking. Bill demonstrates this neatly.

**Bill and Becci's story:**

Bill: It's like, I'm trying to think – it's like we said to you from the offset. Like kiddies' story books with the wicked stepparent and that. That makes more entertainment for the TV and I think that's the way they tend to portray them. They really do. But you don't very often see loving stepparents and loving stepkids. It's always like there's some underlying nastiness going on there somewhere and it just makes better entertainment and that. So I do think they portray it wrongly.

[Interview 1:1071-1077]

Interestingly, Bill's statement was paradoxical with Becci resenting money being spent on Laura her stepdaughter.

The parents' use of images from media and mythology to illustrate their perceptions, experiences and understanding was personally fascinating to me<sup>49</sup>. American remarriage education programmes have found that engagement with films as a tool to encourage discussion helped give

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<sup>49</sup> As the creator of **FAMILYWISE** which used cartoons to trigger parents' issues and needs, I had discovered through my Masters dissertation, that parents felt more comfortable using a 'third person' to articulate their issues. It was as if by using this approach enabled a depersonalisation of the issues, yet simultaneously acknowledging a normalisation as the issues were in front of them in pictorial images.

participants a feeling of 'safe distancing' and was less threatening (Leon and Angst 2005:4). Therefore the power of images was strong and aided articulation and coherence of the issues for the parents.

### **The inverse Cinderella law**

In keeping with the mythological theme and in response to judgemental and negative discursive undertones, the inverse Cinderella law (Day 2006) enabled the parents to manage these influences in their own unique ways, as demonstrated by Yvonne.

#### **Yvonne's story continued**

Yvonne's partners sixteen year old stepson, Wayne, and therefore with no biological connectedness to either Yvonne or her partner, had been thrown out of his mother's house, spent time in a Youth Offender's institution and was currently being parented by Yvonne. He had stolen expensive electronic toys from Yvonne's boys, causing disputes between the boys.

Yvonne: And I've sat and explained that to Wayne [partner's stepson] as well. You know, "I don't have to love you. I don't have to have you in my home. You're here because I want you to. But if you're just going to go on and basically take the mick, I'm not going to want you here. And our relationship is going to fail." And you know, I have a really brilliant relationship with his stepson, because I can sit and talk to him and he can sit and talk to me. Now you know, he's even said that out of his mam and his dad, you know, if he had a problem I would be the one he came to. Because I'm not directly involved with him in that way, I've become more of a friend really than like sort of, you know... But as I say it was really hard for my two boys to be sitting and have this wayward teenager in my home. And having to be responsible for him, you know?

[Interview 2: 736-748]

Yvonne's idiosyncratic moral way of managing the morass of everyday challenges is a good example of the parents' responses as they worked hard to create moral redress, with Yvonne attempting to create a stable base for her stepson, both at home and school.

Disharmony between stepsiblings is a common occurrence in newly formed stepfamilies (Coleman *et al* 2001), and the stepson's behaviour contrasts with the iconic Cinderella figure that children and adults over the generations have pitied and loved. But, implicit in the love and support for Cinderella is the acknowledgement of the stepfamily as a dysfunctional family unit, with the wicked stepmother and stepsisters and a seemingly incompetent father, all conspiring and functioning in less than moral ways. The extract above demonstrates exemplary engagement of Yvonne with her stepson and provides a contrast with the constructed images of stepmothers as wicked and immoral promulgated in myths. Thus the inverse Cinderella law could be said to apply where good parenting of challenging stepchildren was viewed as a moral imperative, despite the attendant problems of their difficult behaviour.

### **7.3 Creating immoral others**

Again a polarisation occurred with immorality a prominent theme throughout the parents' accounts, with the exception of Susie. Reports of explicit or implicit immoral parenting behaviour, usually an ex-partner or a partner's ex-partner were common. Differentiation from the immoral parents, was an essential part of disidentifying, and was done through an 'improvement discourse' (Skeggs (1997:82). This was important as it displayed and reinforced the narrator's morality, as if in compensation for the seemingly immoral behaviour of the other, 'an important device in telling a moral tale about oneself' (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2000:794). Therefore by constructing immoral others, innocent children, even difficult stepchildren, could be rescued by the narrator, with the maligned parent's misdemeanours assigned to the pit of poor and ineffectual parenting. Becci is a good representation.

#### **Bill and Becci's story continued**

Becci: Yeah, I was quite a bit disappointed with her mam in that sense as well because it was about – she has just started them now – but about was it a year ago? I think she was eleven. No she was going on to eleven and she was starting to feel a bit like



crampy. And her mam said, "Oh, it might be her hormones." And I said, "Is it your period? Have you got period cramps?" And she was going, "What are they?" And I was going, "You know, your period?" And she said, "I'm not allowed to talk about them, they're dirty." And I went, "Who told you that?" She says, "My mam." She says, "I can't talk about them, she says they're wrong and they're dirty." And I went, "Right, okay." And I sat down and I explained everything to her and I showed her what tampons were and what sanitary towels were. And said they're not wrong and they're not dirty. And I was really disappointed with her mam for that, because I felt like she shouldn't have done that – I felt that was bad parenting on her behalf. And equally disappointed with her when Laura had head-lice and she never told us. And she came here and she had them for about three weeks before I noticed and I went, "Oi." She said, "I've got dandruff." And I looked and I said, "No you haven't." And you could see – they were that bad they were crawling on top of her head. And it took her nearly four months to get rid of them. But her mam never rang me and told me that she had them. And I'd just had him and he was only six weeks old. And he had a lot of hair and I was really annoyed. Not with Laura – it's not her fault – but with her mam. I thought, "Do you know what it is? You could have had the decency to ring me." I mean what happens if I got them or the bairn got them?

[Interview 1: 609-633]

As evidenced above, Becci gave other accounts of not being quite so understanding with Laura, but despite her 'spoiled identity' (May 2008:470), she still managed to convey a moral superiority and integrity as a better parent than Laura's biological mother. Explanations through justificatory accounts were common (May 2008), as most parents recounted issues and / or events that placed them in a morally superior position to another. With the exception of Susie, they all presented a construction of themselves as moral selves alongside a construction of significant others that was flawed or in some cases demonised. The presentation of self as morally good was not necessarily articulated, but rather implicit and inseparable from constructing the vilified other(s) as immoral in some way. It was as if by so doing they were somehow innocent bystanders or voyeurs attempting to ameliorate the messy issues caused by another's immoral actions and or behaviour.

Through the mothers creating good reputations in their family, a corresponding good family was constructed (Finch and Mason 1993:160). Thus for Becci being 'seen in a good light' was a statement about her as a person (Finch and Mason 1993:130), which was particularly important as throughout her first interview with Bill present, she frequently displaced her concern over lack of money onto Laura and Bill's ex-partner as the cause. Drawing from Goffman's (1967:78) work on the concept of demeanour - gestures, bearing and words all convey certain attributes or qualities, which enable a transparency through which moral identities are constructed (Finch and Mason 1993:130). Consequently Becci had to work hard to create a moral reputation for herself as a better person and *parent* compared to Bill's ex-partner. In contrast the only parent who appeared not to overtly demonise another parent in order to present themselves in a morally superior position was Susie.

### **Susie's story continued**

Susie:...I think I felt for them [stepsons] that they had been let down by their mam and that they ought to have some stability. And that by my moving in with their dad I had made a commitment to them. And on that basis that whatever difficulties were going to arise that we work our way through it.

[Interview 4:240-244]

Later:

Susie: The one that I always accepted, that they needed to have Marion [biological mother] in their lives. She's important. And I had said earlier on that I brought up Marion a lot, [to husband] Pete? Yeah? Just trying to make sure that she's not, you know, it's their mam and she's not some kind of... And we can talk easily, and I've had them. You know, she didn't come to a visit and they were upset. And I said what would you... And I had them write a letter to say what they would say if she was there, you know.

[Interview 4:936-943]

Susie, who possibly had more reason than most to demonise her stepsons' mother for her abandonment of her two young 'innocent' sons, only offered a

muted and attenuated admonishment. Thus she bypassed the opportunity for overt demonisation and presented the issues in a factual yet empathic manner with the needs of the children paramount. Susie's words suggested almost an understanding or acceptance rather than an opportunity to vilify the ex-partner. Yet this approach was more powerful and potentially strengthened her moral superiority as she demonstrated the higher moral quality of self-effacement.

### **Demonisation**

However, not all parents were as diffident as Susie. There were numerous intimations and manifestations of the binary oppositions of morality and immorality with good parents vilifying stepchildren and ex-partners as with the stepmothers above. Reputations are sustained by family members talking about third parties with images and shared constructs identified, confirmed and maintained with active cooperation, even if new partners did not previously know the ex-partner (Finch and Mason 1993:156-158), as with Tracy.

#### **Patrick and Tracy's story continued:**

Patrick and Tracy both contributed to the demonisation of Patrick's ex-partner compared with their moral correctness. However, an important aspect was that their exemplary behaviour had been legally sanctioned to such an extent that they didn't receive any statutory help with the children, which was the ultimate accolade.

Patrick: We got full custody last June. And the Christmas before that we had joint custody. With them living with us five out of seven. Which, they're mam simply didn't turn up. She gave up and said that was it. She never, ever turned up. But CAFCASS has been a big role saying that between the two houses – their mam's house there was nothing, they ran rampage.

[Interview 5:292-297]

And later:

Patrick: And like I say, with all the carry on with the kids and all the court case and everything to do with their mam – she got social services help.

Tracy: She got everything.

Patrick: The health service. The school officers, they all came out. They were actually knocking on the front door...

Tracy: And taking the children to school for her. She got all that.

Patrick: Because she hadn't got up – they would take the kids to school. And there was, so how come she couldn't get up? I said it was because she had a drink problem.

Tracy: She only lived a street away from the school, and she still couldn't get up for them. But since we've got the kids we've never got any help offered to us.

[Interview 5:1498-1509]

Whilst it was normal to malign or denigrate an ex-partner, at times the immorality of the other was extreme with outright vilification. It was as if by so doing the narrator was beyond reproach and could not be held to account for the immoral action of the other(s). The cathartic action of presenting as a moral self, despite doing / saying immoral things could lead to a cleansing and the preservation of a positive moral identity and integrity.

**Patrick and Tracy's story continued:**

Patrick and Tracy continued the general vilification of the ex-partner to the extent that she was seen to be the cause of the developmental delay of one of the children.

Patrick: It ties back to when he was living with his mam. He wasn't put into school properly. So he tends to think more like a seven to eight year old.

Ann: Like a how old?

Patrick: Seven to eight year old than a twelve year old. So you'll say and play with him, like a seven or eight year old. I think that's why he's still quite orientated towards the little ones. Because a twelve year old boy doesn't want anything to do with kids.

Hostile relationships between biological parents may cause emotional, social and academic problems for children, which are then attributed to the stepfamily (Ganong and Coleman 2004). For Joanne the demonisation was much stronger with a 'whiff' of child abuse.

### **Joanne's story**

Joanne was trapped in a destructive cycle of bitterness and resentment against her ex-partner after six years apart, which prevented her from moving on. She recounted a long narrative of her suspicion of possible sexual abuse by her ex-partner to their daughter. The health visitor became involved and the situation escalated with the culmination of medical investigations.

Joanne: Because I think it's a case of she goes to bed there when her dad goes to bed. Unfortunately they sleep in the same bed. Which is another issue that I've got which he doesn't seem to be tackling.

[Interview 6:1173-1175]

And later:

Joanne: And I said, "She won't let me touch her. I can't go anywhere near her. I'm terrified of what's wrong." They referred me to a consultant at the hospital. .. " She examined her and took some swabs and everything. You know, because obviously I'd mentioned this to the health visitor and the health visitor was like, "I don't like the idea of this at all." And the sleeping together and all this.

[Interview 6:1210-1215]

And again:

Joanne: And I'm thinking, "Oh god." And you don't want to think, but you can't help it. And I said to the health visitor, I said, "I'll be lying if I said it hadn't crossed my mind." And she said, "Right, we'll get this seen to." So this is how it got on. We went up to the consultant and the consultant said, "Well, I've had a look, I've checked her over – personally I don't think there's anything to worry about. ...

[Interview 6:1227-1232]

Despite the all clear the damage was done. The ex-partner was vilified, whilst Joanne had taken the correct action, thus retaining her moral reputation.

