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Stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmothers stereotypes

Anna Miller

Doctorate of Clinical Psychology
University of Auckland

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing number of stepfamilies, research suggests that negative stepmother stereotypes continue to exist in contemporary society. This qualitative study aimed to explore stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes, and to investigate the impact, if any, that these negative representations have on women's experiences of stepmotherhood.

One hundred and thirty-eight stepmothers, living in New Zealand with their stepchild (at least some of the time), completed an anonymous online questionnaire about their perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes. The average age of the participants was 36.9 years and the average period of stepmotherhood was 5.5 years.

The questionnaire elicited participants' observations of positive and negative stepmother representations in a range of sources. Participants were also asked about their use of the stepmother term, and responded to four open-ended qualitative questions, which related to their experiences of the 'wicked stepmother' stereotype and positive aspects of the stepmother role. Participants also rated on a four-point Likert scale the extent to which they thought wicked stepmother stereotypes impacted on their experience as a stepmother.

Thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data collected, and overall, stepmothers perceived more negative stepmother stereotypes than positive. The majority of stepmothers reported experiences of feeling, or being treated to varying degrees as if they were 'wicked', which were brought together in the themes 'Boundary setting makes me feel bad', 'I am unmotherly', and 'I don't count'. Positive experiences of being a stepmother and a repertoire of personal strategies helped to ameliorate the impact of the wicked stepmother stereotypes. Some stepmothers, however, appeared to have internalised the negative representations which led to secondary emotions of guilt, shame, self-doubt, frustration, and a sense of being 'bad'. Overall, stepmothers rated stepmother stereotypes as having moderate impact on their experience as a stepmother, and the themes were heavily influenced by cultural expectations of motherhood. These findings are discussed in terms of existing knowledge about stepmothers, expectations of mothers, gender issues, and stereotyped identities. This study contributes to the existing body of stepfamily research, and provides discussion on the implications for clinical practice and future research directions.

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Anna Catherine Miller - February, 2015

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CHAPTER ONE - STUDY OVERVIEW AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Brief overview of this study

Reviews of research into attitudes towards stepfamilies suggest that stepfamilies and stepmothers continue to be viewed more negatively than ‘nuclear’ families and mothers, respectively (M. Coleman, Troilo, & Jamison, 2008; Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Planitz & Feeney, 2009). There is also evidence that stepmothers face a number of challenges in their role and are more vulnerable to psychological stress than other family members (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Little research attention has been given, however, to the ways in which stepmother stereotypes may contribute to these challenges and impact on stepmothers’ experiences. With the increasing prevalence of stepfamilies in contemporary society, it is important to investigate if and how these stereotypes affect stepmothers, in order to better understand the challenges of their role and offer appropriate support.

This thesis presents the findings from a qualitative study of data collected from an anonymous, online questionnaire which was completed by 138 stepmothers living in New Zealand. The aim is to investigate stepmothers’ perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes and understand the impact, if any, that these have had on their experience of being a stepmother. The decision to focus on and use the language of ‘stereotypes’ and ‘negative representations’ of stepmothers was made as these are consistent with the terms used by other stepfamily researchers, and are likely to be accessible and easily understood by those people to whom the findings of this study is most relevant (i.e. stepfamily members, researchers, and clinicians).

The first chapter of this thesis gives an overview of the relevant stepfamily and stereotype literature, in order to provide background to the study. Chapter Two outlines the qualitative methodology that was used, and following this, Chapter Three describes the data collection and analysis process. Chapter Four reports on the results of the thematic analysis of the data related to stepmothers’ perceptions of stepmother stereotypes. Chapter Five briefly presents the results of the quantitative and qualitative data regarding the impact that stereotypes have on stepmothers’ experiences, while Chapter Six presents the thematic analysis of stepmothers’ experiences of stepmother stereotypes, including ways stepmothers manage or overcome the stereotype. Finally, Chapter Seven reviews and

discusses the main findings and how these relate to stepfamily research, considers the limitations of the study, and describes the implications the findings may have for clinical practice and future research.

The following sections of this chapter begin by introducing the definitions of terms used in this study, as well as a brief overview of relevant stepfamily statistics. A review of the existing literature on stepfamilies and stereotypes is also provided, before concluding with a more focused outline of the research specifically related to the stepmother role and stepmother stereotypes.

Definition of terms

In earlier times, the definition of ‘stepfamily’ was relatively straightforward, it originated from the Anglo-Saxon word ‘steop’ meaning ‘to bereave’ or ‘to make orphan’ (Bray & Berger, 1993). Hence, the term denoted the status of a family that had been formed due to the death of a biological parent and the remarriage of the remaining parent. Nowadays, defining a stepfamily is more complicated as it is common that stepfamilies are created when a couple enters a partnership and one or both adults have a child from a previous relationship (Robertson, 2012). There are many different labels for ‘stepfamily’ including ‘blended’, ‘remarried’, ‘binuclear’, ‘reconstituted’, ‘reorganized’, and ‘second-time-around’ families (Parker, 2011). In this study the term stepfamily will be defined as “a family of two adults in a formal or informal marriage where at least one of the adults has a child or children from a previous relationship” (Howden, 2007, p.2). Under this definition, the couple may also have children from the current union and children may live-in full-time or part-time with their parent and stepparent. A ‘stepmother family’ is one in which the non-biological parent is the woman, and a ‘stepfather family’ is one in which the non-biological parent is the man. Where relevant, I will also refer to a ‘first-time family’ (Papernow, 2013), which I define as a family in which both adults in the couple relationship are the biological or adoptive parents of the children and the couple lives together in the same household.

Today, stepfamilies are highly diverse in their organisation and come in many different forms (Dunn, 2002). For example, there are classifications such as a ‘simple’ stepfamily, where only one partner in the couple relationship has a child, and a ‘complex’ stepfamily

in which both partners each have their own children from previous partners who reside, at least part of the time, in the same household. The re-partnered couple may choose not to marry and instead may co-habit in a de facto relationship, and they may also have a child born from their new partnership. These various family scenarios may mean that some children move between two households equally, while others spend longer in one residence than the other. They may also create 'residential' parents or stepparents who live with the child or stepchild most of the time, or 'non-residential' parents and stepparents who live with their children or stepchildren for limited periods, such as on weekends or holidays (M. Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2013). Then too, there is the trend that more children are being born into single parent families, and these children are acquiring a stepparent when, most often the child's mother, enters a new partnership. With demographic shifts such as these, it is important to take a broader perspective of stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), although amongst stepfamily researchers and in policy there is often disagreement about what constitutes a stepfamily due to differences in the classifications of variables such as marital status, residential status, and sexual orientation of parents and partners.

Given the topic of this research, it is important and relevant to acknowledge that for some people there is a reluctance to use the 'step' prefix. For example, some children may avoid the term because it affects and reflects a level of relationship quality and closeness which they do not feel comfortable with (Koenig Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Normand, 2008), while for others it has negative connotations and a pejorative nature (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The term was chosen for this study, however, because of its consistent use in family research, because of the nature of the investigation of this study, and because it is a term that is readily understood in society. Sensitivity was given to the use of this term in the data collection stage of this study, where participants were invited to share their views and feelings about their choice to use, or not use, 'step' terms.

Demographic trends

Stepfamilies are a common family type in Western societies. It is, however, difficult to obtain accurate statistics on the number of stepfamilies due to the variety of definitions of a stepfamily that are used and the increasing number of couples who cohabit rather than remarry and who are often not included in stepfamily data collection (Bumpass & Lu,

2000). Furthermore, although it is common for stepchildren to live across two households, data collection may only record the child as living in one household, and therefore, the number of stepfamilies and stepfamily members may be under-represented. Due to these difficulties, statistical data on stepfamilies needs to be considered as an estimate only.

In the United States of America (USA), a nationwide survey found that 42% of adults had at least one step relative (Parker, 2011). It has also been estimated that nine percent of married-couple households and 11.5 % of cohabiting couples in the USA have stepchildren (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008), and with an increasing number of family transitions occurring, more than half of the children in America will spend a part of their childhood in single-parent or stepfamily situation (Carlson & Meyer, 2014).

In the United Kingdom, approximately 11% of all couple families with dependent children are stepfamilies (Office for National Statistics, 2011). However, official figures from the British Office of National Statistics (2011) show a decline of 14% in the number of married and cohabiting stepfamilies between the years 2001-2011, perhaps due to the rise in the average age at which women have their first baby, or because of stepparents not living with their current partner (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Other trends for this same ten year period in the United Kingdom included a 37% increase in unmarried couples raising children, as well as evidence that 35% of children living in England and Wales are not living with both parents.

In Australia, the 2009-2010 Family Characteristics Survey showed that stepfamilies and blended families comprised of seven percent of all families with children aged 0-17 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This survey counted only 'resident' stepchildren (defined as 'the household that the child usually resides in'), and so it is likely that the number of stepfamilies would be considerably higher if the non-residential parent who had also re-partnered was counted in these statistics. If de facto families were also included in stepfamily statistics, it has been suggested that Australian stepfamilies could comprise of an estimated 30% of all family forms (P. Murphy & Pike, 2004).

The New Zealand Census does not collect data on stepfamilies, however an indication of stepfamily prevalence was found through the longitudinal *Christchurch Health and Development Study*. Of the 1265 cohort, approximately 18% (or one in six) had lived in a stepfamily at some time between the ages of six and 16 (Nicholson, Fergusson, &

Horwood, 1999). A national study of *New Zealand Women, Family Education, and Employment* surveyed 3,017 women between the ages of 20-59 years and found that one quarter of women had spent some time living in a stepfamily with children from a previous union of one or both partners (Dharmalingham, Pool, Sceats, & MacKay, 2004) . In 2013, 42% of all divorces in New Zealand involved children under the age of 17 years and nearly one-third of legal marriages involved at least one partner for whom this was a remarriage (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Although these statistics represent decreasing trends of divorce and remarriage rates, the numbers of men and women aged 15-44 years who are in de facto partnerships continues to rise, with 2006 figures being about two in five (Statistics New Zealand, 2012).

As with general stepfamily statistics, it is difficult to get an accurate number of stepmother families (M. Coleman et al., 2008). For example, census figures may not count stepmothers who do not live in the same household with their stepchildren, or may not include in the data collection those women who are not ‘officially’ made stepmothers by marriage. It is agreed, however, that there are fewer residential stepmother families due to the fact that in the vast majority of separations and divorces, women are awarded custody resulting in a significantly larger number of residential stepfather than stepmother families (A. J. Johnson et al., 2008; Schmeeckle, 2007). In America, 15% of men are stepfathers (16.5 million) and 12% of women are stepmothers (14 million) (Parker, 2011). In Britain, an estimate from the *General Lifestyle Survey* in 2011 showed that 85% of stepfamilies with dependent children had children from the woman’s previous relationship, 11% had children from the man’s previous relationship and 4% of stepfamilies had children from both partners’ previous relationships (Office of National Statistics, 2011). New Zealand statistics on single-parent families are similar to those from overseas, and indicate that only a minority of children in single-parent families live with their father (16.6 % in 2006) (New Zealand Ministry of Social Development, 2010).

These statistics highlight a trend of diverse family situations, which has led stepfamily researchers to investigate the implications that stepfamily living may have on children both in New Zealand and overseas.

Outcomes for children from stepfamilies

Many studies have investigated the outcomes for children who live in stepfamilies. Reviews of these studies have observed that children in stepfamilies are, on average, more likely to experience negative outcomes in behavioural (Hetherington, 2006), academic (Jeynes, 2006) social and emotional areas than children from first-time families (Amato, 2005; Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington, 2006) and may be worse off than their counterparts from single-parent families in emotional and educational outcomes (Brown, 2006; Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2006).

Children often struggle to adapt to stepfamily living. The *Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage (VLSDR)*, one of the largest and most influential studies of divorce and remarriage, followed children from ages 4-15 years, and included a twenty-year follow up (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Hetherington and Kelly (2002) concluded that children in stepfamilies had more externalising, internalizing and problem behaviours during the first two years of remarriage and again during adolescence, compared to children from non-divorced families. Smaller cross-sectional studies also found that children in stepfamilies exhibited more internalizing behaviour such as depressed moods (Barrett & Turner, 2005) and more externalizing behaviour, such as delinquency (Breivik & Olweus, 2006; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1996) relative to children in non-divorced families. In a New Zealand sample, the *Christchurch Health and Development Study* found that children living in stepfamilies had greater difficulties with delinquency, substance abuse and dependence, leaving school without qualifications, emotional issues and suicidality, compared to their peers from non-divorced families (Nicholson et al., 1999). There is also evidence that children in stepfamilies encounter more educational problems (Brown, 2006; Mance & Yu, 2009; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Tillman, 2007). Results of a meta-analysis of 61 studies showed that children in stepfamilies had poorer educational and psychological outcomes than children from families, although similar outcomes to children in single-parent families (Jeynes, 2006).

Hetherington & Kelly (2002) concluded from the *VLSDR* study that around 25% of children in single-parent and stepfamilies experience emotional and behavioural problems compared to around 10% of those in first-time families. However, although statistically significant differences have been found, the effect sizes have generally been small (Amato, 2000; M. Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Dunn, 2002; Jeynes, 2006). Although there are

increased risks and challenges for children in stepfamilies compared with children from first-time families, there is great variability in the outcomes for children in stepfamilies, and many young people are resilient and cope well (Amato, 1994; Hetherington, 2003).

What factors may influence the extent to which a child will adjust to stepfamily life? Research suggests that the level of conflict between parents before, during, and after separation is a major determinant of the impact that separation and divorce will have on children (L. Coleman & Glenn, 2010; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). There is also evidence that other factors which are not specific to living in a stepfamily such as family socioeconomic status, adverse family life events, and family mobility may ‘spill over’ as “unfinished business” and account for some of the adjustment difficulties experienced by children in stepfamily studies (M. Coleman et al., 2013 p.87; Nicholson et al., 1999; Sweeney, 2007). The age and gender of the child at the time of re-partnering also affects adjustment, with girls and adolescents having greater difficulties than boys and younger or adult children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The level of parenting knowledge and style of parenting and stepparenting also impacts on the children’s adjustment, as does the parent-child relationship (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002) and the extent to which there is continued non-conflictual involvement of the non-residential parent (Cartwright, 2005). It has also been found that societal attitudes and beliefs influence individual perceptions of stepfamily membership and relationships, and these cultural beliefs about family play a role in determining how children and other stepfamily members adjust to stepfamily life (Cherlin, 1978; Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Societal views of stepfamilies

Nowadays there is diversity in the family structures of western societies, yet there is still the common assumption that a first-time or ‘nuclear’ family consisting of a mother, father and their biological or children is the ‘natural’ family type, and that any alternative family structure is a deviation from this ideal standard (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Consequently, based on this ‘nuclear’ family model several societal perspectives of stepfamilies have been posited.

The first perspective was proposed by Cherlin (1978) who observed that stepfamilies are lack norms and guidelines for role performance and are often ignored by society. Unlike first-time families where members have roles which are clearly defined, stepfamily

members often experience a great deal of confusion due to the ambiguity of their roles and uncertainty about how they should relate to one another. Stepfamilies often go unrecognized in legal and policy considerations and are invisible in social institutions such as schools and religious systems (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). For example, in some states in the USA, stepparents have almost no legal rights to their stepchildren (Mahoney, 2006) despite potentially having an active and positive role in their stepchild's life (Malia, 2005). These stepparents may be living with and acting as primary guardians to their stepchildren, with full participation in the emotional and financial support of the child, however unable to discipline, authorize medical treatment, or sign any school related documents (Jones, 2003; Mahoney, 2006; Mason, Harrison-Jay, Svare, & Wolfinger, 2002) due to the denial of any legal parental rights. They may also have experienced exclusion and invisibility by the Family Court processes which may have left them feeling stressed and dealing with negative emotional and relational consequences (e.g. Gately, Pike & Murphy, 2004). Cherlin (1978) argued that this relative absence of institutionalized social support for stepfamilies contributes to increased stress, unsuitable solutions to problems, and higher separation rates for re-partnered families; a case which has been supported by some research (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Hequembourg, 2004).

Secondly, it has also been proposed that societies hold a stigmatized view of stepfamilies (Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990). This perspective sees stepfamilies as devalued and deviant groups who are less functional, more problematic, and less healthy forms of family. This is sometimes reflected in the terms used to describe stepfamilies such as "failed marriages" or "broken homes" (Ganong & Coleman, 2004, p.30). The term 'intact' family has also been used to define a first-time family, but this term has been criticised for implying that other family forms are less cohesive and not 'whole' or 'united'. Despite the statistics which show significant numbers of stepfamilies, the nuclear model is favoured and this ideal influences expectations of how family members should live and relate to each other (Levin, 1997).

A third perspective of stepfamilies, as proposed by Ganong & Coleman (2004) is that of the 'reconstituted' nuclear family. This is where a stepfamily presents themselves as a first-time family, in order to 'fit in' and be supported by society. Often in this model, others assume that step-family members are related and so interact with them as if the stepparent were the mother or father of the children. The desire to be treated as 'normal'

and avoid stigmatisation may lead to stepfamily decisions to not correct the assumptions or in some cases to overtly present themselves as a first-time family. Researchers have recognised, however, that attempting to recreate a nuclear family without the agreement of all family members is often an emotionally taxing and stress-producing task (M. Coleman et al., 2013).

Inherent in each societal perspective are cultural assumptions about stepfamilies which manifest in the development of negative stereotypes and cultural myths that can impact on the functioning of stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Stereotypes

Extensive literature exists in the area of communication and social psychology about stereotypes. In order to investigate this current research topic, it is helpful to have a general understanding of what stereotypes are and how they function. The following information draws from models and theory which focus on the psychological processes associated with stereotypes.

Defining and understanding stereotypes

Stereotypes are cognitive schemas that arise out of the necessity for people to receive, process, and organise the vast quantities of information that come from their complex physical and social environments (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Allport (1954, p. 191), an American Psychologist defined a stereotype as 'an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalise) our conduct in relation to that category'. Categories (or social groups) can be defined by any number of criteria, such as race, gender, occupation and age (Bergh & Theron, 2009). Once these social groups are formed, beliefs or perceptions usually exist about the characteristics, attributes or behaviours of members belonging to that particular group or category (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996; Whitley & Kite, 2006). These beliefs may be positive, negative, or neutral. There may be a 'kernel of truth' to them (Whitley & Kite, 2006), for example, people who play basketball are tall), however, by definition stereotypes are usually overgeneralised, oversimplified, exaggerated, and inflexible beliefs (Pickering, 2001) which do not account for group member differences. For this study, stereotypes will be defined as "associations and beliefs about the characteristics and attributes of a group and its members [i.e.

stepmothers], that shape how people think about and respond to the group” (Dovidio et al., 2010, p.11).

A modern theory, the Stereotype Content Model, proposes that there are two fundamental dimensions of stereotypes: warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). This theory suggests that stereotyped groups which are very distinct from each other (e.g. housewives and the elderly) may be stereotyped in similar ways, because they are both high or low on each of the dimensions and therefore elicit similar emotions from the ‘social perceiver’ (Dovidio et al., 2010). This model proposes that stereotypically warm and competent groups elicit pride and admiration, stereotypically warm but incompetent groups elicit pity and sympathy, stereotypically cold and competent groups elicit envy and jealousy, and stereotypically cold and incompetent groups produce dislike and resentment.

In some ways stereotypes can be helpful in that they can lead to faster explanations, (McGarty, Yzerbyt, & Spears, 2002) however, they can also cause a number of problems. Stereotypical beliefs may lead people to perceive, anticipate, and interpret behaviours or characteristics that are consistent with the stereotype (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994) which may therefore result in negative judgements, misunderstandings or discriminatory behaviour against the stereotyped group. Moreover, people often attribute stereotype-disconfirming behaviours of the group member to be because of situational factors, and attribute stereotype-confirming behaviours as being because of the person’s disposition (Hewstone, 1990). This cognitive process then helps to maintain cultural stereotypes, along with the media (Rivadeneyra, Ward, & Gordon, 2007), language, discourse, and processes such as self-fulfilling prophecies (Dovidio et al., 2010).

Self-fulfilling prophecies and self-stereotyping

Self-fulfilling prophecies help to maintain stereotypes as the ‘outside’ group members use the behaviour of the stereotyped group as ‘evidence’ for the ‘validity’ of their stereotyped thinking (Jussim & Flemming, 1996). As said by the sociologist Robert Merton (1948) who first proposed the phenomenon of a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’:

The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation, evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true. The specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error.

For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning. Such are the perversities of social logic (p. 423).

Studies have also demonstrated that self-fulfilling prophecies are so powerful they can also lead the stereotyped group to regard their actions as reflections of their own personal dispositions; that is, they internalise the negative characterisation and believe it to be descriptive of them. This kind of negative ‘self-stereotyping’ (Latrofa, Vaes, Pastore, & Cadinu, 2009; Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd, 2011) has been linked to lower self-esteem in various populations, such as juvenile delinquents (Chassin & Stager, 1984), individuals with mental illness (Ritsher, Otilingam, & Grajales, 2003), and gay, lesbian, and bisexual men and women (Luhtanen, 2002). On the other hand, in Bell & Buckley’s review (2014) there is also research to suggest that only those who are chronic (stable, long-term) in their self-stereotyping are at risk of low self-esteem. For individuals who are more functional (flexible, short-term) in their internalisation of a stereotype, self-stereotyping may help them to justify existing social arrangements, encourage assimilation and differentiation, and protect against personal and social threats (Bell & Buckley, 2014). Regardless of the chronic or functional internalisation of self-stereotyping, this kind of identification with the stereotype can also result in reduced social change, lower levels of personal ambition, and negative reactions from others (Bell & Buckley, 2014).

People may also have a tendency to internalize a stereotype when they enter new situations or major life transitions, as they are often less clear and confident in their self-perceptions (Jussim, 1990). Stigmatized individuals may experience greater uncertainty associated with being unsure of whether others will judge them according to their identity, or whether stigma will negatively impact on their outcome in the situations (Crocker et al., 1998). This phenomenon has been researched in recent times, and forms part of the theory that has been developed around ‘stereotype threat’.

Stereotype Threat

Social Identity Theory is fundamental to Stereotype Threat (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and posits that each person has multiple social identities, such as gender, age, social economic status, etc., which become salient in settings when situational cues signal an identity’s value or importance. When an identity becomes more salient, a vigilance process is activated whereby a person’s attention becomes focused on other situational cues around

them to determine if the identity is acceptable (Murphy & Taylor, 2012). If a person assesses that the cues disconfirm that they will be stigmatised based on their social identity, vigilance decreases (Cohen & Garcia, 2008). Conversely, if a person thinks they are likely to be negatively evaluated based on their social identity, vigilance increases. When the latter happens, even ‘harmless’ situational cues can be interpreted as threatening and hold meaning (Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2006; Wout, Shih, Jackson, & Sellers, 2009).

People vary in the extent to which they engage with the vigilance process. For example, some people constantly scan environments for situational cues relating to their identity due to being highly sensitive to identity-based rejection (e.g. Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002) or conscious of the stigma associated with their identity (Pinel, 1999; 2002). Some may become vigilant with one strong cue, whereas for others, threat may be experienced when there are multiple cues (Murphy & Taylor, 2012). Regardless of this variation in the vigilance process, all people have social identities that – given a particular set of cues – trigger stereotype threat even for those who do not belong to traditionally stereotyped groups (see Murphy & Taylor, 2012 for a review). When stereotype threat is registered, an individual can experience cognitive, behavioural and emotional disruptions which can inhibit their performance and relationships. Even subtle cues from media, such as advertising (Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005) or body language (Logel et al., 2009) can initiate a stereotype threat process. People who identify more with their stereotyped social group are likely to be more vulnerable to stereotype threat effects (Schmader, 2002; Wout, Danso, Jackson, & Spencer, 2008; Wout et al., 2009). This can then affect their future experiences of new environments, as their attention becomes focused on cues that are similar to those they have encountered in previous, more threatening, situations.

Concerns of stigmatized individuals in new situations

Murphy and Taylor (2014) reviewed stereotype literature and summarized six key concerns that stigmatized individuals have when they encounter new situations, and perceives that cues - especially subtle and ambiguous ones - are connected to their performance or how they will be treated by others. These concerns include stereotype threat concern, where individuals worry that they may inadvertently confirm a negative group stereotype (Steele, 1997), and also concern about whether they can be themselves in a situation, as well as be accepted by others (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Stigmatized

individuals are also preoccupied with whether they can be authentic, and are vigilant to cues which indicate whether or not they will be treated fairly and can trust others (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008) and the institutions they interact with. Worry about whether they will be discriminated against and devalued on the basis of their social identity also takes attentional resources, as do concerns that they will be marginalized or socially excluded.

Section summary

The aspects of stereotypes which have been discussed in this section are of particular relevance to this study as they highlight what stereotypes are and several ways in which they operate and are maintained. As will be further discussed in this chapter, stepmothers are seldom appropriately socialised into their role, often struggle with the uncertainty and lack of clarity of their role, and are often ignored and stigmatized by society. Given that stepmothers are stereotyped, and may be aware of negative stereotypes existing about them, they may be vulnerable to the process of stereotype threat which increases vigilance to situational cues, feel anxious about themselves in new or ambiguous situations, and be led to behave in ways which increase the likelihood they will be favourably judged. Like other stereotyped groups, stepmothers may also be susceptible of inadvertently confirming and identifying with the stereotype that society prescribes for them. The next section will discuss how stereotypes relate to stepfamilies and stepmothers, as well as describe more of the relevant stressors and challenges of the stepmother role.

Stereotypes of stepfamilies

Stereotypes have often been researched according to social categories such as race, gender, physical attractiveness, religion, ethnicity, and occupations (Ganong et al., 1990). In the 1980's, however, research emerged which focused on investigating if, in fact, family structure could also be a cue for stereotyping. This research used a range of methods (vignette, interviews, paper and pencil assessments) and was conducted with samples of college students (Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Fine, 1986), teachers (Fry & Addington, 1984), nurses (Morgan & Barden, 1985), and counsellors and social workers (Bryan, Coleman, Ganong, & Bryan, 1986); these studies unanimously indicated that family structure is a salient social category by which people are stereotyped.

