

The Experience of Mothers in Stepfather Families

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The study presented in this article investigated the experience of mothers in stepfather families. A stepfather family is defined as a two-parent family in which the adults are married to each other and there is at least one child from the mother's previous relationship. According to Statistics Canada (1996), four out of ten married Canadians will divorce. In 1975, only 12% of all marriages involved persons who had been previously married, while in 1995 this figure had risen to 21.5%. Most of these divorced individuals who remarry bring with them children from previous relationships, resulting in an ever-increasing number of stepfamilies.

Given that this type of family is a growing phenomenon in our society, researchers have been trying to understand the dynamics and experiences of the various members in stepfamilies (Kelley, 1996; Madill, in press; Sauer & Fine, 1988; Zeppa & Norem, 1993). Stepfamilies embody individuals who have separate histories and who have a variety of expectations and ties outside their present family. The fact that they have come together to form a small community lacking social norms and roles to guide them poses myriad possible difficulties. The present study was based on a normative-adaptive model, where the family is regarded as struggling to adjust and adapt, rather than a deficient one, where the family is compared to first families and therefore regarded as inadequate or dysfunctional.

An in-depth review of the stepfamily literature reveals several gaps. For example, most studies have focused on the steprelationships (Crosbie-Brunett, 1984; Ganong & Coleman, 1984; White & Booth, 1985), the spousal relationship (Bray, Berger & Boethel, 1994; Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman, & Coleman, 1984; Pasley & Sandras, 1994), the adjustment of the children (Ganong & Coleman, 1984), the stepfather (Robinson, 1984), or the couple (Roberts & Price, 1989). It is surprising to find little data relating to mothers in stepfather families, especially given the importance assigned to biological relationships in these families by some theorists (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). In stepfather families, the children and their mothers have a history, patterns of interaction, and strong bonds that predate the new spousal relationship. Moreover, given that it is the mother who brought the family together, she holds a very particular place in this system. She is the axis around which the family revolves. Therefore, exploring her experience seems like a logical step and may reveal how such experience has a significant impact on the functioning of a stepfather family. In short, in order to have a better understanding of the workings of a stepfather family it is important to investigate the biological mother's experience.

The formal empirical literature reveals some clues as to what these mothers may experience. For example, Demo and Acock (1996) compared mothers in first marriages, divorced mothers, continuously single mothers, and mothers in stepfamilies on their levels of well-being. They found that the strongest predictors of mothers' well-being across family structures were measures of family relations, especially children's well-being, marital happiness, marital stability, and low levels of marital conflict. Single mothers fared the poorest while mothers in first marriages, followed by mothers in stepfamilies, fared best. Mitchell (1983) also compared well-being and sense of competence in divorced and remarried mothers. She found that divorced mothers felt both less competent and less satisfied with their lives than remarried mothers. Finally, in a 5-year longitudinal study, Isaacs and Leon (1988) found that mothers who separate experience the same level of adjustment regardless of their blending family type and the length of separation. These studies collectively indicate some factors affecting mothers in stepfather families. Their reports, however, are limited and fragmented: their scope is limited by their comparative nature or the narrow focus they placed on mothers in stepfather families. The practical significance of what they found is very modest and they still do not provide us with a meaningful understanding of these women's experience.

The clinical and qualitative reports also offer some indications of these women's experiences. They suggest that one major source of internal unrest for parents in stepfamilies is the conflict that arises from their love for their children and for their new spouse (Papernow, 1993; Sager et al., 1983; Visher & Visher, 1988). Visher and Visher (1988) believe that remarried parents also experience guilt because they may feel as though they are betraying their children by remarrying.

In her qualitative and clinical report, Papernow (1993) explains that biological parents feel a multiplicity of pulls. They experience competing demands on their time and attention. They are usually devoted to "making it all better" for everyone. They tend to experience resentment because of all the different pulls they encounter and because they are unable to nurture and enjoy their new relationship as much as they would like to. Furthermore, the biological parent feels caught between the children's needs for stability and the stepparent's needs for change. Parents in this situation often do not know how to act and who to support. Papernow has found that many custodial parents feel like the "meat" in the sandwich: they feel in the middle and they eventually become tired of intervening and begin to retreat from this role. She further suggests that the timing of the remarriage also has an impact. If biological parents remarry soon after the divorce or separation, they face the task of forming a new family simultaneously with the task of resolving unfinished issues from their previous family. The qualitative and clinical literature points in the right direction. However, most of what has been published addresses biological parents as a group and does not distinguish between biological

mothers and fathers. Consequently, relatively little is known about the experiences of mothers in stepfather families.