Clearly some parents found the dichotomy between the reality of old histories and new histories difficult to manage. Smart (2004) suggested that some parents might operate two sets of moral codes. One focused on vilification which was a common occurrence with the old divorce laws pre 1969, as blame was a central concept. The other one post 1989, where parents were working together co-parenting albeit in silent toleration. Interconnected and inseparable from the moral code guiding the mothers in my study was the concept of care, enabled through caring for the children and partner, as a caring mother further emphasised moral virtues.

#### **7.4 Caring and gendered moral rationalities**

Even where there were tensions between stepmothers and their stepchildren [Becci, Yvonne and Leanne], 'the ethic of care for dependent children present[ed] a non-negotiable norm' (May 2008:478). The mothers' accounts demonstrated that they attempted to care for both biological and stepchildren in the same way. Equity for all the children was viewed as important, exemplified with the same presents or equal monetary value as with Patrick and Tracy. Equity also extended to stepfathers having the same rights as mothers to discipline their stepchildren as with Yvonne and Gordon (Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy 1999). These findings are consistent with other commentators who found that in marginalised stepfamilies, social relationships with stepchildren were as important as relationships with biological children and with a strong belief that 'step' relationships should not be seen as inferior to biological relationships (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:81-87). Yvonne is a good demonstration of this.

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Yvonne: ...I think regardless whether I'm biologically their mother or Gordon is their father, I think we still have a role to play in bringing them up and raising them. And it's just as important though as what their own fathers and their own mothers have. I don't think you get the recognition for it. I think, you know, as I say, I tell sort of my children off they accept it. If I tell Ashley off it's, "Who are you to tell me off?" But when she's over at my house and his son's over at my house, I have a very important role to help raise those children. Just like Gordon has an important role – just as important as their own fathers, to raise my two children. To teach them about life, and teach them right from wrong really. I think because you're not related to them, you know, like you say, through the media and all that – just because you're not sort of related to them it doesn't mean that you don't love them or you don't treat them and feel for them and want the same things for them as what you do for your own children.

[Interview 2:281-295]

While the stepmothers attempted to care for the children equally, there were differences as with Susie.

**Susie's story continued:**

Susie suggested that caring in the step relationship was different in that it seemed to be less natural. Susie referred to it as 'not [being] as emotionally attached to them' and explained it thus:

Susie: And the upshot of having her [biological daughter] in so far as my feelings towards the boys is that I realised what was kind of missing in a way, is the sense of responsibility. And just how enormous that is for your own child. Because you brought them into the world. And I didn't have that and don't have that sense for the boys [stepsons] at all. But whilst they were growing up the responsibility I've felt is the same as I do for all of them. That they need to go to good schools. And they need to have, you know, nice clothes and they need to have as much as we can affordably give them.

[Interview 4:306-314]

The idea of difference in the affection / love for a biological child suggested different aspects of caring. Susie's explanation would suggest 'caring for'<sup>50</sup> her stepchildren, but 'caring about'<sup>51</sup> her biological child. This distinction has been reported by other commentators, but in slightly different contexts (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003:81-87)). The latter's findings are consistent with those of reports on middle class stepfamilies. Caring was different between the classes with middle class parents focused on 'caring for' stepchildren, but 'caring about' biological children. Whilst there was a feeling from the middle class parents that this might not be politically correct, there was also a realistic inevitability and acceptance that emotional attachments with a non-biological child were not as deep and were different with stepchildren. Time was thought to be important in developing good relationships with stepchildren, but incapable of rivalling biological ties. In fact step-fathering in middle class families was viewed as a disengaged practice which did not equate with fathering at all (Smart 2004b; Williams 2004).

Focusing on these differences in parenting practice again emphasises the differences between parents from different social classes as an intrinsic factor in parenting practice. Marginalised parents in stepfamilies demonstrated caring of a high moral and altruistic order, both in my study and that of Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003:81-87). However, this selflessness is rarely considered in the literature on marginalised stepfamilies, rather they are framed within an individualism and blamism framework with an assumed intergenerational transmission of poor moral behaviours taking centre stage. That is not to say that middle class parents cited by Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies (2003:81-87) were selfish and less caring, rather their caring was different, some might say more realistic.

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<sup>50</sup> 'Caring for' means taking the initiative for concrete activities with responsibility being a key value (Tronto 1993), as in a physical sense of an action involving specific tasks (Skeggs 1997:67; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:81).

<sup>51</sup> 'Caring about' consists of paying attention to the factors that determine survival and wellbeing and in establishing the need for care with attentiveness a corresponding value (Tronto 1993), an emotion as in feeling, demonstrating and receiving love and commitment (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:81).



The construction of mothering responsibilities might help explain class difference and paradoxical understandings of care between marginalised and middle class stepfamilies (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003:81-87). For example, Duncan's (2005) research on mothering and class explored working mothers and non-working mothers reasons for their decisions. The framework guiding their views differed within particular social groups, contexts, places and histories (Barlow and Duncan 1999:28). So, mothers from different classes often had different ideas of what constituted good mothering. Parenting one's own children rather than having them cared for by others was found to be a matter of pride and honour in marginalised families. 'Abdicating' parenting responsibility by having children 'minded' by others was not an option for many marginalised women who saw it as a dereliction of their duty. In contrast middle class mothers believed that the financial remuneration enabled a better life for the children. Duncan posited that Government had made 'the rationality mistake' by assuming that people made decisions based on universal rational economic and legal models (Barlow and Duncan 1999:28). Whereas the reality was that people appeared to make decisions based on moral and socially negotiated views of what constituted proper behaviour. Again, this could be viewed as pragmatic and realistic practice in areas where unemployment was high.

Middle class stepparents maintaining biological co-parenting across households was thus normatively viewed as the better way of operating, whilst their stepfamily status was minimised. The implication being not only moral, but financial with these parents honouring their responsibilities, rather than abdicating them and as such the child remained of central importance. This rational, social and economic behaviour was visible, heard and applauded by policy and media. With this in mind I would suggest that the mothers in my study adopted a moral approach to parenting and caring, but with a pragmatic context specific element, underpinned with their own idiosyncratic moral rationalities. The latter were generally rendered invisible and silent to external others. For example, viewing Yvonne's caring above through a policy lens, a superficial glance - living in disadvantage, three children to different men, stepparent to one child and parenting a 'juvenile

delinquent' would suggest that she was socially excluded and needed parenting support to enable her into social inclusion to prevent further moral and 'parenting deficit' (Etzioni 1993:6). However, Yvonne's exposition demonstrated her inbuilt moral code influencing her parenting practices. The multi mothering involving heroic acts of care demonstrated good responsible moral behaviour. As such, the mothers presented a variety of valid, moral rationalities for their caring behaviour highlighting the huge chasm between the reality of parents' lives and 'the rationality mistake' (Barlow and Duncan 1999:28) of policy implications of a 'parenting deficit' (Etzioni 1993:6).

All the mothers presented, in different degrees, as a 'caring self'. As we have seen, women who were dually marginalised [socio-economically and in different families] had to work harder to present as moral. Investment in caring for helpless and dependent children was a responsible job fulfilling the needs of not only the mothers, but also their partners and enabled the mothers to feel valuable and valued (Skeggs 1997:62-67). Caring for children [and partners] offered a means to value, trade and invest in themselves (Skeggs 1997:56), as the 'right' sort of caring woman linked with other cultural discourses of femininity (Skeggs 1997:67). As highlighted above the judgement of others, both significant others and external others was an important factor, women did care about what others thought (Skeggs 1997). Furthermore, demonstrating caring and responsibility for [step]children might be viewed as a method of impressing partners. Two mothers [Kate and Leanne] had been teenagers [who no longer had contact with their mothers], when they became stepmothers. A 'display of selflessness is crucial to their production of their caring selves. Their self is for others' (Skeggs 1997:65). As such I would suggest that they achieved not only external validation from partners, but also internal validation within themselves aiding the development of self-esteem. The mothers did not have the opportunities or resources to access other forms of respectability and similarly for the men, providing for the family, however limited appeared to be important. Care was thus central to their moral rationalities and identities.

All the parents were well aware that as stepfamilies they were viewed as morally lacking and yet paradoxically an inherent sense of morality and care guided them. They worked hard to present as good, moral and respectable parents with the interests of the children foremost demonstrated through their caring. At times this involved maligning others, but this was considered to be acceptable as the others were deserving of an immoral reputation.

The strong theme of caring and responsibility for all the [step]children did not appear to be based on duty and obligation as in an individualisation discourse, but rather based on relationships, interdependencies and connectedness, with mothers balancing the intricacies of care. Although there were differences across the families in terms of caring practices, for example despite Becci's concern with money, she still demonstrated good care of Laura. Thus caring appeared to be prioritised, despite the shifting, never static scene. The parents appeared to have worked out the proper thing to do (Finch 1989; Finch and Mason 1993) in the context of their particular families, with moral and ethical reasoning everyday social practices (Sevenhuijsen 1998:79). However, the reality of the parents' moral practices might be a key reason as to their difficulty in voicing their parenting support needs. How could moral and respectable parents appear to be 'needy'?

## 7.5 'IN THE DARK': PARENTING SUPPORT NEEDS

### Yvonne's story continued:

Yvonne: Because as I say, in the beginning you don't even realise what lies ahead of you. It's just a total sort of smack in the face when all of the crap hits the fan basically. And you know, you're actually in that situation and you don't actually know how you've gotten there, but things are actually that bad that you're in that situation. I think that's maybe when people would probably go to get help. You know, as I say, in the beginning, you don't anticipate and you certainly don't realise how many problems there is going to be. You know, I think if anybody knew that they wouldn't get together. Really, you know.

[Interview 2:944-952]

And at the next interview after the dissolution of her stepfamily:

Yvonne: But at the time, you just don't know, you've got no idea.

**You're in the dark.**

[emphasis added]

[Interview 2a:138-139]

None of the families had been prepared for the difficult and challenging complexities and all reported in their idiosyncratic ways that they had been 'in the dark'. However, not only were the parents in the dark, but also me as the researcher as the parents appeared to have difficulty in articulating their parenting support needs. Considering the centrality of parenting support within the research question: **What are the parenting support needs as perceived and experienced by parents in marginalised stepfamilies?** I was left with potentially a conceptual dilemma as a researcher. How would I be able to construct theory? I had been concerned about the wording and phrasing of the parent information sheet enforced by ethical guidelines, but I had attempted to make it and the accompanying letter to the parents as user friendly as possible [appendix 1]. [The aim of this study, ...is to discover the views and experiences of parents on parenting in stepfamilies. Also, what if anything, you think would be useful in terms of help and support for parents in stepfamilies]. Moreover, both when arranging interview times on the 'phone and before starting the actual interview and obtaining consent I reiterated the

aim of the research, but in more colloquial language. Despite this I had to prompt all parents for their views on their own personal ideas and thoughts about parenting support. I steered them back to the focus of the research. Even the most verbose parents struggled with articulating the essence of their parenting support needs. My approach left me feeling uncomfortable, as I felt that I was coercing them into an answer. I was surprised and disappointed as there had not been any lack of spontaneity in their articulation of the numerous parenting issues! I had anticipated problems with the professional phrase 'parenting support needs' and adjusted it, as with the exemplar below which also reveals Leanne's difficulty in answering.

**Leanne's story continued:**

After raising difficult and emotional parenting issues Leanne's reply was typical of the general response.

Ann: What you're describing is very common in stepfamilies. You know, that feeling that it's your responsibility. Particularly as a mother. Would you, if there was any support out there, I don't know what sort of support you might feel would be helpful, but is there anything that you think would be helpful to you?

Leanne: I don't know. I've never really thought about it really.

Ann: If you could wave a magic wand and have some help around being a parent in a stepfamily, what do you think would be helpful?

Leanne: I honestly don't know.

[Interview 10:296-304]

Later in Leanne's account she revealed her concern about the confidentiality aspect of parenting support and her partner's family discovering her 'neediness'.

Leanne: I don't know. I think, like I said, talking to somebody about it. Having someone to talk to – like, you know, that doesn't know you - like, know your family and stuff. That you know won't say anything.

[Interview 10:1293-1295]

Despite the ease with which parents described and explained their perceptions and experiences of numerous parenting issues within their lives, there was a corresponding 'dis-ease' with articulating what they thought might help them in terms of parenting support. To some extent their responses were dependent on whether parents had received useful support from professionals in the past.

