STEPMOTHERS' EXPERIENCES OF ACHIEVING SATISFACTORY
STEPMOTHER-STEPDAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

by

GAIL HOWELL-JONES
B.A. Loyola College, 1974

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Counselling Psychology, Faculty of Education)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
August, 1997
©Gail Howell-Jones, 1997
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced
degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it
freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive
copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my
department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or
publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written
permission.

Date 97.08.29

Department of Counseling Psychology

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada
ABSTRACT

The stepfamily has always been part of western society. However, only in the past two decades has it been given much attention, and in spite of suggestions that the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship is both the most problematic of step relationships, even contemporary literature virtually ignored it.

Using an interview and validation format, this research explored the experiences of 6 stepmothers as they defined and negotiated satisfactory relationships with their stepdaughters.

Specifically the researcher interviewed six stepmothers who described themselves as having achieved what they believed to be satisfactory relationships with their stepdaughters. Five themes emerged from these narratives: The ability to balance Emotional and behavioural Distance with Openness, the Ability to Engage in Positive Persistence, the Ability to develop a Unique and valued Role in the Lives of their Stepdaughters, the Need for a Supportive Partner, and the Need to Relax Expectations of Self and Other.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Terms</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wicked Stepmother Focus</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Social Construction Focus</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Clinical Focus</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Assumptions</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Interviews</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS ................................................................. 40
Participants ............................................................................. 40
Introduction ............................................................................. 44
The Initial Experience of Rejection and Hostility ...................... 45
The Ability to Balance Emotional and
Behavioural Distance and Openness ....................................... 49
The Ability to Engage in Positive Persistence ......................... 55
The Ability to Develop a Unique and Valued Role in
the Lives of their Stepdaughters ............................................. 58
The Need to Have a Supportive Partner .................................. 68
The Ability to Relax Expectations of Self and Other .................. 71
Figure 1: Achieving a Satisfactory
Stepmother-Stepdaughter Relationship .................................. 78
Common Story ........................................................................ 79

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS ..................... 88
Introduction ............................................................................. 88
The Initial Experience of Hostility and Rejection ...................... 89
The Ability to Balance Emotional and
Behavioural Distance and Openness ....................................... 92
The Ability to Engage in Positive Persistence ......................... 94
The Ability to Develop a Unique and Valued Role
in the Lives of their Stepdaughters ......................................... 95
The Need to Have a Supportive Partner ................................. 99
The Need to relax Expectations of Self and Other......................... 101
The Deepening: A Satisfactory Relationship .................................. 103
Summary .................................................................................. 105
Implications for Counselling ....................................................... 106
Implications for Further Research ............................................... 109
Personal Understanding ............................................................. 111
REFERENCES............................................................................ 113
APPENDICES ............................................................................ 119
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the six stepmothers who so freely shared their heartaches and joys, my mother and sister for their efforts in helping to find these participants, Dr. John Banmen for the singular role he has played in my growth as a clinician, Dr. Judith Daniluk for her time and patience, and for her ability with both English and academic languages, and not at all least, Michael and Katie for their unwavering faith I would complete this journey.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Starting with what some consider a ground breaking article by Fast and Cain (1966), the past two decades have seen a gradual increase in the attention given to stepfamily issues. This has in part reflected a shift in larger social trends from divorce to remarriage. Statistics revealed that almost one half of Canadian families are now of the remarried form (Morrison, Thompson-Guppy, & Bell, 1986). Visher and Visher (1988) asserted that the stepfamily will soon be the predominant type of American family and demographers predict that by the year 2000, stepfamilies will outnumber all other family forms, including single parent families (Papernow, 1993).

Twenty-three percent of remarriages are between a divorced man and a divorced woman and 20 percent between a divorced man and a single woman (Glick, 1989). Many of these new partnerships include children. Over nine million children under the age of eighteen are estimated to be living in stepfamilies (Cherlin & McCarthy, 1985). Of the 80 percent of divorced men who remarry, 60 percent have children (Glick, 1989), and while custody is still most often awarded to the mother, a large proportion of children from divorced families nevertheless spend part or all of their growing years with their father. In Canada, 80 percent of all children of divorce thus acquire a full or part time stepmother within two to three years after the divorce (Morrison, et al., 1986). These statistics do not take into account either women who marry widowers with children or lesbian couples. Nevertheless, Morrison, et al. (1986) predicted, "if
there are three daughters in your household today, chances are one of them will become a stepmother" (p. 2).

The divorce rate for second marriages was estimated to be between 55 and 57 percent, higher than the divorce rate of 50 percent for first marriages (Glick, 1989). The primary cause of divorce in second marriages is problems in coping with children from the first marriage. Remarriages involving stepchildren are more likely to end in divorce than remarriages not involving stepchildren (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1987). Together these statistics imply that the stresses of stepfamily living are tremendous.

However, although the number of stepfamilies is growing and the problems within such families are documented, there was still a relative paucity of critical literature regarding many aspects of stepfamily life (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1994). A review of three major family journals over a ten year period from 1979 - 1990 found only 10 out of 1,061 published articles addressing the stepfamily (Darden & Zimmerman, 1992). From this literature survey, Darden and Zimmerman concluded that the discrepancy between the types of families making up society and the types of families addressed in the literature is a serious concern. Sauer and Fine (1988) remarked on the "noticeable lack of empirical research" (p. 434) in this area. In contrast to the lack of analysis of the stepfamily, Hughes (1991) wrote, "there remains a body of work where the primary aim is to give advice" (p. 2), and went on to suggest that the existence of this "growing arm" of stepfamily literature is indicative that stepfamily members both perceive the need for help and are increasingly seeking solutions and support for problems in the stepfamily.
The limited available research suggested that stepmother families (families with a biological father and a stepmother) experience more relationship problems than do either stepfather families or intact families (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1987). It was generally agreed by both researchers and clinicians that stepmothers have the most difficult time in remarried families (Sauer & Fine, 1988), that the stress for stepmothers is greater than for stepfathers (Burgoyne & Clark, 1984), that the stepmother role is the most difficult and demanding family role, and that the most intense levels of family stress flow from the position of the stepmother (Papernow, 1993). Reflecting this, the clinical literature described low self-esteem, confusion, depression, and the inability to cope as common issues brought to therapy by stepmothers (Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985; Salwen, 1990; Visher & Visher, 1988). Clingempeel, Brand, and Ievoli (1984) also argued that there seemed to be more problematic interaction, more role confusion, and a greater risk of non-adjustment among family members in stepmother families compared to first marriage families, biological mother families, or stepfather families. Hughes (1991) summarized the plight of many stepmothers when she wrote, "that to say 'I am a stepmother', has the same connotations as 'I am an alcoholic'. It speaks of a problem" (p. viii).

Nevertheless, after an exhaustive review of the literature, Pasley and Ihinger-Tallman (1994) concluded that little was still known about stepmother families. Smith (1990) wrote of the frustration of locating stepmothers in biographical material, although a number of historical figures, including both Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln, had stepmothers. Even much of the feminist literature, which spoke to the issues of lesbian women in families, largely ignored
the experience of heterosexual women in remarried families.

Further, in perusing the literature as a prelude to their study on stepmothers and adolescent stepchildren, Quick, McKenry, and Newman (1994) suggested that most of the limited literature seemed to be problem focused. Issues of role identity and role management, unrealistic expectations, including the myths of instant love and family bonding, the shattering of personal and social expectations, issues of discipline, rivalry, finances, boundaries, privacy, feelings of alienation and loneliness were some of the problems addressed by both researchers and clinicians. A number of other authors also recently noted the prevalence of anecdotal and problem-focused literature in this area and concluded their work by stating the need for more research on stepmothers, how they manage, and what works for them (Dainton, 1993; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Salwen, 1990; Smith, 1990).

A number of researchers and clinicians cited anecdotal and research evidence that within stepfamilies, the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship was the most problematic and difficult to resolve (Burns, 1985; Duberman, 1975; Clingempeel, Brand, & Ievoli, 1984). Female children constitute possibly half of the stepchild population. Yet virtually none of the literature had as its focus the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. In particular relationships that worked for the stepmother and relationships that described her experience were missing. A recent issue of the Journal of Divorce and Remarriage (October, 1993) was devoted to the stepfamily, yet only one article addressed the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship, and that article looked at stepdaughter's perceptions of support from stepmothers, stepfathers, and biological mothers. In a review of two
short story anthologies written by women on mother-daughter relationships, Smith (1990) found that only 2 out of 43 stories were about the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship.

Given the observed difficulties of this relationship and its growing prevalence, the lack of empirical research was curious. In particular, it seemed important to know more about stepmothers' experience of parenting a stepdaughter.

**Purpose of the Study**

Research literature suggested that the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship was a troubled relationship (Sauer & Fine, 1988). Anecdotal and research evidence implied that it was a critical relationship often ending at best in standoff, with enduring and mutual feelings of bitterness, jealousy, and even hatred (Maglin & Schniedwind, 1989; Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1986). Nevertheless, some anecdotal evidence also suggested that there were some stepmothers who described relationships with their stepdaughters that were warm and satisfying (Maglin & Schniedwind; Burns, 1985).

Papernow (1993) provided one framework for describing this sense of satisfaction in her discussion of the resolution stage of her model of the Stepfamily Cycle. According to Papernow (1993) Resolution includes feelings of ease, a sense of 'we', a shared history, and an acceptance and grieving of what cannot not be. While such feelings have also been offered as part of what some stepmothers experience as constituting a satisfactory relationship with a stepdaughter (Papernow, 1993; Maglin and Schniedwind, 1989), there appeared to be no orderly construction of narrative themes, nor research focusing on
uncovering the process through which women had come to incorporate the role of stepmother to a stepdaughter into their lives in a way that was satisfactory to them. A narrative approach strongly grounded in phenomenological and existential assumptions and direction as outlined by Colaizzi (1978) facilitated the unveiling of this process as the stepmother experienced, it in a way that was faithful to both her story and to formal research.

This proposal therefore presented a narrative study designed to begin to understand the process through and by which stepmothers defined and negotiated a stepmother-stepdaughter relationship that they experienced as personally satisfactory. The intention was to gather from these perceptions and understanding, experiential self-portraits that would be further examined for common themes or meaning units. The research question that guided this exploration was: How do women find a way to incorporate the role of stepmother to a stepdaughter into their lives in a way they experience as satisfactory? The purpose of this study was to explore with stepmothers, their narrative descriptions of how they made sense of the experience of stepmothering a stepdaughter, how they experienced a satisfactory relationship, and what were common themes and transition points that could possibly begin to provide a theoretical and clinical context for helping other women work towards a similar satisfaction with their role.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this research, the following definitions were used.

The word step has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon English word astepan, which means deprived or bereaved. Thus the term stepfamily, has been criticised
as having too many negative connotations (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Various terms, including blended family, remarried family, and reconstituted family had been coined in an attempt to remedy this. However, as Maglin and Schnidewind (1989) point out, the term blended underestimates the problems in remarried families and devalues its uniqueness. They asserted that remarried families are plagued by the blended fantasy and the idea that the nuclear family should and can be recreated, and argued that "the blended family assumes integration and hides difference" (p.1). The currently more popular, remarried family still carried a traditional, unified, and heterosexual connotation. Reconstituted family, which was originally utilized to focus on the idea of a family reforming, nevertheless managed to sound like a second rate fruit juice. In view of these various and generally unsatisfactory labels, I chose to remain with the original descriptor of stepfamily which seemed to me to be the least problematic descriptor in that it could simply be used to describe a legal relationship. Ganong & Coleman (1994) concurred with using a descriptor that reflects the personal choice of the researcher. They wrote, "because none of these labels have won widespread approval by social and behavioural scientists, the selection of terms remains somewhat a personal choice" (p. 2). Because the term stepmother family is commonly used to describe a stepfamily where the father has children from a previous relationship, and the stepmother may or may not have children from either a previous relationship or the present one, the term was considered appropriate for use in this study.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature in relation to stepmothers and stepmother families generally fell into three categories. The first of these explored and analysed the myth of the wicked stepmother, and the effects of that mythology on all family members. The second approach viewed the stepmother’s difficulties through the lenses of social constructivism, emphasizing ideological familialism and the myths of motherhood. The third focus encompassed a broad range of clinical and therapeutic literature, the aim of which was to give advice and provide solutions. Although little literature spoke specifically to the dynamics of the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship, each of these approaches was reviewed below, as each provided some insight into the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship.

The Myth of the Wicked Stepmother

Bettelheim (1989) explained that the child experiences the world as chaotic and tries to make sense of it by dividing everything into opposites such as good and evil. Fairy tales, complete with a wicked stepmother and a lost good mother personify these dualities. Beginning as far back as 9th century China, over 345 versions of the Cinderella story alone have been created (Wals, 1981); almost every one has a stepmother whose envy and cruelty result in her downfall (Smith, 1990).

Radomisli (1981) however, argued that although we learn to minimize its intrusion, dualistic thinking is not outgrown as Bettelheim (1989) suggests, but is instead a lifelong mode of organizing experience mythopoetically. In Jung’s archetypical system for example, the Mother archetype has a dual nature. On one
side she represents solicitude, she is benign, cherishing, sustaining, and exhibits magical authority. On the other side she connotes secrecy and a terrifying and devouring power (Sir Herbert Read cited in Smith, 1990).

Wald (1981) found that negative connotations of the word *step* and *stepmother* were in place by 1400. Although a small number of studies (Fine, 1986; Lutz, 1983) suggested that increased exposure to stepfamilies attenuated negative stereotypes of stepmothers, in general both the empirical and clinical research supported Radomisli’s (1981) contention that such mythologies have a lifelong influence.

Ferri (cited in Hughes, 1991) commented that the literature on stepfamilies was packed with extensive accounts of almost universal wicked stepmother mythology. Much of the time the focus was on the stepdaughter who is on the receiving end of the mythical stepmother's viciousness. Once again, the lived experience of the stepmother was omitted from the equation. Once again the focus was problem oriented.

Some believed that the wicked stepmother paradigm follows us into adulthood and has particular present day-to-day relevance for the stepmother (Dainton, 1992; Hughes, 1991). Salwen (1990) commented that the stepmothers she sees in private practice report a continuous struggle against "internalizing a negative self concept related to connotations of evil, jealousy, cruelty, and selfishness that are derived from the stories of Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, and Cinderella" (p. 120). Maglin and Schniedwind (1989) among others, remarked that stepmothers frequently reflect upon the power of this archetypical mythology in their lives. They wrote of the 8 stepmothers in their support group
who collectively reported, "we slowly learned that, deep down, we were afraid we were evil" (p. 323). The feelings of resentment, anger, jealousy, and bitterness expressed by stepmothers appeared to be framed by them and others as evidence of 'wickedness'. Smith (1990) summarized in a similar vein, "when you feel that your very existence is resented, you begin to hate back and then it seems all the myths of wicked stepmothers have come to live in yourself" (p. 13).

Empirical evidence supported the stereotype and the contention that stepmother families were more likely to have conflict and poor adjustment (Kurdek & Fine, 1993). Sauer and Fine (1988) presented research that suggested there was greater negativity towards the adult female in stepmother families. The subjects were 177 introductory psychology students. Before they came to college, 31 lived with their biological mothers and stepfathers (stepfather group), 16 lived with their biological fathers and stepmothers (stepmother group), and 130 were from intact families. Each student completed self report scales to tap the affective component of parent-child relationships (Parent-Child Relationship Survey and a Modified Parent-Child Relationship Survey). There were two parallel sets of scales, a mother scale and a father scale and a stepmother and a stepfather scale, each of which contained 24 Likert-type items. The researchers found that students from stepfamilies perceived their relationship with noncustodial biological mothers and stepmothers less positively than now adult children from intact families perceived their relationships with the custodial biological mother to be.

Ganong and Coleman (1983) asked 208 volunteer college students to provide ratings of six family positions via semantic differentials using pairs of bi
All students rated grandmother, brother, nephew, and cousin; one half also rated mother and stepfather; the other half also rated father and stepmother. The authors reported that the stepmothers in their study were perceived by other family members as less affectionate, good, fair, kind, loving, happy, and likeable, and more cruel, hateful, unfair, and unloving than stepfathers, or biological mothers and fathers. As recently as 1990, Ganong, Coleman and Kennedy reported these same negative connotations about stepmothers from other family members.

In a non-clinical, exploratory interview and questionnaire study involving 50 stepmothers, 21 female, and 29 male adolescent stepchildren Quick, McKenry, and Newman (1994) employed three open ended questions to provide qualitative data about how stepmothers cope. They asked stepmothers if there was any information they would like to share about their experience with living in a stepfamily, what were the most positive aspects of living in a stepfamily, and how did they feel relationships could be improved between themselves and their adolescent stepchildren? These questions were intended to elicit "what satisfaction and strains do women experience as they assume this role, and what methods have they developed to become effective stepmothers?" (Quick et al., 1994, p. 120). The authors reported that while the stepmothers in their study could not identify specific coping mechanisms, they seemed to be saying that with time the relationship improved. However, clinicians more often related that in their experience, stepmothers frequently developed intensely negative feelings towards their stepchildren and may have actually treated them unfairly or even cruelly (Hetherington, 1987; Morrison, Thompson-Guppy & Bell, 1986;
Papernow, 1993). Thus the stereotype may have been reinforced by the behaviour of stepmothers themselves.

In general then, the research in this area supported the idea that the mythology of the wicked stepmother continued to inform both the feelings, behaviour, and self concept of stepmothers and the perceptions of those with whom they interacted.

