(RE)CONSTRUCTING FAMILY IMAGES:

STEPMOTHERHOOD BEFORE MOTHERHOOD

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATIONS

To my three parents. No words can capture the depth of my love and appreciation for you. The friendship amongst the three of you is the most treasured gift you could ever have given your children, and for that, I am eternally grateful. Specifically, I dedicate this thesis to Karen, who navigated stepmotherhood with insurmountable grace, and never made me wonder if perhaps it was not always easy.
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(Re)constructing Family Images: Stepmotherhood Before Motherhood

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ABSTRACT

Strong cultural values and ideals attached to women in families deem the role of stepmother as inferior to that of biological mother. While motherhood is celebrated, stepmotherhood is stigmatized, and women who assume a stepmother role before having biological children of their own may grieve the loss of images surrounding normative ideals of creating a family. Using a feminist family studies approach, the purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore the experiences of women without children in their transition to stepmotherhood. Interviews with 23 stepmothers (aged 26-47) revealed that women engaged in an internal process of creating and then adjusting personal images of family life to accommodate their new family circumstances. The process of (re)constructing family images had implications for later adjustment to stepmotherhood. Notions of the motherhood hierarchy emerged to depict the unique experience of women who assumed the role of stepmother prior to having biological children.

Keywords: feminist theory, gender, motherhood, stepmothers, stepfamilies
CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent estimates have indicated that approximately half of all marriages today are a remarriage for one or both partners, and more than 40% of American adults report having at least one step relative in their family (Pew Research Center, 2010). The increase in stepfamily formation has resulted in heightened interest in the relational processes relevant to the development of step-relationships. Researchers have paid greatest attention to understanding the dynamics of the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2016). Because children tend to live with their mothers following parental divorce, most of stepfamily research has focused on the mother-stepfather household; less is known about the relational processes of residential father and stepmother relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2016).

When stepmother-stepchild relationships are examined, research tends to support that stepmothers are less successful than stepfathers in developing positive relationships with their stepchildren. For instance, using a sample of 139 stepparents, MacDonald and DeMaris (1996) found that stepmothers reported more difficulty in raising and relating to stepchildren than did stepfathers. Perspectives of stepchildren have likewise reflected greater ambivalence in relationships with stepmothers. Schmeckle (2007) found that while adult stepchildren described positive relationships with stepfathers who fulfilled “breadwinning” responsibilities, stepmothers who enacted the role of kinkeeper were often disliked for such behavior. In fact, multiple studies have found that stepchildren reported accepting stepfathers more frequently as parent figures than stepmothers (Ahrons, 1994; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). This gender difference is noteworthy, and it arguably deserves more attention from stepfamily researchers than it
receives. As Levin (1997) pointed out, “most research uses gender as an explanation of why relationships can be difficult, but not as a starting point for understanding” (p. 178). In order to understand the development of stepmother-stepchild relationships, it is necessary to understand the unique role of stepmotherhood.

Although stepfamily roles, in general, are characterized by a lack of normative beliefs and guidelines, the role of stepmother is particularly ambiguous. Feminist theory provides a useful lens for understanding why. From this perspective, role construction and enactment is heavily influenced by the gendered contexts within families (Thompson, 1992), and men and women’s experiences in families are shaped by social norms of expected behaviors and responsibilities (Allen, Lloyd, & Few, 2009). For women, these norms become particularly complex in stepfamilies. Unlike stepfathers, stepmothers must negotiate competing role expectations, as gendered notions of the appropriate familial roles of women collide with expectations of the appropriately distanced role of stepparents (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). In other words, stepmothers are expected to be highly involved as women in families while somehow simultaneously less involved as stepparents (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Men, on the other hand, experience no such contradiction; the male role, Levin argued, “is determinant of his behavior regardless of whether he is father or stepfather” (p. 187).

Not surprisingly, research exploring the experiences of stepmothers has reflected their frustrations with conflicting role expectations. For instance, in two studies stepmothers’ use of online support groups and discussion boards in coping with their stepparent role were examined, and both found that issues related to role conflict were the most frequently discussed topics (Craig & Johnson, 2010; Craig, Harvey-Knowles, &
Johnson, 2012). Many of the stepmothers expressed their frustration with being expected to fulfill mothering responsibilities such as cleaning up after stepchildren, while at the same time feeling as though they had no authority in decision-making regarding visitation schedules or disciplinary practices (Craig & Johnson, 2010). It is important to note that even the most successful and well-adjusted stepmothers have experienced considerable challenge with role ambiguity (Whiting, Smith, Barnett, & Grafsky, 2007). In an exploration of stepmother success stories (cleverly titled “Overcoming the Cinderella Myth”), the most frequently discussed challenges of stepmotherhood were those pertaining to conflicting expectations of the stepmother role and ensuing feelings of confusion and frustration (Whiting et al., 2007).