## 7.6 Professional support

### **Barbara and Paul's story continued:**

Barbara: And if there was anything that I really, really need to know I would speak to the health visitor. When Robert was little I used to speak to her. But that was it.

Paul: I would be, not scared, but sort of... You hear so many rumours about how you can get the kids taken off you. And don't do this, don't do that. And you think, "Oh well, I'd rather just do it myself. I'd rather just muddle along and actually just do it myself."

[Interview 8:1460-1466]

Paul's suspicion about professionals' motives, coercive practices and the 'policing' of families was interesting and suggested a cautionary approach when dealing with professionals, which is consistent with Edwards and Gillies (2004, 2005) findings. As if in deference to my health visitor background and their own health visitor who had recruited them, three parents suggested the health visitor as a means of support and gave examples of their interventions, which again is consistent with other commentators (Edwards and Gillies 2004, 2005). However, these were focused on developmental checks for their pre-school children and so were considered normal. Only Joanne seemed to understand the role of the health visitor as working with the needs of the whole family. In contrast, others ignored what could be viewed as a social

desirability effect and gave examples of indifferent or unhelpful health visitors, the latter also found by other commentators (Walker *et al* 2010:74).

Three of the parents thought that parenting support should be provided by formal, professional services in the form of information giving, together with the understanding and skills to manage the situation(s), with a reassurance of the issues and help with 'not knowing'. Other studies have found similarities in that parents could not specify a particular service (Walker *et al* 2010:16,72). Knowing what to expect, how to manage the different parenting issues or whether what was occurring was normal were key features of all the parents' accounts. None of the families had been prepared for the difficult journey and some had formed a stepfamily with a naïve belief that it would work out. Susie highlights some of the issues.

**Susie's story continued:**

Susie: Nina was only a year and the boys [stepsons] weren't seeing their mum and I was then trying to look after three kids. And there was nobody, you know, remembering their mum used to come up and take them out. It was great because we got a chance to go out, otherwise we didn't go out anywhere. Yeah, there has not been much in the way of... Ways to relax and feel not stressed out by situations. I think you just got on with it. And I didn't see the health visitor despite that you know, the health visitor came out to see me after I had had Nina, and the midwives. But I still didn't see their role as being anything to do with helping us as a family. Or to help with Sam and Chris [stepsons], whose needs were completely different to the baby's needs I had never had before.

[Interview 4: 297-308]

And later:

Susie: ...Because the boys were under five it would have been good to see the health visitors and then for me to kind of have an idea. Because I didn't, you know. Their job as it was to Pete, was just to come out and make sure Sam was, you know, his development was fine and pack him off to school and that's it, you know.

[Interview 4: 443-447]

Susie's alienation is clear:

Susie: So there are things out there but we didn't have the means to access that. And we didn't...and we didn't know that they even

existed really. And it would've been, I think it would've been good because the courts were involved, it would have been beneficial, I think, if they had offered some kind of support to... Encouragement when things are very... And that would probably have worked in our instance because there was no other support or encouragement going on. So that would have lent itself very well just to make you... For me, with not having the... [to her son] That's the train. **To feel that you are on the right track**, or to give you some ideas which we didn't, you know, didn't have because we couldn't get out, we couldn't see. And our friends as well didn't have children. So it is kind of like who do you lend yourself to, to get you know, where do you go to get some kind of feedback?

[Emphasis added]

[Interview 4:457-469]

And at the second interview:

Susie: ... I think what we could have done with, and I think people could do with, I was going to say intervention. But I mean that, I do think that they need a sounding board, is it? Where you can, just somewhere you can get ideas. I'm saying [to husband who just arrived] we didn't have... You go off what you know. We didn't have people saying, confirming what you are doing is right or, you know, perhaps you could do it this way. And offer you advice and support.

[Interview 4a:811-817]

Again a clear emphasis on 'not knowingness' and a need for encouragement rather than intervention was evident. Susie continued the theme of alienation with emotive language to sum up her experiences and frustrations with CAFCASS. But, more poignant is the injustice of not being recognised and helped as a parent because of her step status.

Susie: ... But you've got these other places, like when we went to the court welfare and I wasn't included.

Ann: You weren't included?

Susie: No. So that everything went through, everything went through Pete and his [ex]partner and the boys. **And yet I'm here, living with them 24/7** now – and the school is not acknowledging me and the court welfare place doesn't acknowledge me. And I understood that to a large... you know, hugely. Because, you know, I'm not their mam. But that kind of compounded this feeling that I'm not their mam.



[emphasis added]

[Interview 4:703-712]

Due to Pete and Patrick's success in gaining fulltime residency for their children, Susie and Pete and Patrick and Tracy received statutory services in the form of CAFCASS. However, Susie's exclusion and marginalisation from the process reflected the lack of acknowledgement of stepfamilies within the legal system. The paradox of the huge responsibility as stepparents, yet Susie and Tracy's 'rights' were omitted in policy and legislation (Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy 1999). However, in contrast Patrick and Tracy felt that CAFCASS had been very helpful with suggestions of behaviour management techniques, and included both of them as responsible parents. The fact that Tracy was already a mother may have played a part.

The focus was generally on parents and not partners (Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy 1999). Professional help and support as a couple coping with new and different parenting issues appeared to be in short supply as Yvonne suggests.

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Yvonne: If there had of been a number there to phone up and for us to actually go there and say, just to sit really and have a talk. Not for someone to actually say this is what you've got to do and that's what you've got to do. Just really for them to sit there and mediate between the pair of us. If that had of – like I say if there was something like that – I think it would be really beneficial to people like sort of me and Gordon really. Because we were that desperate. We would have tried anything. And I think you know, if things are getting that bad between you, there definitely should be some support out there. Because, you know, it's the last straw really before you actually split up.

[Interview 2:684-693]

Yvonne was the only parent to focus on the couple relationship and the need for mediation to support them as a couple coping with parenting issues. At the time of the first interview Yvonne's angst was focused on her

stepdaughter as the root of all the problems that she and her partner were going through. They had almost separated, even though they had just had a child together. However, they managed to avert separation and were working hard at keeping the stepfamily together. But by the time of the second interview the relationship had broken down and Yvonne felt that the blame lay with her ex-partner for not managing the parenting issues with his daughter.

Yvonne: And I think it's imperative. I really do. Unfortunately it's come too late in the day for me. But who knows if there had of been that support or, sort of, you know, things available to us. Who knows? We might have still been together. Who knows? You know? And I think for, like, other people – you know, for the future, there definitely needs to be something. Because there's something like that for families, you know?

[Interview 2a:688-694]

Again, the suggestion that third party 'other people' might find couples mediation helpful neatly distances Yvonne from needing it. Whilst Yvonne suggested that if couples mediation had been available she and Gordon would have attended is interesting. Yvonne presented as an assertive, confident woman, able to negotiate access to services, yet she didn't. Yvonne's self-confidence and psycho-social surveillance of self, demonstrated above with her presentation of self and family as respectable with a strong moral base, could have been a hindrance to seeking help over such a private matter.

Other commentators have found that couples reported that having to use a relationship support service implied weakness, defeat and a sign of failure in the individual(s) and furthermore they believed that one couldn't learn to improve one's relationship (Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield 2010:8). The latter is an interesting finding, but the study did not classify the participants in terms of socio-economic groupings, rather that the sample 'represented a demographic data set'. In contrast requiring relationship support has been found to be different depending on class, with 52% of parents from AB classes believing it implied weakness and failure, whilst only 32% from DE classes believed that to be the case (Family and Parenting Institute 2010). In

terms of my research this was a surprising finding as I would have expected marginalised parents to have been more concerned about respectability. Alternatively it could have been due to some marginalised parents feeling comfortable with accessing services. Interestingly Walker *et al* (2010:72) found in their study that:

From the e-surveys, there was some indication that parents and their new partners might appreciate more support and advice, both for themselves and for their children. From interviews, however, it was also clear that, while biological parents thought it might be good to have more support, most tended to consider this a rather sensitive and private area.

(Walker *et al* 2010:72)

Other sensitivities were also discovered, for example barriers such as social stigma, inhibition and taboos affecting people seeking help with relationship problems (Walker *et al* 2010:85-86). Moreover, it is worth noting that commentators from the US who focused parenting interventions on strengthening couples' relationships rather than on interventions which isolated parenting within the mothers domain, found them to be more effective in terms of improving parenting outcomes (Cowan and Pape Cowan 2008). The results demonstrated decreased parenting stress and children's behaviour problems, less couple conflict over the children and stable levels of couple satisfaction. While the latter did not differentiate between biological and stepfamilies, Susie perceptibly suggested different families need different solutions.

**Susie's story continued:**

Susie: But it is different and I think there needs to be something which is very specific to being a stepfamily, you know. And that difference is that it wasn't about – it isn't a bad thing that we're recognized as a stepfamily, it's whether or not you are a good family. It's whether or not you are working, you know. That's what matters.

[Interview 4: 875-879]

Whilst Susie had earlier vented her anger at CAF/CASS for not recognising her important role as the stepmother in the stepfamily, here her contradiction suggested that the labelling of the family took second place to the more

important element of a functioning family. Later she suggested that parenting support should value and celebrate difference and diversity.

Susie: I don't believe that it's kind of inclusion for all. I don't think you can give in. You can't take a structure and try and fit all these other things into it. There has got to be a way to manoeuvre all of these things. And having difference isn't a bad thing. I think it's how you work with it. And I personally think that there should be some way of helping different families under the whole umbrella of family life. But you can't dismiss that they are not... It's not the nuclear family. And I don't think what is workable in a [nuclear] family will work in a stepfamily.

[Interview 4:1199-1206]

Interestingly there was again a distancing of professional parenting support suggestions by changing to the third person. Possibly this approach helped the parents thought processes, tangentially producing stories of others' needs. The resulting depersonalisation acted as a 'distancer' to first person real life experiences. Yet in seeming contrast seven parents thought that instead of professional help, talking to others in similar situations using a model of a lay support group might be helpful.

## **7.7 Non-professional support**

The normalisation aspect of talking and listening to others in stepfamily situations was attractive, as Kate said, 'Because you would feel like you weren't the only one' [Interview 3:1504]. Also learning from one another was thought to be important, as approaches that had worked for others were worth attempting. However, there were disadvantages such as Leanne's concern about confidentiality and gossip getting back to her partner's family. Becci, had her own inimitable style of summing up lay support.

### **Bill and Becci's story continued:**

Becci: Even if just offloading on somebody makes you feel better. Even if you don't... You know? You just turn around and tell them the situation. I mean, from a woman's point of view, right, even if you turn around and tell the woman everything and she goes, "Eee – the bastard. Eee – I can't believe it." You just feel much better

because they're agreeing with you. Even if they don't...

[Interview:1:1044-1049]

Becci also thought that parenting websites and message forums were a good idea, because it wasn't about 'help', rather 'offloading'. Becci was the only parent to mention online support which might reflect the sample group not being in possession of computers. However, the main source of help and support appeared to be from significant others.

Becci: I don't know [about parenting support] because I've just talked to friends and him [partner] and my mam. Do you know what I mean? The people that I've talked to about these problems have been Bill, my mam and my friends who are in the same situation. And once I've talked to them I feel better because I know that they've been in the situation and they've had experience and I find it, just talking to people who are in similar situations and knowing that these are normal emotions and that everyone has had to go through this at some point. And maybe it's not so bad, and maybe he's not getting screwed over as much as what some families are. You do feel better about it. You know? I mean, you've got comparisons here. You've got comparisons and people just to offload on.

[Interview 1:985-996]

But sometimes the emotional support could be maladaptive. Becci's mother's idea of support was collusion with Becci, rather than helping her to explore ways of managing the situation.

Becci: And my mam summed it up – she said, “Look, she's [stepdaughter] spoiling your family unit sometimes. And that's why you feel so down about it. At times – because you feel like she's spoiling your family unit. **It's like your little family unit and then you've got somebody else coming in. That's not meant to be there.**”

[emphasis added]

[Interview 1a:436-440]

Becci had been raised in a stepfamily, where according to Becci her mother was equally fair with all the children, yet her support of Becci encouraged a maladaptive management of her stepdaughter. Alternatively the above exemplar could have been Becci's attempt again to transfer her point through another's voice. As highlighted above, at times Becci could have been

viewed as walking a fragile moral tight rope with her comments on her stepdaughter, but by transferring her message through her mother's voice enabled a distancing.