**The Social Construction Focus**

Proponents of a social constructionist perspective viewed the stepmother from within the context of ideological familialism and its accompanying myth of the perfect mother. Ideological familialism is a relatively modern construct through which the family is seen as naturally based on close (preferably blood) kinship, and properly organized through a male breadwinner with a financially dependent wife and children (Grant, 1989). In spite of the reality of contemporary family life, as recently as the 1992 American elections, the emphasis has publicly and politically been on reaffirming the traditional familial system.

Both stepfamilies and stepmothers are affected by the larger social context in which they exist. The Vishers (1988) among others, asserted that when the intact biological family was idealized and other family types compared negatively with it, a deficit model for other than the nuclear family structure was created. Ganong and Coleman (1994) described the deficit comparison approach as "an atheoretical assumption that steprelationships would function at a deficit compared with relationships in a nuclear family" (p. 15). They further suggested that the stepfamily could be identified as "one of the protagonists of postmodern
families, which to some people implied a radical transformation of familiar patterns of family activity and the emergence of new fields of family activity whose meanings and implications cannot be fathomed .... The social stigma of stepfamilies also is likely to continue as a result of societal uneasiness with so-called non-traditional family forms" (p. 152). Not surprisingly then, the assumption of one right kind of family was also found to be upheld by many stepfamilies (Burns, 1989; Visher & Visher, 1988).

Inseparable from the idealization of the nuclear family was the myth of the good mother. Chodorow (1979) argued that many individuals still believe that women have a maternal instinct and therefore it is natural that they mother. Grant (1989) wrote that in trying to find an experience common to all women, many feminists have themselves taken the traditional family as a starting point and "mistaken the cultural icon Mother, for the reality" (p. 216). Thus biological motherhood has generally been encouraged and mystified, and other positions of female authority and power devalued. In writing from her experience in family practice, Goldner (1985) also observed that women were still "held ultimately responsible for family functioning, in the sense that we expect them to maintain the family's integrity" (p. 115).

The research literature appeared to support the argument that traditional roles and values continue to strongly inform definitions of family and mother. In a study involving over 300 adults in a series of experiments, Deux, Winton, Crawley, and Lewis (1985) looked at the perceptions of sexes in terms of role. The researchers asked people to list attributes (e.g. warmth) for various sub-types of men and women (e.g. mother, father, adult). The researchers were interested in
perceptions of the sexes in terms of their different roles. By measuring the extent
to which the same term appeared on lists with different roles, the researchers were
able to determine the degree of perceptual association. They found that the
degree of overlap between mother and parent, and mother and woman, was
significantly greater than the overlap between father and parent, and father and
man, suggesting that the definition and expectations of motherhood inform both
the definition and the expectations of women to a far greater extent than the
similar definitions and expectations of father inform the definition and
expectations of men.

Traditionally women in nuclear families undertake most of the nurturing
of children and regardless of personality or preference, stepmothers will likely at
some level, believe they must take on a maternal role in relation to their partner's
children (Smith, 1990). A number of authors wrote that women in stepfamilies
reported feeling responsible for the psychological and emotional well being of the
stepfamily (Burgoyne & Clark, 1982; Visher & Visher, 1988). From their
partners, from peers, professionals, and probably even their own mothers, chances
are the stepmother will hear the cultural message that they must love and care for
reflected this pervasive assumption when they argued, "whether or not it is a
spoken motivation, the woman who marries a man with children wants to help
bring them up" (p. 11).

For some stepmothers, pressure to conform to the traditional maternal role
may be further reinforced. Oh (1986) suggested that the remarriage rate for
women who are financially secure, securely employed, and well educated was
lower than for women who are financially insecure. Thus by virtue of circumstance, the traditional role of woman as dependant, and home and children focused, may be reinforced for many stepmothers. Divergence from this role may also have more serious personal, social, and psychological consequences.

Other research suggested that remarried couples may hold less traditional roles, that women in second marriages are more often employed, and bring more resources to the marriage (Ishui, Kurtz, & Coltrane, 1992). Furstenberg and Spanier (1984) reported that remarried women have a larger decision making role than first time married women. Ganong and Coleman (1989) suggested that remarried women seek more control within the marriage. Therefore stepmothers may in fact, define themselves and behave less traditionally than some other women. Therefore they may behave less like the good mother and more like the wicked stepmother.

In either case it appeared the reality of stepmother-stepchild relationships did not often meet social or personal expectations. A study designed by Pruett, Calsyn, and Jensen (1993) appeared to support this perception of poor relationship quality in stepmother families. The researchers employed a number of instruments to measure relationship quality, social network dimensions, and family environment among 104 undergraduates from intact (39), stepmother (30), and stepfather (35) families. They found that children in stepmother families perceived less relationship quality, less support, and more conflict with their stepmother than did children in stepfather or intact families. Although this particular study found no differences in perceived support according to the child's gender, other studies have found that the lack of good mother feelings and
behaviours are often perceived as more prevalent in stepmother-stepdaughter relations (Clinempeel, Brand, & Ievoli, 1984).

Also at odds with how women in stepfamilies are culturally expected to behave, and in contrast to the assertions of authors like Morrison and Thompson-Guppy (1986), are the expressed wishes of many stepmothers that their stepchildren would just magically disappear (Maglin & Schniedwind, 1989). In interviews with more than 40 stepmothers, Burns (1985) found such sentiments as the following expressed by these women: "His children seemed to threaten everything I wanted. I felt cheated, gypped; Her very presence seemed to horn in on my life and pleasure" (p. 13).

For many stepmothers, live-in stepchildren are also an unexpected and unwelcome post-marriage event (Smith, 1990). Mothers are still most often awarded custody. Therefore women involved with men who have children, may very well expect to see those children infrequently, if at all. For a variety of reasons, and to the dismay of many stepmothers, this often changes after marriage (Smith, 1990). One of many stepmothers in Burn's (1985) study reflected the unexpectedness of the reality of having stepchildren when she remarked, "I didn't see the children as being part of our life together" (p. 13).

Burns (1985) asserted that many of these negative reactions to stepchildren were a result of the unanticipated and socially determined demands of mothering. Whereas some research did suggest that stepmothers with no biological children had a more difficult time, this difference appeared to be related to the childless stepmother having no positive mothering experiences to offset the negative experience of stepmothering. Feelings of resentment, dislike,
and anger were just as often expressed by stepmothers with biological children, who may have described their family unit as consisting of the couple and a mutual biological child, to the exclusion of the stepchild (Papernow, 1993).

Coleman and Ganong (1994) contended that in a biological family, research has suggested that maternal involvement in play, or attention given to either of two siblings creates less friendly interaction between the two siblings. They argued that the friendliness of interaction between stepmother and stepchild may also depend to some degree upon the amount of attention the father pays to one or the other. Without traditional kinship ties or biologically established family places, the fight for position, recognition, and affection may become bitter indeed. Through observation of 62 children, ages 9 through 12, in 40 stepmother and 22 stepfather families Brand and Clingempeel (1987) provided some evidence for this, observing that the happier and closer the marital relationship, the more conflicted and hostile are stepdaughter-step-parent relationships.

Researchers also suggested that in a single parent family, relationships between the biological parent and child could become pathologically intense (Fast & Cain, 1966), or at least exceptionally close (Visher & Visher, 1979). Although such closeness was not always harmful, at least one author suggested it could prevent new relationships from forming, and possibly lead to dysfunction in both parent and child (Smith, 1990). With sons and fathers, closeness was often in the context of a male camaraderie from which the stepmother was left out. The stepmother may have been frustrated and angry, but this was still a context and separation she had been culturally conditioned to accept. With fathers and daughters, closeness may have meant that the daughter took the central female
role in the household. Therefore, not only might the stepmother be seen as intruding on an intimate relationship, she may also have been seen as a rival for power and position. Likewise, the stepmother may have viewed her stepdaughter as 'the other woman', and developed feelings for her stepdaughter similar to those she would develop for an adult female rival (Visher & Visher, 1979). The social constructivists held that in a culture informed by images of familialism, there cannot be two women at the centre of the household. One of the more than 30 British stepmothers interviewed by Smith (1990) in a study exploring issues in stepmothering, supported the affect of this world view when she said:

> funnily enough, it was best when (the father) was away. As soon as he was in the house there were conflicts and jealousies. (My stepdaughter) wanted to look after him, used to say she wanted to stay at home to look after him, without me being around (p. 73).

In qualitative interviews with one hundred stepfamilies, Papernow (1993) also found evidence of such feelings. The words of two of the stepmothers in her study reflected this. One stepmother remarked, "I felt ridiculous being jealous of Pam. I was 20 whatever and she was six. How can I be jealous of this child who just wants to be with her father?" (p. 97). Another woman similarly reflected, "I had to get used to sharing him with two other women. And the fact that they were 8 and 4 at the time was irrelevant to me" (p. 87).

Another hypothesis proposed by social constructivists to help explain the intensity of conflict between stepmothers and stepdaughters is that the normative child-rearing practice of familialism encourages greater attachment between mothers and daughters and consequently, the introduction of a stepmother causes
feelings of divided loyalty and other conflicts more salient for daughters than sons. Ganong and Coleman (1994) summarized when they wrote, "children experience more loyalty conflict and have more trouble adding another mother to the family" (p.78). The likelihood of loyalty conflict in a stepmother family was also supported by Draughten (1976) who suggested that of the three possible identifications for stepmother (primary mother, other mother, and friend), the most likely model for interaction and perception is other mother.

Therefore, as often as they were haunted by the image of the wicked stepmother, stepmothers were haunted by the institutionalized images of the perfect mother, the ideal family, and the phenomenology of male-female relationships (Dainton, 1992; Visher & Visher, 1988).

The paradigm of social constructivism held that motherhood in patriarchal society is defined by the myth of the good mother, which assumes caring, giving, and devotion to the child, if need be at the expense of the mother. Anything else is bad motherhood. In order not to be seen as wicked (e.g. a bad mother), the socially defined good mother behaviour of a stepmother must therefore be beyond reproach. When through personal choice or circumstance the stepmother did not fit the definition of good mother, the ideology of motherhood and the reality of stepmothering may have formed a disjuncture which was impossible for her or her stepchildren to negotiate. Hughes (1991) nicely summarized when she wrote that the myths of womanhood create definitions which regardless of "any contradiction between experience and myth are changeless and absolute" (p. 54). Given that this disjuncture exists, there appeared to be a need to go back to the
experience of the women themselves and hear the ways in which they have traversed it.

The Clinical Focus

The clinical focus primarily addressed ways in which stepfamily functioning may be understood and improved. This literature was often problem focused and treatment or advice oriented.

In a paper reflecting the self reports of 23 Canadian stepmothers seeking help at two different mental health centres, Morrison and Thompson-Guppy (1985) identified a configuration of symptoms of psychological distress presented by twenty-three stepmothers. They labelled this configuration, 'Cinderella's Stepmother Syndrome' and described it as a clinical adjustment disorder, attributable to the stresses involved in entering stepfamily life. The syndrome included identity confusion, feelings of rejection, ineffectiveness, incompetence, failure, guilt, loss of self esteem, depression, anger, and hostility. They concluded that understanding these symptoms as a normal adjustment reaction could provide a basis for effective treatment of the problems a stepmother faces in the stepfamily.

In an article discussing the theory behind their Personal Reflections Program, Kaplan and Hennon (1992) conceptualized the stepmother's problem in terms of multidimensional role interactions that were incongruent with either self or other expectations. They held that the normative definitions of family roles cause difficulties in remarried families, but that individuals could "role make" or create "new lines of action" (p.129) A premise of the program was that clarifying the role expectations remarried individuals hold for themselves and their partners
is an important step towards the role competency and redefinition that will avoid many disagreements and disappointments in stepfamilies.

This also reflected the basic approach of therapists such as the Vishers (1988) whose clinical focus involved aiding stepfamilies in redefining and clarifying roles and expectations in the context of what has been called a new family culture. The Vishers encouraged researchers and clinicians to become aware of the stepfamily's uniqueness, and not fall prey to viewing the stepfamily as dysfunctional in itself, an attitude that Darden and Zimmerman (1992) called stepism and suggest has "similarities to ageism, racism, sexism, and other types of discrimination" (p. 15).

Hughes (1991) contended from her participant observation of five British stepfamilies that the stepmother is constantly negotiating between a private and public self. In private, role management strategies may include overcompensation, avoidance, and acting through the more legitimate authority figure of the biological father, while in public the emphasis may be on displays of caring and other traditional mother-like behaviours. Generally, a stepmother's role management strategies reflect a division of roles that is cumbersome and difficult. Hughes argued that neither role can be experienced as complete or satisfactory. Evidence that nonresidential stepmothers may have more difficulties and more ambiguous feelings towards their stepchildren (Amherst, 1986) seemed to support the role management perspective.

Like Hughes (1991), Dainton (1993) looked at stepfamily relations through a lens of identity management, those "efforts on the part of stepmothers to foster preferred perceptions about themselves" (p. 93). She employed
Goffman's (1959) model of stigmatization to address the difficulties stepmothers face in attempting to manage the preferred identity. Dainton defined a stigma as the "product of definitional processes in which the defining attribute (such as stepmother) eclipses other aspects of the stigmatized person, including individual personalities and abilities" (p. 94). Goffman (1963) proposed that stigmatization is the result of the relationship between a certain attribute and a stereotype about that attribute; society defines attributes that are deemed to be "ordinary and natural" for members of each category. Dainton concluded that for stepmothers those attributes reflect the polar opposites of wicked stepmother and instant love, and thus the stepmother must struggle with internalizing two conflicting sets of "ultimately unrealistic expectations. Ambiguity in the interaction of the myth of the evil stepmother and the myth of instant love creates a need for private and public identities" (p. 94). She offered strategies to ameliorate these difficulties, including changing the label stepmother, removing the stepmother from the parenting role, finding alternate roles and labels such as other mother or friend, and choosing an alternative name.

Papernow (1993) was critical of much previous work on stepfamilies which she feels promoted the viewpoint of the professional or the theoretical paradigm of the researcher, rather than the experience of stepfamily members. Her model, titled the Stepfamily Cycle, was different in that it presented a developmental model built from the viewpoint of stepfamily members. Building on her clinical experience as well as interviews with one hundred stepfamilies, she employed a family systems paradigm and gestalt psychology to describe seven stages of stepfamily development, including the difficulties, obstacles, and
challenges of each stage. These seven stages in the Stepfamily Cycle included the early stages of Fantasy, Immersion, and Awareness, the middle stages of Mobilization and Action, and the later stages of Contact and Resolution.

The Fantasy Stage is the courtship period marked by almost universal and complex wishes, fantasies, and unspoken expectations. In the Immersion Stage stepfamily members become mentally immersed in "constant and confusing glitches and misunderstandings" (Papernow, 1993, p. 85) as fantasy confronts the reality of stepfamily structure. As the stepfamily moves into the Awareness Stage, members begin to make sense out of the confusion as understanding of the biological parent-child bond grows. It is here that the restructuring of the stepfamily begins.

The Mobilization Stage is marked by a more open airing of the differences between step and biological families. The insider position of the biological parent becomes more painful as that parent is torn between the needs of the couple and the needs of the biological children. The negotiation of new agreements takes place in the Action Stage.

Papernow (1993) called the Contact Stage the real honeymoon for the stepfamily. This is when relationships are forged and a clearly defined step-parent role emerges. Any leftover wishes or fantasies from the Fantasy Stage are grieved here. Resolution is seen in terms of the whole family and defined for step-parents in terms of having the roles of "intimate outsider". Resolution finds the family with solid and reliable step relationships. However, while useful, Papernow's (1993) model did not specifically describe the experience of stepmothers and there was little research available to determine the applicability
of this model to women's experiences of parenting another's child(ren).

In general, although these and similar clinical approaches attempted to reveal underlying issues for the stepfamily, they did not appear to detail in any depth, the subjective experience of the stepmother as she struggled to incorporate the role of stepmother into her life and meaning system. These clinical approaches simply identified which behaviours and feelings were problematic, and suggested ways of fixing, modifying, or adjusting these behaviours and feelings, many of which focus on altering the presumed feelings and behaviours of the stepmother.

Summary

The literature related to the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship was noticeably sparse. Stepmothers' difficulties were presented as reflecting a disjuncture between two powerful cultural mythologies, that of the wicked stepmother and that of ideological motherhood. These myths appeared to interact, both socio-culturally and as internalized constructions of reality, to produce the symptomatology described in much of the clinical literature. They may also be unwittingly supported by a stepmother's behaviour or given validity through the feelings of envy and dislike she experiences in relation to her stepchildren. The clinical literature (e.g. Dainton, 1993; Hughes, 1991) primarily attempted to understand how the stepmother might better manage this ambiguity and bring harmony to the family. Missing from the literature was an organized and concise picture of the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship, especially as experienced by the stepmother in ways she felt were satisfactory.

Ganong and Coleman (1994) wrote that their recent review of the
literature suggested "neglected areas" in the field of stepfamily research. These neglected areas included descriptive studies of well functioning stepfamilies and positive interpersonal relationships in stepfamilies, relationships within stepmother households, and how those relationships change over time. They wrote of the need for "inductive theory-building efforts, the development of grounded theory, and other approaches that allow stepfamily members to instruct and inform researchers on important issues", as well as "descriptive studies using detailed, reliable self-report" (p.152).