Perhaps the most concise depiction of the ambiguous stepmother role came from a sample of nonresidential stepmothers who described “mothering but not mother roles” (Weaver & Coleman, 2005, p. 477). Although these stepmothers made efforts to engage in mothering behaviors and embody certain mother-like qualities, they were careful not to infringe on the role of the biological mother. In fact, the role of the biological mother was so untouchable that even stepmothers who perceived mothers’ parenting as less than ideal were careful not to criticize or act superior in their roles as a stepmother (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Studies from the perspective of adult stepchildren likewise suggest that stepmothers’ careful negotiation of these roles is important for positive stepparent-stepchild relationships. For instance, one researcher found that young adult stepdaughters who described positive stepmothering behaviors—although they identified five unique styles of positive stepmothering roles—all reported that their stepmothers did not attempt to usurp their mothers (Crohn, 2006).
Why, then, are stepmothers so incredibly cautious in not imposing on the rights of the biological mother? At the root of this issue is the ubiquitous *myth of motherhood*, and with it, an implicit inferiority of the stepmother role. DiLapi (1989) argued that societal values deem certain types of motherhood as more appropriate than others, and women at the apex of this hierarchy are mothers in first-marriage, nuclear families. The pervasive mother stereotypes in North American culture have supported this framework. Powerful societal ideals surrounding motherhood have resulted in the revered super-mom, characterized by involved, intensive mothering combined with unconditional love, patience, and support (Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Motherhood is seen as instinctual to women; as such, biological mothers alone are those best capable of meeting the needs of their children (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). In fact, in attempts to empower women as nurturers, popular child-rearing manuals have reinforced the motherhood hierarchy with such statements as, “Mothering is too complex and instinctive to teach” (Brazelton, 1983, p. 42 cited in Hayes, 1996).

Such positive images are in stark contrast to the stereotypes of the less appropriate role of stepmotherhood. The infamous stereotype of the wicked stepmother has been consistently perpetuated by media representations of stepmothers as cruel or callous (Ganong & Coleman, 2016). Interestingly, traditional fairy tales used biological mothers as the antagonist throughout history (in the original rendition of Snow White, for example, she was persecuted by her biological mother), and in attempts to restore the sacred image of motherhood, wicked mothers were transformed into wicked stepmothers by the turn of the eighteenth century (Thurer, 1994). Despite the diversity of mother types, stepmothers have received the brunt of prejudicial attention. In fact, while
godmothers, grandmothers, and even adoptive mothers have occasionally appeared in these well-known fables, it is only stepmothers who have been repeatedly represented as being “diametrically opposite to ‘true’ maternity,” (Downe, 2001, p. 33). Even when stereotypes are less severe, the word stepmother continues to hold connotations of failure (divorce), being second best (second wife), and challenging the myth of the happy family (Downe, 2001; Ganong & Coleman, 1995). Indeed, in an exploration of mother stereotypes, stepmothers were perceived to be less family-oriented and have fewer positive personality characteristics (e.g., patient, caring, dependable, wholesome) and more negative personality traits (e.g., unkind, unreasonable), not only compared to married mothers, but also to women in general (Ganong & Coleman, 1995).

Although the stereotype of the wicked stepmother may be a myth, it has very real consequences for how women enact their roles as a stepmother. Despite the uncertainty regarding the type of stepmother women do want to be, they generally know what type they do not want to be (Ganong & Coleman, 2016). In fact, women have reported avoiding disciplining stepchildren in a conscious effort to avoid the wicked stepmother label (Weaver & Coleman, 2005). Such negative stereotypes may also prevent stepmothers from seeking social support, as women who fear that they will associate themselves with the wicked stepmother label by voicing their frustrations with stepmotherhood will likely keep to themselves to avoid the reinforcement of social stigma (Craig & Johnson, 2010). Such notions appear to have been supported by research. For instance, in a comparison of biological mothers to stepmothers, one study found that stepmothers received less social validation from members of their families as
well as the broader community—this is particularly problematic given the stepmothers’ higher levels of parenting stress and depressive symptoms (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011).