Social capital was strong amongst the families with couples embedded in dense family networks of help and support generally in the form of physical help with the children, which is consistent with Ramm, Coleman and Mansfield's (2010:101) findings. Although sometimes this practical help brought with it emotional hindrance. For Kate the help from her in-laws meant associated problems of splitting up her children as her new mother-in-law's prime focus was her biological grandchild, so Kate's other two children had to go to her mother's. Kate found this difficult to manage as she wanted all her children to be treated equally. Moreover, it reinforced the inequity for her children in terms of holidays, presents and ultimately wills, as her new in-laws had 'got quite a bit of money' [Interview 3:40]. Other tricky complexities of stepfamily life focused on emotional support were highlighted, but not so forthcoming for several mothers, as with Yvonne.

**Yvonne's story continued:**

Yvonne: It's not until you're actually in that situation where you're absolutely screaming because of how bad it is, that support – you do need support. You know, you do need somebody sort of saying, "Yeah, it's okay for you to feel that way. Yes, it's perfectly natural. Yes, this, that and the other." You know, there is a way out of it. You know, you don't have to split up. You can work together. You can sort the situation and this problem out.

[Interview 2:986-992]

Yvonne's desperation was clearly articulated, and although her mother gave support, and had brought Yvonne up in a stepfamily she couldn't help with the couple relationship aspect, rather she suggested that Yvonne's problems would settle down with time. Interestingly, despite Yvonne's religious convictions she didn't view her church as being able to help either:

'... It [help] definitely couldn't come from the church. Definitely not'

[Interview 2a:733]

Yvonne summarised the hypocrisy of the church as not providing support for her as:

'I feel as if there is a clique there, with the, you know, 2.4 children and, you know, mammy and daddy there.

[Interview 2a:729-730]

Whilst there could be problems with emotional support it simultaneously provided good social capital with the parents gaining succour from significant others. However, in spite of this there remained an underlying implication of a stoical survival and need to find the best course over 'the hurdles'. As Tracy neatly summed up:

**Patrick and Tracy's story continued:**

Tracy: There isn't anything to deal with when you've got stepchildren – how do you deal with it? How do you approach it? There's nothing there. We've just had to do it from our own experiences when we've grown up and what our mam and dad were like. To how we think it's best to parent our children.

[Interview 5:1320-1324]

Relying on one's own judgement is consistent with other commentators (Walker *et al* 2010:72). As such, whichever professional parenting support approach was thought to be best by the parents appeared to be largely academic, viewed at its best as providing legitimate services focused on the children's development and at its worst as surveillance, the latter corroborated by other commentators (Edwards and Gillies 2005; Gutman, Brown and Akerman 2009). Yet a conundrum remains, the parents' ambivalence in voicing their parenting support needs. The following discussion offers possible explanations.

## 7.8 Unpacking the puzzle

### Managing

Firstly, the discrepancy between the parents' easy articulation of their numerous parenting issues yet their concept of themselves as not requiring parenting support. As evidenced most parents were dealing with very challenging and in some cases profound issues, and so their lack of engagement with parenting support was perplexing. Within the confines of the public 'story told' they appeared to have developed a pragmatism and resilience in managing the different issues of stepfamily life and lived within the parameters. Yet as evidenced with Yvonne and Gordon the reality of the private 'story lived' and the 'untold stories' was one of managing sensitive, emotional and stressful aspects, which had the potential to affect self-esteem and self-confidence, exposing vulnerabilities and affecting lives ultimately leading to dissolution of the stepfamily. Yvonne, Becci, Joanne, Kate and Leanne's couple relationship appeared vulnerable and the resilience of the latter two was particularly fragile. If one was thought not to be coping, the potential for rejection by partners, family, friends and of course external others was high, thus risking emotional and economic security and moral stigma. Despite the risks and the focus on the stepchildren as the cause of the problems, parenting support did not seem to be on their agenda, it was superfluous. By implication it was others who needed it, not the parents in my study who were good parents doing their best in difficult circumstances.

'Need' is a contested concept and very much dependent on personal contexts. Cowley *et al* (1995) found that service users didn't like the term 'need' as it had implications of 'being needy', which was stigmatising. Not only did the parents' responses suggest a distancing from professional parenting support services, but also they distanced themselves and dis-identified with 'needy others'. There appeared to be a feeling which wasn't articulated, that to need parenting support was to disclose the possibility that one wasn't coping which appeared to be counter intuitive, morally reprehensible, shameful and potentially dangerous and viewed as bringing private issues into the public domain. Moreover, as Paul implied the



surveillance aspect of health visiting could potentially mean having the children taken away. Loosing power and control over one's children was the ultimate failure. The personal psychological cost that marginalised mothers have experienced in order to obtain professional help, only to find that coercion was the order of the day has been eloquently recorded (Seaman *et al* 2006).

Caring and responsibility for the children and family was the central focus for the mothers and informed their responses. They constructed themselves as respectable and morally good, so suggestions of parenting support were anathema and the very antithesis to their self-concept and identity of themselves. The parents generally positioned themselves as independent and managing in spite of the challenges and realities of marginalisation and stepfamily life. Refuting parenting support needs gave them some sense of power and control in their lives. Reputation and pride appeared to be central to their lived experiences and contributed to the parents denying parenting support needs. For the mothers in my study the respectability element and the moral significance of their parenting and caring aspects for the children and partner cannot be over emphasised. Their acute consciousness and their perceptions and experiences of others' judgement of them appeared to be a powerful influence on their lives. However, as Foucault famously claimed wherever there is power there is resistance (Foucault 1980).

### **Resistance to parenting support**

Secondly, having explored the 'audible' political discourse of power and governmentality at one end of the parenting support continuum, there is another discourse at the opposite end, the discourse of the marginalised parents in stepfamilies, which historically has been 'silent' and appeared powerless. The positioning of these polarised discourses can be seen to have influenced the parents in my study who appeared to be silenced into submission.

Reay (2002) reported that some commentators suggested that marginalised people are not seen as being reflexive, as if they do not possess the ability to have internal conversations and reflect on issues. But, as evidenced the parents in my study most certainly were reflexive, albeit some more than others. So, were the parents devoid of confidence and autonomy, and as such powerless to construct and shape their own lives and consequently passive pawns in the political discourse of regulation and normalisation? Or were they asserting their power through silence and thereby resistance? According to the mothers' accounts they were more than aware of others' views and consequently resisted the perspectives of the powerful by creating respectable and moral reputations for both themselves and their families. Thus, an alternative explanation is that the parents subverted the normative oppressive power in a covert way for their benefit. As such, an exploration of their silence of parenting support needs can be seen to demonstrate a discourse of resistance, which I would suggest suited their purpose and was more powerful through its silence. Resistance does not necessarily involve challenging and it can be difficult to distinguish the difference between resistance and compliance (Sayer 2005b:32-33). Several commentators have reported on the tactics used by mothers to resist professional intervention / support, involving apparent acquiescence with tokenistic gestures of compliance, for example appearing to accept advice, but in reality discounting it as irrelevant and not appropriate to their lives and avoiding contact with professionals (Mayall and Foster 1989; Abbott and Sapsford 1990:144; Bloor and McIntosh 1990; Peckover 2002; Gillies 2005a; 2007:102).

Resistance to power is crucial as it is part of how power works (Kendall and Wickham 1999:50-55). Foucault's disciplinary power has been discussed in terms of its negativity, as a repressive force, but it can also be viewed as positive and as such a constructive mechanism for the parents. In Foucault's introduction to 'Discipline and Punish' (1975)<sup>52</sup> he set out some general rules for interpreting the tactics of power (1977:23), which enable a more insightful interpretation of the parents' silence:

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<sup>52</sup> Original in French, with English translation 1977.

- a caveat not to think of punitive mechanisms in an isolationist sense, but to view them more broadly in ‘a whole series of their possible positive effects’
- to view punitive methods as ways of exercising power
- to determine if there is a commonality in the ‘technology of power’ in the humanization of systems and the knowledge of man
- to think of a ‘political technology of the body’ where power resides

(Foucault 1977:23)

Therefore, I would suggest the parents’ management of the inequities and injustices of living not only marginalised lives, but also stepfamily lives was through resistance, or at times appearing to acquiesce to power. So the parents were complicit in the power game, managing power through demonstration of the normative biological family with maternalism and moralism key elements in their armoury. Consequently their ‘story telling’ potentially induced a feeling of power in their lives and helps to explain their inarticulacy of parenting support. However, as with most stories there are gaps. Lacunae remain and the following section provides the final piece of the puzzle, an analysis and attempt to understand why the parents need for control was so central. An understanding of their daily lived realities is necessary with class intrinsic to understanding just how marginalisation worked in their lives.

## 7.9 Class is dead?

In Susie’s inimitable style her perception, experiences and grasp of reality is tentatively offered.

### **Susie’s story continued:**

Susie: Yeah, but it’s compounded by the fact that as step-parents, you know, it’s not a good... You know, it’s not a... I don’t know if it

changes in different places that you come from – if you're from a more bourgeois background, a more middle class or how these things are weighed up. But a working class stepfamily, I don't think, in terms of, courts and solicitors and all this kind of – schools – I don't think at the time it was very well accommodated. They deal with the parents, the biological parents, and not the people who are looking after the children 24/7. But adoption, yeah, I mean we've done everything else bar that. And it doesn't matter... And I know that that doesn't matter, I know you don't need a certificate, nobody has given me a certificate because I've had Nina [biological daughter]. And it's not about that. It's more about, it's more about the way that people treat you. And if you could just say hang on a minute. You know, I am the parent in my own right and I've got something to... You know, that would have made it easier because it just adds like a lot of, it's added a lot of stress.

[Interview 4:1573-1588]

Susie's passionate response clearly demonstrates the tremendous energy needed to manage the frustration, resentment and the injustice of living marginalised lives in a stepfamily. Susie was the only parent to suggest that class might be implicated. That is not to say the others were unaware, rather they did not refer to that aspect of their marginalisation, but as highlighted [above], working class women talking about their class is rare, as they tend to disassociate so as not to be reminded (Skeggs 1997:76). However, in order to disassociate or dis-identify with their class they need to know from what they are dis-identifying and so first have to identify: 'knowing themselves was based on identifying what they *were not* rather than what they were' (Skeggs 1997a:124). Awareness and recognition of how one is seen in society does not occur without value judgements and people (Skeggs 1997). Susie, along with Yvonne, Kate, Barbara and Leanne were very conscious of their positioning by others and the moral undertones at work, which led to:

... potent signs of the unremitting emotional distress generated by the doubts and insecurities of living class that working class women endure on a daily basis.

(Skeggs 1997:167)

Class and its ramifications provide the underpinning theory central to understanding the realities of the parents' lives and their ambivalence in discussing parenting support needs. This explanation intertwines with the

discursive representation of marginalised families historically demonised and viewed as the source of all social ills. The continuation of this legacy of classism has been an emotional toll on women's lives (Reay 2005). The emotional dynamics of social class in parenting support is a crucial element and it is not difficult to grasp the strong influence and repercussions of class amongst the parents in my study. Their reluctance to articulate their needs was embedded in their class identity – the double jeopardy of marginalisation and stepfamily status, thus suggesting that class is very much alive and kicking. Class as an explanation for the parents' moral accounts of their parenting issues and practices, roles, identities, resiliencies and silence on parenting support needs may appear simplistic, but juxtaposed with the reality of normative [middle class] benchmarks in policy, practice and society, class appears to be a central mechanism despite it being a 'contested concept' (Sayer 2005b:19).

As discussed [above], commentators (Giddens 1991, 1992; Beck and Beck Gernsheim 1995, 2002) from the 'individualisation' school of thought argued that 'class is dead'. Undoubtedly from the 1980s onwards with the end of shipbuilding and coal mining in the north east, marginalised people's lives changed, making class harder to see, but no less present (Lawler 2005). Class is now defined not through explicit economic classification, rather through 'a return to strongly moralized positions' (Skeggs 2004:113), as in the euphemism 'socially excluded'. The continuous denigration of marginalised groups, particularly parents is hard to ignore and it is not difficult to understand the significance of this for the mothers in my study, who were only too aware of how they were represented.

