**The Complex Dynamics of Step-m-othering: A Qualitative Study**

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# Abstract

This thesis centres on the qualitative analysis of stepmothers' experiences of stepmothering, a topic that is significantly under-researched. Between May and November 2012 I undertook semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 women who were in the position of stepmother (not all of them identified with that term), mostly from the north of England. In my core data analysis chapters I examine the stepmothers' reported experiences regarding 1) their relationships with their stepchildren, 2) their relationships with the biological/adoptive mothers of their stepchildren, 3) their perceptions of the roles of the biological/adoptive fathers in shaping steprelationships, and 4) their views of the impact of their wider families on their stepfamilies. These four areas have rarely, in some instances, never, been explored, or explored in any detail, in previous research. My first key finding is that stepmothers lead complex lives in multifaceted stepfamilies, for instance serial stepfamilies, which defy easy categorization. Secondly, the relationships between the stepmothers and their stepchildren, including with adult stepchildren, were 'complicated' at least at some point in the relationship and underwent continuous change. Thirdly, the most problematic of all relationships in stepfamilies were the relations between the stepmothers and their stepchildren's biological/adoptive mothers. Fourthly, the stepmothers reported their partners' role in managing the steprelationships as somewhat uninvolved and 'distant'. Finally, the stepmothers' biological and in-law families played important roles in the stepfamilies, either by building bridges or raising walls (Visher and Visher, 1996). The stepmothers' relationships within their stepfamily constellations were interwoven and interconnected with the relationships other stepfamily members had with each other.

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## Author's Declaration

I certify that all the research and writing presented in this thesis are original and my own. Over the course of PhD I have used parts of my research in a chapter of an edited book and in papers given at academic conferences.

A version of Chapter 5, 'The Relationships Between the Stepmothers and the Biological/Adoptive Mothers' has been used at a conference at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburg, under the title 'Wicked Mothers? The Relationships Between Mothers', June 2013, unpublished paper.

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

<u>Introduction</u>

Everybody 'knows' that 'stepmothers are notoriously wicked. Anyone, with any cultural literacy [...] knows that stepmothers are always out to destroy their stepchildren' (Abrahamsen 1995: 347). It is a sweeping statement but when I told people that my research is about the experiences of stepmothers, I was presented with statements such as these: 'there is no smoke without fire' or 'a stepmother cannot love her stepchild/ren like a biological mother' or 'a stepmother wants to wedge herself in-between [displace] the biological mother and her biological child' – the last statement was said by my biological mother to me. I found these pervasively negative portrayals and mistrust of stepmothers hugely problematic and deeply hurtful because I am a stepmother.

It was my own stepdaughter who inspired me to research the experiences of other stepmothers. Interestingly, she was introduced to the idea of a stepmother at school, in the form of Cinderella's wicked stepmother. She even called my husband to tell him that she has a stepmother herself and that it was me. By this point I had been her stepmother for two years but it was only after my stepdaughter's teacher read *Cinderella* at school that she realized she had one. It would seem that none of her parents read the story to her before and neither of us talked to her about me as her stepmother. I do not know why.

However, despite being prompted by my own experiences, I made a deliberate choice to exclude my own stepmothering story from the thesis as, because unlike my participants, I do not have the security of anonymity and I wanted to focus of the experiences of my participants. Yet, it is important to note that no research is free from its researcher's personal story and my research is certainly underpinned by my own experiences of stepmothering. This is why I shall discuss the implications of my position as a researcher and a stepmother in the Methodology Chapter.

At the heart of this thesis are the experiences of women who were and/or are in the position of stepmother and who, largely, live in the north of England. My key research question therefore is: how do stepmothers experience and view their stepmothering. In this thesis I focus on the stepmothers' perspectives on their

steprelationships, their stepchildren's biological/adoptive mothers and biological/adoptive fathers, and their wider stepfamily members. As stepmothers remain invisible in academic discourse, despite the growing numbers of stepfamilies, stepmothers and calls in academia for more research on them (Coleman et al, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011), this thesis provides a unique opportunity to explore, and learn from, their complex lives.

In this introductory chapter I shall firstly, outline the key debates in research on stepmothers which underpin my own project. Secondly, I will provide the outline of my thesis.

Literature Review

Although there is a large body of research on stepfamilies, stepmothers seem to be mostly absent from it. This surprised me and as I was new to this research, at first I thought that I was doing my 'literature research' wrong and even contacted our designated librarian to help me. However, very quickly she and I realized that this was not the case and that the research on stepmothers is indeed limited. One of the 'easily resolved' problems in locating previous research on stepmothers is that there is no consistency in the field regarding the terminology. Thus, stepfamilies and their members are referred to in a number of ways, for example as 'step-families', 'stepfamilies', 'step families', 'blended families', 'recycled families', 'second families', 'reformed families' or 'remarried' families. Some scholars use the terms 'stepfamily' and 'blended family' to signify two distinctly different family forms (see for example, Bauer Maglin and Schniedewind, 1984). This is why throughout this thesis I decided to use uniform terminology – unless I indicated otherwise – and explain in each chapter what I mean by complex titles. Thus, I use the prefix 'step' without hyphen and as part of one word, for example 'stepmother' or 'stepchild'; I refer to the biological or adoptive parents as 'biological/adoptive parents'. However, I must add that neither of these terms is exhaustive because neither appropriately reflects the complexity of stepfamily constellations, nor the fact that biology has a very different meaning where reproductive technologies are concerned.

The body of research on stepmothers has a number of central themes that dominate it. Roper and Capdevila (2011: n.p.) argue that these are:

> […] 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.

This is why in this section I shall focus on the five key themes that guided my own research: 1) the invisible stepmother, 2) the (wicked) *step*mother, 3) the (natural) step*mother*, 4) the idealized biological mother and 5) the biological nuclear family bias.

*Invisible Stepmothers: Research and Demographics*

There is an almost uniform agreement amongst scholars researching stepmothers that research on stepmothers is scarce, but growing (e.g. Salwen, 1990; Hughes, 1991; Orchard and Solberg, 1999; Coleman et al, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011; Shapiro and Stewart, 2011). The majority of research on stepfamilies, including stepmothers, comes from North America, the USA in particular (Hughes, 1991), with only nine British studies focused specifically on stepmothers, as of 2012. Importantly there are no statistical data available on the numbers of stepmothers, unless they are residential parents (Coleman et al, 2008). This means that since the early 1990s the gaps in, and the focus of, research on stepmothers have not been filled or changed despite the repeated and articulated need for more data on them. The slowly growing interest in stepmothers combined with the incomplete statistical data are rather problematic in a number of ways and I shall explore the implications of these in this section.

*Research*

The relative invisibility of stepmothers and their families in research, legal and educational institutions, and wider society, are noted as problematic by scholars (see for example, Visher and Visher, 1979; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003; Henry and McCue, 2009). Pasely and Moorefield (2004) note that research into stepparents before the 1970s is limited. Through the 1970s till the 1980s the body of research started to grow, with the 1990s being described as 'a period of enormous productivity in the study of remarriage and stepfamilies' (Coleman et al, 2000: 1288). However,

Roper and Capdevila (2011) suggests that only 5% of the research about stepparents from 1987 to 1999 focuses on their roles and behaviours (see also Orchard and Solberg, 1999). And in these 5% more information is available about stepfathers than stepmothers (Roper and Capdevila, 2011). Interestingly most of the research on stepparents is actually about stepfathers, not stepmothers (Pasely and Moorefield, 2004; Crohn, 2010). Sometimes the distinction between genders is not even mentioned (Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Henry and McCue, 2009). This strengthens the arguments that stepmothers are invisible in research.

However, I think it is important to note that before the Children Act (1989) when biological parents divorced it was typical for one biological parent, usually the residential mother, to retain custody of the child/ren. The non-residential biological father did not retain custody of his non-residential child/ren but was given access to them (Alexander, 1995). It was encouraged that the residential stepfather become the primary father figure to his stepchild/ren and the non-resident father limit his involvement with the children as this was considered better for the children (Smart and Neal, 1999). In effect the non-resident parent was discouraged from being actively engaged with his 'former' family and encouraged to focus on his 'new' family – a non-residential stepmother seemed not to exist. Hence this would explain why there was little interest in non-residential stepmothers but this explanation is problematic in the 21$^{st}$ century. The fact that non-residential parents, usually fathers, were encouraged by the Children Act (1989) and societal expectations regarding 'new divorced fathering' to maintain contact with their non-residential children, and presumably with the father's new partner, make it difficult to conceptualize stepmothers as unimportant parents because they would be, presumably, engaged with their partners' children, unless we consider gendered ideas about parenting where it often indicates mothering (Roper and Capdevila, 2011). This suggests that non-residential biological fathers are perhaps less engaged with their non-residential children because they are not the main carer, they are 'part-time' parents and as they are men, therefore, they are less able parents – the same as stepmothers who are 'intrinsically' bad at parenting and 'only' 'part-time' (Smith, 1990; Nielsen, 1999).

The majority of research on stepfamilies focuses on the effects on step/children of divorce and remarriage (Amato, 2004). This reinforces the idea that adults, in particular stepmothers are unimportant members of stepfamilies. Research that focuses specifically on stepmothers started to appear in the 1980s and explores

the myth of the wicked stepmother more rigorously. However, the primary focus of research of this time was on the wellbeing of the (step)children and how the (step)family is 'reconstituted' or 'recycled' (Bumpass, 1984; Frustenberg and Spannier 1984; Frustenberg, 1987).

It was Visher and Visher (1979) who first argued that stepmothers are effectively invisible in social, legal and contexts. They cite the lack of greetings cards for stepmothers, lack of university graduation invitations and lack of legal recognition of stepmothers' duties and rights with regards to their stepchildren. Henry and McCue (2009) argue that stepmothers in Australia and their families are openly discriminated against, in particular with regards to child maintenance payments and the family law process, from which they are excluded. Other studies conducted for example by Roper and Capdevila (2011) in the UK support this finding. This is particularly worrying as these studies show that in 30 years not much has changed in societal, legal and educational as well as academic attitudes to stepmothers.

However, it is important to add that Coleman and colleagues (2008) argue that this status quo is changing, citing the more recent presence of the said greeting cards for stepmothers and more, albeit still limited, research on stepmothers (Pryor, 2008; Shapiro and Stewart, 2011). Additionally Amato (2008) notes that there is a greater interest in some legal recognition of stepmothers, at least in research.

The existence of stepmothers is highly problematic in legal terms. It is evident that stepmothers live in a situation where they have only obligations and no rights (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003; Atkin, 2008; Pryor, 2008). Understandably, there is still some confusion regarding when one becomes a stepmother and the legal organization of stepfamilies. However, the significant changes in English and Welsh family law have not fully entered the social language, and understanding, of divorce. With the introduction of the Children's Act (1989), *parental custody* after divorce was replaced with *parental responsibilities* (PR). This emphasized the children's rights. Although the biological mother always has PR in all parts of the U.K., the biological father does not (Hayden, 2013). He can gain PR in England and Wales only, in four ways: 1) automatically, if he was married to the biological mother at the time of the child's birth, 2) if he and the biological mother jointly registered the birth of the child,

3) if he has a PR agreement with the biological mother and 4) if he has a PR order from the court[1].

Thus, contrary to popular belief, in Britain on divorce or separation, both biological/legal parents, including the non-residential parents, have the same PR and neither of them has custody, although the residential parent has *de facto* custody – as understood pre the Children Act (1989). This means that the 'residency' of the child/ren and the parents is an agreement between the parents about where the child/ren should live based on the premise that both parents are equally responsible for the child/ren[2] (Smart and Neal, 1999). Hence, when a biological parent remarries, her/his new spouse does not *officially* become a stepparent upon marriage. The term 'stepparent' has no legal standing even if a stepmother resides with the stepchild/ren. Although stepmothers can apply to the court for a 'residency order' – that is a court order about where the child should live – they are not a legal parent. For a stepmother to become a legal parent, she has to gain PR, which can be granted with the permission of all the people who have PR or by adoption, in which case one of the parents is stripped off her/his PR and the stepmother, in effect becomes the adoptive mother.

One of the reasons why the legal rights of stepmothers are problematic, is because one has to ask what rights should they have, in terms of their access, rights and responsibilities, to the stepchildren, after they and their biological fathers divorce? How many legal parents can/should a child have? These are very difficult questions that need answering but with little research and interest in stepmothers they will not be addressed.

*Demographics*

The demographic data about stepmothers, especially when it comes to 'the numbers of stepmothers [is] as ambiguous and mysterious as reported roles that stepmothers assume' (Coleman et al, 2008: 370). This indicates that the previously mentioned 5%

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[1] www.gov.uk/parental-rights-responsibilities/who-has-parental-responsibility

[2] A child's residence arrangement as discussed here is the 'ideal', which means that courts are not involved in granting a 'residence order'.

of the research on stepparental roles has resulted in confusion and raised questions about stepparents and that our understanding of their experiences remains limited. The key reason cited as to why there is no demographic data on the numbers of stepmothers in the UK is the way in which the data are collected – that is what questions are *not* asked (Coleman et al, 2008). As stepmothers are more likely to be non-residential stepparents their households are not classed as the primary residence of stepchild and, therefore, not included in the questionnaire. However, one can speculate on the numbers of non-residential stepmothers in the UK by looking at the numbers of residential stepfamilies. According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2001) in 2001 there were 2.5 million children living in stepfamilies – that is with residential stepparents – of which 80% were stepfather households (Coleman et al, 2008: 371). This might suggest that there is a similar percentage of non-residential stepmother households – but we simply do not know. The key problem with this way of data collection, and estimation of non-residential stepfamily numbers, is that the numbers of other stepfamily forms such as 'shared care' arrangements[3], 'part residential part non-residential' stepparents, former stepparents, stepparents to adult stepchildren and non-residential stepparents are invisible.

This is problematic as British statistics on stepfamilies show that the numbers of stepfamilies are growing (Coleman et al, 2008; Hart, 2009; Roper and Capdevila, 2011) and stepmother families, whether residential or non-residential, are also on the rise (Johnson et al, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). Thus, institutions such as courts, social services and educations institutions are unprepared for the complexity of many stepfamily forms and their changing needs. Coleman and colleagues (2008: 372) argue that the lack of statistics on stepmothers is a reflection of societal perceptions of them as unimportant parents; therefore 'there is no need to go to extra effort to identify them'. Importantly, the lack of research and demographic data are reported throughout the western world and are not UK-specific (Coleman et al, 2008).

Although there are two British studies about working-class stepmothers the, now classic, study by Burgoyne and Clark (1984) and Ribbens McCarthy and

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[3] 'Shared care' indicates an arrangement where 'the child spends at least two nights per week with each parent.' 'Part residential, part non-residential' indicates an arrangement where one child (or more) resides with her/his father and the other child resides with her/his mother (Alexander, 1995: 87).

colleagues (2003) these are the exception to the rule. Consequently data on stepmothers other than heterosexual, middle-class and white are also absent from research (Coleman et al, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). This means that our limited knowledge and understanding of stepmothers is dominated by a particular idea of step/mothering, setting it as the norm of how to do step/family – but it also provides us with an incomplete picture of stepmothering. This bias and the lack of a deeper understanding of the complexities of stepmothers' experiences are evident. Perhaps for this reason much of what we think we 'know' about stepmothers derives from myths rather than from lived experiences.

*The (Wicked)* Step*mother*

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (online version, 2011) the word 'stepmother' means 'a mother-loss', but 'to stepmother' means 'to treat one in a cruel and unloving way'. The word 'stepmother' appears to be irrevocably linked to adjectives such as 'wicked', 'evil' and 'cruel' (Coleman et al, 2008). Academic texts are filled with references to fairy tales such as Cinderella and Snow White, and much research refers to the wicked stepmother mythology, which is evident just by looking at the titles of some of the journal articles: for example, 'Cinderella's Stepmother Syndrome' by Morrison and Thompson-Guppy (1985), 'The Poisoned Apple' by Church E. (2000) and 'Contesting the Myth of the Wicked Stepmother' by Church A. (2005), or 'Deconstructing the Myth of the "Wicked Stepmother"' by Whiting and colleagues (2007).

Researchers have grappled with the idea whether the negative representation of stepmothers in fairy tales is detrimental to 'real' adults and children in stepfamilies. For example, Visher and Visher (1979: 6) argue that:

> Fairies do not exist, and witches do not exist, but stepmothers do exist, and therefore certain fairy tales are harmful rather than helpful to large segments of the population (Visher and Visher, 1979: 6).

Dainton (1993) notes that the myth of the wicked stepmother does not show any signs of losing its grip on society and has profound implications for stepmothers. Although Burgoyne and Clark (1984) and Ferri (1984) explicitly reject the idea that step-

mythology, particularly the wicked stepmother myth, has any negative impact on stepmothers and societal attitudes towards them. Their ideas were (and continue to be) rejected by the majority of scholars who point out the negative effects of the wicked stepmother figure from fairy tales on stepmothers and other stepfamily members (see for example, Bryan et al, 1986; Smith, 1990; Dainton, 1993; Claxton-Oldfield and Voyer, 2001; Claxton-Oldfield, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011; Shapiro and Stewart, 2011). Smith (1990) claims that the prevalence of negative portrayals of stepmothers in fairy tales not only underlines negative societal attitudes towards stepmothers but make it acceptable to think about stepmothers as wicked.

Studies have shown that stepmothers internalize the myth of the wicked stepmother (e.g. Brown, 1987b; Penor Ceglian and Gardner, 2001) both in how they think about themselves and how they think others perceive them (Roper and Capdevila, 2011; Coleman and Ganong, 1987). For example, the stepmothers in Roper and Capdevila's (2011) study were reported as strongly agreeing with the statement: 'I try hard to prove to my stepchildren and my partner that I am not a wicked stepmother'. Other research findings suggest that some stepmothers even cease to discipline their stepchildren in order not to be seen as wicked (Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Coleman et al, 2008). Moreover, one stepmother was reported as saying: 'I feel very evil if I have any negative thoughts about [my stepson]' (Roper and Capdevila, 2011: n.p.). Interestingly in a stepfamily 'negative thoughts' about one's family members are seen as a problem, an indication of a wicked stepmother if she happens to think them. Yet such thoughts are part of human relationships, though, their expression is not easily available to biological mothers either because they are expected to 'naturally' not feel them. Hence, these emotions remain a taboo. It would seem that women are not allowed 'negative thoughts' about their child, whether step- or biological.

However, it is important to add, as Claxton-Oldfield (2008) also points out, that although the stepmyths are still present in the social imaginary, there appears to be some change in societal attitudes towards the stepfamily in the form of positive representations of stepmothers in films, TV series and books for children, for example, in films and TV series such as 'Stepmom' (1998) or 'Step-by-Step' (1991); 'Callie and the Stepmother' by Meyer (2005) and cards for stepfamily members (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008: 48-49). This, I think, also reflects the growing need for more positive, and perhaps realistic, portrayals of stepfamilies, not just stepmothers –

although they are the most vilified members of stepfamilies (Coleman et al, 1997). Nonetheless, there appears to be an agreement among researchers in the stepfamily field that the impact of step-myths on stepmothers and society is indeed profound (Smith, 1990; Hughes, 1991; Dainton, 1993; Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Christian, 2005). I would like to note again that my own stepdaughter was introduced to the idea of a stepmother from fairy tales and was not given the option of the positive version of 'Callie and her Stepmother'. I would argue that part of the problem why the wicked stepmother stigma prevails is that we are exposed to the negative portrayals of stepmothers more than we are to the alternative.

Importantly, the stepmother stigma is also present in academic research, where it is not 'dispelled' but emphasized. The bulk of the research comes from psychological/psychotherapy disciplines, and centres on problems about normative-adaptive aspects of life in a stepfamily (Coleman and Ganong, 1990; Pasely and Moorefield, 2004). Such research focuses on how to fix problems in an individual in a stepfamily and a stepfamily as a whole, both of which are 'clearly' pathological (Roper and Capdevila, 2011). However, it would seem that stepmothers need advice more than other stepfamily members. Hence, stepmothers are advised how they *should* modify their 'unreasonable', 'immature' behaviours and attitudes, and expectations in order to have 'happy' and 'successful' stepfamilies (Bray et al, 1987; Salwen, 1990; Hughes, 1991; Hart, 2009) so these families *look like* or can *pass for* biological families (Ihinger-Tallman and Pasely, 1997). But studies also suggest that stepmothers should keep greater distance from their stepchildren and form a relationship that is less like the one between a biological mother and her biological child (Smith, 1990; Pasely and Moorefield, 2004). Importantly, the prevailing notion of stepmothers as ones having only young stepchildren, that is a child below the age of 18. This excludes other stepmothers from research and focuses on a relationship that is, or ought to be (or not), parental in nature. Such framing of steprelationships pathologizes and excludes other kinds of steprelationships.

Furthermore, there is very little guidance and clarity when it comes to the role/s of the stepmother. It should come as no surprise that stepmothers and researchers alike struggle defining them (Dainton, 1993; Coleman et al, 2008). Some researchers asked stepmothers to define themselves, for example Church (1999) and Erera-Weatherly (1996). Crohn (2006) asked stepdaughters to describe their steprelationship. Definitions and expectations can sometimes clash because each

member of the stepfamily constellation might have a different view of how to be a stepmother (Nielsen, 1999; Christian, 2005). For example, the partner/husband might expect the woman to be a 'second mother' to his biological children (Nielsen, 1999: 134); the stepchild might see her as a friend (Smith, 1990; Crohn, 2006); and the biological mother might expect her not to be involved at all (Nielsen, 1999). To decide how to be a stepmother is very difficult for women, and often stepmothers are reported feeling stressed, depressed and unappreciated (Dainton, 1993). This also shows that stepmothering is a complex process which is interwoven with expectations of other stepfamily members. In a sense it would seem that stepmothers are not free to define their role themselves but need to include the wishes of others.

Moreover, I would argue that another problem with our limited understanding of stepmothers' experiences is that the existing research has a strong bias towards parental steprelationships with young, and usually residential, stepchildren in stepfather families. Therefore, the advice that stems from such research might be inappropriate for other steprelationships, in particular stepmother families. For example, a new stepmother of an adult stepchild, e.g. 35 years of age, might find the advice to 'mother' her stepchild pointless. But a new stepmother to an infant whose biological mother is not involved in her/his upbringing could find the advice 'not to mother' inadequate. Such contradictory advice is equally problematic in the limited research because it implies that one way of stepmothering is correct and another is not, without enough information. Many studies and publications have a clinical background and often include data from psychotherapeutic practice. This means that the sample of stepmothers or other stepfamily members is biased towards problems, because people go to a therapist to look for help when 'things' do not work (Coleman et al, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011).

Then, perhaps, it is not surprising that the usual feelings of jealousy and envy are problematized in stepfamilies that need 'fixing' and not viewed as part of human relationships. For example, stepchildren and stepmothers alike are often reported feeling jealous and envious of their steprelations and biological father/partner (Smith, 1990; Church, 2000). Perhaps because in fairy tales the wicked stepmother's jealousy and envy are portrayed as problematic, in a stepfamily context they are viewed with suspicion by some researchers but also by the stepmothers. For example, Smith (1990: 20, 42) quotes a stepmother: 'There is an element of truth in the [wicked stepmother] stereotypes. You can become the wicked stepmother because of the competitiveness

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between yourself and the children […]'. To ease the problem, stepmothers are advised to control their jealousy and to acknowledge that they are have a secondary, if not peripheral, place in their family, because relationships between a biological father and his biological child are more important. Interestingly, only the stepmother is noted as problematic in this situation. If a stepchild reports her/his jealously towards their biological father, it is presented as the stepmother's fault (Smith, 1990). Stepmothers are so much at fault that they are noted as a risk factor for their stepchildren who are at a great risk of behavioural problems, poor health and educational attainment as well as substance abuse (Gunnoe and Hetherington, 2004; Crohn, 2006; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). The emphasis, yet again, is on the fact that it is a stepmother family.

However, the myth of the wicked stepmother can serve a purpose. For example, Bettelheim (1976) and Brown (1987a) argue that the myth of the wicked stepmother helps children 'split' their parents into good and bad. This enables young children to gain control over their 'Oedipal anguish' to express their anger and rage towards their biological mother by making her good and loving and the stepmother bad and evil (Coleman et al, 2008). However, as I argued earlier, as children are exposed to the myth of the wicked stepmother (reading or watching fairy tales at school or home), without being exposed to an alternative representation, considering their psychological immaturity (Oedipal anguish) the 'bad' stepmother can be 'over-emphasized and damaging to the [step] relationship' (Brown, 1987a: 10). Additionally, in all fairy tales the wicked stepmother disappears, thus potentially giving a stepchild false hope that her stepmother will disappear too (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008). Claxton-Oldfield (2008) argues that it is, indeed, possible that stepchildren are afraid of meeting their prospective stepmothers or that stepchildren might interpret stepmothers' expectations towards them wrongly because of the wicked stepmother imaginary from fairy tales. Brown (1987a) states that other members of stepfamily constellations may also overly readily accept the myth of the wicked stepmother. For example, biological fathers passively place their partners in the 'evil' category by expecting them to do all the disciplining of the children, as one stepmother is quoted saying: 'I feel resentment toward my husband because I have been set up by him to take on the role of the big, bad stepmother' (Brown, 1987a: 41). The wicked stepmother myth is in stark contrast to the 'natural' mothering skills women

apparently have or should have (Levin, 1997a) and I shall discuss this in the next section.

*The (Natural) Step*mother

The role/s of a stepmother is/are difficult and complex. Her presence is problematic not only because everybody 'knows' to expect her to be 'less affectionate, good, fair, kind, loving, happy, and likable, and more cruel, hateful, unfair, and unloving' (Dainton, 1993: 94); but also because her presence means the breakup of a 'first', nuclear biological family, the core of society and supposedly the best institution to bring up children (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003). This depiction of the stepmother is the total opposite of her 'natural' abilities to be loving and caring towards their stepchildren because she is a woman (Dainton, 1993; Penor Ceglian and Gardner, 2001). Thus the stepmother is split into two: the wicked stepmother and the 'natural' mother.

In research stepmothers are reported to be expected to 'mother' their stepchildren (Salwen, 1990; Shapiro and Stewart, 2011) and adhere to traditional gender roles in families and that it is to be kin-keepers (enabling and up-keeping family relations), perform most of the household tasks (cleaning, washing) (Shapiro and Stewart, 2011) and look after the stepchildren (supervising homework, health of their stepchildren) (Salwen, 1990). They are expected to love their stepchildren instantly, whilst being told to keep a distance from their stepchildren so that they do not step onto the biological mothers' territory (Smith, 1990; Dainton, 1993; Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Hart, 2009). In short, stepmothers are expected to be close and keep their distance at the same time. It is an impossible where stepmothers constantly struggle to get the balance right (Dainton, 1993; Coleman et al, 2008). Thus stepmothers are reported to overcompensate and become super-good stepmothers, a phenomenon called the Cinderella's Stepmother Syndrome (Morrison and Thompson-Guppy, 1985). Stepmothers also 'fail' as 'mothers' and as wives/partners, stepfamilies are reported to be more likely to end in divorce than 'first' families and stepmothers are held responsible for such failures (Nielsen, 1999; Whitton et al, 2008). Yet, biological fathers and stepfathers are not expected to engage in these complex parental and spousal behaviours with respect to their own role/s (Nielsen, 1999; Shapiro and Stewart, 2011).

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Considering the dichotomy of stepmother role, perhaps it is not surprising that stepmothers are reported to experience greater difficulties in adjusting to their role/s, and greater stress and depression levels than stepfathers (Whiting et al, 2007; Hart, 2009). They are also reported to have by far the most problematic and distant relationship with their stepchildren (particularly stepdaughters), unlike stepfathers (Hetherington and Kelly, 2002; Hart, 2009).

Feminist scholars, for example Levin (1997a) and Weaver and Coleman (2005), point out that the gendered context of parenting can potentially lead to conflict between stepmothers and biological mothers. This makes stepmothering even more challenging, particularly where the parenting of stepchild/ren is concerned. However, importantly, the potential conflict between mothers in stepfamilies is one of the rare examples where stepmothering is considered in a context other than as a relationship between the stepmother and stepchild. Disappointingly though, relationships between mothers are seldom discussed and only touch on the difficulties they have (see Chapter 4). I will argue that the challenging nature of relationships between stepmothers and biological mothers is rooted in power inequality, i.e. which mother has (more) 'mothering mandate', mainly because women, at least in white western societies, are exposed to powerful gendered expectations of motherhood, including stepmotherhood (Roper and Capdevila, 2011; Shapiro and Stewart, 2011). I shall now turn to the discussion of the idealization of the biological mother in research on stepmothers.

*The Idealized Biological Mother*

Coleman and colleagues (2008) argue that to 'mother' is to be selfless, forgiving and ever-loving; it is even better if the 'mothering' is done by a 'happily' and 'successfully' married woman. In western societies biological mothers are idealized. They are seen, and portrayed, as having natural, instant abilities to love, nurture and be selfless (Roper and Capdevila, 2011). They are also depicted as 'too uninterested in sex, too self-controlled, or too-devoted to their families to commit adultery or to leave their marriage for someone else' (Nielsen, 1999: 118). In short, biological mothers are the better person and the better parent (Roper and Capdevila, 2011). Stepmothers, however, are seen as less skilled at marriage, as seductresses (the mythical Phaedra who seduced her own stepson), and as selfish (Watson, 1995;

Nielsen, 1999; Roper and Capdevila, 2011), meaning the worse person and as the worse parent. This idealized portrayal of biological mothers reinforces their power in decision-making processes regarding how the children will be brought up after separation or divorce. But at the same time this makes the biological mother solely responsible for parenting. Thus, it seems that both stepmother and biological mother, contradictorily, are responsible for the success or failure of their step/families.

Weaver and Coleman (2005), and Roper and Capdevila (2011) note that biological motherhood is presented as a way for women to feel complete but it is also child-centric and biological mothers are socially expected to be constantly involved with their children. However, Nielsen (1999: 116) claims that such understanding of motherhood is hugely influenced by white, middle-class – and, I would add, also heterosexual – ideas of mothering, which 'encourage possessive, jealous, restrictive attitudes about [it]'. She adds that 'many white [biological] mothers from upper and middle class backgrounds are more possessive and more uncooperative than other mothers when it comes to "sharing" their children'. This line of argument, I would suggest, makes it difficult for a stepmother to find a space, both physical and emotional, where she can develop a relationship/s with her young stepchild/ren, in particular. Furthermore, biological mothers might feel that by 'sharing' the biological child/ren with their stepmother reflects badly on their mothering; hence they might actively seek to prevent this. By portraying the biological mother as the ideal, might make it difficult for her to acknowledge that she needs help in raising her residential child/ren and that perhaps she would like to negotiate 'shared care' with her former partner. But the biological mother may feel unable to so do because of societal pressure to mother in a particular way and the expectations that she will be harshly judged.

Stepmothers are reported to struggle with the idealized notion of the biological mother (Christian, 2005) and repeatedly report that the biological mothers of their stepchildren cause significant problems in steprelationships and the stepfamily as a whole (Nielsen, 1999). As both mothers are singled out as the ones who make or break the stepfamily, it is important to recognize and understand the role/s of the biological fathers in making stepfamilies. However, stepmothers' perceptions of roles of divorced fathers in stepfamilies are only briefly discussed in the relevant literature and usually indicate that they are not supportive enough of the stepmothers.

*The Biological Nuclear Family Bias*

Much of research from the 1970s is heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis and the notion that the two-parent family is the best for a child to be raised in (Amato, 2004). A large part of research on stepfamilies is concerned with the remaking of families so that they 'fit' into the nuclear biological model (Hughes, 1991; Amato, 2004; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). As the nuclear biological model of family dominates the research on stepfamilies it also focuses on comparing stepfamilies with 'traditional' families. This in effect portrays stepfamilies as deficient in comparison to 'normal' families (Gamache, 1997; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). For example, Atkin (2008: 526) quotes Hoggett, now Baroness Hale (1987) who said that:

> [T]he step-relation is not as the 'normal' family, and perhaps we should not pretend it is (Baroness Hale, 1987 cited in Atkin, 2008: 526).

Baroness Hale's statement is deeply problematic, not only because the idea that steprelationships are not 'normal' relationships is emphasized but also because it suggests that steprelationships cannot be like those between biological family members. This in a sense categorizes steprelationships as abnormal and pretended, which is unfair to many stepfamilies (see Chapter 3).

As 'the nuclear family model remains the cultural standard by default' (Gamache, 1997: 41) and other ways of doing stepfamily remain invisible in both research and society, perhaps it is not surprising that one stepmother is reported to be saying:

> [...] I'm sure there is deeper protection of blood relationship. It is something that is inherent (a stepmother quoted in Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003: 83).

This quote suggests that even some stepmothers view steprelationships as 'inherently' different from biological ties and not as strong or not as 'good' as biological ties because they supposedly do not give the same level of protection. But against what? Daly and Wilson (1998) argue that it is biological evolution that makes parents protect their biological offspring and that it is 'normal', i.e. biologically predetermined, for stepparents to exclude their stepchildren from access to resources.

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In my view such an understanding of family relationships is misguided and fails to consider the complexity of human interaction. Furthermore, Coleman and colleagues (2008: 373) argue that:

> in reality it is biological mothers, and not stepparents of either sex, who represent the greater risk for maltreatment of children.

However, the idea that 'blood is thicker than water' prevails not only in social mores (see Chapter 3) but also in academia. Levin (1997b: 123) states that stepfamilies '[…] are hidden behind the nuclear family'.

It could be argued that as remarriage, the stepfamily, is still seen as an incomplete institution in which the roles, duties and expectations of its members have not yet been defined (Cherlin, 1978). Therefore, comparing stepfamilies to biological nuclear families is a reasonable place to start. However, the dominance of one model of doing family in the limited research on stepfamilies is detrimental to the members of such families (Gamache, 1997). Furthermore, as our understanding of what constitutes a stepfamily remains unclear how, then, can it be institutionalized? Historically stepfamily has been understood to consist of one biological parent who remarried due to the death of her/his previous spouse and the new spouse who became the stepparent (Phillips, 1997). However, nowadays one is likely to become a stepparent when parents divorce or separate, not spousal death, and sometimes multiple times and later in life (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003; Atkin, 2008; Coleman et al, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). Therefore, I would argue that it is important to widen our understanding of who is part of a stepfamily and how this membership is manifested and maintained. However, such discussions remain on the peripheries of stepfamily research.

Research on stepmothers, however, does show some signs of 'improvement' as it has been diversifying, and moving away from comparison and deficit models of analysis – albeit slowly. Kinship formations in stepfamilies have become more prominent (Allan et al, 2008), including the socio-emotional and legal aspects of kinship (Bainham, 2006). However, this aspect of stepfamily research appears to be superseded by the research into reproductive technologies (Franklin and McKinnon, 2001; Ebtehaj et al, 2006). There is also limited research which suggests that some stepmothers are highly successful stepparents who have meaningful relationships with

their stepchildren and their partners (Whitington et al, 2007; Coleman et al, 2008; Crohn, 2010; Ulveseter et al, 2010; Shapiro and Stewart, 2011). It appears that stepmothers might have just found their rightful place within stepfamily constellation. However, these studies are few and far between (Coleman et al, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011).

Gaps in Current Research

I argued throughout this chapter that there is little research on stepmothers in general as well as in the British context and that the existing research is dominated by certain themes and paradigms. Any understanding of the complexity of stepmothers' lives, although it is becoming more prominent, remains limited. Stepmothers of adult stepchildren or those who adopted their stepchildren are essentially invisible in this research, as are serial and 'former' stepmothers. Therefore, relationships between stepmothers and their stepchildren which are not framed as like relationships between biological mother and biological child are also absent from the research.

Furthermore, stepmothers' experiences are often explored separately from a wider stepfamily constellations context. Hence, the stepmothers' perspectives on the relationships between them and the biological/adoptive mothers in stepfamilies and the roles of biological/adoptive fathers in shaping steprelationships are little understood. Additionally the relationship between the biological/adoptive parents as well as the nature of relationship between the biological/adoptive fathers and their children as seen by the stepmothers are also absent. It is important to remember that stepfamilies can and do contain stepmothers' biological, in-law and former in-law families. Thus, it is important to understand how these relationships influence the new stepfamilies and what their role is. However, these relationships are absent from research.

Moreover, stepmothers are seldom asked about how their steprelationships started and how they developed over time. One might argue that stepmothers appear and function in a relational vacuum. Although there is research, again limited, that includes stepchildren's, biological mothers' and step-/grandparents' perspectives, or recognizes their impact, it is limited in numbers and does not include all these parties in any single study. And, although the body of research on stepmothers' stress and depression is relatively extensive, very little is known about their satisfaction and how

this can be achieved (Coleman et al, 2008: 390). It is in this research vacuum that my work is located.

Thesis Outline

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on the methodology that shaped my research project from its inception to its completion. This is where I outline my research design, including the formulation of questions, sampling and my struggles to find stepmothers. I also discuss my position as a feminist stepmother researching other stepmothers. I detail the methods I used for data collection and analysis, as well as the practicalities and challenges of doing face-to-face semi-structured interviews and analysing complex stepfamily constellations. Chapter 3, my first empirical analysis chapter, centres on the discussion of three categories of the stepmothers' relationships with their stepchild: 'bad', 'complicated' and 'good'. In Chapter 4 I analyse the complexities of the relationships between the stepmothers and the biological/adoptive mothers, highlighting 'good' relationships and issues that are problematic for mothers in stepfamilies, which sometimes lead to surprising outcomes as argued in the 'Communication Breakdown' section. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the discussion on the roles of the biological/adoptive fathers in stepfamilies, in particular the stepmothers' introduction to stepmothering and how difficulties in the stepfamilies were, and were not, resolved by the stepmothers and their partners. In Chapter 6, the last analytical chapter, I concentrate on the stepmothers' views of the impact of the wider family on their stepfamilies. I focus on the stepmothers' biological and in-law families who built bridges and raised walls in the new stepfamilies, as well as a discussion on impact the stepmothers' biological mothers who were also stepmothers. In Chapter 7, the last chapter, I look back at my research findings, reflect on the research process and highlight new research avenues.

## Chapter 2. Methodology

Introduction

> [...] the mess, confusion and complexity of doing research [...]
>
> (Kelly et al, 1994: 46)

A research process is not clean and rigid and under the absolute control of the researcher. My research was definitely no exception to this but it was a surprise to me because almost all aspects of my research felt as if they were not really under my control. I felt conflicted about my role/s as a researcher, friend and stepmother – neither an insider nor an outsider and sometimes both. When I interviewed my friends, I seemed to vacillate in-between my roles as researcher, friend, and stepmother, never sure what was, or what should had been, my location. Being a stepmother complicated the research process as well. Although I had the privilege of the insider because I am a stepmother, I worried that this might prevent me from listening to other stepmothers. I was surprised at my struggle to get potential participants and to secure the interviews. Technology, either in the form of delayed trains or malfunctioning recording equipment software, too often felt beyond my control. During the interviews I made mistakes, asked the 'wrong' questions or failed to follow a new lead. Doing the data analysis, let alone writing it up, seemed to be an impossible task with a myriad of the qualitative data that I had to navigate through.

Stanley and Wise (1990: 39) claim that '*all* knowledge, necessarily, results from the conditions of its production, is contextually located, and irrecoverably bears the marks of its origins in the minds and intellectual practices of those lay and professional theorists and researchers who give voice to it' (italics as in original). I chose to research the lives and experiences of stepmothers primarily because I am a stepmother. Stanley (1997) and Letherby (2003) argue that the way in which research is done – that is what questions are asked and how – and its outcomes are governed by the researcher's location. In order to access the experiences of other stepmothers and because their voices are under-represented in academe (Salwen, 1990; Hughes, 1991; Orchard and Solberg, 1999; Roper and Capdevila, 2011; Shapiro and Stewart, 2011), I opted for semi-structured face-to-face interviews and a feminist approach to research

– a decision that too stemmed from me being a stepmother but also a feminist. I chose interviews as a method of research because they aim to '[...] challenge the silences in mainstream research both in relation to the issues studied and the way in which study is undertaken' (Letherby, 2003: 4) and because of their emphasis on participants' reported experience and emotions – the private sphere of women's lives (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Letherby, 2003). In this I also take the view that feminist research is not so much about the method used but more about how it is done (Letherby, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2012). It highlights the importance of 'gender as an aspect of all social life and within research' (Letherby, 2003: 73) and is underpinned by strong ethical considerations regarding the power relations of the knowledge production process. In view of this, it is important to remember that feminist research is not only about the location of the researcher but it is also about representing other women (Reinharz, 1992; Letherby, 2003; DeVault and Gross, 2012) who, in this case, were in the position of being a stepmother.

As methodology has such strong implications for research, in this chapter I shall give a detailed account of my research. I begin with a discussion of my research design, the difficulties I had in finding the stepmothers and present the demographic data about the stepmothers. I then move onto the analysis of the interviews and consider the process of data transcription and analysis.

Research Design

The aim of my research was to explore relationships within stepfamilies from the perspectives of stepmothers. I focused on four areas in stepmothers' lives, namely their relationships with their stepchildren; the impact of the biological/adoptive mother on the steprelationships; the role of the biological (in one case adoptive) father in shaping steprelationships, and lastly, relationships with other stepfamily members.

I chose semi-structured, face-to-face interviews as the method for gathering data. In hindsight I realize that by opting for this method of accessing people's perceptions I was able to preserve the women's individuality and the vast differences among them (Reinharz, 1992). The reasons for choosing qualitative interviewing were complex and multifaceted but the main aim was to listen and let the women speak. Qualitative interviews offer the researcher access to people's articulated perceptions (Reinharz, 1992; DeVault, 1999; Letherby, 2003; DeVault and Gross, 2012). This was

particularly important considering the acute lack of qualitative data about stepmothers, especially from stepmothers' perspectives. I aimed for a non-threatening and nonhierarchical atmosphere in the interviews that would enable me to build relationships with the interviewed women and encourage them to talk (Stanley and Wise, 1990; Reinharz, 1992; Letherby, 2003). A feminist approach to interviews enables that and gives both the participant and the researcher a space where the barriers of formality and distance can be broken down (Stanley and Wise, 1990; Reinharz, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 2002). My role – as researcher – in these interviews was not to judge the interviewees but to listen to their story, on their own terms. I saw feminist qualitative interviewing as a space where I was allowed to be sympathetic to the stepmothers' problems, experiences and emotions, and not hide behind the wall of an objective recorder of the stepmothers' lives (Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1990; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Letherby, 2003). The fact that I am a stepmother helped me to empathize with other stepmothers and that enabled me to achieve a good rapport with the women. And perhaps the quote below from the interview with Jane shows this:

> J: I don't analyse too much. It's nice to talk about it to somebody I haven't met before as well, feel freer.
> P: That's nice. Thank you. I worry whether people are comfortable talking to me.
> J: I don't know how people can be uncomfortable with you!

Because the premise of feminist interviewing is to be non-threatening and non-hierarchical, taking that stance made it easier for me to achieve rapport with the interviewees. And as a result it enabled us (the women and I) to produce new knowledge about the experiences of stepmothers as seen by them (Maynard, 1994; Ribbens, 1994; Green, 2009).

Finding the Questions

As I mentioned above I focused on four areas in the stepmothers' lives. I did so because I noticed that there were gaps in the previous research about stepmothers and stepfamilies in those particular areas and partly because of my own experience as a

stepmother. Also interestingly, the Childless Stepmothers Internet forum (www.childlessstepmums.co.uk) uses these four areas as major discussion topics. I think this shows that these areas matter to stepmothers and need exploring. It is in this part of the research where my position as an 'insider' was hugely influential in relation to the questions I asked.

Although the questions I asked were designed to cover the four topics, they were also designed to elicit as much information as possible from the stepmothers. All questions were open-ended (Appendix 1) and began with: 'what does it mean for you to...?' or 'how does it make you feel...?'. I had set questions or core questions that were the basis of my research but I was aware that I might have to modify them to suit the particular circumstances of individual stepmothers. For example, rather than ask 'what's your relationship with the biological mother?' I might ask 'what's your relationship with the adoptive mother?'

Additionally, in order to collect demographic data about the stepmothers I designed a basis demographic questionnaire (Appendix 5) that I emailed to the interviewees after the interviews. The reason I chose to do so after the interviews was that I wanted to meet the stepmothers first and establish a relationship with them where they felt comfortable. It seemed very invasive on my part to email the women questions about their education, age and social class before I had met them.

Before I started the interviews I produced an information letter (Appendix 2) for the participants in which I explained my research and what it entailed. I also produced a consent form (Appendix 3) in which I explained that the interviews (recording and transcription) are anonymized and confidential, then I asked the stepmothers to sign their consent for me to use their data in my research. Both of these were emailed to the participants prior to the interviews and only then I did make a date for an interview.


Finding Stepmothers


I decided to interview women who are (or were) in a relationship with a person (woman and/or man) who had had children (biological or adoptive) in their previous relationship. I did not aim to access a specific socio-cultural and economic niche because I wanted as wide a sample as possible. Mainly because I am a self-funded PhD student, the initial scope of my research was restricted to the North East of

England, mainly due to financial constraints and ease of travel. I planned to interview the women who took part in my Master's research (Sosnowska-Buxton, 2011) and I placed adverts in the local schools, doctors' surgeries and sports facilities. My friends kindly offered to put me in touch with their friends to get stepmothers for my research and a Thesis Panel Advisory member for my PhD suggested that I should put an advert on the Stepmothers' Internet forums to widen the social makeup of the sample – which I did.

I started my fieldwork in May 2012, in the full expectation that I would be able to complete all the interviews in two to three months. I had no reason to doubt the timescale as I had previously completed my Master's fieldwork, which involved interviewing ten participants in two weeks (Sosnowska-Buxton, 2011); I had prepared myself for this type of fieldwork by extensively reading on in-depth interviews, discussing the practicalities of in-depth interviews with my supervisor and were with regards to the participants my parameters were straightforward and wide enough. I felt confident that given all the support, background knowledge and being one of the stepmothers, I would have no problems gathering women to participate in the research.

With hindsight, I now know that I was very naïve and simply unprepared for the difficulties that lay ahead. After sending the information letter and consent forms to all the stepmothers from my Master's research, all but two women either declined to take part in the research or completely ignored my emails and phone calls. The reasons why these women declined are multifaceted and are discussed later in this chapter. But I think the emotional content of my research could have been one main reason for their withdrawal. These women have already participated once so had an idea what the research required from them and did not want to relive telling their challenging, and often painful, experiences. I think it is particularly telling that the two women who did take part in the research were close friends. As we see each other socially and have knowledge of what is happening in our lives the retelling of difficult stories was not problematic for them and perhaps they felt obliged to help because they are emotionally, as well as socially, invested in my work. After this disappointing first step, I moved on to getting in touch with the friends of my friends, most of whom agreed immediately and we organized the interviews within days. From this group, too, some women ignored my emails and phone calls. I think there are a number of reasons why these women did so. For one, they might have felt

pressured by our mutual friends to take part in my research but had no desire to do so. Or, perhaps, they were simply too busy to commit at that particular time but might also have been put off by the highly emotionally charged nature of my research.