Negative perceptions of the stepfamily positions have also been evident in stepfamily research. Early research in the 1980's found that in comparison to fathers and mothers, stepmothers and stepfathers elicited more negative perceptions (Ganong & Coleman, 1983). Bryan, et al., (1986) also explored college students' perceptions of stepparents and stepchildren, compared with adults and children in other family structures (such as married, divorced, widowed, or never-married parents). They found that stepparents and stepchildren were evaluated significantly less positively than parents and children in first-time families. Moreover, there were also indications on a number of dimensions that stepfamily members were viewed less positively than people in families with widowed, divorced, and never-married parents.

More recently, Planitz and Feeney (2009) conducted a quantitative study to get a broad, more contemporary overview of perceptions of stepfamilies from a young Australian sample. Two hundred and sixty-six participants under the age of 25, who were currently or recently living in stepfamilies and first-time families, took part in two cross-sectional studies which assessed perceptions of stepfamilies in relation to first-time families. In Study One, 160 participants were assessed on lay concepts and evaluations of the stepfamily stereotype, and in Study Two participants ($n=106$) completed measures of perceived conflict between specific family members. Their findings concluded that whilst negative concepts of biological families were uncommon, a substantial number of negative concepts existed for stepfamilies. These referred to lack of or broken ties, negative affection (jealousy, hate), insecure bonds (detached, difficulty in bonding) and having problematic outcomes (abuse, neglect). Perceptions of negative communication (such as fighting, yelling, swearing), negative challenges (teething problems with other family members, different ideas), and negative images (Cinderella story, evil stepmother) were also held by the majority of participants in this study. Approximately 80% of participants thought that negative stereotypes of stepfamilies existed with the majority of participants citing cultural issues such as fairy tales, television, and general portrayals of stepfamilies being less loving as supporting evidence.

Indeed, fairy tales and media often perpetuate these negative representations of stepfamilies and stepfamily members (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000) which also helps to explain why negative depictions of stepfamilies and stepfamily members have been maintained. One study analysed 55 movie plot summaries and concluded that stepparents were negatively portrayed more than half (58%) of the time and in the remaining plots were

portrayed as neutral rather than positive (Claxton-Oldfield & Butler, 1998). Nearly one-quarter of the stepfather summaries represented them as physically or sexually abusive, scheming, evil, nasty, or as not wanted by their stepchildren or stepchildren-to-be. Over one-third of the stepmother summaries had storylines of them as being murderous or abusive, money-hungry or unwanted. None of the plot summaries in this study portrayed the stepparent in a positive manner.

A later study which used content analysis to examine the portrayals of stepfamilies in general across films released from 1990 to 2003 and found that stepfamilies as a group were also portrayed in a negative or mixed way (Leon & Angst, 2005). These studies are important in highlighting that the media reinforce the negative image of stepparents and stepfamilies, misrepresent the kind of relationships that exist in stepfamilies (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000) and consequently help to foster unrealistic expectations of stepfamily life and stigmatise stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). In turn, the members of stepfamilies can often feel abnormal because they do not see accurate representations of their family structure in popular culture (Whiting, Smith, Bamett, & Graftsky, 2007).

Given what has been described about the nature, development and maintenance of stereotypes in general, and the evidence that stepfamilies and stepfamily members are negatively stereotyped, it is relevant to investigate if and how these negative perceptions impact on stepfamily members. There is limited empirical knowledge on this subject, however, if stepfamily functioning is dependent upon the attitudes and values of the broader society (Cherlin, 1978), then these negative stereotypes about stepfamilies and stepfamily roles may be powerful influences on how stepfamily members behave, interpret their own situations, as well as how they perceive themselves and expect to be perceived by others.

The impact of stereotypes on stepfamilies

Negative representations and stereotypes help to create and perpetuate a disadvantage for stepfamilies and stepfamily members which is known to have significant implications (Ganong et al., 1990). For example, when members of society hold rigid or oversimplified beliefs about stepfamilies this may affect how information about the group is cognitively processed. People may view stepfamilies or stepfamily members through this

‘filter’ of what they believe they already know about them as a group, and only use or process information that fits with this pre-existing idea. For stepfamilies, stereotypes may therefore affect stepfamily members by causing them to be inaccurately and less favourably perceived and evaluated based on their status as a stepfamily or stepfamily member, regardless of what behaviour is observed (Ganong et al., 1990). This occurs simply because their behaviour may be perceived as confirming assumptions and stereotypical beliefs that are held.

The power of stereotypes is not only in their ability to affect cognitive processes, but also in their ability to directly influence behaviours of both the stereotyped group and those that they interact with. For example, if a mother from a first-time family holds a stereotypical view of a stepfamily as being dysfunctional and more conflictual this may cause her to want to ‘protect’ her own child by refusing to allow them to play at the house of a friend who belongs to a stepfamily (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008). This idea shows that the stereotypes have the ability to lead to discriminatory behaviours against the stereotyped group. Stereotypes also have the power to directly affect the behaviours of stepfamily members by influencing how they perceive and value themselves. Although there is limited empirical evidence of this, clinicians have suggested that stepfamily stereotypes cause stepfamily members to hold a negative evaluation of themselves and their family which may lead to lowered self-esteem (Visher & Visher, 1996). These negative evaluations of stepfamily life may also impair the adjustment of stepfamily members and in turn may result in self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, if children expect to have a ‘wicked stepmother’ then these children may try to reject, refuse, or sabotage a relationship with her, or otherwise interpret her attempts at discipline as evidence of her ‘cruelty’ (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000). These expectations and misperceptions may then create or contribute to tension in the step relationship (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008), although stepfamily researchers would argue that “it is not too farfetched, considering how stepfamily life is often portrayed, for stepchildren to assume they will be abused and unloved” (Ganong & Coleman, 1997, p.102).

Clinicians have also asserted that cultural stereotypes related to stepfamily status are a source of stress to stepfamily members (Browning & Artfelt, 2012; Papernow, 2013). Knowing that society holds a negative view of them may lead stepfamily members to act in ways to disconfirm or dispel that belief and prevent self-fulfilling prophecies from occurring (Jussim & Flemming, 1996). For example, stepfamilies may resist or avoid

using the 'step' prefix to describe their family status. They may instead opt to use other terms such as 'remarried', 'blended', 'merged' or 'combined' family to be seen by others as a 'normal' family and to avoid stigma and negative stereotypes (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). As will be discussed in more detail later in this literature review, some stepparents employ 'identity management strategies' such as choosing not to reveal their step status to reduce the likelihood of negative reactions (Dainton, 1993). Hence, these negative cultural beliefs and perceptions carry weight and influence an individual's behaviours, perceptions, and expectations about remarriage, stepfamily positions and relationships (Segrin & Nabi, 2002).

Stepparents must not only deal with the challenge of overcoming their own and broader society's beliefs about stepparents, but they must also come to terms with other challenging aspects of their role. The following section will outline some of the research that has been conducted on the stepparent and stepmother roles; how they are currently understood, and examples of how they may be negotiated.

The stepparent role

Stepparenting can be a challenging and stressful undertaking (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2004) and so an increasing amount of research has been conducted on the complexities of the stepparent role (Crohn, 2006; Svare, Jay, & Mason, 2004) and the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). Stepparent-child relationships have been found to be pivotal to the adaptive functioning of the stepfamily unit (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), marital stability (Hetherington et al., 1999) and child and adolescent adjustment outcomes (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The challenges and successes of stepparenting can be influenced by a number of variables such as the age and gender of the children, whether the stepparent is residential or non-residential, whether the stepparent has biological children, the age and gender of the stepparent (Coleman & Ganong, 1997), the length of time the stepfamily has existed, and the type of stepfamily (Fine & Schwebel, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). There is also considerable evidence to suggest that one of the most significant challenges and sources of stress is the uncertainty caused by the lack of clarity of an appropriate stepparent role. Stepparents are often unsure about the scope and nature of their

responsibilities, uncertain about how their perceived role should be fulfilled, unclear about whose expectations must be met, and also often lack certainty about the consequences of their role performance (Doodson & Morley, 2006; Stewart, 2005).

What is known through stepfamily research is that the stepparent role is one that must be negotiated by family members. It has been suggested by researchers that the ability to establish some kind of workable relationship between stepparents and stepchildren is central to fostering a happy second marriage and ensuring successful functioning in stepfamilies (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Yet, this task proves difficult for many stepfamilies. In the absence of guidelines or norms on the stepparent role and with the dominance of the nuclear family model, many parents and stepparents have unrealistic expectations of how the stepfamily will function and have different perceptions about what is the most suitable role for the stepparent to take. For example, stepfamily couples often assume that their new family will function like a nuclear family (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998), that family members will adjust quickly and that stepparents, stepchildren and stepsiblings will experience ‘instant love’ for one another (Visher & Visher, 1996). Parents and stepparents often feel that a stepparents’ role should be similar to that of a biological parent (Bray, 1999; Fine et al., 1998; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Children, on the other hand, usually have different expectations (Cartwright, 2005). They often view the stepparent as not having any parental rights (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001) and instead are more likely to expect them to assume the role of a friend (Fine et al., 1998). Hence, perhaps unsurprisingly given these different expectations and the ambiguity over the stepparent role, confusion and stress arises for the stepfamily members that leaves them unprepared for the realities of stepfamily life and directly impacts on the extent to which they are able to adjust to their new family situation (Fine et al., 1998; Kurdeck & Fine, 1993).

For stepparents, a key issue is around the extent to which they should be involved in active parenting behaviours. There has been some investigation into whether it is possible or advisable for stepparents to adopt more active parenting behaviours (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). These parenting behaviours are often examined in family research along two broad dimensions of ‘warmth/support’ and ‘discipline/control’ as these have been identified as important determinants of child and adolescent outcomes (Fine et al., 1998). For first-time couples, an ‘authoritative’ parenting style, which is high on both warmth and control, is correlated with the most positive outcomes, while parenting

approaches that are low on both warmth and control (neglecting) are least successful. Those that are high on warmth but low on control (permissive) or high on control and low on warmth (authoritarian) are moderately successful (Baumrind, 1991).

With respect to the parenting styles that are used by stepparents, there are mixed results. One study found that stepparents provide less warmth to their stepchildren than non-divorced parents (Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992), whereas another longitudinal study of child development found that a few stepparents used an authoritative style. Hetherington and Clingempeel's longitudinal study (1992) found that stepfathers attempted to get on side with their stepchildren through less monitoring behaviours, and took a more distant approach to stepparenting. Stepmothers on the other hand tended to show more engagement with children, perhaps because their spouses who were the custodial fathers expected a greater level of active parenting, however, stepmothers also may experience more conflict with their stepchildren (Ganong, Coleman, & Weaver, 2002). Hence, as Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) concluded, given the complexities of the stepparent role, the parenting approaches that have proven to be effective may not suitably map on to stepparenting approaches. Clinicians (e.g. Papernow, 2013; Visher, Visher, & Pasley, 2003) and researchers (e.g. Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kelley, 1992; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010) have therefore recommended that stepparents play a supportive role, with a focus on developing a friendship with stepchildren characterised by high warmth and low control.

With the role of the stepparent being so crucial to stepfamily functioning (Fine et al., 1998; Michaels, 2006), some qualitative studies have sought to understand more about the various approaches that stepparents take in trying to negotiate and fulfil a role in the stepfamily. For example, Erera-Weatherley (1996) conducted an interview study with 32 remarried couples and concluded that five basic stepparent 'types' emerged. Some stepfathers adopted a style which mirrored that of a biological parent, whilst some stepmothers strived to be 'super good' as a way of fostering a relationship with their stepchild. Some non-residential stepmothers and residential stepfathers chose a detached role, whereas others were less certain of the position they held and the perception of their role was characterised by distress, confusion and frustration. Finally, the friendship style was one in which stepparents took the role of being 'a good friend'. This proved to be the most effective style, however, as other studies have shown (e.g. Hetherington &

Clingempeel, 1992) the attitudes and behaviours of the stepchild also influence the stepparent-stepchild relationship. A friendship style may only be achieved and effective if the stepchild accepts this and does not rebut attempts by the stepparent to be friends. Indeed, in Erera-Weatherly's (1996) study, the 'detached' stepparenting style was often the result of stepchildren rejecting the stepparents' attempts to take a more active role. Ganong et al., (2011) found however, that some stepparents who were initially rejected by stepchildren but persisted to befriend them, were eventually successful in forming a more amicable relationship and won their affection.

Four approaches to stepparenting were also observed in a more recent qualitative study (Svare et al., 2004) which also sought to also understand how stepparents decide to take one approach over another. One style, the 'replication family' involved stepparents and parents attempting to emulate the nuclear family model, and was found to be similar to Erera-Weatherley's 'birth family' (1996) and the 'first-marriage family' (Ganong et al., 2002). There was also an approach used exclusively by stepmothers in the sample called the 'the third parent' in which they co-parented with the father on daily matters but recognised that their parenting opinion came in 'third place' after the residential and non-residential parent. The 'assistant parent', which was a style adopted by stepfathers in this study, did not consider themselves to be an equal parenting partner and instead enforced the parent's rules in the absence of the parent and worked to develop emotional connections with stepchildren more like a friend. Both the third parent and assistant parent approaches were identified to work well. Finally the 'extended family' approach was characterised by the inclusion and active fostering of kin and non-kin, and residential and non-residential relationships into the family. In this approach stepparents were co-parenting with the parent, or the parent and non-residential parent, respectively.

As these studies show, there is a range of stepparenting approaches that are used and a number of variables that influence the approach and role that the stepparent will take. Participants in the exploratory interview study by Svare (2004) talked about developing an approach in response to the need of the family and filling a gap in the family created by divorce (Svare et al., 2004). For example, some long-time single mothers who re-partner may push their husbands to assume a disciplinary role very quickly (Svare et al., 2004), yet stepchildren may resist or rebel against stepparents who adopt disciplinary roles they do not agree with (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). Other parenting 'gaps' caused by divorce (Svare, et al, 2004) and

circumstances such as conflict with ex-spouses, a lack of parental involvement from a non-residential parent, or the presence of a non-authoritative residential parent may result in stepparents taking on a more active parenting role (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Nichols, Phillips, Peterson, & Battistutta, 2002; Svare et al., 2004). Stepparents who have been in the role for a longer time, or who are the stepparent of a young child may also have more parenting rights.

Whilst these studies investigated stepparenting by both stepmothers and stepfathers, other studies have focused in on one or other of these roles. As the present study focuses on the experiences of stepmothers, the following section will outline some of the relevant literature which relates specifically to this role.

The stepmother role

As with the stepfather role, stepmothers find their position and role to be ambiguous and ill-defined (Doodson & Morley, 2006). Women are not socialised into the stepmother role (M. Coleman et al., 2008), lack role models (Orchard & Solberg, 1999) and often hold expectations for themselves in the role which tend to be unrealistic or in conflict with the expectations of other family members or society (Ganong et al., 1990). Stepmothers may also struggle with the pressure they receive from society to be loving and nurturing caretakers of the family (Levin, 1997), while at the same time not overstepping into the territory of the biological mother (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Hence there are no well-defined social scripts, and stepmothers may be forced to define their role by getting information from their interactions with the world around them (Gosselin & Rousseau, 2012).

In order to better understand the stepmothers' role, several qualitative studies have examined the approaches stepmothers take and the identities they assume to be part of the family. Orchard and Solberg (1999) surveyed stepmothers about their role ambiguity and the realism of their expectations and using factor analysis found that stepmothers in their sample expected to be included in the functions or workings of the stepfamily, but did not expect to be the person primarily responsible for the household duties. The strongest predictor of stepmothers' expectations was the amount of time stepmothers spent with

their stepchildren; the more time stepmothers spent, the greater the stepmothers' expectations of being able to physically and emotionally integrate into the stepfamily.

In another qualitative study, Church (1999) interviewed 104 stepmothers about their views of kinship ties and observed five models of kinship which influenced perceptions of their roles. These included: the nuclear model in which the stepmother perceives the stepfamily as a nuclear family and wants to be acknowledged as a mother; the 'extended/added parent' model in which the stepparent defines the stepfamily broadly and does not try to take on a mother role; the 'couple' model in which the stepparent's primary focus is on the relationship with the partner; the 'biological' model in which the stepmother defines the stepfamily along biological lines and focuses primarily on her own children; and a 'no family' model in which stepparents perceive themselves as separate and unrelated to anyone in the stepfamily. These stepmothers' ideas about family were connected to how they defined their role, the kind of relationships they aspired to, and the conflicts they experienced. Views were also shaped by personal needs, own experiences of family of origin, and others' expectations of their role.

In a qualitative study with eleven stepmothers which took place ten years ago, Weaver and Coleman (2005) found that the gendered ideal of mothers and the perception that 'there can only be one mother' greatly influenced how the stepmother role was considered. The stepmothers in this study discussed roles which were influenced by motherhood ideals and how these conflicted with the stepmother role. They experienced tension about the perceived expectation that all women want to care for and nurture children; and the expectation that there can only be one woman in a mothering position. In this study, many participants described their role as "mothering but not a mother" (Weaver & Coleman, 2005, p. 483) in response to the expectations they believed are held by others, relating to their own ideas of mothering. They defined this "mothering but not a mother" role as a kind of mothering but more like a friend, responsible and caring adult, provider of emotional support, and mentor. 'Other focused' roles were also identified whereby stepmother focused on others' needs and responses such as being a liaison between the partner and the children's biological mother or a facilitator of the relationship between the partner and the children; and 'outsider' roles in which stepmothers were involved only on the periphery of stepchildren's lives, or as partners of the children's fathers with no direct role in the stepchildren's lives. Participants identified a number of factors as influencing their stepmother role: issues relating to the biological mothers, their partner, their

stepchildren, their own biological children, and the extended family; the resources available; and negative cultural myths of the stepmother.

These findings are supported by another qualitative study which investigated the descriptions that stepdaughters use of their stepmother (Crohn, 2006). The participants all perceived themselves as having positive relationships with their stepmothers, and five styles of positive stepmother roles were identified: my 'father's wife', a 'peer-like girlfriend', an 'older friend', a 'type of kin', and 'like another mother'. Interestingly, participants in all categories did not describe the same intensity of connection, closeness, and availability from their stepmothers as they did their biological mothers, and none of the stepdaughters perceived their stepmothers to have strong disciplinary and control functions. In Crohn's (2006) study it was found that stepmothers may manifest more than one style, and in other studies it has also been found that roles within stepfamilies are flexible in that they can change and evolve with time (Church, 1999; Levin, 1997). For example, when stepchildren are very young, 'another mother' or a more parenting-type role may be a more appropriate model for a stepmother to take, if both parents agree (Ganong et al., 2011). As children get older, however, stepmothers may need to adjust their style in response to their stepchild's needs and behaviours (Levin, 1997), and in order to find a stepparenting approach that is mutually agreeable. This process of actively engaging in different roles across time helps stepmothers to negotiate their identity and possibly fare better in their position as they feel more empowered (Erera-Weatherly, 1996).

Stepmother stress

Stepparents face a number of challenges in their roles, and it is commonly found in stepfamily research that stepmothers adjust to stepfamily life less easily than stepfathers (M. Coleman et al., 2000; A. J. Johnson et al., 2008; Nielsen, 1999) and that women fare significantly worse than men in terms of mental health from being a stepparent or the partner of a stepparent (Feijten, Boyle, Graham, & Gayle, 2011). For example, women experience the stepmother role as more stressful than men in stepfather positions (A. J. Johnson et al., 2008; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; Shapiro, 2014), perhaps because they experience greater role ambiguity (Ganong, et al., 1990), perceive themselves to have less satisfying relationships with their stepchildren (Fine & Schwebel, 1992), are frustrated by

their 'caregiving without authority' role (Jones, 2004), perceive a lack of power in the home (Doodson & Morley, 2006; Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985), have difficult relationships with biological mothers (Jones, 2003; Nielsen, 1999), and conflicted or limited support from their spouses (Hart, 2009). Results from two interview studies with 22 Canadian stepmothers found that the majority of stepmothers expressed anger and resentment toward their husbands because they did not set boundaries for their children, did not support them in the parenting role, and often excluded them from the father-child relationships (Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985). Eighteen of the women also expressed identity confusion about their role, and reported feelings of hopelessness and ineffectiveness in the home, as well as exhaustion and burnout. Stepmothers' romantic satisfaction was lower than both stepfathers and biological mothers in stepfather families, and they experienced more inter-parental conflict than stepfathers. In their relationships with their stepchildren, stepmothers also had less close and more conflicted relationships than mothers in stepfather families.

Some studies (e.g. Henry & McCue, 2009; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011) have compared a sample of stepmothers and biological mothers and concluded that depressive symptoms are more common in stepmothers. Shapiro and Stewart (2011) found that stepmothers reported more depressive symptoms and parenting stress and lower perceptions of child regard than did biological mothers. Interestingly, these stepmothers attributed any perceived relationship successes to their stepchildren and took responsibility for any perceived failures, supporting the idea that stepmothers blame themselves and may even internalize these family problems. Another study by Johnson et al., (2008) found that stress levels of adults in stepfamilies might not decline even after they have settled into their new roles. Stepmothers in this study had permanently raised stress levels compared with mothers in nuclear families.

As well as comparison studies with stepfathers and biological mothers, stepfamily researchers have focused on comparing the experiences non-residential stepmothers with those of residential stepmothers. These studies found that non-residential stepmothers experienced greater stress due to the irregularity of children's visits (Howden, 2007), the difficulty of establishing household routines (Smyth, 2004), and trying to fulfil a role which is ambiguous and ill-defined (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). In a more recent quantitative study, Doodson and Davies (2014) compared the wellbeing of 250 residential and non-

residential stepmothers living in 'simple' and 'complex' stepfamilies, with the wellbeing of 83 mothers. These researchers found that the mean levels of depression and anxiety of stepmothers as a whole were significantly higher than the mean levels of depression and anxiety of biological mothers. They also found that residential stepmothers in complex stepfamilies reported a significantly higher mean level of depression than did biological mothers, implying that these stepmothers may have the more complex and challenging daily role in comparison to other types of stepmothers.

Another finding from this study indicated that non-residential stepmothers in simple stepfamilies reported a significantly higher mean level of anxiety than did biological mothers. These authors suggested that the high level of anxiety of simple family stepmothers might stem from a difficulty in building relationships with stepchildren who they are unlikely to see on a daily basis. Interestingly, analyses which controlled for additional variables found that these differences remained significant regardless of the mothers' age, socioeconomic status, whether the mother worked, whether the mother was married or cohabiting, the age of the eldest child, and how many children the mother had. However, the differences between the anxiety and depression levels of stepmothers and mothers were no longer significant when controlling for the length of the current relationship. Doodson (2014) followed up this study with a qualitative study with non-residential stepmothers, where she sought to understand the factors which related to stepmother anxiety through focus group discussions. Doodson (2014) concluded that stepmother anxiety predominantly related to the stepmothers' relationship with the biological mother, their relationship with their stepchildren, and lack of clarity regarding the stepmother role.

Stepmother positions have also been named as stressful because non-custodial mothers remain in closer contact with their biological children than non-custodial fathers. The increased access of the non-residential mother may cause difficulty for the child who may think that they have 'two mothers'. The stepmother may be perceived as a threat, and the children's sense of loyalty to their mother may interfere with the development of stepmother-stepchild relationships (Kheshgi-Genovese & Genovese, 1997). Biological mothers who are possessive and believe rigidly in the exclusivity of motherhood may also undermine or reject stepmothers as having a parenting role in their child's life. This creates further stress, anxiety and confusion for stepmothers (Doodson, 2014; Jones, 2004;

Neilson, 1999), and in many cases the step relationships do not progress and develop until they are explicitly endorsed by the mother (Levin, 1997; Neilson, 1999).

Stepmother families may also begin differently than stepfather families. Cherlin et al., (1991) suggest that because mothers are granted the majority of custody rights, children living with their fathers following divorce may have experienced a difficult custody negotiation, may have a history of troubled family relations, may have mothers who have died, or may have mothers who cannot effectively manage single-parent status due to a physical or psychological disorder. These factors may, in turn, affect the attitudes and behaviours of the child toward the stepmother. In a qualitative study by Doodson and Morley (2006), the role of the non-residential stepmother was examined in order to identify the key issues and concerns affecting the cohesion of the family unit. This study concluded that stepmothers who adopted a nuclear definition of a family may find it more difficult to adapt to stepfamily life than those who are inclusive of all members of their new family. The study also suggested that expectations held by stepmothers which are based on the nuclear family model place an additional risk factor to the couple relationship.

There is a tendency for stepmothers to be self-critical and blame themselves for problems within the family (Bray & Kelly, 1998). In clinical samples, Visser and Visser (2013) found that stepmothers in therapy perceived that they sacrificed their needs and negated their feelings in order to reduce overall family conflict. When family conflict arose in spite of their sacrifices, many of these stepmothers began to feel like failures as women. Further to the reasons cited regarding poor support and role definition, possible explanations for this have been attributed to the high expectations that society, spouses, and stepmothers themselves have for the stepmother role (Nielsen, 1999). Stepmothers have been talked about as “living under a ‘social magnifying glass’” (Jones, 2004, p. 130; Berger, 1998) and having to cope with negative evaluations and social stereotypes which are described as stressful and wearying (Fine & Schwebel, 1992). In light of the above evidence of stress and challenges, it is perhaps easier to understand why stepmothers in other studies have been found to hold a negative view of their stepmother status (Doodson & Morley, 2006; Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Some stepmothers have reported that they would even dissuade others from taking on the stepmother role due to its challenges and the dissatisfaction they had experienced (Doodson & Morley, 2006).

The following sections will examine the current literature which considers societal views and stereotypes of stepmothers, why these may exist, and the ways in which these attitudes and beliefs may require stepmothers to 'manage' their public and private identity.