In my attempt to be objective I missed the significance of the subjective experience of class and its centrality within the marginalised parents everyday lives - their identities not only as stepfamilies, but as marginalised families and their parenting experiences were key factors. Their subjectivity was determined by their class, their lived experiences and identity was formed through daily moral actions (Skeggs 1997; Sayer 2005; Kirk 2006), which I would suggest was of prime importance particularly to the mothers. Their

coping skills were built on an edifice of the moral code and maintaining dignity and being recognised as 'good mothers' was therefore necessary to their psychological and emotional wellbeing. One way of them maintaining their self esteem was by knowing and being recognised as good parents. The mothers' concern with caring, respectability and a strong moral code attempted to ensure good values were passed onto their children.

As such the key to my theorisation rests predominantly on class as a basis for attempting to understand the parents' perceptions and experiences and their inarticulacy of parenting support in my study. Expanding the theory of class beyond that of the binary opposition of power versus powerlessness is important in as much as it enables a more insightful understanding of the multi-dimensional influences, frustrations and injustices impacting on the parents. Bourdieu's concept of capitals [economic, social, cultural and symbolic] and their centrality in the subjective experience of class and class formation cannot be underestimated and aids an understanding of the stigmatised identities of the marginalised parents' in my study and how they managed the inequities as:

To understand the subjective experience of class we need to consider the emotional and evaluative aspects of the relations of self to self and self to other.

(Sayer 2005:22)

Moreover, transferring Bourdieu's concepts to the parents provides added dimensions and is in keeping with my ontological perspective of multiple realities. The parents access to economic, symbolic and cultural capital was severely hampered, yet they had good access to social capital. They were generally socially included within their own milieu and embedded in good, supportive and reciprocal family and friends networks that were very local, often on the same street. Family provided help with the daily parenting rituals. A key defining biography embedded in the identities of the parents' lives continued to be the family and gendered parenting roles. The parents' commitment to caring for 'the bairns' contradicted the presumed selfishness of those 'individualised' parents who separated and went on to form stepfamilies (Smart and Shipman 2004). However, despite the parents' good social

capital, movement out of their marginalised class positions was severely limited as it was not the right kind of social capital. It was not bridging social capital that would enable links for them or their children to exit out of their marginalised communities, rather it was bonding social capital which provided practical and for some emotional / psychological support with family life, which importantly contributed towards not only emotional capital (Reay 2004), but also psychological capital.

### **Emotional capital**

Bourdieu did not explicitly include emotional capital in his repertoire (Reay 2004; Sayer 2005b:133), but he did include devotion, generosity and solidarity from women 'who are responsible for maintaining relationships' (Bourdieu 1998:68). In order to redress the balance Reay (2004) suggested that mothers are sensitive to family members' emotional states and so take responsibility for maintaining emotional aspects of the family's relationships by trying to alleviate stress. Emotional capital is often an unrecognised and 'under-theorised parenting resource', particularly amongst marginalised mothers and would benefit from a more 'flexible understanding' (Gillies 2007:128). It is usually equated with parental involvement resulting in educational success for children, an asset which marginalised mothers often find inaccessible due to their lack of economic, cultural and symbolic capital. Adapting Reay's (2004) concept of marginalised mothers emotional engagement with their children's education and applying it to the more generic aspect of mothering, I would suggest that the marginalised mothers investment in building emotional and psychological capital in their children was central to their lives. A key concern for marginalised mothers was equipping their children with survival skills (Gillies 2005a; Seaman *et al* 2006), in order to manage and navigate the vicissitudes of daily life. This type of emotional capital interconnected with the psyche and class inequalities to produce 'the psychic landscape of social class', that is class thinking and feeling (Reay 2005:912). Such affective aspects are central to living class as 'class [i]s implicit in everyday social processes and understandings' (Reay 2005:912). Thus class can be seen to be deeply embedded in daily parenting

interactions and in spite of the barriers the mothers faced they were resourceful in equipping their children with not only good moral values, but also navigating and managing their marginalised lives with sophisticated strategies (Seaman *et al* 2006). Yvonne's shame, sense of responsibility and indignation over her son's misdemeanours with the old man's car and her righteous insistence that he apologised and washed his car, is a good example of the emotional capital she was investing in him underpinned with a strong moral framework. Yet the dividends were not immediate, and the personal strength that was needed to manage the repercussions of his bad behaviour were immense as potentially it could be reflected back onto her moral status. Rather than abdicating her responsibility she took the morally correct path which enabled her self-esteem and hopefully shored up good learned behaviour for her son for the future. Moreover, the 'inverse Cinderella law' meant that even the stepmothers who had difficult relationships with their stepchildren still felt a commitment, caring and protecting them, particularly in moral terms and their propensity 'to go off the rails' as with Becci and Yvonne's stepchildren.

Reay (2005) suggested that emotional capital developed in response to barriers rather than possibilities. Expanding on this concept helps an understanding of just how important refuting parenting support needs was for the mothers. The mothers were not only fully responsible for the children's care and instilling moral values, but they were also responsible for the emotional health and development of the family. Thus to need help with this in the form of parenting support was unacceptable. They had their own support systems. Motherhood is a highly conscious, classed experience with mothers aware of others' views of them (Skeggs 1997; Lawler 2000; Reay 2005). The contradiction between working class mothers' construction of mothering, built on personal and social experience encompassing dedication, devotion, commitment and the public construction of them as uncaring or indifferent to their children's needs has been eloquently highlighted by Gillies (2007:135). As such the mothers needed to maintain, power, control and resilience, all necessary aspects of survival and mothering in marginalised environments. One of the few things they had control over in their lives was



parenting their children and passing on emotional and psychological capital. The latter capitals interconnected neatly with developing and sustaining relationships and shoring up bonding social capital, a necessary asset to manage future marginalised lives.

## **7.10 Conclusion**

In my study, central to the parents' lives was respectability, a strong moral code and caring for the children and partner, which importantly they could influence to some extent. Managing the multiple realities of living with these inequities meant that resistance to parenting support was not only one of the few areas the parents could control, but also and more importantly parenting support was an irrelevance to them. Looking through a Foucaultian lens I have suggested that the parents subverted contexts to achieve some degree of hidden power and thus retain self-respect. As such, their resistance in terms of their silence was more powerful. They adopted the normative biological family façade and thereby made use of one aspect of the source of their oppression. Thus they were complicit in the power game, managing power through demonstration of the normative biological family with maternalism and moralism key elements in their armoury. So their story was one of resistance which potentially induced a feeling of power in their lives and helps to explain their inarticulacy of parenting support as respectable biological families don't appear to have parenting support needs in policy.

Fundamentally the underpinning theory is one of class and inaccessibility to the necessary resources or capitals to enable movement out of marginalised class positions.

This chapter has sought to give a more insightful understanding of the parents' marginalised positions and their lived realities in stepfamilies. My intrusion into sensitive and private issues focusing on parenting support were met with tokenistic answers and were just that, a polite acquiescence and reference to third party others who might find it helpful. The parents' suggestions of lay stepfamily support groups as being possibly useful in terms

of parenting support, whilst more meaningful in the context of their lives, were not convincing. Their accounts of family and close friends giving support, whilst sometimes a hindrance, were clearly helpful. Ultimately denial of needing parenting support was crucial to their pursuit of respectability, displaying moral selves and needing some degree of control.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

Yvonne: As I say, if I had it officialised or knew what sort of problems me and Gordon were going to have in the very beginning I would have dumped him and got myself a man that was totally single and had no children. Because I mean it has been absolutely horrendous really. The divided loyalties, him sticking up for his children and me sticking up for mine. And the resentment and the anger and everything else has been absolutely horrible. Really, a horrible way to live.

[Interview 2:958-964]

#### 8.1 Introduction

Yvonne's comments highlight the paradox of new lives and new dreams, hopes and expectations set against the messiness of old lives, with struggles and turmoil for the parents and children clearly evident. In this concluding chapter I reflect on the key concepts that have emerged from the sometimes contradictory multiple realities of the parents' accounts and consider the implications. The study contributes to new knowledge with a clearer understanding of the realities of parenting in a specific group of marginalised stepfamilies and also offers alternative understandings of parenting support. The latter are in theoretical tension with historical, contemporary and emerging policy and practice understandings which continue discursive renditions of deficit, dysfunction and immorality in marginalised [step]families. The new insights gained from my study of previously generally silent voices make explicit the different parenting issues and the irrelevance of parenting support in the parents' lives and thus have implications for policy, practice, future research and ultimately marginalised stepfamilies. Throughout I draw from the philosophical, theoretical and methodological aspects that have interwoven throughout the study and I give a critical and reflexive account of the outcomes of the research.

## 8.2 Reality check

Yvonne's plea to have 'it officialised' [Interview 2:958] goes to the very core of the study. Yvonne wanted the official version or normalisation of the potential issues facing parents in stepfamilies made available, so that she and others would have some expectation of what lay ahead. As a stepparent myself and a health visitor and academic I had been concerned about this gap. With parenting support and the professionalisation of parenting so central in contemporary policy, the paucity of research, theory and practice knowledge of parenting support issues in marginalised stepfamilies was an important aspect of my 'intellectual puzzle' (Mason 2002:8). Before the study my assumptions about these omissions centred on the centrality of the biological family in policy discourse with different families designated to inferior and socially excluded contexts. Yet statistical understandings demonstrated the continuing increase particularly in stepfamily numbers in the UK (ESRC 2004), and their speedier breakdown in comparison with biological families (Haskey 1996; Ferri and Smith 1998; Dunn 2002), causing a variety of challenges for both parents and children (Dunn 2002). The paradox of 21st century policy and practice realities continuing to focus on anachronistic understandings of the family, with little acknowledgement of the possibility that different 'family practices' (Morgan 1996:192) might require different parenting support approaches was frustrating for me. Thus the central remit of the research focused on determining the parenting support needs as perceived and experienced by parents in marginalised stepfamilies. The surprise findings of their disregard and / or seeming acquiescence to tokenistic offerings or suggestions of parenting support needs led me to initially reflect on my research design. As Mason (2002:174) suggested, it is vital to reflect on the actual research you conducted, rather than an ideal of what you would have liked to achieve.

My library study which focused on a loosely structured genealogical model and unpacked the literature, clearly demonstrated the centrality of policy and practice discourse as a key conceptual framework underpinning and contextualising marginalised [step]families historically. Governmentality was

central, with its varied and competing discourses of principally moralism, maternalism and familism. The discourses often at work simultaneously as they intertwined with their subtle interplay impacting and influencing marginalised parents over the centuries. The stark contrast between normative renditions of good middle class parenting and the perceived poor parenting in marginalised [step]families shows no sign of abating in current policy.

My ontological position centred fundamentally on the parents and myself having multiple meanings and understandings of our different psycho-socio-cultural realities. This together with the literature formed the basis of my epistemological beliefs. Thus the parents' personal realities of living a marginalised stepfamily life were key, rather than normatively imposed beliefs and understandings driven by discursive policies of governmentality.

I was aware that as a health visitor, academic and a middle class [step]mother I could have been viewed by the parents as representing and reconstituting the very essence of normative understandings. My cossetted middle class life and professionally constructed value bases had been challenging to navigate. I was self-confident and comfortable articulating my parenting support issues and needs and not anxious about what others' views might be. I was rooted in different multiple realities to the parents, with much easier access to social, economic, symbolic and cultural capitals. Moreover, while sensitive to the parents' private family life, essentially my research on parenting with a specific focus on parenting support was an infringement of their private family life. I have reflected on whether the parents 'managed' me as mothers have been found to manage, construct and mediate public and private boundaries when dealing with professionals (Ribbens and Edwards 1998:7). Yet my tacit, intuitive, experiential practitioner knowledge signposted to me that the majority of the parents were open and honest. It could not have been easy for them to share private, personal and intimate details with me, particularly when the public story of parenting in marginalised [step]families is so negative, yet for some it was clearly a cathartic experience.

