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We are a real family: A Q methodological study on the experience of stepmothers

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'We are a real family': A Q methodological study on the experiences of stepmothers.

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Abstract

While stepfamilies are not a new phenomenon, with recent divorce rates, they are now common and more likely to be formed following relationship breakdown rather than death (Pryor, 2004). Stepmothers today have to contend with the wicked stepmother myth, the idealization of motherhood, and gendered notions of parenting, not to mention discourses which position the biological nuclear family as the ideal and, by implication, other forms as deviant. Moreover, the limited previous research suggests greater stress for stepmothers than stepfathers (Nielsen, 1999; Christian, 2005). This study used Q methodology to explore the range of subjective experiences of stepmothers. A diverse sample of 29 stepmothers completed a 61-item Q sort generating six factors or distinct views of the experience of stepmothering. This paper analyses, names and presents these accounts. The results suggest greater variety and complexity of experience than is indicated by previous studies whilst the discussion focuses on the relevance and impact of the culturally dominant narratives mentioned above within stepmothers' reports of their experience.

Keywords: Stepmother, stepfamily, family, mothering

Introduction

There have been major transformations in family life over recent years with a wide variety of family forms co-existing. According to Parentline Plus (2005) over 2.5 million children in the UK live in stepfamilies and one in seven families with dependent children are stepfamilies. Around 85% of stepfamilies are now formed after relationship breakdown rather than the death of one parent (Pryor, 2004). Relative to biologically related first-married families, stepfamilies are generally described as less cohesive and more stressful for their members (Banker & Gaertner, 1998) and second marriages are even more likely than first marriages to end in divorce (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000). Although most children live with their mother after divorce, many have a stepmother (whether married to their father or cohabiting) in the home they visit when in contact with their father. Moreover, the number of children living with their father and stepmother is increasing (Johnson, Wright, Craig, Gilchrist, Lane & Haigh, 2008)

Stepmothers today contend with a number of constructions around parenting, mothering and gendering. This paper will discuss some of these, including the wicked stepmother myth, the idealization of motherhood, gendered notions of parenting and, not least, the positioning of the biological nuclear family as an ideal which can be seen to position alternative family groups as somehow deviant.

Stepmothers are notoriously wicked. As Smith (1990) reminds us, from Phaedra in Greek mythology to fairy tales such as Snow White and Cinderella, the stepmother is always cruel, jealous, and often murderous. Indeed, in many languages the word itself has negative connotations. Humphrey & Humphrey (1988) note that 'step' is derived from the old English word 'steop' meaning bereave or loss, thus, stepmother actually means 'mother loss'. Myths are recurring themes incorporating cultural standards (Birenbaum, 1988) and, according to

Bruner (1960), rely for their continuation on internalisation of personal identities based on the externalised ideas generated by the myth. Research has indicated that the wicked stepmother myth may create negative stereotypes affecting the way that stepmothers are perceived by others (e.g. Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Wald, 1981). It may also be internalised by stepmothers leading to problems such as identity dilemmas (Dainton, 1993), negative self-concept, (Salwen, 1990) and role strain (Jones, 2004)[i].

The vilification of stepmothers is in sharp contrast to the idealization of motherhood. As Forna (1999) suggests, this portrays the mother as innately nurturing, all-loving and all-giving, completely devoted to her child. Thus the mother alone is the best caretaker for her children. Smart (1996) points out that although there have always been mothers, motherhood, in this idealized sense, is not natural but is a construction that presents itself as the natural outcome of biology and an innate female maternal instinct, disguising its social, historical and cultural location. Psychology has been prominent in the development of the modern ideal of a constantly attentive mother (Forna, 1999), and continues to be instrumental in constructing the ways in which motherhood is seen (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). Most notably, both Freud and Bowlby emphasised the unique importance of the mother-child relationship, with gender roles seen as innate rather than socially constructed (Forna, 1999).