Cultural influences and negative stepmother representations

Stepmother stereotypes in cultural stories

The role of stepmother is probably the most stigmatized of all family positions (M. Coleman et al., 2008) and is consistently associated with negative characteristics of stepmothers being wicked, cruel, jealous and unkind (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Stepmothers are not only stereotyped as having fewer positive personality traits than biological mothers, but even as lacking when compared to all women in general (Ganong & Coleman, 1995). They are stereotyped as less family oriented, uninterested and unskilled in parenting, and less successful in marriage than married mothers (Ganong & Coleman, 1995).

Where do these cultural beliefs and stereotypes originate from? The concept of the 'wicked stepmother' exists in nearly every culture and dates back to Roman times (Noy, 1991). From a very young age children are exposed to stepmothers in popular fairy tales such as Hansel and Gretel, Snow White and Cinderella (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008) and children may be influenced by these stories (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000). One suggestion by Bettelheim, an Austrian-born American psychologist, is that fairy tales help a child to develop meaning in life by stimulating and encouraging the skills to cope with difficult feelings and problems (as cited in Campbell, 1995). He states that fairy tales present definitive polarities of good and evil in order to facilitate the child's comprehension of the difference between the two (Bettelheim, 1989)(Campbell, 1995). Another suggestion is that originally these stories appealed because of the psychological needs they met for children (as cited in Levin, 1997). In the times when fairy tales were conceptualised, the stepmother was replacing a mother who had died. Bettelheim (1989) suggested that stepmothers were much more likely to be stereotyped compared to stepfathers because they were more closely involved with the care of the children and the household. The fantasy of the wicked stepmother allows the young child to manage their intense contradictory emotions of love and hate by splitting off anger and rage, simultaneously

permitting an expression of anger, without endangering the relationship with mother. With their recurring themes of wicked stepmothers, such tales perpetuate cultural beliefs about stepmothers, regardless of whether these beliefs are accurate. In conjunction with the dominant and 'privileged status' of the nuclear family, these stories contribute to the stigmatisation of stepfamilies and the vilification of the stepmother (Jones, 2003, p.1). However Bettelheim's suggestion that stepmothers are stereotyped due to greater proximity and involvement with their stepchildren doesn't explain why today non-residential stepmothers are portrayed just as negatively as residential stepmothers (M. Coleman et al., 2008).

Motherhood myths and gendered expectations

Inextricably bound to the cultural portrayals of stepmothers are gendered expectations and myth about women and mothering. Dominant western culture places a high value on motherhood, especially when it occurs between a two-parent, first-married, heterosexual couple (Arendell, 2000). A woman is expected to want to become a mother and to view this as the most central role she holds (Perez & Jaramillo Tórrrens, 2009). As such, women will often define themselves, and will be defined by others according to whether or not they are mothers (Gillespie, 2003). Hence, motherhood is a position which is culturally privileged (Hays, 1998) and seen "a given or a self-evident fact" (Smart, 1996, p. 37), despite the evidence to show that in contemporary society motherhood is not important for all women (Gillespie, 2003; McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Tichenor, 2008).

From this cultural imperative, comes a powerful 'myth of motherhood' which is characterised by cultural expectations about how mothers are expected to behave, and which influences the ways in which people relate to women who are mothers and the ways women think about themselves (Braverman, 1989). Mothers are expected to be self-sacrificing, devoted, tireless, selfless, caring, nurturing, and loving (Hays, 1999). Other expectations are also placed upon mothers such as the myth that only one woman should enact the mother role (Neilson, 1999) as well as the expectations that women cannot be mothers unless they give birth to a baby (Weaver & Coleman, 2005) and that the ability to mother is inborn or innate to women (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Traditional ideas about women's roles in the home and the division of domestic labour still exist today, and despite the fact that there are as many women in the workforce

as men, women still do the majority of housework and care of children (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010).

With so many standards set out, it therefore becomes possible for women to be perceived as either succeeding (being a 'good mother'), or failing (being a 'bad mother') in the mother role. Implicit in the motherhood myths is the message that there is a 'right' way to love and mother a child (Smart, 1996), which inherently raises the risk of failure and incompetence. Furthermore, any mother-type which is a deviation from the heterosexual, middle class, married mother hegemonic ideal is likely to be judged less favourably than if it were manifested by biological mothers (Garwood, 2014). These motherhood expectations are evident in the way in which society talks about women and mothers, and they affect not only mothers, but all women (Garwood, 2014) who are often judged by their attitudes and behaviours regarding motherhood. Some recent studies suggest that those mothers (Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2013) and stepmothers (Gosselin & Rousseau, 2012) who have a more 'traditional' view of mothering are likely to experience higher levels of stress.

For stepmothers, these expectations about motherhood pose great difficulty. As Levin (1997) concludes from her interview study with 63 stepfamily members, not only is the stepmother role automatically devalued, but expectations of mothers conflict with the expectations of the stepparent, which requires lesser involvement in parenting and with children (Levin 1997). The stepmother may then face the difficult task of finding a suitable position somewhere on the continuum of stepmothering, with 'traditional mother/nurturer' at one end of the spectrum and 'wicked stepmother' at the other (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; A. J. Johnson et al., 2008). A double-bind may also be created for stepmothers; there is a likelihood that they will be unfavourably judged if they try to actively 'mother' (nurture, emotionally support and provide care for children), or potentially condemned for maintaining distance and avoiding a mothering role (Salwen, 1990). The gap in the two positions can then further contribute to role ambiguity for stepmothers as they have to constantly negotiate physical and emotional closeness (M. Coleman et al., 2008). Levin (1997) suggests that many stepmothers resolve this ambiguity and dilemma by following their most salient identity, that of being female. However, in doing so, and following their 'mother instinct' they may inadvertently end up reinforcing stereotypical images (Howard & Hollander, 1997). Levin (1997) has also argued that men do not face this same dilemma because the stepfather role and male role

carry similar expectations; neither role is expected to provide the majority of child care, nor take responsibility for the household management.

To complicate matters further, stepmothers may be sensitive to ensuring that they are not encroaching on the territory of the biological mother, who is often involved in the children's lives (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Hetherington and Kelly (2002), in their longitudinal study, found that many stepmothers were challenged by being in a parent role, while simultaneously minimising conflict with the biological mother. It was also concluded that stepchildren benefited from multiple family relationships and did better when all the adults got along. For stepmothers, that meant adopting their own role in the family that was both favourable and yet did not threaten the biological mother (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). For women who are both mothers and stepmothers this may be more challenging, and they may face a greater level of role conflict being in both roles (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). These women may find it harder to try and enact two conflicting roles, and they may also be subject to other people's speculation about any perceived differences in how they treat or feel about their biological children compared to their stepchildren (Pritchard & Kort-Butler, 2014).

When a stepmother is unable to fulfil society's myths of motherhood, a sense of self-blame and a sense of failure may set in (M. Coleman et al., 2008; Ganong & Coleman, 1997). In her review paper, Salwen (1990) suggests that the stigma of being perceived as wicked can have a profound effect on stepmothers' thoughts, behaviours and sense of identity. The collective comment from an early qualitative study with a group of eight stepmothers indicated that the theme of the wicked stepmother is one which had an influence on their experience as stepmothers: "We slowly learned that, deep down, we were afraid we were evil. Much of our behaviour was motivated by that fear" (Maglin & Schniedewind, 2009). Other stepmothers in an interview study talked about how they found themselves withdrawing from other stepfamily members in response to feeling unappreciated and their perception that they were viewed as wicked and evil, regardless of behaviour (Church, 1999). These women felt they were not given a chance to be successful in their role as stepmother, and that all of their stepfamily experiences had been negative (Church, 1999).

Social perceptions can and do exert powerful effects on subsequent social interactions. As will be discussed in the next section, stepmothers perception of stepmother stereotypes may force stepmothers to carefully manage their role and the way they are thought of by

others in contexts which are both inside and outside the stepfamily (M. Coleman et al., 2008).

Managing stepmother stereotypes

Both clinical and empirical evidence reveals that stepmothers identify with the wicked stepmother myth as directly contributing to the stress they experience in adapting to the stepmother role (Hughes, 1991; Visher & Visher, 2013). Stepmothers must carefully balance and regulate perceptions of their parenting involvement and behaviours without being perceived as overinvolved or uncaring. Although no empirical study has directly asked stepmothers about the impact that negative stepmother representations and stereotypes have had on their identity and stepmother experience, there is some clinical support and evidence from studies with a different research focus, that stepmothers have ways to 'manage' their stepmother identity.

Management strategies which help stepmothers to overcome the competing expectations (Dainton, 1993) and negative connotations that surround their role were seen in Weaver and Coleman's (2005) qualitative study with 11 stepmothers. In interviews, stepmothers talked about avoiding issues, particularly around discipline of the stepchildren, out of fear that the children would react negatively, and concern that this could damage either their relationship with the child or the child's relationship with their father. One participant talked of how she was rejected by her stepson, in spite of her attempts to form a relationship with him. She described feeling hurt that, "he saw [me] as the evil, wicked, stepmother" (p. 489). Hence, given that even affinity-seeking behaviours could cast stepmothers in a negative light, the avoidance of the wicked stepmother stereotype was often discussed by participants in this study as the main reason stepmothers were reluctant to discipline their stepchildren.

Other studies with different research focus have also inadvertently suggested that stepmothers may use compensatory strategies in order to manage their stepmother identity. For instance, Jones (2003) was interested in illustrating how a support group and narrative can help stepmothers cope with their difficult role and construct more satisfying personal and family stories. She presented four stepmother stories collected from an ongoing support group for stepmothers that were based on narrative theory and techniques. Out of

this study came evidence that stepmother participants avoided discussing problems or concerns about the stepchildren with their spouse so that they were not perceived by stepfamily members as being 'the enemy'. Some stepmothers also talked of concealing their hopes or hurts so as not to be even more vulnerable to ridicule or rejection from their stepchildren. It is suggested by Jones (2004) that these stepmothers did this to prevent the perception of being a wicked stepmother.

Some of these findings from Jones' (2004) research are supported by a later study with eight stepmothers who were interviewed about their views and feelings on being a stepmother and asked to identify any areas of concern or stress in their family life (Doodson & Morley, 2006). In this study most women felt that they shared many feelings and issues with their partners, but also mentioned that they were selective about this at times when they felt it important to be perceived as being as fair as possible and not enact the wicked stepmother. They were cautious of disclosing their negative feelings and carefully edited conversations with others so as not to be construed as unkind, negative, or mean spirited.

In some other cases stepmothers have tended to behaviourally over-compensate in order to prove the wicked stepmother stereotype wrong. For example, in the previously mentioned qualitative study by Erera-Weatherley (1996), one of the 'super good step-mom's' described how she "tried to shatter the myth of the wicked stepmother" by trying to excel as a stepmother (p. 159). This participant stated that she would

"exert [myself] above and beyond as if to prove that the myth of the wicked stepmother is not true...I took him to the theatre, I gave him the best lessons. I would rush out and buy him things, more and more, the most expensive items" (p. 160).

In other studies stepmothers overcompensated by assuming more household and parental responsibilities and making more personal sacrifices so as to be seen in a positive light (Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985). Erera-Weatherly (1996) suggested that stepmothers who attempt to overcome the wicked stepmother stereotype by trying to be perfect may undermine themselves by failing to set appropriate limits and enforcing discipline. This can in turn result in emotional burnout and resentment toward both the stepchild and the spouse who may be held responsible for the stepmother's overexertion (Erera-Weatherly, 1996).

These strategies identified in empirical studies align with those outlined in Dainton's (1993) theoretical paper and defined as "the efforts or strategies of stepmothers to foster preferred perceptions about themselves in both the public and private contexts of their social lives" (Hughes, 1991 p.94). In the company of her stepfamily members, a stepmother may employ corrective strategies, such as self-promotion (e.g. displaying competence in mothering) and ingratiation (acting in positive or helpful ways) to improve her status as member of the family (M. Coleman et al., 2008). In public, however, a stepmother may attempt to conceal her stepmother status to help prevent or defuse others perceiving her negatively (Ganong & Coleman, 1987). For example, in Church's (1999) qualitative study one stepmother reported dyeing her hair to closely resemble her stepdaughter's hair so that they may be perceived by others as being genetically related. In other public instances, stepmothers may refer to the child as "my daughter" rather than "my stepdaughter", or perform behaviours which imply that she is the biological mother to avoid owning her stepmother status (Smith, 1990). Alternatively, stepmothers may choose to use a corrective strategy in public, such as 'confrontation' and 'breaking through', whereby the stepmother acknowledges her stepmother status and then works to frame it as constructive and commendable (Jones, as cited in Dainton, 1993).

As has been previously mentioned, stepfamilies and stepfamily members have been known to avoid using the 'step' label, which may be considered a corrective strategy. Instead, some families have chosen to use other terms, such as a 'blended' or 'reconstituted' family. These terms may help in reducing the anxiety some people feel about being judged by others as a derogatory status (Ganong, Coleman, & Kennedy, 1990). There has, however, been some suggestion that these alternative labels are confusing, or only add mystification to of stepfamily life (Hughes, 1991). Not only is the selection and use of identity management strategies dependent on whether they are occurring in a public or private context, but they are also contingent on the expectations of other stepfamily members. For example, at home, stepchildren are more likely to expect the distinction to be obvious between mother and stepmother, however, in public stepchildren may also want to avoid the stigma of being labelled a stepfamily member and accept their stepmother behaving in more overtly motherly ways (Dainton, 1993). Hence, because the stepmother role is defined by both internal and external expectations, as well as public and private expectation, there is a great deal of flexibility required in a stepmother's identity management.

Other ways of managing the negative stereotypes of being a stepmother have also emerged in a more contemporary study. Christian (2005) investigated how stepmothers sometimes utilize narratives to cope with the social stigma of the wicked stepmother myth. She conducted a content analysis of two months of posts by stepmothers on a stepfamily support website. From this analysis, Christian (2005) concluded that stepmothers use their narratives to create a binary opposition, and position themselves (as stepmothers) against the biological mother. It is suggested that one of the ways that stepmothers manage and cope with the stigma of being a stepmother is to take what is familiar to them (the position of being the wicked stepmother') and project this image onto the biological mother. Christian (2005) found that the participants achieved this in the way they wrote about their stepmother experiences. The written techniques they used included referring to mothers as 'mom' in quotes, as if to suggest this is only a title and not a role; through exaggeration; and by describing the behaviours they put up with and by positioning themselves as 'good' (Christian, 2005). Some stepmothers wrote about their beliefs and offered supporting evidence to illustrate that they perceive the children's mother to be mentally unwell and incompetent. Hence, Christian (2005) suggests that one strategy stepmothers unconsciously used to deconstruct the myth was to position the biological mothers as the wicked group, which allowed the stepmothers to occupy the positive role and from this position use their narratives to "individually and collectively help to deconstruct myths and stories that perpetuate...forms of prejudice" (Glauser, 1999, p. 62).

Summary and research rationale

Given the evidence that has been presented thus far, it is relevant to explore stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes and understand the impact, if any, that these have on their experience of being a stepmother. Norvall Glenn (1994) argued that "any stigma attached to stepfamilies has declined in recent years and it is unlikely that stigma now ranks high among the causes of stress and discomfort of personas in those families" (p. 45). However, given that stepfamilies and stepfamily members continue to be regarded negatively (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Planitz & Feeney, 2009) there is reason to suggest that this topic requires further investigation, as little research attention has been paid to how individual stepmothers perceive and experience these stereotypes (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Planitz & Feeney, 2009). This is surprising given the

increasing prevalence of stepfamilies, and the evidence that being a stepmother is a challenging and stressful undertaking (Henry & McCue, 2009; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011), with some stepmothers holding a negative view of their stepmother status (Doodson & Morley, 2006). Hence, this study seeks to address the gap in the research (Planitz & Feeney, 2009) by aiming to find out about stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes, and the impact that these may have on stepmothers and their experience of their role.

The next chapter will give an overview of qualitative methodology and provide a rationale for why this methodology was selected for the current study.

CHAPTER TWO - QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

This research aimed to examine stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmother representations and stereotypes, in order to understand the impact, if any, on stepmothers and their experiences of the stepmother role. It uses mainly qualitative data collected from 138 stepmothers in New Zealand who completed an anonymous online questionnaire. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. Do stepmothers perceive stepmother stereotypes exist in society, and if so, how do they experience these?
2. To what extent do negative stepmother stereotypes impact stepmothers' experiences of the stepmother role?

This current chapter outlines the qualitative methodology used in this research and gives a brief overview of the characteristics and strengths of this type of research. Chapter Three will then describe the participants, methods of data collection, and data analysis used in this study.

Qualitative methodology of this study

Qualitative research has been defined as the “study [of] things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). At the turn of this century, a review of stepfamily research from the previous ten-year period concluded that although there had been substantial increases in the standards of stepfamily research, there remained a lack of qualitative work focusing on the experiences, perceptions and reflections of stepfamily members (M. Coleman et al., 2000). Importantly, these authors also acknowledged that “stepfamily members adopt roles from cultural norms, and also...create their own roles that influence cultural attitudes” (M. Coleman et al., 2000, p. 1302), yet little is understood about this interplay and influence between cultural attitudes and stepfamily positions. Although more recently qualitative research has often been used to investigate stepfamily processes and roles (Sweeney, 2010), it is suggested by stepfamily researchers that “there is still little that we can definitively say about [stepmothers'] experiences in stepfamilies” (M. Coleman, et al., 2008, p. 398). Qualitative research in general, and this current study

in particular, therefore helps to address these gaps in the research by providing an opportunity to better understand stepmothers' perspectives and experiences related to a particular aspect of stepmotherhood.

Qualitative methods are frequently used in research that is exploratory, seeking hypothesis development, looking at sensitive issues, or seeking a breadth and depth of data that may not be accessible using quantitative techniques (Bowling, 2014). Qualitative research may also provide a way to understand experiences of people whose perspectives tend to be marginalized or discounted (Willig, 2001). The design of qualitative studies can capture the subjective 'feel' of a particular experience or conditions, or seek to identify recurring patterns of experience among a group of people (Willig, 2001).

Qualitative research values the experiences of individuals and the meanings that they attribute to these experiences with the aim of acquiring "deeper understanding rather than examining surface features" (S. D. Johnson, 1995, p. 4). In a discussion of the epistemology of qualitative research, it has been suggested that people "act in the world on the basis of assumptions [we] never inspect, but just act on" (Becker, 1996, p.7). This current study targets these assumptions by investigating stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of the stereotypes and negative representations that exist in society about stepmothers. I have chosen a qualitative approach as I am interested in exploring these basic assumptions as seen through the stepmother lens, and exploring how they may impact on how stepmothers act in the world. This process of 'making visible' phenomena that occurs in the everyday world of stepmothers (Merriam, 2002) is central to my research questions and the aims of this study. Through a set of interpretative qualitative practices, I aimed to explore how stepmothers make sense of their situations, how they interact with their social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), and what meaning they have constructed about their world and experiences (Merriam, 2002), especially in relation to the presence of negative representations of stepmothers. Using the qualitative data, and consistent with studies that are more exploratory in nature, a mainly inductive approach has been taken. That is, I set out to gather and use the data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories, rather than using pre-determined hypotheses to guide data analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

With a primary objective to capture and value participants' perspectives and meanings of their experiences, qualitative research is often 'emic' in nature – it places importance on

the ‘insider’ or participant view of the phenomenon of inquiry (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002). This differs from an ‘etic’ perspective which interprets the phenomenon from an external position, typically that of the researcher (Yin, 2010). Although an emic perspective is often associated with qualitative research, it is important to note that this mode of interpretation still unavoidably produces two or even multiple sets of meanings over the same events or phenomenon simply because the participants’ meanings are being studied and reported by a researcher. For example, in this present study, I am providing an interpretation of stepmothers’ interpretations of stepmother stereotypes. From a constructivist perspective, this could be seen as studying the impact of social constructions of stepmotherhood on stepmothers. Thus, it is necessary at this point to acknowledge that multiple interpretations on this subject may exist and that, as will be discussed in the following section, steps have been taken in the design of this study to reduce the likelihood of any inadvertent “imposing of [my own] (etic) interpretation onto a participant’s (emic) interpretation” (Yin, 2010, p. 12).

Hence, a qualitative methodology is appropriate to investigate the current research topic for a number of reasons. Firstly, as discussed in the previous chapter, there is empirical evidence that the stepmother role is one which may be subject to some stigmatisation and marginalisation, both within the stepfamily context and in wider society (e.g. Claxton-Oldfield, 2008, Planitz & Feeney, 2009). This study may, therefore, provide an opportunity for stepmothers’ perspectives to be considered on what may be regarded by some as a sensitive issue to explore. Secondly, with a sample size of 138 participants, using qualitative methods may help to identify patterns of experience among stepmothers. The research also, thirdly, serves to capture information-rich, subjective stepmother accounts in order to explore phenomena related to the role of stepmothering, which has been given little research attention. These factors align with a recent article published by Ganong and Coleman (2014), and discussed briefly below, about the suitability of qualitative approaches for stepfamily research.

Qualitative approaches for family relationships

Ganong and Coleman (2014) recently published a paper identifying four goals in which qualitative research methods benefit researchers; these include: (1) obtaining family members' meanings about family interactions and relationships; (2) acquiring family insiders' views about relational processes and observing family interactions; (3) examining families within contexts; and (4) giving voice to marginalized families and family members. The authors' analysis of stepfamily research identified that qualitative research has contributed greatly to our understanding of stepfamily roles and experiences by providing insights into the lived experiences of stepfathers (e.g. Marsiglio, 2004), stepchildren (e.g. Cartwright, Farnsworth, & Mobley, 2009), gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer (GLBTQ) parents (e.g. Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011), children of GLBTQ parents (e.g. Goldberg, 2007), low-income mothers (e.g. Burton & Hardaway, 2012).

With this current study focusing on stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes, qualitative research methodology offers a helpful avenue to identify the "practices, codes, beliefs, and traditions that shape what [families] do on a daily basis but that are often hidden from view" (Daly, 2003, p. 771).

Trustworthiness of the research

It is important that qualitative studies are assessed for quality, to ensure that the data collection and analysis procedures are robust and that the research itself can be deemed to demonstrate 'trustworthiness' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability have been identified to be criteria for 'trustworthiness' of a study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These constructs, respectively, map onto the quantitative research terms of internal validity, generalizability, reliability and objectivity (Golafshani, 2003). In this study I have used a number of practical and procedural strategies to address these criteria and enhance the overall trustworthiness of the research.

Credibility can be defined as the "confidence in the truth of the findings, including an accurate understanding of the context" (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005, p. 25). In this study, credibility refers to the congruence between the stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes, and the research findings. To establish credibility I

have used specific, well-established procedures for the development of the data collection tool, and for data analysis. To ensure transparency of process I have kept documentation and description of the procedures which I have followed to allow for peer review. In addition, in the data analysis stage, 15% of the questionnaire data analysis and coding was examined through peer review, and the thematic analysis was reviewed by a supervisor. Both parties were asked to examine the internal consistency of my analytic process, as well as identify any potential biases.

In order for qualitative studies to be valid, the findings must be transferable – that is they are able to have relevance in their particular field of research, and be generalizable to others in the target population (Guest et al., 2012). This study provides descriptive detail of the participants and the methods used so that other researchers can replicate this study and consider the relevance of its findings to other stepmothers.

Dependability refers to whether the study is “carried out with careful attention to the rules and conventions of qualitative methodology” (Ulin et al., 2005, p. 26). As is described in this chapter, the data was collected and coded using a transparent and well-established process. Following this there was a process of peer and supervisory review to ensure the quality of the research.

To establish confirmability, steps must be taken to help ensure that the findings of the study accurately reflect and are the result of the experiences and ideas of the stepmothers who participated in this study, rather than my own characteristics and preferences. In qualitative research, it is readily accepted that the researcher is the primary instrument for the data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002), and therefore, I am an integral part of the research processes (Willig, 2001). Hence, because my involvement and my biases is inevitable, it is, important that I acknowledge that my interest in researching stepfamilies has not come from any first-hand experience of living in a stepfamily situation as a child, nor as an adult. Although this lack of personal experience with stepfamily living may be a limitation, it could also be considered a useful position from which to engage in the material of this study. The fact that I am married and a mother of two young children hopefully provides me some insight and experience of the way motherhood is constructed by Western society, and the complexities of parenting in general. To further enhance confirmability I have provided verbatim quotes from the participant responses to directly connect my interpretations with what the participants actually said.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within individual data and across the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method of data analysis is one of the most commonly used methods of qualitative analysis (Guest et al., 2012) and is flexible and compatible with a range of epistemological and theoretical approaches within qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this current study, thematic analysis will be used to investigate the stepmothers' descriptions of their interpretations of stepmother stereotypes. Although this method is flexible, it is not an 'anything goes' approach, and some clear guidelines exist about how to best use and conduct thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a six-phase process for using thematic analysis in psychology. These phases include familiarisation with data, generating initial codes to organise and identify the data into meaningful groups, searching for themes and organising all the data under these themes, peer reviewing themes and ensuring they are discrete from each other and internally consistent and, finally defining and naming the themes.

This methodology has been described as being "the most useful in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data set" (Guest et al., 2012, p. 11). Aside from this advantage, this method of analysis was chosen because it is well suited to large data sets; it offers a 'thick description' of the data set as well as identification of similarities and differences across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given the socially imbedded topic of stepmother stereotypes, this approach is helpful in also allowing for social as well as psychological interpretations of the data. Finally, this approach leads to results that may be useful for researchers and clinicians, as well as stepmothers and the general public, who may be interested in the findings.

CHAPTER THREE - METHOD

This section will outline the methods of this thesis. Ethics approval for this research was granted for three years by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 22nd June 2012 (reference number 8307).

Participants

Recruitment

This study aimed to find out about stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes, and the impact that these may have on stepmothers and their experience of their role. It was a criterion that the women who took part in the study were currently living in New Zealand. It was also required that participants of this study were women who had at least one stepchild under the age of 18 years who lived with them in the same residence on a full-time or part-time basis.