The adverts on the stepmothers' internet forums were not particularly successful either. In total 98 women from the stepmothers internet forum first volunteered to take part in my research, although most of these women lived further afield (in the South and in Scotland) and suggested Skype or telephone calls to conduct the interviews. At this point I started getting rather worried about getting enough interviewees – Letherby (2003) was asking herself a similar question, except she asked it at the start of her interviews – but after consulting my supervisor, I got in touch with these stepmothers. And this is why in the end the sample comprised stepmothers from the North of England and not from the North East. But the same thing happened, with initial agreement to participate in the research and then the women either withdrawing their consent, ignoring my emails or to actually cancelling interviews shortly before they were due. Only four women from the forum were interviewed; four were from universities in the North East. All of these women either had a PhD, were working on a PhD or had other postgraduate qualifications. One of these women only got in touch with me because I re-advertised on the forum much later (early October 2012). Additionally, one woman from this group refused the interview to be recorded because of an impending court case.

From my adverts at local schools, doctors' surgeries and the radio I had absolutely no response. Thus my sample was largely the result of snowballing where my friends and my supervisor found most of the stepmothers. This lack of interest, cancellation and drop-out is as worrying as it was interesting. In my Master's research I had used a qualitative questionnaire that was emailed to the stepmothers. I asked the stepmothers to write about their experiences and apart from two women who are my friends I never met the other women prior to interviewing them. I think the fact that the interviews were to be recorded, face-to-face and that the women had to commit to a set time and place were some of the issues why the women opted not to take part. Perhaps they felt that it was invasive – I know I felt that I was invading their privacy by interviewing them – and perhaps the women had some reservations about talking to me for a second time about the same experiences (perhaps there would be discrepancies between the first and second interview). Or perhaps they felt that they had nothing more to add. As I struggled with finding the answers I posted a message

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on the forum – following the advice from one of the stepmothers in my research –
asking the stepmothers why they thought there were these problems. The answers
were very interesting and surprising. One stepmother, *Rotten*, suggested that even
though I am a stepmother other women might worry about being misrepresented
either in the 'wicked stepmother' or 'instantly in love stepmother' light
(http://www.childlessstepmums.co.uk/forum/index.php?topic=6601.15 , accessed 26th
January 2013). *MAH* wrote:

> I also think you may have to hit a stepmother at the right point in the
> journey.  Right now I might step back from doing an interview because
> frankly I'm so fed up with how DH [dear husband] is pandering to SS
> [stepson] that my answers would probably be very one-sided. A few years ago
> I could have been more balanced.
> (http://www.childlessstepmums.co.uk/forum/index.php?topic=6601.15 ,
> accessed 26th January 2013).

There are two issues that arose from the above statement. Firstly, the statement would
suggest that there was some degree of misunderstanding of what research was. My
research was not intended to be about '*the right point* in the journey' but could only
be about *a* point in the journey; it is a snap shot of a relationship at the point of the
interview. Secondly, this statement reveals the sensitive nature of this research and the
effects of this on potential participants. I think it is evident in MAH's narrative that
she was at a difficult point in her steprelationship, and that she therefore did not feel
able to discuss it. This is why she did not want to share this particular experience. At
this point her stepmothering was not a positive experience, she wanted to give a more
'balanced' account.

However, research is not necessarily about a balanced view but about
exploring the complexities of lived realities. This statement worried me because I
thought that there must be something wrong with my advert on the forum (Appendix
4) for people to get the 'wrong' idea about what the research was about. Another
comment on the forum helped me realize that some people misread it. For example,
one stepmother, *jo60*, mentioned that the only reason she did not take part in my
research was because:

I wasn't able to take part due to your own request that people be within an hour's drive from you? (if I remember correctly). This meant I was well outside of your catchment area, otherwise I would have been more than happy to participate.

(http://www.childlessstepmums.co.uk/forum/index.php?topic=6601.15 , accessed 26th January 2013).

My advert stated: 'I am looking for stepmothers [...] who would like to take part in my research and who live in Darlington, Co. Durham and North Yorkshire areas.' Nowhere did I mention 'an hour's drive from [me]'. I think this is very interesting and it never occurred to me that this sort of misunderstanding could happen – again, I was very naïve.

Another reason for this lack of engagement, not lack of interest, might be the fact that the stepmothers on the forum appeared to be in very challenging and stressful circumstances. As stepmothers are haunted by the 'wicked stepmother' stigma (Coleman et al, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011) it might be plausible that these women chose not to participate in the research because it might reveal issues about them that were 'intimate, discreditable and incriminating'[4] (Renzetti and Lee, 1993: ix), and that perpetuated the wicked stepmother myth. Although I might had provided a safe environment where the stepmothers could have talked to another stepmother, by the very nature of my research, I was dealing with highly charged experiences. Therefore, the high number of drop-outs, might not necessarily have been about misunderstanding the research but also about not perpetuating the wicked stepmother myth as well as the need to protect oneself from the retelling and reliving of, often traumatic and very challenging, stepmothering experiences.

I think that my advert or rather the way I wrote was partly responsible for the lack of interest. The advert did not explain clearly what my research was about, how and where it would be done and it did not clarify that I was looking for stepmothers in all circumstances; it also did not reassure the potential participants that the research would not be exploitative. The lack of understanding of what research is amongst 'lay' people (people who do not work in a university environment) was evident in the

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[4] 'Incriminating' in a sense of being discovered as a wicked stepmother by their family and friends with huge and negative consequences for these relationships.

fact that the only stepmothers from the forum who participated in my research all had postgraduate qualifications and worked at universities.

As evident, finding stepmothers to participate was very difficult and it took six months in total to complete. In the end I interviewed 20 stepmothers but only 18 of these interviews were recorded. My sample, as most of the samples in previous research about stepmothers (see for example Coleman et al, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011) consisted of white, English-speaking, mostly middle-class and well-educated women (Pryor, 2008). This sample homogeneity was mostly due to the fact that I used (had to rely on) the snowballing technique – I am white, middle-class and I am doing a PhD – to gather the participants and I shall now discuss the demographic dimensions of my participants in more detail.

My Participants

As indicated my sample was fairly uniform: white, heterosexual and mostly middle class. All but one of these women lived in the North of England. What made my sample unique were the circumstances of how the women became stepmothers, their family situations and their ages. This makes the presentation of their demographic data tricky, an issue reported by other researchers in the field (e.g. Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003). The only straightforward demographic information was the stepmothers' ages presented in Table 1 and their social class presented in Table 2 – in each case I asked the stepmothers to locate themselves in the age group and the social class respectively.

**Table 1**. **Stepmothers' age at time of interviews (2012).**

| Age range | No of stepmothers within that range |
|:---:|:---:|
| 26-31 | 1 |
| 32-37 | 1 |
| 38-43 | 5 |
| 44-49 | 2 |
| 50-55 | 2 |
| 56-61 | 1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 62-67 | 5 |
| 68-73 | 1 |
| Total | 18 |

Source: Interview Data, 2012

**Table 2. Stepmothers' self-identified class position.**

| Stepmothers' class | Actual number of women identifying as a particular social class |
|---|---|
| Working/middle class | 2 |
| Middle class | 12 |
| Upper class | 2 |

Source: Interview Data, 2012.

During the analysis and collation of the demographic data I was faced with several problems. The first difficulty was that most of the women I talked to did not see themselves as 'stepmothers'. In other words, they said they did not regard themselves as such. When asked whether she thought of herself as a stepmother Vicky, for example, said: 'I don't think of myself as a stepmother.' For the purpose of my research I, therefore, define a 'stepmother' as a woman who is in a relationship with a person who has biological/adoptive children from their previous relationship(s). However, to decide if someone was 'just' a stepmother when she had a biological child but had it adopted and met him again in his adulthood – as was the case with Vicky – proved difficult because Vicky did not see herself as a stepmother or as a biological mother.

**Table 3. Stepmothers' parental status.**

| Stepmothers' parental status | No. |
|---|---|
| Only stepmother (no biological/adoptive children of her own) | 7 |
| Stepmother and biological mother | 11 |
| Stepmother who became adoptive mother | 2 |

Source: Interview Data, 2012.

Presenting the residency status of both stepmothers and biological/adoptive mothers was also problematic because, as noted in various texts on stepfamilies, residency status often changes (Nielsen, 1999; Coleman et al, 2000; Ganong and Coleman, 2004; Coleman et al, 2008; Henry and McCue, 2009). For example, in Hannah's case she started as a non-residential but 'shared care' stepmother to both her stepchildren but in time she became the residential stepmother to her stepson whilst remaining non-residential with 'shared care' to her stepdaughter. Fran's circumstances were equally complicated because although she was a residential biological mother to both of her biological children, in time she became a non-residential parent to her biological daughter. The non/residency status of the stepmothers had been shifting and, in some instances, was the same for all of their stepchildren. This coupled with the fact that not all stepmothers in my sample became stepmothers to young stepchildren mean that it was not possible to give a sense of absolute difference, in the stepmothers' experiences with regards to non/residency, as divisions were not clear.

**Table 4. Stepmothers' residency status at the time of interview (2012).**

| Stepmothers' residency status | No. |
|---|---|
| Residential | 2 |
| Non-residential | 17 |

Source: Interview Data, 2012.

**Table 5**. **Stepchildren's status as children or adults at the start of the steprelationship.**

| Stepchildren's status as children or adults at the start of the steprelationship | No. |
|---|---|
| Stepchildren over 18 years of age | 4 |
| Stepchildren under 18 years of age | 15 |

Source: Interview Data, 2012.

When I considered the educational background of the stepmothers it never occurred to me that the stepmothers and their partners might have qualifications other

than 'civilian'. For example, Dawn and her first husband worked in the military. Thus their qualifications did not easily translate into 'civilian' qualifications and I amended the demographic questionnaire and added 'or equivalent' to reflect this.

**Table 6**. **Stepmothers' highest qualification or equivalent.**

| Stepmothers' highest qualification or equivalent | No. |
|---|---|
| GCSEs or equivalent | 1 |
| A Level or equivalent | 8 |
| BA or equivalent | 3 |
| Postgraduate qualification or equivalent | 6 |

Source: Interview Data, 2012.

Another difficulty was navigating between biology, adoption and stepping, since these are not mutually exclusive. For instance both Irene and Emma adopted their stepchildren while Diana was a stepmother to her husband's adopted children. Then there was the problem of drawing a distinction between second or third partners where there was a husband-1, husband-2 and a new partner, who was not a husband – I chose to label him as partner-3 – as was the case for Fran. The reason the numbers in Table 7 do not add up is because the stepmothers' marital status was complex and changed over time.

**Table 7**. **Stepmothers' marital status at the time of interview (2012).**

| Stepmothers' marital status | No. |
|---|---|
| Married | 14 |
| Second marriage | 9 |
| Divorced | 8 |
| Widowed | 2 |

Source: Interview Data, 2012.

The presentation of the demographic data was further complicated by the fact that some stepmothers not only had biological children from previous relationships but also stepchildren from their past relationships, with some of whom, some stepmothers had no relationship at all. For example Dawn did not see her two stepdaughters by her deceased husband.

At one point I felt that I would not be able to present all these findings in a coherent way. However, and more importantly, I think this clearly shows how complex stepfamilies are and that identifying appropriate vocabulary is rather challenging when describing both the relationships within and outside stepfamilies. The stepmothers in the interviews also noted the problem with the terminology as they got lost and lacked words for how to describe their family. Gill, for example, said:

> Yeah, yeah. My stepdaughter-in-law or whatever she is [...] My cousin looks after her ex-husband's little girl, who's obviously no relation to her but related to her sons so, you know, her sons, two sons, stepsister, no half-sister, sorry.

This was not easier when the time as a stepmother was considered. Among my interviewees were women who had been stepmothers for 40 years or more and ones who had been in that position for just three years as well as one stepmother who was an 'ex'-stepmother. There were women who were serial stepmothers (more than once), therefore here too the numbers do not add up to 18. These findings are presented in Table 8 below.

**Table 8**. **Years of stepmothering at the time of interview (2012).**

| Years of stepmothering | No of stepmothers |
|---|---|
| Less than 1 year | 1 |
| 1 – 5 years | 5 |
| 5 – 10 years | 3 |
| 10 – 15 years | 6 |
| 15 – 20 years | 3 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 20 – 25 years | - |
| 25 – 30 years | - |
| 30 – 35 years | 1 |
| 35 – 40 years | 1 |
| 40 – 45 years | 1 |

Source: Interview Data, 2012.

Moreover, the complications of the circumstances of the biological mothers, whether they were dead and/or had left or abandoned (I use the word 'abandoned' because some of the biological mothers left their family homes and refused to have any contact with their biological children, and they did not contribute financially to the upbringing of) their biological children, were equally difficult to show as these also intersected and changed over time. In Irene's case the biological mother of her stepdaughter left the latter and saw her very sporadically and then the biological mother died. Emma's (step-)son's (Emma eventually adopted him that is why I used brackets around the word 'step') biological mother had, at first, full residency of him. But then the residency was given to the biological father by court order and the biological mother ceased all contact with the child. This is consistent with findings from previous research where biological fathers are only awarded custody, now full residency, when the biological mother has mental problems and is deemed unfit by courts to care for her biological child (Smith, 1990; Cherlin and Frustenberg, 1994; Coleman et al, 2008). In Suzy's case the biological mother had left her biological children in the full care of their biological father and then was a non-residential parent but before that for a while she hardly had any contact with them at all. Dawn's stepchildren's biological mother left them with their biological father and had no contact with them; their biological father was the resident parent. All of this is evidence of the very divergent family structures which now prevail and which make any generalization difficult. As the stepmothers' family circumstances were very complex, I present an overview of these circumstances, or a simplified glimpse into the familial circumstances of the stepmothers, at the time of the interviews in Table 9 below:

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**Table 9. An overview of the stepmothers' family circumstances at the time of interview (2012).**

| Context | Stepmothers' names | Total Number |
|---|---|---|
| Resident stepmother | Suzy and Monica | 2 |
| Non-resident stepmother | Emma, Irene, Vicky, Donna, Rose, Marie, Diana, Dawn, Jane, Amanda, Hannah, Nina, Fran, Alison, Gill, Monica, Nancy | 17 |
| Met children first time when adults 18 years old or older | Vicky, Rose, Diana, Donna | 4 |
| Met children first time when young 0-13 years old and dependent | Emma, Irene, Marie, Dawn, Jane, Amanda, Hannah, Nina, Fran, Alison, Gill, Suzy, Monica, Nancy | 14 |
| Met children first time when teenagers 13-17 years old | Vicky, Dawn, Jane, Hannah, Fran, Monica | 6 |
| Had an affair with the stepchildren's biological/adoptive father | Jane and Diana | 2 |
| Biological/adoptive mother dead/no contact | Dawn, Irene, Rose, Monica, Emma | 4 |
| Number of years as a stepmother <5 years | Dawn, Nina, Fran, Suzy, Monica, Nancy | 6 |
| Number of years as a stepmother 5-10 years | Rose, Fran, Alison | 3 |
| Number of years as a stepmother >10 years | Emma, Irene, Vicky, Donna, Marie, Diana, Dawn, Jane, Amanda, Hannah, Fran, Gill | 12 |
| Had resident biological children (fostered/adopted) when became a stepmother | Emma, Dona, Marie, Diana, Dawn, Jane, Fran, Monica | 8 |
| Had biological children with the stepchildren's biological/adoptive father | Emma, Irene, Marie, Dawn, Hannah, Fran, | 6 |
| Never had biological children | Amanda, Nina, Alison, Gill, Suzy, Nancy | 6 |

Source: Interview Data, 2012.

I think it is important to consider the reasons why the 'samples' of stepmothers in British research remain white, heterosexual and mostly middle-class – except, of course, in the case of the study by Burgoyne and Clark (1984) – and why 'my' cohort has the same composition. Pryor (2008: 575) argues that one of the reasons why studies on stepfamilies remain fairly homogenous is that 'many stepfamilies are

cohabitating households' and '[c]ountries and cultures vary in their acceptance of cohabitation by adults'. This perhaps suggests that stepmothers who are not white do not enter relationships with people who have children from previous relationships. But also perhaps women from non-white, and from 'lower income backgrounds' are more likely not to identify as stepmothers and view parenting as a collaborative process (Nielsen, 1999: 116). Another reason might be that some stepfamily research was done by academics who are/were stepfamily members (e.g. Gallardo and Mellon-Gallardo, 2007) and used snowballing technique to gather participants (e.g. Ribbens McCarty et al, 2003; Ambert, 1986). It is also possible that the definitions of stepfamily are too narrow and prevent researchers from accessing other cultural and socio-economic groups. For example, Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues (2003: 20) note that it could had been their narrow definition of stepfamily that stopped their access to African-Caribbean families because it did not include 'live-out' partner option.

Unlike many British studies (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003) I was able to gain access to 'advantaged' women by which I mean women of an upper middle class or aristocratic background who are 'in position of wealth, status, and power' (Adler and Adler, 2003: 157). Marie and Jane were the two women in my sample who were in that social group. The reason I had access to these women was because of a mutual friend. I think our shared experience as stepmothers helped me, and perhaps them, to talk to me. I think the fact that we were from different social circles and not known to each other enabled these women to share many personal stories. But although I was made privy to very intimate details I was asked not to include some of these details in the transcript – this information was purely for me 'so you can have some background' as Marie called it. However, this request was prevalent among all stepmothers, independent of their social class.

The Interviews

I prepared an interview guide that covered the four areas of research highlighted above. I planned for the interviews to last no longer than two hours but not less than one hour. All interviews were recorded on my smartphone and I made sure that it was fully charged the night before an interview, that I had my laptop with me as a backup if my smartphone went missing or broke down. As soon as I entered the place where

the interview took place I switched the phone into the 'airplane' mode, which means that all incoming calls and emails and any other messages would not interrupt the interview and the recording.

Before the interview I emailed a consent and information letter to the stepmothers. After I received the signed and dated consent form back I set out to organize the interview. The process was usually smooth and an interview date was set. Nevertheless right before I was about to start recording the interview I explained to every stepmother what the interview was about and what would happen – the interview process. I explained again how long it was likely to take, that it would be recorded, that any questions I asked which they felt uncomfortable with they did not have to answer. I talked about what the questions were about and the confidentiality of the interview: I would be the only person who would hear the interview. The transcribed interviews would be anonymized. I encouraged the women to choose their pseudonyms but only two did so and in the end it did not matter, as I had to change their pseudonyms, as these were other stepmothers' real names. The decision to let the stepmothers choose their pseudonyms stems from the arguments discussed by Reinharz (1992) that such actions undermine the hierarchical divisions of interviewing process and in doing so the power or control balance is more equal. I find it interesting that only two women took up my offer of choosing their own pseudonyms. I think the women who declined may have done so because they might not have wanted to 'own' the interviews in that way. Given their emotionally charged content, the women might have wanted to have their say but then not be drawn in further. Or they simply were not interested in doing so. In hindsight I wish I had asked the women why they declined.

I felt it was, and indeed is, important to explain prior to an interview what exactly it will entail so the participants have some knowledge of the process and can locate themselves in it. My aim was to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, and in doing so enable the women to share their perceptions with me. This, I think, was made easier by the fact that I was using 'just' a phone for recording and not a separate recording machine. Before I used my smartphone to record I told the women that I was doing so. I always made sure that the microphone was turned to the women.

The interviews happened in different places, one at my home, two at the participants' work places, seven in cafés and eight in the participants' homes – a

decision was made after the stepmothers and I discussed where would be the most suitable place to meet for us both. The interviews presented me with a problem of the 'getting to the place of the interview' or 'before the recording starts' time. I found this time problematic and I felt compelled to control it – as though I could!

Although I explicitly stated in the information letter that I am a stepmother, I tried my best not to interpolate my experiences of stepmotherhood too much. It was very difficult when one stepmother, for example, said: 'So tell me about yourself as a stepmother.' Unlike Letherby (2003) I tried to shut out my stepmotherly thoughts and feelings before the interview to help me focus on the woman I was about to interview, her life. Although this might sound altruistic, and to a degree it was – I was there to listen – I was also there to gather information that would help me complete my thesis (Green, 2009). During the interviews I therefore did not want to take up space to share my experiences with the stepmothers. However, I definitely did after, if not before, the interview. I did not know what experiences of stepmotherhood these participants had had (even two of my friends surprised me with their accounts of stepmotherhood), whether they were the same or different from mine (Reinharz and Chase, 2003). I wanted the women to speak in their own voices and not provide me with information that they thought I might seek (Reinharz and Chase, 2003; Green, 2009). I was, however, aware that both the participants and I '[had] an emotional and political involvement with the research. Thus, respondents have their own view of the researcher and the purpose of the research, and present[ed] themselves and their stories accordingly' (Letherby, 2003: 68). It was really important for me to influence the interview process as little as possible. Although it would be foolish to assume that any interview process is completely bias free (Stanley and Wise, 1990; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Letherby, 2003), my aim was '[...] to avoid naming the interviewee's experience' (Reinharz, 1992: 24) by disclosing my opinions about stepmotherhood.

Furthermore, this 'getting to the place of the interview' and 'before the interview' time were important because this was when both the stepmother and I got to know each other a little, and began to develop a rapport. This time felt like the 'make it or break it' of the interview. The women were often nervous and unsure about the process, for example their hands would shake or they would be breathing heavily whilst speaking very fast. I felt it was my duty to calm them down and reassure them that it was going to be all right. This is when I explained to the stepmothers the practicalities of the interview process.

The participants' homes were my preferred place for the interviews because they were usually quiet, with no or very little interruptions. I think it helped the women to talk more freely; it helped them to relax and just keep talking because it was just the two of us (most of the time) and it felt very private and it was theirs, it was their space. It also appeared to be very important that we were not overheard. However, one downside to home interviewing was that sometimes their children or other relatives were around, and we occasionally had to quiet our voices so others did not hear our conversation or we were interrupted by cupcakes made by one of the women's kind daughter or by dogs jumping on the recorder or barking and scaring us – but this only happened twice. The case where the daughter interrupted was particular interesting because the stepmother and I were talking about deeply personal and sometimes intimate issues. I often wondered just how free this stepmother was to talk about her life? How much did the interview setting here influence what was said and how she said it? There were a lot of whispers and sentences cut short because the daughter had appeared. It also had an effect on me because I was anxious to ask quietly and I was not as 'probing' with the questions regarding this girl's biological father as I was worried she might overhear us, particularly when the stepmother was critical of him. I felt a huge sense of responsibility to and for this girl as well as for the stepmother.

Where the interviews took place in public spaces the stepmothers, in most cases, chose the venues for our interviews because I did not know the towns I was going to and they did. These interviews were a bit more challenging because there was a lot of noise distractions, it did not feel particularly comfortable, safe or private. In one instance one of the stepmothers was so conscious of the noise and the close proximity of others that she and I were almost cuddled up to each other so that we could have a private space and not be overheard. In hindsight I would not do it again like this but would make sure that we had a private room to talk.

Because of the travelling over large distances (the longest trip took me four hours to complete and that was just one-way) due to the difficulties of finding the stepmothers I spend a rather large part of my field work on trains and was only able to do one interview at a time. But this gave me the opportunity to write up my field notes and start with the transcribing. Using trains also meant that I was late (despite the fact that I booked earlier tickets) or stuck on them because, for example, the door would not open. Thus I was inadvertently about three hours late for one of the interviews, for

example. I was very glad that I had not only mobile phone coverage but also that I had access to the internet as, in this particular case, I was able to communicate with the stepmother and keep her informed about developments. Needless to say this stepmother was terribly forgiving and understanding! As I had to travel a lot, the women who lived further afield met me either at their homes or cafes and each of these women picked me up and took me to a place where we could chat.

During the interviews most stepmothers asked me about the anonymity of the interview and a lot of them asked me to remove certain information from the transcripts. The data that I was asked to remove mainly concerned the biological mothers, their husbands/partners and intimate problems. Yet the stepmothers were explicit that I needed to know the facts in order to make sense of the whole story but this information was for me only. In one instance I was asked to not to contact the stepmother with any findings from my research.

Generally, and despite the difficulties of identifying interviewees, the whole interviewing process was far less stressful than I had anticipated. The women readily shared their experiences and some prepared files of photographs, letters and stories for the interview. For me, a lot of the time it felt like we were 'just' having a great chat, although I tried to focus on the research objectives. This led me, sometimes, to steering away from the stories that were not 'on track' with my research objectives. For example, I wanted to stick to the fact that I was interested in the women as stepmothers and not them as stepchildren. But some had actually been in that situation.

The women did not really need encouragement to talk. Some talked for much longer periods than others. Although I was focused on what the women were saying, I found myself being rather rigid in following my interview schedule to make sure that all my core questions were covered. This part of the interview process remains very difficult and contradictory for me. On the one hand I was doing the interview with a purpose: to elicit information about what it was like to be a stepmother. The research was there, partly to fulfil my expectations in terms of getting 'good' (valid) data and gaining a PhD. On the other hand I was there to listen to the women and *their* stories because I 'wanted to hear what the women had to say in their own terms rather than test [my own] preconceived hypothesis' (Belenky et al, 1986, cited in Reinharz, 1992:19). The point of doing feminist research is to break down this binary and represent the voices of others, particularly those that are invisible (Reinharz, 1992;

Letherby, 2003). I think this research binary is important to recognize because it underpins the way the research is done and shows its messiness. Balancing these two sides of research was definitely challenging and this battle is evident in the interviews and in my transcripts. On the recording I can hear myself interrupting, missing important information and not following up points because I was driven to keeping on track. I also struggled when stepmothers were saying things that I strongly disagreed with and had to switch myself off from confronting them or openly disagreeing with them. This particularly happened when the stepmothers expressed views that were un-feminist. I did not find myself in a position of not being able to sympathize with the stepmothers because of such views (Reinharz, 1992), it made me feel frustrated, but more because I was not able or felt not able to challenge them. But, although on the whole I did not challenge the stepmothers there were a few situations when I did. There were also situations when I felt obliged not to answer fully as this might upset the relationship in the interview. For example, when I was asked if I have children of my own, I wanted to say that I do but felt it was important that I answer 'no' because my stepdaughter is 'only' my stepdaughter.

However, I must add that talking to other stepmothers was an incredible experience and I was very surprised by their readiness to share very personal experiences. Being an 'insider' allowed me to gain access to some untold stories and indeed some stepmothers said that I was the only one who was told about a particular experience. Because of my 'insider' position I felt that I understood their experiences since I have 'been there myself'. Some of my questions came from my experience as a stepmother and sometimes the stepmothers would look at me and ask 'how did you know?' I was very surprised just how much we had in common and how much our answers overlapped. However, I had to be very careful not to lose myself in the 'insider' privilege and keep my focus on the women whose lives and experiences were different from my own (Stanley and Wise, 1990; DeVault, 1999; Stanley and Wise, 2002Reinharz and Chase, 2003). The struggle between being an 'insider' and 'outside' was on-going. The stepmothers and I had shared experiences but only to a degree. In fact there were more differences between us than similarities. So although the research came from me as an 'insider' I was very quickly reminded that I was an 'outsider' as well. For example, not all women were feminist, my age or non-residential stepmothers as I am. I think it is actually helpful to think of oneself as an 'outsider', a person that has little in common with the participants, whilst doing

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research because it helps to focus on the interviewees and to hear them. This approach was particularly helpful as it became clear to me that the stepmothers actually enjoyed talking about their experiences of stepmothering. I wished I had the same opportunity to talk about my stepmotherhood. I think that by adopting an 'outsider' attitude I was able to restrain my 'jealousy' of the stepmothers' opportunity to talk about their stories and focus on them and distance myself from my experiences.

The boundaries between the 'insider' and 'outsider' were even more blurred when I interviewed two women who were also my friends. Most of the time I felt conflicted about what my role was and how I should be. Was I a researcher first and friend second or the other way round? I think I fluctuated between the two (Blichfeldt and Heldberg, 2011). This dichotomy made me feel uneasy because as a friend I felt that I was not supporting my friends emotionally as much as necessary and that I was asking too many questions. But as a researcher I felt I was not asking enough questions and focused too much on trying to support my friends emotionally. Although I have not been able to satisfactorily reconcile my position as a researcher with being a friend, I was able to draw on our (at least partly) shared experience of stepmotherhood, which, to a degree, helped me to mitigate the researcher–friend difficulties.

After each of the interviews I tried to share a little bit of my story as a stepmother. I did so because I wanted the interview to feel more like sharing and not just a plain information gathering session, as well as to try to break down the hierarchical barriers between the researcher and the researched (Finch, 1984; Reinharz, 1992; Reinharz and Chase, 2003). It seemed important to me that if I was prepared to ask these questions I should be prepared to answer them but only after the interview, as I explained earlier. But I also wanted to share my story. I found myself being rather jealous that these stepmothers had the opportunity to talk about their lives and I did not. And I was relieved when some stepmothers asked me about my life. One of the stepmothers said at the end of the interview that she wished she had known before the interview that my life was as complex as theirs, as it would have made her feel less bad about her own life because she assumed that my step-life was excellent. However, like Green (2009: 52) I also noticed that most of the stepmothers 'were more involved in telling their own stories, rather than listening to mine'.

I found ending the interviews rather stressful because not only did I have to keep an eye on the time – either to make sure to catch my train back or that the break

that the stepmothers were on did not run out, especially when the interviews took place at work – but also ensure that all my questions were answered. Sometimes finishing the interviews came 'naturally', at other times it felt forced and abrupt.

Transcribing

Transcripts are the often invisible element of research but they are a big and necessary part of it. Transcribing is definitely a very time-consuming and complex process – yet they are rarely discussed in qualitative research (Poland, 2003). The decisions I made with regards to choosing the recording equipment (tape or digital), whether I used transcribing software and how I transcribed have a big impact on the quality and validity of the data as well as the research (Chi, 1997; Poland, 2003). As data analysis is done from the transcripts, I think it is very important to discuss this in detail, which I shall do in this section.

I used a smart phone (a digital recorder) to record the interviews and uploaded every interview onto my laptop. Because the interviews were digital and I lost one of the interviews due to a software malfunction I stored all recordings in three separate places and made sure that these files were password protected. I used transcribing software (ExpresScribe) but not a voice-recognition one. The reason I used transcribing software was because it helped me to slow the participants' speech, muffle the background noise and bring out the interviewees voices. These are particularly helpful features because people speak very fast, a number of the interviews took place in public spaces and I was not able to type as quickly as the interviewees' spoke – I type much faster now as a result. Because the data was in digital form it was easier for me to go backwards and forwards without losing the exact spot. This is particularly useful feature because people do not speak in full sentences and they often deviate.

I chose to transcribe verbatim except for the participants' names – I chose their pseudonyms – and information I was asked to remove or information that might lead to the interviewees being identified and where I was unable to disguise it, for example a place of marriage or the name of a famous person and indicated this in the transcript like this: 'And when I got married, on the day we got married [removed]'. I also changed the names of places, dates and ages to protect the privacy of the participants. There are also pieces of information which I removed but which would

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be helpful in understanding the complexities of a stepmother's life; for example, particular events or social networks (Poland, 2003). Any removal or change of information is problematic and, to a degree, has a knock-on-effect on the quality of data (Poland, 2003) but I think that the privacy and the anonymity of the participants are far more important.

Each transcription was typed up without any corrections on the day on the interview. This resulted in many mistakes and omissions. Therefore a second round of transcribing was needed and this was when I corrected these errors. For example, in my very first interview I said: 'The first one is what does it mean to you to be a stepmother?' After the correction it became 'What does it mean for you to be a stepmother?'. However, looking at the transcripts, not just as 'things' to correct but as objects, enabled me to think more about my interviews as a process, and this is where my supervisor was of great help. Professor Griffin read all of the transcripts and highlighted not only spelling mistakes and parts of the text that made no sense but also pointed out where I asked leading questions or where I was not listening to what the participants were saying. Although I was not able to retract or re-ask some questions, it helped me to ask 'better' and listen more actively to what was being said in subsequent interviews. In this sense, the interview process provided a research learning process.

Following the advice of Poland (2003: 279) I transcribed the 'mhns' and the 'arghms', the pauses are indicated as '...' or if it was a longer pause than ten seconds I used [long pause]. Laughter was transcribed as [laughs] using similar notation. I also differentiated between what a participant said she was thinking 'I just kept thinking god I'm so lucky to get a second chance' (Jane) and 'but I kept saying to them "go and get her, tell her to come in" (Jane) to indicate a conversation or a talk an interviewee was recalling. Furthermore, I transcribed my thoughts during the interview (the thoughts that I either remembered or wrote in my fieldwork diary). For example,

> I don't understand... [Gill is a very good friend of mine and all this had happened just a few days before our meeting, and I was as surprised as she was. Gill from the start of the pregnancy was referred to as grandma, and she talked about it in my masters as well. The difficulty of interviewing friends really kicked in here!]

Every transcription follows the same outline. By this I mean that in the header I wrote the interviewee's pseudonym, the date, time and length of the interview – as suggested by my supervisor. The interviews were written like an interview in a newspaper:

P (for Patrycja): What does it mean for you to be a stepmother?
B (for Becky): I don't see myself as such... I don't know...
P: Why not?

I did this so that the interviews resembled a conversation, albeit a controlled one, because they felt like a 'normal conversation' to me. I also wanted to preserve the flow of ideas and the voices of the stepmothers because after all, these were their stores and not mine (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). At the same time by keeping the newspaper interview style I was able to preserve a little bit of me – the researcher self – something that was particularly helpful when writing this chapter (Charmaz, 2012).

Transcribing verbatim (to a degree) was important because it enabled me to preserve the voices (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998) of the participants and not project my own interpretations on what was said (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Poland, 2003). As I mentioned above, I corrected the grammar in the transcripts before I started my analysis – unlike as suggested by Poland (2003) – but I think this is acceptable because I did not undertake conversation analysis and did not lose the individuality of the interviewees in doing so. But choosing to work in this way with the interviews proved to be laborious and tedious at times. In-depth interviews, as any conversation, 'follow a logic that is different from that for written prose, and therefore tend to look remarkably disjointed, inaccurate, and even incoherent when committed to the printed page' (Poland, 2003: 271).

This is why in-depth interviews take time to transcribe. Additionally, I had to slow them down to be able to catch up with the speed of human speech. As a result I was able to get to know the interviews very well. This helped me tremendously when I moved onto the data analysis part.

Data Analysis

The fact that I knew my data well was a good start to their analysis, a process that proved to be complicated, complex and very exciting. I had two paper copies of each transcript, with big margins on the left and right side of the paper, ready for analysis and notes. I did not have a particular way of analyzing the data in mind but I was thinking along the lines of framework analysis without the assistance of data analysis software.

As I already had four themes in the research, which I had identified initially during my Master's research, I focused on looking what details I could find in these themes. I began the identification process by re-reading the transcripts and highlighting the passages that describe the steprelations, noting ideas and issues alongside the transcript. After I did that with each of the transcripts I started producing spider diagrams and flow charts with these notes on the margins, and pinned them onto the walls at home. I then produced a huge spreadsheet with all these findings and notes, and ideas. Whilst it all looked pretty and colour-coded it was of no use to me. The spreadsheet was too big to find anything in it, the many charts were too messy and complicated to read anything from them. I was unable to many any connections between what is or is not in the research and what my data was 'saying'.

So I started again from scratch. As each stepmothers' family circumstances were varied and in order to preserve the stepmothers' voices and their individual stories, I decided to focus on each stepmother separately and re-read the transcripts. By approaching my data analysis in this way I was able to preserve the individuality of each stepmother and spot the common themes in the stepmothers' accounts and I wrote these commonalities in, again, a spider diagram form. Finally, I was able to make connections between the past research and mine; see where the data overlapped or where there were gaps. This was the way I approached my data analysis for every epistemological chapter. Although it was a time-consuming approach, it enabled me to fully immerse myself in the data.

Furthermore, my approach to data analysis was based on what the stepmothers said to me during the interviews and so my findings are solely based on what the stepmothers actually *reported*. Hence, I do not always indicate that the stepmothers' narratives are 'reported speech' and not 'facts'. However, my standpoint during the research process, including the interviews and the data analysis, was to trust the

participants. By trusting, and believing in, the participants' stories, by treating these stories as 'facts' and 'truths', I hoped to enable 'trust flow' so the stepmothers could trust me and feel able to share their private lives with me because I believed their 'side' of *a* story (Lee, 1993). And I think I was successful in establishing this flow.

Conclusion

This chapter was hugely influenced by the work of Reinharz (1992) because the problems she discusses strongly resemble the problems I encountered whilst undertaking my own research, and her work served as my 'guide' and 'supporter' of my methodological struggles. I found a great sense of comfort in knowing that what I had gone through was not unique.

In this chapter I have discussed the methodological underpinnings and complexities of my research. I explained what a steep learning curve it was for me and how my location as a researcher impacted on the way this research was done. In different parts of this chapter I argued that my location somewhere in-between a researcher and a stepmother was problematic for me and that I never resolved this dilemma entirely satisfactorily. I am a stepmother who chose to investigate the experiences of other stepmothers and this was to be difficult on a personal level. Being a stepmother and a feminist informed my choice of feminist interviewing as my research method because I saw it as the best tool for accessing the lives and experiences of stepmothers without exploiting them. But, as I have kept mentioning throughout this chapter, this research is not about me but about representing the voices of other stepmothers. Thus, I shall now 'give space to my participants' words' (Green, 2009: 75).

# Chapter 3. The Stepmothers' Relationships with Their Stepchildren

Introduction

The dominant image of the relationships between stepmothers and stepchildren in existing research is that they are parental in nature, that is *as* between biological parents and children. And, at the same time as they are portrayed as an idealized version of the family relationship akin to that between biological mothers and their biological children (Ganong and Coleman, 1983; Gamache, 1997; Levin, 1997a and b; Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Church, 1999, 2000; Roper and Capdevila, 2011), they are also constructed as dysfunctional, distant and in some cases even deviant (Hart, 2009; Roper and Capdevila, 2011).

The paradox of the term 'stepmother' is that it implies and disallows mothering at the same time, thus making stepmothering a complex and seemingly contradictory process. This and the framing of the steprelationships as a parent-child relationship are historically rooted. Before the legalization of divorce, a woman became a stepmother when she married a man who had biological children from his previous marriage(s) and whose wife had died – this is why the word 'stepmother' means 'mother-loss' (Smith, 1990). A stepmother became an instant mother to her stepchildren. However, after the legalization of divorce and the de-stigmatization of children born out of wedlock, women were increasingly more likely to 'become'[5] stepmothers due to couples splitting up or divorcing rather than spousal death (Pryor, 2004; Coleman et al, 2008; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). It also became increasingly likely that stepfamilies contained adult stepchildren[6] with whom, sometimes, the stepmothers spent little or no time at all. These women were still labelled 'stepmothers' but the role expectations, for them are less clear – either in their own eyes and/or in those of other people (Coleman et al, 2008).

Gamache (1997) argues that 'values and beliefs from the dominant perspective distort our vision and cloud our thinking when we attempt to examine experiences of

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[5] I put 'become' in inverted commas because the term stepmother carries no legal status for the woman, so I use it as an indication of a social rather than legal status.

[6] By an adult stepchild I mean a person who is over the age of 18 when the stepmother enters the relationship.

the non-dominant culture' (1997: 41). My aim here is to challenge the 'dominant perspective' – that is the nuclear-biological framework as the analogy to stepfamily relationships – in stepfamily research and to show the diversity of steprelationships stepmothers have and/or do not have with their stepchildren. Considering the variety of stepfamily formations in my sample as well as the fact that most of the stepmothers did not identify as stepmothers, framing these steprelationships as that of parent and child seems confusing and inappropriate. As the participants often referred to their steprelationships in qualitative terms as 'good', 'complicated' or 'bad' and how they had changed over the years across those categories, I chose to follow the stepmothers' lead and categorise the steprelationships as such. However, it is important to note that even though for the purposes of this chapter the steprelationships were categorized in those three categories, they did not necessarily remain within one category across time. All steprelationships in the 'good' category, for example, differed in the strength of how good they were ('very good' to 'good enough', for example). Additionally, each steprelationship could be classed as 'complicated' at some point, particularly in its early stages.

In this chapter I explore the complex and fluid processes of the relationships between the stepmothers and their stepchildren. I shall start by analysing the 'bad' steprelationships. Next, I will discuss the 'complicated' ones and lastly I will examine the steprelationships that were 'good'.

Bad Steprelationships

As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, most of the research on this subject reports that steprelationships are difficult, problematic and often unsuccessful – especially between the stepmothers and the stepchildren, particularly the stepdaughters (Coleman et al, 1994; Crohn, 2006; Hart, 2009). Although a variety of factors are noted as problematic in steprelationships, it is the stepmothers that are regarded as the main problem (Hart, 2009; Roper and Capdevila, 2010). This was definitely the case for some of the stepmothers in my sample but the processes of steprelationships are far more complex than that.

Seven of the stepmothers interviewed described their steprelationships with at least one of their 'present' or 'past' stepchildren[7] as 'bad'. Two of these became stepmothers to adults, four to young children and one to both adult and young children. Five of these steprelationships started badly, one started well and one started as complicated. In one case the biological mother was dead, in one the stepmother was a residential parent to one of her stepchildren but not to the other one who lived with her biological mother, and in one case the visits at the stepmother's house were directed by court order. Six[8] of the stepmothers had previous biological children and one of these stepmothers also had a joint biological child with her second ex-husband. In one case the stepmother had a good relationship with her 'present' stepchildren but a bad one with the 'previous' stepchildren. The length of time as a stepmother differed greatly among the women from three years to 20. Two women were serial stepmothers but only one had some contact with her 'previous' stepdaughter. Three women did not identify as stepmothers, one did not identify as a stepmother with regard to her 'previous' stepdaughters but identified as such to her 'present' stepchildren. The remaining two women identified as stepmothers but cautiously and hesitantly.

Because of the complex and unique nature of each steprelationship I decided to analyse them as individual case studies but due to the lack of space I will discuss just three of these. I chose to focus on these particular stepmothers because their steprelationships illustrated bad steprelationship perfectly. Despite their individual specificities all 'bad' steprelationships had some commonalities. In each case the stepmother was rejected by at least one of her stepchildren. There was also a mutual lack of affection, little or no contact between the stepmother and the stepchild/ren as well as the stepmother's negatively defined and inflexible role/s – defined by the stepmother herself in terms of what she was or was not to her stepchild/ren.

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[7] Present means a stepchild from a relationship that was ongoing at the time of the interview; and past means from a past relationship and one with whom the stepmother had no contact at the time of the interview.

[8] One stepmother had a biological child but had him adopted.

*Vicky*

Vicky's relationship with her three stepchildren (two were over 18 and one was 13 when Vicky and their biological father started a relationship) could definitely be described as bad. It started badly and remained bad, despite them rarely seeing each other. Vicky had been a stepmother for 12 years but did not identify as such.

> I don't think of myself as a stepmother... arhm… come to that I've been with my partner now since 2000 and he has three children so because I've been living there I suppose I'm a stepmother, I suppose in a position… We haven't been married because I don't want to. And I don't want any more attachment than I already have… this is why I wasn't sure whether I was…

Vicky's hesitancy to identify as a stepmother while recognizing that she was in the position of one, as well as assuming that being married would make her more of a stepmother, were very common features amongst all the women in my sample. Vicky explained her lack of identification as a stepmother as not 'taking on their [partner's] children as if they're your own' but also as due to 'a bad start' in forming her steprelationships. The stepmothers often referred to the relationships they had or did not have with their stepchildren in biological terms, i.e. being or not being 'like my own children', as if this was the perquisite to forming or having a good steprelationship. The lack of this basis was constructed as a core problem. The same assumption was often made even in the related research about steprelations, hence perhaps it is not surprising that the stepmothers made the same one (see Gamache, 1997; Roper and Capdevila, 2010).

As much as Vicky rejected her position of stepmother she also defined her role with regard to her stepchildren negatively. Vicky was explicit that she had 'never wanted children', that she was 'not a mother figure' – but recognized that this was probably what her youngest stepson had needed. She was unclear about who she wanted to be for her stepchildren. Hence, Vicky did not engage in what Ganong and colleagues (2011) call 'relationship building behaviours' with her stepchildren. Although Vicky recognized that the stepchildren came as part of the package, the fact that she did not want to have children translated into her inability or unwillingness to make adjustments in her attitude towards her stepchildren.

> I couldn't bear… for a start and I can't bear the tip, the mess, curtains never drawn back arhm… just all sorts of things, just not me… I never wanted children… so it was stupid really to go out with Barry!

Many researchers argue that stepparents' flexibility, time and energy investment into the stepchildren are paramount to establishing and maintaining a good and warm steprelationship (see Henry and Lovelace, 1995; Golish, 2003; Ganong et al, 2011). This lack of role/s flexibility as well as not accepting the stepchildren as part of the package made the establishment of good steprelationships rather challenging.

However, it was difficult to ascertain who bore the responsibility for complicating the formation of the steprelationship. Although Vicky's attitude towards the stepchildren was negative, she clearly saw herself as rejected by her stepchildren, the youngest stepson in particular, very early on.

> I've never ever taken to him nor him to me. And the older two arhm… they were very much in defence of their brother for a long time.

The stepchildren 'made it very clear to [Vicky] that [she's] not welcomed' and when Vicky moved into the family house (where the biological mother had lived) she was forbidden from moving anything in it or 'making her mark in it' by the stepchildren, despite the fact that only the youngest one lived there at the time.

> I once decorated the Christmas tree and… and put some crackers on and they all got taken off during the night… and put in the pile, and then redecorated with the [ones] their mummy had … things like that. That was the youngest…

It was interesting that Vicky's partner did not intervene in this and many other situations and Vicky did not expect him to. This non-intervention by the biological/adoptive father was unusual and only happened in three other cases, in one of which the father had a fractured and very distant relationship with his children[9].

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[9] I shall explore the roles the biological/adoptive fathers play in shaping steprelationships in Chapter 5.

With time the steprelationship gradually grew worse. The rejection of Vicky by the stepchildren was further manifested in that Vicky was excluded from family festivities and celebrations.

> I was at his [Vicky's partner] son's wedding, I was around… I was not in family photos when the family have to stand… I was in a relationship with him but I was not to be on family photographs, I was on a separate table than him so this was how welcoming this is… he was on the table… with arhm… bride and groom and he had his back to me and I was also pissed off about that if he had his face to me we could look at each other… on a very nice table… …arhm… yes that's that wedding so I wasn't … in the reception etc. I didn't have the first dance … arhm… I wasn't the one dancing with the … father… so that's that one… The next wedding… I was not given a buttonhole… and I wasn't on that shot either… you'll see me on the wedding group photographs…

Although Vicky was invited to the wedding, she was very much excluded from the family space in it. Vicky was upset about her treatment but did not object as she felt that 'it wasn't [her] place'. Incidents such as not being given a buttonhole may appear small and petty, but when combined with repeated exclusion at family events as well as being reminded constantly of the dead mother, it made Vicky feel rejected and unwanted.

> But I know wedding anniversary, their wedding anniversary, Dora's birthday, Dora's death… I obviously know mother's day and have those in my diary and I can share with him and she [stepdaughter] insists on sending a text, always a text comes in 'thinking of you today dad'... chipping away, this is how I feel it is…

This clearly demonstrates that Vicky might be with the stepchildren's biological father but she is not and perhaps never will be part of the family: 'Barry goes on his own sometimes … The father-daughter relationship is quite good, they don't want me there, it's just them and they can have some time out.' The biological father and his

children had 'family conferences' which sometimes included Vicky to try to work out the difficulties but to no avail because the children could not or perhaps even would not accept Vicky and her relationship with their biological father. In the end the biological father said that he wanted to be with Vicky and if the children could not accept this, there was nothing more he could do. Hence Vicky's partner met with his biological children usually without Vicky. Such arrangements, although uncommon among my interviewees, are reported in related research and are a common feature of problematic steprelationships (Ganong et al, 2011).

