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Preface

Special Issue: Stepparental Investment

In species in which parents care for their young, natural selection necessarily favors those who allocate their limited resources in such a way as to promote their own fitness. It follows that the psychology of parental solicitude evolves to be discriminative, and one obvious aspect of such discrimination is preferential treatment of one's own young (Daly and Wilson 1988). More than 20 years ago, these ideas inspired us to undertake research on child abuse in stepfamilies. What we and others have discovered is that the presence of a stepparent is a powerful epidemiological risk marker for child abuse and murder, that excess risk to stepchildren is cross-culturally ubiquitous and perhaps universal, and that it cannot be explained away by any combination of correlated factors yet proposed (Daly and Wilson 1996, 1998).

But this is clearly not the whole story. Human beings do not routinely dispose of their predecessors' young as lions and some monkeys do, and severe child abuse is rare, even in stepfamilies. More commonly, the negotiated reciprocities of remarriage are such that stepchildren are tolerated, cared for, and sometimes even loved. As Flinn et al. remark in the final paper of this special issue, stepchildren "are not simply unrelated parasites; they are a special kind of relative-by-marriage." What an evolutionary perspective suggests is that the evolved psychology of parental love, the most nearly selfless love that we know, will not normally be fully activated in stepparents, whose investments will remain restrained in comparison with those of genetic parents.

Investing stepparents are not unique to our species, and Rohwer et al. begin this special issue by reviewing the evidence that such investment constitutes adaptive "mating effort" in nonhuman animals. Five empirical studies of human stepparenting and its consequences follow.

Marlowe reports that stepfamilies are common among the Hadza foragers of east Africa, and his exemplary observational data demonstrate that men, although tolerant of their stepchildren, treat them quite differently from their own children. For example, Hadza men were never seen playing with their stepchildren.

Anderson and colleagues present the results of two studies of self-report data, one collected from Xhosa school children in South Africa, the other from U.S. men. Both studies indicate that the genetic-child/stepchild distinction affects both financial expenditures and other more subtle measures of paternal investment, but that the man's investments are also strongly affected by whether he continues to reside with the mother. Thus, both studies suggest that men's contributions to children

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function both as paternal investment in offspring and as investment in the marital relationship.

Zvoch uses a large U.S. national data set to explore differential investment in education. Using multivariate analyses to control for variation due to differential financial means and other possible confounding factors, he shows that children living with a genetic parent and a stepparent are substantially less likely than their two-genetic-parent counterparts to graduate from high school, are substantially less likely to go to college if they do graduate, and receive substantially less familial support if they do go to college. Especially noteworthy is the fact that stepfamilies do not appear to plan ahead and save for the children's education like intact families do.

In the final paper, Flinn and colleagues present data not on the actual investment differentials between family types, but on some apparent consequences of differential treatment. Their longterm study of a Dominican village had already shown that children who reside with stepfathers have chronically elevated cortisol levels (Flinn and England 1995; Flinn et al. 1996), and they now report that such children suffer growth deficits in comparison to both fatherless children and those dwelling with both genetic parents. Surprisingly, however, the stepchildren tend to have lower levels of fluctuating asymmetry, a putative index of developmental disruptions.

Looking beyond the relatively rare and extreme negative outcomes of child abuse and murder, these papers extend evolution-minded analysis to examine the quality of normal steprelationships within each of several societies. Although the results are largely confined to stepfathers (only Zvoch's data set included enough stepmothers to warrant including them) and although many questions remain, the results are clear in their support of two propositions. Investment in stepchildren is indeed restrained relative to that provided to parents' own genetic offspring, and is best understood as an investment in the stepfather's relationship with the children's mother.

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