In order to enhance and complement the existing body of literature and research in the field of stepfamilies, it is important to investigate the role that the custodial mother plays, and how her perceptions and interactions with her children affect the overall functioning of the family. Some important questions are yet to be answered. How does a mother in a stepfather family feel about her children and her spouse? How does she cope with the conflicts between her children and her spouse? How has the marriage affected her relationships with her children? Is she willing to allow her spouse to play a parental role? Does she indeed feel like the glue that holds the family together? These are but a few of the possible areas that need to be addressed if we are to understand stepfamilies and their dynamics. The study presented here sought to investigate the experiences of a few mothers in stepfather families.

Method

This study employed a narrative, discourse analytic method. This was the soundest research strategy because of the study's exploratory and experiential nature. The strengths of this type of research method lie in its consideration of the context and the setting of the focal phenomenon, and its search for a profound understanding of the participants' lived human experience. Five mothers were interviewed and their interview audiotapes were transcribed and analyzed. Emphasis was placed on identifying sections of each transcription that contained repetitive language and particularly rich or elaborated meanings, affective intensity, contradictions, and statements about self. It was anticipated that this process would allow for the construction of a collective narrative that would describe the similarities and discrepancies among the various stories told by these mothers.

Participants

The five participants were recruited through advertisements at Simon Fraser University, on community boards in schools and community centres in Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, through contacts at a family services agency in Vancouver, a stepfamily support group in White Rock, British Columbia, and a parent education class at a parent participation preschool in Burnaby, British Columbia. The participants included in the study were asked to meet the following criteria:

Remarriage (legal or common law) within the last five years.

The children residing with the couple must be the mother's from a previous marriage.

The mother's children must be one- to sixteen-years old.

The couple must have no children of their own.

The names of the participants and their families have been replaced by pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. Table 1 displays demographic and other descriptive information for each of the five participants.

Researcher

At the time of the study, I was a 36-year-old Master of Arts student in counselling psychology at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia. I am a mother in a stepfather family. I had been in a stepfamily for three and a half years, and it was this experience, along with my work in the Master's degree program, that sparked my interest in this area. Clearly, my involvement in a stepfather family may have influenced my interpretations as a researcher. In addition, for the six years prior to conducting this research, I had been working as a parent educator and consultant with parents in stepfamilies, among others. Some of my preconceptions, assumptions, and interpretations in the work reported here have inevitably been shaped by such personal, vocational, and family experiences. As a counsellor, I hold a theoretical orientation based on attachment theory, which suggests that contact and closeness in relationships is crucial to human functioning. Holding this theory may have led me to ask two questions in the study: "What is your relationship like with your children?" and "what is your relationship like with your husband?" It is possible that other researchers with different orientations may have asked different questions or attended to different aspects of the participants' stories.

Procedures

Interviews. The interviews were audiotaped and lasted anywhere between fifty minutes and one hour and fifteen minutes. Participants were asked to provide some general, demographic information (see Table 1) at the beginning of the interviews. This information was recorded in printed form and was not audiotaped. Five main guiding questions were used to focus the interviews:

What is it like to be a mother in a stepfather family?

What is your relationship with your children like? How is it different from the way it was during your first marriage or after your divorce?

What is your relationship like with your spouse? How does your relationship with your children affect your marital relationship?

What are the best and worst parts of being a mother in a stepfather family?

Is there anything I have not asked you that you would like to add?

After each response, I used paraphrasing, reflective listening, and additional questions to encourage clarification or elaboration. I made detailed notes about my thoughts and observations following each interview (see section on reflexivity below).

Transcription. Each audiotape was transcribed into "idea units" (see Chafe, 1980). Idea units are identified by listening closely to the intermittent properties of speech. These spurts of language can be recognized by paying attention to intonation, pausing, and to the words "and," "but," and "so."

Analysis

A review of the literature on discourse analysis along with the experience of engaging in such an activity reveal that there is no fixed set of procedures that is appropriate for all texts and contexts. It is necessary that the analytic procedure adopted be appropriate to the context and aims of the inquiry, and be capable of guiding interpretative understanding of the focal phenomena. The narrative analytic procedures for this study were selected because narrative research recognizes that psychological phenomena are interpretative. This means that humans inevitably make meaning of what they experience. The present study consists of a narrative account of the meanings that participants give to their experiences, as these are interpreted by the researcher. In this study, Table 2 summarizes the various steps taken in the analysis of the transcribed interview data.

Central theme. The first step was to identify a central theme or plot that would be representative of what the participant was trying to convey during the entire interview (Mishler, 1986). The first questions I asked were: What is this story about? What is the essence of this woman's experience? (Mishler, 1986; Van Manen, 1990). This step involved a close reading of the text while listening to the audiotape.