Participants were recruited through a number of different channels. The majority of participants were recruited following a media advisory by the University of Auckland Communications Department. This advisory received interest from a number of media outlets, resulting in print articles, online articles, and four radio interviews with the researcher, which reached stepmothers across New Zealand. In addition to this media coverage, the principals of 34 primary and secondary schools in the Auckland area were also contacted by letter, and a number of these schools advertised the study to their parent and staff community via parent newsletters, websites or noticeboard advertisements. Finally, some posters were put on community noticeboards (see Appendix A for a recruitment example).

For each recruitment method, the website link www.stepmotherstereotypes.com was provided. Stepmothers were invited to go to this website where there was an information page and brief overview of the study, and the Ethics-approved Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix B). If participants were interested in taking part in the study they were invited to click on a button on the website which linked them to the online

questionnaire that had been created in Survey Monkey. Due to the anonymous nature of the study, no consent forms were required for this study.

Participants

Three hundred and thirty-two stepmothers responded to the advertisements and went to the website, although 111 stepmothers did not complete more than two sections of the questionnaire, and so their responses were excluded. Also excluded were stepmothers who had stepchildren over the age of 18, as well as those stepmothers who no longer spent any time living in the same house as their stepchildren. This left 138 New Zealand women who were currently stepmothers as participants for this study. These women lived with their stepchild or stepchildren at least some of the time. The mean age of these participants was 36.9 years (range 21 - 57 years, median =36 years). Fourteen participants did not provide their age. Of the 138 participants, 118 women identified as New Zealand European/Pakeha. Fifteen stepmothers were Maori, 9 identified as European, 3 were from the Pacific Islands, and 7 stepmothers in the sample were of other ethnicities. Participants were able to select more than one ethnicity that they identified with.

At the time of completing the questionnaire, 69 women were cohabiting with their partner in a de facto relationship, 59 women were married for the first time, and for 10 of the women in the study, their current relationship was a remarriage. Forty-eight participants had their own children from a previous relationship. The average length of time that 135 participants had been a stepmother was 5.5 years (range = 1 month - 17 years, median = 5 years), and many women had one ($n=62$) or two ($n=54$) stepchildren. Twenty-two stepmothers in the study had between three and six stepchildren. Another group of stepmothers ($n=45$) had a mutual child/children with their current partner, and seven women were pregnant at the time of completing the questionnaire. Seventeen women did not answer this question.

When asked to quantify how much time they spent with their stepchildren, 33 stepmothers indicated that their stepchildren lived with them on a full-time basis. Reasons for this arrangement included: the children choosing who to live with as they got older ($n=9$); the mother had died ($n=4$); the mother had been involved in a crime ($n=1$); the mother was living in another city or country ($n=5$); the father was legally being awarded full custody ($n=3$); and no reason stated ($n=14$). Other stepmothers had their stepchildren staying with

them for some of the days each week ($n=31$), while 48 stepmothers said that they lived with their stepchildren on a fortnightly basis. Some stepmothers ($n=15$) had their stepchildren to stay on a monthly basis, or some other arrangement (for example, during the school holidays). Eleven participants did not answer this question.

Data collection

Development of the online questionnaire

The data for this study was collected electronically via the Survey Monkey website, using an anonymous, online questionnaire. The University of Auckland owns a private subscription to this site, and the development of this questionnaire took place over a number of months. The development process was guided by seven steps outlined by Krueger and Casey (2009). Although their outline was designed for developing focus group questions rather than an online questionnaire, Guest et al. (2012) propose that this process is a useful guide for the development of other qualitative research tools.

The process began with a brainstorm of the type of information that needed to be collected with consideration to the aim of my study. Secondly, I generated some questions and with the assistance of my supervisor, removed those questions that were not relevant, and edited the remaining questions for appropriate wording and tone. The third stage involved the appropriate sequencing of the questions so that they were in a logical order for participants to follow. Where there were topical transitions or changes in the types of questions (e.g. from 'demographic' questions to explanatory questions) I signalled these changes by creating a new section and inserting transitional statements to explain the shift and intention of the new section. I considered the placement of questions that would likely elicit more negative responses and ensured that the questionnaire was completed with a question which would encourage stepmothers to reflect on their positive experiences.

The fourth step which I followed was to estimate the amount of time it would take to complete the questionnaire, and as a fifth step I sought feedback on the questionnaire from my supervisor, and colleagues. I incorporated feedback as a sixth stage, and finally as a seventh step I sent the questionnaire to a colleague who is a stepmother to test whether the questionnaire was understandable and how it might be received by the target population. The feedback was incorporated and where necessary questions were revised.

Data collection procedures

The anonymous online questionnaire was designed to take approximately twenty minutes to complete, and consisted of three sections with a total of nineteen questions (see Appendix C). The initial section named “General Information” consisted of nine questions to elicit demographic information, as well as collect data about the type of stepfamily the participants resided in. Section Two combined some quantitative and qualitative questions, which were intended to orientate the participant to the topic of stepmother stereotypes and make salient their awareness of stepmother stereotypes. This section asked stepmothers to identify and explain their decision to use or not use the term ‘stepmother’ to describe themselves. Stepmothers were then asked to select from a list of sources they may have seen or heard of positive or negative portrayals of stepmothers. Stepmothers were invited to comment on their selection, in particular, what they were aware of and how they felt about their observations.

The final section consisted of four qualitative questions. Three of these questions were intended to elicit responses which would help me to better understand stepmothers’ negative experiences of stepmother stereotypes and the meaning that these held for them. Questions were framed around the stereotype of the wicked stepmother that has become part of the cultural myth about stepmothers. Stepmothers were asked to

...write about any experiences of negative stereotypes that [you] have had as a stepmother. This could include experiences within your stepfamily or from others outside the stepfamily. Please write about the experiences that have been important or most meaningful for you. Please also say how these experiences have affected you.

In two other questions, participants were asked to write about how they felt about these experiences and how they coped.

Participants were also asked to rate on a four-point Likert scale the extent to which they feel that negative stepmother stereotypes have impacted on their experience as a stepmother. I recognised that given the nature of the research question and aims of the study, there was the potential for the results to be skewed towards being negative. It was intended that that by asking this more quantitative question at the end of the study, it would provide some balance and overall summary of the impact of stepmother stereotypes on their experience, and this would help me in the interpretation of the data. They were able to select from ‘no impact’, ‘a small impact’, ‘some impact’ and ‘a strong impact’.

Space was also provided for them to comment. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on the positive aspects and experiences they have had as a stepmother, and to describe those that are most meaningful for them. If women wanted to also add any other comment they felt had not been covered in other areas of the questionnaire, they were provided with the space to add these perspectives. It was hoped that by finishing with a positive reflection on their stepmother role and opportunity to mention any other comments, stepmothers would complete the questionnaire feeling the focus had not been solely on the negative aspects of their stepmother experience and also feel they had communicated everything they wanted.

Upon completing the questionnaire, participants were thanked for their contribution to the study. They were also provided with the option of being part of a 'second-stage' study, consisting of a brief telephone follow-up interview. If participants were interested in participating in this study, they were invited to email me. It was emphasised that by emailing, their questionnaire responses would still be anonymous as there was no possibility of connecting the email address with their response. This invitation at the end of the study was intended for the purpose of expanding on the data that had been collected, if required. Adding this contingency for data collection helped to provide a 'safety net' for the study so that 'information-rich' data was available to be analysed. Thirty-two participants emailed me, expressing their interest. I responded to this with a standardised email thanking them for their interest, and explaining that the response to the study meant that I did not need to proceed with the second-stage. These women were all happy with this response and the majority expressed their eagerness to be contacted by email again when the final results of the study were available.

Data analysis

Using the phases outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), I completed my data analysis.

Phase 1: Familiarizing myself with the data

In order to begin the data analysis phase of this project I exported the participant response forms from the Survey Monkey website as individual word files, and then imported these files into the qualitative software package which allowed me to manage and organise the data for the thematic analysis process. I also printed out the individual response forms and

read through these a number of times so that I could familiarise myself with the content and structure of the responses. As I read, I noted initial ideas and patterns in the data on the margin of the forms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I then began using nVivo to sort these 'notes' into initial codes, which I created in nVivo.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Once I had these initial codes, I went through all of the data and began highlighting selections of text into meaningful codes according to the content and meaning. After completing this, a list of codes was developed and I was able to identify related ideas and similarities in the codes. I then merged relevant codes to form separate and unique groups of data. There were three distinct categories of data that emerged from this process: stepmothers' awareness of stepmother stereotypes; internalising the 'wicked stepmother' myths; and overcoming the 'wicked stepmother' myths.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Once I had done this, I re-examined all the codes and searched for broad provisional themes which encapsulated the essence of codes. I used nodes and node trees in nVivo which organised my codes into a hierarchical format under each data category, and I also developed a number of mind maps to help with this stage. These allowed me to identify and decide on an overarching theme of 'myths of motherhood' which appeared to sit alongside the negative representations of stepmothers. I started to think about the relationships that were occurring between the provisional themes.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

My next step was to review the themes to ensure that they were internally consistent and discrete from each other. In the data set of 'Stepmother awareness of stepmother stereotypes' I had the themes 'Assumptions about mothers', and 'Unacknowledged and unrecognised'. The second data set which I named 'Internalising the wicked stepmother stereotype' included the themes 'I am unmotherly', 'I don't count', and 'Boundary setting makes me feel bad'. In the third data set named 'Overcoming the wicked stepmother stereotype' I had the subthemes 'Protecting my identity', 'Seeking support', and 'Adopting an attitude'.

At this point I noticed that there was some overlap between the data under stepmothers' awareness of stepmother stereotypes, and the data that related to how they experienced these stereotypes. For example, 'Assumptions about mothers' was identified as a theme in stepmothers' awareness, and this theme was also apparent in the way the participants described their experiences of stepmother stereotypes. However, to merge these two themes would have been to take the comments out of context. Hence, a decision was made with the help of my supervisor, to make explicit this overlap, and to keep the themes as separate. For this example, and as captured in the thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which was developed in this stage, myths of motherhood are represented as 'ever-present' and an influence on all the themes of this study.

My analyses were then given to another researcher in the field of stepfamily relationships to check that the data coded under each of the themes were appropriate, and indeed that the themes themselves were credible. We discussed any disagreement about the coding until an agreement was reached about the coding for the text in question. From this process, some changes were made to the themes and also the text coded under the different themes. My supervisor also provided regular checks and feedback throughout the data analysis process and interpretation of results.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

In this phase I continued to analyse the themes to refine and define them. For example, a theme that was initially named 'The dilemma of discipline' was renamed 'Boundary setting makes me feel bad' to capture the experience and emotion of discipline for stepmothers. I also reworked the themes under the category 'Stepmothers' awareness of stepmother stereotypes' so that there was less repetition and the descriptors were more concise.

Phase 6: Final report

The final report represents the themes and a discussion of what these themes mean in regards to stepmothers' awareness and experiences of stepmother stereotypes.

Other analysis

In this study I also collected demographic data and used a rating scale. To manage this data I created a classification table in nVivo and manually entered in the demographic information and rating response of each participant. This allowed me to then run 'queries' through nVivo, so that I could look for demographic patterns or trends by controlling for a demographic or response variable. For example, I wanted to find out and compare the demographic characteristics of the participants who reported that stepmother stereotypes had no impact, a small impact, some impact, and a strong impact. This classification table allowed me to group the participants according to their response for these variables. I then exported each group's demographic information into an excel spreadsheet so that I could look at the demographic makeup of the stepmothers who endorsed each rating. This information is presented in the results section (Table 3, p.65).

CHAPTER FOUR - RESULTS

STEPMOTHERS PERCEPTIONS' OF STEPMOTHER STEREOTYPES

Obviously there's all the fairytale 'wicked stepmother' symbolism, but there's an awful lot of films/tv/written material on blended families and stepmotherhood and none of it seems overwhelmingly positive to me. There seems to be a few stereotypes that I've come across - the stepmother who favours her kids over her stepkids, the stepmother who resents the stepkids and won't spend any time with them, the stepmother who is cruel to the stepkids or says cruel things about their Mum to them. There's also the expectation that stepmothers should never feel resentment towards their stepkids and people are shocked when they say they do. ...My personal experience from comments from other people as well as literature/movies etc is that 'stepmotherhood' is a term that could be used interchangeably with 'judgement by others' (Participant 117)

As discussed in the method section, Chapter Three, the first section of the questionnaire collected data regarding the participants' awareness of positive and negative stepmother representations, and their perception of the sources that perpetuate these. This chapter begins with a table (Table 1, p. 51) showing the number of stepmothers who were aware of the sources of positive and negative stepmother representations. This section then goes on to describe the results of the analysis conducted on stepmothers' observations of these portrayals under the themes 'Assumptions about stepmothers' and 'Unacknowledged and unrealistic expectations'. A content analysis of stepmothers' views about their use or non-use of the stepmother title are also presented, as their decisions about using the stepmother title are indicative of their perceptions and awareness of stepmother stereotypes.

Table 1 - Stepmothers' perceptions of the sources of positive and negative representations of stepmothers.

Source	% of SM who noticed positive portrayals (N = 125)	% of SM who noticed negative portrayals (N = 134)
Comments from family and friends	9.2	45.2
Comments from others	48.8	58.2
Movies	34.4	77.6
Celebrities in magazines	28.8	29.9
Television programmes	22.4	63.4
Newspaper articles	16	44
Adult literature	10.6	30.6
Children's literature	3.2	73.8

Assumptions about stepmothers

Through various sources, many stepmothers perceived that society holds assumptions about the stepmother role and stepfamily functioning which relate to cultural ideas about mothering and the nuclear family. Positive representations were perceived when others communicated support and encouragement, and role-modelled positive step relationships to them. At times, however, other people's praise felt uncomfortable to some of the stepmothers in this study. These women interpreted some of the positive remarks as being negative because they were based on the assumption that it is undesirable to care for another person's child, and that stepmothers would do this begrudgingly. For example,

Lots of people (friend, family, colleagues, or people I meet) often comment about how impressive it is to take on someone else's child (however this is often loaded with a negative comment that they couldn't or wouldn't do it). (Participant 44)

People seem to praise you for taking on the job or for the dedication that you have to it. This makes me feel a bit funny in a way as I knew going into the relationship with my husband that he was a package deal and I never considered otherwise...the positive praise is good, but not always what you want. (Participant 53)

Some stepmothers also observed an assumption that stepfamilies are created because it is the stepmother who 'stole' the father away from his family. Many women described this as being false for their situation, yet were aware of how the stepmother is often portrayed as the 'home-wrecker'. With this, stepmothers notice a gender bias that places men in more positive roles and stepmothers in the negative positions:

It is often the idea of stepmum breaking up the family, of influencing dad to stay away and not have contact with their biological children once in the new relationship - it frustrates me because there is no assumption or judgement that dad is weaker and lazy for not keeping up contact, it is always stepmum's fault somehow. (Participant 131)

This stepmother observes that fathers are often assumed to be faultless, and notes that the burden of responsibility and stigma of seeming to be 'the other woman' is also often associated with the stepmother role. Implicit to these stereotypes is the representation of stepmothers as disruptive to the existing familial relationships between the child and their biological parents. These stepmothers noticed the assumption that stepmothers are to blame for any disharmony in the family. Another gender difference was observed whereby stepmothers noticed greater scrutiny of the parenting skills of mothers and stepmothers, compared with fathers,

It's interesting that in any given family unit, there seems to be a focus entirely on the role of the mother, or at least, most of the analysis of parenting skills etc. is of the mother's role and not the fathers (in my experience). Where negative portrayals are concerned, I have a very strong idea coming through of the 'wicked stepmother' and again, really nothing where stepfather's are concerned. (Participant 81)

Some stepmothers also observed that cultural beliefs about motherhood which assume 'there can only be one mother' and 'the biological mother is the best mother' help to cast stepmothers in a bad light. As one woman said,

Stepfathers are viewed more positively and it seems that stepmothers are more often seen as legitimate only if the mother is deceased. Stepmothers are often seen as trying to displace the mother ...I think that New Zealand is essentially matrilineal and there is a tacit belief that a stepmother will somehow be up to no good. (Participant 59)

In other situations, stepmothers noted they may be criticised and construed as wicked even if they express fondness, affection, or genuine love for their stepchild. This highlights the double-bind of stepmothers being judged for having a more distant relationship with the children, and simultaneously judged if they appear to be motherly and show affection for the children. The implication is that the stepmother is not telling the truth or is interfering with the role of the mother,

There are negative comments everywhere. I've noticed that there is often snide criticism association with celebrity stepmothers who talk about enjoying being stepmothers/love their stepchildren....The commentators often make out that the stepmother is a bit strange for loving her stepchild, or suggests that the child's mother does not like the relationship. (Participant 35)

These representations become confusing, frustrating, and help to send a double message to stepmothers that they simultaneously need to be a good mother and yet are not able to be as good as the biological mother. As one participant described,

I felt that perhaps the social pressure of having to be a good mother was harsh...I feel that it is really unfair how stepmothers are portrayed as being 'not good enough' as biological parents, especially considering there are still many cultures that practice communal parenting and it works perfectly well. (Participant 48)

In contrast to these comments, a few stepmothers commented that there was an element of truth to the stereotype, although this truth was described differently by stepmothers. For example, several women felt it a reality is stepmothers who also have biological children do feel differently about their own children compared to their stepchildren, and that this does not have to be negative:

I grew up with Cinderella and Snow White. It didn't bother me. I know from personal experience that you don't feel exactly the same way about other children as you do about your own (I fostered children before meeting my partner and knew about the issues)...I think people (correctly) see the difference between a stepmother with her stepchildren and that same woman with her natural children – and I believe that there are differences in the way you feel, but that you just have to work a bit harder to love them. So the negative portrayals and stereotypes do have a small grain of truth to them. (Participant 33)

Another stepmother perceived that stepmothers that she knew had behaved badly to their stepchild by showing favouritism, and this confirmed that the stereotype is occasionally true,

Kids stories have a theme of meanness and jealousy...that the wicked stepmother comes in and steals the dad's affection away from his children. I think this lays a

groundsheet of fear that stepmum = losing daddy. Having said that, I've seen a few relationships where daddy's gone on to have another baby and the stepmum shows absolute favouritism towards the shared child, or her own children for that matter. So there's more than a grain of truth to it. (Participant 47)

For another stepmother 'the truth' was that often stepmothers do not handle the task of stepmothering well, or are unable to provide what is required in their role,

I think it (stepmothering) is not easy and this has been captured and dramatised throughout history because of people's experiences. Often children are placed with woman ill equipped emotionally and sometimes financially to cope with giving unconditional love to a child she did not bare. The child comes with a huge emotional void that she is unable to fill. Some do it poorly because they may have their own emotional luggage and possibly a lack of support or judgement from others. (Participant 51)

One stepmother named the self-fulfilling prophecy of the wicked stepmother stereotype as the reason stereotypes had the grain of truth to them. In her experience, she writes,

Yes, stepmothers are wicked but that is from all the crap they deal with. I started being nice, kind and giving, and guess what, my stepson insulted me, and he was rude and made me feel like crap. (Participant 119)

Although some women talked about these truths, many women talked about how they are aware of negative representations of stepmothers and how untrue these were for their own situation:

A lot of fairytales and Disney movies portray stepmums as being evil and jealous of the relationship between father and his kids. In real life I have not found this to be true. In no way am I jealous of my husband's relationship with his kids. (Participant 80)

In summary, stepmothers in this study perceived problem-saturated assumptions about stepmothers from a variety of sources. Stepmothers were particularly aware of societal assumptions that stepmother-stepchild relationships are difficult, that stepmothers do not want or enjoy the role, and that being a stepmother is undesirable and unrewarding. Whilst stepmothers appreciated and noticed when others made positive comments to them about being a stepmother, some observed that the subtext of these comments contained negative assumptions about what it meant to be a stepmother or live in a stepfamily. Gendered expectations of fathers and mothers also influenced stepmothers' perceptions, leaving them with the perception that stepmothers are portrayed as 'at fault', more scrutinised and less favourably represented in comparison to fathers and mothers. Several stepmothers cited

instances when they noticed that negative stepmother assumptions could be confirmed as accurate in some way.

Unacknowledged and unrealistic representations

Many stepmothers noticed an absence of positive stepmothering stories, role models and success stories, and perceived a lack of societal recognition, acknowledgement and support for the stepmother role:

I feel like there isn't much in the media or society that acknowledges the challenges of having a partner who has a child with someone else. (Participant 110)

I feel there isn't much around that acknowledges my role. No stepmother day, no right to be at things like parents get invited to... (Participant 14)

A number of stepmothers observed that the societal norm of the nuclear family as being the ideal family explained some of the absence of positive representations. They felt that stepfamilies were invisible, ignored, or portrayed as dysfunctional:

The biggest impact is the invisibility. Given how common I believe it is, no one seems to talk about it. There's a lot of talk about divorce, and child support payments and dysfunctional families, but little positive acknowledgement of alternative family forms. (Participant 84)

They identified that despite stepfamilies being a common family form, the nuclear family model continues to dominate, and that without appropriate information or role-models a there is a gap in stepparents' understanding of how to be effective in their role:

There are some portrayals of positive relationships that can be had, but not a lot of information about how to get there and deal with issues that are common in stepfamilies. I also think there is a lack of positive role models for women in stepfamilies. The ideal is the nuclear family and anything other than that... there is no guidance for stepparents. (Participant 94)

In contrast, observation of positive stepmother representations was identified by twenty-two women (14%) as contributing to them feeling proud and acknowledged,

I feel great when I see or hear of positive portrayals of stepmothers. It is a hard position to be in with all the bad stuff that goes with the name so it feels so good to hear positivity around the situation. (Participant 65)

I felt great that people acknowledged the hard work that you put in for others children. (Participant 137)

Such recognition and positive representations of the stepmother role were noted to come from comments by others, as well as through several movies, television programmes and articles about celebrities in magazines. Some participants made the observation that some representations depicted the stepmother-stepchild relationship as initially being difficult, and then growing and developing over time, which they felt was reflective of their own experience and therefore a positive representation of stepmothers. Stories which showed some of the complexities of stepfamily life, but didn't cast the stepmother in the negative role were valued by some,

Often observed things that parallel what goes on in our house and laugh at the fact that I'm clearly having experiences that other stepmothers are and this makes me feel as though I'm "on track" so to speak given that I have never had children on my own. This is usually the stories of the mischief kids get up to or other harmless fun type things that they may do or say of the usual "teenage behaviour" that occurs. I feel mostly reassured by these things. (Participant 60)

There were some stepmothers, however, who perceived that stepparents were represented in the media as not only as mean but also as abusive. They observed that stories of child abuse carried about by a stepparent are given more media and public attention. In turn, they thought this gave the impression that stepparents are more likely to abuse their stepchildren compared to parents in nuclear families, and perpetuates a narrow and negative view of stepfamily life and stepparents:

I know that there are good stepmothers out there. However, I find that they are few and far between. Their story is never really told. As the media focusses on children being abused, the children that are being loved and cared for are not as important to the selling of the media. When I read or come to hear of a woman who is adding value to the lives of her stepchildren it makes me feel good. (Participant 100)

It was observed that sources which showed stereotypical or abusive characterisations of stepmothers and stepfamilies give the impression that stepmothers are entirely bad, and that stepfamily life is completely undesirable. This is also unrealistic and problematic for stepmothers and stepfamilies and was talked about as not indicative of many stepmothers experiences,

The stepmother is the classic demonised character, there is no doubting it...my own experience doesn't match the media/pop culture/social expectation or portrayal. I get fed up with being a stepmother and it isn't easy all the time, but as a

family, we have done weirdly (compared with what you would expect, if you believed the media etc.) well at integrating and accepting each other...I think the evil stepmother myth is incredibly pervasive, and you would have to be almost dead to not notice it. (Participant 46)

Another group of stepmothers talked about positive representations existing in media, but commented that they found these were too idealised, oversimplified, and therefore, unrealistic:

I find often the celebrity stories are far too sugar coated for my liking - proclaiming utter love and adoration for stepchildren, when in my experience it takes a long time to develop (Participant 28).

I think it is nice to see positive betrayals and it gives me hope but we all know that life is not that simple and problems are part of it. It can also make you feel incompetent. (Participant 24)

Although stepmothers did notice some positive representations, many commented that these were not common and that the negative ones were easier to recall. It is possible this is because negative portrayals are more sensationalised and more interesting in the media (movies, TV, newspapers) or it may also be that stepmothers are more sensitized to stepmother stereotypes and therefore tend to remember the negative images. For many stepmothers in this study there seemed to be little in the way of societal acknowledgement, role-models, stories and information which represented the challenges, as well as identified the positive aspects of stepfamily life, without vilifying or idealising any stepfamily member. For example, one stepmother observed that “if stepmums aren’t amazing and lovely, they only seem to be portrayed as totally evil” (Participant 110) - such polarised portrayals of stepmothers were noted to be unhelpful to these stepmothers, and the expectation of being unrealistically good, or unrealistically bad added to confusion about their role, and perception that others may judge them.

Use of the stepmother term

One hundred and thirty-six women answered the question of whether they use the stepmother term to describe themselves. Of these women, 44% sometimes used the stepmother term, 40% used it, and 16% did not use the stepmother term. The following sections describe the results of a content analysis which I conducted on the data relating to

stepmothers' decision to use, not use, or sometimes use the term, which further highlights the awareness that stepmothers have of negative stepmother stereotypes.

Stepmothers who use the term

In this study, 54 of the women (40%) said that they did use the stepmother term. A number of factors were cited by these women to explain their decision to use the term. Some stepmothers listed a combination of reasons, whereas others only named one factor that was most important to their decision. Slightly fewer than half of the women ($n=26$) said that they used the term because it was a simple, quick and accurate term which was most easily understood by others to explain their relationship to the children and position in the family. In some cases, stepmothers assumed it to be the most appropriate title, however for the majority of stepmothers it was more of a carefully chosen term. Some stepmothers felt it was important to discuss the use of the term with the stepchildren, or waited until the stepchildren used the term first. To these stepmothers, the stepchildren's agreement or permission helped them to feel comfortable to use the term.