Quick, McKenry, and Newman (1994) also argued that "most research on stepmother families to date has focused heavily on the frequent use of the deficit comparison model in which researchers perceive stepfamilies as deviant from the traditional family milieu ... we believe that research is needed to identify strengths and resources that contribute to high quality stepfamily relationships, especially for stepmothers" (p. 114). They further concluded that, "the establishment of parent-child relationships is due to more than just the lack of clarity of roles and role boundaries and the strain associated with facing conflicting role demands" (p.124).

Salwen (1990) concluded that what was needed was "more qualitative research focused specifically on stepmothering and the various approaches individual stepmothers have worked out to deal with their unique and potentially uncomfortable position within the family" (p. 124). Dainton (1993) also encouraged more research, "because our knowledge of identity management is quite limited, (and) it would be of interest to identify the specific identity management strategies stepmothers select, when they select them, and why" (p.
97). However she also agreed that, "more important than merely identifying what women do, however, is to identify what actually works'" (p. 27).

Papernow (1993) wrote that the "literature on stepfamily living is full of admonitions to 'hang in there and things will work out'. However the literature provided little detail about just how things did work out, and few pictures of what a 'worked out' stepfamily looks like'" (p. 214 - 215). She suggested that what is needed is a kind of developmental map that offers "workable ideas about what is normal and predictable" (p. 9).

I suggested that the same kind of attention was required specifically in the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship, a relationship to which little attention had been directed in research and clinical literature. While the Quick, et al. (1994) study focused on the adolescent stepchild and while the questions asked of stepmothers attempted to address satisfaction, these questions were not designed to engage the stepmother in a full and deep exploration of her lived experience through a phenomenological research design. Nor was there any attempt to specifically include stepmothers who believed they had achieved a satisfactory relationship with their stepdaughter.

In this study I hoped to explore and report on the lived experience of the stepmother, as a basis for paying heed to these authors' calls for more research on stepmothers, how they manage, and what works best for them in achieving a satisfactory stepfamily life. In particular, given that the literature suggests the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship is particularly problematic, it seemed important to examine the relationship more fully from the perspective of the stepmother.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In a phenomenological paradigm the investigator attempts to enter the lived experience of the participant in order to hear and report the meaning of the experience as lived by the participant. Phenomenological research is a "refusal to tell the phenomenon what it is, but a respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 52). The phenomenological paradigm assumes the following: 1) that reality is complex, constructed, and subjective; 2) that the phenomenon is explored in terms of it's meaning to the participant; 3) that the existence of personal assumptions and biases about the phenomenon (bracketing) must be accepted and examined in order for the researcher to remain open to new insight; 4) that the researcher strives to be interactive and fully present to the experience of the participant; and 5) that the interaction of researcher with participant will in some way influence the outcome (Colaizzi, 1978). Such an approach to understanding - to research - is valuable when little is known about a phenomenon or where there may be a perceived bias in the existing literature (Sandelowski, Davis & Harris, 1989).

The qualitative interview described by Colaizzi (1978) emphasized the phenomenological method. This study incorporated features of this method but emphasized the narrative approach as outlined by Giorgi (1985) and Agar & Hobbs (1982) for interview and analysis. The narrative approach used for this study went beyond pure description in that it included the use of temporality to
produce a story with beginning, middle, and ending. The phenomenological experience was therefore organized into a story which allowed the unfolding of a process with direction, themes, and patterns intended to reveal transitions and points of significance. Cochran (1990) offered a rational for the use of a story form over phenomenological description:

story form supplies what phenomenology lacks, namely a descriptive structure for integrating themes into a whole. With a full story as the aim, the interview is not an open-ended request for an account or description, but a request for a narrative description. Particular attention is paid to the beginning, the end, and the middle as a bridge between the two. (p. 80)

As noted in the review of the literature, there was almost no empirical research exploring the experience of stepmothers and what worked for them in negotiating satisfactory relations with their stepchildren, especially stepdaughters. Research that had been conducted had been informed by the myths and preconceptions that abound in the literature and the culture so that the accuracy of that literature was called into question. Much of the literature reviewed in chapter two also assumed a traditional and single aspect role for an adult female in a family and appeared to place a great deal of the responsibility for step-relationship difficulties on the stepmother. Few themes related to the stepmother's experience of a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship appeared to have been explored through systematic research, leaving a relative paucity of literature informing researchers and clinicians on how women with stepdaughters managed to incorporate the role of stepmother into their lives in a way they believed satisfactory. Therefore the experience as heard from a stepmother's perspective
was thought to lend itself to the use of narrative research informed by a phenomenological paradigm.

The women in this study were asked to talk about their experience of negotiating a satisfactory relationship between themselves and their stepdaughters. The question that guided the inquiry was: how do women find a way to incorporate the role of stepmother to a stepdaughter into their lives in a way that is satisfactory to them?

**Personal Assumptions**

In a phenomenological paradigm it is acknowledged that the investigator brings to a study personal beliefs and assumptions which may influence the investigation. Through a process of self reflection (bracketing) I have attempted to inform and orient the reader to my biases and assumptions.

I became interested in the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship when I found myself a stepmother. While I believe I began the relationship with my stepdaughter with good intentions, it was not long before I found myself prey to all the most negative of emotions and behaviours. I found neither sympathy nor help as I tried to negotiate what was for me a difficult and completely unrewarding relationship, one that threatened both my inner peace and my marital relationship. Literature that spoke to the difficulties of my situation, seemed sickly sweet and over positive and the women described seemed not at all like me. I felt blamed and my experience was not validated.

Many years later as I read the Maglin and Schniedwind (1989) anthology, I felt for the first time that there were possibly real women who described relationships with their stepchildren that were sometimes acceptable. However,
much of the anthology was in the form of poetry, letters, and other musings. The variables that made up acceptability and the process through which a satisfying relationship was achieved were not systematically documented in a way that revealed either the fullness of the experience for the stepmother or informed research and clinical practice. Further, once again there was little that spoke of the specific experience of women who had stepdaughters.

My own beliefs about the difficulties involved in mothering a stepdaughter arose from basic assumptions I held about the isolating nature of parenting in modern culture, the ownership of children, and the ways in which motherhood is defined for women. The weltaschung of patriarchy appeared to have not entirely passed from consciousness and still informs much of how we all, male and female, organize experience, think, feel, and act. The patriarchal family model precludes a concept of shared responsibility and love for both biological and non-biological children, a concept that is part of parenting in some other cultures and times (Debold, Wilson & Malave, 1994).

The meaning of satisfaction and the process through which it was achieved most closely fitting my own experience was provided by Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (1979) and reads, "the passing of a dissonant tone . . . to a consonant chord" (p. 1541). My relationship with my stepdaughter became consonant when among other things, my stepdaughter grew into adulthood and independence. For me satisfaction incorporated a liking for my stepdaughter and a desire to include her as sister to my biological daughter.

As I looked back and reflected upon my own story in this regards, I found the transitions and the significant moments circled around increased feelings of
control (e.g. my choosing to re-involve her in our family after a period of years and myself being the initiator of our meetings rather than my partner or his ex-wife), finances (no longer supporting her to our detriment), mutual benefit (e.g. having a sister for my biological only child), distance from my marital relationship (my partner and myself are the first and primary relationship in the family), and acknowledgement by my stepdaughter and her father as to the role I played in her life. I expected that other stepmothers would describe similar experiences around issues of finances, control, mutual benefit, and perception that the partner relationship is accepted and acted upon as the primary relationship.

I was nevertheless curious to know how a satisfactory relationship with a stepdaughter is experienced by and accomplished for other women. I remained open to the possibility that other stepmothers might not experience the relationship as personally satisfactory or resonant in a way that matches my own experience.

Participants

The stepmothers in this study had all achieved, what they considered to be, a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship.

The participants in this study were women in heterosexual partnerships where the male partner had at least one daughter from a previous relationship. While stepmothers and stepdaughters may also be part of lesbian relationships, as Salwen (1990) contended, in a lesbian relationship there are two "socially defined nurturing figures" (p.123) which presents distinct differences from a partnership where there is only one such figure. Such distinctions could not be given justice
in a study of this size.

At the time of interviewing, the participants ranged in age from their late twenties to mid fifties. Their stepdaughters had been between the ages of four and 19, and thus included a variety of developmental stages. While several of these stepdaughters were no longer dependent children, the stepmothers were able to remember and articulate their experience of stepmothering during the time of more responsibility and involvement on their parts.

In five of these stepmother families, the father was a noncustodial parent and the children lived with the biological mother. Nevertheless, all these stepdaughters spent significant and extended time under the care of their biological fathers and their stepmothers. In one of these five cases, the biological father was in a battle for custody and full legal guardianship of his children. There was one custodial stepmother interviewed.

I had intended to involve only women who had been stepmothers for five or more years. Asking only five year veterans to participate was hoped to insure a greater chance that the stepmothers interviewed would have passed through the various stages of stepfamily development and reached some level of role satisfaction in parenting a stepdaughter. As it has been suggested that five years is a decisive time frame in terms of a stepfamily's survival (Visher & Visher, 1979), this criterion was also hoped to help protect younger stepfamilies in the more vulnerable first five years, when a critical look at a particular step relationship might have resulted in issues being exaggerated or exacerbated. With one exception this criterion was met. The exception was included because
the stepmother met all the other criteria and her experience provided valuable corroboration of themes in a stepmother-stepdaughter relationship she described as having been especially troubled.

As the results of this study depended upon the participants' ability to articulate and explore in depth the meaning they attached to their experience, language ability in English was also a factor in selecting participants (Colaizzi, 1978). All participants had English as their first language and were able to clearly articulate their experience.

The participants were the first six responding women who also met the criteria outlined above. Although six was not a large sample, six participants appeared to be sufficient number to achieve identification and saturation of common themes.

Procedure

Recruitment:

The participants were recruited from the lower mainland. The recruitment of participants was a lengthy process, requiring more than four months to complete. The recruitment of the participants was initially attempted in a number of ways. Poster advertisements (Appendix A) were placed in several community centres, in several campus locations, including the women's centre, and in local supermarket and pharmacies. Advertisements were placed in two local newspapers (Appendix B). A letter to the editor was written to a third newspaper (at the request of the editor). The study was also mentioned in an article on stepfamilies written for a community paper. An unsuccessful attempt was made to interest a local radio host. The leaders of the single stepfamily support group
also distributed the poster advertisements at their meetings.

None of these attempts met with success. This researcher's perception that the stepmother population was difficult to reach was reinforced through telephone calls with Susan Gamach, president of the Stepfamily Association, and with Jennie White, a group leader with the Step-parent Support Group.

The only successful recruitment strategy was a variation of 'snowball' or network sampling (Mcmillan & Schumacher, 1989). In the snowball technique each successive participant is named by a preceding individual. According to McMillan and Schumacher (1989), this strategy is "frequently used in in-depth interview studies" (p.184). In this research, the variation was that the initial contact was not a stepmother, but a personal friend who knew of a stepmother. I provided this friend with some of the poster advertisements and asked that her friend contact me. This was in order to prevent any sense of coercion and to ensure anonymity if the woman chose to participate. This woman did contact me and she was able to provide further contacts, which I approached in the same way. Thus I was able to find 6 participants who met the criteria.

I conducted a brief telephone interview with the women who responded. The purpose of this interview was to establish rapport, describe the nature of the study, answer questions, make clear the various aspects of these stepmothers' involvement (time commitment, confidentiality, nature of study), and to check whether or not they were suitable according to the requirements detailed in the previous section. The researcher's position as a graduate student and experience as a therapist were relayed. Appointments for interviews were made at a mutually
convenient time.

The Interview:

Data was collected during in-depth, unstructured, tape recorded interviews conducted by myself. The interviews took approximately 1 1/2 - 2 hours each. One interview was in my place of work, one was in my home, three in the homes or work places of the participants. In one case, the interview was conducted on the telephone due to factors of distance and time; the consent of this participant was verbal and was recorded.

Each interview was minimally structured and commenced with a minute or two of casual conversation to put the participant at ease, a brief reiteration of the research, an assurance of confidentiality, and the choosing of a pseudonym. The stepmother being interviewed was asked to read, sign, and retain a copy of the ethical consent form (see Appendix C).

Each interview was minimally structured, starting with an introduction to the focus of the research - how the stepmother negotiated what she considered to be a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. Participants were directed to tell their stories from their own unique perspectives. In addition to the researcher's introductory comment, participants were asked to tell their stories with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. Specifically, the researcher read to the participants the directions to the modified lifeline exercise (see Appendix D) adapted from Joffe and Scott (1989). This tool was used to provide a loosely structured context to orient the participants. Participants were give free choice to use this tool. The lifeline was only minimally useful as none of the participants
used it.

I attempted to be fully present to the experience of the participants by attending physically and psychologically to their verbal and nonverbal behaviour, by actively listening, by responding with empathic and encouraging reflection, and by paraphrasing and clarifying. To ensure the natural flow of the narrative, the participants were not interrupted unnecessarily; silence was employed to allow the participants full expression before probes were used. All participants were vocal, well motivated, and articulate. The researchers questions were open-ended probes intended to deepen and further explore articulated experiences or viewpoints, including significant moments in the change process. Including the introductions, the interviews took from one hour to one hour and a half. Completion was mutually decided upon either by exhaustion of the descriptive account or by a definite story ending which suggested narrative finality. A short time was spent with participants debriefing their experience of being interviewed. All the participants indicated the interviews had been positive learning experiences.

When the interviews were finished and had been transcribed and analysed, I returned the biosynopsis to each participant and arranged for a validation interview to discuss and verify the results. With one exception, the biosynopses were mailed and the validation interview conducted on the telephone. Nevertheless, this validation process served to ensure that the final research product represented as closely as possible, the experiences of the women who participate in the study (Colaizzi, 1978).

Data Analysis:
The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The narrative analysis followed the method of Giorgi (1985) in order to synthesize the transcript data into well organized descriptions of the experience under investigation.

1) The researcher read each transcribed interview with no particular attitude in order to gain familiarity with the described experience.

2) The researcher demarcated the meaning units in the data in order to obtain a workable analysis. Phrases or sentences that directly pertained to the experience under investigation were isolated with a highlighter.

3) The researcher judged which were relevant for and revealing of the phenomenon under investigation and coded them with initial thematic titles.

4) The researcher regrouped the relevant units and placed them in temporal order so that they accurately expressed the pattern of the original event. This was a cut and paste exercise. During this part of the analysis the researcher focused on the question of what was essential to this person's experience of achieving a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship.

5) The researcher discarded redundant statements and re-described the events from a common perspective.

The above represented the first phase of this narrative analysis, a narrative summary or composite story, that included all relevant narrative accounts, using time as a method of organizing the story. Global themes of coherence as described by Agar and Hobbs (1982) as being "achieved through repetition of examples making the same general point" (Mishler, 1986, p. 242) were then discussed.
After consultation with the researcher's supervisor, the original 14 themes were reduced to five themes of transition as well as a beginning initial experience that was also common to all six narratives.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited to an exploration of the participants' experience of defining and negotiating a satisfactory relationship with their stepdaughters using an interview and validation interview format. A more complete exploration could be accomplished with additional interviews over time, perhaps beginning with the creation of the stepmother family. The study was also limited to satisfaction as experienced by the stepmother and thus excluded the experience of the father/partner, the stepdaughter, and the biological mother.

The research was based upon self-report and therefore depended upon the participant's ability to articulate their experiences. Nevertheless, what the participants choose to articulate constitutes the phenomenological meaning of the process to each participant and therefore is true to the phenomenological method (Krefting, 1991; Colaizzi, 1978). Participants may have also been inclined to present themselves in a way that they perceived as socially desirable or culturally appropriate. Factors such as judging oneself, embarrassment, guilt, or identity management as described in the literature review may also have affected the reporting. However, in using a phenomenological paradigm the researcher acknowledged that experience is contextually embedded and influenced (Colaizzi, 1978; VanManen, 1990).

Other limitations pertain to a lack of generalizability of the findings to
other populations. Nevertheless as Krefting (1990) argues, "the strength of the qualitative method is that it is conducted in naturalistic settings with few controlling variables. Each situation is considered unique and thus less amenable to generalization" (p.216). The small number of stepmothers in the study may contribute to the lack of generalizability. The limitations of this study resulted primarily from the small number of participants. While the participants came from diverse backgrounds, they were still all culturally homogeneous and reasonably well educated and self informed. Findings from a heterosexual, English speaking population cannot be arbitrarily generalized to populations with different sexual, social, or cultural orientations.

Nevertheless, recording the experience of even the most limited sample in a concise and organized manner can be considered a beginning, a rough map that may later be refined and made more inclusive. Such a map may help shape future research, provide some insight into this step relationship, and delineate a context within which others may begin to construct research and structure therapy.
CHAPTER FOUR
ANALYSIS

Participants

The stepmothers interviewed for this study were from varied backgrounds. There were also distinct variations in the stepfamily structures and dynamics. The stepmothers and stepdaughters are identified by their pseudonyms.

**Sue:** Sue is 43. She grew up in a professional family with a working mother. She attended private school. She was married before and has two biological children from her first marriage, a girl 13 and a boy 9. She met her present husband through his ex-wife. She is presently a stay-at-home mother, although she volunteers at the local library. Her husband is self-employed. He is the noncustodial father of three children, two boys, and a younger daughter, Julie who is eleven. Julie was 3 when the stepfamily was formed 8 years ago. His children live a fair commute away, so that they are with their father only one weekend a month, but for most of the school holidays. In between there are almost nightly telephone calls.