Subject positions. Subject positioning implies that one's identity is relative to the central meanings and the social context in which it exists (Cochran, 1985; Madill, in press). In order to identify the subject positions, I once again reviewed the text and the audiotapes while asking the questions: How does this woman see herself? What aspects of her identity has she revealed in her account? I paid special attention to components of the participants' accounts that conveyed images of self or that indirectly pointed to the identities to which they laid claim. For example, Rachel often said, "I am a fixer..." in order to explain that she feels she has to meet everyone's needs and problems before attending to her own. Not all participants uttered such "encapsulating" words in such a

clear manner, however. To identify some subject positions, I had to infer from their accounts how participants viewed themselves. Each analysis identified one to three subject positions.

Secondary themes. The purpose of identifying other possible themes was to identify the various aspects of personal perspectives that may not be central, but to which the participant attaches significant meaning. These will be referred to as secondary themes. In order to achieve this result, I used a modified version of the highlighting approach proposed by Van Manen (1990). First, while reading the transcriptions, I asked, "What statements or phrases seem particularly revealing of how this woman experiences her place in this stepfamily?" Then, these statements were noted. Particular attention was paid to repetitiveness and affective emphases. Once the entire text was examined, I grouped these statements into themes by sorting them into clusters. Each of these categories became a secondary theme. The number of secondary themes identified for each participant ranged between one and four. Secondary themes. The purpose of identifying other possible themes was to identify the various aspects of personal perspectives that may not be central, but to which the participant attaches significant meaning. These will be referred to as secondary themes. In order to achieve this result, I used a modified version of the highlighting approach proposed by Van Manen (1990). First, while reading the transcriptions, I asked, "What statements or phrases seem particularly revealing of how this woman experiences her place in this stepfamily?" Then, these statements were noted. Particular attention was paid to repetitiveness and affective emphases. Once the entire text was examined, I grouped these statements into themes by sorting them into clusters. Each of these categories became a secondary theme. The number of secondary themes identified for each participant ranged between one and four.

Cross check. In order to evaluate the accuracy of the thematic analysis, a crosscheck was undertaken. This step was important in order to examine the coherence of the various themes and positions. Coherence here is taken to mean that the various parts of the account are connected together in a unified, meaningful story (Mishler, 1986). In part, such coherence is achieved by finding representative examples that support the general point made by the main theme and the subject positions.

Written narrative account. Prior to engaging in a subsequent microanalysis, a brief narrative account of the central theme and its relations to the subject positions and secondary themes was written. This account aimed at describing how the central theme was connected with the other parts of the analysis achieved thus far. The resulting narratives ranged between two and three pages in length.

Summary of replies to main guiding questions. A summary of the replies to the guiding questions was formulated to aid in the revision of the central theme. The purpose here was to have three different avenues (the excerpts, the narrative account, and the summary of replies) to consider and attempt to "triangulate" in revising and refining the central theme during the subsequent microanalysis. In order to summarize each reply, the guiding questions were highlighted and the participant's responses to each of them were summarized. The summary was written in point form.

Microanalysis. In the microanalysis proper, the text and audiotape were examined several more times in order to identify what aspects of the story were inconsistent with the main theme. To assist in identifying these contradictions (a contradiction here is regarded as a statement which appears to be inconsistent with the overall theme of the account), a written version of the central theme was kept nearby. This allowed the researcher to engage in a process of critical comparison between the participant's main point in the story and how some of the specific statements she made were possibly contradictory to it. Narrative explanations of how and why these inconsistencies contradicted the main, organizing theme were formulated by asking, "What do I think prompted the inconsistency?"

Once the inconsistencies were identified, the main theme was revised and refined several times through a method of comparing and contrasting until no further revisions seemed necessary. At this point, I formulated the central theme that I considered was representative of the narrative as a whole (see Table 2).

Submission of analyses to the participants. Each of the participants was provided with two attachments: a) the analysis and b) the narrative account (containing the initial central theme). The participants were instructed to read and think about the interpretations and consider to what degree they were accurate or inaccurate in terms of how well they described their overall experience. Space was provided for the participants to "write their thoughts." Their comments on my analysis were integrated into a final comparative analysis and only in the case of Amanda, adjustments to the original analysis were made.

Collective analysis. The work accomplished thus far focused on each participant independent of the others. The results of those analyses provided the data necessary to develop a collective narrative analysis. This analysis involved identifying components of each of the central themes, positions, and secondary themes. A component refers to an aspect of a theme that can stand on its own. For example, the final, central theme in Gwen's account reads as follows: "Being in this family is an experience of love for me. I have my children who are at the centre of my life and I have Charles who is supporting

me in raising them and with whom I feel fulfilled as a person and as a woman." The components include that "her experience is one of love," that "her children are at the centre of her life," that "Charles, her spouse, is supportive" and that "she is fulfilled as a person and as a woman."