A few researchers argue that stepchildren's attitudes and behaviours towards stepparents are as important as those of the stepparents (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992; Ganong et al, 2011). As Vicky's relationship with her stepchildren was problematic it was not surprising that both Vicky and her stepchildren demonstrated difficulties in maintaining the relationship.

Whenever they have a party [christenings] … but it's probably… no need to be very involved… it's not… it sounds really nasty but it's easier… now… I could have gone… he [one of the stepsons] would come over to me… he might just say… arhm… 'have you had a good journey, has it taken long?' and that's it, that's the limit…

The steprelationship appeared awkward and perhaps forced, limited to social gatherings and not initiated by either party. Neither party seemed to feel the need to spend time together and there was no relationship, let alone affection, between the stepmother and the stepchildren. I think this was well illustrated by Vicky's 'my bottom line is if anything happens to my partner I'll walk away [from the stepchildren], I have known that for a long time.'

After many years of rejection and conflict as well as attempts at conflict resolution the relationship between Vicky and her stepchildren remained strained. Because of this Vicky's partner decided to distance himself from the relationship with his biological children and focus on the relationship with Vicky. Such decisions were very common in my sample in the stepfamilies where the stepchildren were adults, but it was the opposite where the stepchildren were young. This is perhaps understandable because adult children often do not live at home with the parents and have established homes of their own. Thus they do not need intensive parental

involvement and it might have been easier for the parents to focus on themselves. Younger children were still dependent on their parents who felt responsible for them and may have felt that they had to put the children first.

*Fran*

In Fran's previous[10] stepfamily the biological father decided to 'side' with his biological child rather than his wife which, amongst other factors, resulted in the stepfamily breakdown. The relationship between Fran and her 'previous' stepdaughter was bad but good with the two 'present' stepchildren. Unlike Vicky, Fran identified as a stepmother and what is more, she actively sought a partner who had children from his previous relationship. This is at odds with findings from previous research where it was reported that nobody chooses to be a stepmother (Smith, 1990) – because Fran had two children from her previous marriage.

> I really, I was 30 and got two children and... from my first marriage to Henry... and I wanted to meet someone with children because it's hard if you... because they understand that children, unfortunately they are very time-consuming and you can't always drop everything being... illnesses and stuff... understanding of what it's like to have children... and so I knew from the start.

> Differences in understanding of what role the stepparent should take are noted as key factors in marital problems (Kurdek and Fine, 1991). Fran's definition of her stepmotherly role differed from that of her then husband. This was the cause of many of their conflicts. Fran's husband wanted her to be called 'mum' by his biological daughter but for Fran there was a strong division between biological and stepchildren.

> I don't care what you say... you can love them [stepchildren] but you don't love them as much as you love your own... there's that... nature gives you that edge to protect your own... my children come first.

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[10] Fran was a stepmother in her previous stepfamily for ten years until her divorce.

Similarly to all stepmothers who had bad steprelationships Fran was clear about who she was not or what she did not feel for her stepdaughter, but appeared vague about who she was and what relationship she wanted with her. Furthermore, Fran in a sense rejected her stepdaughter by placing her biological children first – but it was difficult to ascertain whether this was her approach from the start or the result of the bad steprelationship.

The inflexibility of Fran's approach towards her stepdaughter also marked their steprelationship. Although Fran recognized that her stepdaughter was a different child from her 'own' children and that she was parented differently (i.e. in terms of different sets of rules and expectations at her biological mother's house from those at her stepmother and biological father's house), she was not prepared to make room for her stepdaughter's different needs. For example,

> It's hard because you've got boundaries in your own place and if you've got other children in your home and this child comes into arhm… and it's parented in a different way is... I think... you've got two sets of rules going on and... I think that's the area I found very difficult. Jess [stepdaughter] is quite a... a difficult child full stop. She's just a quiet, reserved child, where my children are very outgoing and gregarious so I wasn't used to that sort of child and I couldn't find a common ground with Jess ...

As the relationship between Fran and Jess progressed the differences between the parenting approaches became quite pronounced. This not only led to marital conflicts but also to what Fran perceived as hostility from and manipulation by her stepdaughter.

> It [Jess' remark] used to make me feel really like pants because it was quite hurtful... she's very good at one-liners... these comments that she's made and you'll be like... 'what have you just said?' And... I don't know, we were watching, it was Christmas, and we were watching a film, I think ... storyline was this person having a baby and she didn't really want it and Jess said 'Well, daddy didn't really want Emma [joint biological daughter of Fran and Jess' biological father].'

As other research findings (for example, Ambert, 1986; Ganong and Coleman, 1988) show, the birth of a joint biological child can complicate an already strained steprelationship, and in this case it made Fran quite resentful of her stepdaughter coming. The above event ended with Fran insisting that Jess was taken back to her biological mother's home. Fran's already inflexible definition of her stepmother role tightened further and the prioritizing of her biological children appeared to have excluded her stepdaughter from Fran's family.

No one person could be held responsible for the bad steprelationship. Although Fran's attitude towards stepmothering and particularly her stepdaughter was negative it is equally important to note that Fran reported that when Jess came to stay, she was negative and resentful of her. Fran blamed the biological mother as mostly responsible for the hostile relationship with her stepdaughter[11] and her eventual rejection by her. As Fran's second marriage ended in divorce, the relationship with Jess deteriorated further since as the contact between the stepdaughter and the stepmother was even more sporadic. Ultimately it was maintained only because Jess and Emma were half-sisters, Fran described it as follows:

> Now that we are divorced I don't really see her... she sees Emma [joint biological daughter]... they have a relationship, it's her sister and I say 'hello' to her and things but we never had a strong, strong relationship anyway for us to continue it now, I mean obviously she's part of my life through Emma and we don't hate each other or anything, it just was never a plush [*sic*] relationship and I do think some of that was because Mandy [biological mother of Jess] wouldn't allow it because she's her only child, so of course it was…

This quote clearly illustrated not only the lack of affection between the stepmother and the stepdaughter but also the lack of desire to continue the relationship because there was no basis for doing so.

It is interesting that Fran never talked about her role in managing the steprelationship and never quite saw herself as being partly responsible for how it had turned out. This could be because she did not feel responsible for the problems and

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[11] The impact of the biological/adoptive mothers is discussed in the next chapter.

felt powerless to do anything to change things because of her family circumstances: the stark differences in how Fran and her then husband viewed the stepmother role and the negative portrayal of her by the biological mother. These factors will be discussed further in the next chapters.

*Monica*

Monica was one of the stepmothers who felt very much responsible for having a bad steprelationship with one of her stepdaughters. She was fairly new to the stepmother experience (three years), she was a residential stepmother to one of her stepdaughters who was profoundly disabled[12] and a non-residential stepmother to the other girl. She was a biological mother to two children from her previous marriage, she had a stepmother herself and her own biological children were also stepmothered. Monica only tentatively identified as a stepmother because she associated it with the wicked stepmother connotations:

> Because there are a lot of judgments made, you know when you say the word 'stepmother' and I have to be honest and say it's not really positive…

The connotations attached to the word stepmother were hardly mentioned by the stepmothers who had bad steprelationships, which is very interesting. I think that this could be linked to the fact that most of the women in this category had been stepmothers for a long time and perhaps understood that relationships require both parties to want to work on them. They also accepted the status quo. Most of these stepmothers were in happy and fulfilled marriages/partnerships and the stepchildren were adults. It appeared that the stepmothers who were 'new' (less than five years) to this role found it hard to share the steprelationship failure with the other stepfamily members and still felt that they could change the nature of the steprelationships.

The relationships Monica had with her two stepdaughters were profoundly different; she had a good relationship with her resident stepdaughter (Millie) and a bad one with her non-resident stepdaughter (Betty). This relationship, however, had

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[12] The biological mother had no contact with and refused to be involved in the upbringing of the disabled daughter.

started off well. Monica herself said: 'I have one stepchild with whom I get along absolutely fine and I have another that I don't at the moment.' For the purpose of this section I will only discuss Monica's relationship with Betty.

At the beginning of the relationship Monica had high expectations of herself as a stepmother and to a degree she was guided by her own experience as a stepchild. She was hopeful that she would be able to establish a good relationship with her stepdaughter:

> I think… I had a… I have a stepmother as well. Arhm… So I had an idea, I had an idea that she… that I didn't want to be a stepmother like her. I get on with her now but when I was younger not so. So I thought it would be quite straightforward; I thought… I'm a nice person and I can be a good stepmother. But I actually find it very, very difficult and… just not… it's not a very straightforward role.

Clearly Monica started off with high expectations of herself as stepmother and was perhaps naïve in thinking that steprelationship-building would be 'straightforward'. Monica had a positive attitude towards her stepchildren and treated them as 'part of the package' as the next quote indicates: 'I think I thought… arhm… you know, I love my husband and therefore, I will love his children…'

Unlike Vicky and all the other bad steprelationships, Monica's started off well and she was accepted by her stepdaughter.

> It was lovely, it was lovely… It was when we lived in Sheffield so he [Monica's husband] brought them down here for the weekend. We went out for the day, did nice things, they were wonderfully polite, smiling, happy children. I was on my best behaviour [Laughter], the children were well behaved. It was great. Arhm… and it was for quite a while.

However, in time the steprelationship with Betty began to change for the worse. For example: 'We did things together and she enjoyed coming over. As she's become a teenager this has changed arhm… I don't think her perception of me is very positive at the moment.' Monica recognized the change in her stepdaughter as associated with becoming a teenager. Ganong and Coleman (1994: 102) argue that 'the more tenuous

nature of these [step] relationships may make stepparents easier targets for rebellious behaviour as adolescent stepchildren attempt to assert some autonomy from their families.' As Monica was fairly new into her stepmother role there was less 'emotional glue' to undermine the usual teenage bid for independence (Ganong and Coleman, 1994). Yet, Monica struggled to recognize the impact of that change fully and she blamed both biological parents for the problematic steprelationship.[13] Monica also blamed her attitude as partly responsible for the quality of the steprelationship:

> She'll [Betty] say that I don't make her feel very welcome. She's really sad and I do… and that is really… a bone of contention because I don't mean to make her feel like that. But what happens is, because things are so tense when she comes, she comes with an attitude and it sort of brings like a dark cloud over the house so then I feel tense… and I never say anything to her, she never says anything to me, so it's all very polite but… I… I sort of dread her coming, in a way, at the moment because it causes friction and I'm sure she picks up on that. It's very hard for her not to probably. That makes me sad, feel terrible. Although, it didn't use to be like that but something shifted in our relationship.

As soon as cracks appeared in the steprelationship Monica struggled to re-establish a good relation with her stepdaughter and she found it difficult to discipline her. For example,

> Awkward. I really don't enjoy doing it and I'd rather say to my husband: 'Tell her that it's bedtime, tell her to turn the tele off.' I'd rather do it that way because I feel that whichever way I say it, even when I say it in a nice way, friendly way, I still feel she looks at me as though: 'Who do you think you are?'

Monica felt she lacked the authority to discipline her stepdaughter but thought she had to because it was her house and her rules. Discipline is a big theme in research on

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[13] The roles the biological/adoptive parents play in shaping the steprelationships are discussed in Chapter 3 and 4.

stepfamilies, not least because it is generally advised that stepparents should leave it to the biological parent because stepparents lack parental authority and stepmothers can feel powerless to impose any rules on the stepchildren (Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Henry and McCue, 2009). Problems relating to discipline may also stem from the stepmother's uncertainty about her role, i.e. what she can and cannot do in relation to the stepchildren. Role ambiguity might have affected Monica.

This caused a problem for her not least because she struggled with her feelings for the stepdaughters.

> See I don't, I think we should [love our stepchildren]. Because we are given a lot of trust with, they are other people's children; it would be nice to love them, wouldn't it? Arhm… but it is a big ask. Arhm… and I don't think having got children of my own and also stepchildren, I don't think you can love your stepchildren like you love your own.

This differentiation between biologically-based and step love towards one's children was often commented on by the stepmothers in my sample, as has also been commonly reported by previous researchers (see Smith, 1990; Hart, 2009), regardless of whether they had biological children or not. This lack of love for her stepchildren was a great source of sadness and disappointment for Monica especially when she also realized that her husband probably did not love her biological children as much as his own (biological) children. Dainton (1993) and Penor Ceglian and Gardner (2001) argue that stepmothers are expected to care for and 'instantly love' their stepchildren because they are women, and Monica's inability to achieve that appeared to be very problematic for her. Monica made gendered assumptions about her own role and found it difficult, or even impossible, to step out of them. Being female was a dominant factor in her role construction (Levin, 1997a).

This, coupled with a growing sense of rejection by Betty, caused Monica to withdraw from interaction with Betty.

> And then she [stepdaughter] starts to associate me and my role with causing problems between her parents. And I also think there was a point where she's realized that I wasn't just a fun figure. I mean we don't tend to take her out anymore, I mean she's 15, no interest in her coming anywhere with us.

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Although Monica started to spend less time with her stepdaughter and recognized that it, probably, was due to Betty becoming a teenager, she was still upset and disappointed with the current state of the steprelationship. Monica was nonetheless hopeful that the steprelationship would get better in the future. This hope that the steprelationship would be good in the future was very unlike that of most of the stepmothers in the 'bad' category. Again, I think that Monica's fairly recent entry into the stepmother role/s, the recognition that there are many factors that shape a relationship and in a sense her refusal to give up on the relationship with her stepdaughter made her to stand out in the 'bad' category. She herself had also been stepmothered. This would also indicate that her steprelationship had the potential to be classed as complicated, which I shall now discuss.

Complicated Steprelationships

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, most of the steprelationships in my sample could be described as complicated at some point. The three steprelationships I shall discuss now were at that complicated point at the time of the interviews and were the only steprelationships that I have classed as complicated. These steprelationships were characterized by ambivalence, negative and positive feelings, uncertainty as well as emotional pain for the stepmothers. As one stepmother simply said: 'it's complicated'. And this word was repeated by others – hence I use it here as a category for describing the steprelationships I discuss. All three women became stepmothers to young children, had been in this role for over 15 years and all stepchildren were adults at the time of the interviews. One had biological children from her previous marriage and one of the two women that did not, had joint biological children. Two stepmothers were non-residential and one had adopted her (step)-daughter. Hence, one stepmother (adoptive mother) did not identify as a stepmother, one did very strongly and one was unsure about her stepmothering status.

Like bad steprelationships, complicated steprelationships were very different from each other but had some common factors. All the stepmothers in this category reported a recent event in the steprelationship that complicated their previously good relationships with at least one of their stepchildren. This resulted in the stepmothers,

formerly comfortable in their stepmotherly role/s, including the women who did not identify as such, feeling unsure and uncertain about their steprelationships.

*Jane*

Jane was a stepmother to four children (three boys and one girl) and to begin with, their relationship was bad but with time it became good. However, only a couple of weeks prior to the interview Jane and her stepchildren had been on holiday together and her stepdaughter's actions had made her feel excluded.

> It's still quite raw, because I went and saw on Facebook and saw on her profile and there are all the photos of everybody but me. I wasn't there, I'm not mentioned and it's all about, you know, daddy and the boys, her brothers and I'm just... I'm not there at all. And it just so just because I thought actually I would, I never expected her to do it also I thought it was all me that was really pushing her to have the extra days, have the longer time with us look after her, buy things for her, you know, take her shopping - she was mad about going shopping and then she was cross because she wanted to go back to the sun. I couldn't get it right.

Although this event might appear trivial, I think it illustrates a deeper issue and one that, to a degree, underpinned most of the steprelationships in my sample and that is the stepmothers' insecurity and uncertainty about their steprelationships, and a fear of exclusion and perhaps not belonging to the family even after many years. The next quote from Jane illustrates the point perfectly: 'So maybe because you're never in the clear as a stepmother, you're never in the clear, you're always on your guard.' This quote suggests that a stepmother can never relax and perhaps she always has to prove herself as worthy of a relationship with her stepchildren as though her status as a stepfamily member could be removed at any time.

It is important to note that it took Jane a long time to build, what she thought of as a tentatively good relationship with her stepdaughter.

> I was very, I was quite careful but it seemed OK, she was giving me good vibes then and again. She had boyfriends and she wanted to sleep with them

here and she knew if she was getting on with me that would, you know, work in her favour and it did. And I might regret it now but yes I mean there was no arhm... there was no animosity between us but we were both fairly careful.

Jane appeared to regret that she had invested so much time and effort into building the relationship with her stepdaughter. But she also noted that both of them were careful in their relationship, perhaps to avoid conflict. That holiday event, although it was on one level only between Jane and her stepdaughter, also undermined her relationship with her three stepsons.

Unlike the stepmothers in bad steprelationships, Jane strongly identified as a stepmother and when I asked her 'What does it mean to you to be a stepmother?', she answered:

Means an awful lot actually. It's a very, very big... word. It's a big word, it's a big thing. It is a big thing and you get over all the upsets and the arhm... emotions and you break it down to what it really is and it's one of the closest relationships you can have... in the whole book of relationships, isn't it? I mean close in the fact that you are called 'mother' you know, stepmother, but you are a mother and I think that's why I'm really, really determined to always be a mother figure rather than a friend, you know, I don't know what to do with that friend bit. They've got their friends and they've got their mother - if they can be friends with it they can be... they can be... yes it's not a friendship, it is definitely a mother role but I don't see myself as their mother...

Jane strongly identified as a stepmother and saw it as 'a big thing', a role and relationship that were underpinned by strong emotional bonds that could withstand turmoil. It would appear the 'emotional glue' held the family together. She clearly defined her role as that of 'a mother but not the mother' of her stepchildren and definitely not a friend. In their study of non-residential stepmothers Weaver and Coleman (2005) noted a similar role definition amongst the stepmothers, 'a mothering but not a mother role'. But this role had an add-on such as that of a *friend* or *responsible or caring adult* and was filled with contradictions. This was clearly not the case for Jane who defined her role/s along the lines of parent-child relationship but

not along biological lines. Interestingly Jane never compared the love for her stepchildren with the love for her biological children, and it was a role respectful of the biological mother's place without undermining the immense emotional importance that being stepmother had for Jane. Jane's role appeared to be clear and she was very flexible and adaptive in her roles to her children. Jane also had a proactive and realistic attitude in forging her steprelationships. For example,

> I was, I was quite scared I think at times... and they were... silly things... I decided right from the start that the only way I could cope with it arhm... to make it easier for them [stepchildren] was to put my apron on and be in the kitchen cooking because food always brings people and I'm a cook anyway so, you know, that's, it's not that I'm fantastic cook but it's more that it was my role and I could use it, that was what I could use, my experience in the kitchen, to actually draw them in; and also this is quite a good layout I know it's being recorded so you can't see. But I could be in there so not encroaching on their space and we made this very much the family/television area so we knew where they were and we could sort of listen in but they didn't know. And then I was just cooking and they were always coming on OK and they were really cool to start with but always interested and actually I wasn't a threat and I was just in the kitchen, you know, not trying to be great friends with them, I wasn't trying to compete having, you know, lots of their friends here and things like that - it did happen but I didn't push it because I just needed them to understand that you can be at home with somebody in the kitchen cooking, that's not your mother but is not, you know, destructing anything. I just wanted that calm... and it took me a long time to get it.

This quote clearly illustrates how Jane stuck to her role definition but made room for the needs of the stepchildren because she gave them space but supervised them at the same time. She gave them time to get to know her and perhaps let them trust her by showing that she was not destructive. This fluid approach to the needs of the stepchildren was rarely seen in the bad steprelationships but was one of the defining features of good steprelationships.

What is also evident from this quote is that Jane accepted the stepchildren and wanted a relationship with them – they were part of the package and she was

determined to make it work. Hence, it was understandable that after Jane made a great effort in making the steprelationships work, she felt rejected by her stepdaughter's recent actions. Yet, despite this rejection Jane had a sense of a family unit but felt insecure about her place in it.

*Gill*

Gill like Jane had her sense of belonging to the family undermined by recent developments in the relationship with one of her stepsons. One of the long-time stepmothers (20 years) to two stepsons, Gill, shortly before the interview, became a step-grandmother to Will's biological daughter. When the child was born Gill was addressed as a gran. She was addressed as such for a few months and then once again she was referred to by her first name. This had greatly upset Gill and marked the moment when one of her steprelationships had become complicated.

Gill's relationship with both of her stepsons was good. I interviewed Gill for my Master's research and at that time her steprelationship was very good. In her interview for my Master's research Gill talked at length about how good, loving, fun and positive the relationships with the stepsons were. But at the time of the interview for my PhD research she found it hard to believe it was good because of the recent events.

> Finding out the truth about what someone really… feels about you... you begin to think… I don't think… I really don't know what to… what you are. Don't get me wrong, I do like him… his company… but it now feels as if he's been kidding me about enjoying being with me, as if he's just… arhm… as if he's thinking I can charm you as well… because they [stepsons] do, they get all kinds of us. That's the silly thing; if they keep on charming us… they get… you know… they keep on getting stuff.

As in Jane's case, Gill started to doubt both of her steprelationships and appeared to have reduced them into material gains relationships, i.e. continued financial support for the sons, taking them on holidays etc. She was fearful that her steprelationships were pretend and not honest when she was sincere. Gill appeared unable to talk about

the good times with both of her stepsons because the issue of not being called 'gran' upset her so much and it translated to both children.

> It feels as if they're trying to ostracize me. Arhm… I just feel sad that they don't care enough about me, that I care about them arhm… because I do, honestly I do honestly see Lola as my granddaughter… but if they start and say 'Gill' to her and that's how she refers to me… then it all feels a little bit like a friend… than a granddaughter and I know [a] word is a silly thing but… it, it's a powerful thing...

Gill recognized it was 'silly' to be upset about it but her deep sense of rejection was almost overpowering. Not being called a gran indicated a clear message to her: 'You're not actually part of us and being… you know… we do not want to hurt you but…'. Importantly even if Gill's upset appeared 'silly', it was rooted in Gill's inability to have biological children and for the first time Gill felt that she did not belong to the family, or that she her 'right' to be part of the family was not secure.

> Arhm… Well, all I then wanted was… if we had kids to… you know… there's… to be seen as part of the family… it makes you feel really hollow and… arhm… as if you're not part of the gang… and you'll never understand what it feels like to be part of this gang.

> Because of the name issue, Gill's own identification as a stepmother withered and was completely undermined:
> And… so ever since then I kind of thought, I'm obviously being reassessed about how people see me and so I don't really feel like a stepmother.

Gill did not discuss her feelings with the stepchildren. Although she did not specify the reasons why, this could had been because she felt rejected by and did not trust her stepsons, more precisely the relationship with them. In Gill's narrative it appears that it was others who defined who Gill was, which I think reflected Gill's deep sense of rejection and the loss of agency to decide and act for herself. Interestingly, Gill saw this exclusion partly as her own doing.

Maybe because I… chose not to be full on and be more of a friend… maybe I should have forged this… I'm just as… important as your mother relationship, I don't know but that's what I have chosen, that's where I feel comfortable… I've done something wrong but I don't know what…

She also thought it was partly the doing of her step-daughter-in-law and not her stepson's. If anything Gill remained protective and defensive towards him:

Yeah, yeah. My stepdaughter-in-law or whatever she is, it is her who's decided that I'm not a grandparent in her opinion and because Will is obviously married to her, he goes along with it and it's OK. That's the way it is. And it was Will who referred to me initially as gran. But I know that Will will be influenced by whatever she [step-daughter-in-law] says, that tends to be the case, doesn't it? Early doors [*sic*] about marriage, you know, the man for an easy life just goes along with what the wife wants.

Gill's hopes for the future were not strong and she resigned herself to 'the war of words' with her step-daughter-in-law and continued but uneasy contact with her stepson.

*Irene*

Irene became a residential stepmother to a two-year-old girl with whom the biological mother had almost no contact and who was very much rejected by her. When her stepdaughter's biological mother died Irene adopted her.

From the start Irene treated her stepdaughter as part of the package, was immediately accepted by her and Irene noted: 'she always called me "mummy", right from the start without any prompting – which is weird'. This acceptance of the stepmother by her stepchild, expressed by the latter calling her stepmother 'mum', was not only unusual but only happened in one other case – that of Emma. Ganong and colleagues (2011) argue that stepchildren naming their stepparent as 'mum' or 'dad' indicated that they claimed the stepparent as a parent figure. This was the case for both these (step)-mothers. In both cases the stepchild was reported to be had been mistreated and rejected by the biological mother. In these two instances the

stepmothers adopted their stepchildren, and openly and strongly expressed love for their (step)-children. For example, when I asked Irene how she felt about her daughter, she replied: 'I love her very much'. Only Irene and Emma directly expressed love for their stepchildren so readily and they were also the only women who did not use the step-biology dichotomy when describing their love for the children.[14] Both mothers were surprised by this acceptance from the (step)-children.

Considering the issues mentioned above it is perhaps not surprising that Irene did not identify as a stepmother and she further explained why this was the case: 'Well, I didn't because Anna [stepdaughter] was always ours to look after.' and then she said 'I was at home, mother immediately... after eight weeks of marriage'. It is interesting that Irene referred to her then stepdaughter as 'ours' because it not only denotes ownership of the child but also relates to what Vicky described as 'taking the stepchildren as your own'. Nielsen (1999) argues that the notion of owing a biological child is a western and middle-class idea that restricts the chances of a stepchild of forming strong emotional bonds with her or his stepmother. It seems that there was a reversal of this notion in the cases of Emma and Irene, and that it was the bond with the biological mothers that was severed.

The relationship between Irene and her (step)-daughter[15] although strong, was nonetheless complicated. Irene explained this complication as: 'But she's had issues. If your mother walks out on you and dumps you. It doesn't matter how you wrapped it up, it's what happened, and something that stays with you and … she's had a rocky time with it herself.' The (step)-daughter's issues complicated the relationship they had but it was nonetheless good: 'There's a very strong bond there.' The problem that undermined this 'very strong bond' and upset Irene greatly was Anna's recent marriage to which no family member had been invited: 'that was hurtful. I was hurt for a while and I let her know. Because I was really upset.' Again, it was the exclusion, even when it was not only the stepmother who was excluded, which was upsetting and undermined the relationship between mother and daughter. Irene was unsure why this had happened and tried to explain it as partly rooted in biology and

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[14] The role and impact of the biological/adoptive mothers, whether dead or alive, on steprelationships will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

[15] I use '(step)-daughter' rather than 'stepdaughter' because Irene had adopted her stepdaughter.

genes, and partly in the way she and her husband had brought Anna up: 'That's difficult. So I don't know how much of this is genes, upbringing, us? Bound to be some of us [her and her husband]. God knows, who knows?'

However, unlike in the previous example, it was not just the relationship with the (step)-mother that had weakened but also the relationship between the biological father and the daughter. Although Irene was hurt, she felt she had to step in, and mediate between the two: 'I'm the one that says look, you know, her mother walked out on her and that hurts; that matters!' Similarly to Gill, Irene defended the actions of her (step)-daughter. There was a sense that it was never really the fault of the (step)-child when there were problems in the relationship; they were rooted in the rejection by biological mother. This defence of the stepchild by the stepmother was unlike the situation in bad steprelationships. The stepmothers in the complicated steprelationships appeared more willing not only to accept their role in shaping the relationships but were also tentative in blaming the stepchildren for any problems. The strong emotional bonds between the stepmothers and the stepchildren, the length of time they had been together and perhaps the stepmothers' hope that despite these problems their bonds were strong enough to withstand the storm could, perhaps, explain this.

Irene also appeared to be more secure in expressing her hurt to the daughter than the other stepmothers in this category but like them she found it hard to understand this rejection of not only her but also the other members of the family.

> And it is something you can't get over. Cos we are here, we love her, we care for her, we always support her. She's exasperates us, regularly. Still. But erm…

Irene remained ready and available for her daughter and reaffirmed that:

> Well, she knows she can rely on us and she's … she knows where we are, she knows we care for her, she knows we'll never turn our backs on her – ever!

Interestingly, Irene almost constantly used the plural pronoun when describing the actions and attitudes of the family members regarding the problems with Anna. I think it might be because Irene's family approached the problems as a family and perhaps

that is why the lack of invitation to Anna's wedding was felt as an exclusion and was so hurtful. It appeared that it was Anna who often excluded herself from the family rather than excluding certain members of it. Yet, despite the difficulties and complications there was a strong sense of a family unit and deep emotional bonds between the (step)-mother and her (step)-daughter. If it were not for specific issues that arose in these steprelationships, all three would have been classified as good because each of them had most of the factors that feature in good steprelationships as I shall now discuss.

Good Steprelationships

Penor Ceglian and Gardner (2001) note that good steprelationships are not only rarely noted, but they are also noted as unusual. This is at odds with my research findings where most of the steprelationships seemed 'good' and a reflection of a growing body of research documenting this (see for example Whiting et al, 2007; Roper and Capdevila, 2010). Just as with the previous categories discussed in this chapter, the good steprelationships were very different from each other but had common features. In all good steprelationships the stepchildren were reported as accepting the stepmother and in turn the stepmother said that she treated the stepchildren as part of the package. The stepmothers saw themselves as having clearly defined but flexible role/s that were appropriate to the stepchildren's ages and changed as the stepchildren grew older. There was also a strong articulation of a sense of family unit, where the stepmothers and the stepchildren were characterized as mutually affectionate and interested in each other. They also reportedly spend a reasonable amount of time together.

There were 13 stepmothers who said they had a good steprelationship with at least one of their stepchildren. Nonetheless, only five, albeit with a bit of hesitancy, identified as stepmothers. One woman identified more strongly as a step-grandmother than a stepmother. One woman became a stepmother to an adult stepchild; all others became stepmothers to young children. Eight stepmothers, at the time of the interview, had stepchildren that were adult and five were stepmothers to stepchildren under the age of 18. Two women were serial stepmothers, one had adopted her (step)-son, one was a residential stepmother to both her stepchildren and two were residential to only one of their stepchildren. All but one woman were married and one

woman was an ex-stepmother who remained in contact with her stepson. Some had been stepmothers for over 20 years and some only for three years.  Because of these variables, just as I have done in the previous sections of this chapter, I shall discuss three stepmothers on an individual basis.

*Amanda*

Amanda had been a stepmother for 12 years to two stepdaughters who were young at the start of the steprelationship and were adults at the time of the interview. Their relationship was reportedly rocky to begin with but in time, they developed a very good and strong relationship. In addition to her stepmotherly role, Amanda, was also a foster-mother. Amanda's approach to stepmothering was interesting. When asked if she identified as such, she replied:

> Well, I think the word stepmum sounds a little bit … arhm … it's not a really nice word, is it? I, I think of the images of the evil stepmum in *Cinderella*. So I like and try and just think of myself as another mother to them, you know and ... mum number two or whatever or just, you know like arhm you become like another sister to them. I don't know ... maybe depends a lot on your age and their age when you come into that situation.

There are three issues that arise from Amanda's statement; the latter two of them are the defining features of good steprelationships. Firstly, the linking of the word stepmother with the wicked stepmother from fairy tales and her dissociation from that. This was a very common feature in this category of steprelationships, unlike in the other categories and one noted by other researchers (see for example Salwen, 1990; Smith, 1990; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). As the steprelationships were good, the wicked stepmother label perhaps explains the stepmothers' unease with what they viewed as an unfair label.

Secondly, they looked for another way of describing their steprelationship but nonetheless framed it as that between a parent and child. Weaver and Coleman (2005) also noted that the stepmothers in their sample struggled to name their role, especially those who were non-residential stepmothers, and as already indicated termed it as 'a mothering but not a mother role'. Most of the stepmothers in my sample struggled to

define their steprelationships and often found the label of stepmother inadequate for describing their steprelationships. I think this might partly be because, as I mentioned earlier, the term 'stepmother' implies but disallows mothering at the same time. It does not give the stepmother flexibility in her role/s and fails to illustrate that steprelationships change over time.

This change is the third point Amanda made. The word 'become' is particularly important here because it shows that Amanda's role changed from a 'mum number two' to 'like another sister'. This flexibility in the stepmother role was very significant in shaping the steprelationships as good because it was appropriate to the stepchildren's ages and their needs. But as much as the stepmother's role/s definition was flexible, it was also clearly defined firstly as a mother when the stepchildren were younger, and then like a sister when the stepchildren grew up.

Although I classed Amanda's steprelationships as good, they were not so at the beginning. It was quite common for the good steprelationships to start badly or be complicated but in time and with the stepmothers' perseverance as well as many other factors (that will be discussed in the following chapters), they changed for the better. However, the change from bad to good was rather marked in Amanda's eyes and she linked it to the stepdaughters' growing up and starting to date boyfriends.

> Yeah, I really can pinpoint that to that, especially with Nina. When she started going out with Henry, he's a little bit older than Nina as well. Whether that arhm ... sort of changes, yeah … I don't know whether it is a factor or whether it just happens, a coincidence. I put that down to … and I openly say that to her. Yeah ... big, big change in Nina and the same with Lyn, you know … she went through this kind of stroppy time with herself, you know … quite slappy [*sic*] when they speak to you, you know … arhm … Definitely, definitely … I can see that. I don't know whether it's just coincidence or whether that has had a …

Amanda's way of dealing with her stepdaughters' problematic behaviours was not to get involved in the disciplining of them but to leave this to their biological father. The stepmothers in my sample, in terms of their choice as to whether or not to discipline their stepchildren, were almost equally split in the middle but those who had good steprelationships appeared more confident doing so than those in bad

steprelationships. Although disciplining in steprelationships is noted an issues for stepmothers (Weaver and Coleman, 2005), the stepmothers in good steprelationships did not appear to see it as a problem. The stepmothers simply did not do it because their husbands did it, because they saw no need for it and some did it because it was needed. Nancy was the exception: she was new in her role and although she disciplined her stepchildren, she was worried she 'might get in trouble with the girls' mother'.

As Amanda's stepdaughters grew up and their relationships changed, it became richer and stronger. When I asked Amanda what their relationships were like at the time of the interview, she replied: 'Very, very good. Very, very good! Yes!' and then continued to describe them as:

> They have just been so helpful. When they come, whether we have a meal or whatever, they tidy the table, you know, or fill the dishwasher ... 'Does anything need doing?' You know. Or we'd go to town 'Do you want anything getting?' And so they've just been helpful to their dad as well. And that means a lot to me because, you know, he's been so good to them over the years, you know, financially and everything, you know ... and … arhm … And when he's needed a bit of help they've been there and helped. And that means a lot to me.

The family spent a lot of time together and they were helpful and kind to each other. This was a very common theme amongst the stepmothers who had good steprelationships. It was also clear that her stepdaughters accepted Amanda and that she enjoyed being with them. Amanda continued:

> I'm really proud of them. They've turned out to be two very, very lovely girls ... and I'm very proud of them and, you know. And I wouldn't change it for the world.

This quote clearly indicates the affection Amanda had for her stepdaughters and that she was contented with how her steprelationships had turned out.

*Suzy*

The experiences as well as family situation of Suzy were very different from that of Amanda. Suzy had been a residential stepmother to two children under the age of ten for four years. She had a good relationship with both of her stepchildren that had also started well, and similarly to Irene, she was instantly accepted by her stepchildren though they referred to her by her first name. They also had a 'Happy Suzy's Day' rather than a Mother's Day. This expression used by Suzy's stepdaughter is very interesting for two reasons and was a result of card-making for Mother's Day at school. Firstly, it shows that for Daisy (the stepdaughter) the stepmother did not replace the biological mother even though she was residential. Secondly, it firmly placed the stepmother as a mother figure but not a stepmother. The 'Happy Suzy's Day' phrase also somewhat reflects how Suzy constructed her role as a stepmother.

> I'm very much aware that I'm not a biological parent and because their mother, she phones up once a week and they… so I'm very aware the biological parent is there but I really feel like a parent.

Suzy identified strongly as a parent – not mother – and only tentatively as a stepmother. Again, it was evident that the label of stepmother was not adequate to describe the sort of relationship the stepmother had with her stepchildren or how she felt with regard to the role she had. But what was interesting about Suzy was not only the rejection of the term stepmother but also of the appellation mother. Perhaps, as the above quote shows, it was the involvement of the biological mother that prevented Suzy's identification with the role of mother. This was a rather unusual role construction amongst all the stepmothers in my sample.

It was equally interesting that Suzy also struggled with expressing love for her stepchildren. Weaver and Coleman (2005: 478) note that stepmothers are expected 'to simultaneously be closely involved as women in families but distant as stepparent'. I think this might explain the position Suzy had taken both in her role construction and the feelings for her stepchildren because she clearly felt strong emotional bonds with and loved the stepchildren but was hesitant to express love for them. For example, 'I feel emotionally involved with the children.' or 'I mean I feel a huge amount for them.' and only mentioned love for them in passing: 'Ooh, great, great. I love them to

bits, they're brilliant'. This hesitancy in expressing love for the stepchildren was very common amongst my interviewees. When I compared the stepmothers who were biological-child-free to those who had biological children, there was no difference in this hesitancy to express love but they continued to make a distinction between biological and step love.

> There's still the difference. He's still my stepchild. I love him dearly. [...] It's just, it's a line. If I were drawing a picture: a Venn diagram, you know. There would be a stepchild… [...] I don't know. It's there. It's inherent. (Marie)

The only stepmothers who openly declared love for their stepchildren and did not use the step-biological love dichotomy were Emma and Irene who adopted their stepchildren and in a sense replaced the biological mothers. I think that by taking this approach to love, the stepmothers reconciled the problem and the paradox of their position, that is to be emotionally close to and distant from their stepchildren while also respecting the primacy of the biological mother. What is more, the stepmothers did not appear to feel like the wicked stepmothers by not loving their stepchildren 'like their own' – unlike Monica who was conflicted about this inability – but this also did not undermine the good steprelationships.  However, I also think that Suzy's hesitation with expressing love might stem from the fact that she was fairly new to the stepmotherly role, and perhaps did not have the time to feel secure in it – this was evident in other steprelationships where the stepmother was a novice.

In terms of Suzy's role clarity and flexibility, it was a process of a gradual change that corresponded with the changing needs of the family.

> I suppose you're still dating … you're not quite sure, you want to be liked and you know what is that really, your role and didn't think it was in my role [parent] to start with but now I totally feel like a parent, which I don't think I did to start. I was more Mat's partner rather than their parent so I think my role shifted from totally non-parental role to parent role and therefore you have to tell children off [laugh].

Because Suzy wanted to be accepted by her stepchildren she refrained from being parent-like to them and did not discipline them but in time she redefined her role as

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that of a parent. Only after she felt confident in this role, did she think that she could discipline the stepchildren. This shows that her role shifted and was adapted to these changing circumstances. Suzy was aware of the on-going changes with her stepchildren and thought ahead about how to respond.

> It's interesting because it's definitely changing as they get older. I'm sure they've got questions and I suppose they're coming at some point arhm… and how I will have to adjust...

The fact that Suzy was a residential stepmother meant that she spent a lot of time with them so that when she had to go away for a few days her absence was felt strongly by her stepchildren, and herself.

> I've been away for three or five days… and I missed them hugely and I got back on a Monday and Pat [husband] said that certainly … children are really missing you and there were huge hugs. Daisy said, 'it's just not the same when you're not around!' And you know they're very affectionate towards me, so I know they're very fond of me…

The mutual affection between Suzy and her stepchildren was evident in her narrative, and she was clearly accepted by them. There was also a strong sense of family unit, that each member belonged to it and if one was not there it was 'not the same!'

*Emma*

Emma, like Irene, was an adoptive mother, of 45 years, to her (step)-son whose biological mother was not dead but had no contact with him. She was also a biological mother to a son from her previous marriage but his biological father, too, had no contact with him and Emma's second husband had adopted her biological son. Emma did not identify as a stepmother and as far as she was concerned she had three sons, not two biological and an adopted one.

As aforementioned only the adoptive mothers had no problems expressing love for their stepchildren and did not use the step-biological dichotomy when describing it. When I asked Emma what she felt for her (step)-son, she replied: '[t]he

same as to the other two [biological sons]. All the same.' Christian (2005) and Smith (1990) suggest that for stepmothers to become residential and/or adoptive mothers, the biological mother has to be declared unfit or dead and this was the case for Emma and Irene. As the biological mother's custody (as it was in the 1970s before the introduction of parental rights and responsibilities as opposed to custody) was taken away and given to the biological father, the biological mother was no longer present. Emma was not constrained by the primacy of the biological mother. Furthermore, Emma was almost instantly accepted by her stepson who was very eager to call her 'mum', as was Emma's first biological son to call his stepfather 'dad'.

> I remember we were on holidays and Frank [stepson] said to me: 'It's silly me calling you "aunty", isn't it?' and I said: 'You can call me whatever you want to call me. Whatever you're comfortable with.' And it was quite funny because nobody said what he had to do, it was him who chose and it was first 'mummy' and then 'mum'. And it used to be 'Emma. Mum' and that's what he wanted, you see because really underneath it must have been hard for him, which made him, in a sense, quite introvert because he was never sure, you know.

At first Emma was referred to as aunt and only became a mum after some time but before the adoption. Emma explained this almost instant name change by her sons as: 'Frank was missing a mother, Mark [Emma's first biological son from her previous marriage] was missing a father and suddenly they had one.' Whether, this name change was related to the changing family circumstances or the child's need to be included and certain of his belonging was difficult to ascertain and perhaps it was a combination of both.

However, as much as Emma was her (step)-son's mother, she was also mindful of his biological mother who when Frank turned 18 tried to get in touch with him – by sending him a letter.

> And Frank said: 'I don't want to open it.' I said to him: 'You must always remember that biologically she is your mother. Later you might change your mind. Adults have a way of going on and you might not agree with what's exactly happened because there's always two sides to every story.' I said:

'And therefore, never close the door on it.' And at the point he was 18 he said: 'I've only got one mum.' And that was me. And he returned it…

This shows that Emma had some flexibility in her definition of her role as a mother and included the biological mother of her (step)-son in its boundaries. But is also appears that it was her (step)-son who defined the role for her and constantly referred to her as his 'only mum', including his wife and his parents-on-law. The rejection of the biological mother was complete.

There was a very strong sense of a family unit in Emma's case. She felt it was the birth of the 'joint' biological son and the adoption that cemented the family. It was very important for her to reaffirm this family unit idea to her youngest biological son and she told him this story when he was little:

So I'm sitting there and talking about, there's was this one person and another… There was this couple and they each had a child, and I said: 'And they are very much in love and they got married and to make the whole thing complete they have decided to have their baby.' I said: 'Which would relate everybody else…' I said '…to complete the unit.' And he's sitting there, he was seven, and suddenly went: 'And the mummy was called 'Emma' and the daddy was called 'Ed' and the baby was me!'

Conclusion

My aim here was to challenge the framing of steprelationships as nuclear-biological parent-child relationships so prevalent in the existing research on the topic. I have argued that this dominant perspective fails to adequately reflect the complexity of the relationships between the stepmothers and their stepchildren in particular where the women did not identify as stepmothers. Partly because of this and because the stepmothers themselves referred to their steprelationships in these terms I decided to approach my analysis in qualitative terms as 'good', 'complicated' and 'bad' because the stepmothers referred to their steprelationships as such.

The steprelationships of my interviewees were multifaceted and underwent a continual process of change. No two steprelationships were alike even for the same

stepmother across time as in the case of Gill who at the time of our first interview for my Master's research had a good relationship with her stepsons. When I interviewed her for the second time her relationship with one of her stepsons had deteriorated and in a sense damaged the relationship with the other stepson as a result.

Each stepmother had to deal with her own set of family circumstances, hence steprelationships varied. But there were some commonalities amongst the stepmothers for each of the steprelationships categories. I showed that some steprelationships worked and were a source of fulfilment for both parties. Other steprelationships did not work or were complicated for various reasons including the stepmothers' attitudes, family circumstances and the stepchildren's behaviours as well as other factors that shall be discussed in the next chapters. In the following chapter I will explore how the relationships between the mothers shaped of the steprelationships.

# Chapter 4. The Relationships Between the Mothers

> In general, the stereotypes related to stepmothers were as wholly negative as
> the stereotypes related to [biological] mothers were idealistically positive.
> (Coleman et al, 2008: 374)

<u>Introduction</u>

What we know from the existing, albeit scarce, research is that the relationships between mothers in stepfamilies are challenging, to say the least (Shapiro and Stewart, 2011). The lack of effective communication between mothers is noted as a key problem in their relationships (Nielsen, 1999). Other points of contention include the biological mothers' interference in the stepmothers' lives and household; the biological (resident) mothers' fiscal issues and the biological mothers withholding contact between the non-resident biological father and the children (Nielsen, 1999; Henry and McCue, 2009). Interestingly, even in the limited research into mothers in stepfamilies, both mothers are held, although contradictorily, responsible for the success or failure of stepfamily (Hart, 2009).

   Among my interviewees, the problems were very similar to the ones mentioned in the research referred to above. However, I shall argue that the relationships between the mothers were very complex and varied than these points would suggest, dependent on the stepfamily circumstances and their impact on the steprelationships. Indeed, the difficulties in the relationships between the mothers were evident and extensive – particularly where the issues of finances and stepchildren's visits were concerned – and stemmed from the fractious relationships between the ex-spouses as well as from socio-cultural ideas about parenting. However, despite these problems some stepmothers managed to develop friendly relations with the biological/adoptive mothers. I shall argue that, although the effective communication between the mothers was the key perquisite to their good relationship, sometimes 'communication breakdown' that resulted from many years of conflict was beneficial for all family members.

   The aforementioned, complex stepfamily circumstances posed a few problems when writing this chapter. This is because of the sheer diversity of the situations

involved. At a basic level the relationships between the mothers were unchosen – by this I mean that the mothers did not choose to be in each other's lives. The relationships were a given – and shaped by: 1) the biological/adoptive mother's relation with the biological/adoptive father; 2) the biological/adoptive mother's relation with her biological/adoptive children; 3) the biological/adoptive mother's life circumstances, and 4) the circumstances of the steprelationship (i.e. when and how the interviewees came into the stepchild/ren's lives). For example, in some cases the biological/adoptive mothers were dead. Some biological/adoptive mothers had no contact with all or one of their biological/adoptive children and the stepmothers. Thus, it was difficult to categorize these relationships broadly, yet it was evident that there was a relationship and that it shaped the steprelationships. The women who became stepmothers to adult stepchildren had different issues from those who became stepmothers to young children. I have therefore decided to discuss these relationships in terms of 'good', relationships with the 'absent' mothers and problematic relationships between the mothers.

I begin with an examination of the two good relationships between the mothers, what made these relationships work and their impact on the steprelationships. I then focus on the relationships between the stepmothers and the dead or 'absent' biological/adoptive mothers, especially how the stepmothers dealt with this absence. Lastly, I shall look at the problems in the relationships between the mothers, in particular, the issues regarding finances for, and visits by, the stepchildren, the result of these problems on the mothers' communication and the impact they had on the steprelationships.


Good Relationships

There were only two stepmothers in my sample of 18, who reported having good relationships with the biological/adoptive mothers despite their very different family circumstances: Nina and Donna. Due to these differences I shall discuss these relationships separately. However, there were two similarities that these women's relationships with the biological/adoptive mothers had in common. First, both stepmothers and the biological/adoptive mothers communicated with each other, although to varying degrees, and did not shy away from contacting each other. Second, all their communications were civil and friendly, i.e. both mothers were

polite with each other, did not shout abuse, and often agreed on what was needed for the children.