Although the presence of negative stereotypes has been acknowledged by researchers, there have been few investigations of the effects of these stereotypes on stepfamilies and stepfamily members (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Ganong & Coleman, 2016). The number of studies that have explored stereotypes, particularly concerning the position of stepmothers, have primarily examined how stepmothers cope with negative stereotypes (e.g., Craig & Johnson, 2010; Craig et al., 2012) and how they overcome them (e.g., Whiting et al., 2007). However, the contrasting images of biological and step-motherhood likely have implications even earlier in the process of adjustment to stepfamily life. Women, for instance, may begin ruminating about the motherhood hierarchy as romantic relationships to partners with children become serious, and they contemplate the possibility of assuming a stepmother role.

It is important to note that research seldom differentiates between stepmothers with biological children and those without biological children, but it is likely that these two stepmother types have different experiences in their transition to stepmotherhood. In two studies, the experiences of childless stepmothers and their use of online support groups in coping with their role as a stepmother have been specifically examined (Craig & Johnson, 2010; Craig et al., 2012). However, their samples largely consisted of stepmothers whose frustrations with stepparenthood were rooted in the fact that they had never wished to become mothers in the first place. In contrast, we are interested in women who do have dreams of becoming a mother, but become a stepmother first. Downe (2001) argued, “Becoming a mother is a rite of passage and is therefore marked
by culturally celebrated and venerated rituals” (p. 30). Specifically, motherhood is marked by pregnancy and childbirth, as the normative motherhood ideal is based in the belief that becoming a mother should be a biological process. As such, biological maternity is the ultimate symbol of not only motherhood, but also womanhood itself (Downe, 2001). Indeed, such an argument has been supported by findings that the majority of American women today still view motherhood as central to their identity and important for life-fulfillment (McQuillan, Greil, Scheffler, & Tichenor, 2008).

While the role of motherhood may be a sign of achievement, the role of stepmotherhood is typically not perceived as a hallmark of success for women. Hart (2009) offered a succinct comparison of these two roles: “Culturally, mother is central; stepmother is marginal. Mothers are canonized; stepmothers are demonized. Mothers are supported by family and culture and community; stepmothers not only have no built in supports, but are often isolated in their efforts” (p. 131). If women believe this to be true, such a bleak depiction of this less-appropriate type of motherhood may have implications for how women without biological children feel about becoming a stepmother. However, the possible internal struggles that women without children experience as they potentially let go of cultural ideals surrounding the transition to motherhood, and instead assume a “mothering but not mother role” (Weaver & Coleman, 2005), have not been examined.

Although the myth of motherhood is contradictory to the stereotypes of stepmothers, it nonetheless implies that the best stepmothers are those who possess mother-like qualities. For instance, the cultural idealization of mothering promotes the stepfamily myth that stepmothers should love their children easily and immediately (Ganong & Coleman, 2016). However, it is possible (indeed, likely) that childless
mothers are simultaneously letting go of long-held personal images and ideals regarding creating a family. By family images, we mean personal expectations, models, or fantasies that individuals may have about what their future family will look like. Women who wish to someday become mothers likely fantasize about starting a family, but not entering one. If and how stepmothers attempt to build relationships with stepchildren is likely influenced by whether or not they may also be grieving the loss of such images and ideals. The term disenfranchised grief has been used to describe the grief a person experiences “when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (Doka, 1989, p. 4). According to this definition, stepmothers who feel unable to acknowledge their affliction over losing images of ideal motherhood to the less appropriate status of stepmotherhood may experience disenfranchised grief, even as they willingly enter a happy marriage.

Feminist scholars have advocated for an agenda of family studies research that helps women connect their personal experience in families to the larger social context (Thompson, 1992). To optimally achieve this goal, it is necessary to ask the “previously unasked (and unaskable) questions about invisible family processes and structures” using a methodological approach that is “participant-centric,” inviting participants voices to be heard (Allen et al., 2009, p. 7). Using a feminist family studies approach, the purpose of our study was to explore the experiences of women without children in their transition to stepmotherhood. Specifically, we examined how motherhood ideals and stepmother stereotypes influence stepmothers’ adjustment to stepfamilies. Understanding these emotional processes may be important for reducing possible feelings of confliction, resentment, or guilt in stepmothers without biological children of their own. Previous
research seems to support the idea that women silently struggle in adjusting to being a stepmother, and the struggles have implications for their relationships with stepchildren. Santrock and Sitterle (1987), for instance, found that stepmothers’ attempts to establish good relationships with their stepchildren were often problematic, and compared with mothers from first marriage families, stepmothers felt less involved in the lives of their stepchildren. These same stepchildren, in turn, tended to view stepmothers as somewhat detached, unsupportive, and uninvolved in their lives. In fact, a recent study of 333 women found that levels of depression and anxiety were significantly higher among stepmothers than biological mothers (Doodson & Davies, 2014).

