MAKING A GO OF IT

A Study of Stepfamilies in Sheffield

Jacqueline Burgoyne and David Clark

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Volume 2

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Contents

Preface

In this book we present the principal findings from a study of forty remarried couples carried out in Sheffield between 1976 and 1979. As we have been writing we have had a number of different audiences in mind, so that the chapters which follow include not only a description of how the project evolved and a detailed presentation of our findings, but also a more general discussion of remarriage as a social institution and some of the main theoretical and methodological issues which bear upon the study of family and domestic life.

The couples in our study gave up a great deal of time to talk to David Clark and to answer his questions. On occasion some of them admitted to having benefited from the opportunity to talk freely about the particular circumstances of their family lives, but for the most part their principal reason for taking part in the study was a desire to help others in a similar position. We have tried to honour that commitment by writing a book which we hope will be interesting and accessible to remarried couples themselves as well as to members of those occupations who have a 'professional' interest in families of all kinds, and to present our findings in a way which allows those who took part to 'speak for themselves'. As a result the first versions of this book were, from a publisher's point of view, impossibly long; several edits later we trust their voices can still be heard. In the meantime several articles on specific aspects of the study have been published in various books and journals and JB has also written a short 'self-help' book on the problems of separation and divorce entitled *Breaking Even: Divorce, Your Children and You* (Penguin, April 1984) which draws upon this study in several places.

As we hope to demonstrate, the beliefs and professional decisions of judges, magistrates and lawyers, social workers, counsellors

and doctors and, on occasion, teachers and clergymen greatly affected the couples in our study, both through their specific determination of some aspect of their domestic life and family identity as well as through their influential contributions to the climate of public opinion about remarriage and steprelationships generally. As we suggest in the first chapter the findings of social scientists are frequently referred to in the training of members of such occupations and must, therefore, have some sort of effect on their understanding of family relationships, including those created by a remarriage. We hope that this book will be widely read by such practitioners.

The first two chapters, which deal with the frameworks and perspectives on remarriage which informed our work and a description of how the research itself was carried out, offer a background to our findings so that some readers may prefer to go straight to chapters 3 to 6 in which our findings are presented. Discussion of the study couples as a 'sample' and their likeness to the remarried population as a whole may be found in chapter 2 (pp. 28–53). Appendix 1 contains a life history for each of the couples who took part in the study. These were compiled after the interviews were completed; each couple chose a pseudonym and checked and approved the content of their life history. Wherever we have used quotations from interviews in the text we have tried to present them in a way which makes them immediately intelligible but because of the complications endemic to remarriage, readers may find it helpful to refer to these for further details about the individual involved. An impression of the diversity of history, circumstances and experiences of the couples in the study may be gained simply by reading straight through these life histories. The difficulties we have had in analysing and presenting our material, and which have made the inclusion of the life histories so important, point very clearly to the paradox at the heart of any personal, professional or academic understanding of contemporary family life. Our appreciation of an individual's sense of their home, family and intimate relationships as unique must be matched with an ability to perceive similarities and trends in patterns of family life, and to recognise the institutions and structures of power in industrial societies which shape what we designate as our 'personal' life.

There are two groups of people without whom this study would, literally, not have taken place. First we would like to take this opportunity of placing on record our thanks to all those who took part in the study. We have no adequate way of expressing our gratitude to them for their generosity and trust; in a very real sense this book is *for* them and for the unnumbered others who find themselves in similar circumstances. We would also like to thank

Sheffield City Polytechnic, especially the former Deputy Principal, Mr Douglas Thacker, for considering this project worth supporting in the first place, as well as the Social Science Research Council whose grant facilitated its completion.

We are particularly grateful to a number of colleagues with whom we have discussed our work over the years. Robert Chester of Hull University gave us a good deal of advice and encouragement in its early stages and throughout we have benefited from the comments and criticisms of contributers to the Chelsea College Seminar on divorce and remarriage and the National Marriage Guidance Council's Research Seminars.

Diana Cosham and Barbara Cleaver, who typed the interviews for us, deserve recognition as an indispensable part of the research team. This was, at times, a very difficult and trying task and we realised that they made our work infinitely easier because of the very high standards they set themselves. We should also like to thank Diana, Barbara, Mies Rule, Lorraine Gibb and Brenda Chatterton for typing various parts of this manuscript. Mrs Margaret Foster, who looked after inter-library loans at the Collegiate Crescent Library of Sheffield City Polytechnic, dealt with our requests for obscure material tolerantly and successfully.

In a different sphere we would both like to thank Diane Clark for sharing so fully in our preoccupations as we worked together on this study and, in particular, for her support to David whilst he was interviewing. JB would also like to thank David Hills for encouraging her to undertake this research in the first place; her sister, Alison Jefferson, and her colleagues, Eileen Green and Rob Sykes, for their supportive friendship over many years.