The next step in the collective analysis involved grouping the components of all the participants by assigning each of them to a category on their own (if it didn't match any others), or to a category already identified in another of the participant's themes or positions. Those components that belonged to a central theme were highlighted in order to identify them more readily. This process also aided the identification of aspects of each of the accounts that were dissimilar from the others. These were noted by writing brief clarifications next to the analysis number in each category. The resulting collective analysis was then typed into categories. It must be noted that appearing under a category does not mean that the component is exactly the same as others appearing there. For instance, all participants may have described that their experience has been difficult (similarity), but what made it difficult may have differed from one participant to the other.

Special cases. Narrative methods of analysis need to remain flexible given that each experience under study is unique. This uniqueness may at times present challenges to the particular method of analysis employed. I encountered two such challenges. First, while engaged in the search for contradictions in Gwen's account, I was unable to identify any sections or utterances that were inconsistent with her main theme. I wondered if this was not due to my own biases and assumptions. In order to address this issue, a fellow graduate student in counselling psychology was asked to review the transcript and to search for inconsistencies with the central theme. She was also asked if she agreed with the way the central theme had been formulated.

The second challenge to the chosen procedures was encountered in the last analysis I undertook. In this case, rather than having one main organizing theme, there appeared to be two. This was noted and both were taken into account as I proceeded with the analysis.

Reflexivity. In order to facilitate personal reflection on the research process, I maintained a written record of my thoughts, my experiences, my self-perceived biases, and my assumptions for the duration of the study. I used this record to guide, at least in part, my choices, my interviewing strategies, the methodology, and my evaluation of the results.

Auditability, credibility, and fittingness. Although concepts of reliability and validity are not directly applicable to this type of narrative, discourse analytic research, those

involved in field research (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) have coined the following terms to define how they engage in the process of validating and ensuring the overall clarity of their research: auditability, credibility and fittingness. Auditability (a kind of qualitative replicability) in such inquiry is derived by providing a detailed description of the methodological procedures so that other researchers can understand the themes and arrive at similar conclusions. I have endeavored to enhance auditability by providing a careful and detailed description of the procedures followed. One way to heighten credibility (a kind of qualitative internal validity) is by involving others in a process of corroboration. Such corroboration was accomplished here by inviting the participants to comment on and evaluate the final individual analysis I had developed. Finally, fittingness (a kind of qualitative external validity) refers to the generalizability of the results. Since narrative research of this kind does not aim at generalizing the findings of the inquiry beyond the specific participants and situations involved, but rather at describing someone's experience as accurately as possible, the generalizability of the present study is modest at best. In future work one way of enhancing fittingness would be to continue to add additional participants as contributors to the collective narrative until a general saturation of possible themes seems to occur.

Results

A thorough review of the individual analyses reveals a series of similarities and differences among the accounts provided by these mothers in stepfather families. Their individual accounts uncovered a variety of issues that women in this type of family may experience. (These individuals' accounts and their analyses are available upon request from the author.) The present results describe the results of the collective analysis obtained from combining these individuals' accounts in the manner indicated above. This discussion of the findings mainly focuses on the collective narrative analysis. Given space restrictions, focusing on the collective narrative allows a parsimonious description of major findings. Moreover, the collective narrative also contains descriptions of individual participants, while organizing the results in a cohesive manner by comparing and contrasting the individual findings.

Being a Mother in a Stepfather Family is Difficult

All the participants in this study expressed the conviction that being a mother in a stepfather family is difficult. However, they differed significantly as to why they experienced difficulties. For example, Catrina and Amanda found that being in the middle was what made this type of family so challenging. On the other hand, Rachel found that meeting everyone's needs and making sure everyone was happy was the toughest part for her. Finally, Gwen and Brenda expressed the view that what made it

difficult for them was their former spouse. Gwen preferred to have her children with her all the time, so when they went to visit their father she experienced pain. Brenda viewed her former husband as a disruption because he was not supportive of her daughters and he caused many conflicts that her stepfamily had to deal with. Collectively, these women all agreed that being in a stepfamily is difficult.

Nonetheless, Gwen and Brenda both deemed having chosen to remarry a very positive experience. They regarded their partners as being very involved with their children. Both of these women viewed their former spouses as the main source of stress for their stepfamilies. Even though Rachel, Catrina, and Amanda all said at the time of the interview that their families were doing very well, their accounts communicate that there have been strong obstacles to overcome. This does not mean that Brenda and Gwen have not faced challenges, just that their experiences seem to have been less tumultuous than those of the other three.