Consequently, ideas of parenting are highly gendered: by 'parent' we often mean 'mother', mothers are held responsible for the way their children turn out (Hardyment, 1990), maternal love is seen as natural, and mothering as the route to emotional fulfilment for women (Marshall, 1991). Miller (2005) points out that this provides a difficult context in which to make sense of mothering experience. We would argue that it also provides a difficult context for stepmothers.

Phoenix & Woollett (1991) have argued that psychology is implicated in social constructions of motherhood, which fit with political ideologies of the family. When politicians today speak of a return to family values, it is implicit that the family they mean is a biological nuclear family (see for example discussions in Walsh, 2002). Thus, we would argue that like those around motherhood, ideas of family are historically, culturally and socially situated. Stepfamilies have always existed, although prior to the mid-twentieth century this was usually due to death rather than divorce (Pryor, 2004). The nuclear, biological family is not as traditional or universal as it may appear, yet modern discourses of family, that take this as the ideal form, often manifest an insistence upon uniformity and an intolerance towards variety (such as lone parents, lesbian and gay parents or stepfamilies) (Bengston, 2001; Roiphe, 1996). To summarise, stepfamilies are associated with a family form that is seen as deviant and whilst all members have this to contend with, stepmothers, as mentioned above, are particularly affected by the wicked stepmother myth, the idealization of motherhood and gendered notions of parenting. It is in this context that modern stepmothering takes place.

In a review of research on remarriage and stepfamilies during the 1990's, Coleman, Ganong & Fine (2000) note that over a third of the papers focus on the impact of marital breakdown and remarriage on child development. The prevailing perspective was that marital breakdown and remarriage constituted family disruption leading to a higher probability of problems for children and adolescents in social relations, health, educational achievement, aggressive behaviour, conduct disorder, anxiety and depression (e.g. Bray & Berger, 1993; Dunn, 1995; Dunn, Davies, Thomas & Sturgess, 2001; Fine, Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1993; Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004; Hetherington, Henderson & Reiss, 1999). There is less research on the stepparent role; in a review of 133 studies conducted between 1987 and 1999 only 5% focused on the stepparent role or behaviours, and more information was available on

stepfathers than stepmothers (Orchard & Solberg, 1999). One reason for the greater focus on stepfathers and stepfather families, it has been argued, is the relative 'social invisibility' of stepmother families, who are often part-time with the stepchildren living primarily with their biological mother, (Burgoyne & Clark, 1984, Visher, Visher & Kay, 2002).

Attempts to produce typological classifications of stepfamilies or stepparental roles have, to some extent, been useful in recognising the variety of forms that such families may take. However, despite differing approaches, similarities in the classifications are suggested by such research and the pervasiveness of the nuclear family norm is apparent. Although some researchers (e.g. Berger, 1995; Church, 1999) emphasise that there are different ways for stepfamilies to function satisfactorily, the danger remains that typologies or developmental models may become prescriptive. This may serve to limit what is seen as appropriate or adaptive behaviour for a stepmother and could be particularly problematic for stepmothers who do not conform to the types of stepfamilies studied, which are usually middle-class and characterised by married, heterosexual couples.

Several authors suggest that stepmothers often suffer greater stress than stepfathers (e.g. Bernstein, 1989; Fine, 1995; Nielsen, 1999, Doodson & Morley, 2006). However, there is limited research looking specifically at the experiences of stepmothers and research on non-residential stepmothers (i.e. those who do not live with their stepchildren on a full-time basis) is particularly sparse (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Miller (2005) notes that individual narratives are contingent on the societal framing of contemporary motherhood. 'Only when we pay close attention to mothers' everyday experiences are we informed enough to contribute to discussions about how motherhood should be socially constructed' (Chase & Rogers, 2001). One can argue that this is equally true for stepmothers. Therefore this study builds on the existing research to better understand the diversity of subjective experiences of

stepmothers living in a variety of family situations and to problematise constructions that could impact negatively on those experiences.