What we fervently hope will be the final version of this book has been prepared in the months immediately following the launching of a British Stepfamily Association. For reasons which will become obvious as you read this book, we wish it well.

Chapter 1

The theory and practice of remarriage

'The triumph of hope over experience' was how Dr Johnson described the swift remarriage of a widower who had been unhappy with his first wife. The judgment may be less than charitable, yet it is one which touches on the experience of that increasing number of women and men who encounter more than one marriage in a lifetime, for recent high rates of divorce have by no means dampened enthusiasm for matrimony, though they may have profound effects upon what we understand by both the personal relationships and the institution of marriage. The experience of remarriage, seen not only at an individual level but also within the context of the broader structures which shape it, forms the subject matter of this book. Through it we seek to go beyond divorce and remarriage as a public issue in order to say something about modern family life in general. For remarriage constitutes a *sociological* as well as a *social* problem and accordingly its study elicits questions of both theory and practice.

Examination of the relationship between personal experience and the public, institutional structures of contemporary societies is an essential concern for sociology. C. Wright Mills (1967) makes the point abundantly clear in his famous distinction between the 'personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'. For Mills such a dichotomy is at the heart of the sociological imagination, based as it is upon the contention that troubles are transformed into issues when 'some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened' and when the private trouble is reformulated in terms of its consequences for the political and decision-making sphere. Public issues, then, have no reality *sui generis*, but become such as a result of redefinition of the situation whereby the problem is designated a matter of public, political concern. Mills includes

marriage and divorce as one of his examples of how this transformation takes place:

> Consider marriage. Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate during the first four years of marriage is 250 out of every 1,000 attempts, this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them. (op. cit., p. 9)

Thus marriage breakdown and divorce become public issues partly because large numbers of individuals are involved and also because the numbers involved imply a threat to the 'cherished values' associated with life-long marriage and monogamy. Recognising that remarriage also has both personal and public dimensions, Mills's distinction represents for us a way of structuring our preliminary discussion of remarriage and its social consequences.[1] Such discussion must, however, also include consideration of the changes taking place in patterns of marriage, family and personal life generally, for as Bernard has argued in her own study of remarriage in the United States,

> although the marriages here described are remarriages and the families involved are the families of *re*marriage, almost every problem that the family of the first marriage has to meet must also be met by these families. . . . All that we know about marriage and the family in general, therefore, is pertinent to an understanding of the men and women and children (in stepfamilies). (Bernard, 1971, p. 3)

By the same token, 'the study of remarriage illuminates both substantively and theoretically the nature of marriage and family life in general' (ibid.).

Family life as a private matter

In contemporary industrial societies such as our own we take for granted that family troubles are essentially personal matters for which individuals must accept responsibility, and, on occasion, take the blame. By the same token domestic life based upon membership of a family/household is widely regarded as one of the most important sources of individual satisfaction and fulfilment whose benefits are sharply contrasted with the public worlds of politics, work and bureaucratically organised urban life.

If the external, public world of work necessarily involves the strain and conflict of obeying orders, acting out roles and few

opportunities for autonomy and self-expression, the fiercely protected privacy of domestic life provides, by contrast, a haven or retreat in which the 'real self' is renewed and strengthened. Thus the family life of others, even that of kin and neighbours who live in close proximity, frequently remains largely unknown and mysterious to outsiders unless its privacy and autonomy is threatened by some internal or external crisis. The fact that the everyday occurrences of family life remain largely inaccessible to curious outsiders has important implications for the researcher, which will be discussed in chapter 2, but it is also important to consider both the origins of beliefs about the family as a private sphere and the extent to which family life, in fact, enjoys such autonomy and insulation from public intervention and control.

Writers of many different views and perspectives all tend to agree that contemporary conceptions of the family and domestic life as 'an emotional refuge in a cold and competitive society' (Lasch, 1977, p. 6) have their origins in the social and economic changes of the Industrial Revolution, particularly the separation of home and work and thus private and public life.