The stepfamily lives in an affluent suburb. While Sue owned her own home previously, it was sold to support the family as her partner's business was developing. They choose to continue to rent because they feel it is more important to spend their income on family activities such as skiing and sailing. They would also not be able to afford to buy a home in the neighbourhood of their choice.

**Maggie:** Maggie is 37. She owns her own business. She has never been
married and has no biological children. She has 3 stepdaughters who were 4, 6, and 10 at the time the stepfamily was formed, 3 years ago. The biological mother has custody. However due to an untreated and severe bipolar disorder, she has caused significant trauma in the lives of her daughters as well as to her ex-husband and his new partner. As a result, the father is preparing to sue for full custody and guardianship, a decision supported by Maggie. The girls visit their father on a fairly regular basis, with periodic disruptions due to their mother's illness.

Maggie grew up in what she described as a dysfunctional and abusive family. She had a great deal of responsibility for her siblings as well as for the children looked after by her mother for pay. Her grandmother was Maggie's main source of love and comfort. As a result of her childhood experience, Maggie has spent some time in personal therapy and feels the insight she gained there has contributed to her ability to mother her stepdaughters. Her partner is also now in therapy.

The stepfamily live in the city and also own recreational property.

Sharon: Sharon is 27. She is a self employed accountant. This is her first marriage and she has no biological children although she plans to have children of her own. Her husband is a little older and is a self-employed artist. There are three stepchildren, two boys, ages 12 and 14, and one stepdaughter, age 10. The stepfamily was formed 6 years ago. Sharon's partner is a noncustodial father, but the children spend every other weekend and many of the school holidays with their father.
Sharon comes from a working class family, a family where shared customs and relationships are important. She attended a school with much wealthier students. She feels her own childhood experiences have left her with a profound sense of family, as well as with some residual envy for those with greater material wealth. This has caused some difficulty for her because her stepchildren's biological mother is in a more financially privileged position than the biological father and many times Sharon feels inadequate in what they can provide the children.

The family rents an upper floor suite in an upwardly mobile, dense, residential area. This is a recent move; previously they lived in her husband's old apartment.

**Mary:** Mary is in her late fifties. She is a successful artist and art therapist. She is strongly spiritual. She has been divorced from the father of her stepdaughter for a number of years. He was married to Mary when this stepdaughter was born, so Mary has known her stepdaughter since birth. She has two biological children with him, a son and a daughter who are presently in their early thirties. He left Mary when their biological children were 12 and 14 and returned to his first wife. Her stepdaughter is presently eighteen.

Mary describes her own childhood as extremely difficult. She was raised as an only child with her mother and one set of her grandparents in the same house. Her father left when she was young. She shared a room and bed with her own mother and recalls no privacy as a child. She was also born with a cleft palate and was brought up as a special needs child. In 1974 she went into personal
therapy through her involvement in an art therapy program. This experience she described as "a wondrous window into a new realm of understanding myself" and she attributes much of her success as a stepmother to the understanding gained there.

Ellen: Ellen is in her mid fifties. She works in the area of counselling and education, as does her husband whom she met through work. She has two biological daughters from a previous marriage; one of these daughters is now married and has a child. By the time her stepfamily was formed 7 years ago, her biological daughters were no longer living with her; in fact they are still living in another province. In spite of the distance she maintains a close relationship with her own children. Her biological and stepchildren also have a friendly and mutually supportive relationship.

She has two stepdaughters who were fifteen and eighteen when the stepfamily was formed. The eighteen year old was away at university when she met her present partner, but the fifteen year old has lived with them since the beginning. Ellen's partner is a custodial father and since the biological mother was busy pursuing her own interests, the children were seldom with her.

The family own their home and live in a suburb. Although the house belonged to her partner, it was not the family home for his previous marriage.

Jennifer: Jennifer is in her fifties. She is a support staff worker for a government agency. Her husband is a manual worker. This is her third serious relationship. She has 3 biological children from her first marriage. Between that relationship and this one, she was involved as a common-law stepmother to the
children of a man who was killed in a motor vehicle accident. She no longer sees these children, but feels her experience with them helped her cope with her present stepdaughter. Her present partner is the noncustodial father of a son and a daughter. The stepfamily was formed when her stepdaughter was sixteen, seven years ago. This stepdaughter has a serious chronic illness. There have been a number of difficulties and issues aside from the problems with her stepdaughter - Jeniffer’s biological children have been ill, her father died, and her husband has struggled with depression.

The family own their home in a suburb. The financial pressures of the early years have eased and they are able to provide financial support for all the children.

Introduction

An initial experience of rejection and hostility was commonly reported. An analysis of the six narratives suggests a number of themes consistently perceived by these women to be important in allowing them to overcome the initial difficulties and reach a point in their relationship with their stepdaughters they described as satisfactory. Within each theme there also appeared to be a chronological consistency of experience in respect to how each theme developed over time. These thematic developments may be viewed in the context of the beginning, the middle, and the end of the individual stories as experienced by the stepmothers interviewed for this study.

There appear to be 5 major themes that emerge from the narratives. These are:
The Ability to Balance Emotional and Behavioural Distance with Openness
The Ability to Engage in Positive Persistence
The Ability to Develop a Unique and Valued Role in the Lives of their Stepdaughters
The Need for a Supportive Partner
The Ability to Relax Expectations of Self and Other

The denouement of each theme leads commonly to what the stepmothers in this study experience as a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship.

Initial Experience of Rejection and Hostility

With one exception (which will be addressed in the Discussion), the women interviewed for this study described their initial experience of the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship as generally unsatisfactory. They often perceived these stepdaughters as "manipulative" and "spoiled little princesses." In spite of this perception, the women entered into their steprelationships full of hope and good intentions and a desire to connect with their stepdaughters and be a part of their lives. Their efforts were frequently rebuffed. They recalled feeling excluded and unwelcomed by their stepdaughters who were often intensely competitive and constantly 'tested' their stepmothers. For example, one woman reported her stepdaughter wouldn't sit within distance of seeing her, but would send the younger ones out with questions intended to trick her stepmother into saying something in contradiction to the strongly held religious beliefs of the biological mother. Another stepmother recounted that her eldest stepdaughter
told the two younger ones countless wicked stepmother stories.

Some of the participants experienced rejection as a feeling of being invisible to their stepdaughters. One stepmother remembered how her stepdaughter would walk right past her if they met in a mall (Noted by this stepmother was the fact that her stepson always acknowledged her). Still another, described a similar feeling of invisibility: "the worst was being in the car or in a room and having every sentence prefaced by 'dad'. It was definitely exclusionary. There was never a good-by or a thank you. There was no acknowledgment I had contributed and been part of the time together."

Another experience of rejection reported by the stepmothers in this study was in relation to how their efforts at normal physical contact (such as hugs and hand holding), were also rebuffed. As an example, one stepmother described how her stepdaughter "would be ramrod straight if I went to give her a hug. I remember feeling dismayed because there was so little response." Others recalled a refusal to hold hands or remain alone in a room with the stepmother.

Some of the women faced outright hostility and a dismaying sense of disempowerment. For example, one woman described a stepdaughter who was barely polite:

she basically said, 'I don't want to have anything to do with you except what I absolutely have to have'. The one time I visited her when she was ill in hospital she told her father she never wanted 'that woman' to visit her again."

This stepmother reflected how her partner's unapologetic acceptance of his
daughter's wishes increased her feelings of rejection and "compounded all the hurt."

A stepmother to three stepdaughters described how her natural response to cruelty and rejection was constricted by the powerlessness of her role:

if I had been her school yard friend I would probably have given her a knuckle sandwich and said, "I think you’re a mean nasty person and you make things up and I don’t like you because I can’t count on you being my friend." What I had to say was, "you have no reason to be mean to me."

Perhaps the following words summarize the fears of many stepmothers and offer some insight into the reason they initially felt powerless and paralysed. A stepmother of three described the sheer terror she felt thinking her stepchildren, especially her stepdaughter, could get her “booted out”. She recalled, “I could feel them watching me, seizing me up. They were very cool, well spoken, well mannered. They were on their best behaviour and I was a wreck. I was so terrified. I thought they had the power to get me booted out”.

Ellen was the only stepmother who indicated having a stepdaughter who was accepting from the beginning. Underscoring the rarity of her own experience she stated that this acceptance: “kind of startled me. I was surprised and complimented."

The stepdaughters' loyalty to the biological mother was also perceived by the women in this study as exacerbating the experience of rejection and hostility. They clearly expressed a belief that this conflict of loyalty restricted the development of a bond between themselves and their stepdaughters, and increased the hurt and rejection.
One stepmother noted that during stepfamily walks, "the two younger children eventually came to hold my hands; my elder stepdaughter never did that because it was too much like the family thing and it competed with her sense of her mother." Another described the biological mother as "prone to outbursts and upsets" that made it more difficult to "maintain a distance with her and yet try to figure out how to have a relationship with this stepchild".

The ways in which such loyalty conflict negatively impacted on the stepmother, on her relationship with her partner, and on the stepfamily as a whole was well articulated by this stepmother of three:

the biological mom was bitter and angry and I became the scapegoat for everything that was wrong, including why their marriage broke up. They really worried about her, especially if they felt they were giving me too much attention. They had to phone her on certain days and if we went away it could get me really nervous. I would take it all out on my partner.

The over all lack of welcome experienced by the stepmothers in this study was described as painfully discouraging, and inevitably over time their initial feelings of hope and confidence began to diminish. One woman articulated the negative impact of constant rejection on self confidence and the adult partnership when she said, "I was subject to crashes of self doubt and guilt which I would take out on my partner."

In reflecting upon her reaction to the particularly hurtful episode of being told not to return to the hospital, the stepmother involved articulated the common experience to recurring rejection:
things really slumped after that. I'm a very motherly person and I wanted to be friendly, but you can get really hurt when your attempts to reach out are at best ignored. I know I held back. I may have just for my own protection. I never felt I could just reach out and give her a hug. Even my kids noticed because it was not like me to hold back.

And finally the words of another stepmother summarized the emotional turmoil experienced by many of the women when she asserted, "I wanted to be loved by these kids but at times I felt really resentful."

Therefore while stepmothers in this study approached their role hopefully and with good intentions, what they generally encountered was rejection and clearly felt messages that they were both unwelcome and unwanted by their stepdaughters. Slowly, the initial optimism and openness began to erode.

The Ability to Balance Emotional and Behavioural Distance and Openness

Emotional distance refers to the ability of the stepmothers in this study to make themselves less emotionally vulnerable to the affects of their stepdaughters' rejection. While initially these stepmothers were emotionally open, in the face of rejection, they developed an ability to protect themselves through emotional distancing. As one women articulated, "I know I held back. I may have just for my own protection." Another stepmother explained one way through which self protection was achieved: "I decided not to allow myself to get too involved in her needs ... to set myself up to be responsible for her". Another provided further explanation when she described, that in contrast to the feeling she had with her own daughter, with her stepdaughter she always maintained an emotional
separation. She stated, "I never extended my caring deeply inside."

Distancing was also reflected in the approaches the women took to interacting with their stepdaughters; it was expressed by the women interviewed in statements such as, "I gave her space and time"; "If they came around me fine, but I never made them do anything with me"; "I never forced myself on her"; "I always asked before I stepped in". "I did try and honour a hands off attitude and distance myself a bit and let her come to me".

One of the ways in which the women in this study were able to distance themselves was through having a neutral context in which to frame the behaviours and attitude of the stepdaughter. Having a neutral context decreased the stepmothers experience of being personally attacked, thus allowing the women in this study to maintain self confidence, hold a positive view of themselves and the future, and moderate negative feelings such as jealousy and resentment. All these stepmothers indicated some past experience or knowledge that they perceived as having provided them with the ability to depersonalize and ameliorate the effects of subsequent negative experiences and interactions with their stepdaughters. This informed perspective appeared to have been gained in a number of ways: through past experience with children, through knowledge of children and families, and through personal therapy.

The stepmothers commonly indicated some form of prior caretaking responsibility for children. Some had gained this through having biological children. One participant felt that her previous stepmothering experience had been invaluable. She said, "I had experienced stepchildren before and I knew I
couldn't push it.” The following stepmother articulated the advantage of having experienced biological motherhood:

having 2 daughters about 6 years older than Dave’s girls was really helpful. It gave me a perspective I might not have otherwise had - like no matter how bad it was at any one time, it would pass. I was able to recognize a lot of behaviour as nothing more than a developmental phase of (her) life.

Others were able to draw upon previous significant contacts with siblings or with children in their care (e.g. teaching, baby-sitting). These experiences were clearly helpful in maintaining emotional distance. As one stepmother without biological children explained, “I’ve seen all the stages of children. I think that gave me a good perspective and helped me not to personalize everything”.

As well as direct experience, education and knowledge were reported as useful in providing perspective in dealing with stepdaughters. One woman learned from a friend who did her thesis on stepfamily adjustment. She confirmed the importance of relevant knowledge: “I really benefited from the hundreds of stories of how not to do it”. Another stepmother had been through a parenting program and she consistently applied some of the principles learned there to ease her present relationship. Still another woman asserted the relevance of her own training as a counsellor in making her “very aware of things like loyalty issues, rule making, and discipline” so that her “expectations were realistic”.

Personal therapy was a third way the women interviewed felt they developed perspective. One explained that she learned:

the outline of a healthy relationship in therapy. I know what’s okay and
what’s not okay. In therapy I was able to look at relationships as well as what gets me going. This has helped me cope with the girls, especially the rejection and the jealousy.

Another woman described how therapy enabled her to understand some of the limitations of the relationship:

in therapy I learned not to feel I had to save the world. I was able to apply what I learned to this relationship with my stepdaughter. If I had not been working through these other things, I would have gone in as the rescuer-mother. The feelings would have been so strong it would have just pulled me in and I would have been resentful.

These reports suggest that the stepmothers in this study were able to use their past experience in a way that allowed them to maintain realistic expectations of themselves, and depersonalize the rejection and resistance they initially encountered from their stepdaughters. Feelings of resentment, self doubt, and jealousy were also moderated by the preexisting experience and knowledge of the participants. Most of the stepmothers interviewed indicated they just carried on with being friendly in spite of rejection, jealousy, or other hurtful feelings: “if I took offence at something she said or did, I tried not to show it. I just walked away”. Nevertheless, it appeared that the neutralizing context previously discussed might have been what allowed the women to just ‘walk away’ or "ride it out.” For example, recalling times when her partner and his daughters would reminisce, this stepmother reflected:

they needed to do that of course, but I would feel really left out. I would
think, you know, I wasn't there so how can you talk about this? They never deliberately excluded me and sometimes I would laugh along, but other times I would have this twinge of jealousy. All I could do was wait it out. It was hard to realize that these kids had a longer relationship with my partner than me. Sometimes that felt funny. I knew and kept telling myself not to feel jealous and resentful. It really helped to have my own experience to ground me.

Another stepmother described how experience helped mitigate feelings of resentment she had around the lack of privacy as a couple:

I would handle this by telling myself it was just a temporary situation and that for most of our relationship it would just be my partner and me. Kids grow up. I knew that while it can feel like forever, it does end and that there is pain attached to the ending. That helped make me sympathetic where I might otherwise have just been resentful.

While emotional distancing was seen as critical in the early years, the ability of the stepmothers to shift towards openness in response to changes in the behaviour or attitude of their stepdaughters, gained importance as the relationship progressed into the second and third years. For many of the women in this study, the first physical contacts initiated by their stepdaughters during these years were perceived as signals that the stepmothers could also shift towards more openness, both emotionally and in terms of their own behaviours. As one participant stated, "it felt welcoming. It felt like this is okay." These physical contacts were reported by the stepmothers as significant to them in terms of achieving a
satisfactory relationship with their stepdaughters. First hugs were seen as especially memorable for the women and provided them with permission to lower their own barriers, express their warmer feelings, and become more completely themselves. As exemplified in the words of one participant:

about three years ago was the first time she actually gave me a hug. I'm not used to people who won't let you close so maybe until then I was holding back too. But after that I could give her a hug and that let me be more myself. From then on it just got better and we were able to treat each other like friends.

Another stepmother emphasized the importance of hugging in decreasing emotional distance by providing her with a feeling of acknowledgement:

part of the parenting thing, the connection for me, is hugging. I remember the first hug she gave me. She had had a disagreement with her dad. She’s stubborn as the devil and she hates to apologize. She hates to be wrong. I guess we have that in common. She was in the bathroom crying, and I went in to talk with her and she just kind of freely hugged me - like because she really needed someone. That was a moment when we realized that we could help each other out.

Sometimes the shift from distancing to openness was both profound and more subtle. One stepmother recognized the changing balance at a completely different level. She reflected, “I know I have recently reached a new level of caring. I think that when I started to dream about Dave’s kids, when they started appearing in my dreams, I knew that must be a new level”.
From the reports of the women interviewed it appears that an ability to balance distancing and openness is perceived as having importance to achieving a satisfactory relationship with their stepdaughters. Distancing as a means to self protect and ameliorate negative feelings was critical in the early years. The ability to distance was perceived by the women interviewed as resulting from their having a perspective informed by knowledge and experience, both of children and of themselves. Later, the ability of the stepmother to respond to overtures on the part of the stepdaughter appears to have been important.