Methodology

Design

Q methodology was originally developed by William Stephenson (1935) and has more recently been described by Brown (1980), Stainton Rogers (1995) and Watts & Stenner (2005a). Q methodology is suited to answer the research questions of this study, as it aims to identify and describe a range of shared stories or discourses among participants (Curt 1994). It is particularly suited to the study of subjective issues or experiences. For example, Q methodology has been used to study chronic pain (Ecclestone, Williams & Stainton Rogers, 1997), post pregnancy body image (Jordan, Capdevila & Johnson, 2005), constructions of lesbianism (Kitzinger, 1987), pornography, (Senn, 1996), understandings of health and illness (Stainton Rogers, 1991), narrative approaches to therapy (Wallis, Burns & Capdevila, 2009) and partnership love (Watts & Stenner, 2005b). According to Watts and Stenner, Q can be understood as 'a very critical method' (2005a: 70) through its use of a gestalt procedure to identify 'the primary ways in which...themes are being interconnected or otherwise related by a group of participants' (Watts & Stenner 2005a: 70). Q methodology's ability to access a range of perspectives allowing for the identification of shared experiences, be they dominant or marginal, locates it within critical and constructionist concerns with multiplicity. Thus, we would argue that Q offers a critical contribution through its ability to make expressions of marginality manifest and allowing for the unsettling of 'mainstream notions of coherent and total knowledges of the social world' (Capdevila & Lazard 2009: 70). This is particularly relevant in relation to mainstream literature on stepmothering which attempts to pin down appropriate or 'healthy' ways to be, pathologising experiences that may fall outside these

standard understandings. Q methodology, on the other hand, includes these shared experiences, giving them equal representation.

In this case Q methodology was used to explore how themes, seen as relevant to stepmothering in our culture and in the academic literature, were brought together by participants who had experiences of stepmothering.

Pilot Study

Producing the statements for the Q pack involved a number of steps aimed at identifying a sample that represented the diversity of experiences available to stepmothers. Firstly, statements were collected through a review of the academic literature and media as well as informal focus groups held with stepmothers known to the researchers. This produced an initial pool of 264 propositions. The list was then edited and reduced by the researchers to refine wording and eliminate duplication. A questionnaire was then developed with four choices for each statement (agree, disagree, uncertain and unclear) with an open-ended question where participants could comment on any statements or issues of relevance that might have been absent from the list. The pilot study served to control for clarity of expression (that the wording was not confusing, no jargon, etc.), comprehensiveness (that important issues were not missed) and balance (that multiple viewpoints were represented – both negative and positive). Eleven stepmothers took part in a pilot study. This produced a final sample of 61 statements identified as relevant to the concerns of stepmothers (see Table 1 below).

Participants

The participants were recruited from a parenting organisation (Parentline Plus), a web forum for stepmothers and also through the use of a snowballing technique (Howitt & Cramer, 2005). Since Q methodology attempts to access as diverse a sample as possible, the intention of recruiting from a variety of sources was to ensure that the sample included

women from different backgrounds with a wide range of stepmothering experiences. The

final study included twenty-nine participants who identified themselves as stepmothers.

These women ranged in age from nineteen to seventy-four. They came from a wide range of

backgrounds with occupations including manual jobs such as shopworker, white-collar jobs

such as administrator and professions such as barrister. They also occupied varied

stepmothering situations. For example, age on becoming a stepmother ranged from 17 to 47

years, length of time as a stepmother ranged from six months to 36 years and the age of the

youngest stepchild at the start of the relationship ranged from a few months to 24 years.

Participants included women with both stepsons and stepdaughters and the number of

stepchildren ranged from one to four. Seven women had children prior to becoming a

stepmother and had thus formed complex stepfamilies in which both partners have biological

children; one of these and nine other participants had subsequently had at least one child with

their current partner so that sixteen women in the sample were biological mothers. Four of

the participants had their stepchildren living with them full time and four others had been full

time stepmothers when the children were younger. For two of these residential stepmothers

the children's mother was deceased and for another the biological mother had no contact with

her children. Twenty-eight of the participants were living in the UK, one was British but

resident in France.

