

# Portrayals of Stepfamilies in Film: Using Media Images in Remarriage Education

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**Abstract:** Media portrayals of stepfamilies influence societal views of stepfamilies and individuals' expectations for remarriage and stepfamily life. This study examines portrayals of stepfamilies in films released in 1990 through 2003. Using content analysis to understand how stepfamilies are portrayed and to identify film clips appropriate for use in remarriage education programs, we found that stepfamilies were typically depicted in a negative or mixed way. In addition, stepparent-child relations, remarried couple relationships, and issues related to former partners were frequently portrayed. Film clips illustrating themes of stepparent-child relationships, prior marriage, conflict with former partner(s), couple relations, couple conflict, stepsibling relations, and stepfamily strengths are discussed, as well as their use in educational programming.

**Key Words:** media portrayals, remarriage, remarriage education, stepfamilies.

The most current statistics on remarriage in the United States, which are from the late 1980s, indicate that about 46% of marriages are remarriages for one or both members of the couple (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). About 75% of divorced adults remarry (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991) or cohabit with new partners (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995), and remarriages bring unique challenges for which many couples are not prepared. Because remarriage or cohabitation typically occurs within months after beginning the relationship, many remarried couples are simultaneously developing couple relationships and negotiating stepparent-stepchild relationships (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). This process may be challenging because remar-

riage is considered an “incomplete institution” (Cherlin, 1978) that lacks clear social norms or guidelines for role performance or resolving problems. Further, cultural beliefs perpetuated by media and folk tales either stigmatize stepfamilies (e.g., the wicked stepmother stereotype) or foster unrealistic expectations, such as the myth of instant love exemplified in the television show *The Brady Bunch* (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). These cultural beliefs may influence individuals' behaviors, perceptions, and expectations with regard to remarriage and stepfamily relationships (Segrin & Nabi, 2002).

The present study has two primary goals: to examine film portrayals of stepfamilies and to identify media images that can be used in remar-

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riage education programs to foster realistic expectations about stepfamily life. We attempted to integrate empirical and applied perspectives in this study because we believe that this integration strengthens the work of both practitioners and researchers. Others (Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993) have recommended that clinicians who work with stepfamilies should have a sound understanding of empirical work; we believe that the same is true for family life educators. In addition, it is helpful for researchers to understand the complexity of the challenges that stepfamilies face. Thus, we included an empirical content analysis of film portrayals of stepfamilies to provide a broad view of the media environment affecting stepfamilies, and a more detailed discussion of specific film clips portraying stepfamily dynamics and their potential use in remarriage education programs. We argue that media are an important part of the family's ecological context; thus, understanding the media context in which families are embedded increases understanding of families for both practitioners and researchers.

We chose to focus on film portrayals of stepfamilies because exposure to films is so widespread in contemporary American culture, and images portrayed in films are likely to play a role in the creation and transmission of cultural beliefs (Signorielli & Morgan, 2001). Films are described as "symbolic creations which signify social values and meanings through their narratives, plots, and characters" (Levy, 1991, p. 188). Thus, it is important to understand how stepfamilies are portrayed in contemporary films and to identify film images that can be used to promote adaptive and realistic views of stepfamilies. However, presently there is a lack of research on portrayals of stepfamilies in films.

A goal of this study was to identify film clips appropriate for use in educational programs for remarrying or remarried parents. Although we recognize that not all remarriages form stepfamilies, we specifically focus on remarriages that do form stepfamilies. We use the term "remarriage education" here to highlight the centrality of the remarried couple relationship in the step-

family system. Family systems theories emphasize the key role of the couple relationship in laying the foundation for parent-child relationships (Visher & Visher, 1996). A strong remarriage can buffer parents from some of the stress that arises in the process of forming stepparent-child relationships (Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Papernow, 1993). Thus, enhancing the couple relationship is an important component of strengthening the stepfamily (Pasley, Rhoden, Visher, & Visher, 1996).

The use of film clips in educational programming can be a practical and effective way to engage adult learners, for whom interactive teaching activities that foster application of the material to one's life experiences are most effective (Angelo, 1993). Participants can relate to material presented in films, and through facilitated discussion, they can apply the concepts to their lives. Further, family therapists point out that films provide a form of "safe distancing," which can help clients think about problems in new ways (Dermer & Hutchings, 2000). This concept is also applicable to educational settings. Discussing a film character's problems is likely to be less threatening than asking participants to focus on their own problems, and may help them to see the problems from a different perspective. In addition, films provide a common ground for group discussion (Walcheski & Bredehoft, 2003). Further, video is also useful for reaching low literacy participants, and the increasing availability of DVD players makes it possible to show film clips with captions for the hearing-impaired.

### *Effects of Media Images*

The media play a prominent role in contemporary American culture. A nationally representative study of children ages 2–18 (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999) found that 99% of children live in homes with at least one television, 97% live in homes with at least one VCR, and children are exposed to approximately 3 hours of television and 40 minutes of videos and films per day. Media may play an important role in socialization of views about families and family

life (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Signorielli & Morgan, 2001). Specifically, cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986) proposes that conceptions of the social world are shaped in part by exposure to images portrayed in the media. For example, a study of college students found that more frequent viewing of relationship-genre programming (e.g., romantic comedies, soap operas) was related to idealized expectations for intimacy and marriage (Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Stepfamilies have primarily been portrayed either in a problem-focused way that emphasizes their negative aspects, or in an unrealistic manner, suggesting that love develops instantly. Thus, media images of stepfamilies may contribute to the stigmatization of stepfamilies and unrealistic expectations for stepfamily life (Ganong & Coleman, 1997).

#### *Portrayals of Stepfamilies in Print Media*

Researchers have investigated portrayals of stepfamilies in various print media formats, including magazine articles (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1985), self-help literature (Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Coleman, Ganong, & Gingrich, 1985), and juvenile fiction (Coleman et al., 1985). For example, a study of popular magazine articles from 1940 to 1980 delineated change over time in portrayals of stepfamily issues (Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman). The tone of articles shifted from an idealized, optimistic outlook in the 1940s and 1950s to a more pessimistic view in the 1960s, and then to a cautious, neutral tone in the 1970s. Across decades, the primary concern discussed in the magazine articles was the stepparent-stepchild relationship. During the 1970s, the remarried couple relationship, issues related to prior marriages, and material resources became important concerns as well. The authors concluded that the problems discussed in the popular magazine articles were similar to those discussed in the professional literature.