*Nina*

Nina was an unusual stepmother in my sample because she reported having a good, friendly even, relationship with the biological mother and by the time of the interview was an 'ex'-stepmother. Although the relationship between the mothers was good, to begin with the mothers had had a problematic relationship, particularly when Nina started to draw boundaries with regards to family life – i.e. pick-ups and drop-offs of the stepson. Additionally, the initial problems in the relationship were rooted in the tensions between the former spouses.

> I mean, I can only... I mean arhm... the initial problems were I think, were very much... her and my partner were still fairly, there was still a fair amount of animosity at that point – it took a few years for that to calm down... arhm... so I think anybody coming into that sort of situation knows it's gonna be tricky so she was quite defensive... arhm... and I think, I think it was a place... setting boundaries, I think because before I came along – like I've said, my partner was having... his son every weekend... – she, you know, she's got every weekend free if she wants... so I mean it's untestable I come along ... that's not how it's going to be... so... there was an initial... issue there...

The fractious relationship of the ex-spouses that spilled over into the relationship between the mothers was a recurring theme among my participants. Thirteen stepmothers reported that difficult relations between the former spouses had negative effects on their relationship with the biological/adoptive mother. However, Nina was able to overcome this obstacle and develop a sound relationship with the biological mother. Nina appeared aware of the shadow that the tricky relations between the former spouses cast on her potential relationship with the biological mother as well as of the role her demands played in making the beginning of their relationship challenging.

However, Nina's persistence in drawing her boundaries and defining her role/s, early into the relationship – this was just as important in the relationship with the biological/adoptive mother as it was in the steprelationships – provided a good basis for the relationship between the mothers to flourish. For example,

> You know and... and, you know, we took it from there and it eventually calmed down to the point where one of the big breakthroughs was when my stepson, he'd been quite difficult, there's been some issues at home, at his mother's home and he'd been losing his temper, getting quite aggressive and this sort of thing and arhm... his mum was struggling with him ... and so... arhm... She came to ours on a Friday and dropped him off and stayed for a cup of tea. All three of us [three parents] sat down... and it was like this 'this isn't on, you know, this isn't how you behave' and it was a... I think because it was three of us... almost an attack, all of us are doing it, all of us were sitting there as a team, you know... arhm... and when she left, I went out and sort of spoke to her and just basically said 'look, however you want to play this just let us know and we will back you up' and that... I think that was kind of, that was quite a bit, turning point I think... because it was just openly saying you know 'we're not... we're not you know we're not against each other here, we actually ... on the same side so let's, let's behave like that, let's communicate, speak with each other... we all make sure that whatever rules are set in place' ... because that's one of the things we always said that whatever rules or punishments ... carried out... carry on over to ours, don't think that 'oh it's alright, it's Thursday night, so I've got the weekend so it doesn't matter' you know it rolls over and, and there's the same expectations here as there are at your mum's.

It was made clear that Nina was prepared to follow and extend the rules and expectations of the biological mother in her house where the issues of discipline of the stepson were concerned – the parents agreed about practices regarding the child. Among my participants, it was unusual, however, for the biological/adoptive mother to ask the non-residential parents for help but also for the non-residential parents to allow the rules of the biological/adoptive mothers into their households. Interestingly,

many stepmothers noted that they would have liked to have this sort of relationship with the biological/adoptive mothers but that the hostility of the latter prevented it from happening. I think, the key issues here were Nina's ability (and bravery?) to openly communicate and negotiate her expectations and needs with the biological mother, and to give the biological mother the same opportunity as well as being prepared to look beyond the fractious relations of the ex-spouses.

Furthermore, Nina was prepared to work at the relationship with the biological mother. It developed into a friendship, something that became significant when Nina split up with her partner and which enabled Nina to continue to see her stepson.

> Next time I'm in Harrogate I might pop round to see her and have a cup of tea and say 'hello' … I would like to have a friendship there and ... regardless of... I like... arhm... and, you know, obviously this gives me another opportunity to... you know see him [stepson] and spend time with ... yeah...

Because of effective communication between the mothers, the usual problems of the child's visits were not an issue – even though there had been a few initial problems with establishing a visits routine that suited everybody. Nina also did not report any problems regarding child maintenance, which was highly unusual in steprelationships where young children were concerned.

*Donna*

Donna became a stepmother to two adult stepchildren, after their biological parents divorced many years before she began a relationship with the biological father. She had two biological children from her previous marriage. Donna had a good relationship with the biological mother.

> Yes, we get on quite well. Yeah she's… arhm… yes we… … and we, we chat because… I had nothing to do with them breaking up … well she… we didn't cause anything between us arhm… so… we can have a perfectly good relationship arhm…

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In Donna's perception the relationship she had with the biological mother was 'perfectly good', and perhaps the key reason for this was that Donna was not involved in the break-up of that marriage. Therefore, this was not a cause for any animosity between the mothers. I think this declaration of 'not being the cause of divorce' mattered because many stepmothers – in my sample two stepmothers were implicated in the break-up of the relationship with the biological/adoptive father – reported that there was an assumption that they were 'the other woman' and were very keen to state – even before I had asked – that they were not the reason for the divorce. However, as reported by several stepmothers, many biological/adoptive mothers told the children and other family members as well as friends that it was the affair between the stepmother and the biological father that ended the marriage, even if this was not the case.

Unlike most of the stepmothers in my sample, Donna's relationship with the biological mother was not affected by fractious relations between the ex-spouses. For example,

> Because the children were that much older when they split up… he didn't speak to her for… about 15 years. Well, he had no reason to. And Caroline and I can get on well and chat… and Drake and she can but they… don't search for it…

Donna identified two reasons for the distant relationship between the ex-spouses. One was that the children were adults at the time of their biological parents' divorce. Two, the biological mother had had the affair. Despite the rare communications between the ex-spouses the mothers maintained a good relationship throughout the years because they – as it appeared – wanted to. Interestingly, although Donna stated that the children being adults meant that the ex-spouses did not need to talk to each other, this did not stop her from talking to the biological mother and developing a friendship with her. Donna's husband was 'fine' with the status quo.

> He's fine. He's fine. That's very much up to me and he knows that I wouldn't… arhm… jeopardize, is the wrong word, I wouldn't arhm… take advantage of anything… well there's nothing to take advantage of...

The above quote shows that Donna's relationship with the biological mother was independent from the relationship the ex-spouses had. It also indicates that Donna was aware that there was potentially a conflict of interests or loyalties because the mothers were friends.

Another unusual aspect of this relationship was that both mothers had a similar relationship with their daughters, particularly with the oldest one. On the one hand, Donna noted that the reason why this might be the case was because the stepdaughter saw the remarriage of her biological father – the presence of Donna – as a definite end to the marriage of her biological parents with no hope of their reunion. On the other hand, the fact that the biological mother was the reason for the break-up of the previous family meant that she was another problem. Both mothers – not the biological father and his lack of desire to reconcile with his first wife – were blamed for breaking-up the biological family. As the oldest stepdaughter held the mothers responsible for crushing her dreams of her biological parents getting back together, she would not, or could not, develop and maintain good relationships with either of the mothers. This situation helped the mothers to bond more because of their common experience. Donna explained this as:

> You see, with Caroline [biological mother], I can have a relationship… she, she has no axe to grind with me and we had similar experiences with Claire [stepdaughter].

Visits and finances were also not an issue because Donna became a stepmother to adult stepchildren. This made it perhaps easier for the women to have no communication problems but this was no a perquisite for a good relationship between the mothers as Nina's story showed. I shall now turn to the examination of the relations between the stepmothers and dead or 'absent' biological/adoptive mothers.

<u>Leaving Mothers</u>

Six out of 18 stepmothers had to deal with 'absent' biological/adoptive mothers who might be absent for one of three reasons. One, the biological/adoptive mother was dead by the time the stepmother arrived, as was the situation in two cases (Vicky and Rose). Two, the biological/adoptive mother was a non-resident parent and had no contact with the biological/adopted children, as was the case for Dawn and Monica. It is important to add that non-/residency and the visits circumstances of biological/adoptive mothers fluctuated and differed from child to child as in the case of Monica's two stepdaughters or Emma's (step)-son. Three, the biological/adoptive mother disappeared or died some time after the stepmother's arrival, as was the case for Emma and Irene respectively.

The stepmothers therefore had no direct relationship with the biological mother. However, just because the biological/adoptive mother was 'not there' this did not mean that her absence did not impact on the relationships between the stepmothers and their stepchildren. Each of these different family circumstances influenced the relationships or non-relationships the mothers had with each other and with the stepchildren. Therefore, I shall focus on the cases of three stepmothers: Rose, Dawn and Irene.

*Rose*

Rose became stepmother to an adult stepson whose biological mother died many years before Rose married his biological father. There was thus no direct relationship between the mothers. But for Rose the memory of the biological mother was real and she talked to her stepson about her. For example, when I asked Rose whether she thought about her stepson's biological mother, her answer was:

> I've not compared myself but once or twice I've said things to Don [stepson]…
> just got a thing about … – I'm horrible – and you know as I said, as I said 'I
> don't think your mother would have approved either…' [the stepson's
> divorce] … so arhm… I don't know when I've been cooking 'was your mum a
> good cook?' he [stepson] would say 'you're doing alright.'

I found it interesting that Rose compared herself to the biological mother despite the fact that she did not see herself as a mother but 'an older sister' to her stepson, partly because there was only a 15-year age difference between Rose and her stepson. Rose did not want to step onto the biological mother's territory. But it was also clearly about Rose wanting approval from her stepson: she used the reference to the biological mother as reinforcement of her own views (the dead biological mother could not object). Rose was anxious not to be like the biological mother i.e., 'telling him [stepson] what to do' whilst still expressing her opinions. Thus, although the biological mother was dead there was always the possibility of comparison.

It was important for Rose to keep the memory of the biological mother alive, so she brought her into conversations with her stepson and did not treat her steprelationship as a 'biological mother free zone'. I think this strengthened the steprelationship, which Rose described as good. Rose also realized that that there were limits to how far she could compare herself to the biological mother because each mother had a different experience, thus relationship with the step/son.

> So… so we haven't really had the comparison and again his mum missed out because he went to the air force when he was 16 so they both missed out on the teens and 20s really. We never had any of the aggravations … that he lived at home and you come in late and, you know, the usual things… who … he was never really never told off by his mother; she was very easy going so I don't think she's been like me… she might have thought… which is… I don't think I know his mum…

I think the above quote shows that Rose continued to compare herself to the biological mother. By making the distinction between herself and the biological mother she maintained and perhaps even protected the memory of her. In Rose's eyes, the biological mother was easier to get on with than she was. This view was unusual in my sample, as the stepmothers often noted that they were perhaps more amicable than the biological/adoptive mothers. But the key specification in Rose's situation were that the biological mother was dead and the stepchild was an adult when Rose entered his life.

*Dawn*

One of two serial stepmothers in my interview group, Dawn's two stepmothering experiences were very different from each other. In relation to her previous family, Dawn was an 'ex'- stepmother (because she had no contact with her stepchildren) to two stepdaughters and biological mother to two daughters by her first husband, she was widowed. In her present family of 15 years, on which I shall focus in this section, Dawn was a stepmother to two stepchildren, female and male, who were teenagers at the time when she appeared in their lives and who were now in their twenties and, at the time of the interview, no longer lived at home. She was a residential stepmother because the biological mother left the children in the full care of the biological father and was reported to had had no contact with them. The mothers never met. Nonetheless Dawn had to manage the biological mother's absence because it impacted on her stepchildren.

The story, reportedly was, that one day the biological mother called her then husband, and informed him that she was not coming back home. It was left to the husband to tell the children, who were six and eight then, that their biological mother had left. The children had no contact with the biological mother who was reported to had made it clear that she wished to have to no physical contact with them, except for her 'sending birthday cards, Christmases and Easter cards. That was the extent of their relationship.' The only time the stepdaughter saw her biological mother was at the funeral of the maternal grandfather but they did not speak with each other. The stepson, reportedly, saw his biological mother sporadically after he became an adult because both were involved in political activism but again they did not interact.

Although Dawn reported great sadness and anger at what this abandonment did to her stepchildren, she was never overly critical of the biological mother. In fact Dawn's comments about the biological mother were sparse, short and without much detail. For example, when Dawn started to talk about the abandonment she was hesitant to name it as such: 'she [biological mother]... abandoned them... there's no other way... she abandoned her [biological] children arhm...' And when I asked her for the reasons of the biological mother's absence, Dawn only said: 'to this day I don't know if she was totally heartless or incredibly brave...'.

All the stepmothers who had bad relationships with the biological/adoptive mothers were restrained in their criticism of them, and almost apologetic when they

were critical. I think this might be for three reasons. One, the stepmothers felt it was not their place to criticise the biological/adoptive mother. The relationship between the mothers was unequal because the stepmother did not have the same authority and protection as the biological mother because of the myth of motherhood. The stepmothers only had the myth of the wicked stepmother. Thus the stepmothers in a sense were not permitted to criticise the idealized biological/adoptive mother. Two, the stepmothers were aware of the importance of the biological/adoptive mothers for their stepchildren, therefore refrained from criticism and tried to focus on the positives of the biological/adoptive mother. For example, all stepmothers where the biological/adoptive mother had left/abandoned the children, excused them for doing so and provided a variety of reasons: 'she wasn't ready [too young] to have children' (Irene and Suzy); or as Dawn's wondered, whether the biological mother was brave or heartless. I think the stepmothers through such behaviours continued to maintain the primacy of the biological/adoptive mother, a stance advised by researchers (Heart, 2009). The third reason why the stepmothers were careful with criticism was that when the stepmothers and their partners/husbands were on the receiving end of harsh criticism by the biological/adoptive mothers, as was the case for Dawn's previous family, they steered away from such attitudes and behaviours.

I think that Dawn was being careful with criticising the biological/adoptive mother, was rooted in the primacy of the biological parent.

> I love them [stepchildren] dearly but I'm not their mother... I do every other bit of mothering ... If they need a hug, I give them hugs and kisses... I do every bit of mothering that they need. [...] They call us 'the parents' [...] but they will never say 'this is my mum' and I don't have a problem with that. I think out of respect for them really... If they were young people when we got together, you know... then maybe if they were six then it would be different... but I think the other side of that is that Martha and Agatha's [Dawn's biological daughters] [biological] father died arhm... I was very insistent that he was kept alive in their memory and... very much he [Dawn's second husband] is their [stepchildren's] dad. I am to all intents and purposes... as Jules [stepson] said to me that I am more of mother to him than his own mother was.

Dawn's careful approach towards the biological mothers seemed in part to stem from the loss that Dawn's biological children experienced when their biological father died. Dawn wanted to protect the special place and the memory of the biological father for her biological daughters. Dawn's definition of her role and the roles of others in her family were clearly defined but fluid, so they could be adapted to changing circumstances, and be appropriate to the stepchildren's ages. The biological parents' places remained special and crucially the link between the 'absent' parent and the children remained open – Dawn and her present husband, for example, never stopped the children from receiving the cards from their biological mother.

The issues that resulted from the lack of financial support by the biological mother were acute for the family. As the biological father was a house-husband and did not work, when the biological mother left, the family was left with no money, as she did not contribute, 'not a penny, not a penny'. Although Dawn's husband contacted the Child Support Services, they did not pursue the matter. The reasons for this were not clear to me and Dawn would not elaborate. This I think also highlights the stepmothers' passive attitude with regards to the biological/adoptive mothers. The lack of financial support from the non-residential biological/adoptive mother was a common feature reported by the stepmothers. Out of five stepmothers who were residential (Suzy, Irene and Emma) or part residential and part non-residential (as Hannah and Monica) only one stepmother, Suzy, was in a situation where the non-residential biological mother contributed financially.

*Irene*

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Irene was a residential stepmother who became an adoptive mother to her (step)-daughter when the latter's biological mother died. Prior to her death, the relationship between the mothers was pretty much non-existent. For example,

> It was never …... any acrimony. I didn't have a relationship with her, none at all, virtually... I met her three times, briefly, you know, on sort of handovers so then …

This lack of engagement between the mothers and the brief ex-changes during the handovers were very common in the stepfamilies – in my sample all stepmothers, except for Nina, who had young stepchildren, reported that. I think that for Irene, and other stepmothers, the limited communication between the mothers was the major reason why there was no acrimony – there was no opportunity to argue.

However, despite this non-relationship when I asked Irene about how those handovers worked, a relationship full of mistrust and suspicion emerged.

> Her mother did see her occasionally … argh … and to begin with Anna [(step)-daughter] hardly knew who she was. 'Cos she hadn't seen her since she walked out 18 months before. But she'd go and spend an afternoon … pick her up. We used to feel anxious about Anna being with her biological mother. Never quite knew what, what's going on. Barbara [biological mother], Dominic's ex … she had lots of very dubious relationships. Arhm, which made us weary when Anna went to visit.

Irene's anxiety was founded in the many relationships the biological mother had with men but also the sporadic character of these visits. Perhaps another reason for this anxiety was the fact that the biological mother had left her child and then did not see her for 18 months. Irene continued,

> her mother never really, didn't send her a birthday card. She didn't give her presents. It was really odd. You know, I mean the poor girl, when you think about actually … arhm … she could have expected a lot more from her biological mother and she didn't get it.

In this quote Irene implies that she did all these things and more for her (step)-daughter and the biological mother did not. The mothers were opposites: Irene was there, was giving, she was married; the biological mother was not there, she was not giving and she had many 'dubious relationships.' Christian (2005) noted a similar pattern in her study of stepmothers, where the myth of the wicked stepmother is turned into the wicked biological mother. The biological mother is the incompetent one and the stepmother is left to pick up the pieces, as Irene had to. I think it

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interesting that it was only three residential (including the two adoptive) stepmothers who used this myth reversal. I think this was partly because in these cases the biological children were essentially abandoned, and one child was physically abused by the biological mother. Thus, the stepmothers literally were left to pick up the pieces. All three stepmothers expressed great sadness and anger at what this abandonment did to their step/children. Perhaps by polarizing the good stepmother and the wicked biological mother, the stepmothers were able to cope with these emotions.

Therefore, when the biological mother died 'that took a lot of the anxiety out'. To have a solid end to the relationship with the biological mother (both for Irene and the daughter) was a relief for Irene and the family.

> Again, it kind of happened quite naturally, really. Because it was something we hoped to be able to do … but her mother was alive it seemed a bit … wrong thing to do … barking up a tree, particularly as her mother was fragile … [long pause] I don't know … it's, I suppose as a family we relaxed. We didn't have to consider Barbara anyway.

Up to the point of the death of the biological mother, she had to be included in the family life. Her presence was a threat to the family, for many reasons. She acted as a constant reminder that the family perhaps was not complete or secure. So there was a shift in the role and place of the biological mother for Irene and her stepdaughter following her death. After ten years as a stepmother, Irene adopted her (step)-daughter and was legally responsible for her. Although Irene said that she 'didn't have to consider Barbara anyway', with her death and the subsequent adoption this was not the case.

The relationship between the mothers definitely ended, but there was the legacy of the dead biological mother who also abandoned her biological child as well as lost half-siblings, whom Irene's (step)-daughter knew a little, to consider.

> Her mother walked out on her and that hurts; that matters! And she's got her half-brother and sister out there who are the same blood relationship as Harry and Ella [Irene's biological children with Anna's biological father] are, it's just to know where they are. And that must count for something?

It was clear that the biological mother left a legacy. Irene noted that her (step)-daughter was angry with her biological mother for leaving and dying but was unable to express it. Thus she aimed her anger at Irene and Irene felt she had to pick up the pieces.

The non-relationship between the mothers started with anxiety and mistrust and never moved beyond that. In a sense there was no need or desire to make this relationship work because neither mother was interested in building it. However, both the absence and the death of the biological mother, and how Irene negotiated that in her relationship with her (step)-daughter had effects.

Problematic Relationships Between Mothers

The majority of the stepmothers in my sample had problematic relationships with the biological/adoptive mothers. Some of the relationships started well but developed into very conflictual ones. There were many points of contention and vast differences in the mothers' relationships but due to the lack of space to analyse them all, I shall focus on two stepmothers, Hannah and Monica, to discuss financial problems, and Alison to analyse the process around the stepchildren's visits. Although, I analyse these two issues separately, it is important to note that in most cases all problems in the stepfamilies, including finances and visits, overlapped and were interconnected with other problems. In time, most of the relationships appeared to calm down, although they never reached a friendly level. However, the end of the challenging nature of the mothers' relationships stemmed from a 'communication breakdown' – that is an end to all but absolutely necessary communication between the mothers – rather than from conflict resolution.

Despite these similarities of the stepmothers' relationships with the biological/adoptive mothers, there were other vast differences. Therefore, I shall examine the experiences of certain individual stepmothers and focus on the two problems, highlighted above, and the 'communication breakdown' between the mothers. I shall now explore the stories of Hannah and Monica in the section on finances. The experiences of Alison will be examined in the visits section. And lastly, I shall analyse communication breakdown in Diana and Suzy's cases.

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*Financial Issues*

Although financial issues are noted as important, the complexities of stepfamilies' financial organization are rarely explored in detail in stepfamily research. The change in how child maintenance (for dependent child/ren) is calculated since the introduction of the Child Support Act 1993 means that non-residential stepmothers are not required to support non-residential stepchildren financially, but they often do support them indirectly. By this I mean that their wages are not included in the calculation of the child maintenance but they contribute financially to food, holidays, trips, pocket money and when the stepchildren stay with them. All but one residential stepmothers did not receive any financial help from the non-resident biological mother. Additionally, the stepmothers to adults contributed to family outings and gifts, including the stepgrandchildren, and often supported the stepchildren financially; some baby-sat their stepgrandchildren. Yet, the usual assumption in research about the finances in stepfamilies is that in 'stepmothers families' – I presume, because it is not specified although implied, that in said research the stepmothers are residential parents – should contribute financially towards their stepchildren but rarely do so and this is seen as problematic (Case et al, 2000; Case and Paxon, 2000; Hart, 2009). For example, Hart (2009: 129) notes:

> […] studies further concluded that children raised in families with stepmothers are likely to have less health care, less education, and less money spent on their food than children raised by biological mothers. […] Although the conventional wisdom holds that the more benevolent adults present in a child's life, the better for the child, these data strongly suggest that this belief does not apply to stepmothers' involvement.

This finding is at odds with my research findings were the residential and non-residential stepmothers, and stepmothers to adults were concerned.

In their Australian study of non-residential stepmothers, Henry and McCue (2009) noted that the stepmothers were strongly in support of child maintenance paid for the stepchildren by their biological/adoptive fathers. The stepmothers also did not have a problem with contributing financially towards their stepchildren. However,

they had problems with the process of child support. Their findings were that the Australian Children Support Agency and family courts treated stepmothers and their families unfairly in practice, described as discriminatory. The same can be said about the stepmothers in my sample. The unequal treatment of non-residential families, that is the majority of families in my sample, was evident and problematic. Biological mothers (both as residential and non-residential parents) were reported to abuse the child maintenance process and system. Therefore, it was not surprising that finances were deeply problematic in the stepmothers' families and were detrimental to the relationships between the mothers.

*Hannah*

Hannah was stepmother to one stepson and one stepdaughter for 15 years. Both were adults at the time of the interview but were under the age of ten at the start of the relationship. Hannah was one of the stepmothers whose residency status fluctuated: at first she was a non-residential stepmother to both stepchildren and then became a residential stepmother to her stepson. Both mothers knew each other prior to Hannah becoming the stepmother and had a friendly relationship. It was the biological mother who instigated the divorce and Hannah was not the reason for it. After the remarriage, Hannah's relationship with the biological mother became challenging and distant.

> I think, I didn't get involved in anything with her… ever and I'm pleased about that really… arhm… you know, sometimes she would ring and, you know, sometimes she's friendly on the phone and not conversational but just you know, 'Hi, it's Rachel [biological mother] na-na-na, is so and so there?' I just… yeah… 'I just get them for you.' Never had a conversation with her, I gave her basic information if there were any.

The exchange of basic or factual information between the mothers as well as the lack of involvement were common and were employed as a conflict avoidance tactics particularly where there were many points of contention. For Hannah, these points were the negative impact the biological mother had on Hannah's husband, the residency of the stepson and finances.

The relationship between the mothers and Hannah's steprelationships appeared to be part, and the result, of complex stepfamily formations. Although Hannah had limited contact with the biological mother and never experienced direct confrontation with her, Hannah had to deal with the aftermath of the conflict between the former spouses, which undermined the relationship between the mothers. For example,

> It was before really emails and things, when they [stepchildren] were younger and you had to write notes, you had to call – it would always end in an argument, so there'd be letters going backwards and forwards or... you know, something left, she'd collect the children and post this letter through, you know, and then you... and just think 'oh!' That's the only bit really, that wasn't about being a stepparent, that was about dealing with the ex, you know and their mother because I didn't have to deal with her, John [Hannah's husband] did… But it was the impact… yeah… yeah…

It was clear that the relationship with the biological mother was complicated for Hannah and her husband alike; it was a problem that had to be dealt with. The relationship between the parents was particularly problematic when the children were young (something Hannah referred to regularly in the interview) because the former spouses had to articulate the problems. At that time there was no easy way of communicating, the parents had to resort to hand-written notes and phone calls, which was clearly time-consuming but it was the only way in which the parents could provide the proof of such exchange without having to talk to each other. Despite the rudimentary and somewhat awkward communication, its impact had profound consequences for Hannah and her husband. Keeping the distance in the interactions between the former spouses did not help this relationship, which remained. This placed Hannah in a tricky position.

> And you know there was always tensions around things and… really difficult… I just keep out of it and she's rung and I'd be always pleasant and polite so I was never gonna have a… even though there were times where, you know … you see the impact on your partner and there would be times when

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they would go back on a Sunday night and… arhm… it was the raising uncertainty; John [husband] would just be so upset, you know. There would be something that would happen and he wouldn't sleep properly and… so to that extent you know, it had an impact… arhm…

Here loyalty issues emerged. It seemed that Hannah thought it was necessary to be 'pleasant and polite' towards the biological mother in order to avoid any opportunity for open confrontation. But in doing so she perhaps felt that she was letting her husband down by not supporting him in the confrontations, particularly when these negatively affected her husband. In a sense Hannah, and other stepmothers in similar situations, could not develop a good relationship with the biological/adoptive mother because this might indicate disloyalty towards the husbands.

Despite the problematic and secondary (that is not direct) relationship between the mothers, Hannah felt that she and the biological mother could talk if they had to because the biological mother was 'outgoing'. For example, the mothers could talk about the things the stepchildren did, like their graduation. But they could not talk *about* the children and Hannah could not challenge the biological mother about her actions.

But we can't talk about the children ... no, no, no, no because no… that will be... you couldn't express an opinion about anything unless it's something she wanted to hear because… they are her children because she's got views...

It was clear that mothers who talked together had to keep their conversation to a minimum. The needs, wishes and ideas of the biological mother regarding her biological children, particularly when she was the residential parent, were a 'no go' areas. This was often mentioned as problematic by the stepmothers who felt that their opinions were side-lined and ignored 'because the biological mother knows best' (as noted by Nancy). It appeared that the biological mother had a problem to include the stepmother (and the biological father) in any decision-making regarding the children and felt that it was her role, as a mother, to know everything about them. Such a stance made effective communication between the mothers almost impossible to achieve. Hannah's decision to 'bite [her] tongue on many occasions, really, really hard' and not challenge the biological mother was also fairly common amongst the

stepmothers. I think this stemmed partly from the stepmothers' conflict avoidance technique designed to evade harm to the steprelationships and the relationships between the biological fathers and their children, and partly from the fact that the relationship between the mothers was not equal. This inequality stems from social attitudes towards motherhood – the motherhood binary: the good (biological) mother versus the wicked stepmother. It was also evident in the exclusion of the stepmothers from all family court proceedings as well as their invisibility in the child maintenance process, indicating that the stepmothers did not matter. The stepmothers also reported feeling anxious about not stepping on the biological/adoptive mothers' territory. All these factors combined created a system in which the stepmothers appeared unable to assert themselves.

This was unlike Nina who was prepared to negotiate with the biological/adoptive mother and in a sense defend her boundaries. Nina saw herself and her needs as equally important as those of the biological mother. The other stepmothers however remained invisible in the relationships with the biological/adoptive mothers because they had, and/or felt that they had, little bargaining power.

However, when Hannah found herself in the position where she knew more about her stepson than the biological mother did, she challenged this inequality and altered the power balance in the relationship between the mothers.

> And also there's real tension because Colin [stepson] came to live with us full-time so actually I knew more about him and his life and what was going on than she did for a number of years…

It was clear that the biological mother found the stepmother's better knowledge of her biological son problematic. The fact that her biological son chose to live with his biological father and stepmother in a sense undermined the supposedly special bond between biological mother and child. Hannah saw it as a loss of control for the biological mother and that loss caused many difficulties between them.

> And I think there's a thing for the parent about the stepparent, about like no control. She really struggled when she didn't have any control about anything… arhm…

The visits of the stepchildren were not problematic, except on a few occasions when the biological mother had planned what the children were to do at the stepmother's house and the difficulties that stemmed from the stepson moving in with the stepmother. But the organization of the finances was most conflictual and problematic. This is how Hannah recollected it:

It was an absolute nightmare! Well because… she [biological mother] carried on getting the child benefit, as it was at the time, for both of the children. And she firmly believed because she was their mother that she was entitled to maintenance payments but actually they had shared care. It was complicated and difficult. And so at one point she [biological mother] kept on and on at this [the biological mother was asking for more child maintenance] and would not accept that because they had a shared care. In the end she's said 'you've left me no choice.' and she went to the Child Support Agency arhm… And they then got on to John's employers and stopped two months' worth of – I don't know 5 or 600 pounds, the max amount – until they did the assessment in which case they have responded to their letters and put in everything and they came with a nil assessment. Because actually the shared care, which he'd acknowledged and during the holidays they were with him, there will be six weeks holidays, three weeks with Rachel [biological mother] and three weeks with John. Because of her earning and his mortgage being much bigger than hers, it was a null assessment – they do it differently now and so I think for some fathers in this situation it could be a lot worse. But actually she was furious about that and it became a problem. I think she thought she would win and the calculation they did at the time backfired on her big time and they reimbursed him the money.

The situation that Hannah described was not unusual, although the family arrangements were. Hannah's family organization was atypical because her husband had shared care for both children and later had shared care for the daughter and residency for the son. The biological mother continued requests for child maintenance to the biological father, when she was not contributing financially towards her biological son who was living with his biological father. Hannah's assertion that the biological mother 'firmly believed because she was their mother that she was entitled

to maintenance payments' despite the circumstances was another common complaint the stepmothers voiced. I think that such behaviour of the biological/adoptive mothers reflects societal ideas about parenthood, which are highly gendered, and shows that a 'one size fits all' system of child maintenance is ineffective and open to abuse, despite the numerous changes the maintenance system has undergone.

It is important to emphasize that the stepmothers in my sample firmly believed in child maintenance, and all reported the payment of such, but thought that the biological/adoptive mothers were not always reasonable in their, often increasing, demands for child maintenance. The stepmothers also noted that the way in which the Child Support Agency[16] operates was unfair and presumed the non-residential parents, particularly the father, guilty of non-payment. In my research the gender bias when the parents were dealing with the Child Support Agency was strong. The non-residential mothers who did not pay child maintenance were not pursued once. I shall now discuss Monica's story where the gender bias was also evident.

*Monica*

Monica's relationship with the biological mother of her stepdaughters was reported by her as being very fractious and highly problematic. As previously mentioned, Monica was a full-time carer for her residential stepdaughter who was profoundly disabled, and non-residential stepmother to her second stepdaughter. What was also interesting about Monica's case was that she was a stepmother, her biological children from her previous relationship were stepmothered and she herself had had a stepmother.

The relationship between the mothers started reasonably well. The biological mother was invited to the wedding of her ex-husband and Monica because they were 'trying to be adults about it'. Although such a gesture was an isolated incident in my sample where the problematic relationships were concerned, the desire to build a well-functioning stepfamily based on sound relationships between the adults was not. All stepmothers in this group started with the premise that everybody can 'be adults about it' but as time went by there were many problematic issues that ravaged the budding relationship. I think that Monica's desire to have a good relationship with the biological mother stemmed from her being brought up by a stepmother with whom

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[16] https://www.gov.uk/child-maintenance/overview

she got on well and who had a good relationship with Monica's biological mother, and having her biological children stepmothered. Monica had high hopes but was also realistic about the relations between the former spouses, for example,

> just take it the other way round. If I argue with my ex-partner, I never tell my children. I mean it's not like they have never heard things on the phone, as a rule they don't know what's going on and I certainly never say anything bad ever about his new partner because I want them to get on with her. And I would rather have that, than not get on with her and not want to go, and not want to spend time with her and we're lucky enough that they do like her, she seems to be a nice woman.

Furthermore, Monica hoped that despite the fractious relationship between the former spouses, she would be able to get on with the biological mother. Just as in the previous cases, Monica's husband had a terrible relationship with his ex-wife. As in Hannah's case, the conflicts between the ex-spouses spilled over into Monica's house and had a profound effect on her husband. Thus, that relationship translated into a problematic relationship between the mothers.

One of the major problems in the relationship between Monica and the biological mother was the organization and distribution of finances, which arose early in the relationship. This was interwoven with the stepchildren's visits and residency.

> Millie receives disability living allowance and then of course has child benefits and tax credits. When I moved up here, Andy [biological father] wasn't getting any of those things and it all's been going to Millie's mother, even though Millie never lived there. And when I've moved up here, I've said: 'That's not fair!' Andy said: 'Well, I've let that happen because Betty costs more than Millie.' And… I was unsure about this and I've challenged that and I've said: 'It's not only that it's illegal, because she's claimed benefits for child that doesn't live with her, but I don't think that's true.' you know. Millie does cost money… so we asked for the benefits to be swapped and it caused an absolute upheaval, chaos. She [biological mother] absolutely refused. We went to court for a residence order and she contested the residence order and they've got 50-50 residence order in place, which she cared for, for about six

weeks and then dropped it quietly. The only thing… the benefits… I've contacted the local MP and she got involved, the benefits are all in Andy's name, the benefits are in the right place now. So then we stopped paying maintenance because we've got a child that has special needs… And then Andy sort of feels that he then… Betty sees that he doesn't give her any money and finds that situation really, really difficult. So now he gives her £20 a week spending money. And Millie… and her mother doesn't contribute a penny towards Mille. That's what we do now but it was around the benefits when all the upheaval. Yeah.

Monica's arrival into the family altered the way the family was functioning. Like Nina, Monica when she arrived on the scene tried to assert herself, her needs and ideas with regards to stepmothering, the distribution of finances and the stepchildren's care and/or visits. Monica challenged the biological mother's – socially and financially privileged – position by stating that the current situation was unfair, and was the driving force for change in the family. It was equally interesting that the biological father did not see a problem in this organization and that it was Monica who disagreed but I shall describe the role of the biological father in stepfamilies in the next chapter. Although there was an opportunity for the parents to look for resolution, this did not happen and the problem was taken to court. As in Hannah's case, here too, the biological mother was adamant that she should have the money whilst not contributing financially for her biological non-resident child.

Going to court or other legal steps were unusual and severely undermined the relationship not only between the mothers but also with the step/children. Only two stepmothers, Monica and Alison, sought residency and visit orders. Three stepmothers including the aforementioned two and Hannah were involved with other agencies dealing with child maintenance and/or benefits. And in each case the biological mother lost, which perhaps explains why they resisted that change. But I also think that the biological mother found herself in a situation where she felt it necessary to defend her position and her status quo. That was also evident when the biological mother contested the residency order and her wish to have a '50-50' order for her disabled biological child that had not lived with her and whom she was not in contact with for years.

It is interesting that although the biological mother did not say that Monica was the cause of the divorce, she said to her biological residential daughter that it was her biological father who would not allow any contact with the biological non-resident daughter. For Monica this seemed unfair and made her angry.

> So I got a taste of, this is how it's been twisted because Millie's never ever's been to see her mum. And I could see Andy didn't know what to say and I felt really angry, and I said – which is when I wasn't particularly acting like an adult – I said: 'Your mum's got that wrong way round, Betty. Your mum doesn't want Millie to go there anymore.'

It was unusual for the stepmother to openly challenge the biological mother in front of the stepchild. I think Monica's reaction stemmed from her feeling that this was unfair, that she and the biological father were vilified whilst the biological mother tried to maintain her good image. Curiously, Monica described her reaction as not like an adult, which I think indicates that she felt guilty for in a sense outing the biological mother, being critical of her and perhaps being drawn into conflict. As I previously mentioned, the stepmothers struggled with being critical of the biological/adoptive mother and rarely were. The same can be said about Monica. However, she talked a bit more openly about the problems with the biological mother and appeared to be conflicted about it.

I also think that Monica's anger at the biological mother stemmed from the fact that she did not have any contact with Millie. Monica's feelings were similar to those of other stepmothers who had to deal with the loss of the biological/adoptive mother of their stepchildren. Although Monica did not have to deal with what that loss did to her residential daughter because of her profound disability, it appeared that in a sense Monica was angry *for* her stepdaughter. And Monica's anger at the biological mother was exacerbated because it was her who 'looked after Millie and not her [biological] mother'. The biological mother did not fulfil any of her parental obligations (emotional and material support) but refused to give up her parental rights to Millie so Monica could have legal authority.

> I think the problem that I find, is that if I have to get professionals – and obviously Millie has a whole load of sort of occupational therapist, special

school, careers, respite place there's all sorts of things – and you're sort of viewed with a bit of suspicion as a stepmother… So, you know, you sort of think that people think: 'Oh how lovely that her stepmother's so involved.' But they don't. Sometimes if I need to phone to query something like the disability living allowance or something and they say: 'Oh, we can't speak to you. We need to speak to her mum or dad.' You know because I don't have parental responsibility for her so… even taking her to the doctors' for an injection or something like that is always queried and… and school… I once had an issue – not any more, we've resolved it – when they phoned up and said: 'Is Andy there?' 'No, he's not. He's at work.' 'Oh yeah, we've tried him on his mobile but he's not available.' Arhm… 'And Rose doesn't have a relationship with her mum…' they were like… 'Oh we don't know what to do.' And I say: 'So what's the problem?' 'Oh, we can't tell you.' I mean it's ridiculous! I mean, Andy had a fit after 'cos I then had to phone Andy's colleagues, get him out of the meeting to phone the school and all it was, she was ill and needed taking home, and they didn't think they can tell me because I don't have parental responsibility.

The lack of parental responsibility was acute for Monica because she was powerless to make decisions for her residential stepdaughter despite being one of her main carers. In the above quote Monica highlighted the issues of the perception of stepmothers by society, and these were in her experience negative. Here, too, the stepmother appeared to be trapped in-between the powerful myth of good motherhood and wicked stepmotherhood – Monica appeared to be questioning this division, why she was the wicked one, when it was the biological mother. Interestingly, Monica never referred to the biological mother as 'Millie's mother' but as 'Betty's mother', perhaps because she did not see her as such. Yet legally the biological mother still had all the power, which she would not relinquish and Monica was aware of that. All other 'absent' biological mothers gave up their custody,[17] Monica's stepchildren's biological mother appeared not to be prepared to do so. Reversely, the biological

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[17] In Irene and Emma's cases it was custody, not parental responsibility, legal parents (the adoptive mothers and the biological fathers, not the biological mothers) had as understood pre the Children Act (1989).

mother sent Monica a text message, which was that '[Monica] could be Millie's mother now if [she] was so perfect.'

The mothers appeared to be heading for a communication breakdown (discussed later in the chapter) because Monica found it hard to be cast as the wicked stepmother. For example, when I asked about what she thought her relationship with the biological mother would be in the future, she answered:

> Well it's difficult to live and know that somebody really thinks you're awful. You know, things that are really terrible arhm… and not have that ability to kind of say to them what you want to say because it would actually just make it worse. Arhm… I suppose it makes me feel a bit rubbish, really. When there's someone you cannot get on, you can't be civil; you can't be completely rational about. [...] I don't know whether it's very hard or is it impossible? I mean… for me in some situations, it almost feels impossible to, to deal with Betty's mother without getting angry or being… I could scream at her, d'you know what I mean?

It was evident that Monica could not see a resolution to the fractured relationship with the biological mother. She felt that if she spoke her mind she would make the situation worse – a common worry for the stepmothers, hence they opted not to get involved in any communication – and Monica also noticed that she could not step back and look at the relationship dispassionately. There was a sense of powerlessness coming through in Monica's narrative.

*Visits*

In Britain when parents split up in the majority of cases the child/ren will reside with the biological/adoptive mother – this was true for my sample as well (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). Eleven stepmothers were non-residential parents, while three were 'residential and non-residential' and one stepmother was a non-residential parent twice. There were only two residential stepmothers at the time of the interview. One of these was a residential stepmother to one of her stepdaughters and non-residential to the other stepdaughter. But there were seven stepmothers who were residential stepmothers at some previous point to all or

one of their stepchildren. Therefore it is not difficult to imagine that the stepchildren's visits will form a big part of the relationships between the mothers, either directly or indirectly.

The research on stepfamilies usually focuses on the impact the stepchildren's visits have on the stepmothers' households, such as additional chores, the disruption of family life and on their psychological well being, which is reported to be poor (see Henry and McCue, 2009). In this section, I shall focus on the process of the stepchildren's visits to the non-residential stepmothers' household, in particular where the biological/adoptive residential mothers withheld the visits or made the process very difficult and how this affected the relationships between the mothers. Just as with the financial matters, the process of the visits was interlinked with other issues such as finances, for instance, and was often rooted in the fractious relations between the former spouses that translated into a problematic relationship between the mothers.

The reasons why I focus on non-residential families were that out of six residential stepmothers, not one reported a problem regarding the stepchildren's visits to their non-residential parent and none reported actively preventing the contact between the non-residential parent and the stepchildren[18]. Only Irene and Suzy noted that they missed the children and were a little worried about them being with their biological/adoptive mothers. I shall focus on Alison's case and her relationship with the biological mother in the context of family law.

*Alison*

Alison was a non-residential stepmother to three stepdaughters, one of whom was an infant at the start of the relationship. She was the only stepmother who reported to had had an access order in place to see the children, in effect giving the biological father 'shared care'. Her story was unique in terms of other legal matters. There was, reportedly, an injunction order for the stepchildren with regards to one of their maternal biological grandparents and there was an order stopping the biological mother from moving away to another city with the children. One instantly senses that this made for a strong foundation for the relationship between the mothers to be fractious and that there were the problems regarding visits even before that

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[18] In one residential stepmother case the biological mother was dead by the time she assumed the role of a stepmother, therefore she is not included in this section.

relationship started. Despite the fact that Alison had been a stepmother for ten years at the time of the interview, her relationship with the biological mother remained fractious and distant.

In Alison's case the starting point of the relationship between the mothers was a very fractious relationship between the former spouses. The main reason for the biological parents' divorce was a, reported, maternal grandparent's involvement in sexual offences. The biological mother was reported not to see the point in putting safeguards in place when the children were visiting the maternal grandparents and was not prepared to discuss it with her then husband. Alison recognized that being involved in the legal process of gaining access put a serious strain on an already strained relationship between the former spouses.

> There were very difficult family dynamics around who could have access and who could not. Playing out of the divorce through the access issues was hard and so I think my husband trying to work through legal access to the children arhm... complicated the situation. Yeah it was just complicated.

The early relationship between the mothers was further complicated by the biological mother's use of the children in managing the relationship with the biological father, particularly in inflicting guilt on him. Alison had to deal with the aftermath of this at home, trying to support her husband and his quest for residential care of his biological children – something she saw as crucial for her husband and their family. Hannah also mentioned the impact the conflict between the former spouses had on their home life although she did not have direct contact with the biological mother. This was also the case for Alison who said that she did not have a direct confrontation with the biological mother and went out of her way to ensure that. For example,

> I don't have a relationship with her. It's tense. We have lots of sightings but we go out of our way not to speak, occasionally we speak about ... trainers, jumpers, lost scarves... about things about 'can you remind Jo about her medication', 'yes', so we try to keep the handovers between only me and the biological mother... I always say to my husband 'the handovers are purely your thing' arhm... I don't step onto her territory, I'm very respectful of her space so I will meet her at the gate and won't go in the house – I don't like her

in my house, I meet her at the front door ... occasionally the children pulled her in and say 'come and see this, come and see that' whilst I think it's nice for the children, I'm usually in the garage seething! [laughter] so...

It is interesting that Alison said that she did not have a relationship with the biological mother and that it was a tense relationship. Alison also said that it was the biological mother who 'set the tone' of the relationship between the mothers. For example,

it's as much about the ex-wives as about the children, they [ex-wives] set the tone I think and in this case it was just the worst possible to set and I don't think she had any realization that she was rude, she had no sense that she had to leave the children separately. She was happy to have them pulled in the drama...

Alison's narrative suggested that the biological mother 'used' the children as a powerful bargaining tool in her relationship with the biological father. Alison thought that the biological mother was worried about losing her position as mother by *letting* her biological children visit the non-residential parent:

It was such a battle to get them to stay with us. When we moved in together, the mother was very anti them [stepchildren] coming and staying with us as she was very protective of the mother role and arhm and she wasn't fond of me anyway so that ... and one of her large anxieties in the early years of the relationship was that my husband and I would have children together so the idea that her children would be round with us in a family unit was immensely threatening and I think still is on some level. So ... for a number of weeks she would say yes you can have them overnight and then next Saturday change her mind so ... it became every fraught, the first visit was, would it even go ahead and I think I focused on wanting my husband to get through that, for him to have that possibility.

Although Alison was the only stepmother to report that the biological mother felt threatened, in a sense losing her biological children to the stepmother, other stepmothers noted, in what seemed like, a reverse, the same observation by saying

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that they did not want to encroach on the biological mother's territory in their steprelationships. It was clear that the biological mother strongly identified with her mother role – as Alison put it – and that *letting* her biological children go and stay at their biological father's with the stepmother was very difficult for her as though she would lose her position. Smart and Neal (1999: 56-7) noted two elements in post-divorce parenting: parental care, that is 'the direct physical and emotional work of raising children', and parental authority meaning 'the degree to which parents share or monopolize the overall decision-making about how a child should be raised.' What transpired from Alison's narrative was that the biological mother was not prepared to share parental authority and care with the biological father, let alone the stepmother. Although, it seemed at one point that the biological mother was thinking about shared parental care by allowing the children to stay at their biological father's, she was not and then withdrew the consent.

In time, the biological mother had to agree to at least shared parental care because she was required to do so by the court but continued to assert and perhaps even enforce her parental authority in various ways. For example when the girls went to stay with the biological father and Alison, the biological mother dictated what the children had to or did not have to do there.

> I lost my temper once at dinner time because arhm... for the first few years they came to stay with us ...arhm [...] they have menu driven option at [their biological mother's] home so if one of them is fancying pizza and the other one is fancying fish fingers that's what they get and at our place it was going to be pie and vegetables, potato and the message came from their [biological] mother that they did not have to eat that when they came round to our house. If she could find an opportunity to interfere in the smooth running of the other household she took it so... arhm...

or

> his ex-wife and his oldest stepdaughter decided that it would be ok for her to stay at our place and made that arrangement without reference to me and my husband [...] that's a decision that has to be run by me, it's not a decision that's made outside of this house, it's our stuff and not the ex's stuff and

arhm... […] normally I would let things slide... but this time I was... I told my husband to pick up the phone and call that woman and change the arrangement... and he said that he doesn't like to have these conversations ... I said 'have it!'