Procedure

Participants were asked to sort all of the 61 items from most agree to most disagree on

a grid with a quasi-normal distribution (from +5 to -5) as shown in figure 1. Q methodology,

unlike traditional questionnaires, prioritizes the relationship of the statements to each other

rather than the absolute value of their positioning. Hence, participants were asked to focus on

the ordering of the statements. Participants were also provided with a response booklet where

they could add comments on any item or set of items, the study as a whole and their

experiences as a stepmother.

Figure 1. The Q Grid

The sorts were then analysed using Principal Component Analysis (eigenvalue > 1)

and Varimax rotation to find the associations among the sorts. This process initially

identified eight factors[ii], which together explained 71% of the variance. Those sorts which

correlated above 0.6 with any one factor and no more than 0.4 with any other factor were

merged to produce reconstructed sorts to exemplify each factor (as per Brown 1980, see also

Jordan et al, 2005 & Wallis et al. 2009). These reconstructed sorts together with the

comments provided by participants whose sort contributed to the reconstructed factor were

used to interpret the account. For the purposes of this paper, however, only the first five

factors (those with an eigenvalue > 2) have been included. Of these one factor is bipolar, with

both a statistically positive and negative version, therefore six accounts of stepmothering will

be discussed.

These six accounts can be seen to describe differing constructions or understandings which were prominent, both statistically and conceptually, within the study and, thus, within the participants' cultural context. No assumption is made here that these accounts are exhaustive of all those open to stepmothers, simply that these are diverse and shared understandings that exist and are available (albeit differentially) to stepmothers.

Results

The six accounts discussed in this paper have been (arguably) labelled: 'The Extra Parent', 'Unsupported and Battling', 'Out of my Control', 'Excluded', 'Detached' and 'Unappreciated'. Below we present a table indicating the rankings for each of the 61 statements in each of the six factors that will be discussed. These rankings, together with the comments of exemplifying participants, inform a narrative (or storied) account of each factor treating each configuration as a Gestalt entity (Watts & Stenner, 2005b). These narratives are incorporated into the discussion that follows.

Table 1. **Statement rankings by factor**

Figures in bold indicate the highest ranking for each statement. Figures in italics indicate the lowest ranking for each statement.

No.	Statement	F1	F2	F3	F4+	F4-	F5
1	My stepchildren get the attention I want from my partner	-1	+3	-2	**+4**	-3	*-4*
2	I prefer my partner to take most of the responsibility for disciplining his children	**+1**	*-1*	*-1*	*-1*	0	**+1**
3	My partner is too indulgent with his children	-1	0	-3	**+2**	-3	+1
4	I am fully included in decisions about my stepchildren	**+1**	*-5*	+1	+1	0	-1
5	My partner undervalues what I do for his children	-3	**+4**	-2	0	+2	-2
6	I sometimes feel like an outsider in this family	-2	**+5**	0	**+5**	-4	+2
7	Difficulties with my stepchildren have a negative effect on my relationship with my partner	0	**+5**	-2	+1	+3	+3
8	My partner and I agree about my role in this family	**+3**	*-4*	+2	-1	+1	-2
9	My partner gives me lots of support in being a stepmother to his children	**+3**	-4	0	-1	*-4*	-2
10	I have no authority over my stepchildren	-3	-1	-3	-1	+2	**+3**
11	I'm jealous of my stepchildren	*-5*	+1	-2	**+5**	*-5*	-3