Husband's Contributions are Valued

All the participants valued the contributions that their new partners have made to their new families or to their lives. The types of contributions the participants valued differed from one participant to the next. Gwen and Brenda described both their partners as being very involved with their children and helping significantly to meet their day-to-day needs. For instance, both of these stepfathers drove the children to their sports or musical activities, they both helped with lunch preparation, and they both shared "fun" projects with their stepchildren. Gwen's partner, Charles, was also very involved with the overall maintenance and cleaning of their home. Gwen explained that he has made her life "a hell of a lot easier." Brenda also expressed how she has more freedom and time for herself because Jonathan has been so involved with her daughters. She was also very appreciative of his objective input regarding her daughters and her parenting.

Catrina welcomed Sam's contributions in the sense that he has made a very strong effort to make things work. Catrina, however, would like Sam to spend more time with her children. Amanda and Rachel appreciated other very specific, unique contributions. Amanda appreciated her husband as someone who was mature because he was much older and "more level headed." He has helped her to be calm with her daughters and to enforce the rules better. Finally, Rachel appreciated her partner because he made her feel good about herself. She felt very sexually attracted to him. Having him around made her feel like a woman and not just a mother. Gwen also expressed that Charles "fulfills" her as a woman and as a person.

The emphasis that these women placed on their husbands' contributions varied, but in every case these contributions were seen as important to the present success of their families. All of them saw their present situations as more desirable than their first marriages. They all regarded their present partners as better than their former spouses. Being "better" was represented by the participants' descriptions of their partners' various contributions.

Financial Situation

One interesting finding is that none of the women in this sample were financially dependent on their husbands. Rachel, Gwen, and Brenda were presently employed in well-paying jobs. Catrina had worked before her wedding. When she left her job, she received a "very good" severance package and now runs a picture framing business out of her home. She stated explicitly that she is not financially dependent on her spouse. The home where her family resides belongs to her. Amanda, on the other hand, mentioned that she keeps her finances somewhat separate from her spouse's. It was not clear where she obtains her income.

Proud, Dedicated Mother

All these women regarded themselves as dedicated mothers, and they all appeared to be very proud of their children. In the case of Gwen, this was the central theme of her narrative. It is clear from the women's accounts that their children "come first" for all of them. However, for Gwen this commitment seemed most extensive. Most of her replies included some information about her children. Although Rachel did not express this in the same way as Gwen, she stated that it was important for her to make sure that her children's needs were met before she could meet her own. Catrina has taken parenting courses and reads extensively in order to provide her children with a more effective upbringing. She also likes the time they have spent together when her husband, who is a pilot, has been away for five days at a time. Finally, Brenda described herself as being the central figure in her daughters' lives because she has always been close to them. She has sided with them when Jonathan has become angry because she is very "protective." Both Amanda and Rachel viewed themselves as being the only ones in the world who could meet their children's needs. On a day-to-day basis, neither of their partners was involved in the lives of the children. On the other hand, Brenda and Gwen expressed the opposite experience. Even though they saw themselves as very important for their children, the fact that their partners have been so involved with their children has helped them in not having to be the sole caretakers of their children. Both of these women described, in my opinion, the most positive experiences.

My Relationship with my Kids is Excellent

Rachel, Gwen, and Catrina described explicitly their relationships with their children as excellent. Brenda's and Amanda's stories only expressed this point implicitly. Rachel, Gwen and Catrina described their relationships as being very good, very close, and very trusting. They all said that their children "tell them everything" and that they are very close to them. Brenda has found that her present marriage has enhanced her relationship with her daughters because it has reduced some of her time commitments. This has made her a more relaxed parent.

The type of relationship that Amanda has with her daughters is not very clear from her account. When asked about her relationship with her children, Amanda said, "Ah...Ah I think my relationship is pretty good with my kids right now." Then she went on to say how her oldest child is a "very strong headed child." This has led to conflict between them. She also described Bradley as having helped her to enforce rules better than she used to do. It is clear that for Amanda her children come first, but it is not clear if her relationship with them is as good as that which the other mothers described with their children.

I Feel in the Middle

Four out of the five participants stated that they feel in the middle, between their husbands and their children. Catrina, Amanda, Rachel, and Brenda have all experienced being in the middle at one time or another. Catrina and Amanda both expressed it with the words, "I'm in the middle." They both worried about not betraying their children or their partners. Rachel saw herself as the mediator who was trying to help her partner and her children to like each other. Brenda also felt torn between her children and husband, especially when he has become angry with her daughters. She felt she needs "to watch" how she deals with this situation. She did clarify, however, that such occurrences are infrequent. All four of these women have experienced difficulties in dealing with their steprelationships while these evolved over time. They all expressed having to intervene in these relationships and having felt torn between their husbands' and their children's expectations.