Both Alison and her husband felt that their house should not be a 'biological mother free zone' – it would seem that they thought so because of the involvement of CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) with regards to the children's residence – but it resulted in a situation where the biological mother was haunting the family life by being constantly present. A situation where the biological mother's decisions and/or rules would almost always override those of the non-residential parents was commonly reported by the stepmothers in my sample and in relevant research (Coleman et al, 2004; Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Henry and McCue, 2009). Papernow (2008) notes that such behaviour by the former spouses is detrimental to the stepfamily.

It was evident that Alison often felt unable, or perhaps unwilling, to address the matter of the biological mother's interference and that Alison 'let things slide' except that in the instance mentioned above she stood her ground. Alison also saw the biological mother's involvement spilling over into her home as disrupting its smooth functioning. The stepmothers in my sample were seldom assertive about their needs, wishes and ideas and were often ignored by the residential parent, which only contributed to their sense of powerlessness and invisibility. Alison's inability to confront the biological mother was not surprising for various reasons, considering that their communication was brief and superficial, and, as in the previously mentioned examples, typical. The mothers exchanged factual information about 'trainers, jumpers, lost scarves, forgotten trainers' and kept the 'hand-overs to a minimum'. Alison was anxious not to 'step on her territory and I'm very respectful of her space', but the actions of the biological mother felt like an invasion for Alison. Territorial boundaries between the households are crucial for the development of a stepfamily and should be encouraged by the former spouses and clinicians who work with people in stepfamilies (Papernow, 2008). But these are rarely discussed in research where the 'blended' idea of the stepfamily presides (Papernow, 2008) and are a fairly new addition in stepfamily research.

The prospects of building bridges between the parents were further complicated by the fact that the biological mother wanted to move with the children to another part of the country (from Harrogate to Glasgow) so Alison and her husband went to court.

> I think she got scared by the court process. I think she got the summons and fell apart, in fact I know she felt apart because we had my mother at the time and we had to turn our phones off because she went into meltdown and all her friends started to phone up and saying, can you just explain why you're taking a court order out, why don't you want your ex-wife to be happy and move on with her life. It's just an extraordinary pressure we were under to arhm... to bow to the wishes and make the mother happy. The fact that my husband would have to stand aside as a father because she wanted to move to Glasgow, her assumption was that every second weekend I would drive us up to Glasgow to collect the children and then drive them down for a weekend and at the end of the weekend I would drive them back up to Glasgow...

The action of both parents had a knock-on effect on the relationships. Interestingly the reaction of the biological mother's friends appear to mirror the biological mother's understanding of her role as a mother, which was to do as she saw fit (her parental authority) and that her ex-husband was making it impossible for her to 'be happy and move on' without any consideration for the biological father's feelings, and essentially varying a binding court order. The legal steps taken by the non-residential parents may appear heavy-handed, but they were taken partly because they felt that otherwise they could not stop the move, partly because the biological mother made this decision without consulting her ex-husband and partly because there was no effective communication between the former spouses. It did not seem to them that there was another way to address the problem.

Alison was resigned to a problematic relationship with the biological mother: 'Their mother will never approach anything in an adult way, I have no real hopes of her becoming an adult any time soon.' Like Monica she used the term 'adult' to describe the ideal relationship with the biological mother, which would be that between adults. I think it implies that Alison wanted a relationship with the biological mother that was based on civility and reasonableness, where everybody was equal –

just as was evident in the section on good relationships between the mothers, particularly in Donna's case. Eventually the relationship between the mothers broke down irretrievably. I shall now discuss the communication breakdown between the mothers.

Communication Breakdown

Fractious relationships between the mothers in my sample were evident. Almost none of the stepmothers had a direct relationship or confrontation with the biological/adoptive mother. In fact the stepmothers reported that they did not have any relationship with the biological/adoptive mothers. Despite this non-relationship between the mothers, the stepmothers described it as problematic. It was so because the relationships between the mothers were underpinned by the relationships between the former spouses. As the relationships between the former spouses in some instances gradually became worse, so did the relationship between the mothers, resulting in a situation where none of the parents were able and/or willing to communicate, let alone negotiate. Although some stepmothers already had a limited relationship with the biological/adoptive mothers, the deterioration in their relationships was marked.

Research, particularly from the clinical field, is filled with advice on how stepfamilies should function (Papernow, 2008) and that effective communication between, and blending of, families are the ideal situation for raising children in stepfamilies. However, Papernow (2008) points out that the idea that stepfamilies should blend is a 'cruel fantasy' and that household boundaries should be firm. My research findings support this view. They are new in the field of research on the relations between mothers in stepfamilies. Interestingly, my research findings indicate that the stepmothers who had good relationships with the biological/adoptive mother did not blend and kept their household boundaries, although there was a degree of blending in Nina's case.

Instead, most of the stepmothers (11 in total) in my sample experienced or were heading for communication breakdown with the biological/adoptive mother. Here I shall focus on two distinctly different cases of communication breakdown between the mothers. First, I shall discuss Suzy's story who was in the early stages of breaking off all but the most necessary communication with the biological mother.

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Second, I shall analyse the entrenched communication breakdown between mothers as was the case for Diana.

*Suzy*

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, at the time of the interview Suzy was a fairly new residential stepmother (of almost four years) to an eight-year old stepson and a seven-year old stepdaughter. The children had regular contact with their biological mother, but they did not to begin with. Only at the time of the interview had the relationship and contact between her and the children been re-established for a few months. It was the biological mother who was the parent that left when the youngest was four months old. She was the only non-residential biological mother who was paying child maintenance. The ex-spouses had a fractious relationship.

> Mat [biological father]… and her don't get on at all, the relationship has completely broken down, it did a long time ago and I think Mat is still very, very... angry well not angry but kind of bitter about it.

Suzy's husband was bitter about the breakdown of the marriage and the subsequent – although temporary – abandonment of the children by the biological mother. This ranged from money and clothing to the stepchildren's routines and how the attitude of the biological mother towards impermeable household boundaries affected the stepchildren. Problems in the relationship between the former spouses were very common and deeply ingrained; in my sample 16 out of 18 stepmothers reported these. The only two former spouses who managed to resolve their problems, were the husband of Emma and the partner of Nina.

In the early stages of the relationship with the biological mother Suzy, as most stepmothers, thought that she could help the warring former spouses to communicate.

> I suppose my first thought was that I am being quite good at sort of pacifying people and bring them together and I mediate them. So I suppose I sort of, when I came to the relationship I was wanting to make the relationship with [the biological mother] work…

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It would seem that Suzy saw herself as a person who could interact effectively – that she was not on anybody's side, not the biological father's and not the biological mother's – and would not be drawn into the complicated relationship between the ex-spouses, that she could keep her distance and help the biological parents talk 'because [she] wasn't part of their relationship'. It may seem very naïve of Suzy to take such a stance, in particular when she was only gradually becoming part of the relationship. But in the early stages of the relationship she was not part of that relationship and she could remain an outsider. Suzy like the other stepmothers naively thought that she understood the complexities of the ex-spouses' relationship despite the fact that she was warned by her husband/partners that her involvement was not a good idea and she would get hurt.

> Mat [biological father] didn't really want me to do that, he didn't want me to sort of, to get involved in that because he said I will only end up getting hurt and I was like 'no it'll be fine, I'll manage' and I haven't really realized that at the time that's she's quite bitter towards me… I wasn't part of them… but I think she feels quite jealous of Mat and I…

Suzy was surprised by the complexities of the exes' relationship and that she became part of the problem in that relationship. Suzy noted that the biological mother was 'bitter towards' her. Most stepmothers mentioned that the biological/adoptive mother did not like them. Whether the stepmother was the cause of the divorce or separation between the biological/adoptive parents or not was irrelevant in this dislike. Nancy, for example, reported that

> [the biological mother] doesn't seem to be able to accept that she has her half share and responsibility in the ending of the [marriage] but I think it's easier to say that 'well you've run off with someone else' which he didn't. So she hates me.

The arrival of the stepmother seemed to cause a great deal of distress to the biological/adoptive mothers who blamed the stepmother for various things, one of which was the divorce, even if she was not involved. Nielsen (1999) noted that the stepmothers often made the assumption that the biological mother would have no

problem accepting them in her life, particularly when it was the biological mother who broke up with the biological father and was remarried. This was evident in my sample. The stepmothers appeared to be unprepared for their rejection by the biological/adoptive mother and it would appear the stepmothers were naïve in their high hopes for a working relationship with her. I think this hostility and the rejection partly stemmed from societal ideas about motherhood and family, and assumptions made about the role of stepmother by both mothers. As seen in Alison's case, the biological mother felt that the newly created family unit, consisting of the biological father, the stepmother and the children, threatened her position as mother. The biological/adoptive mothers, reportedly, seemed unable to imagine that they could or even should share the parenting of their biological/adoptive children with other parents (Nielsen, 1999). The stepmothers appeared aware of the myth of motherhood and tried to present themselves to the biological/adoptive mother – as well as to the husband and the stepchildren – as not the usurpers or replacements of the biological/adoptive mother. However, these efforts to reassure the biological/adoptive mother that her role and place were safe appeared not to have the desired effect.

I also think that another issue why the biological/adoptive mothers had problems accepting the stepmother was because they were losing possession of and power over their former spouses and had to make room for another person in the relationship. The biological/adoptive mothers, like the stepmothers, were in a sense forced to be in relationship with each other, in a relationship they did not chose and did not want.

As time went on the problems in the relationship multiplied. One of the problems in Suzy's relationship with the biological mother was clothes, a surprisingly big and common problem in my sample where young stepchildren were concerned. This is how Suzy reported it:

> Clothes are an issue. And the whole clothes thing is a big issue arhm…
> because we used to sent them down with nice clothes and she will always send
> them back in scruffy stuff that was too small. So we ended up paying a fortune
> in replacing their clothes that were down there and that went on for quite a
> while and then we kind of got into a position we just don't send them down in
> their nice stuff so they just go down in their regular.

Suzy reported that this issue was becoming less problematic as time went on.

A part or temporary resolution to problems in the relationship between the mothers was common. There were periods of calm and periods of extreme fighting between the parents:

> We go through real phrases with her and at the moment we're going through a good phase with her and… you know, she's going to email us and … she'll get all cross… withdrawn, making… she's...

But if the core problems remained and were not addressed, they lingered and eventually there were more angry confrontations. What was evident in Suzy's narrative was that she was hesitant to be critical of the biological mother. As I previously mentioned it was very uncommon amongst the stepmothers to be openly critical of the biological mother and if they were, the stepmothers were often apologetic about it and made excuses about her behaviour; or tried to show that they understood the difficulty she was going through – that they were empathetic and imagined themselves in the biological mother's shoes. For example,

> Mat and I are thinking … and it's not consistent how we [the three parents] are, I think, we're the sort of, we're their main home and another thing is when they go down there is that there are a lot of treats. Lots of … and things, I think and I understand that and I'd probably do the same in her case and of course we have far less money as it's just my salary and Mat doesn't work so we can't really afford to buy PS and that's just how it is but we do other stuff instead so I think there are differences. And I can't worry about that too much because I can't do too much about it… so I don't get drawn to it.

Suzy hinted that there were discrepancies in the way the two households were organized and financially secure. Although Suzy was critical of the biological mother's indulgence of the stepchildren, she quickly pointed out that she understood why the biological mother was doing so and that she would do so herself if she were in her position. A similar attitude was noted by Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues (2003) but in relation to residential biological mothers in their sample. Suzy also

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noted her powerlessness to change the situation, thus she in a sense ignored the problem.

However, not all problematic issues could be ignored and sometimes Suzy felt she had to get involved. One such problem was that the biological mother was strict about the rigid separation of the two households. All the possessions that belonged to the biological mother stayed in her house. For example,

> Nicky [biological mother] won't allow anything that they have down to come up here, so any possessions they have, they have to keep down there. And she won't send … any presents because they never have their birthday with her … and Daisy [stepdaughter] got quite upset about that last year and… that Nicky hasn't sent anything and there was a parcel being delivered so she thought ... and it was for Daisy and her immediate reaction was 'oh it's from mummy, she's remembered!' It wasn't from Nicky, it was from somebody else and it was pretty tough and I felt really sorry for her and… because Nicky doesn't want anything related to her here, she's also … it's sort of… keeping it separate and I felt sorry for Daisy ... so I did ask Mat to email her about it...

In my sample it was very common for the non-residential parents to be separate and independent from the residential parents' household. The non-residential parents were sensitive to the invasion of their territory by the residential parent/s in the form of imposing rules, for instance. In Suzy's case too the biological mother deliberately segregated herself from the residential home of her biological children. Like all residential stepmothers, Suzy felt bad for her stepdaughter and the impact of this separation on her, particularly the lack of birthday cards and presents. Although Suzy asked her husband to email the biological mother with regards to the children's birthdays the issue had not been resolved.

This indirect involvement of Suzy in the relationship between the ex-spouses was indicative of what I called a 'communication breakdown', which usually resulted after many years (about ten years) of fraught relationships between the parents and was often instigated by the stepmother. Importantly communication breakdown between the mothers translated into a cooling of the relationship between the former spouses as well, and in Suzy's case her husband communicated with his ex-wife via

email. Although Suzy was fairly new in the stepmother position the problematic relationship with the biological mother started to take its toll on Suzy's emotions.

> you know I would read her email at home…but no it wasn't what I was hoping for and I was getting quite upset by it all and Mat was just like, he never said 'I told you so' but this is the way she is, she's very ... so... And then I just realized that actually it's gonna be better for her and Mat to do the emailing stuff… and they have and I took totally, totally a back seat.

Many stepmothers, like Suzy, reported that the dealings with the biological mother whether directly or indirectly were stressful and unsettling. Suzy also saw that her involvement did not help the former spouses in communicating better, that she was not able to build bridges between them and that because of her involvement the husband then also had to deal with Suzy's distress. The realization that there was nothing that either Suzy or her husband could do in order to communicate better with the biological mother was a sign of powerlessness but also a sign of acceptance on Suzy's part. Importantly, the decision to 'take a back seat' was a gradual process but in a sense it also happened suddenly because there was no gradual withdrawal from the communication between the mothers.

However, the end of active and direct communication between the mothers did not mean the end of their relationship or interaction because the stepchildren were still young, thus depended on the parents to organize their lives. Suzy like other residential stepmothers supported and nurtured the stepchildren's relationship with their non-residential mother.

> I would organize the… mother's day card to go down there and I'm the one who always says it's five o'clock you need to phone because we almost forgot and children always forget and I make sure that all that kind of things always happen and naturally a few times… we talk or met but we were very civil and it's fine arhm… but until… anything … and I don't think Mat will…

Despite the communication breakdown the stepmothers kept the lines of communication open because of the children. Here the stepmothers acted as kinkeepers to make sure that the links between the biological parent and the child/ren

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were on-going (Schmeeckle, 2007). This could partly be because the stepmothers felt the need to prove that they did not replace the biological mother, and partly because they saw this link as important for the children who already had to deal with the loss of the non-resident parent, be it father or mother.

Most stepmothers reported that when they met the biological/adoptive mother in person, they were polite and civil with each other if distant. Only Nancy reported verbal abuse by the biological mother when they met face-to-face. The stepmothers thought it was because the children were present. Importantly neither the biological mothers nor the biological fathers seemed to mind that the children were present when they were arguing. However, the stepmothers were mostly passive in their interactions with the biological mothers. Thus there was no opportunity for confrontation. This could be because the mothers generally behaved according to their gendered roles as peacemakers.

Suzy and the biological mother continued their non-direct relationship and the electronic relationship between the former spouses remained fragile and fraught, and had to be carefully managed. For example,

> We've had a big issue with Daisy, because she's still not dry through the night and so we had to have the school nurse come in, trying to sort issues and when she's with her mum the routine is totally different and… so Nicky [biological mother]… you know so we're trying, so we sort had a few emails … but she just doesn't respond, if she sees it as a criticism of her… her emails, we have to be quite careful how we word it. Sort of… she didn't respond to the emails… half-term she did it what we've said so she's obviously taken that on-board. So it seems to be steady at the moment, we just don't…

It would seem that Suzy's stepdaughter was struggling with the relationship between her residential and non-residential parents, and needed both parties to cooperate. Despite the efforts of the residential parents to engage the biological mother in discussing the issues regarding the children, there was no success. This could be because – as Suzy indicated – the biological mother saw any suggestions or requests from the residential parents as a criticism of her. Such interpretation of the biological mothers' resistance or refusal to act on the biological/adoptive fathers and their partners' suggestions was often reported by other stepmothers. What is interesting is

that in Suzy's case the biological mother, although she initially did not seem to take on board their advice, she did so at her home. This might suggest that biological mothers might be able to include the suggestions of their former spouses and their partners but without 'losing face', as in the western world it is the expectation that the biological mother knows the needs of her biological offspring best.

In Suzy's case the relationship between the parents had to continue because the children were still young. But it was evident that there was no direct communication between the stepmother and the biological mother; and that the relationship was conducted via emails, perhaps to maintain as much distance between them as possible. Although this way of communicating was not problem-free, and the parents appeared to have conveyed important messages to each other without too much conflict, the problematic relationships between both parties remained.

However, for parents whose children were adults the need to keep the communication between the parents going was not obvious. These parents faced different challenges, and in some cases had to endure years of fraught and stressful relationships. In the next section I shall discuss the communication breakdown between mothers using the example of Diana.

*Diana*

Diana became a stepmother to two adult stepchildren and had been in this position for over 20 years at the time of the interview. She was one of only two stepmothers who was the cause of divorce between the parents. Diana's story was unique because she was a stepmother to adopted children. The mothers knew each other socially and were friends. This however changed when Diana had the affair and subsequently married her now husband: 'I was the big bad witch in all this or, you know… the queen and arhm… Jeremy's ex-wife really… whoa! Don't go there!' It was interesting that Diana made the reference to the wicked stepmother from the fairy tales, who is portrayed as a cruel, selfish woman (Nielsen, 1999). It was clear that Diana was labelled as the 'bad' and guilty one, and the home-wrecker; and that the relationship between the mothers was 'a no go' zone. However, Diana seemed prepared for this vilification and to a degree accepted it because of the affair.

I've often thought about Chris's [adoptive mother] position. She and Jeremy [adoptive father] chose to adopt and then of course Jeremy leaves so that's a hard one. I would have thought any woman would have felt resentful in many ways and… they [Chris's family and friends] probably will be talking to this day arhm… 20 years since, about the terrible time when that woman – I'm sure I'm called 'that woman' that 'harlot' or something – I'm sure, I'm sure… and so I think a combination of lots of things there. And the fact that we have a reasonable lifestyle, I had my business, I didn't need a man, economically independent and… and in fact Jeremy's lifestyle rose when he came to our family.

Diana was able to empathize with the position of the adoptive mother, not least because of the adoption and the affair. She understood that the adoption factor was a key element in the establishment of the relationship with the adoptive mother. Diana also expected that the affair would undermine the relationships between her and the stepchildren. Despite the fact that the affair happened more than 20 years ago (at the time of the interview), this was still viewed as a 'terrible time', and Diana was seen as 'that woman'. This would suggest that the relationship between the mothers had not moved past the initial anger and that because this emotion was still present, even if only in Diana's perception, the mothers were unable to build a relationship. Diana also noted that her relative wealth was another factor that complicated the relationship between her and the adoptive mother, which is an interesting change of circumstances where the wicked stepmother from fairy tales may be interested in her choice of a husband only because he is wealthy (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000). Furthermore, Diana was prepared to share her wealth with her stepchildren – again unlike the wicked stepmother from fairy tales.

Just as Diana's relationship with the adoptive mother was distant, infrequent and underpinned by hostility so was the relationship between the former spouses. At the time of the interview and after many years of hostilities from, and rejection by, the adoptive mother Diana gave up trying to establish a relationship with her.

Yeah. Yeah. It's a case of… for me now it's… '*Que sera sera*' it's like… you know, you… some things you've got to accept that you can't change. And this is one of them and it's very sad but that's life.

Dina tried for years to forge a relationship with the adoptive mother but to no avail. Thus, when Diana accepted that there would be no meaningful relationships between her and the adoptive mother, she stopped trying and the communication breakdown between the mothers was complete. Diana and the adoptive mother, as other mothers, did not talk or communicate in any way for many years. In Diana's case and other stepmothers whose stepchildren were adults, there was no need for the mothers to have a relationship, due to the independence of the stepchildren. Hannah, for example, remarked that:

> Arhm… we… if she was… well, we hardly have any relationship now. I mean… so for example… arhm… tomorrow she may drop arhm… our granddaughter off at some point… so… so in a sense it won't be really involving her ... she collected them from the airport so she brought them into our house so again… she didn't get out of the car so… not really much for a relationship to speak of…

Hannah's 'no relationship' with the biological mother was well established by the time the stepchildren were adults. Thus, the communication breakdown was, in a sense, inconsequential but a welcome break from a fractious relationship; it did not seem to bother the stepmothers and the biological/adoptive mothers.

However, Diana like other stepmothers, kept the door open just in case the biological/adoptive mother changed her mind. For example,

> I did meet her at Jeremy's mum's funeral last year. And I gave her a hug and arhm… and she's remarried and, and she… acknowledged me but then when we went, after the service, when we went to… we got some food in a pub and… and she was with, she immediately went with the nasty neighbours, aunties and uncles and… arhm… who, who just, you know…

It was clear that it was Diana who attempted to build bridge between her and the adoptive mother, not least because the adoptive mother was invited to the funeral of her ex-mother-in-law. Apart from being acknowledged by the adoptive mother, Diana was ostracized by her and in a sense 'put in her place' by the adoptive mother who chose to sit with the group of people who were 'against' Diana. It would seem from Diana's narrative that the adoptive mother did not seek a relation with her, and other stepmothers observed a similar pattern. I think that as the communication breakdown between the mothers was well established and worked for the stepfamily members, this relationship was not needed. If anything, I would argue that the communication breakdown benefited all members of the stepfamily limited stress and opportunities for conflict, raised firm boundaries between the residential and non-residential households. Yet, the distance and communication breakdown between the mothers still enabled an exchange of important information between these households.

Conclusion

It was clear from my research that the relationships between the mothers in stepfamilies were challenging and multifaceted, not least because some of the biological/adoptive mothers were dead or 'absent' from the stepmothers' lives. The majority of the relationships between the stepmothers and the biological/adoptive mothers were difficult. The relationships were, in a sense, superimposed on the mothers and built on power inequalities and were interrelated with the conflictual relationships between the ex-spouses. Most relationships were highly conflictual and although with time they calmed down, some never reached a 'friendly' level. This is perhaps not surprising considering the animosity and mistrust between the mothers. Ironically the 'communication breakdown' in the mothers' relationship marked a point of greater control and peace for all stepfamily members and this in turn enabled some of them to form strong bonds with each other.

The combined issues of a lack of power, vilification, constant financial demands and making difficulties for the children to visit the non-residential parent by the biological/adoptive mothers resulted in a number of stepmothers' feeling stressed, resentful and mistrustful of their relationships with the biological/adoptive mothers. A turning point in these relationships between the mothers was when the hostilities were reportedly constant and the stepmothers felt pushed into a corner; the stepfamily life

was disrupted and often required the involvement of external agencies to shift some power towards the stepmothers' family. This conflict escalation helped the stepmothers to withdraw from all but essential communication with the biological/adoptive mother. The biological/adoptive fathers then chose to follow suit. The stepmothers grew more confident in themselves and no longer accommodated the wishes of the biological/adoptive mothers. Marie recalled a moment when she thought: 'Why the bloody hell I should stay in my bedroom when she comes here and you know? I just couldn't believe that she… couldn't accept it but again, you know she's only human.' This newfound self-confidence together with a withdrawal from all but necessary contact with the biological/adoptive mothers resulted in a more harmonious stepmother-stepchild relationships. Although some relationships between the mothers sometimes got better there never was trust. Gill noted that: 'I kind of like her a little but I would never ever trust her.' But this was the case for most of the stepmothers who were in long-term relationships and it was not until about ten years into the relationship that the complete communication breakdown happened. It was the communication breakdown that sometimes helped to draw clear boundaries between the stepmother's and the biological/adoptive mother's households, prevented further conflicts and enabled the formation of deep bonds between the stepmother, her husband and the stepchildren. Sadly, this was not the case for all the stepmothers as their relationships with the stepchildren never had a chance to develop because the biological/adoptive mother prevented all contact.

The stepmothers who were fairly new to their role appeared to be heading towards the conflict escalation as evident in the cases of Monica and Suzy. These stepmothers were still in the phase of trying to form, or be open to, dialogue with the biological/adoptive mother but they also came to the realization that effective communication or an 'adult' relationship between them and the biological/adoptive mother would not happen. Thus, it was better to stop communicating with the biological/adoptive mother and use emails or text messages to communicate, and only when it was necessary.

## Chapter 5. The Stepmothers' Views of the Biological/Adoptive Fathers' Role in Shaping the Steprelationships

<u>Introduction</u>

During my Master's research I was surprised to find that despite my direct questions there was little reference in the stepmothers' narratives to the roles the biological/adoptive fathers played in shaping steprelationships. For example, one stepmother, Nicola, answered: 'Ther[e] is no need for my husband to influence the relationship as I have always made the effort with my stepdaughter.' (Sosnowska-Buxton, 2011). For Nicola it did not seem necessary that the biological/adoptive father should play a role in shaping the steprelationship, it was the stepmother who 'made the effort'; she engaged in a relationship-building with her stepdaughter. This suggests that the stepmother saw herself as solely responsible for the success and/or failure of this relationship. Similar assumptions are reflected in the existing research on this.[19] As discussed previously, basically the stepmothers and biological mothers were, and considered themselves, responsible for the success or failure of the stepfamily (Hart, 2009).

Notably research into stepmothers is limited. Hence our understanding of how stepmothers view their husbands'/partners' involvement in shaping steprelationships is also limited. What the existing research on the role of the biological/adoptive fathers in steprelationships shows is that they undermine the stepmothers' parental and/or other authority, both actively and passively, and exclude the stepmothers from the biological family unit consisting of the biological father and his biological offspring (Smith, 1990; Church, 2000; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). I think this lack of insight into, and therefore understanding of, and perhaps interest in the biological/adoptive fathers' impact on the steprelationships stems from gendered notions of parenting, where parenting often implies mothering (Dudley and Stone, 2001; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). Therefore the focus is on the women in stepfamilies, and stepmothers in particular, and not on the biological/adoptive fathers.

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[19] For related research, see, for example, Church, 2000; Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Ganong et al, 2011.

My aim here is to analyse the biological/adoptive fathers' role in shaping steprelationships which, I suggest, is complex.

In their research on non-residential stepmothers Weaver and Coleman (2005: 488) showed that the

> [biological] fathers influenced stepmothers' role conception through their expectations of the stepmothers, the stepmothers' perceptions of the men's fathering behaviours, and conflicts between the husbands and the stepchildren's [biological] mothers.

This suggests that the role of the biological/adoptive fathers in the stepmothers' role – and thus the steprelationships – is interconnected with, and dependent on, other stepfamily members. There are also indications that the biological/adoptive fathers influence the steprelationships *directly* through their fathering behaviour such as activities with, or for, the children and voicing their expectations of the stepmother, for example; and *indirectly* by, for instance, not articulating but insinuating their expectations of how their partners should stepmother. The majority of the stepmothers in my sample had some difficulties in seeing the role which the biological/adoptive fathers played in their steprelationships, as evident in Nicola's quote for instance. Interestingly though, despite the vast differences among the stepmothers' personal and family circumstances, their narratives regarding the fathering role in the stepfamily were strikingly similar. This is why in this chapter I focus both on certain themes that emerged in the interviews and on individual stepmothers.

This chapter builds on the already existing research on the relationship between stepmothers and their partners or husbands but I analyse its impact on steprelationship by exploring the stepmothers' views of these relationships in more detail. First I shall explore the process of introduction to stepmotherhood between the biological/adoptive fathers and the stepmothers. Next I will examine the effects of the biological/adoptive fathers taking either the stepmothers' or the biological children's side in step-relational conflict. Lastly, I shall analyse how the biological/adoptive fathers and the stepmothers negotiated conflicts in the stepfamily without resorting to taking sides.

<u>The Beginnings</u>

Even considering the dearth of the research on stepmothers, the lack of data about whether or not the stepmothers and their partners/husbands had any conversation about their expectations regarding the stepmother's roles at the onset of their relationship, and whether there was any preparation for the first meeting between the stepmother and the stepchildren, is striking. I see this omission as problematic because these two features of the early stages of romantic relationships and stepfamily formation are important as they show how the couples are constructing and conceptualizing their new roles and how these affect the steprelationships. It also enables us to see how these roles are managed and change over time.

I was interested to find out if and how the biological/adoptive fathers helped the stepmothers through this process. To my surprise the majority of the stepmothers (15 out of 18[20]) said that their husbands/partners did not prepare them in any way for the first meeting with the stepchildren and that they did not discuss the role of the stepmother. Although Weaver and Coleman (2005) reported a similar finding in their study of non-residential stepfamilies, they noted at least a degree of discussion about it. Suzy and Fran were the only stepmothers who reported having some discussion with their partners regarding the first meeting and their prospective role.

*The First Meeting*

The stepmothers remembered the first meetings with their stepchildren and often talked about being nervous as well as hopeful beforehand; they wanted to be accepted and get on with their stepchildren, they wanted to like their stepchildren. But surprisingly few stepmothers reported talking with their partners about it. Out of 18 stepmothers five (Marie, Hannah, Jane, Emma and Diana) who knew the stepchildren already in a social capacity prior to their first meeting specifically said they did not recall any conversation on the subject. Neither did four of five women (Emma, Irene,

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[20] This figure includes the two serial stepmothers, Dawn and Fran.

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Dawn and Monica) who were becoming residential[21] stepmothers report any discussion with their spouses about this. Out of the 18 stepmothers two had been stepmothers before and nine women had been biological mothers prior to becoming stepmothers but these women also did not report any prior discussion about it. Even Alison, who was involved in a legal process in securing meeting the stepchildren, reported that she and her partner did not plan the first meeting because they were wondering whether it would happen, not how it would happen.

I asked the stepmothers a direct question: 'Did [your husband/partner] prepare you/discuss with you meeting the child for the first time?' But as in my previous research the stepmothers provided answers like these:

No. Men don't, Patrycja, you know that. You know that! It's a fact. You have a child. You gonna meet her. Bang! (Irene)

No. 'We'll go out for a pizza and I'll bring the girls', you know. (Amanda)

Derek and I hadn't really spoken about it before I met them [stepdaughters]. (Nancy)

No. No. No I don't think he did, I don't recall. (Donna)

These women were adamant that there was no conversation. Particularly the older women (over 50 years of age) reasoned that this was because 'men do not talk about these things'. Some stepmothers like Irene appeared surprised that I even asked this question because 'men do not talk about it'. This could be an indication that the stepmothers assumed that their partners, because they are men, are uncommunicative about personal matters (Dudley and Stone, 2001; Wall and Arnold, 2007). Incapable of considering and instigating such a discussion, they could not foresee the emotional

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[21] Including those who were part residential and part non-residential like Monica and Hannah, though Hannah became a non-/residential stepmother a few years after her marriage.

significance arising from the meeting (Dudley and Stone, 2001). It would seem that the stepmothers viewed men in general as not particularly emotionally forthcoming so there was no point in trying to talk to their partners about meeting the stepchildren – hence the stepmothers' surprise at me asking about this. The bottom line was that meeting the stepchild/ren was a given and non-negotiable, something that had to be done and the sooner the better.

Considering the importance of this first meeting for the stepmothers, especially when the stepmothers' particular family circumstances were taken into account, it is surprising that the stepmothers reported no prior discussion about this. For example, some stepmothers knew the stepchildren beforehand and/or were residential biological mothers. Marie recalled: 'I've known him since he was little boy when he was probably one. So I mean, I knew him; he wasn't a stranger to me.' It seemed that because some stepmothers and stepchildren knew each other there was an assumption that there was no need to discuss the first meeting. Where this was the case, the assumption seemed to be made by the parents that the stepmothers' transition from a family friend to being the stepmother would happen 'naturally', that it was without problems and without questions. I also think that in the circumstances where the stepchildren were very young, the stepmothers and their partners thought that the children were too young to understand this transition. Hence there was no need to discuss how to re-introduce the stepmother. The following quote by Marie indicates that: 'I mean he was too young, you know…'. Alison noted a similar thought that the stepchildren were too young to really understand the change in their family circumstances and 'too young to treat you with suspicion... they were interested in what toys we've got and DVDs.'

However, this lack of re-introduction also occurred with older stepchildren. For example, Hannah recalled: 'I was never… introduced to as something different… arhm…'. I think a 'natural' transition is implied in Hanna's words. This might be indicative of the expectations both the stepmothers and their partners had regarding this transition process, that it would be smooth, that the stepmother would accept, and get on with, the stepchildren and vice versa. Importantly Hannah was also uncertain whether the biological father had had a conversation with his biological children about the change in the relationship between her and him.

Arhm… I don't think there was… I don't know… it would be really interesting to talk to them about it. I don't really know if we ever really did that, it became… I can't actually remember but I'm almost certain it just became… I don't know whether he had a conversation with them… we certainly didn't have the conversation all together…

Hannah's doubt was not unusual and was replicated in other stepmothers' narratives. Importantly Hannah indicated that she, her partner and the stepchildren did not discuss the presence and position of the stepmother in the father's and stepchildren's lives. There may be several reasons why such a discussion did not happen. As the biological fathers were overwhelmingly non-residential parents they might have had problems maintaining close emotional bond with their children, thus making such conversations problematic. Such conversations might also have been considered unimportant because the children were too young, for example. The residential biological mothers might have prepared the children for it. It has been suggested in numerous papers that divorced fathers take the mothers' lead in tending to the children's emotional needs (see Smart and Neal, 1999; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003) and I think that this explanation remains a strong possibility. However, whether the biological residential mothers prepared the children for meeting the stepmother was uncertain.[22] Still, it is also worth considering that the absence of such discussions could have stemmed simply from the biological/adoptive fathers not anticipating any problems and hoping for the best. The parents might not have known what to say to the children because parents' romantic relationships are not usually discussed with children.

As already indicated, the stepmothers were very specific that there was no preparation for the first meeting with the stepchildren and when I tried to probe further their answers were a short 'no'. They would not elaborate further – something that was unusual as the stepmothers talked extensively about most issues as is visible in the length of their responses elsewhere. But the quotes in this context are much shorter than on other matters. There was also no difference in the stepmothers'

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[22] Interestingly, in Suzy's case, when the biological non-residential mother married her partner neither her nor the resident parents told the children, but then the residential parents did not even know about the event.

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answers depending on the length of time they were stepmothers. I thought that the women who were stepmothers for a long time might have simply forgotten but this did not seem to be the case.

However, I also think that there might have been an indirect preparation for the first meeting in the form of the biological/adoptive fathers telling the stepmothers about their children and the stepmothers asking questions about them; and some practical preparation for it in terms of activity planning. For example, although Gill was clear that her partner did not prepare her for meeting the children, 'he painted a picture of the children in [her] head but not really…'. It is evident that Gill's partner talked about the children to her and that she had an idea about the children because of this. I think this was how the biological/adoptive father's expectations regarding stepmothering or parenting in more general terms were conveyed to the stepmothers. Weaver and Coleman (2005) noted in their research that the stepmothers 'learnt' how to stepmother by observing their partners' fathering behaviours. Although this does not appear to be precisely the case in my research, it would seem that the narratives of some biological/adoptive fathers about the children provided the opportunity for the stepmothers to experience their partners' attitudes to fathering and their behaviour.

This indirect but practical preparation was clear in some stepmothers' narratives. Nancy, for example, stated that although she and her partner did not talk about the first meeting (see quote above), she noted that they 'planned like exactly what we're gonna do'. It seemed that perhaps the parents did not emotionally prepare for the meeting but planned extensively the activities for that first meeting. Nonetheless, the stepmothers were adamant that there was no discussion and preparation for the first meeting.

Suzy was only the stepmother who reported directly planning extensively with her partner for the first meeting. Suzy needed to plan because she was that sort of person and it was important for them both that the children liked Suzy.

> He was very, he's very good actually I'm quite, I get quite anxious and I like to plan and prepare, know what I'm doing and he's much more, he's more like, it will be fine, he's quite realized [*sic*] about things and I think it's because he's you know he trusted me and we get on so well, be ourselves and so no, we didn't really do a lot of planning.

It is clear from Suzy's narrative that she and her partner prepared for the first meeting with the children. Suzy and her partner seemed to approach new tasks differently: she was anxious, in need of preparation and planning, while her partner was the composed and 'realized' one. It appears that the biological father was able to reassure Suzy before the meeting that 'it will be fine', he was supportive of Suzy. Because Suzy and her partner 'got on so well', the biological father, it would seem, assumed that the stepmother and the children would like and get on with each other, an idea further reinforced by him trusting Suzy to be herself – advice commonly reported by the stepmothers.

However, I also think that the period prior to meeting the children in Suzy's and Mat's courtship was crucial in deciding that the meeting should take place. As Suzy would become a residential stepmother to two very young children whose biological mother was largely uninvolved, it was important that the biological father had the time to get to know Suzy well enough to trust her with his biological children. But as Suzy's narrative about the preparation for the meeting was limited, it is impossible to elaborate further.

What distinguishes Suzy's preparation is that she and her partner talked about her, and presumable his, worries and hopes; and that he reassured Suzy, which seemed to help her with her mental preparation for meeting the stepchildren and ultimately for the stepmotherly role. Possibly the lack of discussion in the case of the other stepmothers between the partners about the stepmothers' hopes and anxieties was the reason why the stepmothers felt that there was no preparation for meeting the stepchildren despite the evidence that there was some practical consideration about, and indirect preparation for, it.

*Preparing for the Role of Stepmother*

Just as there was no of little prior discussion about the first meeting between the stepmothers and the stepchildren, there was no or little prior planning for and discussion about how the biological/adoptive and stepparents would parent, no exchange of ideas, hopes and fears about how the stepmothers could or should stepparent.

Arhm… in terms of preparation… to become a stepmother… No. There was no, virtually no discussion. He was already spending huge amounts of time away from them; they were already established in their own lives. Arhm… and… No. They didn't even come up in discussions. (Diana)

To be honest with you, we've never really sat and said: 'This is what I want you to do…' you know. We've never really talked about it. (Monica)

No. No, he's a ... no, he's not that kind of ... just be … I suppose he feels, he's more like my mum ... just be yourself, you know. Take-it-from-there kind of thing. (Amanda)

Again the stepmothers were adamant that no preparation or discussion had taken place regarding how they would stepmother. Some stepmothers, like Amanda and Diana, talked about why such process did not occur; others simply reported that it had not. In Amanda's case it would seem that her partner was not the 'kind of' person who talks about 'these things', i.e. discussing Amanda's role as a stepmother. Although Amanda did make a direct reference here to the fact that her partner was a man she implied that this lack of discussion was due to his character. This statement is similar to the one made by Irene that I quoted earlier. Perhaps, and as noted earlier, because the stepmothers' partners were males, the stepmothers did not think about broaching the subject of the role expectations with them as men supposedly do not discuss that; or perhaps because the biological/adoptive fathers did not anticipate any problems. But I also think it possible that the stepmothers did not instigate this conversation because they saw their partners as the greater parental authority (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003: 16). Thus, as the biological/adoptive fathers as such did not start the conversation, this was possibly taken to mean that it might not be needed.

As indicated previously, it would appear that there might have been some indirect communication between the partners about the expectation regarding how the stepmother should be with the stepchildren, indicated by the 'just be yourself' expression. This also might be indicative of a degree of trust and hope on the

biological/adoptive father's part that the stepmother would 'know' how to stepmother by 'just being herself'.

I think that the 'take-it-from-there' expression also implies a degree of planning and preparation for the stepfamily on the parents' side. I see this as what I term a small-steps approach to stepfamily formation: the first step was the meeting between the stepmother and the stepchildren and depending on how that went, the next step would follow. Interestingly, Amanda indicated that she sought advice from others regarding her approach to stepmothering, here her biological mother[23]. However, it seemed that most stepmothers and their partners were oblivious to, unaware of, or avoided considering the possibility that the role of adults in the stepfamily might be tricky. Doodson and Morely (2006) reported a similar finding in their study but note that the stepmothers were aware of this. Only a few stepmothers in my sample reported such thoughts (see Chapter 3).

In the cases of adult stepchildren, as evident in Diana's narrative, this non-discussion could be understood as a consequence of the adult stepchildren being independent and not needing stepmothering. Yet, considering that Diana was expecting her partner to become a residential stepfather to her own biological residential and young children, the absence of the conversation is puzzling.

> I... to Jeremy... and the bottom line is, him entering our lives, was that if my children didn't get on with him the relationship would finish. And he understands arhm... that my children come first. And... he... underneath him... and he accepts that...

The priority for Diana were her biological children from her previous marriage, and she made it clear that the romantic relationship would continue only if the children accepted the stepfather. It seemed that her partner did not give the same priority to his adult adopted children from his previous marriage. This would explain why Diana and her partner did not discuss her stepmotherly role.

However, there was no difference between the biological/adoptive fathers who were stepping into residential stepfather roles or those who were residential fathers in

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[23] The role of other stepfamily members in the steprelationships shall be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

terms of the lack of any preparation for the stepmotherly role. I found it surprising that particularly in Monica's case there was no conversation because Monica was stepping into the complex and demanding role of being a full-time residential carer for her profoundly disabled stepdaughter and non-residential parent to the other daughter, and her husband was to become a residential stepfather. To my direct question: 'What did your husband expect of you as a stepmother?', she replied: 'Well, I suppose they're similar probably to what I would have expected of him as a stepfather to my children.' It is evident that there was many supposition made about what each parent would do regarding parenting but no in-depth conversation.

There appeared to be an underlying assumption on both parts that the stepmother, and stepfather in some cases, would assume a gender-appropriate role, i.e. the stepmother would undertake a mothering role involving nurturing the stepchildren and be homemaker; the men would assume a fathering role of material provisions and somewhat distant emotional relationship with the children.

> He never put any pressure on me to be... anything. I think he'd seen how arhm... what a good relationship I have with my boys and vice versa. (Jane)

Jane saw this lack of conversation as 'not being put under pressure to be anything' and that the biological/adoptive father in a sense enabled Jane to find her own way of stepmothering – a feature crucial for establishing good steprelationships as I mentioned in the Chapter 3 – but a position that was based on a traditional female role. As Jane continued: 'he saw how, you know, we have fun; my boys and I, and there's very much I'm not their friend, I'm still very much their mother.' It was clear that Jane chose a motherly role, as indicated in the Chapter 3, that was based on her biological mother role. Henry and McCue (2009: 186) argue that 'stepmothers try to recreate a role that is consistent with societal expectations for appropriate family roles for women.' I think the same could be argued for the biological/adoptive fathers, that is they expected their partner to adopt a gender-appropriate role because they took this role for granted, i.e. as biologically predetermined. Therefore both the stepmothers and the biological/adoptive fathers assumed there was no need to discuss how to stepmother because both parties would assume their 'natural' roles. This point is further illustrated by Marie who said:

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Nothing different really to anything else. Except, of course, that you were expected to have to take in an extra child. Mmhn. You were to get on with it.

Most of the stepmothers were expected – by their partners and family – to 'get on with it', no questions asked, because as Penor Ceglian and Gardner (2001: 117) argue, '[w]hen a woman marries a man with children, she not only takes the role of wife; she is expected to rear her husband's children as well.' However, there were two couples that did discuss their ideas of stepmothering and planned the first meeting with the stepchildren. Suzy and Fran both planned with their partners how the first meeting between the stepmothers and the stepchildren should or could happen. But these two women's experiences, particularly when it came to ideas about how to stepmother, were very different.

Although Suzy had extensive preparation to become a stepmother and discussed with her husband how they would like the first meeting with the children to be and how they saw her role as a stepmother, she did not give any specific information about it.

I don't think Mat had really, he just he just kind of introduced me as a … we haven't really said who I was, he just said 'we've got Suzy, you know a friend is coming' but he said they immediately picked up that I wasn't just a normal friend because he's got a lot of female friends you know, women used to go in to help him … but I think they immediately picked up I was quite something different, yeah.

Here the stepmother was not introduced as a stepmother or even the father's partner. Interestingly Suzy also refers to the children sensing that she was a different kind of friend of their father's. The stepmothers throughout their narratives referred to this 'knowing', whether the stepchildren knew or sensed that the stepmother was somebody special or what their husband/partner wanted or expected of them as a stepmother. I think that this 'unspoken knowledge' was underpinned by the parents' hopes that the introduction of a stepmother to the stepchildren would 'work'.

What was important in Suzy's case was that her ideas about how to stepmother were close to those held by her husband. Therefore there was an

agreement between them about it. This was not the case for Fran who had seriously different ideas from her husband about how to stepmother.

> Stanford... Stanford... he tried Jess calling me 'mummy' which I said 'no way', I said 'that is wrong'. So she's got one mum and one dad and I'm just... can be a friend I can be a confidante when she gets older I can be someone who she will grow to love but... I'm not her mum and it's unfair on Mandy [biological mother] to try to get her to call me 'mummy' and... I think because Stanford was really angry at Mandy at the time he just was trying to almost... arhm... I don't know why... the picture was wrong, it was wrong... the wrong way round and... arhm...

Fran and her second husband had initial and lasting differences regarding their understanding of what it means to stepmother. For Fran's second husband it was about replacing the biological mother despite the fact that she was the residential parent. Church (1999) classified such behaviour as implementing the *nuclear model* of stepfamily formation. In this model it is important for a stepmother to be seen as part of the nuclear family, thus to be called 'mummy' and be 'mistaken for' the stepchildren's biological mother. In a sense it seemed that Fran's second husband wanted to implement a nuclear family model where Fran would be seen as, or mistaken for, the biological mother. Hence his wish for Fran to be called 'mummy' by her stepdaughter. For Fran being a stepmother was about being a friend or a confidante. For her the term 'mummy' seemed to be strongly linked to being a biological mother, which she clearly was not. Fran suspected that her husband's expectation that she was to be called 'mummy' stemmed from her husband's dislike of his ex-wife. In a sense this was his punishment or revenge on the biological residential mother and/or a way of proving that he had successfully recreated a nuclear family (see also Burgoyne and Clark, 1984; Erera-Weatherly, 1996; Church, 1999; Roper and Capdevila, 2011). It would seem that because of this Fran did not trust this expectation. Furthermore, Fran was uncomfortable with being called 'mummy' by her stepdaughter because she had biological children from her previous marriage. She said,

my kids... they come first and I've never expected Stanford nor Richard to, to say to 'I love your children' and I say no you don't, you get on really with them and you might get to love them in time but they... your children are your... yours and I don't have that expectation because I think it's unrealistic, to be honest, to make somebody love a child.

