

stepfamilies and children in the past



## Stepfamilies across Religions in East-Central Europe (1500-1800)

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Children in the past faced the continual threat of the loss of a parent before they reached adulthood whether through the childbed mortality of a mother or from the sporadic threats of famine, war, and epidemic. To secure the upbringing of children, for economic survival, and to ensure family continuity many widowed parents sought to rebuild the broken family by remarriage. As a result, **stepfamilies**, in which **siblings**, **half-siblings** and **step-siblings** lived together with **parents** and **stepparents**, were just as (if not more) common in the past as they are today.

The book wishes to examine the various forms and functions of stepfamilies and how stepfamilies evolved and survived from the 1500s to the 1800s. We propose to explore this elementary but neglected aspect of early modern family life across several social strata. The **multiethnic** and **multi-confessional** character of **East-Central Europe** provides an opportunity to study the processes of stepfamily dynamics comparatively. The comparison of stepfamily formations and transformations in the context of different family and household (**extended**, **stem** and **nuclear**) types will offer new insights with regard to the grand issue concerning the role of **ethno-cultural characteristics** and/or **socio-economic conditions** in shaping family types.

The burgeoning historical interest in stepfamilies comes from the United States, where the ratio of children and adults living in stepfamilies is the highest in the modern West, and a huge sociological and psychological literature is attempting to address the phenomenon. Since **death, not divorce**, defined early stepfamilies, our working hypothesis is that past and present stepfamily experiences differed for children in some key aspects of life in a stepfamily after remarriage, but other realms of stepfamily life offer rich possibilities to understand similarities. We propose to concentrate in particular on the social practices surrounding **life transitions (birth, marriage, conversion, death)**, which were critical periods when the distribution of authority and feelings within the (step) family was intensely renegotiated among family members. Thus we seek to generate new insights into how familial ties, hierarchical relations and emotional bonds constantly created and recreated ideas about the stepfamily as a family form.

We propose to address questions related to

- 1) KINSHIP NETWORKS AND INHERITANCE STRATEGIES:** How did the law and emotions interact in inheritance strategies within stepfamilies? How did the “regular” conflicts between widows and their sons who reached legal adulthood over property management and inheritance change in a stepfamily context?
- 2) THE ROLES OF STEPPARENTS AND GENDERED STRUCTURES OF REMARRIAGE:** How did remarriage patterns affect the structures of stepfamilies? Did higher rates of widower remarriage affect perceptions of the stepmother? Has there been a gradual shift from more stepmothers to more stepfathers? Did the roles of stepmothers and stepfathers shift over centuries past?
- 3) SIBLING RELATIONS:** Remarriages tended to have more of a disparity of age, social status or wealth than first marriages. (Though these were more frequent in some social-professionals groups, than in others.) How did the frequent age gap between children from first, second or even third marriages transform the roles of older siblings vis-à-vis their half or stepsiblings? What were the legal and affective implications of the practice of step-sibling marriages? Was there regional variation in these stepsibling marriages based on consanguinity or affinity taboos and laws?
- 4) INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS:** Are the dynamics of stepmother/father-stepson/daughter relationship approachable via terms of endearment and address in letters? Can we learn about stepfamily dynamics through coresidence patterns or if there are patterns of placement of children and stepchildren to facilitate a remarriage? How did the disparities between partners in remarriages affect stepparent-stepchild relations?
- 5) the dynamic of practices and representations:** In what ways did literature and art affect how people viewed their own families? How did the use of space (e.g. the choice of family residence, or the placement of children to facilitate remarriage) reflect intrafamilial relations?

By making the stepfamily and its variations across ethnic groups and religions the subject of analysis, the session aims to go beyond the historical accounts based on simplistic binary frames (such as the conjugal vs. extended, the emotionless and patriarchal vs. the sentimental, Western and Eastern European families) and convey instead the multivalent forms of preindustrial family dynamics. Additionally, the studies focusing primarily on Northwestern European stepfamilies in the very recent collected volume entitled **Stepfamilies in Europe 1400-1800** (ed. Lyndan Warner, Routledge 2018), will offer further possibilities for regional comparisons.

East-Central Europe offers a unique opportunity to study stepfamily relations comparatively, across the ethnic and religious groups and their interactions which shaped family life. German-speaking urban population and settlers, Hungarian, Bohemian, Polish-Lithvanian, Romanian noblemen and peasants; the ethnically mostly Southern Slavic soldiers and administrators of the Ottoman Empire, many of whom were new-Muslims; Habsburg imperial administration and their supporters, various Protestant branches under German and Dutch influences, Greek and Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic believers, just to mention a few dimensions, all took their parts in the picture and intermingled in various cases, creating a multilayered scenery of family relationships and family patterns.

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