In an analysis of self-help literature written for children and adolescents (Coleman & Ganong, 1987), several additional issues were identified: loyalty conflicts, wicked stepparent, merging two

family styles, discipline, stepsibling conflicts, instant love, guilt, jealousy, changes in birth order, and territory. Again, these issues were similar to issues identified by clinical writers as challenging for stepfamilies. Self-help books are more likely to focus on problems rather than strengths in stepfamilies, which is to be expected because self-help books are often written by clinicians based on their experiences helping clients manage problems (Coleman et al., 1985). Some strengths were identified, such as more adults providing new experiences, and more gifts at birthdays and holidays.

A study that examined self-help literature and adolescent fiction focused specifically on stepfamily strengths (Coleman et al., 1985). Although the self-help materials emphasized stepfamily problems, strengths also were identified. The most frequently mentioned strength in adult self-help books was the availability of new people to provide new experiences and support for children. Other commonly cited strengths included providing a positive model of adult intimacy, that the parent is happier, and that stepchildren learn cooperation and flexibility. Adolescent fiction provided a different perspective. Children living in stepfamilies were presented as having increased maturity and coping skills and ability to accept differences.

In summary, studies found that print media have generally taken a problem-focused approach, giving more attention to stepfamilies' problems than their strengths. Commonly discussed issues include stepparent-stepchild relationships, couple relationships, and relationships with former partners. Some of the studies also identified common stereotypes of stepfamilies, such as the wicked stepparent and the myth of the nuclear family, and strengths, such as the presence of more people to provide new experiences and greater support for children.

#### *Portrayals of Stepfamilies in Visual Media*

A few studies have examined the portrayal of families in visual media, such as films and television (e.g., Levy, 1991; Robinson & Skill, 2001), but

they have not analyzed portrayals of stepfamilies. For example, one study (Levy) identified changes in film portrayals of American families from the 1960s through the 1980s. Specifically, films cycled from portraying a decline of the first-married family in the 1960s to a reaffirmation of this family and nostalgia for traditional family values in the late 1980s. Despite some changes across the decades, the White middle-class first-marriage family with traditional values and sex roles predominated.

A study of portrayals of families in primetime television series from the 1950s through the 1990s revealed some interesting changes in the composition of TV families (Robinson & Skill, 2001). Specifically, families headed by married couples decreased from 68% to 38%, and families headed by a divorced or separated parent increased from 0 to 15%. Stepfamilies consistently comprised a small portion of the families portrayed on TV, but they have increased from 1% to 6%. The tone and content of stepfamily portrayals were not examined.

Although no studies have specifically examined stepfamily portrayals in films, one study investigated descriptions of stepparents in film plot summaries (Claxton-Oldfield & Butler, 1998). Not surprisingly, the majority (58%) of the 55 film plot summaries portrayed stepparents as abusive or wicked. The remaining summaries described stepparents in a neutral tone; none portrayed stepparents in a positive manner. Several plot summaries portrayed abusive stepfathers (23.5% of the 34 summaries that included stepfathers) and wicked stepmothers (38% of the 21 summaries that included stepmothers). These results suggest that films are likely to portray remarriage and stepfamilies negatively, but actual film portrayals were not examined. In addition, previous studies have not identified specific clips useful for educational programming.

## Goals of the Present Study

This study had two primary goals: to examine how stepfamilies are portrayed in current films,

and to identify film clips appropriate for use in remarriage education programs. We investigated four research questions related to these goals.

1. Are mother-stepfather families portrayed more frequently than other configurations? There is a common perception that there are more mother-stepfather families than father-stepmother families because the census bureau only counts the household where the child lives most of the time, and primary physical custody often is awarded to mothers (Fields, 2003). Thus, films about stepfamilies may be more likely to portray a mother-stepfather family than other configurations.
2. We hypothesized that film portrayals of stepfamilies would more often focus on stepfamily problems than on the positive aspects of stepfamilies. Previous studies have consistently found that portrayals of stepfamilies are more likely to be problem-focused than to emphasize stepfamily strengths (Claxton-Oldfield & Butler, 1998; Coleman & Ganong, 1987).
3. Are stepfamilies in films likely to be portrayed in a stereotypical manner? Previous research identified several stereotypes about stepfamilies: stepchildren resenting stepparents, stepchildren having problems, the wicked stepmother, the abusive stepfather, the neglected or unloved stepchild, the myth of the nuclear family (i.e., stepfamilies should try to recreate the first-married family), and the myth of instant love (Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Many of these stereotypes are based on reality, but when they are overgeneralized to include all stepfamilies, they perpetuate an oversimplified view of stepfamilies that is excessively negative in some cases (e.g., the wicked stepmother stereotype), but unrealistically positive (e.g., the myth of instant love) in others. In this study, we examined whether the stereotypical portrayals identified by other researchers were present in recent films.
4. What were the types of content featured in current films about stepfamilies? Both popular and clinical literature identified several issues as important for stepfamilies: stepparent-stepchild

relationships, couple relations, prior marriages, financial issues, and stepsibling relationships (Coleman et al., 1985; Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1985). In addition, greater support for children has been identified as a stepfamily strength (Coleman et al., 1985). Therefore, we investigated whether those same issues were featured in films, and we selected film clips depicting these issues for use in remarriage education programming.

## Method

### Sample Selection

The Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB; <http://www.imdb.com>) and the VideoHound's Golden Movie Retriever (Craddock, 2003), a book containing reviews of 25,000 movies, were searched for films about stepfamily issues. These sources were chosen because they are comprehensive sources of movie plot summaries and are searchable by subject. Using the IMDB, film plot summaries were searched for using the following key words: blended family, remarriage, remarry, stepbrother, stepdad, stepdaughter, stepfamily, stepfather, stepmom, stepmother, stepparent, stepsibling, stepsister, and stepson, and their plural (e.g., stepfamilies) and hyphenated (e.g., step-family) forms. The VideoHound's (Craddock) category index included cross-referenced subject categories, so it was easy to locate related categories. Thus, we identified films in the Stepparents category index and the cross-referenced Family Ties and Parenting categories.

From the IMDB and VideoHound (Craddock, 2003) searches, a list of 1,757 films was compiled. The plot summaries of these films were evaluated by the authors and rated on a 3-point scale (1 = *stepfamily issues are a central focus*; 2 = *stepfamily issues may be a central focus*; 3 = *stepfamily issues are not a central focus*). All summaries that received a rating of 3 were eliminated, resulting in a list of 317 films. A large number of films were eliminated from the

original list of 1,757 because many were obtained from the Family Ties and Parenting categories (VideoHound; Craddock), and many of these films had nothing to do with stepfamilies. We looked at these broad categories in an effort to be inclusive and not miss relevant movies that may have not been listed in the Stepparents category. From the reduced list of 317 films, we applied the following criteria to choose the final sample of 26 films. First, plot summaries specifically mentioned a stepfamily member, remarriage, or a parent's engagement to a new partner. Second, films must have been released between 1990 and 2003. Third, films were in English with no subtitles. Fourth, films in the thriller or horror genre were eliminated from consideration. Finally, videos were available in local video stores. These criteria were used because of our goal of identifying film clips for use in remarriage education. Outdated films, films that required the ability to read English subtitles, and films that could be considered frightening (e.g., thriller or horror films) would be inappropriate for educational settings. The resulting films represented five genres: drama (46%), comedy (38%), romance (8%), action (4%), and crime (4%). Motion Picture Association of America ratings represented four categories: PG (12%), PG-13 (36%), R (40%), and not rated (12%). The length of the films ranged from 77 to 137 minutes ( $M = 102.08$  minutes,  $SD = 13.44$ ).