What is interesting in this quote is that Fran referred to her previous husband and her present partner at the same time. This would indicate that she did not change her idea about how to stepmother and stepparent. It would seem that unlike Weaver and Coleman's (2005) research finding, Fran's role conception did not stem from her partners' expectations. In her second marriage she went against the biological father's expectations regarding her role. Fran was clear that she did not love her stepchildren and did not expect her partners to love her own biological children. It would appear that love for her stepchildren was impossible for Fran because in her view being a biological mother meant that her biological children came first. In Fran's view her family was biologically defined and the stepfather to her biological children and her stepchildren were not part of it, or were on the peripheries of her biological family unit (see Church, 1999). Importantly Church (1999) pointed out that stepmothers took this view of their family when they disagreed with the stepfather about how to parent. Fran's stance was very similar to that of Diana in this respect; the stepfather was seen as an outsider who came into the stepmother's family and he was expected to adjust.

It would also seem that Fran's idea of how stepmothering should be done was the dominant perspective in her family. It is interesting that Fran told her second husband (now divorced) and her present (at the time of the interview) partner that he could not possibly love her biological children as she did not love her stepchildren. These different attitudes towards stepmothering translated into a relationship where the biological father would take the side of his biological child in a conflict with the stepmother.

I think what transpired from this discussion is that the biological/adoptive fathers and the stepmothers were unprepared and naïve in their approach to stepfamily formation. For example, Alison noted that 'at the beginning you don't think it's going to be such a huge part of your life! It's on par with, he plays golf three times a week.' The parents assumed gender-appropriate roles in the stepfamily formation and were hopeful that the stepfamily would 'naturally' work because as a couple they 'got on'.

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Although, in most cases this approach worked, in a few cases it did not and I shall now discuss how the stepmothers and the biological/adoptive fathers negotiated family conflicts.

Taking Sides

Allan and colleagues (2013: 174) note that:

> Literature on stepfamilies often highlights the potential conflicts that arise as a result of their greater complexity and the uncertainty there is over what the appropriate 'rules' governing them are.

But they also point out that it is dangerous to generalise conflict in stepfamilies because conflicts or problems are part of any family and as Whiting and colleagues (2007: 102) point out, conflict is present in 'healthy and normal [...] loving relationships.' Furthermore, conflict fluctuates over time, for example, there may be more conflict in the early stages of the stepfamily formation or when the stepchildren approach adolescence than at other times (Allan et al, 2013). The stepfamilies in my research argued about many issues but only in a few instances did these arguments result in serious family rifts. In this section I shall focus on the two key issues that led to such rifts – disciplining the stepchildren and the rejection of the stepmother by the stepchildren.

Although the stepmothers on the whole did not express any problems with disciplining or not disciplining their stepchildren *per se* – as discussed in Chapter 3 – they highlighted the issues of parental authority and partners' support as problematic when dealing with their stepchildren. The second important problem was the stepchildren's dislike of the stepmother whom they tried to force or persuade their biological/adoptive father to leave. Therefore firstly, I shall look at the problems when the biological father took his biological child's side (actively, or passively by not acting), focusing on Monica and Fran because their stories were more extreme. Secondly, I shall examine the issues that arose when the biological/adoptive father sided with the stepmother, analysing the experiences of Vicky and Diana as the issues were more pronounced here.

Brown (1987a) noted that biological fathers, in the early stages of the stepfamily formation, would 'protect' their biological children from the stepmother and would have to be encouraged to 'let' the stepmother be involved with the stepchildren. Considering this and the argument of Daly and Wilson (1998) that it is 'natural' – that is genetically and evolutionary predetermined – for the stepmother to want to exclude and mistreat her stepchildren because of scarce resources, it is not surprising that some biological fathers would want to take their biological child's side in a conflict with the stepmother. Following this argument, persuading the biological father to go against this genetic and evolutionary survival mode would appear inappropriate but also dangerous. However, this understanding of parenting as 'natural' and 'evolutionary' seems at odds with another 'natural' notion of parenting where it is seen as gendered, i.e. women are 'naturally' emotionally available to children and men are 'naturally' emotionally unavailable to children. As I discussed above and in Chapter 3, these two views were clearly present in Fran's first stepfamily (one on which I shall focus here). But in Monica's case they seemed to be diluted.

For Fran and Monica the issues regarding the biological father taking the side of the children against the stepmothers varied in their degree and involved different consequences for both families. Both stepmothers reported feeling undermined, excluded and even vilified by their husbands' behaviour in response to problems between themselves and the stepchildren – which almost exclusively centered on the discipline issues. Both stepmothers wanted better communication with their husbands regarding their child-rearing practices. But the effects of these communication difficulties translated into different problems for the stepmothers.

As mentioned before, Fran and her second husband had different ideas about parenting and stepparenting, in particular. As reported by various researchers (Church, 1999; Orchard and Solberg, 1999; Roper and Capdevila, 2011) where parents in a stepfamily disagree about how to stepmother. This is often related to the fact that the biological fathers require the stepmother to be a mother. Fran did not want to mother her stepdaughter but her husband expected her to do so, and he would also not support her in her mothering practices.

I remember... really clear in my mind … we went to the zoo... and I remember saying: 'What would you like to drink?' and I asked her again about it... she asked for an apple juice... and when I brought it she said, 'I asked for orange juice! You didn't listen!' and I remember looking at Stanford thinking, 'are you gonna step in and say something?' and he never said anything, he never challenged her on it ... and was like... right! I was fuming, so I had a go at him out of earshot of Jess, 'So you know I'm not gonna tolerate this behaviour. I don't from my own children and will not from yours.'

For Fran this incident was vivid even after eight years and in a sense marked how future problems of a similar kind would be, or rather, would not be, addressed. It was clear that Fran was waiting for her husband's response, his backing of her and addressing the child's – in Fran's eyes – misbehaviour. Fran even felt compelled to pull her husband over to one side and tell him that she would not accept such an attitude from her stepdaughter as she would not from her biological children. Fran's quote 'I don't from my own children and will not from yours' clearly shows that the children 'belonged' to the biological parent-unit but were also expected to obey the rules of the stepparent. However, it would seem that Fran preferred the biological father did the discipline of his biological daughter as Fran did not discipline her in that situation (or in other situations); perhaps because Fran did not think she had the authority to do so (Weaver and Coleman, 2005). Furthermore, Fran was *telling* her husband, informing him 'so you know' what she would not accept but did not ask him to, but perhaps expected to, intervene. Interestingly Fran did not say what her husband's response was.

However, further on Fran explained how she thought her husband could have approached his biological daughter's misbehaviour and poor attitude towards Fran.

And... but it never got addressed and I think if it had been if... she'd been told very... early on by her dad, 'You don't speak to Fran like this.' I think... in a blended families as they are now called in the PC [politically correct] world… you've got to know who's the boss in the house... adults; and you've got to back each other... and I think if you disagree you can pull them to one side and 'I don't want you to handle it like that' or... 'you've been a bit hard on that one...' but you as I say you don't show division in front of the children... and I

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think that's the issue with Stanford, he never really backed me and sort of said, 'that is enough.' and... so of course then I felt undermined and... it was very difficult... and, and my daughter Jenna didn't like her... so it was, it was just a fractious [relationship] and I think obviously Jenna see [*sic*] how she spoke to me and... saw how she is with her mum, you know...

It is clear that Fran's stepdaughter's attitude was not addressed or not addressed in terms of Fran's expectations by the biological father. Fran thought that behaviour issues should be addressed because the child had to know that the adult is 'the boss'. Fran saw that sometimes one parent might had been too harsh in disciplining the child and if this was the case the other parent should intervene. Importantly this had to be done so that the child could not hear the adults disagreeing about each other's approach in order to appear as a united front or 'back each other'. As this did not happen, and Fran repeatedly remarked on not being supported by her husband, Fran felt undermined. This in turn made her steprelationship tricky and complicated her relationship with her biological daughter – a factor aptly named 'unsupported and battling' in Roper and Capdevila's (2011) research. The problem regarding the lack of spousal support is reported as a significant factor in couples' arguments (Orchard and Solberg, 1999; Roper and Capdevila, 2011).

It seemed that Fran and her husband had two different parenting styles, where one was more permissive and the other stricter.

So that's what I mean about the two different parenting styles... and I think if you're the non-resident parent, then there is that tendency to over... compensate when you do see the child... if you don't see them on regular basis like Stanford didn't, he always felt bad about it.

Fran recognized that she and her husband had a different approach to parenting and that her husband being the non-residential parent found it difficult to discipline his child; instead, he indulged his biological child when they were together. In research such fathers are often referred to as 'Disney dad' which means that the biological father is not strict, instead providing presents and trips out to compensate for the time they are separated and trying to maintain emotional closeness with his biological child/ren (Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Henry and McCue, 2009). But although Fran

understood that, she and her husband were not able to overcome these issues and their different parenting styles eventually led to Fran's biological daughter moving out and moving in with her biological father; and the ending of Fran's second marriage. Fran felt that its break-up was largely due to her and her husband's differences regarding parenting, differences that could not be overcome. It is important to add that Fran also reported that her second husband was abusive towards her. But Fran suggested that this abuse was a secondary reason for the divorce and insisted that it was the different parenting styles and the detrimental impact of the biological mother on the steprelationships that made her family life impossible.

Monica's story was different because she experienced being supported *and* undermined by her husband as a stepmother when they were dealing with her stepdaughter. She remarked that she and her husband were 'getting better' at dealing with problems. Importantly, Monica and her husband agreed in their attitude and behaviour regarding the daughter that lived with them (although they had some disagreements initially) but had strong differences regarding the non-residential daughter. When I asked Monica whether her husband influenced her steprelationship, she answered:

> I think he does, he will either support me or undermine me. Arhm… and he's done both in the past. It's only in conversations that I've said to him: 'You know when you say that then that makes, negates what I've just said or makes me look stupid.' Arhm… and he has taken a lot of that on board. But yeah, he does shape… because he, you know, is the one who decides when she comes, what we do, usually, to try and entertain or… stirs the conversation a lot. And, you know, I've asked: 'Can we not talk about her mum?' because she talks a lot about her mum and he steers the conversation so we don't talk about her mum. So you know, it's not a conversation I can join in and… arhm… think he does, think he does.

Monica was the only stepmother who almost without hesitation said that her husband shaped the steprelationship, especially in practical terms as indicated by her listing of the 'things' he did: when the stepchild came and what activates would be done. He also controlled the way the conversations at their home were conducted but only because Monica asked him to do the latter as she did not want to talk about the

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biological mother. Clearly Monica and her husband talked about their issues and expectations regarding how to stepparent and he took 'a lot on board' of Monica's ideas and/or wishes regarding stepparenting. Yet she found it difficult to identify other ways in which he shaped the steprelations, i.e. emotionally.

Monica recognized that her husband supported and undermined her in her dealings with her stepdaughter and they talked about these instances but this had not always been the case, particularly at the beginning of their relationship. As a result Monica expected her husband to contradict her and expressed her relief that he sided with her. For example,

> Well, he does, he's quite good now – he wasn't always. I think, initially, his instinct was to be on Betty's side; almost reaching the same view as other people that stepmothers are, you know, the enemy of my child but now… he doesn't, he will usually take my side, I mean it doesn't happen very often… but there was, you know, an incident not taking off her shoes, I said really nicely: 'Betty, could you take your shoes off as we have got a new carpet?' and she said: 'Dad doesn't make me take my shoes off!' and I've said: 'I know but we have a new carpet, I and your dad are trying to keep this carpet clean.' 'No. Dad, I don't have to take my shoes off, do I?' and I thought 'Oooohhhh!' I would have killed him! And he said: 'No, you have to take your shoes off.' So she took them off and threw them!

The reference Monica made to the biological father's instinct to take his biological child's side reflects the argument made by Daly and Wilson (1998) that it is 'in our genes' to protect our 'own' because the stepmother is the 'enemy'. Monica often noted that society views stepmothers with suspicion and that she struggled with the wicked stepmother stigma.

Voicing the discontent or disapproval of her stepchildren was something that the stepmothers did not often do – it was taboo. Expressing negative thoughts about a child was seemingly viewed as unnatural for women, particularly mothers (Roper and Capdevila, 2011). When Monica did so, it made her feel like the wicked stepmother and made her husband side with his biological child. Alison similarly noted that, 'there's only so much you can complain to your husband about his kids.' Despite these difficulties, Monica and her husband were negotiating – although, this

negotiation might have been budding at this point in their relationship – how to parent and what they expected of each other. The husband was perhaps encouraged to share his parenting authority with Monica (Brown, 1987a).

Also, importantly, Monica used the phrases 'taking my side' and 'taking her [stepdaughter's] side', which suggests that in a conflict between the stepmother and the stepchild the biological father had to side with his wife or his child, he could not remain neutral or opt to negotiate between the two. Somebody would always be the loser as the event with the shoes indicated. It was clear from this situation that Monica did not think she had the authority to tell her stepdaughter what to do. This was not necessarily because the biological father did not share his parental authority but because the stepdaughter did not recognize her authority. When the biological father took the stepmother's side it resulted in the stepdaughter throwing the shoes as an act of protest because she was the loser. She had been made to do something that she did not want to do, and her stepmother had told her to do it first.

Additionally this and other conflicts had started to happen fairly recently (prior to the interview) and incidentally marked the stepdaughter's becoming a teenager. This developmental stage is often noted for adolescents' push for greater autonomy, the rejection of parental and other adults' authority (Allan et al, 2013). However, it would seem that Monica and her husband had some difficulty recognizing this developmental stage in the child. They viewed such behaviour as a manifestation of the stepdaughter's challenge to Monica's authority in setting and enforcing the rules and not as the stepdaughter's need, and/or bargaining, for more autonomy.

Fran's and Monica's views of the role their husbands played in their steprelationships differed markedly. Both stepmothers, however, noted that at time they felt undermined and unsupported by their spouses, which they thought was detrimental to their authority to discipline the stepchildren. In Fran's case the marriage reportedly ended mainly because of these differences in parenting approaches and Fran's steprelationship was very distant. Monica and her husband managed to gain control over their, sometimes, contradictory parenting behaviours which made the stepmother feel supported and perhaps have a degree of authority even over a teenage stepdaughter. It would seem that if the biological father sided with his biological child, this was detrimental to the stepmother's feelings of control and authority, and in effect to the steprelationship. But when the stepmother was

supported by the husband she felt more empowered and the steprelationship appeared to be easier to manage for the stepmother. However, sometimes the stepmothers' partners shifted their alliances from their biological children to the stepmothers entirely and I shall discuss an example where this was the case next.

*Taking the Stepmother's Side*

In a sense most of the biological/adoptive fathers took the stepmothers' side in relation to the stepchildren at some point in the relationship. However, in the examples I shall discuss next this side-taking was quite drastic, particularly where the adult stepchildren rejected the stepmother. Diana reported that she knew from the start of her romantic relationship with the adoptive father of her stepchildren that they would reject her because of 'the fact that they were adopted and now they were being rejected as they thought by their father.' Adoption was a contributing factor to the separation of the family members and the rejection of both Diana and the adoptive father by the stepchildren as was the fact that Diana was a family friend and she was the mistress. This would suggest that the role the adoptive father could have played in shaping the steprelationship was restricted and rather challenging. For example, Diana noted:

> I have never, for example, had a birthday card. I've never… Jeremy always has a Christmas card, I've never… it's always 'to dad' yeah. So it's arhm… there's… it's, it's been made very clear to me what the relationship is to be. And arhm… what do you do? What do you do beyond that?

There was a real sense of the family members' separation. The stepchildren continued to communicate with their adoptive father, essentially retaining the previous family unit consisting of the adopted children and their adopted father to the exclusion of Diana and her biological children. It was clear that the stepchildren did not want to include the stepmother in their family unit with their adoptive father and were actively excluding her from it. Diana and her husband were at a loss as to what to do with this constant rejection. It seems that the stepchildren decided that there would be no

relationship between them and the stepmother, and that the adoptive father and the stepmother had little power to change the situation.

Diana suggested that her husband accepted that his relationship with his adopted children would not progress and was essentially 'one of disappointment'. But Diana thought that he wanted a meaningful relationship with his adopted children regardless.

> There has to be good will on both sides. I think Jeremy would have loved to have the fairy-tale… and it's accepted and… But his own relationship with his children… arhm… he has told me, it's one of disappointment. He worked overseas for a great deal of the time. Arhm… and he's not a good communicator arhm… and that may have also contributed to why his children aren't good communicators. Arhm… and he, he's an odd mixture because he cries at everything; he cried at Flintstones, he cries, you know… you know at places you'd think… So, you know, you have…

Diana saw the relationship as a two-way process where the children and their father or the children and Diana would make the effort to build and maintain a relationship. She was also aware that this would have been the ideal situation for her husband but this was not the case. Diana recognized that her husband's poor communication skills were unhelpful in building close emotional bonds with others. But she also noted that he was emotionally receptive and sensitive, which I think indicated that the distant relationship with his adopted children perhaps hurt him emotionally and that he was able to feel emotions but not skilled at showing them.

Diana's descriptions of her husband's emotional limitations seemed to be in line with traditional or stereotypical masculine and fathering roles – physically distant and poor at communicating emotions. Coleman and colleagues (2008: 375) argue that

> the cultural conceptualization of good fathers (and stepfathers) allows for less emotional closeness and more distant involvement with children. Men can fulfil their primary family duties simply by providing financially and acting as a protector for the family. If they are nurturing and emotionally engaged, it is seen as a bonus.

But although the adoptive father seemed to have adhered to his gender-appropriate role the lack of the 'bonus' was problematic and limited his potential to shape the steprelationship substantially. As he was unable to communicate his feelings and wishes to his adopted children, he was also unable to relay the stepmother's. Yet despite the adoptive father's limitations in terms of interpersonal skills, and the poor treatment of him and Diana, he continued trying to retain and deepen the relationship with his adoptive children. But due to the constant rejection of the adoptive father's and the stepmother's efforts by the stepchildren, Diana's husband decided to scale down these efforts. This was not an easy decision, 'so… so when this… it was with regret but they also were treating him badly.' It might appear that as the stepchildren were adults and continually rejected the efforts of the parents, it would have been easier for the adoptive father to side with the stepmother; however, both 'kept the door open.'

The poor treatment of the adoptive father by his adopted children coupled with the rejection she faced, were difficult for Diana to reconcile with her continued effort to have a relationship with them. I was intrigued as to why Diana kept trying to connect with her stepchildren for so many years. She replied: 'it was important for Jeremy to arhm… he… kept trying different things...' it seems that the reason was the adoptive father's wish for a 'fairy-tale' with the children. The adoptive father influenced how and for how long the stepmother kept trying to build the steprelationship. But when asked whether her husband shaped her steprelationship, she replied: 'No. Only when I dug him and I said: "Look, shall we try to do this? Shall we do that? You need to, we could…"' This would suggest that Diana was the more active agent in shaping or at least attempting to shape the relationship between the father and his children but not necessarily her steprelationship. I think it is possible that Diana did so because she prioritized the relationship between the father and his children. She focused on her family consisting, first, of her biological children and, secondly of her husband – the second family unit; because the stepchildren clearly rejected her and there was no possibility that a relationship would develop and they were adults. However, Diana also exhibited kin-keeping behaviours that women are expected to perform by encouraging her husband to try different approaches to relationship-building with the children (Schmeeckle, 2007; Coleman et al, 2008).

Diana was the *facilitator* whose '[...] goals for the role were to preserve or improve stepchild/father relationship and, to a lesser extent, stepchild/stepmother relationships' (Weaver and Coleman, 2005: 486).

The adoptive father's decision to focus on his relationship with Diana and distance himself from the relationship with his adopted children resulted in him 'see[ing] [her biological] children as his children.' She continued: 'Elle and Pete are high achievers and he gains a lot of credence from that.' In a sense the stepchildren replaced the adopted children for Diana's husband, which further reinforced the idea of two separate family units. Diana reported that her husband was fulfilled in his relationship with her biological children, but she noted that he still had a sense of loss in relation to his adopted children and I think this was why they constantly 'kept the door open' both physically and emotionally.

Just as Diana's husband took her side in the problematic relationship between her and the children so did Vicky's partner. There was a similar situation of keeping the channels open in Vicky's case. As I discussed in Chapter 3, Vicky, her partner and the stepchildren tried to resolve their problems concerning the children's dislike of the stepmother during family meetings but to no avail. It was during those meetings that Vicky realized that 'there was quite a separation of the family.' This might also indicate that during the family councils it was clear that for Vicky to remain in a relationship with her partner the family separation would be permanent.

> I think Barry having to make that decision [to stay with Vicky despite his biological children's opposition to it] arhm… there… showed… what his priority was sad but what his priority was: it was him and me and our lives now… and… the other two… it's evolved because of marriage and grandchildren… it softens them, they realize that any help is better than nothing… even from a stepmother…

After the biological father made the decision to focus on his relationship with Vicky, the stepchildren initially withdrew from any relationship-building with Vicky. But after the two oldest stepchildren had their own children they were prepared to let 'even' Vicky help. The biological father firmly sided with, and chose, the stepmother, a decision that was possibly easier to arrive at because the children were adults and independent. However, one of the stepchildren was an adolescent at the time and this

caused a few problems but the biological father remained firmly on the side of the stepmother. But because of this the relationship between the biological son and his biological father as well as with Vicky was very distant.

> We just get on. And now… it's… it's a lovely friendship and relationship… it's strong, we're both quite happy with the family being the family but not… part of us. His son's away now arhm… he didn't contact us for a while… Barry's making sure, making sure… but he doesn't call back or emails… he would… and then one day he thought 'Enough! He doesn't want to have any contact with me, you know, you are my son but… it should be a two-way thing'… so arhm…

It was clear that the biological father's decision to choose the stepmother also stemmed from the strong foundations of their relationship and the impasse in the relationship with the children. Similar to Diana's case, Vicky's partner noted that relationships are a two-way process and that if his biological son did not want to contact him, he would not continue to make the effort. The fathers, both biological and adoptive, tended to end their efforts if these were not met with reciprocity and withdrew from communication with the children. However, the fathers also kept the doors open so if the children wanted to continue the relationship with them and the stepmothers, they had the opportunity to do so.

Just as Schmeeckle's (2007) research findings show, the stepmothers in my sample reported many kin-keeping behaviours. For example, Vicky like Diana, or other stepmothers for that matter, saw their role as that of a facilitator and nurturer, albeit at a distance, of the relationship between the father and his children.

> You see the other things I tried to ... do …is to make sure that Barry goes on his own sometimes … The father-daughter relationship is quite good, they don't want me there, it's just them and they can have some time out… arhm… I sort of… to do that because I think it's good for them.

It was evident that Vicky was active in supporting that relationship that she was not part of, at least not directly. She was the one who ensured that her partner saw his

daughter regularly because it was 'good for them' and seemed important for the biological father to have a relationship with his children. Interestingly Vicky said that 'they don't want [her] there' as if she was a negative factor in that relationship. Considering that Vicky was rejected by her stepchildren and no amount of family councils helped to overcome this, Vicky's inclusion in these meetings was unhelpful.

However, despite the exclusion of Vicky from the relationship between the father and his biological children, he still tried to influence the steprelationship at least on a superficial level. For example,

> last year Barry was so angry about it because... and he sent a text and he will not say what text he sent to the three kids arhm… that it was my birthday, it wasn't anything… so the phone rung and Linda called full apologies 'we missed your birthday...' the other one phoned, the oldest and arhm… said 'really sorry you know we forgot your birthday', which made me so embarrassed because I'd rather they forgot it than do it as a response… So this year comes round so… when both of us… waiting to see what happened… and… the card is still in the post, he said it was in the post but it wasn't there and Linda's arrived late…  Now whether Barry has sent her another reminder… his arrived on time although all the cards arrived on time… system… so that's another thing… was it deliberate?

The biological father took direct action at the mistreatment, in his view, of the stepmother by the stepchildren. The stepchildren obliged. It might seem like a small issue that the stepchildren did not call or send birthday cards to Vicky but such behaviour coupled with the rejection and/or treatment of Vicky in other family events, appeared too much for the biological father. What is more the stepchildren were reported to know not to criticise Vicky to their biological father because, 'Barry said that what they feel now... because they know how close he is to me and they know it will hurt him.'

After experiencing the initial, and then continuous, rejection and hostility from the stepchildren, Diana's and Vicky's partners sided with the stepmother. By siding with the stepmother the biological/adoptive fathers were faced with a loosening of the emotional ties with their biological/adoptive children, which also meant less time together. Yet, despite this frosty treatment by the biological/adoptive children the

biological/adoptive fathers continued to 'keep the door open' for a possibility of a meaningful relationship with them. The stepmothers encouraged their partners to do so and importantly they 'kept the door open' for their stepchildren because they saw this as being important for their partners.

<u>When the Biological/Adoptive Fathers Did Not Have to Take Sides</u>

In the previous section I discussed how conflicts in stepfamilies resulted in, or in some cases were caused by, the biological/adoptive fathers taking either the stepmothers' or the stepchildren's side. Such choices resulted in fractured relationships but such relationships were the minority and only in Fran's case led to divorce. This finding is at odds with other research findings, which 'suggest [...] that living in a stepfamily confers an elevated risk for negative outcomes, including high rates of conflict and divorce' (Whitton et al, 2008: 455). Here I shall discuss how the biological fathers shaped the steprelationships in problematic situations without having to choose sides.

Most of the stepmothers reported some difficulties in the early stages of the stepfamily. But these early issues were resolved quickly as seen in Monica's case, for example, or in Emma's,

> Possibly in the beginning and what is interesting and it is a psychological thing as well that you'd be… at first you're very protective of your own. Yeah. Yeah, this is, this is how I perceived it long time ago if… Mark has done something wrong and Ed was reprimanding him, I would tend to be defensive and Ed would say arhm… he said: 'Never contradict me in front of the children, we'll do it afterwards. It's not good for them. They need consistency.' (Emma)

Emma noted that at the beginning she was siding with her biological son when the stepfather disciplined him. She would defend her biological son and it was the stepfather who told her not to do that, at least not in front of the children. In an interesting role reversal – from Fran's – the biological mother was protective and the stepfather told her in private that she should not do that because such behaviour

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undermined his parental authority. Importantly the stepfather-biological father[24] was shaping the relationships with his wife, his stepson and the steprelationship between the stepmother and her stepson by expressing his wish not to be contradicted in front of the children. For the stepfather it was important that both parents supported each other in their dealings with the children. Fine and colleagues (1991) and Weaver and Coleman (2005) suggest that the stepfather's agreement to the parenting practices aids the couples' marital satisfaction. Emma also noted that it was 'ok' for the couple to disagree earlier but not when the children were present. This indicates that the couple had shared expectations regarding parenting and relationship-building. It is interesting that the 'thing' that made her 'protect' her biological child from the stepfather was 'psychological'. This could indicate that Emma viewed this reaction as perhaps socially constructed and not biologically predetermined.

It was clear from the stepmothers' narratives that there were times when the biological fathers prioritized the stepmother over the biological children.

> There's times when he's ... put me first, you know, and said to the girls, 'OK', even if you're not ... 'I think he told them: 'I think the world of Amanda and I'm not gonna stop seeing her, if you're not happy about something because …you know … you won't always be around and …' You know ... Yeah... (Amanda)

The biological fathers were reported as doing so only when the children misbehaved or perhaps tried to manipulate them not to see the stepmothers anymore, as is suggested in Amanda's quote above. Here the father made it clear that the biological children would not be there 'for ever' in his life because one day they would be independent adults. This attitude was also reported about the fathers siding with the stepmothers whose stepchildren were adults, therefore not dependent on the biological/adoptive father. However, it is interesting that Amanda saw her husband's stance as prioritizing her rather than viewing it as an explanation of the fact that the children would be adults. Perhaps Amanda's behaviour could be explained as a social expectation regarding parenting that has to be giving and selfless, particularly for a

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[24] Emma's husband was both a residential biological father and stepfather.

woman and (step)mother (Roper and Capdevila, 2011). There was a similar sentiment in Jane's narrative, for example:

> Yeah, I know, I know that was hard, that was very difficult for a good two and a half – three years I'd say we were... I was struggling on a bit... but I had, you know, I had... I had Daniel's support. We knew we were not going to reverse anything...

Jane was clear that she not only had her husband's support regarding the misbehaving stepsons (as discussed in Chapter 3) but that her marriage was solid and the actions of the stepchildren would not undermine that basis. Crucially Jane felt supported by her husband despite the difficulties in the steprelationships in the early stages of the marriage.

And that support experienced by the stepmothers appeared key to good romantic relationships and good steprelationships. Many stepmothers talked about how their partners helped and supported them in stepmothering but struggled to fully recognize and appreciate these efforts, as in Nancy's case:

> …Arhm… it's kind of… I don't know. He… I suppose he has really, he has really helped… I think, I don't give him enough credit for but actually if I complain about something and he does… make changes he will like talk to them about it or like… so I got tired of always clearing the table and one day I mentioned to him and one day he was like: 'Right kids, we are having a new routine and then you gonna clear the table.' And that was that and now they clear the table. (Nancy)

Nancy hesitantly confirmed that her husband was helping in the development of the steprelationship and acknowledged that she did not 'give him enough credit' for his involvement. Nonetheless she struggled to recognize his role in the steprelationship-building but easily identified his practical involvement in shaping these relationships. Such recognition of the practicalities – such as changing the routine after the meal – of the steprelationship management by the biological/adoptive father was evident in other stepmothers' narratives. The stepmothers who felt supported 'complained' – to use Nancy's term – to their partners about problems and expected them to fix them.

However, it is interesting that Alison also complained to her husband about the stepchildren but thought that there were limits to how often she could do so and she did not necessarily feel supported by her husband when dealing with the stepdaughters.

Some stepmothers who reported discussing and being involved in the decision-making process regarding the stepchildren with their partners, appeared to be excluded from certain decisions involving the stepchildren even if they had a direct impact on the stepmothers' family life. For example, in Hannah's case the stepson had moved into her house without the issue ever being discussed between her and her husband. Hannah reported that she never questioned it 'because [she] knew it was important for my husband. That he would love that.' It is clear from Hannah's quote that the presence of the stepchild/ren in a stepmother's life was taken for granted by the biological/adoptive father. It was assumed that the stepmother would accept the stepchild/ren without questioning this or asking for her wishes regarding the stepchild/ren to be considered. This 'taken for granted' or 'part of the package' approach of the stepmothers towards their stepchildren – although regarded as an important factor in creating good steprelationships – as argued in Chapter 3 – was not only visible in the early stages of the stepfamily formation but underpinned the stepfamily functioning many years later. Several researchers (see Coleman et al, 2001; Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Henry and McCue, 2009) note that stepmothers express a lack of agency in decision-making regarding the stepchildren's visits and often report feeling stressed and lacking power to change the situation. Most of the stepmothers in my sample did not express such feelings despite clearly not being in control regarding the stepchildren's visits or moving in.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that the role the biological/adoptive fathers had in shaping the steprelationships was complex. I set out to analyse how the stepmothers viewed the role of the biological/adoptive fathers in the steprelationships. I focused on three areas in the stepmothers' families that emerged in the interviews: 1) the beginning of, 2) taking sides in, and 3) not taking sides in the stepfamily. Although most of the stepmothers struggled to see how their partners influenced the

sterelationships, it was clear that the biological/adoptive fathers shaped them directly and indirectly.

What emerged from the analysis of the beginnings of the stepfamilies was that the initial lack of discussion and preparation for meeting the stepchildren and stepmothering, itself an important finding, continued throughout the couples' relationships. It seems that in line with prevailing gender stereotypes the biological/adoptive fathers were reported to be emotionally uncommunicative and the stepmothers did not press for communication regarding the stepchildren. Stepparenting was interpreted as mothering, and because of this, the stepmothers and their partners expected to adopt a gender-appropriate role in the stepfamily. Possibly because of this, the stepmothers were taken for granted by their partners and were expected to 'get on' with being stepmothers and accept the presence of the stepchildren in their lives. Hence the stepmothers did not report having discussions with their partners about the changing living arrangements of the stepchildren.

The biological/adoptive fathers' role was easily recognizable for the stepmothers when it was expressed in practical terms, like changing meal time routines, for example, or taking or not taking her side in disagreements about how to parent. Other than that the stepmothers struggled to provide examples of the biological/adoptive fathers' involvement in the steprelationships. This is something of a surprise but also testimony to how much is taken for granted in such relationships. In the next chapter I shall examine, how the extended stepfamily and friends shaped the steprelationships as seen by the stepmothers.

# Chapter 6. The Stepmothers' Views of the Impact of the Wider Family on Their Stepfamilies

<u>Introduction</u>

Considering the bio-nuclear foundation of the 'ideal' family where its members know how to be with each other, the place and role of stepmothers' biological/adoptive family, or even the stepfamily, as well as the present and former family-in-law (for both stepmother and her partner), in their new stepfamilies appear unclear and problematic – in so far as these have been explored at all (Bornat et al, 1999; Ganong and Coleman, 2004; Ganong, 2008).[25] It is unclear whether the stepmothers' families should, or could, form relationships with the stepchildren – and if they do, what kinds of relationships should, or could, they be? What relationships can or should stepmothers and their children from their previous marriages have with the new in-laws? Can, or should, stepmothers and their 'joint' biological children from their new stepfamily have relationships with their partners' ex-parents-in-law? What relationships do stepmothers have with their in-laws and what relationships might their new partners have with their new in-laws? Which members of the wider family would, or should be included? The problem is also what names these family members should have: grandparents, stepgrandparents, aunts, uncles, step- aunts and uncles, grandchildren, stepgrandchildren, half-grandchildren or just their first names?

It seems obvious that forming stepfamilies affects members of the wider family and vice versa. However, this is a very little understood and explored area of research, and what little research there is, focuses mainly on the stepmothers' biological parents and their in-laws (Ganong and Coleman, 2004; Ganong, 2008). The existing research informs us that grandparents and stepgrandparents *can* play an important, albeit distant and secondary, role in stepfamilies (Allan et al, 2013). Ganong (2008: 410), following Visher and Visher (1996), argues that grandparents, that is stepmothers' parents-in-law, in stepfamilies:

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[25] The focus of research is mainly on stepgrandparents and biological grandparents.

can be either helpful or harmful to remarried adult children's attempts at developing and maintaining a positive stepfamily life. They can build bridges or they can build walls. They build bridges by accepting the remarriage [or re-partnering], offering assistance when requested, and otherwise allowing the next generations to develop in their own ways.

Allan and colleagues (2013: 164) point out that relationships between stepgrandparents, that is stepmothers' biological parents, and their stepgrandchildren, although possibly pleasant, are essentially inconsequential for the intergenerational stepfamily members and are often mediated through other members of a stepfamily. Research on the views of stepmothers shows that they constantly report the lack of support networks in, and understanding from, close family regarding stepmothering (Smith, 1990; Coleman et al, 2008; Nozawa, 2008).

Notwithstanding these few studies, we still have little understanding of how *stepmothers* view the impact the wider family has on the forming, or formed, stepfamilies and whose opinions matter to stepmothers. This is what I wanted to find out and although did not specify in my questions which wider family members we might discuss during the interviews the stepmothers focused on their biological and in-law families, in particular on their biological mothers and mothers-in-law. Some stepmothers also talked about their biological and in-law fathers, siblings and former parents-in-law – which in itself is an interesting finding – and not their wider families. Because of the lack of research in this area and despite the interviewees' focus on their biological and in-law families, the findings discussed in this chapter are new to the field of family studies and entirely original.

Guided by my participants' narratives, I begin my analysis by examining the relationships between the stepmothers and their biological families, concentrating primarily on their biological mothers, who – to use Visher and Visher's (1996) terms – 'built bridges' or 'built walls'. Next I shall discuss the relationships between the stepmothers and their in-laws, focusing my analysis on the stepmothers who were rejected by their in-laws and those who were accepted by their in-laws. Lastly, I will examine how the stepmothers viewed the impact their biological mothers who were also stepmothers had on forming stepfamilies. As in the previous chapters the sheer diversity of the stepmothers' family circumstances posed a significant difficulty in my

analysis. This is why in this chapter I will focus on individual stepmothers as well as the common threads that appeared in their narratives.

<u>The Stepmothers' Biological Parents</u>

As previously mentioned, grandparents can either build bridges or build walls in forming stepfamilies (Ganong, 2008); I think the same can be argued about stepgrandparents – that is stepmothers' biological parents. Out of 18 stepmothers, 11[26] reported that their biological parents were building bridges. Four did not talk about their biological parents because they were dead by the time the interviewees became stepmothers. One stepmother, Jane, reported that although her biological parents were building bridges initially, they eventually began building walls in the actual stepfamily. Importantly, not all stepmothers' biological parents were enthusiastic about their biological daughters' partners and the fact that the latter had child/ren from their previous marriages. But all stepgrandparents eventually grew very close to their biological daughters' partners and their biological children, except for Jane's. Because of this, in this section I shall focus, firstly, on the stepmothers' biological parents who built bridges and secondly on Jane's biological family who built walls between themselves and the stepfamily.

*Biological Parents Who Built Bridges*

In the available, albeit limited, research on stepgrandparents these are generally considered peripheral members of a stepfamily who are of little importance, particularly to stepchildren (Allan et al, 2013). Scholars also point out that the only connection between stepgrandparents and stepgrandchildren is mediated by and through stepparents and their partners (Coleman et al, 1997; Thompson, 1999; Allan et al, 2013). The focus of this research is primarily on stepchildren and rarely centres on the role they play in stepmothers' lives, unless it mentions that stepgrandparents are not supportive and understanding of their daughters' stepmothering. Although this

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[26] The 11 stepmothers discussed here do not include the stepmothers whose biological mothers were also stepmothers and who are discussed later on in this chapter.

might be the case for some stepfamilies or stepfamily members, this was not the case in my research.

All of the stepmothers' biological parents were actively involved in building bridges between themselves and their biological daughters' stepfamily. The key element of this was an acceptance of their biological daughters' partners and their biological/adoptive child/ren from their previous marriages and current relationships. However, it was also equally important that the acceptance was mutual, by which I mean that the stepgrandparents had to be accepted by their stepgrandchildren in order to build 'good' relationships between the new stepfamily members (Sanders and Trygstad, 1989). The bridge-building behaviour of the stepgrandparents involved to spending time with the stepgrandchildren, gift-giving and sending birthday and other occasion cards to the stepgrandchildren, including the stepgrandchildren in the family get-togethers and supporting the stepmothers' choice to be part of a stepfamily. Furthermore, the stepgrandparents had to be continually engaged in all the aspects of the bridge-building behaviour in order to maintain a relationship with the stepmothers' stepfamily.

The majority of the stepmothers reported that their biological parents responded positively to their biological daughters' new partners and impending stepmotherhood. They were supportive of their biological daughters and appeared not to view the existence of the stepchildren as problematic. For example, this is how Hannah recalled her biological parents' reaction to her becoming a stepmother:

Arhm… they took it really in their stride. Completely. They didn't ask any… difficult questions really and they didn't … but… they sort of… I think they were really just happy for me because I was happy and so they didn't perceive it, you know, major trouble arhm… They didn't ask me anything about, you know… any decisions about our future and family or something. I don't think they would feel it was their place really. Arhm… they didn't… they didn't express any views about, you know 'you're taking on a lot' … I mean, you know, I wasn't 20, taking on four children… you know… arhm… who might have... I think it would be different if you were, say 25 and were taking and you were … and say they had a child already at 15… and you're quite close to their age and he's got a string of them and you're actually going to be their mother for all intents and purposes because maybe she's left or gone or dead

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or something. I think that's very, very different arhm… to what I was involved in. And they knew he had shared care to start. They both, they knew… the children and… you know… so but they were not, they just welcomed Becky and Colin and John and didn't… I was, being … in my mid-30 when I met John and they met the children and I guess, well actually… you know… I was happy so that was part of it arhm… you know… At my wedding, my dad spoke about the children you know… the family… that this was in our family now... so it wasn't an issue really.

It is evident from Hannah's narrative that her biological parents accepted her choices regarding stepmotherhood. Their biological daughter's happiness and satisfaction were their primary concern and potential complications appeared secondary because Hannah was mature and she was not 'replacing' the biological mother, in Hannah's words she was not 'taking on a lot'. It is interesting that Hannah thought that her stepfamily's circumstances were not that complicated or difficult – which clearly she thought made it easier for her biological parents to accept her choice – despite the fact that later on Hannah became a residential stepmother to her stepson and there were subsequent difficult family arrangements, which she found quite a challenge (as I discussed in Chapter 4).

Furthermore, it seems that Hannah's maturity (being in her mid-30s), the prior knowledge of the children and the 'shared care' being in place gave the stepgrandparents, as well as Hannah, a sense of comfort that her new family would not be too problematic. These circumstances appeared to make it easier for the stepgrandparents to support their biological daughter, welcome her partner and the stepchildren. Hannah noted that her biological father welcomed the stepchildren into the family at her wedding. This step was reported by all the stepmothers in this section who were married, and shows that an official welcoming of the stepchildren into one's family at a wedding was considered important by the stepgrandparents but also by the stepmothers. It was a rite of passage but it also shows that it was the marriage that made the stepfamily 'official'.

Irene's new family was the complete opposite from Hannah's. Irene was in her early 20s, her stepdaughter was barely two years old and her biological mother had left her – all three features that Hannah, and presumably her biological parents, saw as

problematic were a reality for Irene. But Irene's biological mother, although initially surprised, did not view the stepfamily as a problem. This is how Irene recalled the reaction of her biological mother to the news that she might become a stepmother:

> That was very funny actually. So anyway, I came back and Dominic had asked me out and I told my mother… 'I have just met a 30-year-old man with a child and I'm going out with him tomorrow night.' My mother was [stunned]. Anyway, she said: 'bring him round for supper dear'. And she said that as soon as she saw him she knew 'it's gonna be all right'. And she's never had a problem with it.

I think it is important to note that Irene, like other stepmothers, was upfront with her mother – her biological father was dead by the time Irene became a stepmother – about her partner and his family circumstances. What seemed to have mattered to Irene's biological mother was to meet her biological daughter's partner and reserve her judgments about him for that. It was evident that the stepgrandmother accepted, and perhaps even vetted, Irene's choice of a partner. And from this point onward Irene noted her biological mother had no problem with him.

   Although Irene did not talk about her biological mother's initial reaction, or attitude to her (step)-daughter, she did discuss the early stages of the relationship between the stepgrandmother and the stepgranddaughter.

> She was absolutely brilliant with my [step] daughter; in fact she's almost overkilled it. Because, of course I didn't really have babysitters or anything … arhm … to begin with. And she would have Anna for me for the afternoon, that sort of thing. And she would really, really, really spoil her. She was always absolutely brilliant. There's never any problem. And my sister's the same. There was never any angst in the family on that front at all.

For Irene her biological mother was a 'brilliant' source of support, not only offering to babysit her stepgranddaughter but also clearly indulging her. Unusually Irene also mentioned that her biological sister did not see the presence of her stepniece as

problematic and that, crucially, in Irene's biological family there was no 'angst' about the stepfamily.

I think it interesting that there did not appear to be any difference in the reactions of the older and younger stepmothers' biological parents to forming a stepfamily because one gets a sense from existing research that, particularly 'in the past', stepfamilies were viewed 'as less functional and more problematic than nuclear families.' (Ganong and Coleman, 1997: 86). Yet none of the stepmothers, in this context, indicated that their biological families were alarmed at the prospect that their biological daughters might be part of a stepfamily. It is difficult to ascertain why this was the case. I would argue that, just as discussed in Chapter 4, the stepmothers and, here, their biological parents were unprepared for the complexities of stepfamily life, hence their naïve, or positive, attitude towards the stepfamily. But I also think that despite this naivety underpinning the biological parents' approach towards the stepfamily, it indicates that they simply did not view a stepfamily as intrinsically dysfunctional or detrimental to their biological daughter. This could suggest that in scholarly work stepfamilies were pathologized needlessly, as pointed out by many researchers (see, for example, Gamache, 1997; Roper and Capdevila, 2011).

The stepgrandparents were reported to almost immediately accept and embrace the stepgrandchildren, whether they knew them in a social capacity beforehand, as was the case for Hannah, or not. For example,

> Lots of my family and my mum were brilliant actually, I just I love my mum to bits, she's fantastic lady and she talks, because we've got lots of nieces and nephews so she's got four grandchildren and whenever you hear her talk she talks about six grandchildren, she's completely, right from the word 'go' they were her grandchildren. And that was really nice actually because I had a lot of people, not a lot of people, but you know really emphasize the steprelationship. The stepparent … and grandchildren… so that was lovely actually. (Suzy)

It was clear that Suzy's biological family, in particular her biological mother, were accepting of the stepgrandchildren. It was the stepgrandmother who instantly, 'from the word "go"', referred to the stepchildren as her grandchildren and talked about her grandchildren to others. This could indicate not only that Suzy's biological

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mother did not view the presence of the stepchildren as a threat to her relationship with her biological grandchildren but also that she recognized the importance of including and accepting the stepchildren into her biological family. This process could be seen as 'easier' if the stepgrandchildren reside with their stepmother[27]. Suzy's biological siblings and presumably their partners, and biological grandchildren, did not seem to view this as a problem. On the one hand, Pryor (2014) notes that the existence of biological grandchildren might make it challenging for the stepgrandparents to treat step- and biological grandchildren equally. On the other hand, Allan and colleagues (2013) argue that the presence of biological grandchildren can make it easier for stepgrandparents to form grandparental relationship with the stepgrandchildren. Based on my sample, I would argue that the presence of biological grandchildren did not make it more difficult for most of the stepgrandparents to develop a close bond with the stepgrandchildren and that the presence of biological grandchildren did appear to enable the stepgrandparents to frame their steprelationship as grandparental. However, amongst my interviewees, there was a consensus that it was not their biological family that had issues accepting the stepgrandchildren and treating them on an equal footing with the biological grandchildren. The problem was that the stepmothers' biological children from their previous marriages were not treated by the stepmothers' parents-in-law in the same way as their biological grandchildren.[28]

Clearly, the affection and reaction of Suzy's biological mother and other family members were a source of comfort to her as indicated through saying: 'so that was lovely actually' and 'that was really nice'. This behaviour was important for Suzy because it made *her* feel 'nice'. The manifestation of the acceptance and the inclusion of the stepchildren by the stepgrandmother was a great source of comfort and support for Suzy – and one that many stepmothers reported. This finding is at odds with other researchers' work (see Smith, 1990; Nozawa, 2008), as it indicates that these

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[27] Existing research in this issues indicates that residence status frequently changes (as was the case among my own participants) and possibly for this reason that existing research provides no evidence to suggest that residence status plays a role in acceptance of the stepchildren by the stepmothers' wider family.

[28] The relationships and roles the stepmothers' in-laws had in the stepfamily will be discussed later in this chapter.

stepmothers had the support and perhaps even understanding from their closest family members, particularly their biological mothers, who acted as confidantes and were the key family members whose acceptance and support the stepmothers sought.

In contrast to Suzy, Marie saw the inclusion of the stepgrandchild by the stepgrandmother as important for the *stepchild* and not necessarily for herself. For instance,

> my mother, who was granny 'Sugar' to anybody's children… And I'd rather think that… again she immediately said to Mick: 'Just call me granny "Sugar".' Because, you know, I think that's important for children to be able to do that…

Marie emphasized the importance of being able, and given the permission to, call the stepgrandmother 'granny'. This gesture, I think, shows inclusion of the stepgrandchild into the (stepmothers' biological) family and it implies equality. There were only two other stepmothers – Emma and Irene – who reported that their biological mothers were addressed as 'grandmother' by their stepgrandchildren. Since both stepmothers were adoptive mothers, it might had been easier, or more acceptable, for the stepgrandmothers to be *like* grandmothers. But it is important to note that only in Irene's case did the stepchild lose all contact with the maternal biological side of her family; the other stepmothers continued contact and relationships with that side of the family.