Twenty-two stepmothers talked about how their ideas about mothering influenced their decision to use the term. For these women, they felt like they needed to be able to explain to others and occupy a family position which did not encroach on the mother's role. The term 'stepmother' or 'stepmum' was helpful to these women as it differentiated themselves from the children's mother and gave respect to her 'territory' and the mother-child relationship. At the same time, they felt that it also gave the impression to others that their role was stable and one of family. They liked that there was the word 'mother' in the title, as they felt it acknowledged and communicated their involvement parenting activities and care for the children in a mother-like way:

The kids have a mum so I couldn't call myself that. I am like a mother so deserve to be called a mum. A lot of the time I use it to differentiate from their biological mum. I do not correct people if they comment about my children even around the kids & they don't correct them either. I only really say they aren't my biological children if the situation necessitates. (Participant 103)

I saw myself as more than a first name to my step kids. I felt the need to identify self as significant (in familial reference to them) around their friends and to pay homage to the level of nurture and love I provide. Their real mum doesn't call me their step mum though, more their grown up friend. This doesn't dissuade me from using the SM title. I think it carries some authority and with boys this seems to work well for

boundary setting. I also think using the title helps my partner acknowledge my hard work, on Mother's Day for example. (Participant 130)

Some women talked about how the title and these 'mother' connotations helped them to have more ownership, legitimacy and authority in dealing with others, like schools or agencies, as well as in developing a trusting relationship and boundary setting with the children:

My husband and I jointly decided to use the terms stepmother and stepfather with each other's children. We also discussed it with the children as a way of explaining how we all relate to each other when we got married...My husband and I liked the stability and family emphasis that the term stepmother carries. It's also helpful and carries weight with other people/agencies when I am caring for the children by myself (for example, taking them to the doctor/school etc. when my husband is not available). (Participant 117)

Six women said they call themselves a stepmother despite not really liking the term. They use it because they feel it accurately describes their role, however they are aware of the stereotypes and feel that the term has negative connotations or is "synonymous with evil stepmother" (Participant 10). A couple of these women said they would only use the term if it was necessary, and would otherwise let others assume they were the children's mother.

Stepmothers who did not use the term

Only 22 stepmothers (16%) said that they did not use the stepmother term to describe themselves. Nine of these women said they did not feel they could use the term as they were not married to their partner, while eleven stepmothers felt that they should not use a term which has 'mother' in it, as they did not want to give the child or the child's mother the impression that they were trying to be a mother-figure or take on a mothering role, and so they were called by their first name by the child:

The name had negative connotations, also the biomother is very dominant and I am very conscious of upsetting her by using the word mother in any title. (Participant 29)

For me it is simple, I am not married to their father. The word mother to me is sacred, and for me I did not want to attach myself to my partner's children as their step mother when I could just as easily or he could just as easily walk out on me. (not to say that married adults don't walk out of relationships) but I didn't want either of us labelling ourselves in title in an important role with the kids and us not

knowing what we wanted and next thing you know his or my children have another new adult in their life they are calling step dad or mum. (Participant 62)

Nine women did not use the term because they felt that it had negative connotations:

I just say I'm [X's] partner, step mother is a terrible way to describe yourself, it just sounds horrible, it hadn't even crossed my mind that I was her step-mother until now I do consider her a part of the family though... I wouldn't call myself a step mother because of all the stereotyping. (Participant 91)

These women associated the word stepmother with the wicked stepmother stereotype, and for two women it highlighted to others the fact that they were in a relationship with someone who used to be a husband to another woman; they were not the 'real' mother and therefore "not as good as the real mother would be" (Participant 48). Another woman felt that the word 'step' was "not nice" and that it "is a word placed in front of a very important word, 'mother' or 'mum' so in some way feels like it negates that latter" (Participant 51). Instead these women wanted a term which implied a closer relationship than that of the step relationship, as they felt this conveyed the affection they feel towards their children.

Stepmothers who sometimes used the term

Many women in this study (44%) referred to themselves as 'stepmother' in some situations but not in others. Their reasons for using and not using the term were often similar to those of the women who chose to either use, or not use, the term. For many of these women, their use, or non-use, of the term changed depending on the situation they were in and the people who were present.

For example, 34 women said that they used the term when clarity and accuracy was important to the person they were speaking with. A number of women thought that it was an accurate and non-confusing term, and would therefore use it with authorities, for introductions, and with friends and family, but might avoid using the term with others, often out of respect for the role of the biological mother, or in front of their stepchildren (who may be offended because they either consider their relationship to be closer than a 'step', or because they do not want to be 'mothered' by a stepmother):

I use stepmother for any situation involving authority, i.e. school, doctor etc., For people I have contact with but don't really know me, I use "my daughter". My

stepdaughter will correct those who call me “your mother” so I only use stepdaughter, or stepmother when I am with her. (Participant 124)

I use it for simplicity, so people know what our relationship is. But when I am talking about my son and step daughter, I just call them 'my kids'. I don't like the connotations of 'step-mother'. I find it negative and it emphasises the fact that we are not biologically related, even though our relationship is the same as a biological one. (Participant 104)

Some women said their decision to use the term is based on whether they think someone will judge them for using it or not, whether they thought it might be the “killer of conversation” (Participant 125), or whether they perceive the other person to be sensitive and understanding of the complexities of being a stepfamily. One woman said that for this latter reason and because of some negative reactions she has had from others, “it is often difficult to determine when/what is the right time/place to make the distinction so that people involved do not become uncomfortable” (Participant 125). Another woman said,

I use the term if the person I am speaking with will know us for a while, if I have the time to explain, and I guess to some extent whether I think the person I am speaking with is sympathetic to the situation. (Participant 122)

Some women chose not to use the term in front of the children because they felt it was too cold, excluding, and the children thought it sounded ‘mean’ (Participant 14), whereas others used the stepmother term with their stepchildren so that they were clear about the role and the stepmother not trying to take the place of the mother,

I wanted to assure the children that I was not trying to be their mother in any means - I had enough kids of my own - but I still wanted us all to feel like a family and for everyone to feel comfortable and loved - without trying to replace anyone else in their life. (Participant 1)

The length of time of being a stepmother may have affected some women’s use of the term. These women tended to be more conscious that the stepmother term emphasised that they were not biologically related, and implied that the relationship with stepchildren was “less rich” than what it actually was:

I don’t always use it as I think of myself as their real mother as I have raised these girls since they were babies. Occasionally I use it just so people understand the situation a bit better. (Participant 31)

Other stepmothers felt that being too young, or unmarried made it uncomfortable to use the term, however they did so in some situations due to lack of any clearer explanation for their role and relationship to the family:

As my partner and I are not married I find that I am in a difficult place to find a term that describes me as 'something' other than just 'Dad's girlfriend'. I would never use the term in front of the children, but to people who don't know our situation it is easier to describe my 'step children' if trying to talk about them. I think once me and their Dad get married the term will be more accepted. (Participant 123)

Twenty-seven women said that they would use the term if it was required, but that they tended to avoid describing themselves as a stepmother if it were possible. Reasons for this reluctance mainly were due to the negative connotations of the word stepmother, or because they were unsure of the reactions of other people. Eighteen of these women also avoided using the term by letting others believe they were the mother (e.g. not correcting others' assumptions, or by referring to the stepchildren as their son or daughter). For some of these women, it was because they also had their own child (from a former relationship or with their current partner) and so they would not make the distinction of being a stepmother versus a mother. In some situations due the negative connotations and reactions to the term, stepmothers instead would feel more comfortable to use less direct ways of describing their relationship or role. For these women it was common to say "He is my stepson", "the kids" or "I am [Name]'s partner" rather than use the stepmother term.

The term is easy to use and a clear description - that is why I use it sometimes. However the traditional negative connotations of course go with it. And the kids think it sounds mean! Sometimes it is easier to just say "my partner's children" or "xxx's girls." (Participant 14)

Overall, use or non-use of the stepmother term was often a conscious decision made by stepmothers. Their decision was heavily influenced by their ideas about what it meant to be a mother and a stepmother, how it would affect the children and the mother, by the negative connotations they associated it with the term, and by the extent to which they thought they would be judged by other people. In general, stepmothers who always or sometimes used the term, did so because they felt it explained the way in which they were related and it was easily understood by others. Those who sometimes used the stepmother term generally felt it was something that they had to use flexibly, depending on the circumstance and the people they were communicating with. Those who chose not to use

the term generally did so because they felt it was a word that was not available to them – either because they were not married, did not see themselves as a mother, or because it had negative connotations.

CHAPTER FIVE - RESULTS

THE IMPACT OF WICKED STEPMOTHER STEREOTYPES

This study aimed to find out about stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes, and the impact that these may have on stepmothers and their experience of their role. To complement the qualitative analysis, this study also asked women to give a quantitative measure by rating on a four-point Likert Scale the extent to which they felt wicked stepmother stereotypes impacted on their experience as a stepmother. The percentage of women who endorsed each rating scale is presented in the table below (Table 2). The mean rating value was 2.49 indicating that on average, stepmothers perceived stepmother stereotypes to have a moderate ('small to some') impact on their experience as a stepmother. Table 3 provides demographic information about the participants in the sample, grouped according to their response to the Likert rating.

Table 2 – The impact that stepmother stereotypes had on stepmothers' experiences of being a stepmother.

Likert rating	Assigned Value	Number of women who endorsed the rating (n=136)	% of women who endorsed the rating
No Impact	1	18	13
A Small Impact	2	49	36
Some Impact	3	54	40
A Strong Impact	4	15	11

Table 3- Demographic information of stepmothers who endorsed each Likert rating

	Total sample n=138		No impact group n = 18		Small impact group n=49		Some impact group N=54		Strong impact group N = 15	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Relationship status										
Cohabiting	69	50	6	33	29	59	25	46	8	53
Married	59	43	9	50	18	37	25	46	5	33
Remarried	10	7	3	17	2	4	3	6	2	13
Number of stepmothers with children from a previous relationship										
	65	47	6	33	17	35	15	28	9	60
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Average time as a stepmother (years)	5.5	3.62	5.9	12.31	5.3	3.84	5.4	3.63	5.7	3.24
Average age (years)	36.9	7.19	39.3	4.93	37	7.07	35.8	12.96	38.4	15.11

As can be seen from Table 3, the average age of the stepmothers across the four groups ('no impact' to 'strong impact') was mid-late thirties, and the average number of years of being a stepmother across these groups was 5.6 years. Slightly more stepmothers who had children from a previous relationship rated stereotypes as having a 'strong impact' on their experience of stepmotherhood. Relationship status was variable across the groups. I was interested to find out about the qualitative data that supported the rating of the stepmothers who endorsed 'no' versus 'strong' impact, and so the following sections describe the patterns of this data.

Explanations of 'no impact' on their experience as a stepmother

Eighteen women indicated that they did not feel that wicked stepmother stereotypes had any impact on their experience of being a stepmother. Three women in this group reported that they had no experiences of feeling or being treated as if they were a wicked stepmother, and hence, stereotypes had no impact on their stepmother role. For example, one stepmother attributed this to the fact that the children's mother was deceased, she had been accepted by family, and because she had treated the children the same as her own children,

We are lucky to have a close and supportive family unit from both his deceased's wife's family, his family and also my family. (Participant 39)

Another stepmother reported that she had not had any experiences of feeling or being treated as the wicked stepmother because she knew she had a positive relationship with her stepdaughter, and joked about being the wicked stepmother. It is interesting to note that this stepmother reported that she had been a stepmother for 17 years, and rated one of her positive moments as "being seen by strangers as my stepchild's mother, and the child not clarifying the situations" (Participant 78). A third stepmother reported no negative experiences because she felt that her stepson understood that "in our house both his father and I are the parents in the house and he respects us both for this" (Participant 116). Hence, it would seem that for some or most of the time, these three women occupy a more traditional 'mother' role.

Similarly, eight other stepmothers said that they had experienced stepmother stereotypes, but similar to the aforementioned three examples, reported that these experiences have not

impacted them because they have treated their stepchild as they would their own child. They experienced a strong relationship with their stepchild and used this as a measure of the impact that stereotypes have had on their role:

I know I'm a good role model and mother figure to her. She treats me like a mother & we have a very close relationship...I have ignored it." (Participant 109)

These women all reported that the variety of ways they occupied a mother-like position, helped to explain why they were less impacted by stepmother stereotypes. In contrast, however, several women stated that they did not experience an impact of the stereotype because they did not try to have a mother-like position with their stepchildren:

No impact because I don't push myself into the children's lives, respect their mother's role as the mother and leave the two parents to parent their children without my interference. (Participant 96)

Actually I've never felt like this. I never tried to mother [stepchild], I took more of an Auntie type position and it worked well. (Participant 127)

Several women explained the lack of impact by the success of the strategies they took to overcome the stereotype, such as joking about stereotypes or a refusal to let stereotypes impact on them:

I attempt to be consistent overall and no negative portrayals or stereotypes of stepmothers are going to impact on my own personal values and expectations. (Participant 86)

It's a choice to let any outside influences effect how we see ourselves and how we react to things. (Participant 20)

Other explanations given by stepmothers who felt no impact of stereotypes included for one, the belief that being a stepmother was their 'life's calling', while for another it was because she was so well supported by her partner.

For a couple of stepmothers, there was less consistency in their responses. For example, despite reporting that stereotypes had no impact, one woman did say that her negative experiences "wear her down", that she had backed away from what she would instinctively do, which "can get me down a bit" (Participant 8). These comments would suggest that expectations associated with her role were indeed having some impact on her. Similarly, another stepmother rated stereotypes as having no impact, yet she also expressed the feeling that "it is a minefield and my approach has been to tread very carefully - the old saying 'blood is thicker than water' is very true" (Participant 41). From this comment, it is

possible that these two stepmothers do experience an impact of stepmother stereotypes, either through a lowered mood, or feeling a need to be cautious around others. Some of these results overlap with the finding that stepmothers have strategies to protect themselves from stereotypes (and hence reduce the impact of them), and this will be further discussed in a later chapter.

A ‘strong impact’ on their experience as a stepmother

In contrast to those who perceived no impact from stepmother stereotypes, fifteen stepmothers indicated that stepmother stereotypes had strongly impacted on their role as a stepmother. A relatively higher number of stepmothers who had children from a previous relationship were in this group and indicated that the wicked stepmother myth had a strong impact on their experience as a stepmother. In addition, more women in this group reported that they had a mutual child with their current partner, indicating that many of these stepmothers were living in complex stepfamily situations. These women could name many experiences of feeling or being treated as wicked and also described feelings of isolation, loneliness, and a fear of being judged negatively:

I do notice and it makes me feel a little bit isolated and helpless when I do see these stereotypes as on the whole I feel that I like being a stepmum. (Participant 2)

It really upsets me as not many people unless you are in the situation can appreciate how hard it is to be a stepmother and hearing negative things just makes me think that people will perceive me in the same light as the negativity. (Participant 65)

Other stepmothers described feelings of being trapped or helpless, and being acutely aware of their sense of powerlessness:

I feel like that a lot [wicked], I question all of my parenting and interactions and am hypercritical of myself because of this stereotype...I feel like there is no one to talk to because no one else understands the difficult position I am in. I feel quite trapped and powerless a lot of the time. (Participant 104)

One woman expressed surprise in how much stepmother stereotypes have affected her, and her sense of being disempowered and unable to defend or protect herself against them:

I am quite an open-minded and easy-going person. I have been surprised at the effects of stereotypes on people’s judgements of me, the inability I have to defend myself against them, and how much it bothers me. (Participant 117)

Several other stepmothers noticed that experiences of the wicked stepmother stereotype affected the way they feel about and see themselves. These women identified with the wicked stepmother stereotype and had internalised the negativity that surrounded their role, describing that, at times, they “feel bad about even being in the household” (Participant 13), often feel “belittled by the term” (Participant 21) and doubt themselves or their place in the family. One stepmother who often thought she was conforming to the wicked stepmother stereotype when she was facing other challenges in her role. It is as if these difficulties triggered her sense of being wicked:

When things are rough, the negative stereotypes seem right, I remember and I identify with them. (Participant 101)

Other women reported that a sense of being invalidated, excluded, unacknowledged or unappreciated explained their reasoning that stereotypes had had a strong impact on them as a stepmother. Some women also said that being perceived or treated as wicked put a lot of strain and stress on their partner relationship, hence contributing to a strong impact rating:

Put a lot of stress on relationship with partner, have tried to ignore lack of respect but that is hard to do at times and tend to snap and get resentful. A very thankless job. (Participant 19)

Other women felt that having a role which was not clearly defined, or difficulties with the children’s mother were major determinants of why stereotypes had such a significant impact on their role.

Overall, women who reported no impact of the stereotype on their stepmothering experience attributed this as being due occupying a more traditional mothering role or because they had used strategies to ameliorate the impact of the stereotype. A number of women felt that parenting the child as they did their own child protected them from the impact of the stereotype, whereas other women credited the fact that they had not taking a mother role as the explanation for their rating.

In contrast, stepmothers who rated stereotypes as having a strong impact tended to describe the negative feelings and stress that they experienced with the stereotype, possibly indicating that these women had internalised the stereotype and they struggled with the impact of it on a more day-to-day basis.

CHAPTER SIX – RESULTS

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF STEPMOTHERS' EXPERIENCES OF STEPMOTHER STEREOTYPES

This section presents the thematic analysis of data related to stepmothers' experiences of stepmother stereotypes. Following the analysis of the impact of these stereotypes as described previously in Chapter Five, I identified three main themes which captured women's experiences of, or their identification with the wicked stepmother stereotype. I named these themes 1) I am unmotherly; 2) Boundary setting makes me feel bad; and 3) I don't count. Many participants in this study also wrote about strategies they used to help them overcome stepmother stereotypes and manage their feelings of wickedness in their role. These strategies, whether employed consciously or unconsciously, were brought together into a separate theme which was named 4) Strategies to manage perceptions and identity. A final theme is 5) Positive experiences.

In the following section, these five main themes and related sub-themes are discussed. Quotes from study participants illustrating examples of the themes are also provided as evidence of the theme, and to provide a sense of the participant's voice. Table 4 outlines these themes and subthemes. The five main themes and associated sub themes were placed onto a thematic map as suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006) as a way of defining relationships between data sets and providing a visual image of the key findings from the study. This map is included below as Figure One.

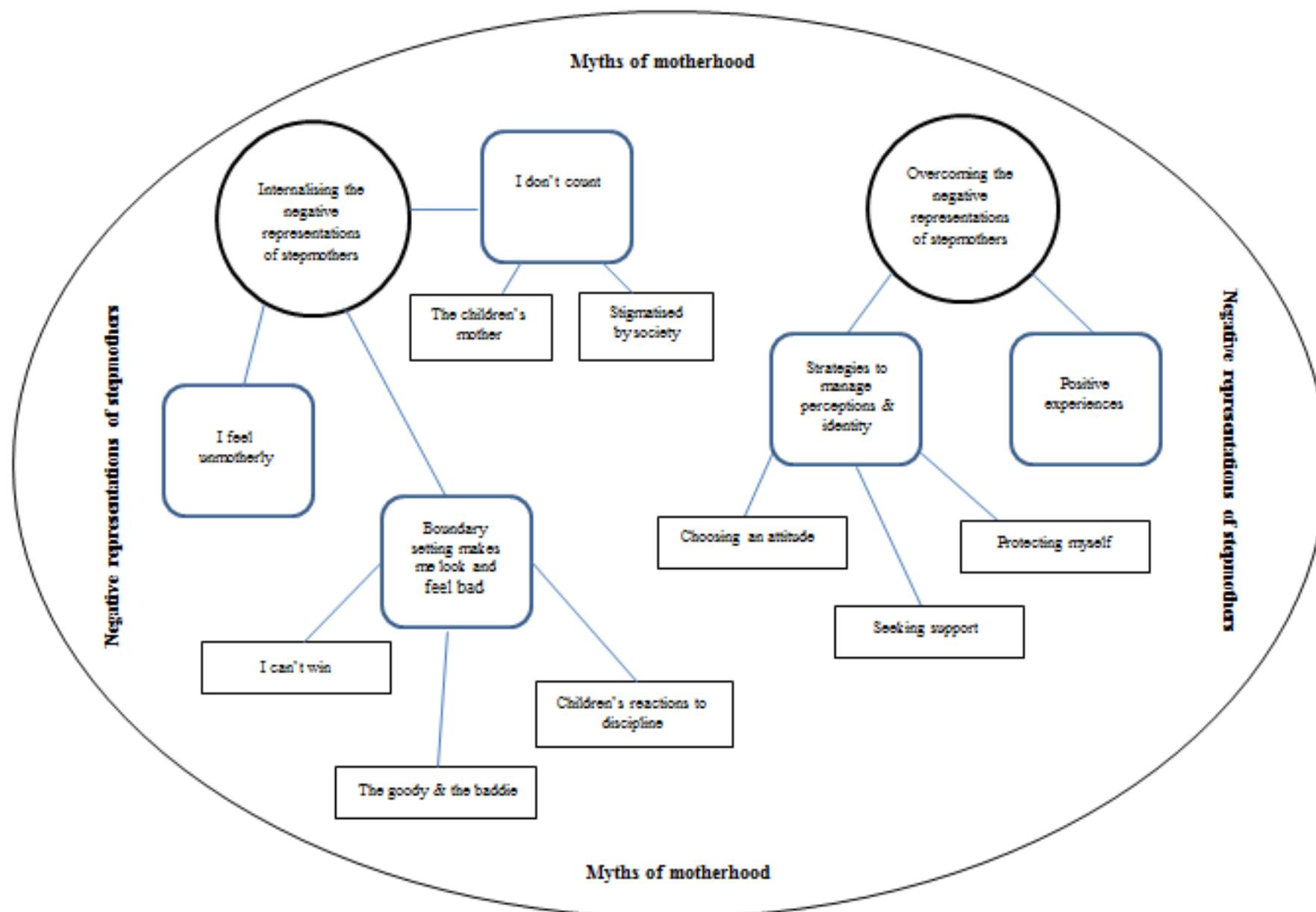


Figure 1: Thematic map showing themes and sub-themes.

Table 4 - Themes and subthemes

<p>Internalising the negative representations of stepmothers</p>	<p>Overcoming the negative representations of stepmothers</p>
<p><i>Theme 1: I feel unmotherly</i></p> <p><i>Theme 2: Boundary setting makes me look and feel bad</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can't win • Children's reactions to discipline • The 'goody' and the 'baddie' <p><i>Theme 3: I don't count</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The children's mother • Stigmatised by society 	<p><i>Theme 4: Strategies to manage perceptions and identity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking support • Adopting an attitude • Protecting myself <p><i>Theme 5: Positive experiences</i></p>

Theme 1: I feel unmotherly

One-third of stepmothers (32%) described feeling that they are the wicked stepmother when they don't feel loving towards their stepchild or stepchildren, or when they experience feelings of resentment towards the stepfamily and their role as a stepmother. Their responses suggest that they struggle with feelings of guilt, shame, and wickedness when they believe they fail to be an 'ideal' mother.

Some stepmothers named the pressure to have a maternal bond with their stepchild and their inability to meet this expectation of love, as contributing to their sense of wickedness:

I feel mean or like a poor stepmother because I don't think I can take her on like she is my own, but I feel there is a societal expectation that I will. That it is a noble and the female thing to do. If I don't express motherly affection then I am a bitch. (Participant 100)

When other people talk about how they love their stepchildren like their own it makes me feel like I must be a bad person for not feeling love for my [stepchild]. I like her, but I just don't click with her or have a real bond or feeling of love. (Participant 142)

Another stepmother described a sense of wickedness as occurring when she was “out of [my] depth and find the children hard to love” (Participant 83), while others related to the wicked stepmother stereotype when they felt annoyed at the stepchild, or had negative thoughts about the stepchild. For example, P44 said “to be honest, sometimes things are hard and I wish that [my stepchild] didn’t exist, and that makes me feel bad and wicked”.

Some women who had their own biological children (with their current partner or a former partner) felt bad about the difference in their feelings and actions towards their own children compared to their stepchild. At times these women judged themselves for feeling and behaving in ways which were kinder, protective and generally more maternal towards their own children, and talked about instinctively prioritising their child’s needs or wants before that of their stepchild. For example, Participant 157 stated that she felt wicked when she was “tired and impatient” with her stepchild, but would find herself with “energy for my own little ones”. Another participant viewed herself as wicked for instinctively protecting her own child,

I struggle with the dynamics when the battle is between our child and one of the children. My instinct is to protect my child, even if she is in the wrong. (Participant 169)

Some of these women tended to feel guilty and blame themselves for their feelings. A number of women talked about making a conscious effort to keep things equal and fair, and feeling the need to monitor themselves. For example Participant 64 wrote:

I believe I am probably the person most critical of my behaviour as a stepmother. I often have to take a quick aside to evaluate my responses to my stepchildren and review these against how I would respond to my own children. This often reveals my own behaviour as problematic because I tend to view my stepchild’s behaviour as threatening whereas I would see similar behaviour from my own children as an opportunity to educate them.