### Coding Procedures

A pilot coding system was developed by the authors based on content analysis procedures described by Neuendorf (2002) and Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1985). Content categories were chosen a priori based on categories identified in the literature (Coleman et al., 1985; Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman). The original coding system included seven content categories (Stepparent/Parent-Child Relations, Prior Marriage, Couple Relations, Stepfamily Strengths, Stepsibling Relations, Finances/Resources, and Support from Extended Family), encompassing

a total of 57 specific themes. The specific themes also were chosen based on issues identified in research and clinical literature on stepfamilies (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Visher & Visher, 1996). Time interval sampling was used to rate the frequency of specific themes in each film. Films were divided into 10-minute time segments, beginning when the production company's logo appeared on the screen. Coders took detailed notes of each 10-minute segment, and at the end of each segment, they rated the frequency of each occurrence of each theme during that segment. A "separate occurrence" of a theme was defined as the occurrence of the same theme more than once within a time segment, but involving different family members. All films were coded in their entirety.

We decided to use 10-minute segments because we wanted the segment to be long enough for themes to be observed, yet short enough for all themes occurring in the segment to be reliably rated. The pilot testing described below confirmed that 10-minute segments were the most effective for our purposes.

The initial coding system was piloted with seven films that met all criteria used to select films for the study, but were produced before 1990. We independently rated the seven films and then discussed the ratings of each film. The coding system was refined based on the pilot data. Themes were eliminated that were observed fewer than twice across films in the pilot sample, and new themes that had been observed at least twice were added. The revised coding system was used to rate the 26 films used here. To establish interrater reliability, we each independently rated 10 of these films. Reliability was assessed using Pearson's  $r$ . Averages of the two coders' scores for these 10 films were used in analyses. The first author then rated nine of the remaining 16 films, and the second author rated seven. The revised coding system included the seven content categories from the pilot system (listed above), and three categories were added as a result of the pilot testing: Couple Conflict, Conflict with Former Partner(s), and

Support from Others (nonrelatives). The 10 categories in the revised coding system described below included 68 specific themes. In addition, global ratings of family composition, overall tone or portrayal of stepfamilies, and cultural stereotypes or myths were made after viewing each film.

*Global ratings.* Family composition was rated on a 4-point scale (1 = *stepfather-mother*; 2 = *mother-stepfather*; 3 = *stepmother-stepfather*; 4 = *multiple stepfamilies*). Interrater reliability was .98. The overall tone or portrayal of stepfamily issues was rated on a 4-point scale (1 = *positive*; 2 = *negative*; 3 = *neutral*; and 4 = *mixed*), for which interrater reliability was .82. We also rated the presence of stereotypes or myths (such as the wicked stepparent) by indicating whether each stereotype was depicted in the film as a whole (1 = *yes*, 2 = *no*), and then the extent to which the film was characterized by the stereotypical portrayal (1 = *slightly stereotypical*; 2 = *moderately stereotypical*; 3 = *strongly stereotypical*). For example, a film might portray a stepfamily wishing it could be more like a first-marriage family at the beginning, but then show the stepfamily developing more realistic expectations. This film would be rated as *slightly stereotypical*. In contrast, a film that portrays a stepfamily functioning exactly like a first-marriage family throughout the entire film without ever addressing this issue (e.g., *A Very Brady Sequel*) would be rated as *strongly stereotypical*.

The two ratings were multiplied to form a weighted variable. The specific stereotypes that were rated were drawn from previous research (Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Ganong & Coleman, 1997). The stereotypes were rated globally rather than in each segment because a defining characteristic of a stereotype is that it is a belief that reflects cultural ideals and is inaccurate when generalized (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Thus, we believed it necessary to look at the film as a whole to determine whether its portrayal of stepfamilies was stereotypical. Of the seven stereotypes coded, three had good interrater reliability—stepchildren resent stepparent(s) (.86), abusive stepfather (1.0), and

myth of the nuclear family (.78)—so data are reported for these three stereotypes.

*Time segment ratings.* At the end of each time segment, the frequency of themes within each of the 10 categories described here was rated.

The category of Stepparent/Parent-Child Relations contained 18 themes, including stepparent/parent-child interactions, biological parent-child interactions, stepparent is supportive of the child, loyalty issues, merging lifestyles, parentification, and acceptance or rejection of the stepparent. The interrater reliability for this category was .93.

Two categories included themes about relationships with former partners. The first category Prior Marriage, contained 12 themes, including communication about or with former partners, cooperative relationships with former partners, parent or child expressing feelings about loss of previous relationship, and custody issues. Interrater reliability for this category was .94. The second category, Conflict with Former Partners, included six themes, such as child- and non-child-related conflict, child involvement in conflict, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. Interrater reliability was .86.

Two categories focused on specific couple relationship issues. First, the Couple Relations category contained 11 themes, including balancing needs of children and partner, affection, role/task expectations, and sharing thoughts and feelings. The interrater reliability was .97. Second, the Couple Conflict category contained the same six conflict themes described in the preceding paragraph. Interrater reliability for this category was .96.

The Stepsibling Relations category included three themes: sexual tension, conflicts about turf/possessions, and adjustment to stepsiblings. The interrater reliability was .99. Finally, the category of Stepfamily Strengths contained eight themes, including greater support for children and biological parent is happier. Interrater reliability for this category was .64. The remaining categories (Finances/Resources, Support from Extended Family, and Support from Others)

had low interrater reliability, ranging from .12 to .48, so they were excluded from further analyses.

## Results: Content Analysis

First, findings from the global ratings are presented, followed by findings from the time segment ratings. The recommended film clips illustrating themes within each content category are then discussed.