Because children in stepfamilies benefit from positive family interactions, it is important to understand possible factors that impede the development of positive stepfamily relationships. Fine and Kurdek (1992) found that supervision, warmth, interest, and order in stepmother families were related to children’s positive adjustment. Children in stepfamilies who reported close relationships with stepparents, either liking them from the start or growing to like and appreciate them over time, perceived personal benefits such as valuable sources of emotional or instrumental support (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). To better understand these outcomes, I was interested in how building relationships with stepchildren may be influenced by stepmothers’ personal adjustment to stepmotherhood. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore the process of adjusting personal images and ideals of creating a family for stepmothers without children.
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

Recruitment & Sample Description

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were recruited through e-advertisements (see Appendix A) at a major Midwestern university. Women who self-identified as stepmothers and who had a) acquired stepchildren before having biological children of their own, and b) had dreams of starting a family but married into a stepfamily first, were encouraged to contact the researchers for an interview. Because frequency of contact with stepchildren may have influenced how women felt about being a stepmother and adjusting to stepfamily life, both residential and nonresidential stepmothers were eligible to participate.

The final sample consisted of 23 stepmothers (see Table 1; all names have been changed) who ranged in age from 26 to 47 ($M = 35.5$). The duration of their stepfamily marriages ranged from two weeks to 26 years ($M = 9.1$ years). Three women self-identified as cohabiting stepmothers; the duration of their cohabiting unions were two, four, and 13 years. Stepmothers had between one and four stepchildren ($M = 1.6$). Since their marriages, 10 stepmothers had given birth to children, and two were expecting. Custody arrangements ranged from seeing stepchildren every other weekend ($n = 3$) to living with stepchildren full time ($n = 6$), with most sharing some derivative of a 50/50 custodial arrangement ($n = 14$). Fifteen stepmothers identified as middle class, and eight identified as working class; all but one identified as White.

Data Collection & Analysis

In-person, semi-structured interviews that lasted 45-60 minutes were conducted with each participant. All interviews were conducted by the first author. Written informed
consent was obtained prior to beginning each interview, and participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used in any published material.

Interviews began with constructing a genogram, a pictorial representation of family structure and membership, which aided in establishing researcher-subject rapport and allowed the interviewer to collect relevant demographic information. Interviews then followed a chronological progression designed to cover a range of topics related to women’s transitions to stepmotherhood. Topics included stepmothers’ personal images or fantasies about starting a family of their own as girls or young women; how they felt about meeting and falling in love with someone who already had children; how stepmother stereotypes influenced the way they conceptualized and enacted their roles as stepmothers; their freedom of expression in sharing their experiences of transitioning to stepmotherhood with spouses or other social supports; and how the loss or adjustment of motherhood ideals influenced the development of their relationships with their stepchildren. Interviews concluded with the opportunity for participants to add any relevant thoughts pertaining to their experiences with stepmotherhood.

Grounded theory procedures were used to examine stepmothers’ experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In accordance with grounded theory, hypotheses were not formulated in advance in order to allow theory to emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then coded. Interview transcripts were read by both the first and second author. The first author then coded transcripts line by line using participants’ own words to form codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These initial codes were then analyzed by the first author for links and grouped into related categories and themes. As an example, verbatim codes
such as “I figured I would have four kids” and “I wanted two children, a girl and a boy” were grouped into the category “constructing family images.” The resulting categories were reviewed by the second author, and weekly meetings allowed for discussion and development of the overall themes. All themes resulted from merging line-by-line codes into related categories and grouping categories to develop larger concepts.