Resentment and negative feelings towards the partner, the stepchildren, or their role as stepmother also caused some stepmothers to feel badly about themselves, perhaps because they were not displaying the virtues of being a good mother such as kindness, tolerance, patience, self-control, and self-sacrifice:

I carry a sense of wickedness: resentment and other challenging feelings that stepparenting sometimes entails. When I feel a strong resentment, jealousy or anger towards [them]. There is some shame for not being more tolerant. (Participant 166)

Every time I get really angry & on the rare occasions that I have 'blown' this has been a 'wicked stepmother' moment! Also at times when I have asked their father to prioritise us I have felt wicked stepmother guilt. For me it has usually developed because my own needs have been higher due to workload/stress and I simply have not wanted to 'parent'. I can feel resentful at times when the girls & Dad are all getting their needs met to some extent but I'm feeling like no-one looks after me! (Participant 18)

On the other hand, there was also a sense from some women that even if they were behaving as a good mother, for example, expressing concern about the children's schooling, they would still feel wicked for this. This presented them with a dilemma of feeling wicked if they were having negative thoughts about the children, but also feeling wicked if they were worried or concerned for them:

If I get angry with the extra work that the children make for me I feel like a wicked stepmother for even thinking that. I even feel like a wicked stepmother when I try to help the children by expressing concern regarding their schooling because my partner feels like it is an attack on the children, but I really want them to do well. (Participant 107)

This resentment also manifested at times when the stepmothers perceived there was some competition or compromise of resources within the stepfamily. These resources may be personal for the stepmother (patience, tolerance), or be related to time, attention, and support. For example, a number of women spoke about feeling wicked when they acted out their resentment and frustration about their partner prioritising other relationships and activities over their couple relationship,

I resent when my partner doesn't put quality time aside for me, prioritises work and my stepchild above time with me. I feel bad because it isn't her fault...Recently my [stepchild] was staying and at the last minute I was told she was staying an extra night. I needed some space and some personal time. I was distraught and was running out of patience. He ended up taking her home and I felt really bad and like a mean stepmother. I couldn't even enjoy the time off because I felt so bad. (Participant 100)

Similarly, stepmothers' perceptions of being unimportant in the stepfamily, taken for granted, and not having their needs met appeared to be a catalyst for feelings of resentment, negative thoughts and a subsequent sense of wickedness. Stepmothers talked about times when they felt their needs were subjugated in favour of fulfilling the expectation to meet everyone else's needs:

I feel like everyone is at me and that I serve as a functionary to get cooking and washing done. My needs go straight to the back of the queue after kids, partner, dogs

and the bloody cat. With that lot, always someone seems to need something...and that makes me feel wicked too. I was trying to explain this to my partner, and he took it as not loving the children enough, which didn't seem altogether fair. (Participant 47)

I constantly feel like a wicked stepmother because you are constantly under pressure to meet everyone else's agenda, your own needs are ignored, and you become resentful. (Participant 37)

Some women suggested it is this resentment comes from feeling out of control, frustrated, and resentful of their situations. One full-time stepmother had a child with a mental health difficulty recounted her experience of feeling alone, frustrated, and "had come to think of myself as the wicked stepmother - stuck in the anger that my life had changed so much since we had them full time" (Participant 11). Some women touched on the fact that the resentment occurs because they are in a position where they do the work of the mother without the 'rewards' of motherhood (i.e. unconditional love, influence, affection, inclusion) For example, this woman described her wickedness as:

Resentment that my stepchild has a huge influence on my children's life and I have no influence on his. I feel left out, that I am not needed or wanted when [stepchild] is around. I have to do chores to look after my stepchild but get no thanks or love in return. So I have hated him at times and certainly felt wicked. (Participant 130)

Even when several stepmothers prioritised their own needs, such as spending time with their partner away from the children, the wicked stepmother feeling was still experienced.

Overall, responses from the stepmothers in this study which addressed this theme of feeling unmotherly demonstrated that they struggled with the contrast between their own and societal expectations of how they *should* feel in their role (the standards of the ideal mother), and their lived experience and more negative feelings about the role. Resentment stemming from the demands to fulfil the mother duties without receiving any of the positive aspects of mothering (respect and affection, for example) was a key emotion named as triggering beliefs they were behaving as a wicked stepmother; thoughts that were often followed by feelings of guilt and shame. The data in this theme all relates to how stepmothers judge themselves when they are experiencing negative emotions about their stepmother role, or unmotherly thoughts towards other stepfamily members. When these internal experiences arise, stepmothers seem to attribute their negative thoughts and feelings as being a part of their character, rather than an understandable reaction to a difficult situation and role, or a by-product of the unattainable expectations set out for all women and mothers.

Theme 2: Boundary setting makes me look and feel wicked

Seventy-seven women (56%) referred to thinking of themselves as a wicked stepmother when they had to discipline or set appropriate boundaries for the children. In this theme, stepmothers also described feeling bad whenever they had to do “normal parenting things” such as saying ‘no’, reminding children to do their homework, enforcing bedtime, asking them to turn off television, or use their manners. Stepmothers talked about feeling “evil”, “wicked” or “the bitch”, “the home wrecker”, and “a horrible person” (e.g. Participants 51, 55, 83, 30, 55). One woman wrote “every time I encourage, cajole, or lose my cool...I feel like the wicked stepmother” (Participant 33). The pattern of data in this theme allowed me to create three subthemes. These are: ‘I can’t win’; ‘Children’s reactions to discipline’; and ‘The goody and the baddie’.

I can’t win

For some stepmothers, having to discipline their stepchild presented them with a dilemma. These women identified that on one hand, if they disciplined the stepchild, they may be disliked and perceived as wicked by the children, it may cause conflict, and they would likely feeling bad about themselves. However, on the other hand, if the stepmother did not discipline, she was aware she may be perceived as being too permissive, the child would have no consequences, and this may impact on the child and the rest of the family. For example:

I knew my stepdaughter was lying about something, this made me feel conflicted as I had to choose between looking like the wicked stepmother for confronting the issue, or letting it go to keep the peace. (Participant 61)

Another woman said,

When I have disciplined...set boundaries...normal stuff that you would usually expect but when you are the stepmother you feel bad about this stuff, like you are overstepping the mark. Trouble is no one knows what the mark is...I could leave it [not discipline her] but I have a son to think about and that affects him. (Participant 111)

These women felt uncomfortable about being too motherly and felt as if they did not have the right to undertake parenting activities or discipline the child. What made it confusing for them was that they were often the only adult in the house at the time, and in some cases, owned the house. In such instances, stepmothers felt these factors suggested they had some legitimacy to set boundaries with the children, however they also were aware that they were

not the mother, did not have a biological connection with the child and so experienced negative feelings for doing so:

I often feel like this. I feel like I am wicked for enforcing my own standards in my own house. I feel like every time I tell the kids off that they see me as wicked. If I get angry with the extra work that the children make for me I feel like a wicked stepmother for even thinking that. I even feel like a wicked stepmother when I try to help the children by expressing concern regarding their schooling because my partner feels like it is an attack on the children, but I really want them to do well (Participant 107)

Children's reactions to discipline

The children's reactions towards the stepmother at times of discipline also reinforced a feeling of being the wicked stepmother, and added to their discomfort with the discipline role. These reactions included the stepchild comparing the stepmother to the child's mother, the stepchild withdrawing from the step-relationship, a negative attitude towards the stepmother, the stepchild doing things deliberately to annoy the stepmother, or the child calling the stepmother a name when she attempted boundary setting:

The [stepchild] called me a bully when I asked him to improve his table manners. (Participant 17)

I often am told I am mean by my [stepchild] because I tell her off when she has misbehaved or hurt someone. (Participant 58)

Some stepmothers wrote about how, when they discipline the children, they do not just *feel* as if they are the wicked stepmother, but they actually *are* wicked. For example, after describing a discipline scenario, one stepmother wrote: "the wicked witch rides her broom again" (Participant 1). Another woman justified the reason she was being wicked,

I am not vindictive or set out to be evil just because: someone is getting hurt or their behaviour is crossing a moral line. (Participant 101)

Other stepmothers talked about their worry of how the stepchild perceived the discipline, fearing that they stepchild may hate them. These stepmothers felt wicked because they believed their discipline was damaging to the relationship and confirmed to the child that they are wicked. For example:

Telling off feels wicked, makes me feel like he hates me. I think he sees me as his wicked stepmother and tells his cousins that. (Participant 37)

Hence, children's reactions to boundary-setting, and stepmothers' anticipation of the impact of discipline on the step-relationship are cues for stepmothers to worry about and internalise the wicked stepmother stereotype.

The goody and the baddie

A fifth of the women who talked about feeling wicked about discipline, wrote that their permissive partner who tried to be a friend to the child caused them to feel and be perceived by the children as the wicked stepmother. The contrast between the parenting styles of the father and stepmother caused the stepmother to feel as if they are always cast as the 'baddie' with the father as the 'goody'. In some cases this is because the stepmother is doing many more of the daily parenting tasks, in other cases it occurred because the children had less contact time with the father, who may also be less inclined to set appropriate boundaries for his children:

For much of our relationship I have been looking after them on my own for more hours than he ever has. As a result I end up having to give the 'marching orders' and discipline when necessary, be the one to tell them off for this and that and it's been REALLY, REALLY hard. My partner gets to walk in, get all the love and attention and the 'good bits'. He rarely has to tell them off and if a situation arises that needs attention, he waits for me to do it... I always feel like the wicked stepmother. Always - and my partner is quite happy for it to be like that. It makes him look even better. (Participant 2)

Some women suggested that seeing their partner being a friend and "good-time dad" (Participant 38) rather than a parent and having different perspectives on what is acceptable behaviour in the house caused some tension with their partner. For example, some of these stepmothers described disagreeing with their partners over discipline, and being criticised by their partner for the way they have handled the children:

This causes friction between my husband and I, he tends to make an excuse for my step-son being "sensitive" and that I'm too hard. (Participant 7)

The father is trying so hard to make his kids like him that he won't tell them off if they treat the stepmother badly, and the stepmother is scared that if she reacts to them it will either make her look horrible or it will affect her relationship with the father. (Participant 39)

In other cases stepmothers perceive that it is the stepchildren who polarise the father and stepmother into goody and baddie roles. One woman spoke of the children's ability to manipulate situations,

The kids know how to wind their dad around their finger so I am often needed to step in and make them behave and listen, I feel like the enforcer. (Participant 75)

Or in another family,

She will run to their father when I tell her off so that he can be the good guy and I end up feeling like the evil cow. (Participant 74)

Having a permissive partner, and feeling unsupported by them with respect to discipline of the children contributed to stepmothers' internalisation of the wicked stepmother stereotype, and led to secondary problems of tension in the step and couple relationship. These relational difficulties likely maintain stepmothers' sense of being wicked as they may also trigger feelings of resentment, negative thoughts and feelings about other family members which could then precipitate stepmothers' beliefs that they are behaving in an 'unmotherly' way (As discussed in theme 1).

Theme three: I don't count

The data in this theme relates to treatment by people outside the stepfamily unit which caused stepmothers to experience the wicked stepmother stereotype. These outside forces were identified by stepmothers as being perpetrators of the wicked stepmother stereotypes, and were perceived to be sources of judgement and marginalisation for stepmothers causing them to feel unimportant, unsupported and treated as if they were wicked. These experiences are described in the sub-themes 'The children's mother' and 'Stigmatised by society'.

The children's mother

Slightly more than half of the stepmothers (50.7%) wrote about the child's mother as a strong force in strengthening and perpetuating the wicked stepmother stereotype. Many stepmothers described an awareness of being called names and put down in front of the children, which caused them to feel like they were wicked or were perceived by others as being wicked. Stepmothers believed that the children's mother characterised them as mean, self-serving, and in competition for their father's attention:

The children who I am a stepmum to have been encouraged by their mother to see me as a mean person who tells them off, keeps their father from them and does not have

their best interests at heart. This has made me feel very stressed and upset. (Participant134)

Another stepmother wrote how the children's mother expresses her contempt for the stepmother to her children, planting ideas in the children's mind about the stepmother:

[She] constantly tries to turn the children against me – saying I don't care about them, that I am trying to control their life, that I am making them work too hard, do too many things, won't let me see her etc. She tries to tell them I don't love them and that I am not their real mother so I don't know what is best for them. This is the primary negative thing in my marriage. It is so hard as I want her children to have a relationship with her but they get upset about what she says. This affects me as I think she shouldn't do this and makes me worry about the time they spend with her. Their behaviour is not good when they return which makes it harder to deal with them. (Participant 53)

Other stepmothers perceive that the child's mother becomes territorial about her role as the 'real' mother, and regularly expresses the lack of rights of the stepmother to have any role in her children's life:

My husband's ex has made comments to counsellors, friends and other parents...that I am only trying to replace her and that I need to "back off"...She also told me in front of the kids that I have no place in discussions about the kids and that they are "her kids, not mine". (Participant 126)

Some stepmothers perceived that the children's mother wielded a major weapon in her ability to deny the stepmother any kind of family status. This manifests as being ignored, refusing to communicate with her, and being excluded from decision-making. For example,

In discussions relating to the care of the kids I've often been undermined by their birth mother. For instance she will argue that the children should not be allowed to stay at our house if my partner is away, even though this is an equal home of theirs, where they spend their days and nights and I am a significant part of their daily lives. The comment I get is "I'm not family." (Participant 106)

Consequently, many stepmothers felt that they were constructed as wicked by the children's mother, and perceived that her behaviour and attitude drove a wedge through the stepmother-stepchild relationship and negatively influenced the stepchild's behaviour:

When the mother of the child is putting the stepmum down 24/7 it's extremely hard to deal with and get to a point of connecting with the step children. (Participant 13)

Another stepmother wrote,

It feels as though I have not had the chance to build a successful relationship with them because of their mother and others around her say about me (with no evidence – she has never spoken to me). (Participant 25)

Many stepmothers expressed that one of the reasons this treatment was so hard for them to bear was because they had a lot of parental and caregiving responsibilities, yet never felt any acknowledgement or appreciation from the children's mother. For example, women talked about looking after 'her' children, doing the chores, enforcing discipline, teaching children new skills, buying them things, keeping them safe, taking them to school and on holiday, reducing their own work hours and leisure time, and being a good role model, yet only felt hostility from the mother. For example,

...the mother restricting access when she feels like it, no matter what the kids want etc. I had the children basically living with us taking to school, picking up from school, - feeding dinner etc. then the mother would turn up and take them – for the night – then the mother would still bitch about me to the kids so when the kids returned the next day, one would be quite naughty – it ended up that...I was deemed as the wicked stepmother. (Participant 1)

Aside from being insulting and derogatory, stepmothers whose comments have been collated under this theme also perceived that the children's mother deliberately made things harder than they needed to be. One stepmother referred to the power of the mother as a problematic force and seemingly a law unto itself:

The mother butts into our life from time to time - she wields power that seems above mine as she changes arrangements to suit herself and her son. (Participant 130)

Other examples of problems caused by the children's mother included making a fuss about seemingly minor things, having pedantic rules, or being territorial about the mother role (examples included no haircuts with the stepmother, the children not being allowed to wave goodbye to the stepfamily and any phone calls between the stepmother and stepchildren having to be on speaker phone). One stepmother wrote,

Mainly I get "I'm only the stepmother" from the ex-wife. She won't let me do the kids washing (they have to bring it back to her dirty! I just won't do it the same way as her. (Participant 104)

Some stepmothers who talked about the children's mother did so by comparing her parenting to their own. A number of stepmothers who responded felt that, compared to the children's mother, they were doing the better job of parenting the children, and through their language appeared to cast the biological mother into the 'wicked' position: "I am a better mother than the woman who simply gave birth to her...if I was honest" (Participant 10). Some

stepmothers talked about how they perceived that the mother had abdicated her parenting responsibilities by living far away or giving the majority of the care to the stepmother household,

I'm proud that I was there for the child when his blood mother chose not to be. Unfortunately she decided that she didn't want to be any other than a holiday parent and sent the child to live with us as she didn't "want him"...Even though there have been behavioural issues and the strain on our marriage has at times been immense he has been given a better start in life than he would have otherwise had. (Participant 21)

Others felt that they displayed more 'motherly' behaviours and attributes than the child's mother,

I am very different to their mother in many ways and I know that they can see this. I do feel for them as it is obvious that I am the stronger parent, yet they cannot benefit from my influences. (Participant 129)

The impression of being a better mother was reiterated by other stepmothers who talked about the safety issues with the children's mother, who had restricted access to the children:

There is a common portrayal of stepmothers as the reason for the family breaking up. In our situation, the children's mother has inflicted a huge amount of damage on my step children that they feel safe, protected fortunate and loved in my care... many people take time to comprehend that children could actually prefer their stepmother over their mother. (Participant 113)

Of the participants who talked about the children's mother, four stepmothers made reference to her in a positive light. They enjoyed a strong and communicative relationship with the children's mother and felt that this had helped them to form a solid relationship with their stepchildren. These stepmothers felt that the support from the children's mother had been integral to ensuring a good relationship with the children and for this reason they said they had less identification with the wicked stepmother stereotype.

I'm lucky their mum is so cool. The real mum seems to be the key. (Participant 130)

I had no rules or model for how to be a step-parent, let alone to teenagers/ young adults who still had a very involved mother. I was aware of trying to get on and build relationships with the kids and expected them not to like me or cause dramas. But I was surprised at how welcoming and accepting they were overall. Their parents had been apart over 7 years and they were pleased to see their father happy. (Participant 10)

In summary, the children's mother was named by many as contributing to stepmothers' experience of the wicked stepmother stereotype. The challenging nature of two women in a

mothering role gave rise to competition for some stepmothers over who could deem themselves the ideal mother and who would occupy the wicked position. From the data, it seemed that stepmothers and mothers may actually see each other as being wicked in some way. For some participants, trying to live with the difficult behaviours of the children's mother, trying to understand when and how they were encroaching on the mother role, and in turn, the impact this had on the children's behaviour and their step-relationship, was the way in which they experienced the wicked stepmother stereotype. Stepmothers reported that the power of the mother, and being characterised as wicked by the children's mother caused them to feel hurt, stressed, upset, worried, excluded and undermined in their role. It is possible that this ongoing stressor for stepmothers may consequently lead them to question many of their own behaviours as a way of pre-empting the way the children's mother and the children would interpret their actions.

Stigmatised by society

Women in this subtheme talked about times when they have felt stigmatised as a stepmother. That is, they felt others have imposed on them society's expectations about what constitutes an ideal mother and, because they do not meet the standards set out, some stepmothers perceived comments and treatment arising from the wicked stepmother stereotype which negatively affected their own sense of self-worth.

As discussed earlier in Chapter Three, other people's assumptions about stepmothers are often communicated to, or perceived by stepmothers in both explicit and indirect ways. In this current subtheme, stepmothers talked further about how they experienced these assumptions and related to them as instances of being treated or feeling as if they are wicked. For example, Participant 115 wrote about her experiences of other people's assumptions which made her feel like a negative stereotype:

I have had many negative comments on how inconvenient stepchildren are. Also that the position of being a stepmum is not ideal and should really have been avoided because the difficulties are too much and will hold me back ...From my partners family, there have been comments about whether we get along and whether the stepchild likes me or whether the child feels that I have "taken their place" or "stepping on their toes" in their relationship. There are definitely very negative stepmother stereotypes that have made me feel like I am doing wrong by the child by just being there and that I am already assumed to dislike the child or not treat them as fairly, equally or affectionately as my own children. (Participant 115)

A number of women were also attentive to assumptions that stepmothers do not want to be stepmothers, and that outsiders could on occasion reduce their step-relationship to being one of conflict. Some of these women spoke about receiving sympathy for having stepchildren, while others felt that they were expected to feel malice towards their stepchildren or be uninvolved or unwilling in the care of the children,

I feel like there is a cultural truth about stepmothers being wicked. People seem to assume that my stepchildren must cause a problem to me and my relationship. I feel as though I am expected to dislike the children and not have their best interests at heart. Almost as though there is an element of a battle line that is drawn between stepchildren and stepmothers. But I really actually want my stepchildren to be happy, confident and do well in life. (Participant 136)

As mentioned in an earlier section of this thesis, stepmothers also wrote about being treated as the wicked stepmother when others expected that stepchildren would live with their mothers and be less involved with the stepmother:

My stepdaughter lives with us 50% of the time. There is this expectation that children will live with their biological mother and only 'visit' their father or stepmother. I'm glad this isn't the case for us, but it still surprises people. They are always quick to assume that I don't have much to do with my stepdaughter. (Participant 15)

Other stepmothers perceived that they were held to higher standards of behaviour than their partners (the father) and assumed to be responsible for the breakup of their partner's former relationship, and even the quality of the father-child relationship

Recently I picked my stepdaughter up from a birthday party at her friend's house. They were running late and I was invited inside to wait. All the other mothers (who are friends of my stepdaughter's biological mum) were looking me up and down and one whispered to another "that's HER." I should add that my husband had been divorced for five years before we even met, yet they treated me as if I had broken up the family. (Participant 117)

I quite often hear of stories of fathers starting a new relationship and not keeping contact with their biological children. It is always stated and expected that this is purely because the new female partner or stepmum had made it impossible for the father to maintain any form of relationship with his children (never the dad's fault!!). It always frustrates me because I know how hard the role of stepmum is and thankless. (Participant 167)

A lack of institutional acknowledgement also contributed to negative experiences for stepparents in general. These stepmothers felt that they were frequently side-lined, and treated as if non-existent in various contexts such as in the court system, education settings, in their workplaces, and in healthcare systems. This was hurtful to many of the stepmothers

who commented on this issue, explaining their perception that the emotional, financial, and psychological support they provide stepchildren is not recognised, yet they are vilified if they do not provide it. They described that when it came to having any parental or even personal rights they were not treated as a valid family member and not afforded an opinion or voice. For example,

Primarily I have found that during the course of custody issues and court cases and day to day arrangements between my partner and his ex, regarding my stepson, that my opinions and assets are marginalized and that as a step parent I am a second-class citizen compared with his biological mum & dad. This is despite the fact that I am the most responsible, I am the breadwinner for the family, the primary disciplinarian for my stepson when he is with us and the planner and instigator of activities for my stepson when he is with us. It seems that although I do much of the parenting work, my preferences and opinions regarding my stepson are not as important or valid as those of his biological parents. (Participant 3)

Being silenced, invalidated and excluded in educational settings was an experience shared by other stepmothers, who felt that their contribution to the upbringing of the child was not recognised.

At parent/teacher interviews at the boys' school, one of their teachers treated me like I was non-existent, unnecessary for the boys' lives. The kids' biological mother was there, as well as my partner (their biological father) and the teacher addressed them throughout the entire conversation and directed her questions and comments to the biological mother particularly. I felt that I was being excluded in my son's education, and that I didn't deserve respect as a parent even though I worked just as hard or harder to provide a good life for them as their biological mother. (Participant 48)

For other women, the exclusion they felt in medical settings caused them to feel disregarded, unimportant, untrustworthy and as if they were being treated as a wicked stepmother who did not care about the child,

Two months ago I also took my stepson to the doctor for a chest infection - I made the appointment, collected him from school. At the clinic the doctor was vague and gave no prescription. I found out later the doctor called and got him to return with his mother the next day as they thought it would be better to go over his medication and tell his mother what was wrong. I was really upset about this. (Participant 2)

Another stepmother observed that in her workplace, biological mothers were given privileges and understanding which did not extend to her situation as a stepmother. Again, there is mention of the idea that being a stepmother is not a legitimate or valid family position, and inferior to being a 'real' mother:

In my current workplace, it feels like being a stepparent is somehow less valid than raising biological kids - there is less flexibility and understanding around needing time off/late start/early finish because of parenting responsibilities. (Participant 16)

Mental health professionals, such as counsellors, have also been named as invalidating stepmothers by ignoring the role they play in the family. For example, one stepmother wrote how she was living full time with her stepdaughter while the biological mother lived in another city. She reported that the family was having therapy for her stepdaughter's mental health difficulties, and that over an 18-month period "even though I was one of the main caregivers... and my marriage suffered I was not asked for my opinion, nor did I feel that I was in any part valued for my input or contribution" (Participant 124).

In general, these women felt that they are performing parental duties, contribute financially, and offer emotional support for the child, but are not assigned the positive attributes nor afforded some of the parental rights or respect that society has for mothers: In a similar vein, a few stepmothers felt that stepfamily guidance that was published colluded with society's tendency to marginalise the stepmother role, and felt frustrated how this advice did not seem practical, relevant or helpful for their situation – mainly due the gendered role they were occupying. For example, this stepmother's comment conveys her annoyance at the lack of recognition for a woman in an alternative mother role. Her comments highlight how her role was very much aligned to how the couple expected a woman and mother would function in the household,

There are some support documents, published by the family courts and relationship services that give guidance to blended families. I found these leaflets very negative, perhaps even patronising. They take a firm line that step parents are not parents, that they should take a back seat and not be too involved or expect close relationships with their step children. This may be fair to couples newly together, but for me it's certainly not what my partner expected of me, or how I saw our new family unit functioning. How could I be expected to pull equal weight running the household and helping raise these kids (cooking, washing, cleaning, making school lunches, dropping at school, cleaning up sick, applying band aids, kissing goodnight, helping with homework- all these roles we do together/ share equally), be loving and caring and supportive to the children and my partner, participate in all family activities and holidays, yet they then say I'm not an actual parent? I perform the role of a parent. I don't demand any special legal rights, but to suggest the family unit should have me in some flatmate/big sister role is ridiculous and unreasonable. This is perhaps the area where I felt least acknowledged. (Participant 83)

Overall, this theme drew attention to the assumptions made by members of the public and public agencies, the lack of recognition, the experiences of stigmatisation, and invalidation of

the stepmother role that caused stepmothers to feel unimportant, blamed and marginalised. Such experiences were direct examples, said many participants, of when they felt they had been stereotyped as bad and wicked. Many women who wrote about experiences in this theme were occupying a more ‘hands on’ mothering role with the stepchildren, and in some instances, their experiences may have been times that they were confronted by society’s reaction and response to another woman in a mother-like position.

Theme Four: Managing stepmother stereotypes

In this study, I asked women to describe how they responded to, or coped with, their experiences of being treated as if they are wicked, or feelings of being bad in the stepmother role. In answering this question, and throughout other areas of the questionnaire, many stepmothers ($n=107$) described ways that they consciously or unconsciously coped with their experiences and feelings of negative stepmother stereotypes, and how this impacted on their sense of self. This section brings together the data which relates to these strategies. Commonalities and patterns arose in the data in this theme, and so I created three subthemes named ‘Seeking Support’, ‘Adopting an attitude’, and ‘Protecting myself’.

In addition, many stepmothers talked about the positive aspects of their stepmother experience and most described how this ameliorated the impact that stepmother stereotypes had on themselves and their experience of the stepmother role. The data collected from this question is described in the final section of this chapter.