### Global Ratings

The findings regarding global ratings appear in Table 1. We investigated whether mother-stepfather families were the most frequently portrayed type of stepfamily. Although this family type was portrayed more frequently than the other types, it appeared only in half of the films. A substantial minority of films (35%) featured father-stepmother families. Second, we predicted that the overall tone of stepfamily portrayals would be negative or mixed more frequently than neutral or positive. In support of this hypothesis, 19 (73%) of the 26 films were rated as negative or mixed in tone (see Table 1). Only three films were rated as portraying stepfamilies positively. Finally, we examined whether films portrayed stepfamily stereotypes identified in previous research (Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Ganong & Coleman, 1997). More films portrayed stepchildren resenting stepparents (46%) and the myth of the nuclear family (38%) than abusive stepfathers (23%).

### Content Categories

The frequencies of each content category observed within each film are reported in Table 2. The numbers in Table 2 represent the number of times that each theme was observed in each film. For the 10 films that were rated by both coders, averages of the two coders' frequency counts were reported, so some of the frequencies are not whole numbers. Issues

Table 1. *Global Ratings of Stepfamily Portrayals*

Variable	Frequency	%
Family composition <sup>a</sup>		
Mother-stepfather	13	50.0
Father-stepmother	9	34.6
Stepmother-stepfather (blended family)	2	7.7
Multiple stepfamilies	2	7.6
Tone of portrayal of stepfamily issues <sup>a</sup>		
Positive	3	11.5
Neutral	4	15.4
Mixed (positive in some parts, negative in others)	9	34.6
Negative	10	38.5
Stereotypes/myths <sup>b</sup>		
Stepchildren resent stepparent(s)	12	46
Myth of the nuclear family	10	38
Abusive stepfather	6	23

<sup>a</sup>These variables have mutually exclusive categories. <sup>b</sup>The categories of this variable are not mutually exclusive, so percentages do not add up to 100.

related to stepparent-child and or parent-child relationships were observed in all 26 films. Within films, the number of occurrences of Stepparent/Parent-Child Relations themes ranged from a low of 4 (*Saint Maybe*, 1998) to a high of 57.5 (*Stepmom*, 1998;  $M = 24$ ,  $SD = 13.75$ ). The most frequently occurring themes in the Stepparent/Parent-Child Relations category (across films) were neutral interactions between biological parent and child, and negative interactions between stepparent and stepchild, both of which were seen in 22 films.

Issues related to Prior Marriages were observed in 25 of the 26 films. Within films, the frequency of Prior Marriage issues ranged from 0 (*Wildflower*, 1991) to 31 (*Life as a House*, 2001;  $M = 8.3$ ,  $SD = 7.9$ ). The theme most often observed in this category was communication between stepfamily members about a former partner, which was seen in 19 films.

Themes in the Couple Relations category were observed in 23 of the 26 films. Three films did not portray any couple issues, whereas there were 25 instances of couple issues in *Rhapsody in Bloom* (1998;  $M = 6.9$ ,  $SD = 6.2$ ). Affection was the most frequently observed Couple Rela-

tions theme, with 77% of the films depicting affection between remarried partners. Couple Conflict themes were observed in 19 films. The greatest number of Couple Conflict themes (15) was observed in *Tumbleweeds* (1998), and six films did not portray any such themes ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 4.0$ ). The Couple Conflict theme portrayed in the greatest number of films was verbal aggression (69% of the films).

Themes in the Stepfamily Strengths category were observed in 19 films. The highest frequency (21) of Stepfamily Strengths was seen in *Man of the House* (1995), and seven films did not show any Stepfamily Strengths ( $M = 4.1$ ,  $SD = 5.2$ ). The Stepfamily Strength theme most often portrayed was greater support for children, which was observed in 14 films.

Only seven films featured themes in the Stepsibling Relations category. *A Very Brady Sequel* (1996) included the greatest frequency of Stepsibling Relations themes (13;  $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 4.7$ ), but most films did not include any Stepsibling Relations themes. Within the Stepsibling Relations category, the most frequent theme was adjustment to stepsiblings, which was seen in seven films.

Table 2. Content Categories Portrayed in Stepfamily Films<sup>a</sup>

Film Title	Production Year	Length (min.)	Frequencies of Content Categories Within Each Film						
			SP/P-C Relations	Prior Marriage	Couple Relations	Couple Conflict	Strengths	Stepsibling Relations	Conflict With Former Partner
<i>The adventures of Sebastian Cole</i>	1999	100	37.5	14.0	2.5	3.5	12.0	0	0
<i>All the little animals</i>	1998	114	20.0	4.0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Blood and wine</i>	1996	100	10.0	3.0	4.0	8.0	0	0	0
<i>Ever after: a Cinderella story</i>	1998	121	33.0	9.0	3.0	0	1.0	10.0	0
<i>Everyone says I love you</i>	1996	106	19.0	15.0	8.0	0	5.0	3.0	0
<i>Hollow reed</i>	1995	106	27.5	17.5	13.5	9.0	2.0	0	10.0
<i>Home fries</i>	1998	92	11.0	9.0	11.0	4.0	1.5	1.0	4.0
<i>Kazaam</i>	1996	94	26.0	12.0	1.0	2.0	3.0	0	0
<i>I capture the castle</i>	2003	113	31.0	5.0	8.0	5.0	3.0	0	3.0
<i>Life as a house</i>	2001	124	40.0	31.0	8.0	2.0	8.0	6.0	13.0
<i>The little death</i>	1995	91	16.0	4.0	10.0	4.0	0	0	0
<i>Lolita</i>	1997	137	32.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	0	0	0
<i>Man of the house</i>	1995	97	41.0	7.0	15.0	4.0	21.0	0	0
<i>Monkey trouble</i>	1994	93	25.5	8.5	1.0	0	1.5	3.0	1.0
<i>Radio flyer</i>	1992	114	45.0	5.0	7.0	0	11.0	0	0
<i>Rhapsody in bloom</i>	1998	96	25.0	6.0	25.0	3.0	2.5	0	0
<i>A rumor of angels</i>	2000	94	23.5	6.5	2.5	3.0	1.5	0	0
<i>Saint Maybe</i>	1998	98	4.0	2.0	4.0	0	9.0	0	0
<i>She's so lovely</i>	1997	96	11.0	14.5	11.5	9.5	6.0	0	5.0
<i>Stepmom</i>	1998	125	57.5	29.0	7.0	2.0	12.0	0	15.5
<i>Tadpole</i>	2002	77	24.0	1.0	4.0	3.0	0	0	0
<i>Tommy boy</i>	1995	98	6.0	4.0	4.5	2.0	.5	1.0	0
<i>Tumbleweeds</i>	1998	102	34.0	2.0	19.0	15.0	1.0	0	0
<i>A very Brady sequel</i>	1996	90	9.5	1.0	6.0	0	4.5	13.0	0
<i>Wildflower</i>	1991	94	6.0	0	0	13.0	0	0	0
<i>The young poisoner's handbook</i>	1995	93	9.0	4.0	0	2.0	0	0	0
Total # of films in which category was observed			26	25	23	19	19	7	7

<sup>a</sup>A list of the time segments in which each content category was observed in each film can be obtained from the first author. <sup>b</sup>The frequencies reported in this table represent the number of times that each theme was observed in each film. For the 10 films that were rated by both coders, averages of the two coders' frequency counts were used, so some of the frequencies are not whole numbers.