Such changes in patterns of family life in the nineteenth century have been widely documented (for example, Anderson, 1971; Sennett, 1977; Laslett, 1977; Banks, 1956 and Hobsbawm, 1977). The distinctive characteristics of Victorian upper-middle-class family life, with its emphasis on the privacy and separation of family life, are best understood in the wider context of Victorian bourgeois perceptions of their new industrial world. To be sure set pieces like the Great Exhibition of 1851 demonstrated pride in industry and its achievements, but this was matched by a fear of some of the consequences of such a creation. The great cities, with their poverty, crime and political unrest, were stark reminders of the dark side of the industrial world so that, for the bourgeoisie at least, home and family life came to provide a refuge and escape. This retreat into domesticity particularly affected women and children as changes in dominant ideologies dictated that because of their innocence and vulnerability they should be increasingly closely protected and shielded from potential danger. Men, by contrast, had to take their chance amidst the dangers and temptations of the world beyond the family which offered many opportunities for the infringement of the strict sexual codes of morality which buttressed a family unit based on life-long monogamy. As the privacy of family life increased, those public appearances in which the social rank and respectability of the family as whole could be confirmed and displayed became more significant. Banks's study of Victorian middle-class lifestyles and patterns of expenditure demonstrates clearly how the expansion of the middle classes in the nineteenth century was

accompanied by the development of characteristically bourgeois patterns of domestic expenditure and consumption (Banks, 1956). The ownership and display of appropriate symbols of prosperity, achieved through dedication to a work ethic which emphasised diligence, thrift and self-denial were important ways of demonstrating respectability. Because of adherence to such values of thrift and self-denial, the problem for the middle classes became one of how to spend their wealth in socially approved ways. This was resolved by concentrating consumption within the home and family circle, so that whilst gambling and 'riotous living' were frowned upon, domestic expenditure on the home itself, servants, entertainment and clothing was an important source of prestige and a legitimate area of public display. As Hobsbawm has suggested (Hobsbawm, 1977, p. 271) material goods and commodities provided the cues necessary to 'place' a man and his family in an age of unprecedented social change, social mobility and alterations in patterns of consumption. The material objects of this bourgeois world were used to confer prestige and social approval, so that public status and identity became entwined with certain approved patterns of domestic consumption and the exemplary performance of prescribed family roles. As a result beliefs in the importance of particular patterns of family life gained increased currency and became an integral part of the dominant ideas of the age. On a limited scale, members of the lower middle class consciously attempted to emulate the domestic ambience and family commitments of their superiors. Furthermore, aspects of bourgeois family morality were also pressed upon the working class and the poor through school and church teaching as well as the activities of both private philanthropists and the growing army of officials who began to be involved in the organisation and control of the family life of the masses. By the beginning of the twentieth century a distinctive public morality had established itself which emphasised the importance of a stable family life for both personal welfare and the public good. Yet whilst the personal and individual benefits of family membership accrued from the apparent privacy and autonomy of the domestic unit, at the same time an increasing range of 'experts' and practitioners began to stake their claim in this allegedly private sphere, especially in relation to the well-being of children.

Writers of widely divergent theoretical and political perspectives have described contemporary family life in terms of its increased *privatisation*. Whilst their assumptions and explanations differ, they point to a decline in the significance of wider kin and neighbourhood networks and an apparent retreat into home-based domesticity. Three versions of this process of privatisation are summarised below with the intention of highlighting those features

which cast most light on the way in which the boundary between the 'public' and 'private' spheres should be defined and understood in our present and more specific consideration of contemporary patterns of remarriage.

Changes in structure and function and the emergence of the isolated nuclear family

One of the most well-known theoretical contributions to sociological discussion of the changing structure and function of the family was made by Talcott Parsons and, as both Morgan and Rosenbaum have pointed out, his writing has continued to exercise a profound influence on the study of the family, even though his more general works have been widely and justly criticised (Morgan, 1975, pp. 25 ff; Rosenbaum, 1978, pp. 74 ff.). Functionalist perspectives based on Parsons's work are still presented as self-evident propositions in much family sociology and continue to provide a framework for the kind of public and political discussions of family life which emphasise the benefits to society as a whole of conventional family beliefs and structures.

Writing in response to a variety of analyses suggesting that industrialisation had brought about a decline in the significance of the family, Parsons argued that changes in family structure, particularly the isolation of the conjugal family from the wider kin network, were an important concomitant of the process of modernisation. The structural differentiation of contemporary society thus removed some of the family's functions to more specialised agencies, for example, education to schools and health care to specialised medicine. But at the same time the family itself became '*a more specialised agency than before*, probably more specialised than it has been in any previously known society' (Parsons and Bales, 1955, p. 9). As a result, Parsons argues, society becomes *more* dependent on the family for the performance of those specialised functions designated to it. These are:

> first, the primary socialisation of children so that they can truly become members of the society into which they are born; second, the stabilisation of the adult personalities of the population of the society. (ibid., p. 16)

Thus, as changes in structure make the nuclear family an increasingly specialised agency, families become ' "factories" which produce human personalities' (ibid, p. 16). Furthermore, a decline in family size, the increasing normality of households limited to two generations, and a relative lack of contact with the wider kin

network each contribute to the efficiency of such family production. The small, isolated family group is also able to concentrate its energies and resources upon its children. For its adult members, on the other hand, it is a source of personality stabilisation through the creation of a 'sharp discrimination in status . . . between family members and non-members' (ibid., p. 20).