Seeking Support

Nearly a third of stepmothers wrote that they actively sought support from others which helped them to manage some of the challenges they experienced with stereotypes and their role as stepmother. These supports varied from person to person. For example, some people sought greater support from their partners, through increased communication, new agreements on how to parent the children, and talking over issues so that they could feel they had back up. One woman wrote,

Usually I am quite confident I am making the right decision if I decide to discuss a matter with my partner and this is validated by him and I usually agreeing on a way forward. (Participant 60)

Eleven of the participants acknowledged that they had sought professional help either through reading self-help and parenting books or by engaging with a counsellor or therapy to help them to manage the challenges they faced:

I engaged a counsellor to help me work through the stress around this issue and other parenting issues. (Participant 107)

Other women found that talking and ‘downloading’ with friends and other family members helped them, and for some it made a positive difference if these people were mothers or stepmothers themselves, as the participants felt that this increased the level of support that they could offer.

Adopting an attitude

Just over a third of stepmothers talked about reconciling their feelings and experiences of stepmother stereotypes through adopting a particular attitude towards the way they interpreted and ascribed importance to these experiences and feelings. These stepmothers found that trying to accept, tolerate or ignore the negativity and remind themselves of their choices and reasons for being a stepmother, helped them to be more resilient in dealing with the stereotype. One participant said,

It is upsetting and you just have to grin and bear it and remind yourself that you are doing this as you love your partner. (Participant 102)

Others wrote,

I tried to ignore it as this is what I have chosen for my life. (Participant 103)

I choose not to respond to any negative experiences. If I haven’t gotten used to it now after seven years it is going to make the rest of my life very difficult. (Participant 125)

Another group of women wrote that developing a more secure belief in themselves and their parenting helped them to distance themselves from the stereotypes and expectations:

I have not really “responded”. I am aware that I need to do what is right for our situation and our family unit, so I keep focussed on that rather than letting outside pressure make me “cave” to demands and expectations that I should “soften up” on her because she is a stepchild. If she is left in my care, I believe I should be free to parent her how I see fit. If her bio parents do not like/appreciate this, they are welcome to parent her themselves. (Participant 111)

Another strategy was using humour to manage the stereotype. Some stepmothers chose to defy the stereotype by taking a less serious attitude to the wicked stepmother label and its connotations, allowing them to minimise the impact that the stereotype had on them:

Out in the world I tend to refuse to allow negative stereotypes. I make jokes about it and call myself a 'parental type unit' when I do things at school....I think the evil stepmother myth is incredibly pervasive, and you would have to be almost dead to not notice it. But I march to my own drummer anyway, and I have quite a lot of faith in my own common sense as it relates to kids...so I think it could be a lot more affecting than its effect on me. I think it is quite rude, as the presumption is that women are stupid and selfish and that kids are naturally mean-spirited. Frankly, I defy the stereotype, and so do our kids. (Participant 48)

These participants also talked about how 'owning' the stereotype and using it in a joking way served to diffuse tension and make difficult situations, like disciplining the children, more comfortable and less tense for everyone. For example,

This is a constant joke in our house and a way to make light of this stereotype. We frequently refer to me as the evil stepmother and the children as Cinderella when I ask them to do chores (i.e. clear their plates or put their bikes away). (Participant 113)

These women described how using the term in a joking way is helpful in managing their relationships, particularly when the stepchildren are also able to join in:

We do jest a bit about this – mainly from my oldest stepchild who I have an exceptionally good relationship with. He hassles me about being a wicked stepmother but it is in fun. I know this is perpetuating the myth but I see it as a way for him to express his emotions towards me in a socially acceptable way. (Participant 53)

For some, however, joking perhaps felt like the only available way of coping with the stereotype, and a strategy which was imposed upon them rather than chosen. They talked about it as if it is a joke that is not really that funny to them, and that 'toughening up' so they can laugh about it helps them, to a certain extent, to feel better about themselves:

I used to be extremely hurt when people, especially friends and family made flippant comments about the 'evil stepmother' when I worked so hard and gave up so much to fill the role of parent to the child when his mother did not want to take responsibility. I've developed a harder shell about this now and will often joke about having a T-shirt made that says "I'm the wicked stepmother...beware!!" However this does not take away from the fact that I often feel belittled by the term. (Participant 21)

Although not outright joking, taking a lighter perspective of "not buying into it" or "taking it all with a pinch of salt and look on the bright side" (Participant 45) helped reduce the power

and influence of stereotyping for some stepmothers and allowed them a way to make visible, refuse, or redefine the term.

Protecting my Identity

This subtheme presents other strategies that stepmothers use to protect their identity so as not to be negatively affected by the stereotype or others' judgements about them as a stepmother or person. Thirty-two percent of stepmothers in this study wrote, in various sections of the questionnaire, about the behaviours they do to prevent or ameliorate the impact that the stereotype has on their identity. For example, some stepmothers disengaged from a parenting role and backed off. Most often women talked about this as a conscious decision to let their partner take over more of the disciplinarian role, however, other women talked about this as either backing off by physically leaving the family or creating some space for themselves, or as more of an emotional withdrawal from the family:

I find I have to remove myself to calm down. This has meant leaving on one occasion as I wasn't coping at all well & didn't wish to continue (during 5th year). Once my partner & I had put ourselves & us back together we were able to resume co-parenting the girls. (Participant 18)

Twenty women whose responses contributed to this theme, suggested that being a stepmother was a "minefield", and that in order to manage this they had to "walk on eggshells" or "keep my emotions in check at all times" (Participants 48, 101, 40). These stepmothers commented that they were cautious with the things they said or did, monitored themselves and their responses, questioned or criticised themselves, or refrained from saying the things they wanted to say because they didn't want to rock the boat. It came through in these stepmothers' responses that if they were not being careful about what they said and did, they would be in danger of being negatively perceived and judged badly as a woman and stepmother. Feeling "paranoid about coming across as the evil stepmother" (Participant 85) caused them to censor and monitor themselves, and protect themselves from the stereotype:

They've (stereotypes) made me very aware of the minefield that is step-parenting, and perhaps overly cautious in how I approach it...My fear has been that the children will look for any opportunity to hate me - I've responded by removing any obstacles to them liking and accepting me. This doesn't mean I've pandered to their every whim - far from it - but I've kept my emotions in check at all times, and gone out of my way to be kind and fair, and defer anything negative to their father. (Participant 47)

One participant wrote that negative portrayals of stepmothers

It [the stereotype] makes you aware of how you could be negatively portrayed and can make you cautious about being involved in discipline and guidance in front of other people. You are 'only' the stepmother. (Participant 11)

Interestingly though, this stepmother had said that she has had very few, and unmemorable experiences of being treated by others as the wicked stepmother. This raises the question of whether her self-protection strategy of avoiding disciplining her stepchildren or offering guidance about behaviour around other people explains why she has seldom experienced the wicked stepmother stereotype? Similarly, other stepmothers write that they have not felt the impact of stepmother stereotypes because they have adopted the strategy of being 'perfect'. This strategy involved conscious attempts to prove to others they are not wicked but are in fact a good stepmother. These stepmothers try to de-bunk the myths and stereotypes by being faultless and unrealistically nice. One woman wrote,

A lot of the time I have tried to over-compensate for this perception by being overly nice and spoiling stepchild. This was exhausting and unrealistic and wasn't fair on the other children who I would treat normally. Because the stepchild only came on some weekends I would feel that I had to make it fun and ensure that they liked it here so that...well I don't know, to prove to others that I was a good person and to prove to others that it isn't as terrible as they made out it would be. (Participant 94)

Other women said that they entered into the role of stepmother with a pre-conceived plan to never be perceived as the wicked stepmother. These women purposely tried to show others that they were nothing like the negative portrayals in media or legend "working (consciously) hard to not be the stereotype" (Participant 18). Other stepmothers talked about "proving that I am a good mother and that I care about X (Participant 44) and "striving not to fit into the mould" (Participant 15). Another comment reflects the same concern, focussed on the stepchild's impression:

It did worry me and make me very much want to explain to her that I would not be that mean, and it is often in the back of my mind to prove that I'm not. (Participant 95)

Other women tried to manage their identity by standing up to the stereotype and correcting people's inaccurate assumptions about stepmothers, and their relationships with other stepfamily members:

Simply by explaining my experiences - and will always correct people if they're still under the impression that I'm unhappy as a stepmother - naturally experiences and feelings change over time. (Participant 54)

Told people to pull their heads in, I love her like I would love my own. (Participant 106)

Other stepmothers protected their identity by pretending to be the children's mother:

Whenever I go to any after school groups outside of school (swim classes, that sort of thing) I now address myself as their mother because I have experienced negativity in the form of 'knowing' looks, being asked for permission slips from the biological parents, and being treated more like a live-in babysitter. (Participant 48)

In other cases, some avoided situations where there could be a connection made between their role and wickedness:

Since becoming a stepmother it does bother me to see these. I often avoid reading books like Cinderella and others to [stepchild] as I don't want [stepchild] associating me with those stepmother characters. (Participant 73)

As has already been discussed in the previous section about stepmothers' awareness of stepmother stereotypes, management of the stepmother stereotype is also evident by many stepmothers' avoidance of using the stepmother term, in some cases, deliberately choosing to avoid revealing their step status to protect themselves and their stepchild. For example,

I do not correct people if they comment about my children even around the kids & they don't correct them either. I only really say they aren't my biological children if the situation necessitates. (Participant 103)

Over time, and with experience, stepmothers reported that they used a variety of ways to cope with stereotypes and manage their identity. Seeking support from friends and professionals, using humour, and taking a more philosophical perspective about the stereotyping helped some stepmothers to be less affected by the negative representations and stereotype experiences of being a stepmother. For others, there was evidence that their internalisation of the wicked stepmother stereotype led them to change their behaviours, in ways which were consistent with other stigmatised groups. They hid the fact they were a stepmother, avoided certain people or situations, put themselves under self-surveillance and tried to be overly good so that they did not confirm a stereotype.

No experiences of feeling or being treated as if wicked

Nearly a third of stepmothers ($n=41$) reported that they did not have the experience of feeling like a wicked stepmother, or of being treated like one. What is interesting about the responses of these stepmothers is how they tended to mention why they believed that they did not experience either the feeling or treatment of being wicked. These participants' comments highlighted that they were using strategies which seemed to help them to protect themselves

from the stereotype. For example, some women report using strategies of humour, concealment, or avoidance, and this may have helped to minimise their negative experiences:

No experiences here....We tend to sometimes mention that I'm the 'wicked stepmother' at which everybody falls about laughing. (Participant 78)

It has always been a running joke in our family that I am the wicked stepmother - when in actual fact sometimes it is easier for my step daughter to talk to me because I am not her parent. I have never felt 'wicked' or been treated as such. (Participant 15)

No, I never have. My husband and I go to great lengths to avoid situations where our children could view the respective 'step' as mean, horrible or threatening. (Participant 40)

Another group of women report that they have not experienced negative stereotypes, because their strategy has been to treat the stepchild as their own,

I have had no negative experiences. I just tell new people she is my own when they ask. It's just easier. (Participant 93)

For some women this was because they were a mother as well as a stepmother, and so their mother identity was perhaps more dominant or the approach was more practical:

I haven't felt that way. I treat her as I did my own with rules, boundaries and discipline. (Participant 23)

In another example, a stepmother contradicts herself somewhat by reporting no experience of the stereotype, but then relates to it when she has to discipline her stepchild,

I have never been referred to as the wicked stepmother and do not really relate to this or had any experience that connects with this statement.... I sometimes feel like the wicked stepmother when my husband and I wish to discipline or steer my stepson in different directions. (Participant 97)

The comments made by stepmothers in this section are enlightening as they highlight that the use of these compensatory strategies may often be effective in protecting these stepmothers from the impact of the stereotypes.

Theme 5: Positive experiences of being a stepmother

One hundred and twenty-five women in this study expressed positive experiences of being a stepmother, and for many this helped to counter some of the challenges of the stepmother role, including coping with stepmother stereotypes.

Forty-three percent of stepmothers wrote that the most positive experiences about being a stepmother came from the times when their stepchild demonstrated their fondness, appreciation, or love for the stepmother. For example stepmothers wrote how they felt rewarded in the role when their stepchildren displayed trust in them by sharing experiences, asking for advice, offering unprompted affection, or choosing to talk to her about their personal thoughts and feelings instead of talking to others. It was also a sign to some stepmothers that they were needed and valued:

We have fun but I feel validated when she comes to me first when she has a problem, or good news, or needs something or anything really. (Participant 8)

When [stepchild] cuddles into me when she is shy or tired, when she comes to me when she is upset. When she wants to show me things that she is happy about or proud of, and wants to share experiences with me. (Participant 127)

Stepmothers also wrote about their pleasure when stepchildren noticed the things they have done, and how seeing their stepchild's reaction makes them feel connected to them. These moments help them to feel good about being a stepmother and gave them pleasure about having been able to make their stepchild happy:

When my stepdaughter hugs me and tells me she misses me, when she comes to me for advice and talks over things with me. I hope that she finds me to be a fairly neutral person in her life, who doesn't have any interest apart from hers in mind. I also love it when she really enjoys a meal I have made, or something small which I have done for her and it makes her happy. (Participant 28)

Just over one third of stepmothers (38%) defined one of the most positive experiences of being a stepmother as being the opportunity and sense of accomplishment in helping to raise children. The majority of these stepmothers (62.5%) were also mothers to their own children. These women felt that being able to be in a mother-like role of nurturing, providing stability, and being a role-model gave them a great deal of satisfaction,

I am helping to nurture two wonderful children. I get to use my mothering instinct. I am providing a settled home for the kids & modelling a positive relationship. I know I'm doing a great job at the kids & supporting it makes me feel good. (Participant 103)

When I have taken the children to family events and people make positive comments about the children I do have some pride in my influence on them. I enjoy the way the children are together when they are happy. I feel good about providing an environment that is clean, tidy and well organised so that the children don't have to worry when they are with us. (Participant 107)

Stepmothers felt positive about providing a 'good' mother influence, especially those

stepmothers who described having helped to improve the lives of their stepchildren, for example, contributing to the children's more positive behavioural, educational and psychosocial outcomes:

That I can see the growing confidence in our children as they shake the hurt in their past, and knowing that in providing a loving safe and happy home, I have played a huge part in this. (Participant 114)

A sometimes implied, and at other times explicit message which recurred throughout the study was that some stepmothers felt more like a good mother because they perceived they had been able to provide their stepchildren with a life that the biological mother presumably, had been unable to fulfil:

I enjoy reading and I helped one of the children learn to read. She now is an avid reader and is reading well beyond her age group. This in turn has boosted her confidence in her school life. I took the three younger children to Saturday sports for a number of years. My partner took the oldest child to another sport on a different side of town. The children's mother did not want to attend. The children are fit and healthy and lead active lives. I feel that I have contributed to this. (Participant 129)

Whether or not it was due to the biological mother, or the children's home environment, it is possible that perhaps some of these stepmothers felt that their stepchildren had suffered in some way prior to her entry as their stepmother, and that she had helped them to overcome the difficulties of their former life by offering a positive influence:

I've seen him grow up to be a really cool young man with some of my humour traits having etched into his personality. He really tries hard. That makes me proud, to see that my input helped to repair some of the damage and helped shape him to who he is today. (Participant 32)

Some stepmothers perceived that their influence has helped to avert future problems too:

He was on a path of trouble until he came to live with us, he has grown a lot and is starting to develop into a respectful young man now. I know that I have had a positive impact on his life (Participant 68)

Of the stepmothers who answered this question, 29% expressed that they felt highly positive about the relationship they have been able to develop with their stepchild. They talked about the enjoyment that they have received from this relationship and how, at times this has been the factor that has helped them to overcome difficult experiences of being a stepmother,

The love of a child! My step-son and I have a very close relationship and that makes other negative experiences worthwhile. (Participant 121)

Other stepmothers praised their stepchild as being a great person to know, and felt it was an honour to have the opportunity to be a part of their life. A genuine feeling of warmth, fondness, and often love for the children has also been a positive experience for stepmothers. Some have even been surprised by the depth of affection they could feel for a child who was not biologically related to them, and have enjoyed getting to know the children and the development of their relationship into one which looked closer to a 'mother' role,

I enjoy spending time with the children. Fortunately they are really nice kids and I care about them. I haven't been able to have a child myself, so it is nice to be able to "parent" them. (Participant 136)

These stepmothers enjoy the bond they feel with their stepchildren, and at times they talked about how this relationship had helped them improve as a person and develop a stronger resolve, perseverance, and persistence to rise to other challenges in life. Other stepmothers have discovered positive characteristics about themselves (such as maturity, empathy and tolerance), and learnt more about life and relationships. For example,

It's been really positive and has definitely expanded me, taught me new skills, taught me to be more tolerant and given me a broader outlook on life. (Participant 17)

Overall, the most positive aspects of being a stepmother seemed related to moments when stepmothers felt closest to resembling a mother-like role with their stepchildren. When they were able to exhibit qualities associated with good mothers like tolerance, when they were able to 'parent', provide a 'good home', or receive the benefits of mothering, such as love and affection, they described how such experiences compensated for the more difficult aspects of the role. Above all, stepmothers who enjoyed positive experiences valued and celebrated the knowledge that they have been a positive influence and contributed to the growth and development of a child.

CHAPTER SEVEN - DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes, and investigate if and how these affected stepmothers and their experiences of the stepmother role. In general, the stepmothers in this study perceived negative stereotypes of stepmothers in society and this is supported by research (e.g. Planitz & Feeney, 2009). Stepmothers also perceived that these negative representations were more pervasive than the positive images (see Table 1 p. 51), and noted common assumptions that they would not like their stepchildren or want to be in a stepmother role, and that their relationships with their stepchildren were conflictual. Characterisations of stepmothers as being wicked, 'home-wreckers', less loving, and suspicion about a stepmother's motives for being in a mother-like role were also observed by stepmothers in this study. Many also commented on the role of the media in perpetuating unrealistic and extreme representations of stepmothers as being both cruel and abusive, or exceptionally loving and mother-like, which is consistent with other studies (e.g. Claxton-Oldfield & Butler, 1998; Leon & Angst, 2005). Other stepmothers perceived stigmatisation through the absence of positive representations of their role, and expressed a sense of invisibility and lack of legitimacy about their stepmother role.

A review of previous research has found that a number of challenges exist for stepmothers, including how to communicate about the stepparenting role with partners on daily basis, being accepted and supported by members of the stepfamily, how to establish a validated role which allows for stable and consistent boundaries, and difficulties related to the negotiation of territorial issues with the stepchildren's mother (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Sweeney, 2010; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). In this study, many stepmothers also talked about these issues when they wrote about their perceptions and experiences of stepmother stereotypes. Hence, this study highlights that these known challenges of being a stepmother do not exist in a vacuum; societal myths and cultural beliefs held and internalised by stepmothers, as well as by members of society, contribute to and influence the difficulties stepmother experience in their role. On average, stepmothers in this study perceived that negative stepmother representations have a moderate impact on their experience as a stepmother.

When and how do stepmothers experience the wicked stepmother stereotype?

The main findings of this study show that there are three key themes which highlight when and how stepmothers think of themselves as a ‘wicked stepmother’ and feel ‘bad’ (see Figure 2 below).

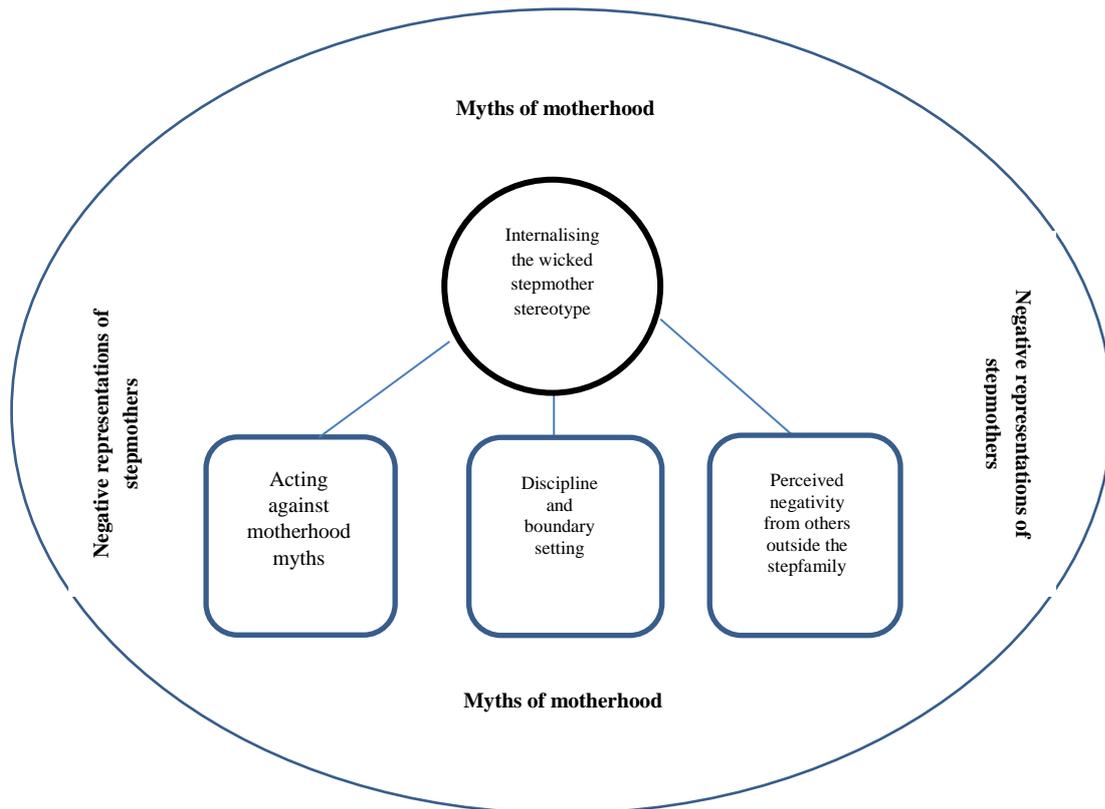


Figure 2: Model of situations in which stepmothers experience the ‘wicked stepmother’ stereotype

Firstly, some stepmothers expressed that trying to reconcile their feelings about their stepchild was challenging (I am unmotherly) as they perceived a societal and internal pressure to love their stepchild as their own, and felt bad when they were unable to meet this expectation. Some stepmothers felt wicked when they noticed themselves having negative feelings about their stepchild, or when they recognised themselves having a stronger maternal connection with their own child than the stepchild. A lack of personal time, or having to

fulfil a mother role and meet the practical and emotional needs of everyone in the family with often little recognition or support, also caused feelings of resentment for stepmothers. In turn, some stepmothers judged themselves as being, at times, the wicked stepmother which often led to secondary emotions of guilt, shame, and a belief they were failing to meet the expectations of being a 'good' stepmother.

Secondly, enforcing boundaries for stepchildren also led many stepmothers to feel wicked; they worried that their stepchildren would react badly, and that their boundary-setting would confirm that the stereotype. The feeling of wickedness occurred over matters such as asking stepchildren to do homework, turn off the television, and "saying no to sweets" (Participant 120). The difficulty in boundary-setting or having a disciplinary role was compounded for stepmothers when their partners took a permissive, and/or unsupportive role, an issue which has been noted in previous stepmother studies (e.g. Gallardo & Mellon-Gallardo, 2007; Jones, 2003; Levin, 1997; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Similarly, some stepmothers in this study found that their partners' behaviour forced them into a more active parenting role with boundary-setting, and that it was frustrating to look wicked in comparison to the easy-going and good-time father. These findings highlight that discipline is a dilemma for stepmothers, and that they can feel trapped between two difficult options: being responsible for looking after the children and deciding to not discipline the child and compromise their standards and expectations, or to set boundaries and risk looking wicked and confirming the stereotype. Participants also highlighted that fathers have role in creating, and alleviating some of the difficulty of the wicked stepmother stereotype; that is, fathers who move away from their gendered expectation and take a more active role in discipline and boundary-setting with their children can support the stepmother in having less responsibility for discipline and less likelihood of taking a wicked position (Kelley, 1992). However, comments from several stepmothers in this study align with discourse from stepmothers in Weaver and Coleman's study (2005), which suggest that this might be "easier said than done" (p. 495).

Thirdly, experiences of being treated as if they were unimportant, excluded and devalued from the children's mother, family members, and wider society also led stepmothers to experience, and at times internalise, the wicked stepmother stereotype. The results showed that many stepmothers believed they were characterised as wicked by the children's mother, and that this contributed to their experience of being treated as if they are, in fact, wicked. Some stepmothers perceived that the behaviour and comments of the children's mother was territorial, excluding, and often undermined the step relationship. As found previously, some

stepmothers pointed out their frustration about fulfilling a caregiving role to the children, and yet being unacknowledged and devalued by the children's mother for this (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). Other stepmothers positioned the children's mother as being the negative influence, by pointing out her parenting shortcomings, a response similar to behaviours of stepmothers in other studies (e.g. Christian, 2005; Doodson, 2014a; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Experiences of feeling discounted and discredited by those in the wider society were also cited by some stepmothers as times when they felt treated as if wicked. These included experiences of stigmatisation by staff in schools, in medical, legal, mental health and employment settings, which signalled to some stepmothers that they were 'invisible' and unimportant (Gately, Pike & Murphy, 2006) and highlighted for some stepmothers a double-standard in the way society expected them to emotionally, physically, and financially care for their stepchild, yet also excluded them and expected them to be mean or not want children.

Drawing from stereotype theory, these three themes indicate times of vulnerability, and are likely to be when a stepmother is under the greatest stereotype threat. That is, in these situations women's stepmother identity is most salient, they face increased self-doubt about the appropriateness of their behaviour or role, and they may be more conscious of the negative representations of stepmothers. In turn, stepmothers may increase their attention to cues from stepchildren, partners, the children's mother, and others in her wider social network that indicate they will be negatively judged based on their stepmother identity.