Themes in the Conflict with Former Partner category also were observed infrequently ( $M = 7.38$ ,  $SD = 5.5$ ). Only seven films featured themes in this category, with the highest frequency (15.5) occurring in the film *Stepmom* (1998). In the films that did portray themes in this category, the two most frequently depicted themes were child involved in conflict and verbal aggression, both of which were observed in six films.

## Results: Recommended Film Clips

Clips illustrating themes within each of the major content categories were selected (see Table 3). First, we identified the three films with the highest frequency of each content category (see Table 2), then reread our notes from those films to identify clips illustrating themes within the category. Once we had identified possible clips, we reviewed the films to determine whether the clips would be useful in educational programming. Although we chose recommended clips from each content category, some categories had more recommended clips (Stepparent/Parent-Child Relations) than others (Stepsibling Relations) because the films featured some content categories more than others. We did not choose clips showing every theme within each category because of space limitations, and because we were limited by what was portrayed in the films.

We used several criteria to determine whether clips would be useful in educational settings. The first criterion was relevance. Clips were selected if they could be used to illustrate and or generate discussion about key issues that remarried couples likely face and find challenging. Rather than choosing clips illustrating the most frequently observed themes, we chose clips illustrating themes from our content categories identified by researchers (e.g., Ganong & Coleman, 2004), clinicians (e.g., Visher & Visher, 1996), and family life educators (e.g., Adler-Baeder, 2001) as key stepfamily issues. The second criterion was realism. We selected clips that por-

trayed issues realistically, based on the research and clinical literature, rather than stereotypical portrayals (e.g., the wicked stepmother). Third, we selected clips that presented enough information that the viewer could understand what was going on without having seen the rest of the film. We describe clips illustrating selected themes within each content category.

### Stepparent/Parent-Child Relations

A challenge for remarried couples is simultaneously developing couple and stepparent-child relationships (Visher & Visher, 1996). Issues related to stepchildren are a primary source of conflict for remarried couples (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002), and parenting or stepparenting is a primary area of concern for stepfamily members seeking therapy (Pasley et al., 1996). Further, the quality of stepparent-stepchild relationships may affect the quality of the remarried couple relationship (Pasley et al., 1993; White & Booth, 1985). Thus, addressing issues related to the development of stepparent-child relationships is a critical component of remarriage education. Clips depicting several themes (loyalty issues, biological parent-child interactions, stepparent supportive of child, merging lifestyles, and parentification) within the category of Stepparent/Parent-Child Relations were selected.

*Loyalty issues.* Loyalty binds are a common challenge for children in stepfamilies (Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Visher & Visher, 1996). Specifically, children may be afraid that the new stepparent will try to replace their biological parent, or that if they like the new stepparent, they are being disloyal to the biological parent. A clip from the movie *Stepmom* (1998) provides an example. The mother, Jackie, criticizes her former husband's fiancée, Isabel, to the children. When her son begins to talk about some of Isabel's positive qualities, Jackie responds with more criticism of Isabel. The son says, "If you want me to hate her, I will," and Jackie looks taken aback. This clip illustrates how nonresidential parents' criticism of the stepparent can

create loyalty binds for children (Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999). In contrast, a clip from *Stepmom* (1998) in which the parents tell their children about their father's engagement illustrates how parents can deal with children's loyalty conflicts in a positive way by reassuring them that the stepparent will not replace the parent, and by letting children know that it is okay to value both stepparents and parents (Visher & Visher). These clips can be used to generate discussions about ways that biological parents unintentionally increase the loyalty conflicts that their children experience, and ways that parents can help decrease their children's loyalty binds.

*Biological parent-child interactions.* As illustrated by the clips from *Stepmom* (1998) and previous research (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), biological parents can do things that either facilitate or hinder stepparent-stepchild relationships. For example, in *Rhapsody in Bloom* (1998), the children are surprised and upset when their father brings home a woman who is a stranger to them and announces that they are engaged. The father does little to help foster a good relationship between the children and his fiancée. Research suggests that this pattern, in which the resident biological parent does not attempt to facilitate the stepparent-stepchild relationship, is common (Ganong et al., 1999). Film clips can be used to increase participants' awareness of this issue and to generate discussion about what the resident parent might do to foster a positive stepparent-stepchild relationship. For example, successful strategies include encouraging the stepparent and stepchild to do things together and helping the stepparent and stepchild understand each other (Ganong et al., 1999)

*Stepparent supportive of child.* Relationships between stepparents and stepchildren have been found to be the most challenging relationships in stepfamilies (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Stepparents are more likely to form a positive relationship with stepchildren if they try to develop and maintain a friendship rather than taking a disciplinary role (Ganong et al., 1999; Hetherington & Clingempeel). Several clips

provide examples of stepparents acting in friendly, supportive ways. For example, in the film *Kazaam* (1996), the son is upset when his mother tells him that she is getting engaged. The (future) stepfather reassures the boy that he does not intend to take the place of his father, but he would like them to be friends. In *Man of the House* (1995), the mother and her fiancé Jack discuss her concerns about her son's reaction to his moving in with them. Jack reassures her that he expected Ben to have trouble with it, so he read books about stepparenting. Jack is sensitive to the difficulties that Ben will experience, but Jack's expectation that reading books will make everything go smoothly is unrealistic. Jack also tries to build a positive relationship with Ben by doing things together that Ben wants to do. These clips can be used to illustrate the importance of affinity-seeking, or trying to form a friendship with stepchildren (Ganong et al., 1999). Discussion about how the children in these clips might feel if their stepparents tried to discipline them right away and ideas for ways to build friendships with stepchildren could be used with these clips. Successful affinity-seeking strategies include spending one-on-one time doing fun activities chosen by the stepchild, sharing new skills or activities, and working together on chores or projects (Ganong et al., 1999).