A codebook was developed with the initial verbatim codes and larger emerging concepts (see Appendix B). Constant comparison was used throughout data analysis, involving a continual process of reanalyzing transcriptions line-by-line to apply new codes, refine developing concepts, and validate emerging themes. Memos completed immediately after individual interviews and throughout the coding process assisted in tracking recurring themes and forming hypotheses. Throughout data collection, triangulation and member checking were used to ensure the rigor of data analyses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Once conceptual saturation was reached (i.e., interviews no longer provided new information), recruitment efforts were discontinued (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). Transcripts were revisited a final time to confirm that the conceptual themes were thoroughly represented in the data.
CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Although stepmothers varied in their family demographic variables (e.g., number of stepchildren, length of (re)marriages, presence of biological children, custodial arrangements, etc.), they shared similar experiences in adjusting to stepmotherhood. The core concept was (re)constructing family images; stepmothers engaged in an internal process of creating and then adjusting personal images of family life to accommodate their new family circumstances. This initial process of (re)constructing family images had implications for later adjustment to stepmotherhood. Throughout their narratives, notions of the motherhood hierarchy emerged to depict the unique experience of women who assumed the role of stepmother prior to having biological children.

(Re)constructing Family Images

When I was a kid and people would ask what I wanted to be when I grow up, I always told them I want to be a mom. Most girls want to be like singers or movie stars or whatever, and I didn’t. I just wanted to be a mom, and it was all I really cared about.

Lauren, a 24-year-old stepmother, poignantly expressed a sentiment that stepmothers in our sample shared: at some point during their lives, they had dreams of becoming a mother. They each could recall a time, usually during childhood or adolescence, when they had given thought to what their future family would look like. Often, their images were clear and specific. Renee described, “I always thought I’d get married and then have two kids, you know, the typical boy/girl, with the boy being the oldest.” Marci described, “I wanted girls…I probably figured two was a good number.” Similarly, Julie said, “I always knew I’d be a mom, and I figured I would have four kids.
We always have this idea, right? I thought all that would be done and over with by the time I was 30.” The origins of women’s personal images, however, seemed to vary. Several stepmothers pointed to their family of origin as an explanation. For instance, Denise reported, “I wanted two children, a girl and a boy.” (Interviewer: “Why?”) Denise: “Cause my mom had a girl and a boy, so I wanted the same thing.” Emily likewise identified the influence of her family of origin but further elaborated on the role of society in shaping her personal images:

I just always imagined meeting somebody similar to me, and doing what my parents did, what my sister did, what I thought you were supposed to do…as far as like, you know, the ideals that society places on us, the ideals of two people meeting, like college age. They meet, they marry, they buy a house, they have kids, they live in the suburbs.

Women in our sample wanted to become mothers, but why was becoming a mother important to them? Most struggled to answer this question, and our interviews were an opportunity for them to reflect on this matter, seemingly for the first time. In trying to articulate their reasoning, statements like, “I just always assumed I would” (Kathleen) were common. Similarly, Sharon said, “I guess I always thought, ‘Of course,’ you know, ‘Of course I will have children some day.’” In attempting to find the origins of these assumptions, issues surrounding cultural ideologies of womanhood were brought to the surface. Sharon explained, “It just seemed like that is what you’re supposed to do, you know, that is what women do. Women, among the many things that they do, they produce children.” Lynn described, “I guess that’s just something, I don’t know, fulfilling my biological destiny somehow.” Marci and Eileen likewise pointed to an ambiguous
internal feeling that motivated a desire to reproduce: Marci described, “I guess it’s that motherly instinct kicking in.” Eileen echoed, “I don’t know, it’s just something in me that wants to have that experience.”

Of the 23 women interviewed, none expressed that becoming a stepmother or having stepchildren was something they pictured in their original family image. No one said, “I wanted two stepchildren and two biological children,” or “I had always dreamed of becoming a stepmom.” Sharon, like many participants, was acutely aware of the negative stereotypes of stepmotherhood, and she perceived that these stereotypes played a role in explaining why becoming a stepmother was not part of her initial plan:

“Stepmother is not a positive word. The stepmother is never a good character, always evil, always out to damage the children, never the good guy, good gal, whatever. And so it never crossed my mind as an appealing thing to be.” All of these women, of course, did become stepmothers before having biological children of their own. How did they adjust their images accordingly?