As a result writers and researchers who employ, albeit implicitly, a Parsonian view of the family make a clear distinction between functional and dysfunctional family structures. Conventional family units which act as an effective socialising agency for children as well as emotional fulfilment and stability for its adult members appear to enjoy considerable privacy and autonomy in order to get on with their job effectively. By contrast 'problem' families of all kinds, as well as other deviant groups or individuals, elicit much greater public curiosity and scrutiny from policy-makers, welfare practitioners and even, on occasion, researchers like ourselves.

Privatisation and changes in class structure: the family and the embourgeoisement thesis

Discussion of post-war changes in the British and American class structure has focused in the main on the political consequences of transformations in working-class lifestyles. References to the increasing affluence, instrumental work orientations and altered political consciousness of the 'new working class' of affluent workers have therefore been accompanied by descriptions of considerable changes in family life and in patterns of domestic consumption (Klein, 1965). In an important paper which stimulated a number of empirical studies Lockwood described the 'privatised worker' as one who derives little or no satisfaction from his work and for whom work 'is socially isolating, and to a large extent socially meaningless; a situation in which the dominant relationship is the cash nexus' (Lockwood, 1975, p. 22). He argues that post-war experiences of housing and residential mobility reinforced certain aspects of the work experience of this group. In their later, classic study of affluent workers in Luton, Goldthorpe *et al.* found that the men in their sample who had dependent children and thus bore heavy financial burdens as husbands and fathers were most likely to have instrumental attitudes to work. Work was therefore perceived primarily in terms of a set of goals external to it but whose attainment was only economically possible through the form of labour they had adopted (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1969, p. 147). By contrast, family life was regarded as 'a major source of expressive and affective satisfactions' contrasting sharply with the world of work (ibid.,

p. 149). The authors concluded that in the future there would be 'mounting inducements to relegate work to the level of merely instrumental activity and to seek employment which offers a high economic return' (ibid., p. 174). Moreover, as the manual worker became more 'family-centred' expectations of him as husband, father and bread-winner were intensified:

> To the extent that his out-of-work life becomes dominated by home and family concerns, the link between this and the worker's occupational life is likely to be narrowed to one of a largely economic kind. In other words, a privatised social life and an instrumental orientation to work may in this way be seen as mutually supportive aspects of a particular life-style. (ibid., p. 175).

This particular version of the privatisation thesis stresses critical connections between economic structures of both production and consumption and the retreat of the working class, led by its most affluent members, into a private family-based domestic life, which despite certain innovatory and prototypical characteristics was hitherto more typical of the middle class.

Marriage, personal life and the growth of modern consciousness

The problem of the personal and social consequences of industrialisation has been a major preoccupation of sociology from its earliest beginnings and many writers have included a specific consideration of its effects upon patterns of family life. As part of a much broader concern with the forms of consciousness which are associated with modernisation, Berger and Kellner argue that marriage has become the relationship in which *par excellence* adults learn to make sense of the social worlds they inhabit. Their well-known argument, based on an earlier theoretical treatise by Berger and Luckmann (1971) is that modernisation, defined as 'the institutional concomitants of technologically produced growth' (Berger and Kellner, 1974, p. 15) has been accompanied by fundamental changes in consciousness, affecting the individual's experience of everyday life. For example, they point to the web of meanings attached to every detail and aspect of everyday life through which men and women make sense of and negotiate their daily routines. Where such meanings are shared by a group of individuals they can be said to occupy the same 'life-world'. The highly developed division of labour within modern society, however, makes for not one, but a plurality of life-worlds; each has its own routines, patterns and symbols of interaction. Consequently, life may be

experienced as atomised and segmented. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this is the division between public and private spheres. Thus urban consciousness, which, because of mass media, education and so on, is not confined to those who actually live in large cities, is essentially pluralistic. The individual is thereby presented with a range of options – in beliefs, values, lifestyles – from which he or she may choose according to preference. Such a wide variety of possible identities and careers encourages the individual to expect, or possibly fear, personal changes in the future which will necessitate coming to terms with new life-worlds. Within this tapestry of past and anticipated change, individual identity and biography run as a constant, integrating thread. In consequence, Berger and Kellner argue, identity in the modern world is peculiarly 'open' or 'unfinished'.

> Biography is . . . apprehended both as a migration through different social worlds and as the successive realisation of a number of possible identities. . . . This open ended quality of modern identity engenders psychological strains and makes the individual peculiarly vulnerable to shifting definitions of himself by others. (Ibid., p. 73)

A 'permanent identity crisis' (ibid., p. 74) thus pervades modern consciousness wherein considerable emphasis is placed upon the notion of the individual as the author of his or her own destiny.