However, Marie also noted that her biological mother was 'granny Sugar to anybody's children'.  On the one hand, Marie's biological mother welcomed her stepgrandson and saw the relationship between them as between a biological grandmother and biological grandson. On the other hand, this gesture was not unique to the stepgrandson as the stepgrandmother treated the children of others in the same way – including children of friends and acquaintances. Nonetheless Marie saw her biological mother's action as symbolic and one that was important for her stepson and therefore for Marie as well – Marie's parents-in-law rejected the idea that they would be addressed as grandparents by Marie's biological son from her previous marriage. However, they had a warm relationship with their stepgrandson.

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As seen in the previous quotes, these stepmothers consistently described their biological parents' responses to the stepfamily and its members as 'brilliant', 'fantastic' and 'took it in their stride'. Importantly an overwhelming majority of the stepgrandparents remained 'fantastic', supportive and accepting in their attitude towards their biological daughters' stepfamilies and the stepchildren in particular – in short they continued to build bridges between themselves, their biological daughters, their partners and the stepchildren over the years. Nancy, for instance, recalled:

> My parents have been really great about actually, they're arhm… they really like the kids and we go down there for a weekend and we get down there at weekends and… yeah they…stay with them actually. My dad really likes them but they want grandchildren so they're kind of like their instant grandchildren. And they go fishing with them and go and play in the garden, they get on really well. …They give them presents…

It is clear from Nancy's quote that her biological parents, too, were 'great about' her stepfamily and that they, particularly her biological father, treated them like their 'instant grandchildren' despite being addressed 'by their first names'. The stepgrandparents' treatment of the stepgrandchildren as their grandchildren suggests that the latter, in a sense, filled the position of biological grandchildren. It would be interesting to see how this relationship continued if biological grandchildren were born.

Nancy, highly unusually, singled out her biological father's feelings for his stepgrandchildren. This could indicate that he, in Nancy's view, was more positive about, and outspoken in his attitude towards, the stepchildren; or perhaps that he was emotionally closer to them than the stepgrandmother. However, Nancy also noted that the stepgrandchildren did some activities together with both of the stepgrandparents. This could indicate that, although the stepgrandchildren were closer to their stepgrandfather than their stepgrandmother, they had an affectionate relationship with both stepgrandparents. And despite the difference of emotional closeness between both stepgrandparents both were proactive in building bridges between themselves and the third generation.

Allen and his colleagues (2013) argue that non-residential stepfamilies' circumstances are not conductive to relationship-building, particularly, between

stepgrandchildren and their stepgrandparents. They argue that this is because the non-residential parents want to spend their limited time together and not 'dilute' it by being with others and that preference is given to the biological parents of the stepmothers' partner. This did not seem to be the case amongst my non-residential, or part residential interviewees, who managed to share the time they had with the stepchildren with their biological families. It was evident in the stepmothers' narratives that they valued the time their biological parents and the stepchildren spent together and saw it as an indication that the family members accepted each other and a space, which was conducive to bridge-building. It was difficult to ascertain whether the stepmothers were the main driving force behind the frequency of the contact between their biological parents and the stepchildren. It was clear, however, that the time the stepfamily members spent together was often enough to encourage affection between the stepgrandparents and the stepgrandchildren (Ganong, 2008). I think this is a significant finding, which further shows that the stepgrandparents were not on the peripheries of the stepfamily and that the role they played was crucial for the stepmothers and their stepfamily.

Another sign of acceptance and inclusion, at least on the stepgrandparents' part, were gifts and card giving. Such gestures seemed significant for the stepmothers, who often talked about their biological parents doing so. Visher and Visher (1979) argue that the absence of cards for Step-Mother's Day signifies the invisibility of the stepmothers in society. The stepgrandparents' gesture of giving their stepgrandchildren cards, despite the lack of cards which name that relationship, and gifts was seen by the stepmothers as yet another way in which their biological parents publically declared their acceptance of the stepfamily. I think this is also why it was important for the stepmothers that their biological parents talked about the stepchildren to other people and publically welcomed them into the family at weddings.

However, for some stepgrandparents the acceptance and inclusion of the stepgrandchildren, as well as public acknowledgement of them, was not enough to build a close and affectionate relationship with them. Although most of the stepmothers did not specifically state that their stepchildren accepted the stepgrandparents and were reciprocal towards them, there was a strong sense in their narrative that indeed this was the case. The only stepmother who reported a distant

and 'one way' relationship between her biological parents and the stepchildren was Alison.

> I would like for my sister, not for me, my sister is a really great auntie and my mother would make a fabulous grandmother. When I got with children she put pictures of them up ... and she lives in New Zealand, she printed their pictures and she was very keen to tell about the grandchildren at the golf club... She can buy dolls, clothes and find cute heart shaped presents and [send] Christmas parcels [to the stepdaughters]. And she was just pleased they were girls and that they will have the opportunity to do all those girly things between grandmother and granddaughters... and because there were contact issues, the biological mother had some issues with that, there was this woman who was playing grandma and so the presents that my family bought the children were never seen again, when they were clothes, they wore them once when they were at ours and when they went home, I'm sure they went to a car boot sale. The toys were never talked about again so both my mother and my sister realized that, that it's not a relationship and even I had to say to my sister that I don't think they get it and thank you that... my family was very excited at the prospects of the children and it's a very disappointing expectation for them. It's alright for me not to be thanked but it really... I feel quite overwhelmed for my mother... they get the door slammed in their face. So I'm very protective of my family.

Just like other stepmothers, Alison noted that her biological family, her sister and her mother, in particular, were 'great' in response to the stepchildren from the start. It was revealing, however, that Alison early on in the quote stated that her biological 'mother would make a fabulous grandmother' – a clear indication that the relationship had not happened or that there was a waste of her biological mother's 'talent' for being a grandmother. It was evident that the stepgrandmother and stepaunt accepted and embraced the stepgrandchildren and were looking forward to developing and deepening the relationship with them. Alison's biological mother and sister were actively involved in bridge-building with their biological daughter's stepfamily and did all those 'things' that other stepmothers' biological families did such as talking

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about the stepgrandchildren 'at the golf club' and buying gifts. However, Alison's stepchildren did not appear appreciative of, and keen on, her biological family.

Obviously, the stepgrandparents did not choose to have the stepchildren – grandparents, whether biological, adoptive or step, on the whole do not chose to become grandparents, they just do – they chose to build a relationship with them. Conversely the stepgrandchildren did not choose to have stepgrandparents, they just got them. However, the difference was that Alison's stepchildren did not choose not to have a relationship with the stepgrandparents; they – in Alison's opinion – were stopped from this by their biological mother. As previously noted, Alison's circumstances were unusual. Because of the existing court order that prevented the stepchildren's contact with one of their maternal biological grandparents, the development and the maintenance of a relationship between the stepgrandparents and the stepgrandchildren was very problematic. Ganong (2008: 400) argues that stepgrandparents who are engaged in bridge-building behaviours, or affinity-seeking and –maintaining, with their stepgrandchildren will be emotionally closer to the latter. However, this clearly was not the case for Alison. The stepgrandchildren rejected or were made to reject the relationship with Alison's biological family. However, it important to remember that Alison's relationship with her stepdaughters was bad and, I think, this could also partly explain why the relationship between the stepgrandparents and the stepgrandchildren was distant.

Alison saw the ideal relationship between her biological family and her stepchildren as one of reciprocity.  She clearly expected her stepchildren to show their appreciation of her biological family's efforts to engage in relationship-building and was upset that her stepchildren were, in her view, only taking from her biological family. Although Alison was an isolated case in my research, some scholars note that non-residential parents often feel exploited, both emotionally and materially, by the stepchildren (Artlip et al, 1993; Ahrons, 1994; Ganong and Coleman, 1994; Nielsen, 1999). However, I think it is important to bear in mind that just because a relationship between the stepgrandparents and the stepgrandchildren was 'one way' and emotionally distant, this does not mean that it was intrinsically pathological. Relationships in any family can be, and often are, disappointing, distant and confusing (Nelson, 2013).

Dawn was the only stepmother in this group who reported that her biological mother had some initial problems accepting her choice of her second but not first partner.

> First time she had no opinion about it ... I think she just got on with it. The second time she had lots of opinions about it! Arhm… she was, well, she was of a generation shall we say... she's seen me widowed and I think it was the only time I saw my mother cry, it was the only time I saw her sob. After that she was incredibly protective of me, understandably – this is how I would be with my girls. My mother was not impressed when I got with Hugh. As I told you, the man with no job and arhm... two children... I was going to tie myself down with two more children...

The first time Dawn embarked on a relationship with a man who had biological children from the previous marriage, Dawn reported that her biological mother had no problems and 'no opinion' about it. However, when Dawn started a relationship with a man with biological children the second time round, Dawn's biological mother was against it. It is clear that Dawn's biological mother was concerned for her biological daughter and that she had various reservations. First, Dawn's biological mother witnessed her biological daughter lose her first husband so she was protective of Dawn. Second, Dawn's biological mother did not view Dawn's partner as a suitable candidate for a husband because he was a house-husband as he had no money-earning job. Third, Dawn's biological mother was sceptical about it, presumably because she saw the difficulties Dawn had had to go through in her first stepfamily, although Dawn did not say that specifically. Yet despite the opposition on the part of Dawn's biological mother, she was supportive of her biological daughter.

The stepgrandmother viewed the existence of the stepgrandchildren as a barrier to Dawn's full enjoyment of life as the stepchildren were tying her down – similarly to what Hannah and her biological parents saw as problems that would be detrimental to the happiness of Hannah – and her new partner was in a position to look after her biological daughter and her biological children financially. However, the stepgrandmother was reported to have grown fond of the stepgrandchildren in time, and gave them presents and sent cards just as she did for her biological grandchildren.  The stepgrandmother also warmed to her son-in-law. Clearly the

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stepgrandmother, like other stepgrandmothers discussed here, was predominantly worried about the happiness of her biological daughter.

It was evident from the stepmothers' narratives that their biological parents, especially the biological mothers, were immensely important for them and the stepfamily as a whole. The stepgrandparents', in most cases, instant acceptance of the stepgrandchildren and the new son-in-law and their inclusion in day-to-day family time were seen by the stepmothers as an inseparable part of stepfamily life. It was important for the stepmothers to feel supported by, and be able to talk to, their biological mothers about stepmothering but it was equally important that there was a continued and deepening relationship between their biological parents and their stepchildren.

*The Biological Parents Who Built Walls – Jane*

Jane was the only stepmother who reported that her biological mother and other family members had built walls in the stepfamily. However, this wall-building did not stem from the stepfamily *per se* but rather from the family circumstances. The relationship between the biological mother and daughter broke down and 'it's all gone very, very wrong. Very wrong. Yes.' This in turn, translated into a breakdown of the relationship between the stepgrandchildren and the stepgrandmother even though they had a good relationship to begin with.

> There was a relationship and my mother was very good and they were, my stepchildren haven't got any grandparents alive. I think, arhm... they quite liked the idea that my mother and father were coming and my mum was very good at sort of Christmas presents and birthdays and all the rest of it, it couldn't have been better, it could have gone on being OK.

Because Jane's stepchildren's biological grandparents were dead, the stepgrandparents provided a replacement for the dead biological grandparents. It seemed that the stepgrandparents and the stepchildren 'liked' this grandparents relationship; the stepgrandchildren enjoyed the company of the stepgrandparents, and the stepgrandparents, particularly the stepgrandmother, had been 'very good' at

manifesting her affection through giving gifts. It was clear that Jane, like other stepmothers, viewed gift-giving and spending time together as important ways in which the stepgrandparents showed affection for and inclusion of the stepfamily members. And because the relationship between the stepgrandparents and the stepgrandchildren had gone well, there was a sense of loss and sadness in Jane's narrative, that this relationship was no more. Jane was not only sad and disappointed that she had lost the relationship with her biological family but also that the stepchildren lost their 'replacement' grandparents, the only grandparents they had left. Importantly, Jane did not express the same sadness for her biological sons who also lost contact with their maternal biological grandparents but perhaps because her children still had their paternal biological grandparents that loss was from her perspective not as acute as for her stepchildren.

The breakdown of relationships in Jane's biological family was a complex process that took many years to develop. Jane thought that there were three key reasons why her relationship with her biological family had ended: 1) Jane and her second husband had had an affair, 2) Jane's second husband's wealth and 3) the close relationship Jane and her biological family had had when she was a single mother. This is how Jane talked about them:

> Well, I think I was on my own for so long... but while the children were younger as well so they could all help, they all felt they had a role to play and they could help and they did. I mean I didn't ask for it but they were very kind. My mother especially, who's, she's a whole story on her own arhm... but... they were very, very helpful so I think when I... and then there's moral issues obviously involved so you have to get through that but on the whole they were... I think she was pleased that I've met someone.

When Jane was a single mother, her biological family, particularly her biological mother – who as I mentioned earlier was also heavily involved with her stepgrandchildren – helped and supported her and her two biological children. There was a sense in Jane's narrative that her single-mother family and her biological parents created a close-knitted unit. Such a family setup, as I shall explain later, appeared to make it extremely difficult for the biological family when it came to building bridges with the stepfamily.

Jane was appreciative of her biological mother's help and noted that despite the morally problematic basis of the relationship between Jane and her second husband, Jane's biological mother was supportive of her biological daughter's relationship, she was pleased for Jane. The fact that Jane and her second husband had the affair was clearly an issue that Jane and her biological family had to 'get through', which I think suggests that they had the capacity and ability to discuss and resolve conflicts and problems. Yet it seems that the wealth of Jane's second husband was impossible for them to overcome.

Although Jane's biological family knew about the wealth of the son-in-law, the moment Jane moved into her second husband's house,[29] the family was caught in a downward spiral. I had to remove certain information here as Jane asked for it to not be included in the transcript but the gist of the problem that led to the biological family break up was Jane's decision to host her biological parents' wedding anniversary party at her new home.

> It was OK while we were still renting another place, it did start to change when we came here and I think my sister - who's seven years younger - we were very close, we don't speak now because of something I did [removed]. I did our parents' wedding anniversary here. We did it but then, since then my sister's been dreadful and awful, it's destructed the whole family. For me - I'm very much the one, the black sheep now; my parents hardly speak to me but that was jealousy, I think, on my mother's part. It's a massive, massive upset for me and I think, I think it happened, because of it, it's made me concentrate more on this unit. Because I haven't got any fall back now onto my family now.

It was difficult to ascertain who was more responsible for building walls between the family members. Jane accepted her part in the breakdown of the relationship,

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[29] Before Jane and her stepfamily moved to her second husband's house, they lived in rented accommodation for a number of years. The reason why it took them so long to move into the house was because Jane's second husband's ex-wife was still living there.

particularly between herself and her biological sister, but she also thought that the fragmented relationship with her biological parents was the result of the conflict with her biological sister. Jane also indicated that jealousy, on her biological family's part, was one of the contributing factors in the 'destruct[ion] of the whole family' including the stepfamily because her stepsons lost grandparent figures and her second husband lost a family-in-law.

The loss of the biological family support was painful for Jane and forced her to focus on, and readjust the position of, her stepfamily (consisting of her two biological sons from her previous marriage and her second husband's biological children). Jane's stepfamily, in a sense, had to become her source of support because she did not have 'any fall back onto [her] own [biological] family'. Braithwaite and colleagues (2010: 396) refer to such a family as 'voluntary kin as substitute family', that is Jane's stepfamily replaced her biological family in emotional support. It is interesting that Jane seemed not to look for that sort of support from her stepfamily before the biological family relationship breakdown. But Jane's case was the exception in my sample.

The In-Laws

As previously mentioned, stepmothers' parents-in-law can build bridges or raise walls between themselves and stepmothers, and their biological children from previous relationships (Ganong, 2008). Kalish and Visher (1981) argue that remarriage, or re-partnering, of grandparents' biological child is stressful for grandparents who are faced with the loss of control and physical as well as emotional closeness with their divorced biological children and grandchildren. They argue further that grandparents might be very weary and critical of a stepparent, and they can try to sabotage the developing stepfamily relationships by withdrawing emotional and material support. This was definitely the case for two stepmothers in my sample. However, the majority – eleven – of the stepmothers whose parents-in-law were alive noted they built bridges and were great supporters of the stepmother and the stepfamily, including the stepmothers' biological children from previous relationships. Exceptionally, one stepmother had a relationship with her former mother-in-law, which resulted in her

biological son from her second marriage having a relationship with her too – these findings are also new as these stepfamily members' roles in this context are unexplored in research.

Just as in the previous section this one is divided into two: 1) where the parents-in-law built walls between themselves and the stepmother and their biological children, and 2) where the family-in-law, including one sister-in-law and ex-mother-in-law, built bridges with the stepmothers and their biological children. In the first part I focus on Dawn and Alison's stories exclusively as these were the only stepmothers who reported almost non-existent and fraught relationships with their in-laws. In the second part I will focus on Nancy and Hannah in particular, as their stories represent the majority of the stepmothers in my sample. Later in the section I will concentrate on Nancy's and Emma's experiences as they were unusual – the former was atypical because of the role her sister-in-law played in the stepfamily and the latter because she had a continued relationship with her ex-mother-in-law.

*Parents-In-Law Who Built Walls*

Despite the vast differences between Dawn's and Alison's experiences, they had three issues in common with regards to the relationship they had with their in-laws. One, both stepmothers were rejected from the start by the prospective in-laws. Two, the stepmothers' husbands' relationship with their biological parents was markedly strained as a result of the stepmother's appearance in their lives. And three, the stepmothers were rejected by the in-laws from the start and were never accepted by them.

*Dawn*

From the start Dawn and her biological children from her first marriage were rejected by her new mother-in-law[30] – as Dawn's second husband's biological father was dead there was no relationship there.

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[30] Dawn's second stepfamily.

Hugh's mother didn't approve of us getting together and whilst... and before we were married, Hugh's mother... oh... god... Hugh's mother supported him, paid his bills, phone bills, trips for the children [...] When Hugh and I got together, when he said that we were an item, Hugh's mother just lost it basically, really lost it with us. Julian was due to go on a trip and when Hugh said that we, Dawn and I... and she said that 'if you want Dawn, she can pay for everything for you. I'm not paying for anything anymore' and she won't pay for his phone bill and we weren't even engaged at this stage... in front of her grandson.

Dawn's story with her mother-in-law resembles that of Jane's in so far as the single resident parent was supported by the biological family. Dawn's partner was a single father for some time before he became involved with her and received a lot of emotional and financial help from his biological mother. It would seem that during this time, Dawn's partner, his biological children and his mother were very close and she had a lot of control over his and the biological grandchildren's lives, particularly financially, as Hugh was a stay-at-home father who was on benefits. An arrangement where a biological grandparent was actively involved with their divorced-with-residency child has been commonly reported in research (see Kalish and Visher, 1981; Ganong, 2008). The research findings show that grandparents struggle to adjust to the new partner of their biological adult child, particularly with relinquishing some of the power and sharing both their biological child and grandchild/ren with a stepmother and her biological children (Kalish and Visher, 1981; Ganong, 2008). This was evident in Dawn's narrative. Her mother-in-law lost the power that came from financially providing for her biological son's family and used it as a bargaining tool with him. Basically Dawn's husband had to make a choice between his biological mother's financial help, without which he would be struggling, and the relationship with Dawn. The relationship between the son and his mother was co-dependent; the son was reliant on the support of his mother in order to support his children, his mother, presumably, gained importance and power. Dawn's presence disrupted that relationship and the grandmother seemed desperate to go back to the previous status quo. Therefore, it should not be surprising that Dawn was not accepted by her mother-in-law but this does not explain why she rejected her biological son and her biological and stepgrandchildren.

I think that because Dawn's mother-in-law's attempts to emotionally and materially blackmail did not bring the desired result – that is the end of the relationship between Dawn and Hugh – the mother-in-law turned her attention onto her biological grandchildren. Her strategy was to take away the financial support from her biological grandchildren, particularly from the grandson.

> So not only they had a complicated relationship with their [biological] mother who abandoned them, they got the evil grandmother the minute Hugh and I got together... so it became a very negative influence. Poor Julian. *He's gonna end up even more screwed up than he is.* She built the relationship with the children. Their beloved grandmother... and she looked after them a lot before Hugh and I got together.

Another similarity between Dawn and Jane was that both stepmothers felt that the strained relationship with grandparents was depriving their stepchildren of a meaningful and important relationship. Although Dawn tried to make light of her stepson 'go[ing to] end up even more screwed up than he is', there was a real sense of sadness and worry in her voice. For Dawn's stepchildren the loss of the relationship with their biological grandmother was doubly painful because they had no relationship with their biological mother who abandoned them and now their biological grandmother was rejecting them as well.

It is interesting how Dawn described the evolution of the grandmother from a beloved grandmother to 'evil grandmother' – an interesting twist from the wicked stepmother and an interesting finding considering that generally speaking grandmothers are positively stereotyped (Ganong and Coleman, 1998). As Dawn noted, her mother-in-law 'became a very negative influence' in the stepfamily life and was actively raising walls between herself and the stepfamily. Sadly, the 'evil grandmother' was not a phase in Dawn's mother-in-law life. As the mother-in-law struggled to adjust to the new family setup, she continued her rejection of it. For example,

> So she, she wouldn't speak to us, she wouldn't be with the family... she... she... was just horrible. And I was hoping that she'd realize that Hugh and I were perfect together and that she would find it in her heart to come around to

us, I never wanted to burn the bridges with her. I wish I had now. But hindsight is a wonderful thing.

Dawn's mother-in-law was not involved in affinity-seeking and -maintaining behaviour, she actively raised walls. Nonetheless, Dawn still sought her mother-in-law's acceptance and was hopeful that she would eventually become part of the family. Thus, Dawn was prepared to keep the channels of communication open between her and her mother-in-law, although she wished she had not. The stepmother did so not only because she wanted her mother-in-law's acceptance. The events following the wedding invitations and the wedding of Dawn and Hugh, made it clear how the mother-in-law envisaged the relationship between her, Dawn and her biological children and who was in the family.

> But it was all... it's just like when we did the wedding invitations... until a day before the wedding we got a letter from her saying: 'Barbara Smith [mother-in-law] will attend the wedding of [Dawn and Hugh] but not attending with pleasure.' And on my wedding day she didn't speak to me. I spoke to her, she didn't speak to me and I was the bride! And when we got back all the presents have been laid out by all the children for us... there was a pile of presents for the children as well and arhm... she sent a present for Julian and Theresa [stepchildren] but none for Jasmine and Ruby [Dawn's biological children from her previous marriage]. She never acknowledged my children. Ever. It was if they didn't exist. [Crying] and the wedding present – seems funny now – but it was addressed to Hugh. My name wasn't on it! [Laughing]  She didn't acknowledge me. So I had no support from my mother-in-law.

At the first glance, it does not seem as significant that Dawn's mother-in-law only responded to the wedding invitation a day before the event but I think it was a strong gesture intended to show displeasure with the wedding and her lack of acceptance of it. Its aim was to emotionally hurt the stepfamily as a last-ditch attempt at exerting power. When this did not work the mother-in-law did not talk to her daughter-in-law, did not include her in the wedding present and excluded the stepgrandchildren. Unlike the stepgrandparents discussed in the previous section, the stepgrandmother did not make the gesture of officially and publically welcoming the stepgrandchildren into the

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family, she made it clear that neither Dawn nor her biological children were part of her family, and marriage was not going to change that. The exclusion of Dawn from the wedding present address and not giving the stepgrandchildren presents whilst giving them to her biological grandchildren was a clear sign that they were rejected by the stepgrandmother. For the mother-in-law, family was defined by biological ties and consisted only of her, her biological son and his biological children. Marriage, although an official way of becoming family, would not change how the mother-in-law thought about her family membership.

However, by continuing the wall-building between the biological and 'married' family, the mother-in-law eventually undermined the biological foundations of her family. Dawn's second husband, like Dawn, tried to build bridges between his family and his biological mother, and both were very understanding towards her.

> When Hugh and I got together and it wasn't great timing because she's just lost her husband but... it was different for her... she was older, I was younger but I knew a little bit what she was going through. I understood widowhood, I have been there and I was very sensitive to her feelings. And when Hugh and I got together ... on my birthday, my birthday it was Sunday, we saw each other in church that morning and she knew it was my birthday because the choir sung happy birthday to me and he went and had a Sunday lunch with his mother.
> But she put him in a difficult ... because he got so stressed out by it that he didn't want to see her because he wasn't to speak about me at all or if he did she would just... she didn't think we should get married arhm... being religious, second marriage... only she wouldn't speak to me, I'm a widow, I'm allowed to get married in a church if I want to. You [husband] can't but I can. No. Because we need to concentrate of on bringing up our children and not ourselves.

Because both Dawn and her mother-in-law 'experienced widowhood', Dawn was able to empathize with her and saw it as part of their shared experience that had the potential to bring the two women closer together. This was why Dawn and her second husband gave his biological mother the time and space to adjust to their relationship, perhaps too much of both. And in so doing they seemed to have enabled Dawn's

mother-in-law to exert her control over their life and her demands grew. As the demand grew the distance between her and her biological son grew as well.

Clearly religion was a significant barrier to Dawn and Hugh marrying because he was divorced and they were expected to focus on raising their 'own' sets of children and not think of themselves. However, the actions of the grandmother seem to have drawn Dawn and her stepfamily closer together. Despite the lack of support and active wall-raising, the stepfamily was strong and when the grandmother died, they did not seem to be phased by her last act of rejection.

> When Hugh's mother died and arhm... and she left all her money... well... she divided her money into thirds... third to her friend, third to Theresa – she was 17 – not in a trust and the final third she divided third to the cathedral, third to a charity and third to her neighbour and she left us a £10000 and a letter saying that she wasn't leaving money to Hugh because he was financially stable and didn't need it.

The grandmother's last gesture was to exclude her biological son and grandson from any significant inheritance – although why the grandson was excluded was unclear. Even though Dawn's mother-in-law was adamant that family was defined by biology and would not accept Dawn and her biological children into her family, her actions caused her biological relations, in the form of her son and grandchildren, to distance themselves from her. Furthermore, the mother-in-law effectively also excluded her biological son and biological grandson. Kalish and Visher (1981) argue that parents of divorced children often use their power to destabilise the new relationship. This was evident in Dawn's mother-in-law's behaviour and was also the case for Alison, whose story I will discuss next.

*Alison*

Alison, like Dawn, was rejected by her in-laws from the beginning; they saw her as a significant problem in their vision of what marriage was, particularly when children are present.

When we first started going out and his father met me for the first time and he said: 'I hope you understand we do think Liam should return to the family home, nothing personal, but they have children. If they didn't have children we wouldn't feel we had the right to interfere... for him to return to his family and make sure he does'... They never liked his first wife, they had made that perfectly clear...

It was striking how upfront Alison's father-in-law was with his opinions about marriage to Alison when they first met. His disapproval of the relationship was impossible to miss, and not surprisingly Alison remembered it vividly after many years. This was a strong message which conveyed the exclusion of Alison, and intended to make her feel unwelcome, and perhaps even prompt her to break up with Liam. The father-in-law thought it was his right, or duty, to interfere in his biological son's life because the latter had biological children. This stance seemed to stem from the idea that people should remain married 'for the sake of the children', even if he did not like or approve of the ex-daughter-in-law.

Although Alison's parents-in-law openly disliked their former daughter-in-law, they thought that 'leaving the children' was unacceptable. For example, Alison noted:

I think I'm... they didn't want their son to divorce, they thought... the phrase: 'you made your bed, now lie in it' [laughs] came up quite a few times. They thought that leaving children was... I think because they thought he left his children... he lost all the rights to have any say in their future so… when his ex-wife wanted to move the children, they supported her, they felt that since he had left the relationship... she needed the support because she was left with the children. What she wanted to do was basically, was perfectly ok and that because he left the marriage he had to like it or lump it, his responsibility is to apologize to her for the rest of his life...

Although Alison tried to make light of her parents-in-law' phrase about making one's bed and lying in it, she clearly was not amused by it. For them marriage was for life, it was a duty that could not be discharged because there were difficulties – these difficulties were based around one of the maternal biological parents who was

reported to be a known sex offender – therefore they used the phrase. Importantly, and despite the reason for the divorce, Alison thought that the parents-in-law held their biological son as solely responsible for the breakdown of the marriage, particularly because he 'left his children'. The fact that he had left his ex-wife, not his biological children, and fought in court for regular contact with his biological children seemed to be of little consequence for his biological parents. Such a stance of the biological parents of adult divorced children was highly unusual amongst my interviewees; none of them reported a similar experience. I think it possible that Alison's in-laws' alliance with their former daughter-in-law may have partly stemmed from their fear of losing contact with their biological grandchildren and perhaps from misunderstanding the reasons for the divorce.

It was not surprising that Alison struggled to make sense of her parents-in-law's stance on divorce, remarriage and her, as she explained further:

So I think they don't know what to make of me... I think they're uncomfortable that they have a divorced, remarried son, they keep saying that they're the only one in the family that had a divorce. They are working-class people from the North. I don't think they've got... I have no idea of working-class families from the North standards... I don't want to mock their standards; I just don't understand what they are standing for. I don't get it. I'm quite puzzled. And they are quite traditional, they tell my husband that it's a shame I have to work. My father-in-law feels very bad that I have to keep working and that his son is somehow not looking after me. I think he quite likes me, he likes my mum because they both play golf… in a different world you can see my mum and his dad marrying [laughs] and they'd be very happy. So his dad has this sort of guilty relationship with me and he quite likes me but wished that I wasn't around and that his son was still married albeit... his solution was that he could live somewhere else and just come back on a weekend, that somehow they didn't have to be properly married.

Alison's presence made her parents-in-law feel uncomfortable. It seemed that they did not want to make her feel uncomfortable, as their stance was not 'personal', her father-in-law liked Alison, it seemed to be a moral issue for them. Her presence was making their efforts to 'keep the family together' futile. Alison was clearly perplexed

by her in-laws' attitude and behaviour. They were different from her but she tried to understand them without being patronizing. For Alison these alien standards were rooted in her parents-in-law's working-class upbringing in the North of England. These standards were, in a sense, the barrier that prevented the parents-in-law from accepting the divorce and remarriage partly because their family was the only one who had experienced this; and partly because, it would seem, they thought that their son's divorce reflected badly on them as parents because they did not bring up their son 'properly' (Johnson and Vinick, 1982). The barriers, and perhaps even the shame of the divorce, were so strong that the parents-in-law thought it was better that the marriage remained pro forma and was managed on a weekend basis, that is that their biological son lived apart from the family home and did family at weekends. Alison was clearly baffled by such a solution.

Interestingly, Alison interjected that she thought that her father-in-law and her biological mother would make a great couple. This, together with Alison's lack of mentioning of her mother-in-law and her father-in-law's fondness of her, might suggest that she had a closer relationship with her husband's biological father than his biological mother. I would also suggest that the attitude of Alison's father-in-law might be an indication that he was trapped in societal pressure and expectations – and perhaps even from his wife – regarding divorce and remarriage. These prevented him from having a different relationship with his daughter-in-law, accepting her and his biological son's remarriage. This would explain why Alison thought that he had a guilty relationship with her.

Because Alison and her partner were not married there was, in some members of the stepfamily's view, a real possibility that they would separate and he would go back to his first wife and biological children.

> They were the reasons why we got married... it was to stop the constant, constant [emphasis as in the transcript] possibility hanging in the air unsaid that this was reversible... so it was harder for the in-laws, children and ex-wife to see it as reversible. And my father-in-law pulled my husband aside for a 20-minute chat after the wedding to tell him how unreasonable he thought he was being for even consulting lawyers. And I believe my husband when he tells me that he will never forgive his father for one) raising it and two) for raising it at his wedding!

Unlike Dawn's mother-in-law who did not see marriage as a significant step that would change her approach to her biological son's new relationship, for Alison's parents-in-law, as well as the stepchildren and their biological mother, marriage was a clear sign that their relationship was permanent. However, similarly to Dawn's mother-in-law, Alison's father-in-law did not think it inappropriate to express his opinions about his biological son's actions at his wedding. Alison's father-in-law's actions at her wedding were closely linked to his view that their biological son had lost all rights to have a say in how his ex-wife decided to bring up their biological children. The disapproval this time was transferred from the objections to divorce and remarriage into the actions of their biological son regarding the move of the children to another part of the country. This was clearly unacceptable to Alison's husband and appears to have marked a further, and perhaps more significant, breakdown in the relationship between the son and his parents. The actions of Alison's husband's biological father were so significant that the son strongly felt that he would 'never forgive his father' for his total lack of support of him and his stepfamily.

Both Alison and Dawn experienced not only rejection by their in-laws but also lack of support and approval from them. This translated into strained and distant relationships between the in-laws and their biological sons. The grandparents were actively raising walls and appeared to be completely opposed to the new stepfamilies for fear of losing control or face and perhaps contact with their biological grandchildren. However, these were the only two sets of in-laws who behaved in this way. The vast majority were supportive of their biological sons and their new families and I shall discuss them next.

*In-Laws Who Built Bridges*

Just like the stepgrandparents, the in-laws (including the parents-in-law, one former mother-in-law and one sister-in-law) built bridges between themselves and the stepfamily, they accepted the new stepmother and her biological children from her previous marriage (if she had any), and supported their biological son in his efforts to build his stepfamily. Importantly, most of the parents-in-law rejected their former daughters-in-law, particularly where they held her responsible for the ending of the marriage.

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Fine. Again I think I met them through work… because they were up for something. Fine. Arhm… I think they were quite happy for that, his mum in particular… John, they knew… he'd gone to tell them what had happened because they've known her for well, since she was about 15 or 16, they've been together from school really so I don't think… nothing like that had ever happened in their family at all. The biggest thing that ever happened really so arhm… I think they were… I think they were quite shocked. Arhm… his dad just… didn't want anything to do with Rachel from then on… not a thing, just like she was dead to him arhm… Although, you know they kept in contact with the children… and I think she contacted them a few times, probably quite shocked and… I think his mum had a couple of contacts with her and not been, she wouldn't want to sort of die without having had some sort or more contact… very ambivalent about… arhm… yeah… yeah… it is difficult. (Hannah)

Hannah's parents-in-law were welcoming towards her as their new daughter-in-law and were happy that their biological son had found a new partner who could help him emotionally heal as his marital breakup was a painful experience for him and for them. The grandparents sided with their biological son and against their ex-daughter-in-law who, in their view, was wholly responsible for the divorce. The relationship between the former in-laws ceased to exist, particularly for the ex-father-in-law to whom she was 'dead', although Hannah's mother-in-law had sporadic contact with her ex-daughter-in-law and had ambivalent feelings about her. I think it is possible that the former mother-in-law continued contact with her former daughter-in-law because women are socially conditioned to be kin-keepers, keep the channels of communication open and not burn the bridges (McGrew and Walker, 2004; Weaver and Coleman, 2005; Schmeeckle, 2007; Ganong, 2008). This would explain why the biological mother tried to contact her former in-laws and why she was surprised by their distance and lack of communication. The cooling off or even cessation of contact between the former in-laws was a common response amongst my interviewees. For example Nancy noted: 'Derek's mum couldn't cope with her so… she doesn't speak to her anymore.' In Nancy's case the biological mother would contact her former

parents-in-law in order to complain to them about their biological son, to influence their biological son to do as she would like.

Notably, Hannah quickly remarked that the breakdown of the relationship between the former in-laws did not impact negatively on the relationship between the biological grandparents and their biological grandchildren, which I think is a clear indication that the grandparents did not reject their biological grandchildren; it was just their biological mother whom they could not forgive. It would seem that the ex-daughter-in-law became the 'wicked woman', just like Dawn's mother-in-law became the 'evil grandmother', whose actions were seen as detrimental to the wellbeing of the stepfamily. Perhaps this is why there was a sense of relief on the grandparents' side when Hannah appeared in their biological son's life. The presence of the stepmother was perceived by her new in-laws as a welcome and positive change in their biological son's life, a person that was to be cherished.

However, in the absence of a relationship between the former parents and daughters-in-law and non-existent communication between the former spouses, some stepfamilies had an intermediary member of their family who maintained a degree of connectedness between the members. Hannah's mother-in-law might have functioned as such a go-between but this was difficult to ascertain. Nancy's sister-in-law was certainly playing the role of intermediary. This is how Nancy recalled her role:

> I know that Derek's sister spoke with her [biological mother] about me, how I am with the children and I know that she told, Derek's sister, told her that I'm really good with them, which made me feel kind of more… better about it somehow like his family would say: 'Oh she's good with the kids.' and that sort of thing and made me feel somehow more… secure about it.

Nancy's sister-in-law role in the new stepfamily was to relay information between the non-residential and the residential household – a role that seemed to be important for both the stepmother and the biological mother. For Nancy it mattered that her sister-in-law was positive and complimentary about her parenting abilities and skills to the biological mother, which boosted her confidence; she saw it as being recognized by the stepfamily members as an able parent. The sister-in-law built bridges between the two mothers but clearly sided with Nancy. In a sense Nancy's sister-in-law was the lynchpin that held the stepfamily in contact with each other.

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Emma's former mother-in-law also appeared to have been the intermediary member of the stepfamily. It is interesting that Emma was the only stepmother who continued to be in touch with her ex-mother-in-law, as did Emma's first biological son with his biological grandmother. This was a particularly unusual story because Emma's second husband adopted her first biological son from her previous marriage, and his biological father had no contact with his biological son.

> Anyway, so I used to see my ex-mother-in-law with the child, with her grandchild, very often… and my [second] husband used to go for coffee as well, right? He [second husband] was bringing up this person's [Emma's ex-mother-in-law] grandson and she's said, she was a beautiful, a lovely lady and said to Ed: 'All I can do' – she had a large family as well – 'all I can do is thank you for bringing up my grandson so well. I will thank you till the day I die.' And I thought how Christian is that? She could thank my husband for actually, he was actually bringing up her son's child. So I actually didn't lose contact with my ex-mother-in-law. When Tim was born, he then asked one day because he used to go with me and see her and he suddenly he said: 'How come I have got three grandmas?' you see what I mean?

It was not just Emma and her biological son from her first marriage that continued to have a relationship with his biological paternal grandmother, Emma's (step-)son and her second husband as well as Emma's and Ed's 'joint' biological child also had a relationship with her. It was clear that the relationship Emma's former mother-in-law had with her step and biological grandchildren was grandparental in character, as Emma's third (joint) son indicated in his question about having three grandmas – Emma's stepfamily included the wider family.

As Emma's ex-husband had no relationship and no contact with his biological son, the role of the grandmother was to keep them connected at least through the relay of information about the grandson. And by including Emma's new husband and the two non-biological grandsons into the family, the former mother-in-law was able to do that. The grandmother further showed her bridge-building behaviour by thanking Emma's second husband for raising her biological grandson. It seemed that it was important for Emma that her first son did not lose all the contact with his paternal

biological family and that her other two sons had another grandparent who enriched their lives.

The Biological Mothers Who Were Stepmothers

There was some scepticism about stepfamilies from the stepmothers' biological mothers who were also stepmothers, Monica – who was herself stepmothered – and Amanda. Although these biological mothers built bridges between them and the stepfamily, they were reserved about their biological daughters embarking on the stepmotherly role. These stepgrandmothers, like Dawn's biological mother, had strong reservations about their biological daughters entering the stepfamily but not about their biological daughters' choice of partner. This is how Monica recalled her biological mother's reaction to Monica's stepmotherhood,

> I think she's very wary. She's had, she's been a stepmother in a stepfamily that didn't work out and she had stepsons, which she's struggled with. Arhm… so she's quite… anti-stepfamily; she's supportive of me and my life and always sends Betty and Millie birthday cards, Christmas presents and all that kind of thing. She totally includes them but I think she thought: 'My god! Why would you take on two extra children?'

As this quote suggests, Monica's biological mother was against stepfamilies because her own stepfamily had been difficult and in the end 'did not work out', particularly with her stepsons. But I think it is important to add that Monica was also stepmothered (as discussed in previous chapters), which could also have impacted on Monica's biological mother's wariness about the stepfamily. Based on her own experiences as stepmother, she presumably saw the potential difficulties that lay ahead for Monica.

It is clear why Monica thought becoming a stepmother would be a challenge. She had experienced being stepmothered and her biological mother stepmothering and both these experiences were problematic and, in her biological mother's case, did not last. However, it is interesting that Monica thought her biological mother viewed becoming a stepmother as meaning 'tak[ing] on two extra children'. 'Taking on' indicates a degree of responsibility for the children who were added to the existing

biological children Monica had from her previous marriage. It seems that Monica and her biological mother were very aware of the potential problems of being part of a stepfamily. Yet Monica did not report that she or her biological mother worried specifically about Monica becoming a residential stepmother to a profoundly disabled child who would require a lot of time and care.

Despite Monica's biological mother's opposition to stepfamily, she was still supportive of her. The stepgrandmother embraced the stepgrandchildren and included them in family occasions such as Christmas and birthdays. Monica clearly indicated that '[her] family accepted his children…'

Like Monica's, Amanda's biological mother was hesitant about her biological daughter being part of a stepfamily.

> Well, I remember saying to my mum ... when I was getting ready for him to pick me up ... and I said ... like I said to my mum what was going on. And my mum is like: 'You know it's very difficult if someone's got children' ... it was for me with your dad because ... she said, you know, 'it can be really difficult' ... She was very worried for me. She wasn't very particularly happy about the situation. Not that she didn't like Bob, she liked him. She thought the world of Bob … but she was very worried. She was very much of the opinion: 'You should have your own family.' Because … she could see what problems do arise from stepchildren. She's experienced it herself. She's been divorced herself. You know, so she has seen the whole picture. She's seen the other families, you know.

There was the same pattern of initial scepticism towards and attempts to dissuade the biological daughter from becoming a stepmother. But none of these stepgrandmothers had problems with accepting their biological daughters' partners. Amanda was explicit that her biological mother accepted and 'liked' her partner but she was worried for Amanda being part of a stepfamily. Amanda's biological mother viewed one's own, i.e. biological, family as less problematic than having a stepfamily because of her own experience as a stepmother and the experiences of others. It seems that the stepgrandmothers tried to protect their biological daughters from the potential problems that could arise in a stepfamily. None of these stepgrandmothers had any positive experiences of being in a stepfamily or of stepmotherhood. Hence they

viewed them with suspicion and were worried about the happiness of their biological daughters. Nonetheless the stepgrandmothers were supportive of their biological daughters' choices.

Amanda sought advice from her biological mother about being a stepmother. Although the stepgrandmother could have tried to dissuade Amanda from becoming a stepmother more fervently, this did not happen.

> I've never been out with anybody who had any children so it was and … but ... I remember her saying: 'Just be yourself.' And she said: 'They like you or they won't. But you just be yourself.'

The advice she received from her biological mother was similar to the one that most of the stepmothers received from their partners about meeting the stepchildren (as discussed in the previous chapter). Although some researchers suggest that it is the stepmothers who should modify their behaviour in order to suit the stepchildren (see for example, Smith, 1990; Hart, 2009; Sosnowska-Buxton, 2011), the stepgrandmothers knew from their own experiences that it was best for their biological daughters to remain 'themselves' in their relationships with their stepchildren and there was no point, in a sense, trying to be someone they were not.

Just as other biological mothers of stepmothers, Amanda's biological mother accepted the stepgrandchildren and developed a meaningful relationship with them.

> Fine, yes. They don't see a lot of her because me mum lives on her own. And … we as much … as much as I see her, I see quite a lot of me [sic] mum. It tends to be sort of through the week, you know, because of the hours that I work … so she doesn't really, I mean she does see them ... they're very good with her, you know ... they give her, you know, if she's been at our house one of them will take her home, you know. Mike did a few plumbing jobs for me mum, you know ... so yeah, they have a good, good relationship, you know. And they're always, you know polite and very nice to her, you know. Which has pleased her, you know, as time goes on, as I've said she was quite worried for me but you only want the best for your kids, don't you?

Amanda's good relationships with her stepdaughters pleased Amanda's biological mother, as did the close relationship with her stepgrandchildren. This would seem to have reassured Amanda's biological mother that being a stepmother had turned out to be good for her biological daughter and she did not need to worry about her. Over the years it would appear the bridge-building behaviours were reversed and the stepgranddaughters were doing them.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by asking what roles the wider members of a stepfamily could or should have with each other and noted that these roles are unclear in stepfamilies. I pointed out that this is a largely unexplored area of research on stepmothers, and one that I wanted to focus on. However, the stepmothers set the agenda for this chapter by focusing entirely on their biological parents, particularly their biological mothers, families-in-law, predominantly their mothers-in-law. Two stepmothers mentioned other members of their families, namely a sister-in-law and a former mother-in-law.

It was clear that the stepmothers' biological and in-law parents largely took grandparental roles with their stepgrandchildren, even if the stepgrandchildren referred to them by their first names. It was also clear that, according to the stepmothers, their in-laws – or former in-laws – and biological parents functioned as grandparents to their stepchildren, as seen in Jane's and Emma's narratives.

On the whole, the stepmothers' in-law and biological families build bridges between the two families. For the stepmothers, their biological mothers were they key family members to whom the stepmothers turned for support. The stepmothers wanted their biological families, in particular their biological mothers, to accept and welcome their new partners and their biological/adoptive children from their previous relationships. The help and encouragement the stepmothers received from their biological mothers regarding their stepmotherhood was very important for them and they sought their biological mothers' approval. The stepmothers also expected their biological families to accept the stepchildren and nurture relationships with them. And that is what happened in most cases. Thus contradicting the limited existing research that there is on this topic.

Where the interviewees' biological mothers were also the stepmothers, there was an initial hesitation in their acceptance of their daughters' stepfamilies.

Nonetheless, the stepmothers sought their biological mothers' advice on how they should approach their stepchildren because of the latter's experience. These biological mothers with time grew very close to their biological daughters' new partners and their stepchildren so that the stepgrandchildren and their stepgrandmother had a relationship independently of their stepmother as evident in Amanda's narrative.

The relationships between the stepmothers and their in-laws appeared to be more problematic, and although the majority of the stepmothers reported to feeling supported and included by their parents-in-law, some stepmothers experienced rejection and hostility, primarily from their mothers-in-law. Importantly where the mothers-in-law were antagonistic towards the stepmothers and their biological children from their previous relationships, this eventually led to a distancing of the relationships between the mothers and their sons but also a strengthening of the stepfamily.

# Chapter 7. Conclusion

<u>Introduction</u>

Stepmothering is a highly emotionally charged process. It is about love, rejection, acceptance and vulnerability. It is complex. The aim of this thesis was to investigate stepmothers' experiences of stepmotherhood as articulated by them (see my research questions, pp. 8-9). My research focus was on how stepmothers reported experiencing and viewed their stepmothering and I concentrated on four main areas of the stepmothers' lives: how the stepmothers viewed their relationships 1) with their stepchildren and 2) the stepchildren's biological/adoptive mothers; 3) how the stepmothers perceived the roles their partners had in shaping their steprelationships; and 4) the stepmothers' views of the impact of their biological and in-law families on the stepfamilies.