When romantic relationships became serious, and women contemplated the possibility of joining their partner’s family, they found that they had a decision to make. Was their original family image flexible, or was it so governing that it could not be relinquished? Tracey reflected on this period of internal rumination: “For a long time I was a little concerned because I know a lot of things can come along with that, with an ex-wife and kids, and I really wasn’t sure that that’s what I wanted for my life.” In recounting their experiences, stepmothers shared an important commonality: in the end, they all felt that the benefits far outweighed the costs. Kim said, “They [husband and
stepson] stole my heart. I fell in love with Daniel [husband], and he came as a package deal.” Eileen added:

When you marry someone, you marry their family. I’ve always wanted to have a family, so it may not be what I imagined or the perfect family that I thought of when I was 14, but I’m gonna try my best to be the best that I can doing it.

Jennifer became emotional when reflecting on how the benefits of gaining her husband and stepchildren far outweighed the cost of adjusting her family image: “There was the realization that [crying], I’m sorry, where I just realized how lucky I was, so it didn’t really matter…whatever I was losing was pale in comparison to what I was gaining.”

Stepmothers acknowledged that even as they were willingly entering happy marriages, they were nonetheless faced with the task of adjusting long-held personal images regarding what it would look like to start a family. Stepmothers in our sample demonstrated flexibility in adapting their family images to accommodate their new circumstances. As Sharon described, “I had to change my thinking, which was having an idea of what something should be and then being faced with the reality of what it is.”

Stepmothers used various strategies to cope with adjusting their images. Initially, women exemplified an effort to normalize their new family images. Women who normalized were able to alter their images by reminding and reassuring themselves that stepfamilies are not uncommon. For example, Emily described, “After I met them [husband and stepdaughter], I talked with my friends who would say, ‘You know, a lot of people are in this situation.’ So I thought, ‘Yeah, you’re right, there are,’ like this isn’t really an uncommon situation.” Jennifer described a similar process of normalizing: “I
guess I became okay with it [the thought of becoming a stepmom], because it started to seem like more and more of a, you know, quote/unquote normal family.” For Jennifer, normalizing also involved reconsidering how important her original images were to her. She explained, “I realized that these visions or plans that I’d had in my head weren’t really based on much…just realizing that life isn’t going to be exactly as you had thought, and that’s okay, and sometimes it’s really great.” She, like other stepmothers, was able to adjust her images by recognizing the value in flexibility and change.

Following a process of normalizing, stepmothers fell into one of two categories: they either broadened their images, or they replaced them. Half of women in our sample (n = 12) exemplified the strategy of broadening their images to create a family picture that was inclusive of stepchildren. In doing so, they did not let go of their original image of starting a family. For instance, Denise described a conversation she had with her husband before becoming a stepmother to his daughter:

I said that if we’re gonna get married, I still wanted a girl and a boy. Even though I’d already have a girl [my stepdaughter], I still wanted a girl that was mine, that I birthed myself. So I was like ‘Okay, well, instead of two I’ll just have three.’

Lauren also did not relinquish her dream of having biological children:

I guess I just kept the thought in my mind that we would have a family later on. I held onto that, you know, that one day I will have my own kid, and then this will be worth it.

Women who broadened their family images desired biological children so strongly that this desire often served as a requisite for entering the marriage. Kathleen recalled, “When Andrew and I were dating, he did not want to have more kids, and I
knew that would be a deal breaker. I knew that I couldn’t marry someone without a chance of having a family.” Marci went to great lengths to ensure the possibility of reproducing with her partner. She described:

Once we knew that we were interested in each other and that this could possibly go somewhere, he broke the news to me that he had a vasectomy after his second boy was born. I was really taken aback. Okay, do I really want to pursue this because I really want my own kids. You know, I can have a family with these boys [her stepsons] but they’re not mine. So I really had to think about that…eventually I had to say, you know, “If this is gonna go anywhere, you’re gonna have to have things reversed so we can try to have kids of our own as well.” So he agreed to that.

The remaining women in our sample (n = 11) described an adjustment process that involved replacing original images with new images. This occurred when women’s desire to have children was satisfied by the acquisition of stepchildren. Unlike stepmothers who broadened their images, stepmothers who replaced images relinquished their original intentions of having biological children. For example, Ashley described, “I realize that I sort of missed out on having babies, but I have this new family that is wonderful and fills that need.” Ashley was the sole mother figure to her oldest stepchild, whose biological mother had died before Ashley’s involvement. However, replacing images was not true only of stepmothers who fulfilled the primary mothering role. For instance, Lisa’s two stepsons spent 50% of their time with their biological mother, but they nonetheless satisfied her desire for children. She explained:
Being with Jack [husband] has made me feel less and less like I need to have my own kids, because he already has kids, and we have them for half the week…if Jack didn’t have children, and we didn’t have kids in our home, I might think about having kids, just because I think family involves children in some way…But having Cameron and Liam [stepchildren] in my life, that’s enough of being a mother for me.