Stepmother stereotypes and the link with motherhood myths

The themes in this study were anchored by a common influence - the myths of motherhood that exist in society. This is perhaps unsurprising given that we live in a culture that frames motherhood as an "unquestioned norm" (Gillespie, 2000 p. 223) and a goal which all women are expected to strive for. Furthermore, feminist scholars argue that gender shapes family processes and roles (e.g. Lorber, 1994), and in stepfamily literature gender issues have been highlighted as central to the challenges that stepmothers experience in their role (Levin, 1997; Salwen, 1990; Shapiro, 2014; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). The majority of stepmothers in this study indirectly and explicitly wrote about their identification with wicked stepmother stereotypes when they self-evaluated, or felt judged by others as failing to meet 'mother ideals'. Similarly, motherhood myths also contributed to participants' decisions to use or not use the stepmother term, influenced how they managed their experiences of stepmother

stereotypes (for example, theme of ‘Protecting myself’), and contributed to their positive experiences of stepmotherhood. Hence, on the Thematic Map (Figure 1, p. 71) myths of motherhood are presented alongside the negative representations of stepmothers as these provide the social context for women’s experiences within the stepfamily.

From the results of the questionnaire which probed when and how stepmothers experience the wicked stepmother stereotype, it appears that at least some of stepmothers’ sense of wickedness may stem from their inability to meet the unrealistic societal expectations prescribed for them, and a tendency to blame themselves for this failure rather than recognising the social structures and discourses that have set up the myths and unattainable standards (T. Miller, 2007). Indeed, there is further research evidence to suggest that other mothers who deviate from the idealised standards of motherhood, also struggle with this internalisation of inadequacy and feeling stigmatised. For example, similar themes were identified in a qualitative study of mothers whose children have a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD: Singh, 2004). Mothers in this study also described feeling a failure, inadequate and blamed, as well as experiencing guilt for their resentment, and shame for lacking connection with their child. These mothers also found that the fathers’ attitude reinforced their position of inadequacy. Similarly, in a Canadian qualitative study, Euro-Canadian women who had children when they were in their early twenties perceived that they were stigmatised by society and by mothers who had children in their mid to late thirties. These women felt that they were socially excluded, judged, and felt shame, anger and stress which occasionally left them feeling depressed, unsupported and doubting their own mothering capabilities (Whitley & Kirmayer, 2008).

With the construct of stepmotherhood being heavily influenced by motherhood myths, stepmothers face the dilemma of how active they are in taking a mothering role and whether this level of input will be acceptable to others. Indeed, stepmothers in this study struggled with internalising the wicked stepmother stereotype both when they perceive they are inadequate mothers (I am unmotherly), and when they are too active in mothering tasks (Boundary setting makes me feel bad). Over the years, researchers (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and clinicians (Kelley, 1992; Papernow, 2013) have recommended that in the early stages of stepfamily formation, stepmothers adopt a less active mother role and instead adopt more of a supportive friend approach, which would lead to better stepfamily adjustment. Although there is acknowledgement of the diversity in step-relationship development (Ganong, Coleman & Jamieson, 2011), the cultural milieu in which

stepmothers function, and recognition that specific factors can help to enable an easier transition into this role (for example, the biological mother's presence and attitude) (Ganong & Coleman, 2004), the supposition is that stepmothers and parents are freely able to choose the extent of their stepmother role.

It is likely, however, that society as a whole underestimates the difficulty stepmothers have when trying to follow this guidance in a culture which places a high value on mothers and where, despite it being common for mothers to be in paid employment, the division of domestic tasks (housework and childrearing) continues to reflect gender differences (Coltrane, 2000; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010), even for stepmothers in stepfamilies (Demo & Acock, 1993). This observation is certainly relevant to the findings of this study, which indicate that many stepmothers are spending significant amounts of time with their stepchildren during the week, and so are likely to be forced into a more hands on mother role because of their gender, the fact they may be also parenting their own children, and societal expectations of what it means to be a woman in a family.

In response, stepmothers may have to weigh up the social and cultural expectations for women and mothers, and decide their own position, depending on the situation they are in and the people they are with (Dainton, 1993). In several areas of the results section, (e.g. I can't win, The use of the stepmother term, Protecting myself) there are indications that stepmothers adopt an identity and role according to whether or not they will confirm or refute negative stepmother stereotypes. For example, many stepmothers in this study chose to use, or not use the stepmother term out of concern that they may offend someone or be negatively evaluated. Similarly, stepmothers' choice to discipline stepchildren became less about whether this was warranted and appropriate, and more of a dilemma about what the consequences would be for her if she did – including to be judged negatively by others and feel wicked. The tension is further exacerbated when recognising that the alternative could also be viewed negatively, such as avoiding boundary setting and failing at the mother role (Levin, 1997). Feminist researchers and scholars have drawn attention to this kind of “rhetoric of choice” for women and have argued that:

No choice is a free choice when others have feelings, beliefs and values about the choice that is made. The choice becomes much more than “will I do this or that?” It is about “will doing this bring other consequences with it, will it harm a relationship, will it offend, and will it create barriers to on-going help? (Lothian, 2008, p. 232)

For stepmothers in this study who perceive and have to navigate their way around negative stepmother representations, the constraint placed on their choice of what role to take may be about whether adopting a non-traditional mother role will challenge their own and others expectations of women's roles in families, and bring about negative consequences for self or other. Like other researchers interested in gender topics, Levin (1997) briefly touches on this issue in her qualitative study when she questions whether some of the stepmother participants had real and free choice about their decision of how much to engage in a traditional 'feminine' role; in this case the 'choice' was to either forgo their feminist ideology or compromise the quality of their partner relationship.

Perhaps as individual and societal shifts in gender roles occur, some progress towards more of a 'free choice' and more egalitarian households will enable stepmothers to not only be practically supported by their partners and society in taking more of a friend role with the stepchildren, but also to feel that they can do this without the repercussions of self- or other judgment. However, the progress in our society's gender attitudes has tended to be slow, and the factors that affect it are acknowledged to be multifaceted and complex (Davis, 2010; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard (2010).

A lack of recognition and support for stepmothers in New Zealand

Stepmothers in this study named the lack of societal support, the absence of stepmother role models and a general lack of guidance and information about their role as ways in which they perceive themselves to be excluded and marginalised. They thought that this invisibility perpetuated negative stepmother representations on a familial, social, community, governmental, and national level. Unlike other countries (e.g. Australia, England, the United States of America) New Zealand does not have a Stepfamily Association and in the most recent national Census (2014) there was no collection of stepfamily statistics. These facts objectively support stepmothers' perceptions in this study that they are relatively unrecognised and supported in their role, at least in this New Zealand context.

It is possible that more information and guidance for fathers and stepmothers would help to reduce the tendency for stepmothers to self-stereotype. For example, some stepmothers in this study talked about feeling hurt, invisible and excluded when fathers devoted their time and attention to the child. They then thought of themselves as wicked for feeling jealous, and experienced guilt, shame and frustration. This experience is well-documented by stepfamily

researchers and clinicians and has been named as the 'stuck outsider' position (Papernow, 2013) - a position which, when experienced by a stepparent or a child, usually leads to feelings of shame, jealousy, resentment, and problematic behaviours (for example, of stepparents putting their partner in a position to choose between them or the stepchild, or stepchildren feeling left out and trying to sabotage the couple relationship). Without appropriate knowledge, stepfamilies are not able to have this experience normalised as a common aspect part of stepfamily life which can be overcome with different strategies. Instead, these situations may be interpreted by fathers and stepmothers as confirmation that stepmothers characterise, at least in part, the representation of the wicked stepmother.

Similarly, the challenge of discipline and adopting appropriate parenting and stepparenting styles is a common problem for couples in stepfamilies (Hetherington, 2002). Patricia Papernow (2013), a stepfamily therapist, writes about how stepfamily life often pulls stepparents toward a more authoritarian parenting style, while parents are pushed toward permissiveness. A phenomenon occurs, she says, whereby stepcouples loop in a cycle of polarization, is an issue which is raised by stepmothers in this study and discussed under the theme 'The goody and the baddie'. While this challenge can exist for stepfathers as well as stepmothers, it is likely that the existence of the wicked stepmother stereotype helps women to more easily identify themselves and be seen by others as mean-spirited or unkind. Stepmothers may then become frustrated about being put in an unworkable position. This frustration may lead to tension in the couple relationship, and possibly creates some resentment and negative emotions that then escalate and reinforce stepmothers' self-judgements of being unmotherly and wicked. There is also the possibility that the conflict and tension creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for the stepmother, and the more she is forced into the authoritarian role and as her frustration with the step and couple relationship increases, the more likely she is to see herself, and be judged by others, as wicked. In order for stepmothers to identify this process and have this normalised as a stepfamily challenge, fathers and stepmothers need access to information and guidance about how these issues affect the stepmother experience.

Managing stereotypes and stepmother identity

As discussed earlier, Dainton (1993) outlined the dilemma that stepmothers face of trying to not only "foster preferred perceptions" but also prevent "unwanted perceptions associated

with preconceived evaluations of a given social role” (p. 94). This theoretical point is highlighted in the results of the current study in several ways. For example, in their reports of using the stepmother term, a number of stepmothers used preventative identity management strategies such as behaving in a way consistent with a mother or aunty without specifically claiming to be this person, or avoidance of the ‘step’ term altogether. These concealment techniques used by stepmothers are consistent with those used by other stigmatized groups who fear negative evaluation such as people with mental illness (Ilic et al., 2012).

Some stepmothers in this study also adopted a compensation identity management strategy when around others in order to prevent negative judgement. Compensation is understood as being a social interaction strategy for dealing with stereotype threat, which involves behaving in a skilful and deliberate way in an attempt to achieve goals despite the existence of prejudice. For example, some stepmothers talked about trying to be a ‘perfect’ stepmother in order to disprove the wicked stepmother stereotype. These women strived to disconfirm the stereotype and worked hard to be perceived as good – competent, positive, helpful and generous. This finding supports Erera-Weatherly (1996) and Weaver and Coleman’s (2005) ‘perfect stepmother’ typologies, and gives weight to the conclusion that these behaviours arise, at least in part, because of negative stepmother representations. However, compensation strategies are found to be overly taxing (Crocker, et al., 1998) and this is evident from those stepmothers who spoke of having to abandon that method due to high levels of personal stress. As a strategy it may also lead to lower self-esteem (Ilic et al., 2012) and further problems such as increased criticism from the children’s mother, and therefore may not fully prevent or protect stepmothers from negative judgement.

What also became apparent, as described in studies of stigmatized groups (Ilic et al., 2012) and feminist theories of women (Bartky,1988) is that many stepmothers in this study found themselves consciously or unconsciously regulating their behaviour and thoughts regarding the stepmother role. From a feminist perspective this internalising of the ‘disciplinary gaze’ (Foucault, 1979) which involves “habitual and relentless self-evaluation and monitoring” (Tiggemann, 2004; Tuffin, Hamid, & Blake, 2014, p. 38) requires a lot of attention and energy which increases cognitive load and places additional stress on stepmothers. Furthermore, those who worry about confirming stereotypes may be less resilient than those who do not have the tendency to do this (C. T. Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

Some stepmothers withdrew from others (Doodson, 2014), or avoided situations or contact with people if they perceived they might be judged, in order to avoid experiencing other's negative stepmother representations. In contrast, a smaller number of stepmothers chose to correct others or offer a more accurate description that was representative of their situation. Jones et al. (1984) called this correction strategy 'confrontation and breaking through' whereby a stepmother acknowledged her stepmother status and attempted to frame it in a constructive and positive context. Many stepmothers used humour as a way of managing their identity and joked about being a wicked stepmother with others. This kind of strategy could be construed as a version of 'linguistic reclamation' which describes the way a derogatory term is consciously employed by a marginalised group, often in a positive or oppositional sense (Chen, 1998). Stepmothers found joking helpful to diffuse situations, particularly with their stepchildren. A third of stepmothers in the study sought social support from partners, counsellors, family members, friends, and other stepmothers, which may have been helpful for them to express their emotions, redefine the stressful event, or distract themselves from the event (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Another group of stepmothers used acceptance-based strategies to manage the impact of negative stepmother stereotypes.

There is evidence from this study to suggest that the identity management strategies employed by stepmothers are successful, to varying degrees, at helping them to manage their identity. A number of women in the study reported that they had little experience of either being treated like a wicked stepmother, or feeling like a wicked stepmother, whilst another group felt that stereotypes had had no, or only a small impact, on their experience as a stepmother. A couple of women reported this was due to lack of territorial issues with the children's mother (either because she was deceased, absent, or they had a good relationship), but mainly it seemed as if stepmothers were not experiencing the stereotype because the strategies they were using were reducing the impact of these experiences. From a stress and coping perspective, this may relate to Miller and Kaiser's (2012) theory that stigma-related events (e.g. rejection, negative comments from others) and the associated stress will only be perceived as stressful and detrimental to well-being, if they exceed the individual's resources for coping. If stepmothers are using a repertoire of identity management strategies, these may ameliorate the perceived impact of the stereotype. Positive aspects of stepfamily living also helped balance these experiences. Stepmothers talked about their enjoyment of having a warm and sometimes affectionate relationship with stepchildren, being able to offer

emotional support and develop positive qualities (such as empathy and tolerance), and the knowledge that they were having a positive influence on the stepchildren, as contributing to some sense of satisfaction about their stepmother role. Many of these comments aligned with the types of role actions taken by women in Weaver and Coleman's study (2005), and similarly, many of these actions were synonymous with those 'rewards' of a mother.

Limitations

This thesis study has several limitations. Firstly, this study is overrepresented with stepmothers who identify as being New Zealand European, and therefore, the results might not be relevant to stepmothers of other cultural groups, particularly those cultures who hold non-Western views of mothering. For example, Maori and Pacific Island culture have the practice of 'whangai' through which a child is raised by 'whanau' (family) or other members in the broader kin group. Stepmothers in these cultures may have different perspectives and experiences of stepmother stereotypes.

Secondly, this study collected qualitative data through an anonymous online questionnaire. Whilst the data collected had enough depth to address the research aims, this data was limited compared to the richness of data that is able to be gathered from other methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups. In the latter methods, the researcher is able to ask participants to expand on their responses, or clarify information, which can help to better understand their experiences and draw greater meaning from them. Given the larger sample size and the size of the project, follow-up interviews or focus groups were not able to be included in the scope of this project, however this could be a potential research opportunity for the future.

Another limitation is the study's focus on an aspect of stepmotherhood which is problematic for stepmothers. Many stepmothers experience meaningful and positive experiences of their role and it is important to understand these as part of the stepmother role. Although not a focus of this current study, stepmothers were asked to write about their positive experiences and draw out coping strategies, in order to provide some balance to their perspectives. While it was clear that stepmothers have times when they feel most positive in their role and that these experiences help overcome the negative experiences, further research could be

conducted to investigate these positive experiences and how they relate to the motherhood myths.

Clinical implications

This study highlights that myths of motherhood and gendered expectations of women's roles in families are inextricably linked to negative stepmother representations and that these cultural forces were reported as impacting on the women's experience as a stepmother to a moderate extent. For clinicians working with stepfamilies, it could be helpful to guide couples towards understanding their attitudes about their gender roles, and if possible to support the couple to work towards involving the father further in the parenting role both in being able to place primacy on the father taking more responsibility for parenting activities, and having a more equal role in household labour. This could be beneficial to the couple and the stepfamily in several ways. For example, strengthening parent-child relationships is helpful to the adjustment of the child (e.g. increases security) (Planitz, Feeney, & Peterson, 2009), parent (e.g. strengthens bond) and stepparent (e.g. facilitates better step relationships) (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). There is also evidence that children have strong preferences for parents to be mainly responsible for their discipline and support (Cartwright, 2005) and stepparents tend to fare better in terms of role satisfaction and personal wellbeing (Gosselin & Rousseau, 2012). However, often a less traditional position for a stepmother can only be achieved with the help of her partner adopting a non-traditional attitude.

As with other clinical guidance, this study also suggests that care should be taken around using the 'step' label and that it is important to find out the family's views of this term before working with them. With the wicked stepmother stereotype having a moderate impact on stepmothers, and given previous research about levels of stress experienced by stepmothers (Shapiro, 2014) and individuals who internalise stereotypes (Ilic et al., 2012), it is important for clinicians to look for signs of depression and anxiety in stepmothers. This study also draws attention to the number of ways in which stepmothers may protect themselves from the wicked stepmother stereotype and manage their identity. Psycho-education about motherhood myths and increasing social support may alleviate some stepmothers' tendency to internalise the wicked stepmother stereotype and instead be able to identify the social and cultural forces at play.

Future research directions

Further research exploring gender role negotiation of stepcouples, as well as qualitative information from fathers about their expectations of the stepmother role, and how they support her to take a less 'traditional' gendered role in the house would be helpful. As previously mentioned, this study was focused on a problematic area of stepmotherhood, expanding on stepmothers' positive experiences in their role, would help to provide balance to the known challenges that exist for stepmothers. Given the findings of this study, it would be interesting for further research to examine the factors that influence stepmothers who are more vulnerable to internalising wicked stepmothers stereotypes.

Conclusion

Myths about motherhood which exist in Western culture are an underlying influence on the experiences stepmothers have of stepmother stereotypes. Stepmothers in this study perceived negative stepmother stereotypes in the media and through their interactions in different social contexts. Many stepmothers experienced and internalised the wicked stepmother stereotype when they had negative thoughts and feelings about their role and other stepfamily members, when they had to set boundaries for stepchildren, and when they perceived they were reduced, devalued and excluded by forces outside the stepfamily. Stepmothers perceived that the wicked stepmother stereotype had, on average, a moderate impact on their experience as a stepmother. Positive aspects of their stepmother role, and a number of personal strategies (e.g. identity management, seeking support, and a resilient attitude) helped to ameliorate the impact of the wicked stepmother stereotype. The data collected in the study was limited by its online data collection method, and the sample was predominantly New Zealand European. The focus was on a negative aspect of stepmotherhood, and it is also important to study positive stepmother experiences. Future research directions could focus on understanding how stepcouples negotiate their gender roles and examine the factors that influence stepmothers who are more vulnerable to internalising wicked stepmothers stereotypes.

APPENDIX A – RECRUITMENT EXAMPLE

Are you a stepmother?



We are looking for stepmothers to take part in an online study which is investigating stepmother's perceptions and experiences of stepmother portrayals and stereotypes.

As a participant in this study your identity will remain **anonymous**. You will complete a questionnaire which asks you to write about your views and experiences of stepmother images and stereotypes. This questionnaire will take about 20 minutes to complete.

For the purposes of this study a 'stepmother' is defined as a woman who is in a de facto relationship or legal marriage with a partner who has biological children from a former relationship. To be eligible to participate, you will be a stepmother who is currently living in a stepfamily, with at least 1 stepchild. You will also live with your stepchild at least some of the time.

Please go to www.stepmotherstereotypes.com for further information.

This study is being conducted by Clinical Psychology Doctoral student, Anna Miller (amil686@aucklanduni.ac.nz) and supervised by Dr Claire Cartwright (c.cartwright@auckland.ac.nz) at the University of Auckland.

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 22nd June 2012 3 years, Reference

APPENDIX B – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



Dept. of Psychology
Tamaki Campus
Cnr Morrin and Merton Roads
St Johns
Auckland 1072.

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland 1142, New Zealand

We invite you to take part in a study examining

Stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of stepmother images and stereotypes

My name is Anna Miller and I am a Doctoral student in the Clinical Psychology programme at the University of Auckland. This study is part of my Doctoral research and will be supervised by Dr Claire Cartwright and Dr Kerry Gibson.

Purpose of the research

Today, in Western societies, many people live in stepfamilies. Due to the increase in shared child custody arrangements, there are an increasing number of women who are stepmothers. Many women express positive aspects of being a stepmother, however, stepmother reports and stepfamily researchers acknowledge there are some challenges with taking on the stepmother role. For example, there is evidence that negative stories, images, ideas and stereotypes about stepmothers exist in society such as the 'wicked stepmother' in fairy tales. There is, however, uncertainty about what influence, if any, these stories and images may have had on stepmother's sense of self, and their stepmother experiences.

This study is, therefore, exploring stepmothers' awareness and perceptions of stepmother ideas, images and stereotypes. It aims to understand if, and how societal ideas, images and stereotypes may have affected women's sense of self, behaviour and experience as a stepmother. It is intended that the results of this study will contribute to the body of knowledge which is available to guide parents and stepparents in stepfamilies.

Participation

For the purposes of this study a 'stepmother' is defined as a woman who is in a de facto relationship or legal marriage with a partner who has biological children from a former relationship.

You are invited to take part in this study if you are a stepmother currently living in a stepfamily situation, and have at least one stepchild. Your stepchild/stepchildren must be under the age of 18 and you must live with your stepchild/stepchildren at least some of the time.

One hundred stepmothers will be recruited for this study which involves the completion of an **anonymous online questionnaire**. The questionnaire will take 20 minutes to complete. The results of this study will be analysed and used for the purpose of completing a doctoral thesis. It is also expected the results will be used for publication in an academic journal.

Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants will be provided with the email address of the researcher and invited to contact them if they are interested in taking part in a brief, follow-up telephone interview about this topic. This is entirely optional, and in no way a requirement of completing the questionnaire. If participants are interested, and do decide to email the researcher, their questionnaire responses will remain anonymous, as this email will be separated from their questionnaire responses.

There are no known risks caused by participating in this study. However, if participants wish to talk more about their experiences as a stepmother then they may like to contact Parent Help Line 0800 472 7368.

I would like women to take part in this research but they are under no obligation to do so. This questionnaire is anonymous, and therefore, by completing the questionnaire participants are giving their consent for their responses to be included in this study. This anonymity means that participants' responses cannot be withdrawn from the study once the questionnaire has been completed.

Participants will not be asked to provide any personal identifying information (such as name, address, telephone number, email address) about themselves or their family members. When writing the results of this study, any personal identifiers (such as age, occupation, number of stepchildren) will be removed to prevent individuals from being identified. All the information that is collected in this questionnaire is kept in a secure, locked facility at the University of Auckland for 10 years. Only the researchers will have access to the information that participants have given in the study.

Queries

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project. If you have any queries or wish to know more please phone me on 021 236 9497 or email me at amil686@auckland.ac.nz

Alternatively, my supervisor is Dr Claire Cartwright who may be contacted by phone on (09) 3737 599 Extn. 86269 or by email at c.cartwright@auckland.ac.nz

The Head of Department is Professor Fred Seymour who may be contacted by phone on (09) 3737 599 Extn. 88414 or by email at f.seymour@auckland.ac.nz

For any queries regarding ethical concerns please contact: The Chair, the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, The University of Auckland, Room 005, Alfred Nathan House, Private Bag 92019, Auckland. Phone (09) 3737 999 Extn. 87830

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 22nd June 2012 for 3 years, Reference Number 8307

APPENDIX C – QUESTIONNAIRE

Section One: General Information

1. *What is your age in years*
2. *Which ethnic group/s do you identify with (you may select more than one)*
3. *What is your current relationship status (de facto, married, remarried)*
4. *How many biological children do you have from a previous relationship?*
5. *If you have biological children from a previous relationship, do they live with you and your current partner?*
6. *How long have you been a stepmother?*
7. *How many stepchildren do you have?*
8. *How much time do you spend living in the same house as your stepchild or stepchildren?*
9. *How many biological children have you had with your current partner?*

Section Two

In this section you will be asked four questions. These questions are intended to help us understand if you think that portrayals or stereotypes of stepmothers exist in society. Three of the questions have a box for you to write answers in. The boxes may look small but they will expand as you write.

10. *Do you use the term 'stepmother' to describe yourself?*
Yes/No/in some situations but not in others
11. *How did you arrive at the decision to use, not use, or only sometimes use the 'stepmother' term? You may wish to consider what factors or who may have*

influenced your decision. Please write your response in the box below, the box will expand as you write.

12. *Please select the box or boxes to indicate where you have seen, read or been aware of POSITIVE portrayals of stepmothers*

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Celebrities in magazines | <input type="checkbox"/> Comments from other people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Comments from friends/family | <input type="checkbox"/> Adult's literature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper articles and stories | <input type="checkbox"/> Children's literature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Movies | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify in the comment box below) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Television programmes | |

Please comment on what you observed and how you felt about these portrayals

13. *Please select the box or boxes to indicate where you have seen, read or been aware of NEGATIVE portrayals of stepmothers*

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Celebrities in magazines | <input type="checkbox"/> Comments from other people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Comments from friends/family | <input type="checkbox"/> Adult literature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Movies | <input type="checkbox"/> Children's literature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Television programmes | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify in the comment box below) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper articles | |

Please comment on what you observed and how you felt about these portrayals

Section Three

This section is important as it will help us to understand your experiences of stepmother stereotypes. Please write about what is important or meaningful for you and give as much information as you would like and feel you have time for. The boxes may look small, but they will expand as you write.

14. *There is a stereotype of stepmothers as being 'wicked'. Please write about any experiences of negative stereotypes that you have had as a stepmother. This could include experiences within your stepfamily or from others outside the stepfamily. Please write about the experiences that have been important or most meaningful for you. Please also say how these experiences have affected you. Note that the box will expand as you write, if it is not big enough.*

15. *Some stepmothers talk about times when they have felt like they were a 'wicked stepmother'. Please can you describe any experiences you have had of feeling like you were a 'wicked stepmother'.*
16. *If you have had any experiences of negative stereotypes in relation to being a stepmother, how have you coped with this, or how have you responded?*
17. *Please indicate on the scale the extent to which you believe that negative portrayals and stereotypes of stepmothers impact/impacted on your experience of being a stepmother?*

No impact

A small impact

Some impact

Strong impact

If you wish to comment on your rating please feel free to do so here

18. *While there are challenges with being a stepmother, women also have good experiences. What aspect/s of the stepmother role has caused you to feel most positive about yourself?*
19. *If there is anything else that you would like to say about your experiences of stepmother stereotypes, please use the box below to write your comments.*

Thank you for your time and responses to this questionnaire.

If you would like to register your interest for the small follow-up telephone interview study, please email amil686@aucklanduni.ac.nz

Please be assured that from your email, we will not be able to tell which questionnaire in this current study was yours, and so your responses will remain anonymous.

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