In this chapter I shall firstly summarize my findings and how they contribute to knowledge in the fields of Women's and Family Studies. Secondly, I shall revisit three key concepts I drew on in the thesis, namely: stepmother paradox and mother blame, and kinkeeping. Thirdly, I shall reflect on the process of doing doctoral research. In particular I will look back at my personal journey and what I learnt from the research process. Lastly, I shall discuss two future possible areas of research on stepmothers: emotional work and displaying step/families.

<u>My Main Findings</u>

My work clearly shows that the stepmothers had complex lives and that there was no uniformity of patterns amongst them. The research highlighted that there are many ways of being a stepmother and doing stepmothering, both in terms of doing it 'successfully' and 'unsuccessfully' with respect to the different members of the stepfamily constellations. All these ways are, however, underpinned by gendered norms of how to do biological/stepmothering – and the stepmothers rarely questioned these expectations. Even in situations where they appeared to have rejected stereotypical gender practices the stepmothers continued for example to be actively engaged in kin-keeping behaviours commonly associated with women's 'work'.

*Steprelationships*

My approach to the analysis of the steprelationships drew directly on how the stepmothers themselves described them. In so doing I was able to analyse the diverse types of relationships that stepmothers reported having with their stepchildren and to preserve the way in which the stepmothers referred to their own steprelationships. I found that relationships between a stepmother and a stepchild, especially if the stepchild is adult, can be 'good' even if not 'maternal' in 'nature'. I also showed that a stepmother *not* having a steprelationship with a younger-aged stepchild similar to a loving one between biological mother and her biological child did not necessarily mean that such a relationship could not be fulfilling for both, or that such a steprelationship was not 'successful' or not 'working'. The specificity of my interviewees' stepmothering constellations meant that, for the first time, a variety of stepmothers' experiences were discussed together.

All this meant, as I also argued, that steprelationships are complex and should be viewed as a fluid, rather than a fixed state and that – although I categorized each steprelationship as being in one of three categories – all steprelationships 'moved' between different categories, and could have been classed as 'complicated' at some point. I argued that the circumstances of the stepmothers' lives meant that stepmothers had a variety of relationships with their stepchildren, in some instances different relationships with each of their stepchildren, and that some stepmothers continued relationships with their 'former' stepchildren despite the end of the romantic relationship with these children's biological/adoptive fathers. Both these findings are original and new in this context.

Some steprelationships were 'bad' but these were not the majority of the steprelationships my interviewees reported to have had. Some of these steprelationships were underpinned by a rejection of the stepmother and stepchild/ren by either party. 'Good' steprelationships were the majority of the steprelationships the stepmothers reported to have had, and were underpinned by love, although this was not always easily verbally expressed.

I developed the concept of the 'complicated' steprelationship, showing that difficult relationships often stemmed from a recent event which undermined the women's confidence and security in their roles as stepmothers. However, the stepmothers still had a strong sense of family unity and although they felt vulnerable

in relation to their stepchildren, it was evident that the stepmothers had a strong emotional connection to their stepchildren. This, too, is my original finding, as steprelationships have never before been presented and analysed as being in transition from 'good' to 'complicated' and vice versa (see for example Allen et al, 2013).

*Mothers in Stepfamilies*

On reflection the chapter on the relationships between the stepmothers and biological/adoptive mothers was the most difficult chapter to write because of its critical portrayal of the biological/adoptive mothers (I shall discuss 'mother blame' later in this chapter) and because of the sheer diversity of the stepmothers' life circumstances.

The majority of the relationships between the mothers were underpinned by suspicion and mistrust, by certain notions of mothering and stepmothering – where the former requires intensive involvement and the latter passivity and invisibility – and by assumed societal expectations, as well as the women's own, as to how to do step- and biological family. However, it is important to note that there were two 'good' relationships between mothers, not just poor ones.

My research indicates that the 'absence' of a biological/adoptive mother from a stepchild's life (either due to abandonment, being a non-resident parent or death) did not mean that this 'absence' was not experienced, or managed, by the stepmother. I showed that whether the biological/adoptive mother was 'absent' or present, the relationships between the mothers were challenging, particularly regarding issues such as finances and the stepchildren's visits which eventually led to a 'communication breakdown' between the mothers. The stepmothers who experienced a 'communication breakdown', felt that they had regained control over their lives, and the resultant clear separation between the stepmothers' and biological/adoptive mothers' homes furthered their sense of control and disconnectedness. Although the stepmothers noted that the stepchildren were aware of the separateness of their parents and underlying mistrust, they adapted to the 'communication breakdown' relationship better than to open hostilities.

*Biological/Adoptive Fathers*

My findings show that most of the stepmothers thought their partners expected them – but rarely discussed this with them – to fulfil 'traditional' female roles, i.e. nurture the stepchildren emotionally and connect 'naturally' with them. At the same time, the stepmothers themselves also conceptualized their role in gendered terms. Interestingly, the stepmothers viewed their partners as not very communicative about their ideas about stepmothering and somewhat emotionally detached from their biological/adoptive children and the stepmothers. However, this was not necessarily regarded as problematic by the stepmothers but rather as a fact: men simply do not do things such as talking, as Irene noted. My original finding here is that the stepmothers struggled to recognize their partners' active engagement in shaping the steprelationships, unless the partners were doing practical 'things', i.e. changing routines or telling a misbehaving child off. Importantly, however, my research also shows that the biological/adoptive fathers played both direct and indirect roles in shaping the steprelationships by, for example, talking about their children to the stepmothers.

Most of the stepmothers (with the exception of the stepmothers who adopted their stepchildren) were rarely involved in all aspects of the decision-making process regarding the stepchildren. This continued through the years. Both the stepmothers and their partners appeared to take the presence of the stepchildren as a non-negotiable part of life, and it was down to the stepmothers to 'just get on with it', as reported by Marie. And, although on the whole the stepmothers did not complain about this lack of inclusion, they wanted to be informed about the practicalities of their non-residential stepchild/ren's visits, for example.

Furthermore, my research findings reveal that although there were some instances of conflict in the stepfamilies – mainly about the disciplining of the stepchildren and the rejection of the stepmother by the stepchildren – where the biological/adoptive father would side either with his biological/adoptive child/ren or the stepmother, on the whole all stepfamily members managed to resolve their problems constructively for all parties. This is an important and original finding as conflict or problems in stepfamilies are usually portrayed as pathological and destined to result in the breakdown of the stepfamily. Nonetheless, there were instances where intrafamilial

problems were so deeply ingrained that it was impossible for all members to resolve them.

*Biological and In-Law Families*

I started my discussion on the role/s of the stepmothers' biological and in-law families with the assertion that forming stepfamilies seems to affect all members of these families, partly because these roles are not 'institutionalized' – there are no social rules governing definitions of who does what in an extended stepfamily – and partly because forming stepfamilies changes the family's previous status quo. I followed Visher and Visher's (1996) idea that step/grandparents can build bridges or build walls between themselves and the rest of the stepfamily.

Unlike previous research (see for example Allan et al, 2013), my work suggests that in-law and biological families play an important and not a secondary role in supporting and accepting stepmothers in particular, and stepfamilies more generally; and that more family members build bridges than build walls. My finding that other stepfamily members such as the former mothers-in-law or sisters-in-law, function as the lynchpin that can keep two disconnected families connected, is new. Some of the stepgrandparents who built bridges, although not initially enthusiastic about their biological daughters' stepfamilies, in time grew close to their stepgrandchildren and sons-in-law. Importantly, the stepgrandparents' acceptance of their daughters' stepfamilies and the inclusion of the stepgrandchildren in particular in the family were significant for the stepmothers. The stepmothers sought their on biological parents', but mostly their own biological mothers' approval and viewed the stepgrandparents relationship with their stepchildren as important and enriching, particularly if the stepchildren did not have biological grandparents.

Although the stepmothers reported that the majority of their parents-in-law were supportive and friendly towards them, some stepmothers were rejected by the latter. Dawn and Alison were cases in point. In these cases it was evident that the appearance of the stepmother disrupted the familial status quo and that the parents-in-law struggled to adapt and in effect raised walls between themselves and their biological sons' families. I also argued that if step/grandparents raised walls, in effect they isolated themselves from the stepfamily and strengthened it – the opposite of what they intended. This, too, is a new finding.

The stepmothers' unique family circumstances meant that I was able to discuss a variety of family forms, including the stepmothers' biological mothers who were also stepmothers and in doing so introduce a completely new dimension to research in this area. Perhaps understandably, the biological mothers who were also stepmothers were sceptical about their biological daughter becoming stepmothers because of their own often negative experiences of stepmothering. But they were also a great source of support and knowledge for the stepmothers, and in time grew close to their stepgrandchildren. As the biological mothers who were also stepmothers built bridges despite their negative experiences, or unsuccessful stepmothering, this in a sense enabled them to have a positive experience of being part of a stepfamily – this is also a new finding.

The Main Concepts

The precariousness of the stepmothers' position was clearly visible in their narratives. The position of a stepmother is an intersection of the myth of the wicked stepmother with the myth of being a woman and the myth of the instantly-in-love stepmother – and with the myth of a (biological) mother. The specificity of the stepmothers' location at the intersection of these myths meant that they were struggling to manage it because these myths are contradicting and exclusionary. In short they were dealing with the stepmother paradox. What is more, societal and familial expectations regarding step/mothers' role/s only complicate a stepmother's position further. Although the myth of the wicked stepmother was often verbalized and implicit in the stepmothers' narratives, other myths were rarely verbalized but nonetheless pervasive in the stepmothers' stories. This indicates that the roles which are seen as 'natural', i.e. being a woman and a biological mother, are taken for granted but that social roles seen as added ones and secondary to the biological or legal (adoptive) ones are not and therefore require comment.

*Stepmother Paradox and Mother Blame*

The awareness of, and the distancing from, the wicked stepmother myth was present in the stepmothers' narratives and was often referred to (see for example, pp. 64 and 78). What is more, the stepmothers said that they took active steps not to be seen as

(or prove that they were not) a wicked stepmother to all members of their stepfamily constellations and themselves, by avoiding disciplining their stepchildren, for example, thus attempting to become super-good stepmothers (the Cinderella's Stepmother Syndrome). However, the stepmothers who reported that they had not been emotionally close to, and had not 'mothered', their stepchildren said that they were aware that they were viewed as the wicked stepmother who did not care about her stepchild – as was the case for Vicky. The stepmothers who did not adhere to supposedly 'natural' feminine attributes were viewed, in their opinions, as wicked.

Those stepmothers who struggled with being perceived as wicked, in particular those who reported that the biological/adoptive mother was the problematic mother, noted the disparity in the depictions of stepmothers and biological/adoptive mothers and found it to be unfair. The former was perpetually wicked and the latter was always idealized. In these stepmothers' views despite the 'fact' that the biological/adoptive mother was, reportedly, destabilizing the stepfamily or that she was the 'guilty' part in a previous relationship breakdown, etc., the legitimacy of her biological and legal status meant that the biological mother was always the wronged party while the stepmother was always the wicked one.

It seemed that both mothers were locked in mother blame relationships which, I think, stems from the pervasive gender ideas about family roles where doing family is still seen as women's work. Socioculturally it is 'obvious' that neither mother is the good mother because they are both in a stepfamily as 'to mother otherwise [in a non-normative way] is to be abnormal or unnatural' (O'Reilly, 2014: 3) – it is a failure of sorts. In a sense both stepmothers and biological mothers were expected to do the stereotypical gendered tasks in their step-/biological families, in effect stepping onto each other's feminized territories.

Interestingly, most stepmothers despite the pressure to behave and feel according to gender stereotypes did not report the pressure to instantly love their stepchildren; for most of them the myth of the instantly-in-love stepmother did not appear to be significant. Nonetheless, most stepmothers expressed love for, or deep emotional bonds with, their stepchildren, which seemed to be separate from this myth. Yet many stepmothers, for example Suzy, who reported to love or be emotionally close to their stepchildren, expressed these feelings with hesitation, seemingly careful not to step onto the idealized biological mother's territory.

However, in some instances the absence of that love/emotional closeness was problematic for some stepmothers and for some members of their families – for example, for Fran's second husband. On the whole what the stepmothers felt for their stepchildren, and the intensity of that feeling, was largely reported as unproblematic. Interestingly, not loving their stepchildren 'like their own [biological] children' was not problematic for the majority of the stepmothers, thus keeping some emotional distance. Some stepmothers were comfortable in differentiating between one's love for a step and a biological child, while other stepmothers did not report any difference in their love for their step- or biological children.

The key problem for stepmothers was the stepmother paradox because their role required but simultaneously disallowed mothering; furthermore, this myth does not take into consideration that some stepmothers have adult stepchildren who do not require mothering, or that intensive mothering might not work for a particular stepmother. Yet despite this struggle, I argued that most stepmothers managed to resolve this paradox. For some in this category it was more about 'step' than 'mothering' – as seen in the examples of Suzy and Amanda – while for others it was to *only* mother – as in Emma's case. What the stepmothers reported to be feeling towards, and doing with, their stepchildren seemed to be rooted in their specific familial constellations. Importantly, not all stepmothers had young stepchildren. Hence some did not have to deal with the stepmother paradox as was the case for Rose and Donna. It is, however, important to note that Irene (one of the stepmothers who adopted her stepchild) even though she did reconcile the stepmother paradox, struggled with being rejected by her (step)-daughter. However, getting the balance right in terms of the stepmother paradox was an ongoing process for most of the stepmothers.

*Kinkeeping*

The myth of what it means to be a woman seemed to be the most dominant of the myths for the stepmothers in the conceptions of their role/s. This was particularly clear when the stepmothers were encouraging and managing the relationships between their partners and their biological/adoptive children as well as between other stepfamily members even when the relationships were 'bad'.

The stepmothers were reported to be acting as enablers and maintainers of relationships between their partners and their biological/adoptive children, in particular where the relationship was distant and strained. Many times in bad steprelationships the stepmothers removed themselves from the biological/adoptive father-child dyad completely, in order to keep that relationship going, in a sense despite or outside the stepmother as seen in Vicky's and Diana's stories, for example. Although the stepmothers were not in that relationship, it was they who reminded their partners of upcoming birthdays, anniversaries and that it was about time the father and his children met up. Furthermore, it was the stepmothers who tried to explain to their partners the stepchildren's reported misbehaviour as Irene did.

There was a similar pattern of kinkeeping in a wider family context, where the stepmothers were actively involved in the maintenance of the relationship between their stepfamilies and biological and in-law families. The stepmothers were acutely aware of the importance of extended family relations for their biological children and stepchildren. Thus they created opportunities for them to meet as seen in Nancy's and Jane's cases. Although Jane did not report to be particularly 'successful' in maintaining the relationship between her stepchildren and her biological parents, she saw it as a great disappointment as her stepchildren now had no grandparents in their family.

My Personal Journey

Letherby (2003: 9) argues that 'our personal biographies are [...] relevant to the research that we do in terms of topic and method, relationship with the respondents and analysis and presentation of the findings' and I note this in the Methodology Chapter (see p. 28). I chose to research the lives of stepmothers because I am a stepmother which is in line with feminist work which shows that people work with issues close to their heart (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Letherby, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2012).

I struggled as a stepmother researching stepmothers, partly because I wanted to focus on the stepmothers and partly because I wanted tell my own story. I was worried that me being a stepmother would stop the stepmothers from telling me their stories, I struggled with how much I should or should not, and how to, disclose to the stepmothers before the interviews. I was prepared to answer any question truthfully –

although this was complicated as I note in the Methodology Chapter when I was asked if I have children of my own – but I feared that in so doing I would label the participants' experience and I really did not want that. Although I strove to understand the stepmothers' 'lived realities' (Chamberlayne et al., 2000: 1, in Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003: 18–19) on their own merits, I did so through my own sets of meanings and interpretations. This is one of the reasons why I decided to focus on individual stepmothers and use their long quotes in my research in order to emphasize the stepmothers' experiences while acknowledging that it was I who analyzed them.

I worried that being a stepmother myself would prevent me from listening to the stepmothers because I would focus on my own performance as a stepmother and how it would measure up to theirs (Plummer, 2001; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010). Most of the stepmothers were much older and more experienced stepmothers. I did not know whether their stepmothering stories would be 'un/happy' or more 'un/successful' than mine and how this would affect me, or them. This is why I attempted to shut down my own feelings about my stepmothering in the interview process but at the same time I struggled with not being able to tell *my* stepmothering story. In a sense in the interviews I was struggling not with the stepmother paradox but with the 'insider' researcher paradox. I tried to be both close and distant to the stepmothers I interviewed. I wanted to make sure that I was not too close and not divulge 'too much' of my stepmothering story to the stepmothers because I was worried that this would skew their narratives. I also tried to be close enough to the stepmothers to encourage them to tell their stories whilst at the same time being aware that it was me who would ultimately do the telling of the stories. I did not feel that I struck the balance right. I felt conflicted and frustrated by my position as both a researcher and a stepmother.

Another reason why my story is not told in, but not absent from, my research is because I did not have the privilege of anonymity as my participants had. I had to bear in mind that my stepdaughter or her biological mother might read this. I was not comfortable with them doing so, regardless of whether I am a 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' stepmother. In this sense my research was a 'threat' to me in terms of its possible repercussions for me (Lee, 1993), and my relationships with my stepdaughter and her biological mother, or how this would make them feel. Furthermore, I had to consider the impact of doing so on my husband and his relationship with his biological daughter. So although I wanted to tell my own story, I

did not feel my stepmothering story was *entirely* mine. However, it was somewhat told because of how I did this research which from its conception to its completion was underpinned by my own experiences of stepmothering. To conclude, I think that limiting one's account of oneself in detailing one's research findings can be appropriate because sometimes the nature of that research, i.e. its sensitive or taboo character, merits this silence (Lee, 1993; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010).

Future Research

My research answered many questions but it also raised new ones and areas in stepmother research which remain unanswered and unexplored. These include: emotion work and management, family practices and doing families, challenges to dominant and authoritative discourses and displaying families. I think that further research into these aspects of stepmothering would extend our understanding of this complex process. Here I shall briefly focus on two of these areas, firstly 'emotion work' and 'emotion management' (Hochschild, 1983) and secondly, family display (Finch, 2007). For this, I shall look back at my data as an exploration of, and a starting point for, further research into these areas.

*Emotion Work and Emotional Management*

In the opening sentence of this chapter I argue that stepmothering is about love, rejection, acceptance and vulnerability. Furthermore, I suggest that stepmothering is an intersection of powerful myths of what it means to be a woman, a biological mother and a stepmother. It is therefore important to understand how the stepmothers managed their associated emotions in their step- and wider families, not least because 'emotion work' and/or 'emotion management' are unexplored in stepfamily research, in particular in research on stepmothers[31]. 'Emotion work' and 'emotion

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[31] Coleman, Ganong and Frye have recently begun to research the role emotional management has in stepfamilies (http://hdfs.missouri.edu/research.html) but this project is on-going. Bernstein (1994) briefly discusses stepmothers' emotion work and management.

management' describe acts of induction or suppression of one's feelings in order to make oneself and others feel in a certain way and to gain 'something' (Frith and Kitzinger, 1998; Letherby, 2003; Hochschild, 2012). The stepmothers did 'emotion work' and 'management' in various ways not least where conflict or kinkeeping were concerned. However, in this section I shall focus on the stepmothers' 'emotion work' and 'management' during the time before they met their stepchildren for the first time because the findings of my research suggest that the stepmothering scene, so to speak, is set at this point.

Hochschild (1998: 5) begins her sociological analysis of emotion work/management by looking at a bride's feelings as she is about to marry. Marriage and becoming a wife, in western societies, are rituals that are projected as positive, hopeful and institutionalized. In this context, becoming a stepmother is seen as a secondary process, not positive and not hopeful because 'second marriages' are more likely to fail (Hart, 2009). The stepmother is placed below the previous woman as a mother and as a wife/partner (Burgoyne and Clark, 1984; Sosnowska-Buxton, 2011). What is more, the stepmother is seen as a 'home-wrecker' who is now trying to 'steal' the child/children of another woman – is the husband not enough? (Smith, 1990) But as a woman she is also expected to be emotionally giving and receptive. The only institutionalized aspects of stepmothering is its negative portrayal. What, then, is the emotional dictionary – an authoritative ontology of how one should feel in a given situation – available to stepmothers before they meet the stepchildren for the first time? (Hochschild, 1998: 6)

The feelings the stepmothers, on the whole, reported to have had are those of being nervous and hopeful (see p. 143). However, the stepmothers commonly reported to have suppressed these feelings and instead focused on how their partners had felt about seeing the children. For example, Alison, in accordance with the expectation to be secondary, rather than focus on how she felt about meeting her stepchildren for the first time, focused on supporting her husband in his uncertainty whether he – note 'he' not 'them' – would be able to see his biological children at all. Her role was to support her husband emotionally by 'not' dealing/feeling with her own emotions with regard to that first meeting. Her worry about whether the stepchildren would accept her was displaced by her emotional management of her husband's feelings. Hochschild (2013: 165-6) argues that women nurture and celebrate the status of others. Most of the stepmothers emphasized the status of their

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partners as fathers and worked on nurturing it. By sticking to the gendered expectation of woman's work, a stepmother actively 'displays' herself as a 'good woman' and positions herself as her partner's subordinate.

As much as the stepmothers' feeling were secondary to their partners' feelings, they were also secondary to the stepchildren's feelings. The stepmothers were expected to be emotionally expressive and make emotional connection with their stepchildren on that first meeting. The goal of that meeting was for them to be accepted by the stepchildren. Hence the stepmothers felt nervous because they might fail in their attempt to do so. So the stepmothers prepared for the emotion work by asking questions about the stepchildren, for example, how they were and what they dis/liked, and distanced themselves from what they themselves were feeling. The focus in this emotional work was on the stepchildren's needs, how to make this first meeting easier for them and not to jeopardise the relationship between them and their biological/adoptive fathers. The stepmothers' feelings became secondary and unimportant in this process.

The stepmothers reinforced the idea of being a 'good woman' by suppressing their emotions by not displaying them and by not verbalizing them. The majority of the stepmothers reportedly did not talk to their partners about meeting the stepchildren (see p. 144). Importantly, however, the stepmothers did not see asking questions about the stepchildren as 'emotion work', and did not recognize this 'emotion work' in their partners' behaviours when they talked about their biological/adoptive children. Thus, I agree with Hochschild's (2003: 68) argument that 'the deeper the bond, the more emotion work, and the more unconscious we are of it. In the most personal bonds, then, emotion work is likely to be the strongest'. Emotion work was invisible for the stepmothers because 1) the presumed – and 'naturally' formed – bond between the stepmothers and their stepchildren was taken for granted, and 2) the bond between the biological/adoptive father and his biological/adoptive children too was a given. However, this raises questions about the authority and validity of the stepmothers' claim to have 'the most personal bonds' with their stepchildren and how stepmothers manage and do stepmotherly love?

Furthermore, it was also a given that the stepmothers were to build relationships with their stepchildren without, or despite the lack of, the help of their partners. It was the stepmothers' responsibility to emotionally cater for others (Letherby, 2003) including the stepchildren who might or might not accept them.

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Hochschild (2013: 11) argues that 'the task of emotion management is to rise to the opportunity, and prepare for the loss.' (Hochschild, 2013: 11) By 'hiding' their hopefulness, the stepmothers managed to protect themselves from the potential rejection by their stepchildren – because they did not expect to be accepted by the stepchildren. Thus they acted according to societal expectation, or the emotional dictionary, which dictates a lack of hope. Nonetheless, the stepmothers were also hopeful that this first meeting with the stepchildren would go well and they would be accepted. How do stepmothers manage these competing emotions of being both hopeful and hopeless? Furthermore, there was an underlying assumption in the stepmothers' narratives that the consequence of not being accepted by the stepchildren meant the end to their romantic relationship. However, it seems that it was the stepmothers' view but not their partners'. Diana made it clear that if her partner had not been accepted by her biological children that relationship would not go on but her partner reportedly did not take the same view. It is, therefore, possible that the stepmothers expected that their romantic relationship would only last if they managed their and others' emotions appropriately but that their partners did not make this connection (Hochschild, 2013).

This brief analysis of how the stepmothers managed their own emotions and the emotions of others as well as what emotion work the stepmothers did at the very beginning of their stepfamilies opens up many interesting research possibilities around emotion work in the step context. The stepmothers in my sample distanced themselves from the wicked stepmother image and tried to carve out a role and steprelationship that suited them and their stepfamilies but was largely based on gender-'appropriate' familial roles. This might suggest that, indeed, there is no institutionalized emotional dictionary for stepmothers and that this dictionary is being developed by the stepmothers on a daily basis. But it is also possible that such a dictionary exists, or such dictionaries exist, but remain(s) little understood. This alone, I think, merits further investigation into the emotion work of stepmothers.

It would be interesting to find out whether there are any differences in emotion management depending on a stepmother's and her stepchildren's age when she enters into a stepfamily. Older stepmothers and their experiences of entering and building a steprelationship with adult stepchildren are absent from research. Thus, how and what emotion work is done by the stepmothers would provide an opportunity to perhaps 'move away' from the idea that all stepmothers should, and do, mother. My research

suggests that the emotional resources available for, and required of, stepmothers to older children are different from those of the stepmothers of young stepchildren. But this area too requires further research.

Moreover, it would be equally interesting to learn how the stepmothers do emotion work and management with regards to the biological/adoptive mothers (Bernstein, 1994). As I argue in my thesis, these relationships were unchosen and in a sense forced onto the stepmothers and the biological/adoptive mothers. And as both mothers are held responsible for the success or failure of their step-/biological families it would be beneficial to understand how the stepmothers, as well as the biological/adoptive mothers, manage emotions, and what their secondary gains, if any, are.

*Displaying Step/Families*

Finch (2007: 6) argues that '*families need to be "displayed" as well as "done"*' [emphasis as in original] in order to be recognized and validated as a family. My findings show that on the whole stepmothers are not displayed in society, as the example of the lack of cards for stepmothers and their exclusion from participating in social events, and from research show (see pp. 10, 12, 15). Additionally there are many aspects of the stepmothers' relationships which are not displayed, not least the relationship between the stepmothers and the biological mothers but this relationship is unchosen and not seen as a familial relationship. But some stepmothers and biological/adoptive mothers displayed their stepfamilies, so it would be interesting to understand how and why it is done, and what it signifies. However, although some steprelationships were not displayed, others were. There were many ways in which stepfamilial relationships were manifested, for example by being involved in running family events, such as weddings or christenings, or by how one was named, i.e. being called 'gran' or by one's first name as was the case for Gill; or by being included family albums, whether in cyber space or 'real life'. All these familial displays conveyed to others who was, and who was not, family (Finch, 2007). Hence, not being displayed was hurtful and problematic for the stepmothers.

It would be interesting to investigate what not being displayed in 'family' photos meant. For example, both Vicky and Jane reported being excluded from family photographs or from public display of these photographs by their stepchildren. This

could indicate that *this* family was not working and this might be the case for some stepmothers who were reportedly rejected by their stepchildren, as Vicky was. However, it is also possible that *this* family was simply lacking narrative resources to 'accurately display their family' (Gabb, 2011: 42) because there are no institutionalized narrative resources available to them. For example, in Jane's case she was not excluded from the family photographs but from the public display of them. This could be because her stepdaughter did not have narrative resources which enabled her to show that she had a working relationship with her stepmother while indicating that her stepmother did not replace the biological mother. Nielsen (1999) notes that stepchildren often report feeling guilty when they have a good time with their non-resident step- and biological parents, in particular when they report this fun back to their resident biological mothers. Nonetheless, this non-display upset Jane who reported feeling upset because, she said, she tried to make the holiday they had had fun for her stepdaughter and encouraged her to stay with her. In other words, the stepmother was involved in doing stepfamily but was not displayed as part of it. Thus, it is important to find out how and why some members of stepfamilies are or are not displayed.

Vicky's case was particular because she said, she was excluded from the family photographs by her stepson at his wedding, clearly indicating that the stepmother was not part of the family, not in legal terms and not in social terms. Yet there is a contradiction in Vicky's narrative in terms of being part of a family. Vicky did not want to be part of a family unit which included her partner and stepchildren but viewed herself as part of a family which only included her and her husband. She sought also recognition of the former family by being included in family photographs (see pp. 57 and 60). Why, then, in some instances was not being displayed acceptable while in other situations it was not?

Furthermore, I think it is important to look at how stepfamilies are displayed in different contexts. For example, why and how stepfamilies are displayed for external agencies when external agencies are involved, as in Alison's case and CAFCAS. What happens when stepfamily members have different ideas about their family display and when they display their family differently, as was the case for Fran, and whose display counts as 'valid' or what display is 'valid'? These issues merit further investigation into how stepfamilies are, and are not, displayed as well as how stepfamilies can/should be displayed in order to be understood as 'working'

stepfamilies. Importantly, we need to look again at what 'stepfamily' and 'family' mean because without a definition the notion of 'family display' remains unclear.

What I find interesting is that, in a sense, the stepmothers embodied the subordinate position of women in families, where their emotions were secondary to the emotions of others and where they have to manage these emotions in order to 'make happy families', yet the stepmothers rarely reported being displayed as part of the stepfamily and almost always appeared to have been taken for granted in their stepfamilies. Because there is little research on stepmothers, my project opens up new avenues for research on stepmothers, not least where emotion work and management are concerned. I hope to pursue some of these avenues in the future.

To end then, stepmothers and their experiences are important and should gain a more prominent place in research and our lives, not only because their numbers are growing but also because they are little understood. The reported invisibility and the problematic display of the stepmothers and an overwhelmingly negative portrayal of them in popular culture should be challenged, and more positive, perhaps more realistic representations are needed in order to stop the stigmatization of stepmothers and stepfamilies.

# Appendix 1. Interview Schedule

1. <u>Relationship between stepmother and her stepchild/ren (how it evolved over time)</u>

1.1 What does it mean for you be a stepmother? Do you identify as such or not, why?

1.2 How do (you think) your stepchild/ren perceive you?

1.3 What was your first meeting with your stepchild/ren like (in the capacity as a stepmother)? What have you expected and how it turned out, why do you think that?

1.4 What did you expect of your life as a stepmother, and how is it now? If different why do you think it changed? How do those changes make you feel?

1.5 What relationship with your stepchild/ren would you like to have? (Why do you think it's not as you would like to have?)

1.6 Any particular 'turning points' in your relationship with your stepchild/ren that affected it?

1.7 How do your stepchild/ren make you feel, why?

1.8 What do you feel for your stepchild/ren, why?

1.9 What do you like to do with your stepchild/ren, why?

1.10 What do you think your stepchild/ren like to do with you, why?

1.11 How do you think your relationship will be, and you would like it to be in the future?

1.12 Why do you think that?

2. <u>Relationship with the biological/adoptive mother</u>

2.1 What did you expect of your 1st meeting, why? And was it? What would you like to be different, why?

2.2 What is your relationship like now, why? How would you like it to be? And why can't it be as you envisage it?

2.3 What do you think of her in terms of her 'mothering'?

2.4 What do you think she thinks of you as a stepmother? What do you think she expects of you?

2.5 How does she affect your relationship with your stepchild/ren?

2.6 How do you think she impacts on your relationship with your partner?


3. Role of the biological/adoptive father

3.1 How does your partner affect feeling/emotions you have for your stepchild/ren, why?

3.2 How did your partner tell you about his biological/adoptive child? How did it make you feel? What were your thoughts about him and your future when you found out, why?

3.3 Have you talked about mutual expectations about what, who should you be with his biological/adoptive? What were they? If not would you have liked, why?

3.4 What does your partner expect of you as a stepmother, why?

3.5 What would you like him to expect of you as a stepmother, why? Why do you think there are differences in these expectations?

3.6 How did your partner prepare his biological/adoptive child/ren for the first meeting with you?

3.7 How did your partner prepare you for the firstmeeting?

3.8 How was your partner in that first meeting?

3.9 How would you describe your partner's role in shaping the relationship with your stepchild/ren?

3.10 What did you expect of your partner in terms of shaping the steprelationship, why? What would you like him to do, why? Why do you think he doesn't do it?

3.11 What is your partner's relationship with his biological/adoptive child/ren? What would he like it be? Why it isn't like that?

3.12 What is your partner's relationship with his previous partner? And how do you think this affects your relationship and the relationship with your stepchild/ren?

3.13 How does your life change when stepchild/ren are with you?


4. Relationships with the wider stepfamily members and friends

4.1 What was your parents' (siblings, etc.) reaction to finding out you are going to be a SM? How did it make you feel, why? What do they think your role as a stepmother is?

4.2 Do you parents accept and see your stepchild/ren?

4.3 What was the reaction of your aunts/uncles (etc.) to you becoming a stepmother?

4.4 What relationships do they (aunts/uncles etc.) have with your stepchild/ren? Why do you think that?

4.5 Do you have biological/adoptive child/ren from previous relationship? What was their reaction to the news that you are going to be a stepmother? How do they feel about it?

4.6 What was your friends' reaction to the news that you are going to be a stepmother?

4.7 What do they think your role as a stepmother is? Do your friends see you as a stepmother?

4.8 What relationship do your parents/siblings have with your stepchild/ren? Why do you think that?

## Appendix 2. Information Letter to Participant

Patrycja Sosnowska-Buxton

Centre for Women's Studies

University of York

Grimstone House

York

YO10 5DD

tel: 01904 323671

psb507@york.ac.uk

Dear _____,

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in my research.

As you know I am doing a research project as a part of my PhD dissertation on stepmothers' experiences at the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. As a stepmother myself, my aim is to explore the experiences of other stepmothers in relation to their partners/husbands, step-/biological children and other members of their family as well as friends.

The research will involve one face-to-face interview and a short questionnaire. The interview will take approximately one hour and will be recorded on a Dictaphone. The questionnaire contains five questions mostly about the number of step and/or biological children, your education and marital status etc. I might, however, send a follow-up e-mail if I need clarification and/or additional information to the answers you have provided. Please, feel free to share as much or as little as you wish.

The process of research will take part at my or interviews' homes, local library or a café as well as via e-mail. The audio recording will be transcribed and together with other information you provide will be anonymized by me, so that only you and I will be able to identify who you are. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me anytime on either of my e-mails above.

This research will take part from the middle of May 2012 to November 2012, to be later transcribed and analyzed. I am hoping to conduct all interviews and send/receive all additional data by the end of July 2012.

If you are happy to take part in my research please fill in the Ethics/Consent form. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

Patrycja Sosnowska-Buxton

## Appendix 3. Consent Form

Patrycja Sosnowska-Buxton

Centre for Women's Studies

University of York

Grimstone House

York

YO10 5DD

tel: 01904 323671

psb507@york.ac.uk

Dear _____,

In this consent form I explain how the data you provide will be used in and for my PhD research and I outline your rights with regards to your data throughout the duration of this research.

The interview will be recorded and only I will transcribe it. The transcription of the interview and the demographic data questionnaire will be anonymized: in the research you will only be referred to by your pseudonym; making sure that none of the information you provide can be traced back to you.

The transcribed interview and the questionnaire (both anonymized) will be seen only by my PhD Supervisor and I. I will ensure that the data and the questionnaire are safely stored throughout my research and are properly destroyed once the research is over.

Once the interview has be done there will be a two week period (from the date the of the interview) in which you can retract any data you would prefer not to appear in the dissertation. You do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable with.

You have a right to remove yourself from the research at any stage during the research process.

This dissertation will not be published publicly but I may wish to use some of the findings for future public publications.

Please tick the correct box below whether you consent or not.

| Statements | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| My data can be used in this research on the understanding that the data I provide will be kept anonymous and secure at all times. | | |
| My data will be seen by Patrycja Sosnowska-Buxton. | | |
| My anonymous data can be seen by Patrycja's supervisor. | | |
| I understand that I can retract my data two weeks after the interview has been conducted (the date when the interview took place) and I can remove myself completely from the research at any point during the research process. | | |
| I am happy for my data to be used in the PhD dissertation. | | |
| I am happy to have my data used in other publications, on the understanding that it will be kept anonymous and treated with respect. | | |
| I understand the aim of this research and my rights as a participant. | | |

Name:

Date:

## Appendix 4. Advert for the Internet Forum

Hello to all,

My name is Patrycja Sosnowska-Buxton and I am a PhD student at the University of York, Centre for Women's Studies.

My research is about stepmothers' lives and experiences, I am a stepmother myself hence the interest.

I am looking for stepmothers (in all circumstances residential, nonresidential, with biological/adoptive children and without, etc.) who would like to take part in my research and who live in Darlington, Co. Durham and North Yorkshire areas.

The research will involve 1, approximately 1 hour-long face-to-face interview, which will be recorded on a Dictaphone; and a short questionnaire. The entire process is anonymous, where only the stepmother and I will be able to identify her.

Feel free to look me up at this link:

http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/cws/researchst/patrycjasb.htm

Thank you for taking your time to read this. If you would like to participate you can send me a private message or email me on psb507@york.ac.uk

Looking forward to be hearing from you.

Patrycja Sosnowska-Buxton

## Appendix 5. Demographic Questionnaire

1. Years as stepmother:
2. Your age:
3. Your partner's age:
4. Your highest qualification (GCSE, A Level, Bachelor's, etc.):
5. Your partner's highest qualification:
6. How would you describe your social class?

## Appendix 6. The Stepmothers' Family Diagrams

Suzy

First
Husband

Second
Husband

Ex-Wife

Biological Daughter

Biological Son
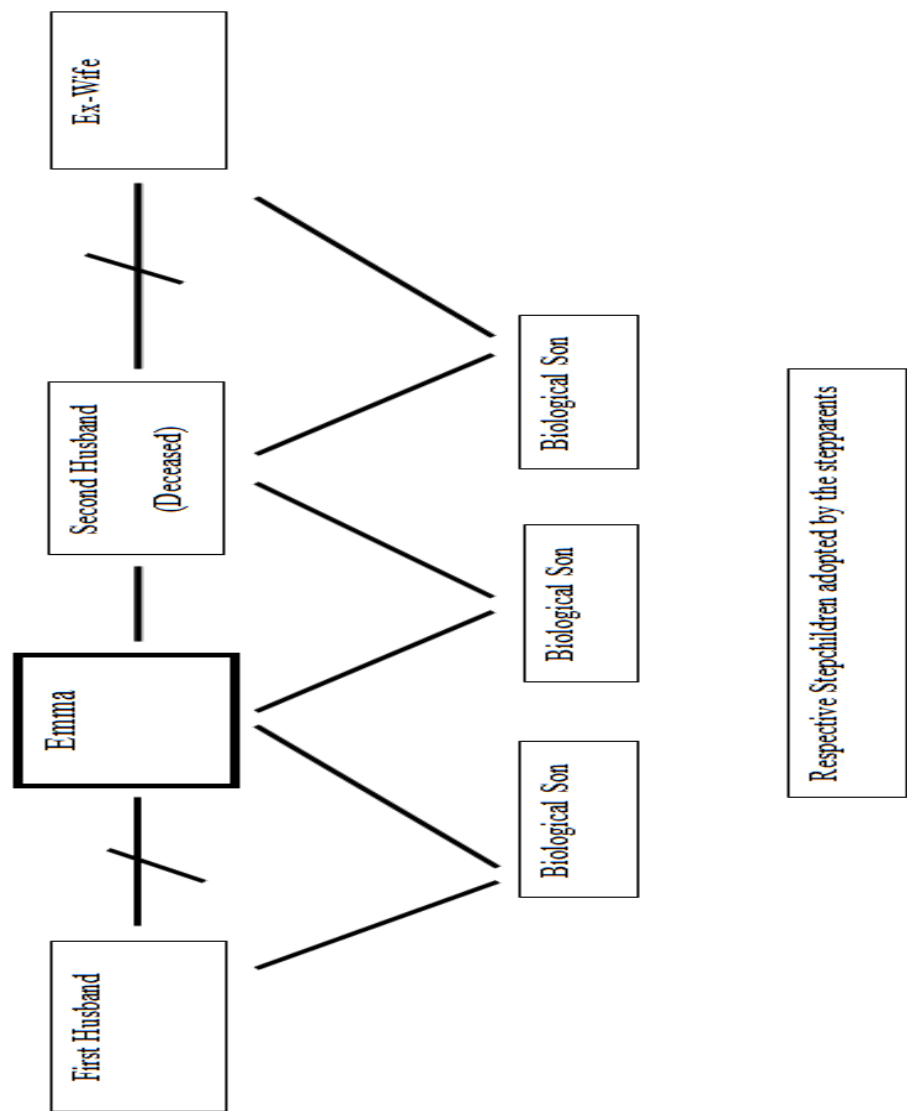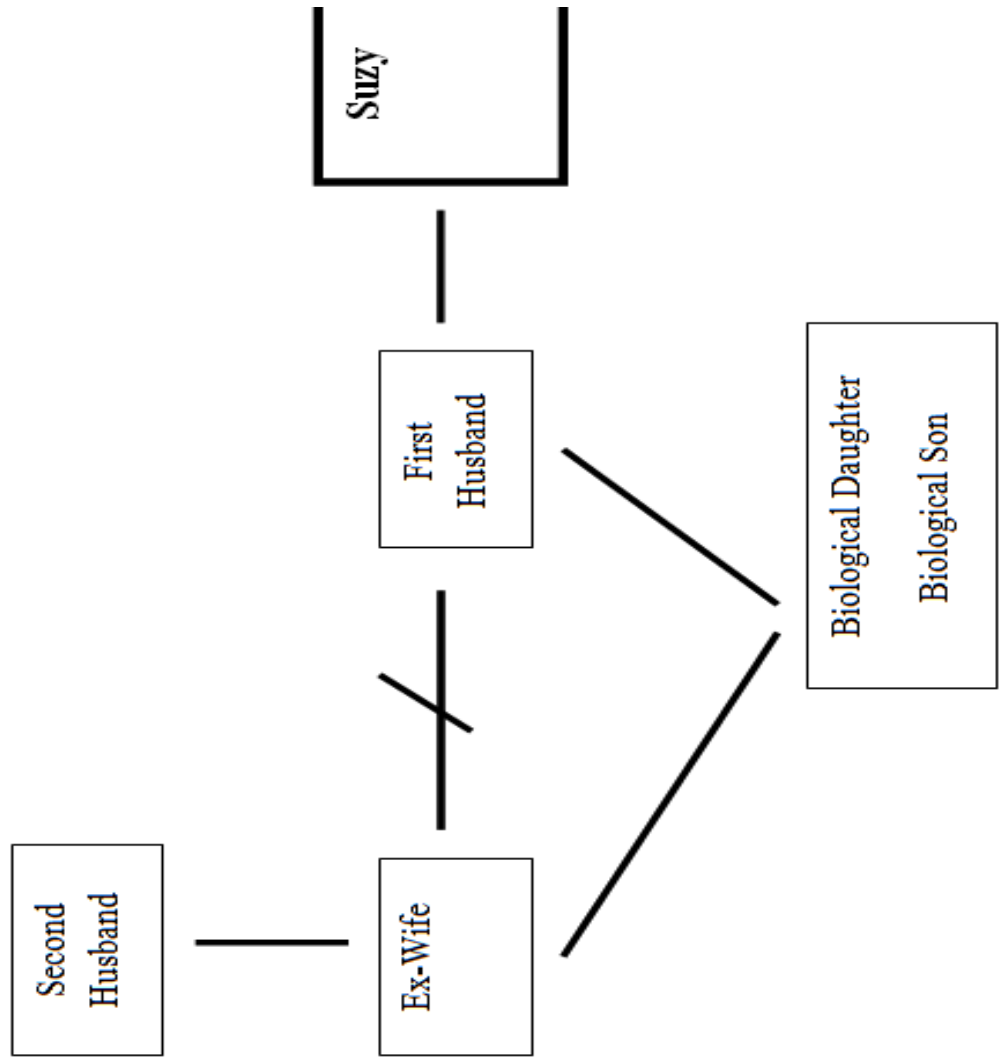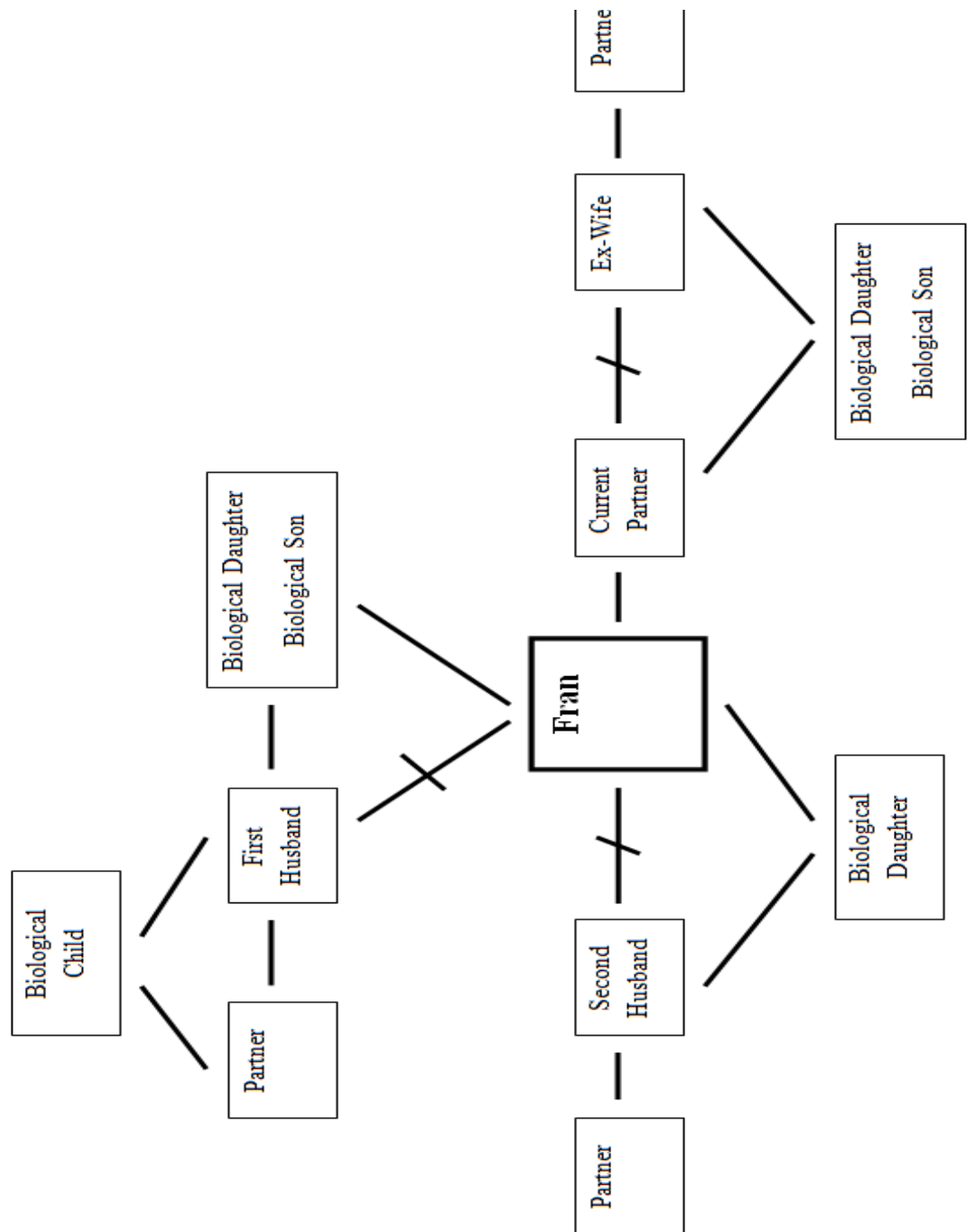
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