*Merging lifestyles.* Merging different households, traditions, and routines is a challenge for stepfamilies, particularly in the early stages of stepfamily formation (Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Papernow, 1993). Disputes over space, property, and how to accomplish daily routines are common during this process (Coleman et al., 2001; Papernow). For example, in *Man of the House* (1995), the son Ben is getting ready for bed and cannot find any of his toiletries because his mother has moved them to make room for Jack's things. The next morning, Jack tries to make a nice breakfast for the family, not knowing that Ben and his mother usually make breakfast together. The mother realizes the need to communicate with Jack about existing family routines. Similarly, in *Rhapsody in Bloom* (1998), the prospective

Table 3. Film Clips Recommended for Use in Remarriage Education

Category: Themes	Film	Location <sup>a</sup>	Description <sup>b</sup>
SP/P-C relations			
Loyalty issues	<i>A Rumor of angels</i>	1:14:50–1:19:49	F and S discuss S's feelings about SM & M's death; SM brings S a picture of M while he is away from home.
	<i>Stepmom</i>	31:58–32:47	M criticizes SM to S; S says, "If you want me to hate her, I will."
		47:38–49:31	F and M tell children about F's engagement and reassure them.
P-C interactions (that affect SP-SC relationship)	<i>Rhapsody in bloom</i>	30:04–30:30; 31:35–32:20	F announces engagement when children have just met fiancée.
		1:11:50–1:13:34	F decides he is not ready to get remarried and realizes that he needs to focus on building a stronger relationship with his children first.
Stepparent supportive of child	<i>Stepmom</i>	15:52–18:01	F explains to children that parents may fall out of love with each other, but they will never fall out of love with their children.
	<i>Kazaam</i>	14:13–16:02	SF supportive of S, tells him he is not trying to replace his F, and lets S know that he will be available to talk when S wants.
	<i>Man of the house</i>	6:06–7:14	Discussion of child's reaction to remarriage; unrealistic expectations; SF thinks that transition will be easy because he read SF books.
		40:32–42:58; 43:21–43:35	SF seeks social support; does things with SC that SC wants to do.
	<i>Stepmom</i>	49:39–51:59	D is having trouble with art project and SM offers to help; D begins to realize that M & SM can provide different kinds of support.
Merging lifestyles	<i>Man of the house</i>	9:42–10:48	Adjustment to living together.

	16:49–20:03		SF is unfamiliar with existing family routines; M and SF realize that they need to communicate about routines.
	28:11–31:34	<i>Rhapsody in bloom</i>	Fiancée unfamiliar with existing family routines and has unrealistic expectations that the kids will instantly accept her.
Parentification	0:29–1:17	<i>Man of the house</i>	After F leaves, S promises M that he will always take care of her.
	2:14–3:25		M decides to remarry; S fears losing peerlike relationship with M.
	6:25–7:49;	<i>Radio flyer</i>	SF is abusive; older S feels responsible for taking care of M and brother.
	8:31–11:50;		
	28:44–30:25;		
	1:09:50–1:10:22	<i>Tumbleweeds</i>	D has adult responsibilities (e.g., deciding where family will live, M confides in D about problems); they have peerlike relationship.
	9:48–11:25; 12:25–13:00		
	15:57–17:00; 23:49–24:35		
Couple relations	7:12–8:25;	<i>Hollow reed</i>	F tries to gain custody of S because M's BF is abusing S; custody battle has negative effects on S and on F's relationship with BF.
Balancing needs of children and partner	42:21–43:23;		
	58:30–59:30;		
	1:06:25–1:08:40;		
	1:22:46–1:23:04	<i>Man of the house</i>	S tries to sabotage couple relationship
	10:56–13:31	<i>Rhapsody in bloom</i>	F deals with conflicting needs of SM and S; F and SM have appointment with wedding caterer when F needs to be at S's concert; fiancée realizes that she is not ready for the challenges of stepfamily life.
	1:07:04–1:09:31		

(continued)

Table 3. Continued

Category: Themes	Film	Location <sup>a</sup>	Description <sup>b</sup>
Couple conflict Child issues	<i>Man of the house</i>	35:39–39:24	M and fiancé argue about child-related issues.
	<i>Stepmom</i>	12:51–15:47	F and SM have conflict when F has to go out of town for weekend, and SM wants to take care of the kids, but F is not sure she can handle it.
Other issues	<i>Rhapsody in bloom</i>	39:41–40:57	F and SM discuss remodeling F's house and have different expectations.
Prior marriage			
Communication with former partners	<i>Stepmom</i>	42:11–44:35	F and M talk about F's plans to remarry and how to tell the children.
		1:05:42–1:10:14	M and SM discuss hopes and fears regarding their future roles.
Communication about former partners	<i>Man of the house</i>	59:24–1:02:00	SF is unable to show up for canoe trip, and S is reminded of his F leaving; M and SF discuss how S's father's irresponsibility in the past affects the current relationship between S and SF.
	<i>Rhapsody in bloom</i>	1:01:05–1:04:34	F and S discuss and argue about unresolved issues surrounding M's death.
Cooperative relationships with former partners	<i>Monkey trouble</i>	6:21–7:59	"Drop-off" scene shows cordial relationship between F, M, and SF.
	<i>Stepmom</i>	1:18:10–1:19:51	M and SM are at D's school play, discuss problem that D is having with a boy.
Conflict—Former partner			
Child involvement in conflict	<i>Life as a house</i>	26:09–27:46	M, F, and S argue about S's summer plans; M knew that F wanted S to spend summer with him, but M told S that he could go on trip with friends.

	<i>Stepmom</i>	30:23–31:43	SM loses S in park; M, F, and SM argue about SM's parenting ability in front of the kids; M threatens to prevent SM from having contact.
Child issues	<i>Life as a house</i>	44:14–46:05	M and F argue about F's fitness as a parent.
	<i>Stepmom</i>	9:00–10:38	M and F argue about parenting issues concerning their adolescent son.
		7:55–10:29	M and F argue about F's girlfriend and her influence on D; counselor suggests that conflict between M and SM may be causing problems for D.
		32:53–35:02	M and F argue because M does not want SM to have contact with the kids, but M agrees to try to solve the problem in a nonadversarial way.
Stepsibling relations	<i>Monkey trouble</i>	9:00–11:14	D is jealous of her new baby half-brother, who is a "concrete baby."
Adjustment to stepsiblings	<i>The adventures of Sebastian Cole</i>	28:12–30:24	Adolescent son's transgender former SF provides support and structure for him when his parents fail to do so.
Greater support for children	<i>Life as a house</i>	1:09:15–1:09:35	S tells F about getting to help SF build house; F is supportive.
	<i>Man of the house</i>	1:09:15–1:09:35	S starts to see SF as supportive rather than someone trying to replace F.