The Ability to Engage in Positive Persistence

A second theme articulated by the participants was an ability to engage in Positive Persistence. Positive Persistence may best be defined as the deliberate and consistent efforts of the stepmothers to foster positive interactions with their stepdaughters. The behaviours and attitudes that fall under Positive Persistence were at first stated by the stepmothers interviewed with statements such as, “As time went on”, “gradually”, “I just kept trying”. Positive persistence was so much a part of how these stepmothers conducted themselves and structured their relationships with their stepdaughters, that it was difficult for them to specify exactly what it was they did. Nevertheless there was a dogged quality to this trying, succinctly acknowledged by one women: “if I got smacked in the nose, I tried a different tack, a new angle”.

Persistence entailed both effort and deliberation on the part of these stepmothers and the majority of the women interviewed described the early years as years marked by a kind of hypervigilence, a constant attention to the needs and
desires of their stepdaughters. One stepmother reflected this common experience when she stated, "I listened. In fact I spent hours listening to them talk to each other. I never ignored them when they were around. I was constantly listening to what they were saying and how they related. I guess you could say I studied them".

Hypervigilence meant that the stepmothers engaged in activities they felt their stepdaughters would enjoy. The words of this stepmother echoed the persistence of the others: "I thought about her all the time. I planned weekends around what the children would like, what dinner, what movie, what activity."

Another aspect of hypervigilence required these stepmothers to gauge the openness of their stepdaughters to any one approach at any given time. Persistence meant encouraging the stepdaughter to open up. One woman with a young stepdaughter related, "I showed her I cared for her by encouraging her, trying to get her to talk about her feelings, her friendships, the things that interested her - like ballet. I focused on what interested her".

The stepmothers with older stepdaughters also reported a persistent and positive stance. One recalled, "I just kept being friendly and making her welcome. Being friendly meant being a good listener, making time for her, avoiding scheduling conflicts with her family. I always had some small talk, some general conversation". Another said, "I always welcomed her and treated her with respect and kindness. I would interact by being open and friendly and interested in what she was doing".

Positive persistence sometimes involved financial sacrifice on the part of
these stepmothers. One stepmother recalled the difficulty the family had in paying for her stepdaughter's medications: "it took almost all of her dad's pay cheque." This stepmother supported all of the other needs of the family. Another remembered, "I sold my house just to keep us afloat, the financial pressure was so great. I worked so hard trying to establish a good life for those kids when they were with us".

Persistence was the behavioural strategy commonly chosen by the women in this study to respond to rejection and resistance by their stepdaughters. The reasons for this choice were well articulated by an experienced stepmother of three when she said, "that's all you can do. Keeping her welcome all the time. I just had to keep being friendly".

A second basic strategy commonly reported was a deliberate attempt to keep all interactions with their stepdaughters positive. One woman explained this common approach: "I kept it positive. I would give her positive feedback on different things like her appearance, her schoolwork, what she was doing. I would never ever say anything to her that would suggest a criticism". Another related, "I tried to accept the kids for who they were and I tried to work with their weaknesses and their strengths".

Positive persistence seemed to be a successful strategy, often with unexpected pay-offs. One stepmother recalled that:

a real milestone happened about two years ago. My stepdaughter's fiancee backed out of the marriage two months before the wedding. She came over for a lot of compassion from her dad and one day when her dad wasn't there,
I said come on in and I'll make you tea and we can wait for your dad. I said I was sorry about what had happened. Welcoming as always, but this time she just started to talk. So I listened and I showed empathy, like a friend. Inside I was thinking that finally all that other listening had paid off.

When she received a rather special card from her stepdaughter, another stepmother similarly reminisced, "it was a beautiful card made through her own painting and her artistry. I kept it. It was so wonderful. You never know whether you plant a seed or not".

The excitement and joy experienced by these stepmothers when their efforts were rewarded by shifts in the behaviour of their stepdaughter, can almost be heard in the words of this stepmother:

now she’ll phone to talk to me, to ask me for advice. She tells me what’s going on and is a real Chatty Cathy. And that to me is a breakthrough. I never would have expected that. She will come up to me and give me a hug and a kiss and buy Christmas presents for me and birthday presents. She includes me in whatever she is doing. Just in the last two years she’s actually dropping by on her way home and letting me know what’s going on - like a real daughter.

The Ability to Develop a Unique and Valued Role in the Lives of their Stepdaughters

From the beginning, the stepmothers in this study struggled to develop a unique role that included connection to their stepdaughters and a recognition of themselves as persons of value in the lives of these stepdaughters. The challenge
as seen by these stepmothers, was to carve out a unique role for themselves in relation to their stepdaughters. However, sometimes there were painful obstacles to this goal. For one woman, the difficulty was underscored by the difference in what she and the father could materially provide (hikes and camping) and what the biological mother could provide (e.g. restaurants, trips to Disneyland). She remembered that her own feelings of jealousy and being unappreciated made it a longer and more difficult struggle.

In spite of the obstacles, the women in this study described philosophies and behaviours through which they were able to carve out a unique and valued role for themselves. The development of such a role was seen by these women as critical to developing a satisfactory relationship, in that they both connected with their stepdaughters and received some acknowledgement of their own value to those stepdaughters.

For the stepmothers in this study, finding a unique and valued role seemed to begin with a personal recognition they did not wish to take on the role of mothers. One woman described it as "the struggle to be a family without me being a mother." These stepmothers generally resolved the struggle by presenting and viewing themselves as friends or aunts rather than mothers. For example, one woman stated, "I never played mom. I thought of myself like an aunt or a family friend."

The stepmothers interviewed were also able to make the distinction between mother and friend clear to their stepdaughters. A stepmother to three stepdaughters remarked:
I was definitely not obsessed with the mother-daughter relationship and when the middle one asked if I was like a mom, I was able to be clear about what I am and what I am not. I was very specific to tell them I was not their mother, but that I could be their friend, in that I was there if they needed me for anything.

Others stated this philosophy even before being asked. One woman approached her stepdaughters and said, "I'm here for you but I don't want to be your mom. You've already got a mom. I just want to be your friend".

One of the ways in which these stepmothers acted out the distinction between the role of mother and that of friend was to limit the type and depth of emotional and behavioural involvement with their stepdaughters. As one stepmother explained:

I never tried or wanted to be mom. For example, with my kids, my house and my time were always open to their friends and friends' problems. I cared for the little girl but at the same time I felt it wasn't my place to interfere too much. Providing food, being a good listener, being open and accepting and positive is not the same as being a mother. I did not set up expectations that I could be that to her.

A second way these stepmothers differentiated themselves from the role of mother was by acknowledging the biological mother as part of the life of their stepdaughters, even when they felt she acted in hurtful ways to the child or to them. A stepmother with older stepdaughters said that even though the biological mother refused to acknowledge her, she "still asked the kids how things were
going with her. So they knew I was not avoiding knowing about that part of the family”. Likewise a woman with a younger stepdaughter reported, “I never criticized her mom - never said anything negative about her. I always tried to accept her as part of the family as much as possible. Like we would make cards for her mom. We’d do stuff like that so it never seemed as if I was trying to ignore that part of her life”.

Another foundation stone for developing a unique and valued role reported by these stepmothers was an avoidance of stigmatization into the role of 'stepmother'. Developing a unique and valued role required that the stepmother be known as a person in her own right, rather than as 'stepmother'. As one woman explained, "I knew the relationship had to come first. Otherwise they would have been able to call me the wicked stepmother."

A lengthy introduction was thought by these stepmothers to positively affect the outcome of the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. One stepmother summarized a shared perception and offered an explanation of how a gentle and slow introduction into the family might have helped the relationship to develop:

I was introduced slowly. That way they got to know me a little bit as me and then eventually they were used to me. He gave us time to get to know each other without putting any roles into the situation. I wasn’t step mom, she wasn’t stepdaughter. I was just this person dad liked.

Without exception these stepmothers attempted to connect to their stepdaughters in ways that fostered the development of friendly commonality and trust. All of the women interviewed contrived bonding experiences with their
stepdaughters in order to achieve this. Bonding experiences may be defined as interactions through which the stepmothers could relate in a positive and enjoyable way with their stepdaughters.

In many cases, these stepmothers grabbed onto the one existing commonality - the fact they were both female. Thus a number of these interactions deliberately excluded the biological father. One stepmother clearly remembered the value of this connection:

we were the girls of the family. All I had to grab onto were the sort of girlie things like feeding, cooking, or schlepping for the males. We would break into typical female roles of baking, cooking and cleaning up and it created a kind of bond. I guess I went to great lengths to develop that aspect of our relationship because that was some way I could relate to Julie outside of her father. And it worked. This was very cementing and a trust began to develop.

A stepmother to a teenage daughter also recalled how she contrived experiences to facilitate connection with her stepdaughter:

I deliberately looked for interests that her and I could share. We did things where we really had fun together and where her dad wasn’t included. It was her and me having a good time. I tried to find areas of mutual enjoyment and agreement where we could enjoy being two females together. I would capitalize on those moments.

Where the stepmother had biological children, the relationships between the biological children of the stepmother and the stepdaughters affected the ability
of the stepmother to develop a unique and valued role in the life of her stepdaughter. For example, the stepmother's biological children sometimes introduced a more positive picture of the stepmother. One of the women summarized this when she reflected: "The kids began to look after one another and care for one another and we just sort of got included in the general good will. I don’t know if they swapped stories about me or whatever, but things lightened between us and we both felt more at ease."

Another woman reported a similar lightening of tensions when the biological and stepchildren developed a shared reality: "when we all got together it wasn’t long before all four would be rolling their eyes about how square their parents were." A stepmother to a much younger stepdaughter related another way in which the warmth between step-siblings facilitated connection by reducing stepmother-stepdaughter tension: “gradually and it’s hard to pinpoint, as my daughter and Julie strengthened their relationship, it sort of extended out to me. I think the kids have been very cementing”.

In contrast, when relationships between step-siblings were troubled, this was experienced by the stepmothers concerned as negatively impacting on the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. One stepmother explained how this increased her own difficulty in connecting with her stepdaughter. She remembered that her biological daughter "seemed to feel she wasn’t being acknowledged enough by her father and also by her stepsister for trying to help care for her.” She tried to explain the impact of this on her desire and ability to interact with her stepdaughter:

I had feelings about my own children. I also felt there were things that had
not been addressed in their relationship with him - he would go off for days and spend time with his daughter. To bring this other child, this stepchild into something I hadn’t finished working through with my children would have complicated things and created more guilt and more demands on me. I wasn’t willing to give that much.

She continued, "so I had a lot of reservations, trying to figure things out - how to have a relationship with this child and still take care of my own daughter and myself".

There was common agreement between those stepmothers with biological children that good relationships between their biological and their step children had a positive affect on the development of a satisfactory relationship with their stepdaughters. This affect was seen to be based on the biological children’s' ability to represent the stepmother as a unique and valued person in her own right and on the children's shared reality.

Connection between stepmother and stepdaughter also benefited from the shared experiences of the larger stepfamily. A long time stepmother reflected on the value of shared stepfamily experiences to the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship: “as a group we would have fun times and it gradually began to develop into a stronger one to one relationship with my stepdaughter”. Another stepmother provided further clarification as to how longer periods of family fun time may have aided the relationship: “we had some extended times together. On weekends they would get a bit hyper because the change was hard on them. Spending a large chunk of time together we all got to relax and be ourselves.
That’s when we were really able to get to know each other”.

Not all shared experiences were enjoyable however. Experiencing a crisis also helped some of these stepmothers and stepdaughters to connect by facilitating a perception of the stepmother as a unique and valued person. By way of example, one stepmother reflected: “I think all these crises drew us together. The kids saw over and over again that I had tried to help them all equally, that nobody was missing out. I was exhausted and she I think, was able to see me as a person because it’s hard to hide who you are when you’re exhausted”.

Through shared experiences the stepmothers were able to facilitate a more satisfactory connection with their stepdaughters by fostering commonality and a perception of themselves as individuals who could have a positive and useful impact on the lives of their stepdaughters. Bonding experiences decreased the resistance of the stepdaughters to the efforts of the stepmothers and allowed the development of a more positive and trusting relationship.

Each of these stepmothers related one particular interaction with their stepdaughters that seemed to her to have greater significance than other interactions in lowering the resistance of the stepdaughter and fostering a perception of the stepmother as a unique and valued person. I have called this special interaction the Gift. Frequently the stepmothers reported changes in the behaviour or attitude of the stepdaughters as a result of this interaction. Three stepmothers in this study have had confirmation of this perception from their stepdaughters. One of these stepmothers related:

strangely enough, although I didn’t know it at the time, I did something that
touched her. When she was in hospital and I was still ‘that woman’, I sent her a Guardian Bear, a cute little fluffy bear with wings. I had given one to my own daughter when she was having a really tough time. In spite of her reaction to my earlier visit, I felt my stepdaughter’s illness had given me this window of opportunity to show, that regardless of how she felt about me, I was concerned about her. It obviously touched something somewhere and it seemed to break a barrier. It took a while, but later she expressed to me how that affected her and now she never goes into hospital without that bear.

The Gift was a way in which stepmothers could make their presence felt even when they are not physically available to their stepdaughters. A stepmother to three girls recalled a time when she was unable to be with her stepdaughters as a result of conflict between the biological parents. Remembering her own love of rocks and the similar love for rocks held by her stepdaughters, she sent them "really big, fancy rocks." For her the significance of the gift was that "I was still there even when I wasn’t."

Another stepmother to small children expressed a similar sense of how her special offering helped connect her to her stepdaughter and allowed her to be seen as a unique and worthwhile person:

the children came and spent Christmas with us. We were still living in a basement suite but I made Christmas dinner, you know with all the trimmings. We had Santa. They got to be in that real warm family, the hokey Christmas with the turkey and the presents and the stockings - the whole thing you see on TV. My partner would have taken them to Reno, but Christmas is a big thing in my
family. That Christmas transformed us. I think they finally got to realize that I was a person who could be involved with them. That was after three years.

In addition to affecting the stepdaughter, the Gift also had significant impact on the feelings of the stepmother towards the stepdaughter. A stepmother who is an artist beautifully stated the power of the gift to facilitate positive connection between stepmother and stepdaughter and also provide to the stepmother some validation of her importance in the life of that stepdaughter:

I gave her art classes. Those art classes were important to our relationship. When we did the art together her willingness to share her thoughts and feelings - seeing her soul - was meaningful to me. I felt on some level we had made a connection. Somewhere there was a touching of each other in the heart, in an emotional sense. Those little rays of light sometimes feed us forever.

In each instance, the Gift was perceived by the stepmothers involved as a means through which they could foster a perception of themselves as persons of value to their stepdaughters. The Gift was also seen by the stepmothers as a way in which they could highlight their own unique relationship to their stepdaughters. Therefore it was seen as important in deepening the connection between these stepmothers and their stepdaughters. Further, as the stepmother previously quoted in this section so well articulated, the Gift provided these stepmothers with a, "window of opportunity to show, that regardless of how she felt about me, I was concerned about her."
The stepmothers in this study were able to foster perceptions of themselves unique and valued persons. They reported a number of important strategies through which they were able to achieve this goal. Without exception it was reported by these stepmothers that they did eventually receive acknowledgement from their stepdaughters for their efforts. This acknowledgement came both directly in the form of the stepdaughters words or indirectly through changes in the behaviour of the stepdaughters. However the acknowledgment came, it was experienced by these stepmothers as significantly increasing their satisfaction with the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship.

The Need to Have a Supportive Partner

Another theme commonly reflected in the 6 narratives concerned the role of the partner in enabling the development of a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. Even prior to the formal introduction of the stepmother into the family, the role of the biological father was considered important. As one stepmother provided: “I remember being struck by his common sense attitude towards being the parent of a teenager. I came into a very healthy situation, strong neat kids and good parenting already going on”. She reflected that this made it easier in that neither of her stepdaughters had become parentified and therefore she did not have to struggle to gain a position of authority.

A perception that the partner was committed to the stepmother and supportive of her in her role as stepmother accomplished a number of things. It increased confidence, reinforced the value and position of the stepmother and thus helped mitigate some of her negative feelings and hurt, and made it easier for the
stepmother to maintain positive persistence and foster positive perceptions of herself. In this way a supportive partner greatly contributed to the development of a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. In the words of one stepmother, as her marital relationship strengthened, "I also remember feeling more secure that my husband would stick by me and that eased my mind a bit too."

One woman explained the importance of her partner's behaviour in helping to foster positive perceptions of herself. She recounted that:

her father was very obviously in love with me and I think that makes a deep impression. He would make statements to the fact he was secure and fine with me. The kids saw how well he treated me and how well we treated all of them. We were affectionate and happy with each other in front of the kids. Maybe she (stepdaughter) said to herself, ‘there’s more to this than I thought’.

Another stepmother agreed with the positive affect of the partner's behaviour, especially in helping to mitigate the jealousy and competition many of these stepmothers initially experienced from their stepdaughters. She explained:

Dave is a truly dedicated father. He’s always kind and loving and really spreads himself around. As a partner he’s very demonstrative with me in front of the children. He makes a point of giving me a big hug or a slurpy kiss when we are in the family room. That could have been really negative for the kids if they hadn’t seen all the love come back and include them.

Some partners refused to 'take sides' and in not doing so reinforced the
adult authority of the stepmother. One woman suggested how this stance worked for the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship by not interfering with the developing connection between her and her stepdaughter:

Ron has never pitted us against each other. He has never chosen sides. If there was a disagreement between me and one of the kids, he would put in his advice, but he never said, ‘do as Sharon says’. He made us work it out together.