Gwen, on the other hand, did not feel in the middle. She said, "I do not feel in the middle, I take charge of the situation, they are my kids." Gwen, in other words, does not feel in the middle because she perceives herself as being in charge of the ultimate decisions about how her children will be raised. It should be mentioned that while she made this point clear, Gwen does worry about undermining Charles in the eyes of her sons. She has intervened in front of her sons in the past, and stated that Charles was not

appreciative of her actions in these instances. Gwen stated that she needs to be more careful about how she approaches this situation. It is possible that this situation is related to "being in the middle," even though Gwen typically may not regard it as such.

Dealing with my Former Husband is Difficult

Four of the participants explained that their former spouse has been a disruption to their lives in one way or another. Gwen not only missed her sons when they visited their father but she complained about how they behaved when they came back. Gwen suspected that the boys' father does not enforce rules the way she does. Catrina felt rather disappointed that her former spouse sees her children only once a month for dinner. She felt that this leads the children to feel angry, and that this anger is then unfairly directed at Sam. Brenda found that dealing with her ex-husband's behavior has been the most difficult aspect of her experience. She has felt angry and worried when he has acted in ways that hurt her daughters or when he has made unreasonable requests. Finally, Amanda explained that her daughters have often been ready to go for their visitation when she has received a phone call from her ex-husband's new wife saying he was not home because he was out with his friends "doing drugs." The impact of these women's former spouses on their lives varied, but the disruptions were significant for all of them. Rachel was the one participant who did not describe her husband as a disruption or as difficult. She said that they still own property or investments together, and that they "got along" quite well.

Fixer and Mediator

Three of the five participants saw their roles as involving mediation and intervention between the stepfather and stepchildren. Rachel, Catrina, and Amanda believed they needed to intervene when there was conflict between their spouses and children. They all explained to their husbands on numerous occasions how they thought the children should be treated. They would also speak to the children to help them understand their stepfathers' perspectives. These women all saw such intervention as a difficult endeavour because they did not want to hurt or betray anyone in their families. Neither Gwen nor Brenda described themselves as being involved in any "fixing" or mediating.

Conclusions

It is not surprising that mothers in stepfather families would find their experience difficult. The present findings are supported by the relevant extant clinical and empirical literature, which indicates that living in a stepfamily presents a complex and unique set of challenges. This study found that these mothers in stepfather families may feel in the

middle between their partners and their children. Four of the five participants experienced strain either from feeling in the middle or from having to take care of the needs of both children and the stepfather. Papernow (1993) has previously reported this same finding. She has also reported that many of these parents become mediators as they try to deal with conflicts in the steprelationships. The present investigation supports this claim. Three of the participants indicated that they felt like mediators who had to intervene in conflicts between their children and their partners.

Members of stepfamilies have been reported as having to deal with a series of relationships for which they are not prepared (Visher & Visher, 1988). For example, this study found that relationships with former spouses can be a source of strain for mothers in this type of family. The magnitude of the effect is unclear. Some of the factors that may affect the level of stress experienced may include the type of relationship former spouses had when they were married, and whether the mother is satisfied with her present relationship, or with the specific actions of the former husband. For instance, Gwen explained in her feedback that she feels she has "unresolved" issues toward her former husband, and that these resentments may be partly to blame for why she sees him as a disturbance.

It is clear from the findings that these women regard being a mother as their main role. This is indicated by their commitment and dedication to their children. Furthermore, the participants perceived their children as being their main priority and described themselves as having very strong relationships with them. Demo and Acock (1996) found that the most significant factor affecting the self-esteem of mothers in stepfather families was the frequency of difficult interactions between mother and child. The present study found that four of the five participants expressed contentment with their lives. It is possible that part of this satisfaction is due to the positive perceptions they have of their relationships with their children. The participating women stated that they had very strong bonds with their children. It is possible that these relationships became closer due to the threats and difficulties they faced during the separation from their previous husbands (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Keshet (1980) and Visher and Visher (1988) report that biological relationships tend to be intense after divorce as parents turn to their children for companionship, emotional support, and nurturance.