<sup>a</sup>Times listed are based on starting (or resetting to zero) the counter when the movie's production company logo appears on the screen just before the movie starts. <sup>b</sup>M = Mother; F = Father; P = Parent; C = Child; SM = Stepmother; SF = Stepfather; SP = Stepparent; D = Daughter; S = Son; SC = Stepchild.

stepmother Deborah prepares a pancake breakfast for the family on Sunday morning. The children are upset because their tradition is to have bagels on Sunday morning, and Deborah is upset by the children's negative reaction. These clips that illustrate the theme of merging lifestyles can be used to generate discussion about difficulties that might be expected during this process, and ways to ease the transition, such as talking about family routines and traditions beforehand.

*Parentification.* Children in single-parent households may assume responsibilities that are more appropriate for adults (Jurkovic, 1997). This can be problematic if it is an ongoing pattern, because it might interfere with children's ability to accomplish developmental tasks (Chase, 1999; Jurkovic). Parentification may present challenges for the stepfamily because when children become accustomed to having an overly close peerlike relationship with a parent, they may feel displaced by the new partner (Jurkovic, Jessee, & Goglia, 1991). For example, in *Man of the House* (1995), the son Ben and his mother develop a peerlike relationship after his father leaves, and Ben feels displaced when his mother's fiancé Jack moves in, so it is hard for him to accept Jack. *Radio Flyer* (1992) depicts another form of parentification: a child's attempt to protect the mother. In this film, one of the children, Bobby, is being abused by his stepfather. He does not tell his mother about the abuse because she's happy now. Bobby's brother Michael feels responsible for protecting him. Finally, *Tumbleweeds* (1998) shows a single mother discussing her relationship problems with her daughter Eva and relying on Eva to make adult decisions, such as deciding where they will move. These clips are useful for discussing appropriate roles and responsibilities for children, how children are affected by filling adultlike roles, and the importance of obtaining emotional support from other adults rather than children (Jurkovic et al.).

### Couple Relations

Film clips in the Couple Relations category illustrate the theme of balancing the needs of the

partner and children, which is a common challenge in stepfamilies (Visher & Visher, 1996; Papernow, 1993). The resident biological parent often feels caught in the middle between the stepparent and the child (ren), and the stepparent may feel like an outsider (Papernow). In an example from *Hollow Reed* (1995), the father is trying to gain custody of his son Oliver, and the mother tries to prevent this because the father is gay. The father temporarily ends his relationship with his partner to increase his chances of gaining custody of Oliver. A scene from *Rhapsody in Bloom* (1998) also illustrates the challenges of balancing conflicting needs. The father and his fiancée, Deborah, meet with their wedding caterer, but the father needs to leave to be at his son's concert. Deborah is upset because she wants him to be there to help plan the wedding, and she feels overwhelmed by the challenges of becoming a stepmother of three children. These clips illustrate the conflict that can exist between marital and parent-child subsystems in the stepfamily (Cissna et al., 1990). They can be used to emphasize the importance of solidifying the couple relationship (Cissna et al.; Pasley et al., 1996) and developing communication skills to deal with the challenges of meeting the children's needs, while maintaining a healthy couple relationship (Ganong, Coleman, & Weaver, 2001).

### Couple Conflict

Childrearing issues are among the most frequent topics of remarried couple conflict (Hobart, 1991; Stanley et al., 2002). Other frequent topics of conflict are resources (finances, space, and so on) and relationships with extended family and former partners (Coleman et al., 2001; Stanley et al.). Thus, clips showing examples of couple conflicts about child issues and non-child-related issues were identified. For example, a clip from *Man of the House* (1995) illustrates such conflict. Ben, the son, tries to get rid of his mother's fiancé Jack by convincing him that they should join the Indian Guides (a group similar to scouts) because he thinks Jack will not like it. When Jack decides that he cannot partic-

ipate because it interferes with his work, Ben acts disappointed, and Mom gets angry with Jack. Mom wonders whether she made a mistake and should have waited until Ben was older to get involved. Clips in the Couple Conflict category can be used to help participants think about behaviors that are more and less effective in managing conflict, and what might be done differently for more positive outcomes.

### *Prior Marriage*

We identified clips illustrating three themes related to prior marriages: communication with former partners, communication about former partners, and cooperative relationships with former partners. Resolution of issues related to the prior marriage can affect adjustment to stepfamily life (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), and non-resident parents can be psychologically present in the stepfamily, even when they are not physically present (Boss, 1999; Visher & Visher, 1996). In a clip from *Man of the House* (1995), the stepfather Jack is supposed to go on a father-son canoe trip with his stepson Ben, but he does not show up because of unavoidable circumstances and the group leaves without Ben, which reminds Ben of his father's abandonment. Later, Ben's mother tells Jack that Ben is really upset about this because his father used to break promises all the time. This is a good example of the psychological impact that Ben's father has. A clip from *Monkey Trouble* (1994), which depicts a cordial relationship between the mother, the stepfather, and the biological father, might be used to generate discussion about how cooperative communication between former partners can ease tensions and help stepfamilies function more smoothly (Giles-Sims, 1987). Other clips in this category can be used to highlight the importance of accepting the nonresidential parent as a part of the child's life (Visher & Visher) and developing a more cooperative coparenting relationship (Ahrons, 1983).

### *Conflict with Former Partner*

Some former spouses are unable to develop a cooperative coparenting relationship. Specifi-

cally, 20%–30% of divorced parents in one study (Whiteside, 1998) reported a highly conflictual coparenting relationship. Children in stepfamilies in which their biological parents have hostile coparenting relationships are likely to have social, emotional, and academic problems, which are then attributed to the remarriage (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Further, a hostile coparenting relationship can have negative effects on stepfamily functioning (Giles-Sims, 1987). A clip from *Stepmom* (1998) provides an example of a child-related conflict between former partners. The mother Jackie and her ex-husband Luke meet with their daughter's school counselor to discuss problems that Anna is having. They argue about Luke's relationship with his new partner Isabel, whom Jackie blames for Anna's problems. The counselor points out that the high level of conflict between Jackie and Isabel may be part of the problem. Clips showing conflict between former partners can be used to help participants think about how children in stepfamilies might feel when there is ongoing conflict between their parents or between a non-resident parent and the stepparent. These clips can generate discussion of ways that the characters in these scenes might develop more cooperative coparenting relationships.

### *Stepsibling Relations*

Stepsibling relationships have been less well researched than other relationships in the stepfamily, but relationships with half- or stepsiblings are less close than relationships with full siblings (Ganong & Coleman, 1993; White & Reidmann, 1992). We did not identify any clips that met all of our criteria and showed an example of true stepsibling interaction because stepsibling interaction occurred very infrequently. However, a clip from *Monkey Trouble* (1994) depicted a dynamic documented by clinicians (Papernow, 1993): an older child who is jealous when the parent and stepparent have a child together. Here, the mother and stepfather are preoccupied with their new baby, and the daughter is upset about all of the attention that

her new half-brother is getting. Some studies (Ahrns & Wallisch, 1987) found similar patterns in which mothers spend less time with children from previous marriages when a half-sibling is present. This clip can generate discussion about how children might feel about the arrival of a new half-sibling, and ways that parents can prepare children and help them with jealousy issues.