Other partners provided support by taking on all responsibility for discipline, thus reinforcing the positive role of the stepmother. When one woman made it clear she would not take on a disciplinary role and yet intended to back up her stepdaughter if she agreed with her, her partner responded with humour and support and “thought that was kind of neat. If anyone got ganged up upon it would be him and he thought that was fun.”.

However the partner provided support, what was perceived by the stepmothers as most significant was that they were treated by their partners with respect, both in front of the children and when they were alone. While initially at least, the stepmothers in this study maintained a discrete role in regards to discipline, they nevertheless had their authority supported by the partner. One stepmother summarized this: "when it was important we stood firm as a unit and we always talked between ourselves.”.

Early in their relationship, Maggie clearly informed her partner of the importance of his support. She spoke to the shared perceptions of all the stepmothers when she told him:
look pal, it's mostly going to rest with you, not with those little girls. They're just little girls. It's about how you will be with them and with me. The most important thing you have to show them is what I am to you and then I can go ahead. But if I'm just nobody, it's going to be hard.

The difficulty of developing a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship when the stepmother was treated as a "nobody" was well explained by this stepmother: "her father had a way of dismissing me when I brought up situations around Sandra. He did not give my thoughts any importance. My role was invalidated. I decided not to allow myself to get too involved in her needs. That might have seemed selfish but my marriage was difficult and it wore me down". While this stepmother described her relationship with her stepdaughter as satisfactory, it was not considered to be a warm or close relationship, and is in fact, becoming increasingly distant.

In summary, partner support was seen as influential in creating a perception of the stepmother as a valued person. The importance of a supportive partner was experienced by the women in this study in more than one way. It affected their perceptions of efficacy and thus increased or diminished a desire to engage in positive persistence and bonding experiences. The profound affect of not having a supportive partner was reflected in the words of this stepmother: "sometimes I felt like I was on hold with the girls until my partner actually sorted it out."

The Ability to Relax Expectations of Self and Other

The ability of the stepmothers interviewed to relax the expectations they
held of themselves, their stepdaughters, and the relationship and appeared to be a critical component in achieving a satisfactory relationship with their stepdaughters. The expectations initially held by these stepmothers were relaxed early on, allowing the relationship with their stepdaughters to develop and be strengthened through positive persistence and bonding experiences. Later the relaxation of expectations allowed the stepmothers to change attitudes and behaviours that interfered with the deepening the relationship to a point at which it was considered satisfactory.

Initially these stepmothers reported a sense that part of their role as stepmother was to engage in positive and persistent interactions with their stepdaughters. The attention the women in this study devoted to this goal demanded a constant state of hypervigilence on the part of the stepmother. As the relationship with their stepdaughters progressed, hypervigilence became tempered primarily by a shift in the perception of the stepmother that a positive outcome to the relationship rested solely with her. Experiencing more acknowledgement and positive feedback from their stepdaughters was perceived as encouraging this relaxation of responsibility. The words of one stepmother reflected this shared feeling when she said, “I’ve become braver about face to face conversing and making myself heard without being aggressive. I can still get mad but the kids know I can go a little off the wall but that I can still be fun and loving”.

Part of decreasing hypervigilence involved letting go of any residual and over zealous caretaking behaviours. This aspect of relaxing expectations was articulated by a stepmother of three:
I used to be running around and picking up after those poor kids which I’m thinking is keeping the house nice for them, but was actually making them uncomfortable and wearing myself out. I was getting angry and feeling unappreciated. I was so busy keeping anything nice my relationship with Julie was at times almost a non-relationship. And I remember when I would go into this mother Sue frenzy, my partner would say, ‘Sue we want you, not this whirlwind, this person running around cleaning.’

She also voiced the sense that, "now they know about my 'busyiness' and I will involve them or send them out. I'll clean but I won’t intrude on a good time and I won’t clean around them any more."

One stepmother remarked that much of how she proceeded was trial and error. Her shift in expectations centred around developing an expectation that her own needs in the relationship were also important. This shift opened up the relationship with her stepdaughter. She reflected, "ultimately I found it was better for me to be pushy about it and now it’s a joke. They make jokes about me wanting my hug, but it’s light”.

Another stepmother shared an incident where her stepdaughter had said something to her that was particularly "nasty." In this case she directly assigned partial responsibility for the relationship to her stepdaughter:

I turned to her and said, ‘I’m willing to be your friend, but it takes two.’ I put out my hand and said, ‘I’m willing to try if you are’. She put out her hand and then she took it away. And then she did it again. I just stood there and my heart’s going a thousand miles an hour. But I didn’t flinch and I said
I was serious. So she shook my hand. I think that was the biggest test ever because I was basically saying, 'I'm calling you on your shit, you little brat'.

While articulating her caring for her stepdaughters one stepmother reflected the shared perception that stepdaughters also have responsibility for the relationship. She said, "I want them to understand that I shouldn't be taken for granted, that I don't have to be nice to them."

In throwing off the restriction of taking sole responsibility for a positive outcome to the relationship, the stepmothers in this study were able to relax their hypervigilence and become more fully themselves. This helped foster positive perceptions of the stepmothers and reduced stepfamily tension. As this stepmother articulated, I was able to start being myself and have my little temper tantrums once in a while. Part of it was we had gotten to know each other. They learned I wasn't pushing any power trips on them and me learning they weren't going to do that with me."

The women interviewed developed an ability to recognize rewards in modest things. The ability to find reward in small ways was important to these stepmothers in that it allowed them to find be acknowledged as persons of value. One stepmother felt acknowledged when she could see her influence on the way in which her stepdaughter did certain things. By way of example she said: "I also began to realize I had to get my rewards in little things. Like if she made a card for her mom and would be pleased with herself, the reward had to be seeing her do things the way I liked her to do them and then I felt I had some influence."

Others found acknowledgement when they were asked to participate in the lives of their stepdaughters in even minor ways. This woman explained, "you take
what you can get. I started to look at little things and see them as monumental. Like when she would ask my advice about some problem at school, or ask me to help with things like homework as opposed to me always just being nosy and sticking my two cents in without her actually wanting it”.

The ability to voice anger was also an important part of relaxing expectations for these women. Initially they attempted to avoid the use of anger in dealing with their stepdaughters. Instead anger was often displaced onto their partners. Once the relationship was more solid, the stepmothers in this study made a decision to direct appropriate anger at their stepdaughters. In the words of one stepmother: “I realized they needed more than a friend. They needed someone from who they could get a different sense of what’s okay and what’s not. I realized I could be that even if that was the most I could probably hope for.”

While in the early years, stepmothers generally distanced themselves from any disciplinary role, they eventually began to relax this self imposed rule. This stepmother offered one explanation for why she relaxed her initial decision to withdraw from disciplining: “I had some specific ideas about raising children. Jim’s girls were slobs. I wanted to change that but I did not want to be seen as the wicked stepmother. Now they know me. Now I can make some rules. I’m not scared anymore.”

Similarly, this stepmother remembered being “afraid to seek appropriate behaviour or reprimand even gently”. It was only after 2 or 3 years that she was able to assert herself. In making a decision to take on a more authoritative role,
she stated she began to feel more comfortable with her stepdaughter: "I never yelled at them until I felt comfortable with them. Once I did, we all seemed to take a deep breath and relax."

Another stepmother reflected on how the relaxation of her original expectations for the children helped moved the relationship along:

I was the strict one who didn’t want them watching TV if they had homework. It was hard to find a balance, but I came to see it was more me getting upset. I realized they had to be raised by his rules because it’s just easier and I just had to get rid of my strict little things. So I lightened up a bit. That was a hard one, giving up expectations, and I can’t really say when it started or where it will end - it’s a subtle thing. But it was important because that’s when the changes started to come about - when I learned to adjust my approach and then we could all get to know each other as people. I am more comfortable.

Relaxing expectations also involved recognition of the ongoing limitations in these stepmother-stepdaughter relationships. One stepmother explained that while she no longer felt awkward with her stepdaughter:

there’s a part of me that won’t completely relax. I’m still not really sure of her yet. I mean I feel extremely comfortable telling my own daughter something she might not want to hear. With my stepdaughter I don’t tell her something she might not want to hear.

Expectations were also tempered by an acceptance that some degree of lack of recognition would probably always be part of the relationship. A
stepmother to two adult stepdaughters shared her insight here:

when Angela was graduating from highschool, there was all this fighting going on about who was going to what ceremony. I had spent hours with her proofreading essays and driving her to school and helping her with homework and yet suddenly I realized that in order for this graduation to work, I could not be part of it. I could not be considered as a guest and that was the way it had to be. I had never been invited and I remember feeling hurt that although it was right her mom should be there, I was left wondering what was the three year involvement we had all about. On an emotional level that really hurt. I knew that every occasion that would come up that should be a celebration for the girls will actually end up being contentious like that high school graduation with all the angry phone calls about who should be going. I looked ahead and I thought about their weddings and I guess it will just go on and on to contention about who will be at the funeral.

Another woman admitted to ongoing bouts of negative feelings: “it’s amazing how you can be jealous of an 8 year old, but I can still feel quite upset that all the attention is being lavished on this little creature. But we work it through. I understand she adores her dad and so I try and keep my jealousy in check. His kids come first for him, as mine do for me”

A mother of a young stepdaughter also acknowledged the continued interference of negative emotions and the need to distance from them. She said:

it’s the littlest things I still find the biggest hurdles. The big things are so cut and dry so there’s no conflict. The little things are crosses to bear and it’s
Figure 1. Achieving a Satisfactory Stepmother-Stepdaughter Relationship.
ridiculous when I look back sometimes. There they are, little tiny bullies I never knew I had. Until they come up and I go, ‘Whoa. Where did that come from?’ I just ride it out and say to myself, ‘okay, you’re mad now, but you’ll get used to it. It will pass’.

Some of the women remarked on the need for trust to continue to develop. As one stepmother explained:

it’s still not really in depth or overly personal. I don’t want to ruin what I’ve accomplished or put myself at risk for being hurt again. It’s trust. That’s the final element. Our relationship is still very sensitive and I think we are both a little timid about stepping over the line. It’s almost like eggshells.

Finally, accepting the limitations of the relationship included an acceptance by these stepmothers that what they had done was ‘good enough’. This stepmother summarized the understanding and self acceptance achieved by the stepmothers in this study:

I sometimes think I could have done more, but I hold out hope that little spark will catch. At one time I would have felt guilty that there was not more, of not mothering more. But I gave and continue to give what I can. So that’s a difference - my difference in understanding. I have empathy for anything she might share with me. I wish her well and send my blessings that her life gets better. I respect her as a human being that has gone through 18 years of life. That’s a kind of love.

Common Story

The question that this study attempted to address was what allowed a
stepmother-stepdaughter relationship to develop from less than auspicious beginnings into what the stepmother considered to be, a satisfactory relationship.

The initial experience of the stepmothers interviewed reflected the early difficulties in the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. These stepmothers met with rejection and resistance which were expressed by their stepdaughters through a variety of unwelcoming behaviours. Some stepmothers faced hostility and coldness, others an avoidance of physical contact. Still others were ignored completely. The experience of rejection was exacerbated by a sense that the stepdaughter held power and could determine whether or not the stepmother would be, as one stepmother suggested, "booted out." The single exception to an experience of rejection was unique in that the biological mother was quite happy pursuing her own life and the father was the custodial parent. More commonly, the early part of the relationship, which could last for up to two years, was marked by feelings of exclusion and depleted confidence. Rewards were few and small.

In spite of such inauspicious beginnings, the stepmothers in this study were able to persist, and overcome both their stepdaughters' resistance and their own diminished optimism. They were able to achieve what they consider to be satisfactory relationships with their stepdaughters.

Some of the stepmothers initially found it difficult to articulate the role they played in this. Some attributed it to nothing more than their own continued 'thereness' in the stepdaughter's life. As one stepmother explained: "what really helped nourish the relationship the most was the realization I was not going to leave. I'm not going away. I am a constant, they can count on me". Another
woman articulated a similar understanding: “After two years it was like, ‘she’s not going away. I think we’d better start acting differently’.”

However, as the stepmothers continued to reflect upon the research question, they were able to articulate behaviours and attitudes that they felt facilitated a change in the relationship. These articulated behaviours and attitudes provided the basis for the thematic deconstruction of their stories.

In response to constant rejection and resistance, the stepmothers in this study reported that their initial openness and efforts gradually diminished. These stepmothers described feeling a need to protect themselves from further hurt, both in order to maintain behaviours that would eventually lead to more positive interactions and also because they experienced a sense of powerlessness to do anything else. Thus emotional distancing appeared to be an important way through which stepmothers managed in the early years.

The ability to protect themselves through distancing was primarily supported by having an informed perspective. An informed perspective depersonalized rejection and resistance. It also allowed these stepmothers to ameliorate their own feelings of jealousy and resentment towards their stepdaughters. An informed perspective was gained as a result of preexisting experience and knowledge: prior experience with children, knowledge of childhood development, knowledge of the issues facing stepfamilies, and self knowledge, often attained through personal therapy.

The middle story heralded a period of what could only be described as intense and nonstop work on the part of the stepmothers. Emotional distancing
enabled these stepmothers to engage in this effort and practice the positive persistence that was important in the early and middle years.

The middle period was commonly marked by hypervigilence to the needs and demands of their stepdaughters, often to the exclusion of the needs or wants of the stepmothers. For example, one stepmother sold her loved home in order to support a stepfamily lifestyle that would most benefit her relationship with her stepdaughter. Another stepmother travelled thirty miles back and forth between Christmas dinners in order to accommodate her the wishes of both her own family and the family of her stepdaughter.

Hypervigilence manifested through positive persistence, the central theme of the middle period. Positive persistence was a strategy commonly employed by the stepmothers interviewed. Positive persistence was the conscious avoidance of behaviours on the part of the stepmothers that could be construed by their stepdaughters as in any way critical or conflictual.

Initially the stepmothers in this study engaged in positive persistence because they felt powerless and helpless to do anything else. As time passed they were encouraged to continue with such behaviours because they began to receive reward in the form of acknowledgments by their stepdaughters. Although at first, the acknowledgements were few and small, these stepmothers were also able to moderate their expectations and find encouragement in the little things. During the middle story when rewards were few and small, this seemed to contribute to the maintenance of positive persistence which eventually paid off in larger more frequent rewards and ultimately formed the experience of a satisfactory
stepmother-stepdaughter relationship.

The second strategy employed by these women was that of contriving bonding experiences with their stepdaughters. These were interactions between stepmother and stepdaughter intended to increase feelings of connection and foster perceptions of themselves as interesting and useful people. Bonding increased the feeling of the stepmothers in this study that they had a unique and valued role in the life of their stepdaughters.

An important tertiary theme related to support of these stepmothers by their partners. Support included behaviours of the partners that showed public love and respect for the stepmothers, especially in the presence of their stepdaughters. Partners perceived by these stepmothers as supportive enabled the relationship in a number of ways. The stepmothers felt included, valued, and loved, feelings that helped mitigate the negative impact of continued rejection and resistance by their stepdaughters, as well as their own feelings of resentment, insecurity, and jealousy.

Although there seemed to be a definite transition around the two year mark, the time line for the middle story varied. As one stepmother articulated, "There was no monumental breakthrough like 'aha we're a family'. It was more a gradual learning process over the first years". Nevertheless, around the two year mark there appeared to be a shift.

This shift can best be described as moments when these stepmothers began to feel a sense that 'this will be okay'. This experience included two aspects. Firstly there was a change in the response of the stepdaughters who
frequently began to make gestures of affection and acceptance towards their
stepmothers. Recognition and acceptance by their stepdaughters were primary
factors that facilitated the deepening of the relationship between them. Secondly,
as a result, these stepmothers perceived that their hard work and compromise
were beginning to pay off. Reinforcement by the stepdaughters encouraged these
stepmothers to continue with their strategies, to distance less, and to open
themselves to further involvement. The combination of factors led to a deepening
and a warming of the relationships and the period of time following the shift was
marked by increasing satisfaction for these stepmothers.

A satisfactory relationship included feelings of being acknowledged and
loved by their stepdaughters. One of the important ways the stepmothers
interviewed felt acknowledged by their stepdaughters was when the stepdaughters
showed concern for them. One stepmother shared this common response to
acknowledgement by stepdaughters. She was recounting a time when her
stepdaughter had begun to call her biological mom's new partner, 'dad'. She said,
"so she came to me and asked if I wanted her to call me mom. I was really
touched because it showed me that she was thinking about me and how I feel and
what I am to her."

Rewards in the form of opportunities for the stepmothers to see their
unique influence on their stepdaughters also increased with time. One stepmother
stated: I'd like to think that I helped in some way - all those awkward
conversations we had. Me sitting down and explaining things. I think she
remembers the discussions." Another stepmother shared this perception. She
remarked that while her stepdaughter, "is still a lot like her mom, every once in a while a bit of me pops out. And then there’s her - like she’s taken the two and blended them. That’s nice to see." Sometimes acknowledgement came from sources other than the stepdaughter. One participant shared that, "my partner’s therapist says I sound too good to be true."

A satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship included freedom for these stepmothers to be themselves. It also included an acceptance of themselves by their stepdaughters, as a unique and valued persons, persons who laughed and shouted and did all things human. One participant reflected this when she stated:

the most important thing was to be me and share whatever good and bad things about me. That’s what’s important. I saw we had come to a point where she could know who I am so I was less worried about how she would react to me. That’s when I got to sit back and relax and enjoy her, as opposed to worrying the whole time how I was going to be with them - not too pushy, keep my temper etc. Being myself also gives Jane the freedom to be herself because she can know that whatever, I’ll love her, good or bad.