Lisa’s process of letting go of her images of traditional motherhood involved what she called an “evolution of self-understanding and self-discovery,” as she had to learn to become comfortable with embracing nontraditional alternatives. Lisa elaborated, “I’ve certainly posed myself the question a lot of times, ‘How do I think I’ll feel when I’m 70, and haven’t had kids of my own?’ I still feel relief, so I actually felt that the whole process has felt really liberating.”

Three stepmothers, however, replaced their family images by default rather than by choice. These women entered their marriages with the intention of having biological children, and in the process of trying to conceive a child, they learned of their infertility. Cultural ideologies of womanhood provided a rich backdrop against which these stepmothers evaluated their experiences. Julie had been previously married to a man who left her for another woman, and she speculated that her inability to have children may have been partially responsible for her failed marriage. In an emotional disclosure, she recalled, “Maybe he didn’t see me as much of a typical woman ‘cause I couldn’t have kids, so he found what he needed someplace else.” Like Julie, Eileen was also unable to have children, and her process of adjusting family images was influenced by a perceived social stigma towards female infertility. She described, “I feel like people look down on
women who don’t have children…It makes me feel like I’m less of a woman because, I mean, every woman’s supposed to be able to give birth.”

Adjusting to Stepmotherhood

Following an initial process of adjusting their family images, women were faced with the task of adjusting to the role of stepmotherhood itself. Not having biological children before acquiring stepchildren was a challenging trial for most participants, both for instrumental as well as emotional reasons. First, women described a lack of experience in regards to childrearing practices. For instance, Joy explained:

I had no clue what I was doing. I went into this relationship with a 3-year old and I had never had children, hadn’t really been around kids. I felt like I just jumped into it, you know, and hoped for the best, and I was just treading water most of the time.

Emily voiced similar frustrations, particularly in regard to disciplinary practices: “I didn’t know how to discipline a kid, let alone not my kid…I didn’t know what to do, and there’s nobody to tell you what to do or give you a right or wrong answer.” A particularly frustrating component of stepmothers’ lack of experience was that they assumed it would ‘come naturally,’ and they were unprepared for the challenges that not having prior experience would create. Denise explained this well:

I didn’t think much about ‘being the stepmother’ and how it would go. She [stepdaughter] was 3 so she didn’t need to be changed or anything, just feeding her and sending her to daycare and stuff like that. I always hear women are natural nurturers so I thought it would come natural taking care of someone. (laughs) What do they call it, maternal instincts? I don’t have it. I still haven’t
developed it where there’s just this unconditional love of your child like I see with other parents…Right now it’s just okay, I’m supposed to take care of her, so I take care of her.

The obstacles for adjusting to stepmotherhood, however, went beyond those associated with completing instrumental tasks. More importantly, stepmothers were constantly reminded of the hierarchical nature of motherhood as they sought to adapt to their supposed less appropriate role. Recall that all women in our sample wanted to have children, and becoming a mother was something that was important to them. This made assuming a stepmother’s position particularly difficult. Participants were acutely aware of their inferiority to the position of the biological mother. Although they understood the hierarchy, it was challenging to cope with, particularly when they were highly involved in parenting tasks in stepchildren’s lives. Lauren described, “I put in all this effort and care about him [stepson] so much, and I still have really no say in anything.” Feeling like the outside third party was quite painful for women who were simultaneously adjusting to the loss of their own family images, now finding themselves on the peripheral of the family picture rather than central to it. Lynn described, “You’re second fiddle when you’re the stepmother…As a mother, you are the central person, you call the mother when anything happens, but as a stepmother, you don’t give or get those calls for important things, you’re just a little off to the side.” Similarly, Renee said, “You always kind of feel like the outsider, because you will never be part of that original nuclear family.”