Berger and Kellner argue that much of this process of identity creation takes place within the private sphere, which is 'more and more segregated from the immediate control of public institutions (especially the economic and political ones) and yet defined and utilised as the main social area for the individual's self-realisation' (ibid., p. 31). Most central of all is the married partnership, which has become the vital context within which individual identity can be understood and negotiated. They illustrate this through the examples of courtship and the period of early marriage, where, in conversations, accounts of past biographies, exchanges of opinions and – especially – planning for the future, the new couple arrived at shared distinctions and understandings. A joint life-world is thereby created which will enable them to make sense of everyday life, both within and beyond the private sphere itself.

For Berger and Kellner the privatisation of family life, which is the focus of so much emotional and psychological investment for the individual, is the result of a process of modernisation in which, 'Public institutions now confront the individual as an immensely powerful and alien world, incomprehensible in its inner workings, anonymous in its human character' (ibid., p. 32). By contrast, the private sphere of the family and personal relationships offers the

individual 'power, intelligibility, and, literally, a name, the apparent power to fashion a world . . . that will reflect his own being'. Accordingly, when the stakes are so high, individuals have 'no tolerance for a less than completely successful marital arrangement' (ibid., p. 46).

All three accounts focus on the apparent separation of domestic, family and personal life from the public sphere of the economy, politics and the state. Whilst the functionalist version implies that this privacy and autonomy is both functionally desirable and has some basis in reality, the other two versions, although primarily concerned with the personal and public effects of such beliefs, treat the notion of an independent, autonomous 'private sphere' as inherently problematic. This issue is of considerable contemporary political significance. The more persuasively it is argued that 'the family' is different from other areas of life and should, wherever possible, be protected from state intervention of any kind, the more the economic leader, or 'head', of the family, stereotypically the husband/father, is encouraged to care and provide for 'his own' by making individual arrangements for housing, health care, education, insurance and pensions for his family within the significantly named 'private sector'. Thus the belief that the family is, or ought to be protected as a private arena insulated where possible from state intervention has political as well as personal implications. Consequently descriptions and analyses of the family in the literature of the social sciences which consciously stress, or even tacitly imply, the autonomy of the family unit in contemporary society may serve, through their subsequent popularisation, to legitimate further a particular ideological view of family life. In addition, as Brittan (1977) has suggested, where there is a strong commitment to the view that the family is the basic, central institution of modern society and that problems in other spheres, e.g. juvenile delinquency, school achievement, attitudes to work and employment, have their origins in the family, then solutions to social problems will be limited to intervention in the lives of those families who are obviously at fault or in trouble (Brittan, 1977, p. 71). Thus 'the family' or, more specifically, particular kinds of families, are frequently designated as a source of widespread problems for political and ideological reasons and an association is made between the state of 'the family' and the nation's moral and economic health.

Clearly those writers who have associated the growth in privatised lifestyles with changes in class structure and orientations towards work recognise the critical interdependence between public and private spheres. The construction and daily organisation of a private domestic family life in which the worker can 'be himself' depends upon his income and position in the housing market and is

much affected by both the context and timetable of his working life. Thus, as Goldthorpe and Lockwood's analysis shows, in subtle and complex ways, the privatised lifestyles of affluent workers remain clearly distinguishable from their non-manual counterparts. Such analyses draw our attention, therefore, to the continuing effects of class inequalities on family and personal life.

By contrast, although Berger and Kellner acknowledge the interrelationship between the public world of institutions and the private sphere of personal life, referring to a 'dialectical relationship between . . . what is experienced as outside reality (the world of institutions etc.) and what is experienced as being within the consciousness of the individual' (op. cit., p. 32), most of their analysis seems to be focused on subjective meanings and Brittan's criticisms of their general propositions apply equally well to their specific discussion of marriage. Their construction of an ideal-typical married relationship based on the American middle classes therefore precludes consideration of how social inequalities based on either social classes or gender differences affect opportunities, expectations and the subjective meanings which individuals attach to their own lives and futures. If a sense of individuality, autonomy and freedom is based upon being able to choose and negotiate alternative biographies, then white Anglo-Saxon, male college graduates clearly have many more alternatives outside the realms of pure fantasy than black, female educational failures. The most obvious defects in their analysis of marriage occur where they entirely ignore the effects which macro-structures have on everyday experiences of married life, and more specifically, the ways in which structural factors determine how the expectations and experiences of men and women will differ in marriage. Everyday talk in which married couples make sense of the past and plan for a joint future takes place in given historical circumstances, structural contexts and particular sets of constraints. Such constraints are both economic, affecting life chances and standards of living, and ideological, in that individuals are not entirely free to define their own life-worlds. They therefore draw on socially available meanings and moralities which structure and limit the range of alternatives open to them. For example, Berger and Kellner emphasise the increasingly egalitarian nature of married partnership and yet their article in which, incidentally, individuals are always referred to as 'he', ignores the ways in which the new joint biography to be created after marriage and especially after parenthood, varies in relation to the differing experience of the male and female partners before marriage. As Bernard has argued, there is a wealth of evidence to show that marriage both means different things to men and women and also has very different consequences for the two sexes