No.	Statement	F1	F2	F3	F4+	F4-	F5
12	I feel tense when my stepchildren are around	-3	+4	+1	0	+2	-1
13	My relationship with my stepchildren has improved over time	+4	+1	+1	-3	-2	+1
14	My relationship with my stepchildren is distant	-5	-2	-5	-3	+4	0
15	I love my stepchildren	+5	0	0	-1	-5	0
16	I try hard to develop and maintain a good relationship with my stepchildren	+4	+1	+4	+4	0	+4
17	I would prefer to be less involved with my stepchildren	-4	-2	-1	+3	+1	0
18	Stepmothering has been easy for me because my stepchildren are really nice	+1	-3	-1	-3	-2	-1
19	I'm very satisfied with my relationship with my stepchildren	+4	-3	0	+1	-3	+2
20	My relationship with my stepchildren is delicate; a trust that could easily be broken	0	+2	-3	-4	-1	+1
21	I try to be like a friend rather than a parent to my stepchildren	+2	0	+1	+2	+2	+5
22	I try to remain a bit detached from my stepchildren	-2	+1	-1	+2	+2	-2
23	I try to be like a godmother or aunt to my stepchildren	0	-1	-1	-1	0	0
24	I try hard to prove to my stepchildren and my partner that I am not a wicked stepmother	0	-1	-1	-2	0	-3
25	I try to make it up to my stepchildren for all the upset they've suffered	-1	-1	-2	-5	+1	-5
26	It is difficult to discuss my feelings about my stepchildren with my partner	-3	+5	+1	0	+3	-3
27	I am something good and extra in my stepchildren's lives	+3	-2	+4	+4	-1	+2
28	It is hard to know what is expected of me as a stepmother	0	+2	+3	+3	-1	+3
29	I feel unappreciated by my stepchildren	-3	+1	-3	0	0	+4
30	Stepmothering is much more difficult than I expected	0	+3	+5	+2	-1	+2
31	I find it hard to deal with my emotions about the problems we have as a stepfamily	-2	+2	0	+1	+1	+1
32	I can do a better job than my stepchildren's real mother	0	-5	+4	+3	+3	+4
33	I find being a stepmother very stressful	-1	+2	+3	+3	0	0
34	My rules and values are undermined by the other influences on my stepchildren	0	0	0	-1	+4	+1
35	I'm always second best for my stepchildren after their real mother	+1	+3	-4	-2	+2	+4
36	I feel less confident in my role as a stepmother than in other aspects of my life	-1	+4	+3	0	-1	-3
37	I feel I'm an important influence on my stepchildren	+2	-2	+2	+3	-2	+1
38	I think people see stepfamilies as a poor substitute for a real family	+1	-2	+5	-2	+1	0
39	My extended family include my stepchildren as equal family members	+2	0	+1	-5	+1	-1
40	I wish my partner and I had more privacy	0	+2	+1	+5	0	-1
41	The way my stepchildren treat their father sometimes upsets me	+1	-1	-5	-2	+3	+3
42	I feel rejected by my stepchildren	-4	+2	-4	-5	-4	-1
43	I think my stepchildren resent me	-2	+1	-4	-2	+5	-5
44	I try to treat my stepchildren as if they were my own	+3	-1	+1	0	+1	-4
45	I wish I didn't have stepchildren	-5	+4	+2	+1	+5	+5
46	I think my stepchildren love me	+1	-4	+3	-2	-5	0
47	I consider my stepchildren as part of my family	+5	+1	0	-4	0	-3
48	Being a stepmother has given added depth to my relationship with my partner	+2	-4	-3	0	-1	0
49	I get a lot of pleasure from spending time with my stepchildren	+5	-1	0	0	-3	-2

No.	Statement	F1	F2	F3	F4+	F4-	F5
50	I worry that I sometimes treat my stepchildren unfairly	-1	0	**+5**	-3	-1	*-4*
51	Having negative feelings about my stepchildren makes me feel I'm a nasty person	-1	**+3**	**+3**	+2	-2	**+3**
52	I can be more objective than my partner about my stepchildren	+2	*0*	+2	+4	+3	**+5**
53	I'd like my stepchildren to treat me with more respect	-1	0	*-5*	-1	**+5**	0
54	Dealing with the difficulties of stepmothering has taught me a lot about myself	**+2**	-3	**+2**	*-4*	+1	**+2**
55	I'm reluctant to admit to being a stepmother	-4	*-5*	-2	-4	**+4**	-1
56	My stepchildren often behave badly	*-4*	-3	*-4*	+1	**+4**	-1
57	Being part of a stepfamily has enriched my life	**+3**	*-2*	-1	0	-2	-2
58	It is hard for other people to understand the difficulties of being a stepmother	+1	+1	**+4**	+2	-2	+2
59	I would like more support from friends for my stepmothering role	-2	-3	0	**+1**	-3	-5
60	My role as a stepmother changes over time	**+4**	**+3**	+2	+1	*-1*	+1
61	I'd sometimes like to be more involved with my stepchildren	-2	**0**	-1	-3	*-4*	*-4*