As such the very public world of my research, intended dissemination and publication in the wider policy, practice and research community had to be handled sensitively (Ribbens and Edwards 1998:1-23). My choice of research design needed to be flexible enough to embrace and reflect the above sensitivities. Crucially my stepfamily status and intentions needed to be transparent and I had to be willing to give open and honest answers to any questions asked by the parents. Consequently 'a situated methodology' (Seale et al 2007: 1-11) was a pragmatic approach to the 'fallibilistic' (Seale 1999:6) situation of recruiting and engaging with a sample of marginalised stepfamilies. I reflected on my choice of method. Would a semi-structured or even more formal structured interview approach have enabled more response on parenting support needs? My experience as a health visitor developing and honing my therapeutic intervention skills over the years, cautioned me that more structured approaches might well have produced antagonistic and defensive responses as found by other commentators (Cowley and Houston 2003; Mitcheson and Cowley 2003; Appleton and Cowley 2004; Cowley, Mitcheson and Houston 2004). In contrast the loosely structured in-depth interviews enabled an open, exploratory and conversational style (Rapley 2004:15) from both the parents and myself. If I had experienced the same issues as the parents I was honest and shared them in the hope that it would normalise the issues. The rich data I collected could be viewed as testament to my open conversational style.

Due to my ontological beliefs of multiple meanings and realities, for which each of us has a different language (Ribbens and Edwards 1998:9), my interpretations of the parents' accounts had the potential to be tricky and ambiguous. However, I minimised this risk with respondent validation from six parents encouraging and validating my findings. Moreover, I was sensitive to their previous laboured comments on parenting support and gently asked if they wanted to add anything to their comments on parenting support. There was no further elucidation from them on that topic, which at the time provoked a lot of anxiety for me, which didn't dissipate until well into the thematic analysis of the data.

The privileged insight I gained from the parents' accounts enabled a much deeper understanding of their everyday realities, with their voices throughout giving a clear indication of their struggles of parenting in stepfamilies. Viewing the themes – 'the hurdles' or different and difficult parenting issues; [un]clear families and [un]clear roles causing troublesome power and control issues as biological identities didn't fit with their social roles; fragile resiliencies of particularly stepmother / stepchild relationships, impacting on and rendering silent voices in the couple relationships; intimations of [im]morality and the ramifications of their lived reality, all of these influenced their responses to parenting support needs. Initially I briefly explored the themes as disparate, isolated concepts, but this impeded my understanding and when examining their properties closely there was clearly an interconnectedness with each other. Biological family identity, good parenting and moral lives clearly linked with the discourses of maternalism, moralism and marginalisation in the literature. Some commentators have criticised researchers for simply 'letting discourses emerge' that are simply not there (Parker and Burman 1993:155), but it was transparent that many of the political and societal discourses discussed in the literature emerged through the parents' voices. Yet there remained a key challenge for me which was difficult to unpack and prevented me for some time from closing the 'intellectual puzzle' (Mason 2002:8) underpinning my research. There appeared to be an analytical and theoretical gap between the parents' easy articulation of their parenting issues and their ambivalence in discussing their parenting support needs. It was essential for me to gain a grasp of what was actually occurring in the data and why. My reflexive musings continued for some time and as I read and re-read the data I began to see the 'detailed, contextual and multi-layered interpretation[s]' (Mason 2002:15). I also went back to the literature for clues:

Discourses do not simply describe the social world, they categorize it, they bring phenomena into sight... Discourses provide frameworks for debating the value of one way of talking about reality over other ways.

(Parker 1992:35)

The discourses of moralism and maternalism categorised the parents' lives and the reality of their marginalisation came into sight. Their moral behaviour

was not simply explained by their cultural beliefs, but also by psychological and emotional influences. Our emotions are often perceptive reasonable judgements about particular situations as we are dependent on others views of us and our actions, and in need of their recognition (Sayer 2005b). Initially I had not grasped the centrality of the parents' marginalised class position and its significance within their accounts. Irwin's (2006) comments were particularly helpful.

How we understand empirical data cannot be separated out from the substantive and theoretical issues we are tackling. Empirical data provide a particular slice through our research problems. And we need to understand **how** this is the case: not simply that we don't get the whole picture in one shot, so to speak, but we get a specific angle.

(Irwin 2006:4)

I had focused on the parents' marginalisation objectively in terms of the inequities and injustices of parenting support policy and practice, yet the underpinning ubiquitous framework of class was of course experienced subjectively. Class was central to their lives; it was embedded in their everyday realities. In my attempt to distance myself from normative views on marginalised parents I had missed the substantive and theoretical centrality of class, as its significance in my multiple realities was negligible. It was not a crucial aspect of my comfortable middle class life, yet for the parents the multi-dimensional nature of class with its influences and trajectories structured their lives. Their 'stories told' (Barnett Pearce 2007) represented an outward looking trajectory with an eye on the public sphere or what other people might think. The stories conveyed that they were 'normal' and 'proper' families living respectable lives with everyday problems with the 'kids', which was acceptable, but to need parenting support was not. The influence of others' views was a crucial aspect and impacted their private family sphere with their moral orientation clearly displayed. Their public lives were constantly open to scrutiny from external others and sometimes significant others. The ubiquitous danger of being viewed as immoral was a real concern for the mothers, so their stories told were an important vehicle, with 'story telling'



often focused on their good moral character and hence the family (Barnett Pearce 2007).

In contrast, the private sphere represented an inward looking trajectory and the realities of 'stories lived'. Unfortunately the dissonance between the public 'stories told' and the private 'stories lived' caused a misfit that some parents couldn't manage. Barbara and Paul's insistence that they were a biological family and Yvonne and Gordon's disintegration of their couple relationship were just two instances that exemplify the multiple realities and pressures of stepfamily life which begin to inform an understanding of why more 'repeat players' (Walker *et al* 2010:16) relationships fail in comparison to 'first timers'. The normal complexities of couple relationship dynamics together with the pressures of stepfamily functioning were too troublesome and complex.

The parents' accounts, full of their perceptions and experiences, has provided a rich insight into their daily challenges of not only parenting in marginalised stepfamilies, but also fundamentally their management of the intricate realities of living marginalised class lives. The latter was never far away and while not spoken about overtly, other than by Susie, I have suggested impacted on the articulation of their parenting support needs, the central remit of the study. However, through their inarticulacy a more insightful and realistic understanding has emerged. Historically marginalised different parents' voices have been silent as they have been contextualised against the cacophony of audible voices emanating from the very public normative middle class policy discourse. Myths have perpetuated and what has been 'officialised' [Interview 2:958] is the deficit paradigm of the detrimental effects on children, thereby neatly rendering the parents' 'stories lived', silent in an effort to preserve their respectability and moral code, attributes not generally associated with their marginalised class positions (Gillies 2005b, 2007). As Skeggs (1997:160-161) astutely noted:

The representations of working-class women (historically and contemporary) are more likely to be products of fear, desire and projection than of knowledge and understanding.

(Skeggs 1997:160-161)

The marginalised parents in my study were a good representation of parents that policy and practice target with little knowledge and understanding of the realities of their lives. Yet the paradox is that this is complicated by the stepfamilies' presentation as biological families which continues the hegemony of the biological family and hinders the acceptance of different family forms in society.

The findings from my study have given a rare insight and contributed to new knowledge and understandings of parenting in some marginalised stepfamilies and why parenting support may not be relevant. The inductive study represents a snapshot in time, which is time and context specific and I cannot claim that my findings are representative of all marginalised stepfamilies or generalisable. Moreover, some of the issues could be said to be pertinent to all stepfamilies regardless of socio-economic group. Issues such as adjusting to different parenting practices between parents with different styles and roles; power and control issues with tensions between biological and social roles; managing not only stepchildren, but also non-resident partners and co-parenting; fragile resiliencies and acknowledging the importance of old and new histories and their impact not only within the family, but also within the couples' relationship. These issues were also clearly evident in the literature [chapters three and four]. However, the unique difference in my study is the centrality of maternalism, moralism and marginalisation discourses, underpinning the parents parenting practices, which negates the need for 'official' parenting support, a key implication for policy and practice.

### **8.3 Reframing the approach: implications for policy and practice**

Until the misfit between policy, practice and the perceptions and experiences of parents in marginalised [step]families is recognised, acknowledged and adjusted, the efficacy of parenting support for such families needs to be viewed with caution. A caveat that real engagement with the parents might be an elusive concept until there is a concerted policy and practice effort to firstly become familiar with, and then normalise the different parenting issues in marginalised stepfamilies. In short, learning from my study can inform policy and practice and help to create an alternative vision of both marginalised stepfamilies and parenting support in order to be responsive to the varied needs of marginalised stepfamilies.

### **Policy**

Adoption of anti-discriminatory policies of recognition and respect rather than tokenistic acknowledgement and stigmatisation of marginalised families who break up is the first step. Moreover, working towards policies that would enable a shifting of attitudes towards parenting support as a normal positive 'health' seeking behaviour would be a big step forwards, particularly for marginalised parents. In their efforts to normalise sex education by introducing it at an early age in schools, the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries have drastically reduced their teenage pregnancy rates. Adopting similar models in schools in the UK, children could learn about couples' relationships, parenting principles and family life. This could provide a base for the general acknowledgment that seeking parenting and couples' relationships support is a normal aspect of family life.

Whilst the policy focus on managing the separation / divorce process for children and the importance of co-parenting for children has improved over the last two decades, this needs to be extended and developed further to the next stage. Little progress has been made since Ferri and Smith's (1998) call for the development of parenting support for stepfamilies, particularly in the preparation for the challenges and difficulties in the early stages of stepfamily formation. With my previous experience of researching and developing the parenting support programme *FamilyWise*, which achieved European recognition for innovation in Primary Care (World Health Organisation 2000),

together with my current experience as a senior lecturer teaching a variety of practitioners across the health, social care and education sectors, I am well placed to develop accredited stepfamily parenting seminars, courses and programmes. The target audience would be service providers / commissioners and practitioners across the multi-agency arena of health, social care, education, including the public, private and voluntary sectors, whose work is focused on families, children and parenting. Working with colleagues [particularly those health visitors who were involved in recruiting the parents], from both external organisations and from within the university, together with parents from marginalised stepfamilies [again particularly the parents from the study if they are willing], a collaborative evidence based programme could be produced. A key aim of the programme would be to enable open discussion and a re-education away from a deficit model to an asset focused approach that recognises and validates the diversity of contemporary stepfamily life. Much can be learned from acknowledging and celebrating the strengths that marginalised stepfamilies have in working through the continuum of challenges from separation to new family formation and maintenance of that new family. Whilst funding might be a challenge, potentially monies from the Coalition Government's investment in parenting support and couple relationship support could be accessed, together with local authority monies. In time, 'Train the Trainers' courses could be produced with a variety of practitioners facilitating, including health visitors and other parenting practitioners.

An important finding from my study was the informal parenting support that was gained from the parents' social support networks [family, friends]. The latter is a key issue for policy and practice and needs to be recognised and acknowledged by Government and local authority policy which is currently busy promoting the 'Big Society'/localism agenda, while seemingly unaware of existing 'bonding' social capital already present amongst many marginalised communities. It is these links that need to be built upon and developed through enabling policy and practice to draw on the strengths of local communities to develop stepfamily peer support networks. These could be developed along the lines of other peer support groups [for example parenting

programmes, the community mothers' programme and breastfeeding support], which use informal 'lay' workers to support parents. Parents who live in disadvantaged communities and who have experienced particular issues are increasingly recruited and trained by health visitors and other parenting practitioners, who act as both a resource and support to the 'lay' workers. Building on these informal networks of support and harnessing this could be a way forwards not only for social inclusion and community harmony, but also a way of maintaining stepfamily relationships and preventing family breakdown.

Parents in stepfamilies who have managed to navigate their way through the issues could be recruited and trained to work with other parents in stepfamilies. This would need investment for training, but capacity could potentially be provided by some of the extra 4,200 health visitors recruited through the Coalition Government policies. However, this should not be seen as a quick fix, one off, one size fits all policy solution, but needs to be built preferably on joined up / cross party agreement on parenting support. Sustainability is key to a successful process as stepfamilies remain the fastest growing family type.