None of the women described their relationships with their children as conflictual. The literature indicates, however, that these relationships often encounter difficulties because of the many issues involved. For instance, children go through a process of grieving the loss of their first families, of dealing with having two homes, of accepting the finality of their first families, and of adjusting to their new stepfamilies (Hetherington et al. 1988; Visher & Visher, 1979). The sample in this study is limited and may not be representative

of the population as a whole. It is conceivable, however, that because the participants had the opportunity to tell their stories, they focused on the most salient aspects of their experience. They may accept that some level of conflict with their children is to be expected given what the children have had to adjust to. These mothers may not have regarded this conflict as significant at the time they were interviewed, or they may have felt a need to maintain their status as "good mothers" in my presence. The latter is possible and may limit the validity of the findings.

All participating women were financially independent. Crosbie-Burnett et al. (1988) report that women often remarry due to financial difficulties. Thus, the present sample may not be representative of the overall population of mothers in stepfather families. However, the findings may also point to the realities of our times, where more and more women are becoming financially independent.

Four out of the five participants expressed satisfaction with their families at the time of the interview. Mitchell (1983) reports that divorced mothers felt both less competent and less satisfied with their lives than remarried mothers. He found that remarried mothers used their time more effectively, believed their lives were working out the way they wanted, felt they could rely more on their relationships and community supports, and were generally happier and more satisfied with life as a whole than were divorced mothers. The present investigation suggests that some mothers in stepfather families may benefit from remarriage. All of the participants expressed appreciation of their partners' contributions, and felt that they benefited from the addition of these men to their lives.

There are various aspects in any investigation that may have an effect on its findings, including the interview context, the researcher's interpretations, and the researcher's personal experience and knowledge. The interview context involves interactions between the interviewer and participant. Findings were based on the information provided by the participants during the interviews. I may have been making inferences based on partial information because of the brevity of my contact with the participants. It is difficult to know if additional and perhaps more complete information would have altered my interpretations (Mishler, 1986). As well, my participation in this study was by no means neutral. My experience as a mother in a stepfather family together with my knowledge of the literature undoubtedly resulted in biases and presuppositions. It is important to note that while my experience and knowledge may have had an influence on the interview and analytical processes of my research, it also provided me with a necessary context for conducting the research and interpreting the results.

Generalizability (fittingness) of the findings was not a goal of the present investigation. However, what this research has found may point to some possible facets

of the experiences of these women. The uniqueness of these stories was a significant finding of this study. Each of the participants identified something that was not only unique but also significant to them. Rachel's husband was a recovering addict. Gwen's partner was especially involved with the home and the children. Catrina was very involved in couples' counseling and leading a support group for stepfamilies. Brenda found her former spouse to be very unreasonable. Finally, Amanda had experienced a year of extraordinarily difficult events, and her husband was 25 years older than she was. The uniqueness evidenced in the findings is significant because it holds implications for practitioners. While attending to the information found in the literature, clinicians should always listen to their clients' stories and identify what is significant and unique about them.

Implications

Given that human experience is complex and that general statements concerning individual experiences are necessarily elusive, the present findings are best considered as a set of experiential possibilities. I suspect that each mother in a stepfather family experiences a unique mixture of the possible factors affecting women in these family structures. The commonalties among mothers are limited by the fact that there are many possible combinations of factors. Furthermore, each mother may place different emphasis on each of these experiential factors. This claim is congruent with the normative-adaptive model in that it proposes that mothers in these families experience challenges in adapting to their new lives. It enhances the theory by speculating that while there are similarities among mothers in stepfather families, the mixture of unique challenges and benefits that each woman faces are unique to her situation. At the same time, the findings do identify some possible aspects of maternal experiences for mothers in stepfather families that can inform clinicians in working with this population. Studies like this one carry the implication that practitioners who deliver counselling to stepfamilies should keep in mind that these women's experiences are unique to the dynamics of this particular type of family. Clinicians must pay attention not only to the issues but also to the weight that each client places on various issues, and how the unique combination of these issues may require different types of intervention.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of social research are always bound by certain limitations and this study is no exception. First, the present investigation focused on the content of one-hour interviews. The data contained in these interviews are selective and limited. The generalizability of the findings is limited because of sample size and methodology. The study focused on the stories of only five mothers in stepfather families. These women

may represent a number of other mothers in stepfather families but certainly not all such individuals. For instance, the participants in this study were all financially and socially stable. Clearly, there are other women from different socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds who may have different experiences. Nevertheless, the present study may be an initial step in understanding women in this population. Research that includes women from a greater variety of backgrounds would be a next step in qualitative research on mothers' experiences in stepfather families. Qualitative research is necessarily bound to both the subject's and the researcher's perspectives. Different researchers may arrive at different interpretations and find different theories to account for them.