Discussion

This study used Q methodology to capture women's subjective experiences of being a stepmother allowing the expression of considerable diversity; five distinct factors emerged, of which one was bipolar, giving six different accounts of the stepmothering experience. Although Q methodology makes no claim to identify all the perspectives that exist (Brown, 1980; Kitzinger 1987; Stainton Rogers 1995), the women who participated in this study were chosen for maximum diversity; this research should therefore have captured many of the dominant perspectives of heterosexual, British stepmothers and arguably some marginal ones that other methodologies would miss (Capdevila & Lazard, 2007/08). This is a key consideration because much of the limited previous research has only considered married, middle-class, and usually residential stepmothers and thus failed to address marginal yet important experiences. Thus these accounts, express a panoply of culturally informed understandings of stepmothering available in varying degrees to diverse experiences of stepmothering.

Of all the factors that emerged only factor 1, **the *extra parent*,** offers a wholly positive view of the experience of stepmothering. In this perspective, stepchildren are a source of pleasure and the stepmother sees her role as beneficial and one for which she is valued. This factor is characterised by parental feelings towards the stepchildren. They are much loved, incorporated into the stepmother's family and treated much as if they were biological children; this includes a feeling that the stepmother has some authority over them. Whilst, from the perspective of this factor, the stepmother feels loved by her stepchildren, this is ranked lower than her love for them suggesting that her love, like that of a parent, is not dependent on reciprocation. Being part of an extended family enhances the stepmother's life and adds to her relationship with her partner. As one participant commented 'I think these extended families are fab! And we all benefit.' (participant 14).

Although none of the results from this study map directly onto parenting styles or stepfamily types that have been described by previous research, this extra parent perspective does have some resonance with 'The progressive family' model identified by Burgoyne and Clark (1984) and the 'Extended' model proposed by Church (1999). The stepmother stresses the advantages of her expanded family and has defined a role for herself that is an addition rather than a replacement for the natural mother.

In the *extra parent* factor it is interesting that when naming the factor the best description available seemed to be 'the extra parent'. There is no other suitable word for an adult in this relationship with a child. Smith (1990) does suggest that we need an alternative name for stepmothers because of the word's negative connotations. Perhaps an alternative name would also help to avoid constructions of stepfamilies, including such constructions within psychological research in which they are seen as deviant in comparison with a nuclear biological family (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000).

In contrast factor 2, ***Unsupported and battling,*** finds stepmothering to be a loveless struggle to define a role and deal with the emotional impact, which, together with a lack of support from her partner, impacts negatively on the couple's relationship. As one participant expresses it, 'the only added depth we've gained is arguments' (participant 26). Lack of support from a partner is an issue that was also raised in previous research by Orchard and Solberg (1999) with only 26.1% of their participants feeling supported or appreciated by their partners. The factor 2 account also indicates little involvement in decisions about the children. The role ambiguity and strain evident in this factor has been identified by previous research (Orchard & Solberg, 1999; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Orchard & Solberg (1999) further found that 44.5% of their participants felt that their husbands had different expectations of them as stepmothers usually wanting them to be more involved or mother-like. Saint-Jaques (1995) suggests that avoiding such strain requires both role clarity and consensus of the partner and stepparent's expectations. However, consensus and clarity may be difficult to achieve if ideas of an appropriate role for the stepmother are informed by constructions of mothering as natural for women, of parenting as women's work and if such constructions conflict with the view that stepmothers should not encroach on the role of the natural mother or her relationship with her children. Yet despite the difficulties these women are the least reluctant to admit to being a stepmother. They recognise some improvement over time and continue in their efforts to make the relationships better. This factor was named 'Unsupported and battling' to recognise the lack of support, conflict between the couple and this sense of battling on.