(Bernard, 1973, pp. 19–41). This omission on Berger and Kellner's part appears to be linked with their failure to consider more than superficially the extent to which the characterisations and scripts of married life are already written as part of much broader structural configurations. Their overall problem, therefore, lies in an over-emphasis on the autonomy of the private sphere (see Morgan, 1981). Although this book is principally concerned with a specific aspect of family life, remarriage, and a particular family structure, the stepfamily, the issues created by the research we describe may only be adequately understood by reference to much broader questions about the significance of family life and the extent of public influence and control over the family as an apparently private sphere. In some respects remarried couples and their children provide a particularly useful 'case study' from which to consider and evaluate these broader theoretical issues because, as we intend to show in chapter 4, the experience of divorce and remarriage is likely to bring such couples in contact with a number of experts and public agencies and thus under greater public scrutiny and control than their first married counterparts.

Remarriage as a private trouble

Most of the private troubles of the remarried stem from an earlier stage in their biography and remarriage is frequently seen as a solution to the individual and social problems associated with widowhood, marital separation and lone parenthood. As a result, as we hope to demonstrate from the results of our own study, whilst individual expectations are high, couples bring to their new partnerships an emotional and material inheritance from the past which inevitably complicates their married and domestic life, at least during the early years of their new partnership, and sometimes for very much longer periods.

Whether to remarry at all and whom to choose pose problems not shared in the same way by those marrying for the first time. At first sight a second marriage may offer solutions to the material, practical and emotional problems of widowhood, separation or single parenthood. Women left on their own to bring up children might find in a new partner a degree of economic security and relief from the ambiguity of their formerly married status whilst at the same time offer their male counterparts the comforts of a shared domestic life and the restoration of married 'normality'. At one level the advantages of remarriage are overwhelming but studies of the widowed and divorced show that some, at least, feel ambivalent about the prospect.

Whether male or female, widowed parents tend to wait longer than their divorced counterparts before remarrying. This is demonstrated in the National Children's Bureau study of one-parent families; a larger proportion of the divorced mothers had remarried (25 per cent) or set up home with a man in the years between when the study child was seven and eleven than either the widowed mothers (15 per cent) or those with illegitimate children (9 per cent) (Ferri, 1976).

The National Children's Bureau study also investigated parents' attitudes to remarriage, showing more widespread negative attitudes to remarriage among the divorced and separated than the widowed (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 *Parents' attitude to remarriage*

Percentage	Widowed	Separated/divorced
Positive	18	18
Negative	40	59
Uncertain/other	41	22

(Ferri, 1976, Supplementary Table)

Goode argues from his American data that divorced women experience strong pressure upon them to remarry. He describes their situation as one of institutional ambiguity where conflicts stem both from the social disapproval they experience and from their own status confusion. Such conflicts are resolved through remarriage:

> The greater clarity of role definition that results is easily seen. So far as strangers are concerned there is no particular reason to question the new marriage, there is a father for the children and a common domicile. The mother is once more wife-mother and the lesser events, problems and solutions of daily life are very similar to those in families where there has been no history of divorce. (Goode, 1956, p. 211)

In a more recent British study Geoffrey Gorer also asked his divorced respondents about their attitudes to remarriage; half expected to marry again, one-third already had a second partner in mind, whilst a quarter did not expect to remarry and a quarter were uncertain (Gorer, 1973, p. 226). These relatively high levels of uncertainty and even antipathy to remarriage suggest that Goode's conclusions might need to be modified in the light of British evidence. In the case of the bereaved, however, it is likely that feelings of loyalty to a dead partner and the desire to conform to

social convention will deter widowed parents from seeking a rapid remarriage. More especially they may be inhibited from expressing such intentions to the researcher; with some justification we might see Goode's concept of 'status confusion' as a more typical characteristic of the widow or widower than of the divorced person. Some of Marsden's informants discussed the significance of continuing to wear wedding rings:

> taking the ring off signalised a definitive resolve in these circumstances and usually indicated that a woman was once again seeking marriage or had definitely ended her marriage. All the widows and almost all the separated women wore rings but only two-thirds of the divorced or unmarried mothers did. (Marsden, 1969, p. 160)

Marris, in his study of *Widows and their Families* found that

> the greatest objection to remarriage . . . was the belief that they could never love another as much as the husband they had lost, and hence they would not sacrifice their independence to a stranger, whom they could not help comparing unfavourably with the man whose place he had taken. (1958, p. 58)

The legal formality of divorce proceedings, even when they are not simply making marriage to a previously selected partner possible, seem to set people free to look for someone else in a way which is not shared by bereaved parents who can see no formal end to their period of mourning. For Marsden's widows this was most often signified by the advice of kin and friends to *begin to forget* and think of finding someone new.