### **Practice**

Historically the tensions for health visitors and other parenting practitioners in managing and operationalising discursive policies of parenting control, rather than support, have been challenging and complex. While practitioners' power resides in Foucaultian approaches to assessing [parenting support] need, the fact remains that some health visitors manage the process while simultaneously demonstrating more overt parenting support practices. Kate, Joanne and Leanne gave positive accounts of health visitor interactions, representing real engagement with parents, rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. A key finding from my study was the parents' presentation as biological families. Being cognisant, understanding and grasping the reality of this is necessary for health visitors, indeed any parenting practitioner. Ignorance potentially hinders not only practitioners' abilities to offer

meaningful support, but also the families' own efforts at developing functioning stepfamilies. Practice that embraces the stepfamily in an holistic sense and normalises the issues needs to be developed in order to effectively support parents in stepfamilies. Practitioners need to develop skills in building up trust and respect with parents together with interpersonal sensitivity. This can only be achieved through learning, by developing knowledge, understanding and skills drawn from practice through working in real partnership with stepfamilies. An open and 'not knowing' approach by practitioners is an essential aspect of that practice (Brechin 2000).

Not only practice, but also theory is key to delivering meaningful therapeutic interactions. A paradigm shift might be required for some parenting practitioners. Being aware and / or becoming familiar with the different issues in stepfamilies may involve challenges to existing beliefs, attitudes and myths for some practitioners. Assumptions and prejudices may have to be confronted. Moreover, this might be difficult for practitioners when faced with parents who can appear hostile and resistant. Some practitioners could hide behind workplace policies, rather than attempt building up relationships with these parents, but it is helpful to try and understand that parents might have had overly intrusive previous experiences.

Continuing professional development [CPD] courses could easily be developed along the lines of the accredited stepfamily parenting seminars outlined above in order to provide both existing and qualifying practitioners with the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to work with stepfamilies. In my University I currently provide a session on parenting in stepfamilies for students undertaking the Specialist Community Public Health Nurse [SCPHN] award [which incorporates health visitors, school nurses and sexual health practitioners]. Furthermore I am working towards incorporating this into CPD sessions for practice teachers who supervise the students. I have also facilitated several of these sessions for staff in Sure Start Children's Centre's around the region.

However, I would suggest that many health visitors and other parenting practitioners have a wealth of understanding, knowledge and skills of working with stepfamilies and could contribute and share good practice. For example, health visitors often have good working knowledge of the families, what does and doesn't work for them and those who have friends and family who give help and support. Nevertheless, sometimes due to different local organisational policies and procedures, the opportunities to share best practice not only within disciplines, but across multi-agency arenas become restricted. These are key operational issues which need to be articulated and rectified with solutions generated by those involved in day to day practice in the real world, but importantly supported by managers.

Improving education for health visitors and other parenting professionals is vital if the numbers of stepfamilies breaking up is to be reduced. Untold misery for thousands of parents and children could be prevented / eased if more knowledge, understanding and skills were made available to help parents and children through often normal, but troublesome times. Physical, mental, emotional and psycho-social issues are common during and after break up leading to pressures on already overburdened medical services [GPs, mental health services, CAMHS], legal, mediation and financial [CSA / child maintenance] services.

## **Parents**

A two way process building on what works for parents in stepfamilies will enable not only practice development for practitioners to help them to respond more effectively to parents' needs, but also a better understanding and normalisation of issues for parents, thus helping them to understand and hopefully better manage their issues. Helping and supporting parents to understand that all families have challenges, particularly at times of transition and crisis, and recognising that whilst the issues may be troublesome and different to previous experiences, they generally do not require clinical input. Enabling and supporting parents to develop their own knowledge, understanding and skills to feel confident in their parenting approaches

through explanations of for example the evolution of the stepfamily (Papernow 1993: 382-385) and the different stages of couple relationships (Kovacs 1983:183-210) aids an understanding of their experiences as normal. These approaches do not have to be complex, academic tomes, but rather simplified models adjusted to suit the needs of individual parents.

The next step of working with parents to help them create solutions to their challenges may involve new and different innovative approaches. But by working alongside, engaging and listening to their voices, giving encouragement is a good starting point. For example, helping parents develop new skills such as interpersonal, communication and conflict resolution skills may be necessary and it is essential that practitioners themselves feel equipped to deal with these issues and have the resources to sustain their approaches. Building on not only the parents internal resources, practitioners [in partnership with parents] could potentially draw on the parents' informal family and friends support.

## **Research**

Susie's plea to be seen not as a different family, but a family that is 'working' [Interview 4: 974], places value on working positively towards change. Inclusive views from parents in stepfamilies must occur if the breakdown of stepfamilies is to be tackled. Rather than parents in marginalised stepfamilies remaining invisible, they need to have a voice in the process of policy development. That process begins with research.

Whilst the last few years have produced some excellent qualitative and mixed method research on parenting support outcomes (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003; Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe 2004; Barrett 2005; Ghate 2005), there remains a tension, often driven by policy that these approaches are not as robust as RCTs, meta analyses and systematic reviews. However, I would suggest that there is a place for quantitative, qualitative and mixed method approaches. A good place to start would be an evidence base informed by the parents. Rather than parenting support needs'



assessments informed with data compiled largely from parenting providers (Klett-Davies, Skaliotis and Wollny 2009:35), real local engagement with parents is needed in the research process (Barrett 2007). This could be achieved by utilising a combination of sensitive research approaches, such as action research, informed by the parents themselves on what they think are the important aims and outcomes. While this approach could be led and overseen by research teams, it could be facilitated by health visitors and other parenting practitioners with appropriate skills training. Moreover, there is also a place for longitudinal cohort studies to determine long term outcomes, rather than the usual short term 'quick fix' solutions often mandated by policy.

Furthermore, research with stepfamilies undertaken by key organisations would be beneficial. For example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Family and Parenting Institute and Parentline Plus are just a few of the organisations which have the credibility and kudos to engage and disseminate to both policy makers and practitioners. In terms of dissemination for my study, I plan to summarise the findings in a newsletter format for the parents who participated in the study, if they can be accessed. Moreover, dissemination of the research and its outcomes through papers for conferences and journals in multi-agency arena, including health, social care, education and the voluntary sector will hopefully contribute towards influencing the policy making process.

#### **8.4 Conclusion: coming full circle**

...a culture where the key aspects of good parenting are widely understood and where all parents can benefit from advice and support... what is needed is a much wider culture change towards recognising the importance of parenting, and how society can support mothers and fathers to give their children the best start in life. We want parenting advice and support to be considered the norm ...

(HM Government 2011:31)

Whilst the above offering on improving social mobility from the Coalition Government appears promising, a caveat is that the continuation of the past is discursively revisited in the present. The Centre Forum's [LibDem Thinktank] 'Parenting Matters' (Paterson 2011), is in danger of continuing the theme of inept parents and demonstrates the gaping chasm between policy and practice misunderstandings and the reality of parents' lives. The proposed parenting initiatives include:

- transforming parenting from a private matter to a community matter within the 'localism' agenda
- recognising that universal parenting support is the best approach, but reality indicates that targeted parenting support should continue with the suggestion that NUDGE, a behavioural insight approach from the US, could be used to 'nudge' parents into better parenting with, for example a parenting / child development campaign based on the '5-a-day' fruit and vegetable programme<sup>53</sup>
- incentivising targeted participation from parents with supplementary benefits conditional on participating in parenting support initiatives which enable 'outcomes in children's education, "families" preventative healthcare and parents' employment' (Paterson 2011:54)
- payment by results for parenting providers able to attract marginalised parents

Thus, we appear to have come full circle in terms of parenting support with an array of suggestions for new policy underpinned with controlling ideologies akin to 19<sup>th</sup> century paternalism.

As I write this concluding chapter the 'broken society' ethos has gathered pace with a particular spotlight on marginalised groups and their supposed parenting deficit seen as a cause of rioting in several English cities. So the historical discourses continue, with the need for parenting policy and practice

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<sup>53</sup> 1. Read to your child for 15 minutes; 2. play with your child on the floor for 10 minutes; 3. talk to your child for 20 minutes with the TV off; 4. adopt positive attitudes towards your child and praise them frequently; 5. give your child a nutritious diet to aid development.

to control and correct marginalised parents' behaviour, in an effort to stem the intergenerational transmission of fecklessness, poverty and immorality. There is little acknowledgment of current policy change further reducing services and finances for marginalised groups, with structural issues of unemployment, poor housing and poor education just some of the challenges continuing the intractable inaccessibility to necessary capitals. Until the voices of parents in marginalised stepfamilies are heard, not only will the parents remain 'in the dark', but also policy and practice. Let the light shine through!

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## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX 1: Participant information sheet**

School of Health, Community and Education Studies  
Division of Primary & Community Care  
Room H202  
Coach Lane Campus (east)  
Coach Lane  
Newcastle  
NE7 7XA  
Tel. 0191 2156714  
e-mail: [ann.day@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:ann.day@northumbria.ac.uk)

#### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS**

Chief investigator Ann Day  
0191 2156714  
[ann.day@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:ann.day@northumbria.ac.uk)

#### **The research study title:**

The voices of parents in stepfamilies: perceptions and experiences of their parenting support needs.

#### **Invitation:**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

*Thank you for reading this.*

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

There is not a lot of research on what it is like to parent in a stepfamily, but there is some research suggesting that the issues stepfamilies face may be different to those in other families. The aim of this study, which is anticipated

to take one year for this part of the study, is to discover the views and experiences of parents on parenting in stepfamilies. Also, what, if anything, you think would be useful in terms of help and support for parents in stepfamilies.

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen as you are a parent in a stepfamily with children from a previous relationship and also have a child from your present partnership. Hopefully twenty couples from stepfamilies will be involved in the study.

### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect the standard of care you receive.

### **What will happen to me if I decide to take part?**

If you are interested in taking part in the study the researcher, who is a health visitor and a parent in a stepfamily, would like to interview you twice either in your home or, if you prefer, at your local clinic. She will ask you to share with her your views and experiences about being a parent in a stepfamily and what you think would be useful in terms of help and support for parents in stepfamilies. The first session will probably last 1-2 hours and will be audio taped. She would like to visit you again, probably about three months after the first interview to share with you her understanding of what you said in the interview and to check with you whether it is correct or not. The second session will probably last about 1 hour.

### **What do I have to do?**

If you are interested in taking part in the study the researcher will ask you to sign a consent form.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Sometimes talking about things can cause some people to feel upset. If this happens the researcher, with agreement from you, will arrange for you to see a professional person who will be able to help you. The researcher will also inform your GP.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

The findings from the study will hopefully lead to new knowledge, which in turn will inform policy and hopefully help both those people working with stepfamilies and stepfamilies themselves.

**What if new information becomes available?**

The researcher will keep you informed by letter of any new information that becomes available.

**What if something goes wrong?**

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for a legal action, but you may have to pay for it. Regardless of this, if you wish to complain, or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, the normal National Health Service complaints mechanisms should be available to you.

**Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

As this study is not being conducted by a GP, with your permission the researcher will inform your GP of your participation.

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you will have your name and address removed from it so that you cannot be recognised from it.

However, as a health visitor the researcher is bound by a Code of Professional Conduct, which states that she must protect confidential information that is given to her unless there is a risk of significant harm to you or others. So, for example, if anything was disclosed, such as abuse or suicidal intentions, then confidentiality could no longer be agreed.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

With your agreement the researcher intends to publish the findings from the study and you will be the first to receive the information in a newsletter. Your contribution will be anonymous. No names or addresses will be used, rather codes.

Also, a concise summary report of the findings will be sent to the health visitors and managers within your local Primary Care Trust (PCT).

A workshop will also be held, which you will be invited to, along with the local PCT and all local statutory agencies (health, education, social care) and voluntary services. After that, the researcher hopes to present the findings at national conferences and through journals and research networks, such as Universities and on-line national parenting support networks such as Sure Start, National Family & Parenting Institute, National Children's Bureau and Parentline Plus.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

Northumbria University is sponsoring this research study which is part of an educational research Doctorate qualification.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

Gateshead and South Tyneside Local Research Ethics Committee

**Contact for further information**

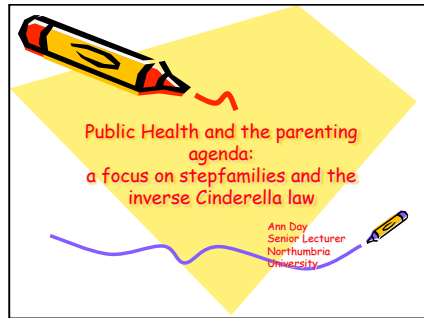
Prof John Ditch  
Northumbria University  
Academic Registry  
Ellison Terrace  
Newcastle  
NE1 8ST  
0191 22774000

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

**Thank you for taking part in this study!**

## APPENDIX 2: Presentations

### Presentation given at Northumbria University Public Health and Primary Care Research Network - April 2006



Public Health and the parenting agenda:  
a focus on stepfamilies and the inverse Cinderella law

Ann Day  
Senior Lecturer  
Northumbria University

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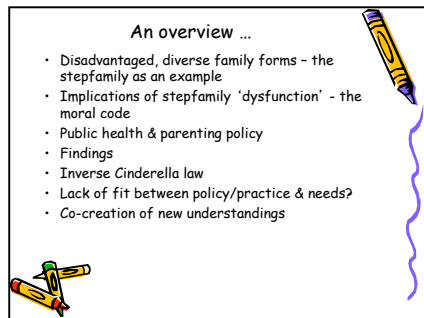
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An overview ...