Factor 3, ***Out of my control,*** incorporates some positive aspects of the relationship with the stepchildren but emphasises external factors; both the negative way that stepfamilies are seen by others, and the stepmother's lack of control over aspects of her situation. In this account, stepmothering is also seen as a difficult job but this does not have a negative impact

on the stepmother's relationship with her partner and she feels her role is important and valued. This factor shows the greatest concern about the opinions of those outside the family. The impact of the nuclear family as an idealized form is apparent here where the stepmother feels that stepfamilies are viewed negatively by society and seen as a poor substitute for a 'real' family. One participant explained that other people's comments in this respect often made her angry, 'as if it's pretend'; as she says 'we are a real family' (participant 22). This pervasiveness of the nuclear family as a social norm is reflected in a number of stepfamily typologies developed by previous research (e.g. Burgoyne & Clark, 1984, Erera-Weatherley, 1996, Church, 1999) where stepfamilies are described as mimicking or attempting to mimic a nuclear biological family.

In this account stepmothers feel valued and loved by their stepchildren; in fact, they rank their stepchildren's love for them higher than any other factor. However, their own feelings for their stepchildren are more ambiguous. This seems to be related to feelings of lack of control over the situation. For example, a participant comments 'the negative feelings I have don't come from problems with (my stepchild's) behaviour but my frustration at our situation' (participant 23). This account reflects a stepmother occupying a position not of her own choosing and although conscientious in caring for stepchildren, the frustration about the economic and practical impact on their lives inevitably creates feelings of resentment. Because there is recognition that the situation is not the children's fault there is also a concern that this may affect the way that they deal with their stepchildren. One can see that this may be affected by the way that motherhood is framed as a choice for women. Yet for many stepmothers their choice is of a partner, they did not choose to become stepmothers (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1988). If, in addition, they feel little love for their stepchildren, they may feel bad or unnatural as mothering is constructed as the route to emotional fulfilment for women (Marshall, 1991). One participant commented 'I feel really evil if I

have any negative thoughts about him (her stepson)' (participant 23). Although, in this study, there was little agreement with the statement 'I try hard to prove to my stepchildren and my partner that I am not a wicked stepmother', it is interesting that this woman uses the term 'evil'. The wicked stepmother myth may be effective even when it is explicitly denied.

Factor 4 +, *Excluded,* is characterised by a feeling of being an outsider, the family here is seen as the father and his children, a group in which the stepmother is not included. Although, the stepmother feels accepted by her stepchildren and believes she is a positive influence in their lives, she is resentful of their relationship with their father and sometimes this is seen as excluding her and putting her in second place with her partner. This probably links to the view that her partner overindulges his children. This feeling of being excluded has also been identified in the work of Church (1999) who found that conflict arose in her 'couple model' when a stepmother saw her partner putting the children before herself.

Factor 4-, *Detached,* offers a view of stepmothering that is uninvolved. In contrast to the factor 4 positive view, factor 4 negative has no feelings of jealousy towards stepchildren nor any sense of being an outsider. Whereas in factor 4 positive the stepmother feels involved with her stepchildren but displaced by them in her partner's affections, in factor 4 negative the stepmother is detached from her stepchildren but this does not make her feel excluded or lacking in attention from her partner. The stepmother feels an insider in the family but here the stepchildren are seen as outside the family group. Whilst in factor 4 positive love is not salient, here its opposite is strongly expressed and the stepmother feels resented by her stepchildren. The stepchildren's behaviour is seen as problematic and in this account the stepmother would rather not have stepchildren. Perhaps, thus, it is not surprising that the relationship between stepmother and stepchild is distant.