Although the percentage of widows and widowers is about the same, widowers left to care for dependent children are probably more likely to remarry than widows with dependent children. George and Wilding's study of motherless families demonstrates that, in addition to the domestic and economic difficulties encountered by fathers bringing up their children on their own, they face considerable misunderstanding and social disapproval. Whilst mothers are expected to be able to cope on their own, and are admired for doing so, fathers are frequently seen to be somehow less than men for attempting it (George and Wilding, 1972, p. 39).

Those who consciously decide that they do wish to remarry face a number of practical problems when it comes to meeting a new partner in a social world where it seems that all leisure and informal social interaction is based on couples. In addition, the sense of guilt and recrimination over the failure of a first marriage which continues to haunt many divorcees may undermine confidence to the extent that they are unsure about being able to choose more wisely

next time. Indeed, some may question whether or not they are capable of sustaining a successful new partnership at all.

Conventional wisdom characterises early married life as a period of personal change and adjustment to each other and to the married state and although remarried partners are used to 'being married' itself, their early married life may have other complications. By definition couples are older than their first-time counterparts and have thus already established day-to-day personal and domestic routines stemming from their first marriage and, possibly, a period spent on their own. Everyday domestic life, which is constituted from accustomed preferences surrounding, for example, food, the timing of meals, styles of eating; whether and what to watch on television; leisure activities; patterns of friendship, neighbouring and contact with kin may all have very different meanings for each partner as they begin a joint domestic life together. In addition, the material and economic constraints of income, maintenance arrangements, position in the housing market and so on which determine standards of living and influence domestic lifestyles may pose particular problems for those remarried partners who continue to pay or receive maintenance for the children of their first marriage.

Conventional wisdom, supported by much of the social science literature on steprelationships, also suggests that the most significant problems of the remarried arise when one or both of the partners brings children of their first marriage into the new household. The negative stereotypes attached to stepparents, particularly stepmothers, in a wide variety of cultures and historical periods, suggest that conflict between stepkin is regarded as both endemic and inevitable. A number of British and American women journalists have written personal accounts of their experiences of remarriage (Maddox, 1975; Simon, 1964; Thomson, 1967; Rooseveldt and Lofas, 1976). These writers demonstrate considerable agreement about the common problems of steprelationships many of which, with those of the remarrying couples themselves, may have their origins in the earlier experiences of the children involved. For many of these children a custodial parent's remarriage represents yet another domestic and personal change in the sequence of events which started when they were first made aware of their parents' intention to part, bringing in train a variety of new relationships and potential anxieties. In such circumstances differing experiences and expectations about the web of everyday family life cause conflict and uncertainty. As there appear to be few norms structuring the stepparent role in our own society many men and women may find themselves trying to construct a new role *de novo*. Hampered by their unfamiliarity with their newly acquired

children, and in some cases with parenthood itself, they feel uncertain about their own legitimacy as a parent to the child or children of their new partner. In addition they may experience considerable jealousy and frustration, perhaps shared by their partner, at the way instant parenthood impinges on the private pleasures of a new relationship.

There seems to be general agreement that stepmothers have a much more difficult time than stepfathers. The impressions of investigative journalists (Maddox, 1975; Thomson, 1967) are partially confirmed by survey data from Bowerman and Irish (1962), Duberman (1975) and Chester (1977). A number of explanations have been advanced for this, which may be summarised under two main headings. First, the previous family experiences of children who acquire full-time stepmothers are likely to have been the more unsettling and distressing. Second, it is widely agreed in our own culture that the mother's role as parent is the more demanding and diffuse, so that much more is expected of the stepmother who must try to become substitute parent to children whose childhood histories, tastes and idiosyncracies are virtually unknown to her.