This stepmother also described the unexpectedness and the joy that is part of a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship when the stepmother experiences permission to be herself:

it’s funny. I am impatient and short tempered and selfish, but when it comes to my partner and his children that part of me goes away more and more as time goes on. I haven’t said to myself, ‘get rid of those parts’. It has just happened. I don’t know. It’s a complete mystery to me. I care for her very
much and that surprises me. Anything I could do for her, I would. And I think she knows that now. I can tell she loves me.

A sense of optimism also marked a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. In spite of an acknowledgement and acceptance of the limitations of the relationship, there was an optimism that the relationship would continue to develop in positive and satisfactory ways. One stepmother reflected this shared feeling:

something will occur. We'll get there. It just takes time. I know we’ve grown as a family. We've matured. We stick together and are supportive. But it’s just like when you develop a friendship. You don’t realize when it changes, although it does. It’s certainly friendly now and in it’s own way loving. I’m happy with the way it’s developed. I hope it gets better and I don’t see why it shouldn’t.

The stepmothers in this study also expressed optimism in the form of an openness to hopes and dreams for the relationship and for their stepdaughters. A stepmother to a pre-teen reported, “It’s getting a lot better and the next stage I hope will be a truly girlie one that will strengthen our relationship. I’ve unwittingly promoted that. I hope I can be a good and wiser friend for her. I put in a huge effort and it’s all paying back. It’s been a slow payback, but it is paying back.”

Another woman with a young stepdaughter also expressed her hopes and dreams for the relationship in terms of a closer woman to girl relationship that will continue to be distinct from the relationship the stepdaughter will have with the biological mother:
I’d like to spend more time with her. I’m waiting for her to get older so we can go out and do things together - just the two of us, I guess as women. Clothes shopping, more girlfriend things than parental things. I want to leave that whole thing up to her mom because that’s her job, her territory. She gets to be the mom and I get to do all the fun stuff. I’m anticipating the future. I hope I can be the safety net in her teenage years.

In summary, a woman with two now adult stepdaughters shared a memory that summed up the place the stepmothers in this study stepmothers found to be 'satisfactory', a place where they felt recognized as unique and valued persons in the lives of their stepdaughters. She said:

I remember Sarah laughing with me about a phone call she had with a friend. She had been talking about home and she mentioned my name. The person she was talking to did not know the family and asked if I were the stepmother. Sarah said she just sat there and then burst out laughing. She said, ‘no it’s not’, realizing she had not used that word to describe me. She meant that as a compliment because in her head she had this picture of a stepmother. She told this person, ‘no it’s not my stepmother, it’s just Ellen.’. She acknowledged me as this person in her life who didn’t fit any of the negative pigeon holes or stereotypes, but still had importance. It was just me and that is just great.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify descriptively, the process through which the participants came to have what they considered to be, satisfactory relationships with their stepdaughters. The participants in the study represented a wide range of personal experience and background, but in spite of this diversity, a number of common themes emerged from the data. In this chapter these narrative themes will be discussed and compared to the literature. The implications of the research for further research and clinical practice will also be discussed, as will the limitations of this present study. And finally, I will acknowledge the personal learning that resulted from listening to and analysing the stories shared with me.

The experiences of these stepmothers can be described in a linear fashion with similar periods of time forming the beginning, the middle, and the end of a common story. However, while the beginning, middle, and ending periods were characterized by common attitudes, behaviours, and interactions, within those periods there was variation, especially in regards to the length of each period. For example, the relaxation of the stepmothers' expectations was reported as significant and always preceded a major turning point in these stepmother-stepdaughter relationships. However, the point at which this was recognized by the participants varied from 2 to 4 years into the relationship.

The themes themselves transformed over time, and once again there were
commonalities between all six narratives. For example, in the theme described as the Ability to Balance Emotional and Behavioural Distancing with Openness, there seemed to be more emphasis on distancing in the first two years, while in the middle and later years the emphasis was on openness. Nevertheless, these stepmothers experienced an ongoing need to juggle the two stances, even after their relationships with their stepdaughters reached a point they described as satisfactory. Thus it represents a single theme.

Therefore in this chapter I will discuss the literature as it relates to each of the themes described in Chapter Four: the Ability to Balance Emotional and Behavioural Distance with Openness, the Ability to Engage in Positive Persistence, the Ability to Develop a Unique and Valued Role in the Lives of their Stepdaughters, the Need for a Supportive partner, and the Ability to Relax Expectations of Self and Other. With one exception, the initial experience of the stepmothers in this study was one of hostility and rejection. This experience will also be discussed in relation to the literature.

The Initial Experience of Hostility and Rejection

Descriptions elicited in this study suggested that the beginning of the formal stepmother-stepdaughter relationship was characterized by exclusionary themes consistent with those described in the literature (Burns, 1989, Salwen, 1990; Thompson & Morrison-Guppy, 1986). Reflecting the literature, although the women interviewed expressed a desire to be loved by and friendly with their stepdaughters, they were most often met with hostility and rejection. Generally they came to view their stepdaughters as manipulative, competitive, and unfairly
demanding. While having realistic expectations was helpful in this beginning period, exclusion was nevertheless experienced by the stepmothers as painful and confusing, even frightening. One woman expressed 'terror' at the "power" his children might have to get her "booted out." Another reported feeling betrayed and let down by her partner for what she perceived as his lack of support. Still another participant reported "huge crashes of guilt and self doubt." These experiences are consistent with descriptions in the literature (Burns, 1989; Maglin & Schniedwind, 1989; Smith, 1990). In interviews with 23 stepmothers in their clinical practice, Thompson & Morrison-Guppy (1986) likewise describe this "adjustment reaction" as including, identity confusion, feelings of rejection, ineffectiveness, incompetence, failure, guilt, loss of self esteem, depression, anger, and hostility.

While most stepchildren experience some loyalty conflict, the literature indicates that such conflict is more common in stepmother families and more salient for stepdaughters than for stepsons (Ganong and Coleman, 1994). This experience was clearly exampled by one participant who reported on the stepdaughter who would ignore her when they met in the mall even when the biological mother was not physically present; her stepson would always greet her, mother present or not.

The loyalty of stepdaughters to their biological mothers also appeared to significantly contribute to the initial difficulties in these stepmother-stepdaughter relationships. In this study, there was one exception to the initial experience of hostility and rejection. This was the one custodial stepmother interviewed.
Further, the biological mother in this case, was described as "very obviously interested in pursuing her own interests." There may have been other differences, including the stepmother's advanced understanding of children and stepfamilies. However, it is possible that the loyalty conflict experienced by these two stepdaughters was more easily resolved in the absence of the influence of a biological mother.

Similarly, it was noted by some participants that when the biological mothers began to make a new start on their own lives, things eased between stepmothers and stepdaughters. Therefore, as suggested by research which addresses the difficulties caused by such loyalty conflict (Ganong and Coleman, 1994), the reduction of loyalty conflict in these relationships may have had a positive affect in allowing positive relationships with the stepmothers to form.

The stepmothers interviewed generally contended that there was no "monumental" breakthrough, but instead a gradual learning process over the first years. This is consistent with at least one other finding. Quick et al. (1994) asked a number of stepmothers about relationship satisfaction. They reported that while the stepmothers in their study could not identify specific coping mechanisms, the relationships improved over time. The notion introduced by Quick et al. suggesting that the relationship improves with time may also be supported by the present findings, although the stepmothers in this study were able to identify mechanisms that facilitated this improvement.

In summary, the results of this study are consistent with the literature in describing the initial difficulties faced by stepmothers, and in particular, stepmothers with stepdaughters.
The Ability to Balance Emotional and Behavioural Distancing and Openness

In her Stepfamily Cycle, Papernow (1993) discusses the initial Fantasy Stage, "a courtship period marked by almost universal and complex wishes, fantasies, and unspoken expectations", all of which cause "constant and confusing glitches and misunderstandings" (p.85) as fantasy confronts reality. In a similar vein, Burns (1985) asserts that many of the negative reactions to stepchildren are a result of unanticipated demands and expectations. Among others, Morrison and Thompson-Guppy (1985) also conclude that understanding the symptoms of adjustment to being a stepmother can provide a basis for an effective treatment for the problems stepmothers face.

Much of the literature describes the anger, resentment, and jealousy experienced by many stepmothers in relation to their stepdaughters (Hetherington, 1987; Maglin & Schniedwind, 1989; Papernow, 1993; Smith, 1990). Smith (1990) writes, "when you feel your very existence is resented, you begin to hate back and then it seems all the myths of the wicked stepmother have come to live in yourself" (p.13). Frequently, these negative feelings escalate and result in an uncomfortable standoff between stepmother and stepdaughter.

The stepmothers in the present study began their relationships with some basic insight and understanding resulting from direct or indirect experience in one of three areas: previous caretaking of children, their own or not; previous learning in the area of child rearing, child development, family or stepfamily adjustment; and/or personal therapy. While the stepmothers in this study also provided evidence of the feelings noted above, they were able to use their prior
experience as a means to maintain a realistic perspective on the behaviours and attitudes of their stepdaughters. Negative experiences were not always personalized, but recognized as part of what was to be expected and therefore somewhat neutralized. As a consequence these stepmothers did not experience an escalation of feelings of bitterness and resentment, but were able to shift between emotional and behavioural distancing and openness.

From these findings it would seem that a satisfactory relationship does not imply immunity to negative feelings, but simply an ability to moderate them. For the stepmothers in this study negative feelings did not escalate or intensify until the relationship with their stepdaughter was unsalveageable. Rather these women seemed able to moderate a negative emotional reaction with rationality and detachment. Previous experience or knowledge appeared critical to this ability. As one participant summarized, "It really helped to have my own experience to ground me."

Personal psychotherapy was also indicated as another way in which these stepmothers informed their perspective, were able to moderate negative feelings through distancing, and maintained non-confrontational interactions with their stepdaughters. Therapy was seen by these women as promoting an understanding of what constituted a 'healthy relationship' and at what point there might be 'boundary violations'. These stepmothers indicated that therapy had further helped them limit their own emotional involvement and understanding of what might trigger negative a negative reaction in themselves. One woman said that without this kind of self awareness she would have "gone in as the rescuer
mother. I would have been resentful." Another woman interviewed stated that personal work had enabled her to understand "what gets me going." Researchers and clinicians alike suggest that therapy may have a positive impact upon positive relationship development in stepfamilies (Kaplan and Hennon, 1992; Visher & Visher, 1979, 1988, 1991). In general, therapy has been found to positively affect an individual's understanding of self in relationship. Nevertheless, I have found no direct evidence linking stepmother satisfaction to previous personal therapeutic work.

In summary, having an ability to maintain emotional distance was a common foundational theme expressed by the participant stepmothers. This ability was largely a result of experience and/or knowledge in the areas cited above and appeared to moderate the "adjustment reactions" described by others including Thompson and Morrison-Guppy (1985). Among others, these authors suggest that negative feelings can be moderated if they are understood as an expected part of adjustment reactions. Perhaps the stepmothers in this study were able to more easily accept these reactions as part of the adjustment process and thus maintain the balance between distancing and openness that allowed them to engage in positive persistence, a critical transitional theme.

The Ability to Engage in Positive Persistence

Salwen (1990) commented that the stepmothers she sees in private practice experience a continuous struggle against "internalizing a negative self concept related to connotations of evil, jealousy, cruelty, and selfishness" (p.120). Maglin and Schniedwind (1989) remarked that the stepmothers in their study often reflected on the power of this mythology to limit the development of their
Consciously or not, the women interviewed in the present study described behaviour that was consistently in contrast to wicked stepmother behaviour. They tried not to say anything negative, they avoided taking on authority or discipline, they showed interest, listened, engaged in activities enjoyable to the stepdaughter, and they provided food and other comforts. In two cases, the stepmother made extraordinary financial sacrifices for the benefit of their new family; one sold her home, another supported the family when the father's entire pay cheque went to pay for the daughter's medication. Another participant openly stated that while she had specific ideas about bringing up children, she also realized that in order to "avoid being called the wicked stepmother" she would have to first develop a relationship with her stepdaughters.

In summary, the theme of Positive Persistence could be viewed as the ability of the participant stepmothers to avoid wicked stepmother behaviours and maintain archtypical 'good mother' behaviours - solicitous, benign, cherishing, sustaining. Further, these stepmothers were able to persist in good mother behaviours in the face of their stepdaughters' exclusionary tactics. As one participant stated, "if I got smacked in the nose, I tried a different tack." The literature provides some evidence that stepmothers do hold strong expectations of themselves to try to engage in such good mother behaviours (Burns, 1985; Hughes, 1991; Maglin and Schniedwind, 1989).

The Ability to Develop a Unique and Valued Role in the Lives of their Stepdaughters

Dainton (1993) defines a stigma as the "product of definitional processes
in which the defining attribute (such as stepmother) eclipses other aspects of the stigmatized person, including individual personalities and abilities" (p.94). While the stepmothers in this study persisted in the above mentioned good mother behaviours, they nevertheless did not define their role as that of 'mother'. Instead they had an ability to develop an unique and valued role for themselves that was 'eclipsed' by neither stereotype.

The clinical literature addresses the importance of such role management (Dainton, 1993; Hughes, 1991; Kaplan & Hennon, 1992). Presumably with stepmothers and stepdaughters, acting like a mother would increase both the loyalty conflicts, which the literature suggests is greater for a stepdaughter, as well as intensifying competition for management of the patriarchal household (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). All the women interviewed for this study were clear that their role was not that of mother. They also appear to have made this distinction clear to their stepdaughters, directly and through their behaviours. Certainly the stepmothers in this study were successful in finding ways in which to interact as adult females without being moms, to as one woman said, "find a balance in being a family without a mom." The attitudes expressed by the stepmothers in this study did not appear to support the interpretation of a stepmother's good mother behaviour that appears in some of the literature (Burns, Smith, 1990; Morrison and Thompson-Guppy, 1986). These authors infer that stepmothers believe they must take on a maternal role and are disappointed, confused, frustrated and hurt when their efforts are rejected. The stepmothers interviewed for this study clearly did not expect to assume such a role, which may have aided in their success.
As did the stepmothers in these other studies the participant stepmothers nevertheless felt responsibility for nurturing and caretaking, and expressed a wish to be a part of their stepdaughter's lives. However, they seemed to be able to distinguish between nurturing and mothering, and defined a role for themselves as that of "friends" or "aunts", rather than mothers. Dainton (1993) also suggests the importance of making such a distinction between stereotypes and reality. She provides suggestions for strategies to ameliorate the difficulties, such as changing the label of 'stepmother', removing the stepmother from the parenting role, finding alternative roles and labels such as friend, and choosing an alternative name. These are similar to strategies employed by the stepmothers in this study. Some researchers argue that stepfamilies suffer in view of the traditional model of the nuclear family and the roles defined thus (Vishers, 1988). Therefore, the redefinition and clarification of old and new roles also reflects the basic therapeutic approach of clinicians like the Vishers who attempt to help stepfamilies develop new ways to behave and interact, new expectations, and new understanding of family roles.

In Papernow's (1993) stepfamily cycle, the final Resolution Stage is the period during which step-parents begin to take on the unique role of "intimate outsider." The development of a sense of 'we' as well as a shared history are necessary preconditions for taking on this role. The stepmothers in the present study were able to interact with their stepdaughters in ways that developed just such a positive and shared history, and sense of 'we'. Activities that included the entire stepfamily also helped form a foundation of shared experience and
closeness that had a positive impact on the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. The participants in this study commonly acknowledged that as a shared history developed, there was more intimacy between themselves and their stepdaughters. For example, one participant recounted how it was only after a year of shared crises that her stepdaughter opened up and shared her deeper thoughts and feelings.

Among others, Visher and Visher (1979) suggest that stepmothers and stepdaughters may be rivals for the affection of the father in a way that is similar to the rivalry between two adult women. Many of the bonding experiences described by the participants were intended to decrease negative feelings, competitiveness, or role stereotyping. Smith (1990) likewise reports that in some cases the stepmothers in her study found it easier without the presence of the biological father, because his absence decreased conflict and jealousy. Therefore, those experiences that excluded the biological father appeared particularly useful to these stepmothers in avoiding stigmatization as the evil other woman, a common wicked stepmother stereotype (e.g. Cinderella). The participants in this present study commonly remarked on the importance of shared experiences that excluded the father, experiences that emphasised that commonality of gender and interest. For example one participant deliberately contrived experiences where they "could be girls together." Another also remarked on the success she had doing "girly things."

These stepmothers consciously looked for windows of opportunity that could lessen the hostility and rejection they experienced and foster preferred
perceptions of themselves. They often provided special and unique 'gifts' of themselves to their stepdaughters, gifts they felt were significant in breaking down the barriers between themselves and their stepdaughters. In this study all three grown stepdaughters later acknowledged to their stepmothers how greatly they were affected by particular exchanges. While bonding experiences at the stepfamily level have been documented by researchers and clinicians such as Papernow (1993), I have not seen specific documentation of something like the gift. Therefore many more stepmothers would have to be interviewed to provide surety of this as a theme. Nevertheless in this study it does appear consistently and would seem to be significant.