Factor 5, *Unappreciated,* shows the greatest sense of comparison with the stepchildren's biological mother with two statements relating to the biological mother given

their highest rankings across all factors. In addition, participants are critical of their stepchildren's biological mothers; 'their real mother is useless' (participant 11), 'in some ways I feel I am a "better" mother' (participant 28). Smart (1996) suggests that if there is a normative idea of motherhood there must be those who fall outside the norm, it is a symbiotic relationship. The usual construction is of mothers as ideal, with the stepmother fulfilling the demonised role of those who are outside the norm. In this perspective, the relationship is inverted. Given this conflict between the stepmother's view of appropriate mothering and the approach she perceives is taken by the biological mother, it is perhaps not unexpected that the stepmother is disappointed not to be more appreciated for her efforts.

Despite strong views about appropriate mothering, more than any of the previous factors, in this perspective (factor 5) the stepmother attempts to take a friendly rather than a parental role. In this account stepmothering is difficult, impacting emotionally, creating some problems in the relationship with the partner and including some negativity towards the stepchildren, although these are not as strongly expressed as for some other factors. The role is also seen as having positive aspects both in terms of the relationship with the stepchildren and in personal growth.

Thus, this is a perspective in which the stepmother endeavours to work at the relationship with her stepchildren and feels she has achieved some success. Despite this, she would much prefer not to have stepchildren but this thought is not usually expressed. As participants comment 'I feel really awful admitting this but life would be much easier if it was just me, my husband and our son' (participant 28) and 'I secretly wish he'd never had children before we met' (participant 11).

By examining experience, this study has captured greater diversity and complexity than may be suggested by research focussing on roles or parenting styles including both dominant and marginal narratives. It is apparent that many of the themes identified in

previous research are reflected in the present study indicating that these draw on wider discourses of family, parenting and stepparenting. However, the fact that these themes do not map directly on to the factors found in this study shows that roles, parenting styles or other behaviours are not necessarily indicative of the subjective experience of a stepmother, and experience does not dictate the roles that may be adopted. This highlights the danger that specific roles or behaviours may be identified, seen as more adaptive and used prescriptively. In addition, we would stress the changing nature of the stepmothering role, as Orchard and Solberg (1999) and Weaver and Coleman (2005) have shown, stepmothers may occupy a variety of roles that are not mutually exclusive and may change over time. In the present study, several participants commented that they would have responded differently to many of the statements at different times in the past. Indeed, Q methodology identifies the perspectives that are available to individuals but recognises that they may utilise different perspectives in different contexts and at different times. Thus we would emphasise that the factors found in this study are not ways to stepmother, rather, they are a range of understandings contextualised both by changing individual circumstances and wider societal discourses. By increasing understanding of the experience, we may therefore gain greater insights into the benefits and pleasures, and the stresses that many researchers (e.g. Neilsen, 1999; Smith, 1990) have found to be a feature of stepmothering.

Conclusions

Women experience stepmothering in a variety of ways and for many it is at times difficult and stressful but it can also be positive and life enhancing. Much psychological research has contributed to the pathologisation of stepfamilies and stepmothers. It has also been implicated in work that may be used prescriptively to ensure that stepmothers perform

their role 'correctly'. By recognising the complexity and diversity of the stepmothering experience, this research supports the idea that women are not alone in their experience and, contrary to the implications of much psychological research and a plethora of self-help books, there is not just *one* way to be a stepmother. In addition, the paper has considered ways in which these varied perspectives on the experience of being a stepmother are culturally informed by wider discourses in which motherhood is idealized, stepmothers are demonised and the biological nuclear family is held to be the standard, an ideal form against which others are judged. In conclusion, the particular problems faced by stepmothers can only be alleviated if these constructions are challenged, diversity is recognised and the singularisation of the experience in the public imaginary is contested.

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[i] For more detailed explorations of wicked stepmother myths and their impact on contemporary stepmothers see also (Campbell, 1995, Ceglian & Gardner, 2000, Christian, 2005).

[ii] This paper will use the term 'factor' to describe the arrays produced by the statistical analysis for the sake of consistency with most Q methodological studies although it is recognised that, as PCA was used, they are technically 'components'