In order to validate the results of this study, I ensured that all of the participants reviewed my interpretations of their interview-generated accounts. Nonetheless, the validity of the findings is always limited by temporal considerations. The time at which interviews are conducted plays an important role in how the interviewees describe their experiences. More recent events and situations in the participants' lives probably affected the tone and content of their stories to some extent. The feedback questionnaires were provided four months after the initial interviews and provided some opportunity to assess the extent to which "timing" was a factor in how these women told their stories. Four out of the five participants confirmed my interpretations, while the fifth participant (Amanda) agreed only partially. In the latter case, it appears that time may have been a factor in how Amanda reported her experience. The results of qualitative research represent the experiences of the participants as participants understand them at the time of the research. Human experience is inevitably influenced by events that are perceived as most immediate and significant.

Some of the tensions experienced by the mothers in this study could be understood as related to the mothers' loyalties to both their children and their partners. Future research could investigate whether a larger sample of mothers in stepfather families actually experiences such issues of loyalty, to what extent, and how. It appeared that these women were all coping well, and that four of them felt satisfied with their lives at the time of the investigation. Researchers might also explore how mothers in stepfather families cope with the challenges facing them, and whether their coping is related to their sense of satisfaction and to the success of their families. The present findings also suggest that the mothers' perceptions of their husbands as contributors to their children's upbringing may have a very positive impact on how satisfied these women are. Future research could investigate further how mothers perceive their spouses and whether these perceptions affect their levels of satisfaction. It is important to note that research on stepfamilies has shown that stepfamilies change and evolve over a period of time (Heatherington & Bray, 1993). In other words, stepfamilies have been found to go through the most difficult adjustment period over the first five years. It is possible that because none of the women I

interviewed had been in their stepfamilies longer than five years, they may have told different stories later in their stepfamily development.

A highly complex web of factors that are difficult to isolate or define affects human behavior and experience. In the present study, I aimed at uncovering how mothers experience being in stepfather families. The findings reveal that each woman's story is unique to her situation, but that some commonalities can be identified across several women's accounts. Clinicians and researchers in this area, like those in other branches of human psychology, must continuously strive to balance the generalizations their craft demands with careful attention to the unique aspects of those individual cases they encounter.

Tables

Table 1

Demographic and Descriptive Information for Each of the Participants

Rachel:

- 34 years old; legal assistant
- 5 year common-law relationship
- Children: Bailey 12 and Jason 10
- Common-law husband, Bob, 29; construction worker
- Bob has a 5 year old daughter from a previous marriage; she visits every other weekend
- Bailey and Jason visit their father, Jim, every other weekend

Gwen:

- 38 years old; biochemistry technologist
- 2 ½ year marriage
- Children: James 15 and Anthony, 8
- Husband, Charles, 31; biochemical technologist
- Charles has no other children
- James and Anthony visit their father on holidays and summer vacation

Catrina

- 38 years old; non-employed flight attendant, owns a home business
- 5 years in present marriage
- Children: Brianne, 12 and Rick, 10
- Husband: Sam, 47 years old; airline pilot
- Sam has a daughter from a previous marriage, she visits every other weekend
- Brianne and Rick see their father once a month for a dinner outing

Brenda

- 48 years old; family therapist
- 1 ½ years in this marriage
- Children: Sandy 16 and Becky, 11
- Husband: Jonathan, 47; teacher
- Jonathan has no children from a previous relationship
- Sandy and Becky's father recently moved to Australia, they will visit during school breaks

Amanda

- 23 years old; planning on entering a legal secretary-training program
- 2 years in present common-law relationship
- Children: Shannon, 6 and Ally, 3
- Common-law husband: Bradley, 48; longshoreman
- Bradley has two sons from two previous relationships. They visit regularly
- Shannon and Ally visit their father every other weekend

Table 2

Steps in the Analysis Procedures.

1. Thematic analysis (identification of main and secondary themes).
2. Identification of subject positions.
3. Cross-check of the accuracy of 1 and 2 by listing propositions in the text that support them.
4. Writing of a narrative account of the central theme and its relations to subject positions and secondary themes.
5. Summary of responses to core guiding questions.
6. Microanalysis.
 - a. Identification of consistencies and inconsistencies in the narrative and the main theme.
 - b. Comparing and contrasting the main theme against the results in steps 3 to 6.
 - c. Revising, refining and limiting the main theme.
 - d. Repeating step 6b and 6c until the final version of the theme becomes most representative of the narrative.
7. Submission of the final analyses to participants for their review and feedback.
8. Collective analysis
 - a. Identification of the components of each of the central themes, positions and secondary themes.
 - b. Components grouped into categories by matching them through similarities.
 - c. Limitations to similarities noted.
 - d. Components highlighted to identify which ones belonged to main themes.

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