In summary, this study provided some evidence that stepmothers who develop satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationships find ways to, as Dainton (1993) contends, "foster preferred perceptions about themselves" (p.93) and thus create ambiguity between the stereotypes and the reality of being a stepmother. Perhaps the stepmothers in this study were able to, as Kaplan and Hennon (1992) suggest, "role make" and "create new lines of action" (p.129). In many ways the ability of the participant stepmothers to develop unique and valued roles in the lives of their stepdaughters was an ability to avoid stigmatization into the polarized roles of evil stepmother and good mother.

The Supportive Partner

For the most part the clinical literature supports the notion that a strong and mutually respectful adult partnership is conducive to the development of satisfactory step-parent-stepchild relationships (Visher & Visher, 1988).
Papernow (1993) also touches upon this in her discussion of the Stepfamily Cycle. During the middle stage of Awareness understanding of the biological parent-child bond grows. Later in the Mobilization Stage, Papernow describes how issues involving the needs of the couple versus the needs of the biological children become more salient. In the Action Stage, negotiations around these issues begin to take place. The resolving of these issues is seen by Papernow as a precondition for the advancement of the stepfamily into the next phase of the cycle and eventually to the more rewarding period of Resolution. Therefore the importance the biological parent has in terms of the stepfamily reaching the more rewarding resolution phase, is clearly held by Papernow.

In the present study, those stepmothers with the greatest perceived support from their partners perceived themselves as having the closest relationships with their stepdaughters. This support included an outward show of affection and respect by partners, a willingness to take on the discipline of the biological children and yet a hands off attitude when the issue was strictly between the stepmother and the stepdaughter. Later, support appeared to include allowing the stepmother to take on authority as she saw fit. The stepmothers in this study clearly indicated the importance of their partners' support in the development of satisfactory relationships between themselves and their stepdaughters. The participant who reported the most distant relationship with her adult stepdaughter, was also the stepmother who had the least partner support. She described herself as often feeling invalidated and unimportant in her role as stepmother, because she felt her opinion was not valued by the biological father. It was only after they separated that her relationship with her stepdaughter became 'satisfactory'. 
In summary the importance of partner support is reflected in the reports of
the stepmothers interviewed for this study. Those studies (e.g., Brand &
Clingempeel, 1987) which suggest that stepfamily relationships may be more
conflicted in happier and closer marital relationships do not seem to be supported
by the data from this study.

The Ability to Relax Expectations of Self and Other

Several authors reviewed in the literature suggest that unrealistic
expectations increase the likelihood of stepmother dissatisfaction and stepfamily
problems (Visher & Visher, 1988). Kaplan and Hennon (1992) hold that
clarifying expectations of remarried individuals is an important first step in
avoiding disagreement and disappointment in stepfamilies. Dainton (1993)
concludes that stepmothers in particular have difficulty because of a struggle
resulting from "ultimately unrealistic expectations" (p. 94). Papernow (1993)
likewise provides research to support relaxation as being part of the long term
formation of stepmother-stepchild relationships. Papernow also places relaxation
of expectations, attitudes, and behaviours in the later stage of her model. She
holds that it is at this time that relationships are forged and a clearly defined step-
parent role emerges.

The theme of relaxation was described by the women in this study as a
subjective state of decreased internal tension about how and where they fit in the
stepfamily and a sense that 'this is going to be okay. Relaxation included a letting
go of any residual caretaking expectations such as keeping a 'perfect home' or
cooking perfect meals. Such expectations tended to increase resentment and ill
feelings on the part of these stepmothers. They often felt unappreciated by their stepchildren. Letting go of such expectations promoted more positive interactions. As one woman stated, "lightening up a bit" in regards to her stepdaughter allowed them to take a deep breath and relax: "That's when the changes started to come about .... we could all get to know each other as people."

These women generally indicated they felt more able to just be themselves and more accepted being so. Thus perhaps "preferred perceptions" of themselves were increased and these stepdaughters were able to relate to their stepmothers as friends. As the perception of the stepmother as 'friendly' developed, the issue of good mother-wicked stepmother appeared to become less salient. In the present study, the one participant who felt accepted from the start recalled that it was only after two years that she had altercations with her stepdaughter. These were quickly resolved, but perhaps, as she described, these altercations were important in that they suggested a relaxation of good mother behaviours and an acceptance that her own needs and desires were also important.

The stories of the stepmothers in this study suggest a number of possible reasons for relaxation. Most simply, having been around for an extended period of time, they had been accepted by their stepchildren as 'there', almost as part of the scenery. As one stepmother stated, "there was a realization I was not going to leave." Another said, "After two years it was like, "she's not going away. I think we'd better start acting differently." This perception reflects the findings of at least two studies. The stepmothers in the Quick et al. (1994) study reported an improvement with time even when no other variables could be identified. Fine
(1986) and Lutz (1985) also reported that increased exposure to stepfamilies by stepfamily members, attenuates negative stereotypes of stepmothers.

The later middle period as described by the participant stepmothers was marked by increased feelings of relaxation, acceptance, and confidence. Certainly from the descriptions provided, their role in the family and especially in relation to their stepdaughters began to form and deepen when expectations of themselves and others relaxed. Consistent with some of the literature, the simple passage of time and finding a non-stereotypical role were factors in increasing the likelihood of relaxation.

The Deepening: A Satisfactory relationship

The feelings expressed by the women in this study reflect the final Resolution phase as described by Papernow (1993). The Resolution Stage is defined by reliable and solid step relationships where the step-parents's role as an intimate outsider is clearly recognized. Both acceptance and a grieving of what cannot be also mark this stage. The stepmothers in Maglin and Schniedwind's (1989) study likewise addressed some of these same descriptors of satisfaction, affection, openness, and involvement with and recognition by their stepdaughters. Clinicians such as the Vishers (1979, 1988) describe working with their clients so that they arrive at a place where interactions between step-parent and stepchild reflect the descriptions of Papernow's resolution.

In describing a satisfactory relationship with their stepdaughters, the stepmothers in this study reported similar experiences. They asserted the importance of recognition by their stepdaughters of their unique and valued roles
in the lives of those stepdaughters. Many recalled with clarity the exact moment they experienced themselves in this way (e.g., "That was the moment I realized I was important to her... that I wasn't just a person who cooked and cleaned"). Many remembered with equal clarity the moment when they felt accepted, often an occasion where the stepdaughter initiated physical contact (e.g., pat on the back, a hug). Part of recognition and acceptance as experienced by these stepmothers was a feeling of involvement in the lives of their stepdaughters, often indicated by an inclusion of those stepdaughters in dreams and plans for the future. However, while there was a belief that the relationship would continue to improve, there was also an ongoing grieving for the sometimes painful limitations of the relationship. For example, one of the participants reflected that however close she became to her stepdaughter and however much she contributed, she would always have to give way to the biological mother 'rights' and desires to limit the stepmother's presence at important occasions such as graduation and marriage.

Therefore, the outcomes of these relationships described as satisfactory have similarities to other reported satisfactory step relationships (Papernow, 1993; Maglin & Schniedwind, 1989). Further there appeared to be consistently delineated periods or phases in the development of these satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationships, similar to those described by Papernow (1993). The outcomes of this study suggest a temporal framework wherein there are common clusters of themes, such as described earlier in this section. While most of the women interviewed found it difficult to pinpoint specific times as references, it
appeared that the middle period began somewhere around the end of the first year and ended somewhere around the third or fourth year. By the fourth year, the participant stepmother-stepdaughter relationships reflected some of the characteristics described by Papernow in the resolution stage.

In Papernow's (1993) research these stages reflect a natural cycle. Overall however, the literature suggests that many stepfamilies dissolve before issues can be resolved (Visher & Visher, 1979). Therefore the ability of the stepmother to foster attitudes and behaviours that propel the family safely forward into a resolution stage may be critical, both to the family and specifically to the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship.

**Summary**

In summary, the findings suggest that stepmothers who successfully incorporated the role of stepmother to a stepdaughter into their lives in a way they defined as satisfactory, did not necessarily have a less difficult situation or more receptive stepdaughters. Rather they were able to maintain a positive, friendly, and supportive stance, which eventually paid off with a lessening of tension between themselves and their stepdaughters. Support by the biological father appeared to have had considerable affect on a positive outcome of these stepmother-stepdaughter relationships. This has been assumed from those stepmothers who perceived their partners as positive, respectful, and outwardly affectionate. It is also suggested by the reports of those participants who perceived less support from their partners and described more distant relationships with their stepdaughters as a result. Recognition by their stepdaughters that they
had a unique and valued role in the family, acceptance of limitations, the support of their partners, and the perception of freedom to be themselves, appeared to constitute the foundations for a satisfactory relationship.

Implications for Counselling

Outcomes of the study indicate that the ability of stepmothers to balance emotional and behavioural distancing and openness is significant to the development of a satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationship. Strategies which counsellors may use to assist clients with this would therefore seem important. A number of possible ways to develop this ability were suggested by this study.

The stepmothers interviewed all reported having a knowledge or experience based perspective that allowed them to balance distance and openness by informing their expectations and helping to ameliorate negative feelings. Therefore, providing stepmothers with such information or enabling them to utilize information they may already have, would appear to be a useful therapeutic intervention. Normalizing the behaviour of the stepdaughter and the reactions of the stepmother may also play a role in providing an informed perspective. Normalization is a recognized therapeutic intervention in that it both informs and validates the experience of clients. In much the same way, an informed perspective appears to validate and inform the experience of the stepmother. This finding is reflected in the findings of Morrison and Thompson-Guppy (1985) who conclude that an effective treatment of stepmother problems is provided by educating stepmothers about negative feelings and normalizing these feelings as
part of an adjustment process. Another approach to increasing stepmothers' ability to balance distance and openness would be through psycho-educational groups. A group setting could facilitate normalization of feelings through the discovery of commonality with other stepmothers. A group might also provide support for the stepmother to continue to engage in the kind of positive, friendly, non-intrusive approach that the stepmothers in this study perceived as valuable to their success. Both groups and individual therapy could provide an opportunity for stepmothers to come to a better understanding of themselves, their needs, and their triggers. The usefulness of personal therapy was reported in this study.

The development of unique and valued roles in their stepfamilies was also seen as contributory to these satisfactory stepmother-stepdaughter relationships. As described in this study, the role of stepmother was perceived as distinct from stereotypical female family roles. While traditional definitions of family and family roles have continued to inform societal expectations and beliefs, it would appear both in the review of the literature and in the reports of the women in this study, that such expectations and beliefs cannot strongly inform the stepfamily if the stepmother wishes a satisfactory relationship with her stepdaughter. The caution to 'not play mom' was strongly stated and consistent to all reports in this study. Clearly the stepmothers in this study were ultimately successful in developing unique and non-stereotypical roles for themselves within their stepfamilies. Consistent with the results of this study, is the premise of the Personal Reflections Program (Kaplan and Hennon, 1992) which attempts to address the problems in a stepfamily by helping the stepfamily members remake
their roles and develop fresh, non-stereotypical ways of interacting. The Vishers (1978, 1988) also incorporate redefinition of traditional female family roles as an important part of their clinical practice with stepfamilies.

The support of the biological father was also reported by the women in this study as important in the transition to a satisfactory relationship with their stepdaughters. Therefore, increasing the biological father's awareness of the difficulties stepmothers face, and helping him re-evaluate his expectations and make changes in his behaviour towards his partner, also seem important therapeutic tasks. The value of information and education for the partners of stepmothers has also been identified in the literature (Kaplan & Hennon, 1992; Papernow, 1993). Therefore, exploration of alternatives to traditional family roles might be of benefit to stepmothers and their partners. Individual therapy, couple therapy and family therapy, could provide this opportunity.

These stepmothers consistently reported on the value of experiences that promoted the development of a shared history and closer stepfamily bonds. The growth of stepfamily bonds was perceived as improving stepmother-stepdaughter relationships. However, these stepmother-stepdaughter relationships were especially improved by experiences that emphasized the commonalities between stepmothers and stepdaughters, commonalities of gender and interest. In the face of rejection and hostility, it may be hard for stepmothers to persist in creating opportunities for these kinds of experiences. This is another area where support could be offered both in individual, couple, and group therapy.

Finally, all the stepmothers interviewed described an ability to relax their
expectations of themselves, of others, and of the relationship. Such expectations may be deeply rooted, both in the person and in the culture. Personal therapy and group work would be useful to help stepmothers explore these preexisting expectations.

In summary, counselling could provide for stepmothers by increasing their understanding of the difficulties and dynamics of being a stepmother through education, normalization, and support. Therapy might also help these women explore personal beliefs and expectations about themselves and their roles. This could facilitate the development of a non-stereotypical, unique and valued role for themselves in the lives of their stepdaughters. Partners would also benefit from education and support. Within the context of therapy and the developing stepmother-stepdaughter relationship, issues of maintaining positive persistence, relaxing expectations, and creating bonding experiences could also be addressed.

Implications for Further Research

The study was undertaken for the purpose of understanding how women incorporate the role of stepmother to a stepdaughter into their lives in a way they define as satisfactory. The intention was to delineate the process from the perspective of the stepmother in a temporal context. Throughout the study I became aware of a number of areas requiring further study. There appears to be a need for further research into the potential of support groups and ways in which they can assist the development of an informed perspective and provide information as to strategies to increase bonding. Reviewing sources for obtaining stepmother participants has led me to believe there are few if any such local
groups. Both educational and support groups are generally acknowledged to be helpful to individuals facing stressful life situations. It would seem reasonable to assume the helpfulness of such support for stepmothers. In a similar vein, the development and testing of informational materials for stepmothers with stepdaughters might be an interesting endeavour.

Further exploration of those stepmothers who do not consider themselves to have satisfactory relationships could provide an important and informative parallel experience. This would allow a clearer distinction between which behaviours are in fact critical to a satisfactory outcome and those which just appear to be. For example, are there stepmothers who engage in positive persistence and never develop satisfactory relationships with their stepdaughters? Are there stepmothers who do not engage in positive persistence and still arrive at what they consider to be satisfactory relationship?

There is a need to clarify and validate the results of this study with further investigation. For example, only one custodial stepmother was represented. This stepmother experienced less rejection and hostility from the beginning. Whether this was a consequence of her being a custodial stepmother, whether it had more to do with the lack of involvement on the part of the biological mother, or whether it was due to some unknown variable remains unclear from one narrative. Further interviews with custodial stepmothers might help clarify these questions.

While this study focused on the experience of stepmothers, the results suggest that exploring the experience of stepdaughters, biological mothers, and biological fathers who are partners to stepmothers might also prove interesting. Such an exploration could provide a more complete picture of how some of the
variables interact and move the relationship forward. In particular the stepdaughters' experience of the gift would confirm the importance of this unique and special offering. While the stepmothers in this study who had adult stepdaughters did receive such confirmation, a larger sample would be required to make generalizations regarding this particular finding.

**Personal Understandings**

When I began this research, I had certain ideas about what might constitute a satisfactory relationship with a stepdaughter, ideas strongly coloured by my own past and present experience with a stepdaughter. Some of those ideas have been supported by the results of this research. The process of my relationship with my stepdaughter also had characteristics of the relationships described in the study.

In retrospect, I created many occasions for bonding. I can look back and see how I tried to maintain positive persistence. However, while I believe I began our relationship with optimism and energy, I was not able to maintain the positive persistence maintained by the stepmothers in this study. Our relationship polarized. When she visited, I erected a wall of silence.

It has been a long time since I experienced the hurt and despair that marked the early years of my relationship with my stepdaughter. The painful memories are fading, but I still regret the time wasted and the difficulties I encountered. For a number of years I chose not to see my stepdaughter. I only found the courage and desire to reconnect after my own daughter was born. Recently, we are able to be adult friends, and I find this to have increased my satisfaction. I have even started to tentatively include her in my thoughts for the
future (her's and that of my biological daughter).

This research has provided me with validation for my past experiences and feelings and for the attempts I made to define a relationship with my stepdaughter. I can also see how the ups and downs of our relationship sometimes reflected the changing attitude and behaviour of my partner. During the most troubled years of my relationship with my stepdaughter, I had no understanding of this, nor any belief that my efforts (positive persistence) would pay off. Therefore, I had little ability to understand or ameliorate negative feelings.

I believe the lack of understanding contributed to my difficulties, and to my premature giving up on the relationship. A certain quality of innocence has been lost to those years. I believe that this might have been different if I had found some understanding and support and been given a sense that work and effort would pay off. I believe that if I had had guidance, there would be fewer scars. And I would like to think that this study will provide a map for other stepmothers, their partners, and their stepdaughters.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX C
MODIFIED LIFELINE EXERCISE

The lifeline is an exploration exercise that draws out life experiences, decisions, major events, significant individuals, feelings, key transitions or changes as they occurred over time, similar to a chronology of life episodes or events. It represents time as a line where the far left point on the line may mark the beginning of events, in this case the beginning of your stepmother role and your relationship to your stepdaughter(s). The right point can be used to signify the time and your experiences which represent the satisfactory relationship with your stepdaughter, however you experience it. Take the pencil and just freely chronicle on the line whatever comes to mind over time as you came to experience a satisfactory relationship.

Reference: Jaffe and Scott (1989)
APPENDIX E
Follow-up Services and Referrals

Women’s Resources Centre 685-3934
Family Services of Greater Vancouver 731-4951
Y.W.C.A. (counselling services) 683-2531
Yaletown Family Therapy 688-7860

For UBC Students
Women’s Students’ Office 822-2415
UBC Student Counselling 822-3811

Counsellors:
Risha Joffe (Psychologist) 736-4378
B.C. Association of Marriage and Family Therapy 737-8140