### *Stepfamily Strengths*

When stepfamily strengths are included in portrayals of stepfamilies, greater support for children is a commonly depicted strength of stepfamilies (Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Coleman et al., 1985). Specifically, self-help books depict children in stepfamilies having more adults to share new interests/talents with them and provide additional role models and perspectives (Coleman & Ganong). For example, a clip from *Man of the House* (1995) shows Ben beginning to see his mother's fiancé Jack as an additional source of support. Ben and his mother have been working on a collage made of found objects for several years. After Ben and Jack find some objects and add them to the collage, Ben points out that the object that Jack added to the collage made the design a complete circle. Clips illustrating stepfamily strengths are useful for helping stepfamilies focus on their strengths and for providing a more positive view of stepfamilies than participants may typically see.

## **Discussion**

We analyzed portrayals of stepfamilies in films from 1990 through 2003, and identified film clips appropriate for use in remarriage education programs. We discuss the findings related to the content analysis, then move on to issues related to the recommended clips and the use of video in remarriage education in general.

### *Content Analysis*

The films we examined featured mother-stepfather families more often than other stepfam-

ily configurations. This was expected because children are identified as only belonging to a mother-stepfather family due to the way that families are counted in the census (Fields, 2003), although they actually often belong to two stepfamilies. Further, almost all of the films portrayed only one stepfamily. Although more films portrayed mother-stepfather families, a sizeable proportion (32%) featured father-stepmother families. Interestingly, the majority of father-stepmother families (62%) were formed following bereavement, whereas the majority of mother-stepfather families (61%) were formed following divorce. The latter is a more accurate representation of reality because divorce is the main precursor to remarriage (Coleman et al., 2000). Similarly, research on television families has found that father-headed single-parent families comprise a much greater proportion of the single-parent families on television than in reality (Robinson & Skill, 2001). One explanation is that portraying the foibles of fathers who find themselves in a primary caregiver role is a convenient dramatic device. This also might be the case in films. In several of the postbereavement father-stepmother families shown in the films, the father was in a primary caregiving role for a period prior to remarriage.

As expected, most of the films took a problem-focused approach to portraying stepfamilies. Previous research documents that negative aspects and problems of stepfamilies are emphasized in self-help literature (Coleman & Ganong, 1987) and movie plot summaries, and that negative stereotypes of stepfamilies are common (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Thus, it is not surprising that films focused on stepfamily problems. Interestingly, films portrayed stepfamilies in a mixed way—showing both positive and negative aspects—about as frequently as they portrayed stepfamilies in a solely negative way.

Regarding stereotypes, as compared with the stereotype of the abusive stepfather, about twice as many films portrayed the myth of the nuclear family and stepparents resenting stepchildren. This finding fits with previous research in which American films emphasized and idealized the

nuclear family (Levy, 1991). Further, the proportion of films showing abusive stepfathers (23%) was nearly identical to the proportion of film plot summaries describing abusive stepfathers (23.5%) in a previous study (Claxton-Oldfield & Butler, 1998). It may be that the abusive stepfather stereotype is portrayed less frequently than the myth of the nuclear family and stepchildren resenting stepparents because it is a more exaggerated view that is further from reality for most stepfamilies. In contrast, many stepfamilies do try to recreate nuclear families (Visser & Visser, 1996), and problems with stepchildren are a frequent source of concern (Pasley et al., 1996).

In general, the content categories seen in films about stepfamilies were similar to the content categories identified by previous studies of magazine articles and self-help literature (Coleman et al., 1985; Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1985). Specifically, stepparent-child relationships, parent-child relationships, couple relationships, issues related to prior marriages, and greater support for children were frequently observed in the films, and in magazines and self-help literature.

### *Recommended Film Clips*

Film clips depicting themes within each content category of our coding system were identified, and uses of these clips for illustrating specific issues were discussed. Rinkoski (2002) suggested five general uses for film clips in marriage education programming: to get attention, to illustrate family dynamics, to generate discussion, to create a shared language, and to create a new culture. The video clips identified can be used for any of those purposes, in addition to the more specific uses previously discussed. We find video clips to be particularly useful in generating discussion. Some discussion questions that may be used with any of the video clips include: What were some negative/positive aspects of the way the family handled this situation? What could the family members do differently? How did family members feel about the situation? Finally, we caution readers to use film clips in

a manner that does not violate copyright laws. (For more information on use of copyrighted material for educational purposes, see <http://www.utsystem.edu/ogc/intellectualproperty/copypol2.htm>.) In addition, we recommend that educators preview the clips to verify their appropriateness for their audience.

### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

Although our study provides needed information on an understudied topic, we note several limitations. The first limitation concerns the use of purposive rather than random sampling. Purposive sampling was used to maximize the likelihood of selecting films containing stepfamily content. This sampling method does not limit the usefulness of the recommended film clips, but it means that the findings from the content analysis are not generalizable to the population of films released during the sampling period from 1990 through 2003. Second, although we used a systematic method of sample selection, we may have missed films about stepfamilies. If plot summaries did not explicitly discuss a parent's engagement, remarriage, or stepfamily members, they were excluded. We assume that if stepfamily issues were a central focus, the plot summary would convey that, but there is no way to know for certain. Finally, the coding system we used was carefully developed and pilot-tested and had good interrater reliability, but this is the first time it has been used, so it must be validated by other studies.

Our findings also raise questions for future research. One question concerns change over time in film portrayals. Research comparing films from previous decades with the films from 1990–2003 would shed light on whether media portrayals have changed. A second question for future research concerns film portrayals of cohabiting stepfamilies as compared with remarried stepfamilies. Increasing numbers of couples are forming stepfamilies through cohabitation rather than remarriage (Bumpass et al., 1995), and cohabitation is also an incomplete institution with few social norms to guide behavior

(Seltzer, 2000). It would be useful to understand how stepfamilies formed by cohabitation are portrayed in media in order to better understand how media may reflect and shape social views about cohabitation. Finally, the use of video is increasingly common in family life education. Evaluation data on the effectiveness of video compared with other instructional methods would be informative. Educational psychologists have proposed that learning occurs more effectively when information is presented visually and verbally, a hypothesis supported by experimental research (Clark & Paivio, 1991). Further, both clinicians (Dermer & Hutchings, 2000) and family life educators (Walcheski & Bredehoft, 2003) recommend the use of video for teaching about family dynamics. However, future research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of this instructional technology in the context of family life education.

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