- Disadvantaged, diverse family forms - the stepfamily as an example
- Implications of stepfamily 'dysfunction' - the moral code
- Public health & parenting policy
- Findings
- Inverse Cinderella law
- Lack of fit between policy/practice & needs?
- Co-creation of new understandings

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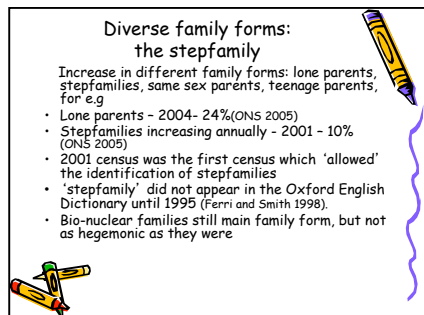
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Diverse family forms:  
the stepfamily

Increase in different family forms: lone parents, stepfamilies, same sex parents, teenage parents, for e.g.

- Lone parents - 2004 - 24% (ONS 2005)
- Stepfamilies increasing annually - 2001 - 10% (ONS 2005)
- 2001 census was the first census which 'allowed' the identification of stepfamilies
- 'stepfamily' did not appear in the Oxford English Dictionary until 1995 (Ferri and Smith 1998).
- Bio-nuclear families still main family form, but not as hegemonic as they were.

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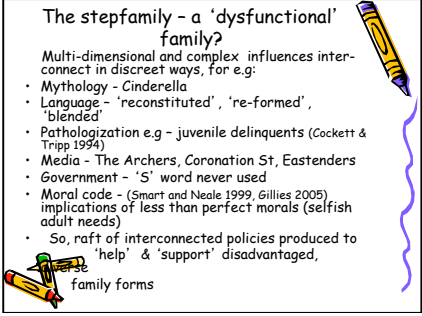
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**The stepfamily - a 'dysfunctional' family?**

Multi-dimensional and complex influences inter-connect in discreet ways, for e.g:

- Mythology - Cinderella
- Language - 'reconstituted', 're-formed', 'blended'
- Pathologization e.g - juvenile delinquents (Cockett & Tripp 1994)
- Media - The Archers, Coronation St, Eastenders
- Government - 'S' word never used
- Moral code - (Smart and Neale 1999, Gillies 2005) implications of less than perfect morals (selfish adult needs)
- So, raft of interconnected policies produced to 'help' & 'support' disadvantaged, family forms




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**Public health & parenting policy**

**Public health policies** (DH 1999, 2003, 2004, 2006) targeting inequality & disadvantage:

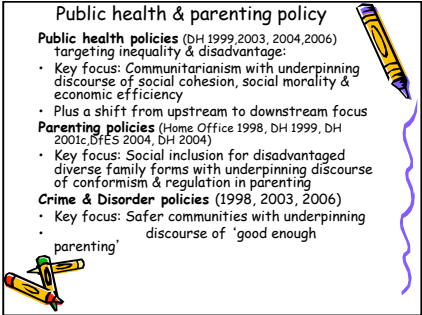
- Key focus: Communitarianism with underpinning discourse of social cohesion, social morality & economic efficiency
- Plus a shift from upstream to downstream focus

**Parenting policies** (Home Office 1998, DH 1999, DH 2001c, DFES 2004, DH 2004)

- Key focus: Social inclusion for disadvantaged diverse family forms with underpinning discourse of conformism & regulation in parenting

**Crime & Disorder policies** (1998, 2003, 2006)

- Key focus: Safer communities with underpinning discourse of 'good enough parenting'




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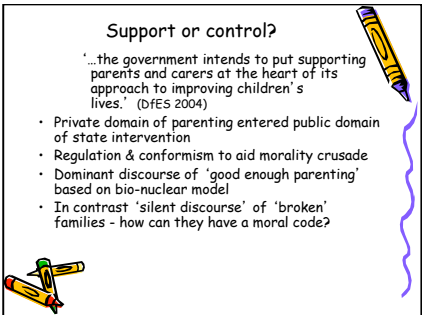
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**Support or control?**

'...the government intends to put supporting parents and carers at the heart of its approach to improving children's lives.' (DFES 2004)

- Private domain of parenting entered public domain of state intervention
- Regulation & conformism to aid morality crusade
- Dominant discourse of 'good enough parenting' based on bio-nuclear model
- In contrast 'silent discourse' of 'broken' families - how can they have a moral code?




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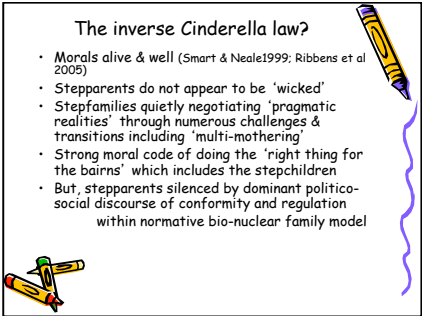
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**The inverse Cinderella law?**

- Morals alive & well (Smart & Neale 1999; Ribbens et al 2005)
- Stepparents do not appear to be 'wicked'
- Stepfamilies quietly negotiating 'pragmatic realities' through numerous challenges & transitions including 'multi-mothering'
- Strong moral code of doing the 'right thing for the bairns' which includes the stepchildren
- But, stepparents silenced by dominant politico-social discourse of conformity and regulation within normative bio-nuclear family model




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**Some examples...**

'..I find, sort of.. that C improved a hell of a lot, when he was sort of like living with me. Because I was going over to his school and taking an actual interest in him because his mother had more or less given up on C..'

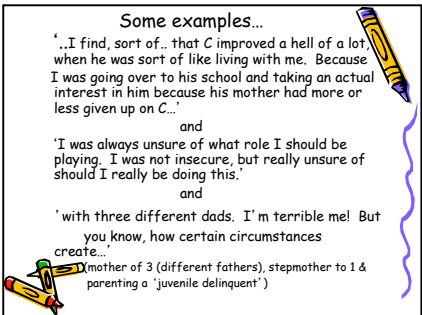
and

'I was always unsure of what role I should be playing. I was not insecure, but really unsure of should I really be doing this.'

and

'with three different dads. I'm terrible me! But you know, how certain circumstances create...'

(mother of 3 (different fathers), stepmother to 1 & parenting a 'juvenile delinquent')




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'teaching (the) children what's right and what's wrong. What's a good sense of, you know, right and wrong, really.'

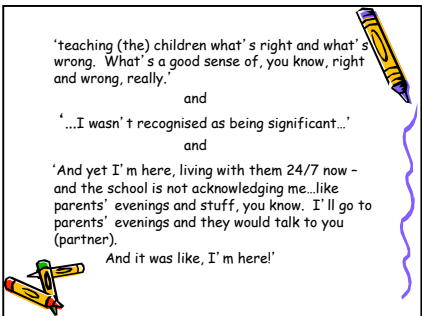
and

'...I wasn't recognised as being significant...'

and

'And yet I'm here, living with them 24/7 now - and the school is not acknowledging me...like parents' evenings and stuff, you know. I'll go to parents' evenings and they would talk to you (partner).

And it was like, I'm here!




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### A mismatch?

- So, a strong moral code appears to be guiding parenting practices
- But, moral judgements implicit in Government parenting policy together with a shift in PH from upstream to downstream appear to ignore this
- Regulation, control & conformism has lead to universal parenting support provision & practice which may not address different needs in stepfamilies & will prevent them from becoming 'fully engaged' (Wanless 2004)



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### A co-creation of new understandings

- Need to address this lack of 'fit' & provide services which are more appropriate
- 'Silent' discourse in stepfamilies needs to be heard
- A more informed conceptualisation of stepfamilies co-created alongside them will aid our understanding of parenting in stepfamilies
- The Cinderella myth can be put to bed!



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# Presentation given to Doctoral Group – June 2004



### Supporting families or controlling families?

- Supporting Families (Home Office 1998)
- Humanistic, caring supportive Govt.
- Underpinning discourse – control, coercion, targeted support
- HVs central to process of supporting families – ‘enhanced role for HVs’
- So, if Govt. discourse is one of control, where does this leave HVs?

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### An analysis of the paradox of HV practice

- Binary opposites of support and control
- Polarised approach to HV:
  1. Overt role: supportive & caring
  2. Covert role: controlling & curing mal-adaptive behaviour
- Dingwall et al (1988) suggest this is necessary – it enables the excluded to become the included
- Need to look at development of HV through lens of governmentality

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### ‘Governmentality’ (Foucault 1991)

- Governmentality can be enforced utilising Foucault’s instruments of disciplinary power as:
- Hierarchical observation or a ‘disciplinary gaze’
- Normalizing judgement
- The examination or ‘clinical gaze’

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**Genealogical analysis - 19<sup>th</sup> century to post WW1**

Changing focus on the body & its efficiency	Discourses of govern-mentality	Influences on health & welfare policy	Influences on HV practice
Physical efficiency of body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Imperialism</li> <li>•Motherhood</li> <li>•Eugenics</li> <li>•National efficiency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Public health</li> <li>•Medicine</li> <li>•Health of population</li> <li>•Social order</li> <li>•Discipline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Dev of HV 1867</li> <li>•High IMR</li> <li>•Mothers needed to be educated about hygiene &amp; nutrition</li> </ul>

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**Genealogical analysis - inter-war years to early 1960s**

Changing focus on the body & its efficiency	Discourses of govern-mentality	Influences on health & welfare policy	Influences on HV practice
Social efficiency of body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Social democracy</li> <li>•Welfarism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Creation of NHS</li> <li>•Increased power of hospital-based medicine</li> <li>•Less Public Health</li> <li>•More welfare services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Model of 'normal' family</li> <li>•Surveillance of families</li> <li>•Potential for 'risk'</li> <li>•Construct of 'problem' family</li> <li>•Socialisation into 'normal' society</li> </ul>

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**Genealogical analysis - early 1960s to 1990s**

Changing focus on the body & its efficiency	Discourses of govern-mentality	Influences on health & welfare policy	Influences on HV practice
The individual body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Consumerism</li> <li>•Individualism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Health a consumer good attained by individual effort</li> <li>•Health a personal responsibility attained by the avoidance of risk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Targeting individual behaviour</li> <li>•Child health surveillance</li> <li>•Child abuse due to 'dysfunctional' families</li> </ul>

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**Genealogical analysis -1990s to present**

Changing focus on the body & its efficiency	Discourses of govern-mentality	Influences on health & welfare policy	Influences on HV practice
Community efficiency of body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Community-anism</li> <li>•Homogeneity</li> <li>•Social inclusion</li> </ul>	Govt. provides structures for health, but individuals responsibility to use it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Inequalities in health</li> <li>•Parenting education &amp; support for families</li> <li>•Parenting groups</li> <li>•Social inclusion - teenage pregnancy</li> <li>•Sure start</li> </ul>

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**Accommodation of plurality of practice**

- Interdependency of support & control as a key to identity for HVs.
- Construction of HV by others & a readiness to conform to what others want:
  - Govt. policies
  - Influence of medical profession (Clarke 2000)
  - Managerial pragmatism/ignorance
  - Issues of gendered identity (Davies 1995)

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**The way forwards?**

- Professional discourse on nature of support & caring
- Articulation of the essence of HV work focusing on its social models of care (supporting families)
- Reconstruction of role of HV through Public Health must be made explicit
- Real involvement in community development work in partnership, not as experts (Clarke 1998)
- A total paradigm shift from controlling - supporting

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