It is safe to assume that in general, children left with their father after the death or departure of their mother will probably have experienced a period of relatively greater emotional change and domestic upheaval than children left with their mother. A period of prolonged illness or the crisis of an unexpected death may affect the bereaved mother or father equally, but, as George and Wilding (1972) demonstrate, the emergency care and support offered to fathers who for one reason or another are left to cope on their own, is likely to be gradually withdrawn as the crisis is felt to have passed. If the children are still young their father must either find substitute care for them from amongst their female kin, pay a housekeeper or give up work himself in order to care for them. George and Wilding found that such arrangements tended to be unsatisfactory and precarious, so that children were subjected to further periods of change. Whilst the father's remarriage may end this period of domestic uncertainty and solve many of his problems, it is not surprising that his children may remain unconvinced. If they have formerly been looked after by elderly relatives they may also have been spoiled and indulged to compensate for the loss of their mother, so that the arrival of their new stepmother may, in their minds, be related to the withdrawal of this indulgence. Children of divorced parents still normally remain with their mothers; if contested, custody of younger children will usually only be given to a father if he is able to demonstrate some significant fault or inadequacy in his ex-wife's behaviour towards the children, so that

it may be assumed that the children in the custody of divorced fathers will generally have experienced some additional sufferings and uncertainties during the time when their parents' marriage was breaking up. For these reasons, therefore, a child's previous experiences may create more difficulties for intending stepmothers than stepfathers.

The sexual division of labour within the nuclear family ensures that the greatest responsibility for the care and upbringing of children rests with the female, so that stepmothers are expected to take the much wider range of responsibilities which are attached to the role of mother. The Rapoports, summarising a wide range of evidence of parenting, conclude that prevailing conceptions of father's role in the family tend to place him on the periphery (Rapoport, Rapoport and Strelitz, 1977, p. 237).

By contrast mothers are not only expected to do the work involved (Oakley, 1974) but also to take public responsibility for how the children 'turn out'. The Newsons claim that:

> even in this age of vastly increased involvement of fathers, where young children are concerned, mothers remain more vulnerable to social criticism. This is because of social expectations: in the end, criticism of the upbringing of a young child is still primarily aimed at the mothers. Fathers are not expected to take public responsibility for either the behaviour or the appearance of very young children, and blame will be transferred to the mother even where the father has voluntarily accepted the major involvement. (Newson and Newson, 1972, p. 30)

If this accountability is transferred to the newly acquired stepmother of children who have still to come to terms with a period of great change and uncertainty, she, and those who judge her, may be bound to feel that she is failing. It is also significant that when she begins to take over household responsibilities from her new husband, she has to create an identity for herself within the domestic sphere by her cooking and household management as well as the routine issues of dress, cleanliness and so on, which are a taken for granted part of child care. This is precisely where she is most likely to find herself compared with the children's mother, whose influence inevitably persists in matters of discipline and routine, and, above all, food. Maddox found that 'stepparents talk a lot about food and mealtimes. . . . In many stepfamilies, meals are excruciating, the time when the expectation of happy family life comes up against the reality' (Maddox, 1975, p. 136). Even if the dead parent is not idealised, as some psychologists have suggested happens (Fast and Cain, 1966) or the mother without custody complicates life as a significant 'third force' (Duberman, 1975, p.

82), it may be difficult for the stepmother to succeed when so much is expected of her.

Chester's data suggest another factor which accentuates the difficulties of stepmothers; they are more likely to have been single before their marriage than stepfathers, and they therefore lack previous experience of parenting or even of the married state itself. Chester received 760 replies to a questionnaire published in the magazine *Woman's Own* (1977), 296 related to stepmother families, and 464 to stepfather families. Seventy-four per cent of the stepmothers had been single before their present marriage, whilst only 53 per cent of the stepfathers had previously been single. Chester's results show generally that stepmothers were more likely to be finding their new role difficult; one third of the stepmothers said that they found their family situations more difficult than they had expected. Thus the range of potential private troubles following from remarriage, especially where children are involved, seems extensive and somewhat forbidding and for the individuals involved they are usually perceived as essentially personal matters for which they alone must find solutions. However, the recent and widely discussed rise in divorce and remarriage rates has, as Mills suggested, made it increasingly difficult to explain such trends entirely in terms of the private troubles of individuals; in some respects remarriage has also become a public issue.

Remarriage as a public issue

The proportion of all marriages which are remarriages for one or both parties has increased steadily since the 1969 Divorce Reform Act came into effect in 1971. In 1981 over 33 per cent of all marriages included at least one remarried partner. In his discussion of official statistics demonstrating changing patterns of marriage, Leete argues that this rapid increase in remarriage rates 'is almost entirely attributable to marriage of two divorced people and of divorced people marrying previously unmarried people' (Leete, 1979, p. 41). There has been little change in the number of marriages involving the widowed so that, in so far as the rapid increase in the number of remarriages constitutes a public issue in Mills's term, it is inextricably linked to a much more widely acknowledged concern about the social consequences of rising divorce rates. Not only has the substantial increase in the number of younger divorced people created a much larger pool of potentially available marriage partners but, as Leete notes, 'prospective remarriage for one or both parties is frequently a reason for divorce' (op. cit., p. 41). Thus, whilst many commentators have used high