Part of women’s adjustment process involved recognizing that their transition to (step)motherhood was not characterized by the normative motherhood ideal. They
became stepmothers before having experienced the biological process of pregnancy and childbirth, which they felt contributed to the perceived inferiority of their role. Helen described, “I don’t think society views [being a] stepmom as actually being a mom. You didn’t go through the whole process of motherhood; you just came into being a mom.” Sharon likewise said, “I think there’s a perception that if the child didn’t come from your own loins (laughs), then you don’t have this full experience.” Joy demonstrated a thoughtful awareness of the implications of the normative motherhood ideal, including what it meant for her relationship with her stepson, Luke:

I feel like motherhood starts before the baby’s born…you have the pregnancy, you have that baby growing inside of you, you have that connection and that person is a part of you…. Somebody else went through that with him [stepson], so he’s got that connection to somebody else. His mom can’t do anything wrong. He loves his mom, there’s that connection he has with her that he’ll never have with me. There’s that spot in his heart that she can only fill, like a special sacred place.

The exalted state of motherhood compared to the stigmatized status of stepmotherhood was particularly frustrating for women who perceived the biological mother to be a poor parent. One stepmother explained:

Moms are put on this pedestal compared to stepmoms, and I struggle with that because Stephen’s [biological] mother is one of those people who probably shouldn’t have had children. She just doesn’t pay attention to him. All he wants is her love, for her to approve of him and pay attention to him, and she just gives him a tablet and sends him on his way. It’s like I’m beating my head against the wall because I’m trying so hard to be this positive role model in his life, and she
gets all the credit for it. I just feel like the whole pregnancy and motherhood and stuff is glorified while stepmoms are kind of put in the dark and not really thought about.

Even stepmothers who served as the sole or primary mother figure to stepchildren were aware of and affected by the “less appropriate” position of stepmotherhood. Six participants had stepchildren who lived with them full time because their biological mothers were either deceased (n = 3) or estranged (n = 3). Even then, stepmothers were often reminded of the hierarchal nature of motherhood. Ashley described public-setting experiences that exemplified this well:

If we’re in a restaurant, and we’re sitting as a family, the four of us, someone will come over and ask me if it’s OK to give the kids soda, because I appear to be the mother in charge here. We went and got his [stepson’s] haircut recently, and the hairdresser said, “Should I use a five on the blade?” and I’m like, “Sure.” But if we went to the restaurant, and I was sitting across from John [husband] and I had some sign on me that said “I’m a stepparent,” they probably wouldn’t ask me the question, they would ask John the question, “Can the kids have soda?” or how the kid’s haircut should look.

Similarly, Jennifer had been in the life of her stepson since he was 4; he lived with her and her husband full time, called her “Mom,” and had no relationship with his biological mother. As such, Jennifer learned the necessity of presenting herself as the biological mother—or at least not drawing attention to the fact that she was a stepmother—especially in institutional settings. Jennifer explained:
I had to learn to drop the prefix “step.” Stepmoms aren’t the one you call first if your kid’s hurt. If Ryan [stepson] was hurt at school and they saw a stepmom and then they saw a dad as the next line, well, they’re probably gonna call dad first, and that’s not what I wanted to happen (laughs). I wanted to know first. But I think there’s a perception that as a “stepmom,” I shouldn’t be as involved as somebody with the title “mom.”

For women who were simultaneously reconstructing their family images as they adjusted to stepmotherhood, being reminded of their less respected position was not easy. Additionally problematic was that amidst this struggle, women in our sample perceived a lack of support. First, women who struggled the most in adjusting to stepfamily life described their hesitation to seek support in fear of reinforcing stigmatized perceptions of stepmotherhood. Helen explained, “Being a stepmom, you’re kind of scared to let people know the negative things because of the media and what kids see growing up, people hear the word stepmom and they usually cringe. It’s just not something I talk about.” Indeed, stepmothers’ reluctance to be transparent about their thoughts was evident. Sharon paused several times throughout her interview to confirm the anonymity of her disclosures. In mid-thought, she exclaimed, “God, how anonymous is this? This is totally anonymous, right? That piece of paper’s gonna burn and eventually this tape will get destroyed?” Stepmothers acknowledged that they were saying many of their thoughts out loud for the first time. Through tears, Marci admitted, “Gosh, this is stuff that I haven’t even really discussed with my husband.” Marci was a stepmother of two; she had been married for 10 years and shared two biological children with her husband. Even after a
decade of marriage, Marci acknowledged that adjusting her original family image was an ongoing process:

Even things like wanting family pictures. In the back of my mind I'm always like 'Well, I'd kind of like a picture of me, Jake, and the girls.' But I know that would hurt his feelings because they're all his kids. Yeah, they're my stepsons, and I've taken care of them since they were babies, and they've never known anything different really, but they're still not mine. I don't think I've ever told him that...I feel guilty sometimes, because I look forward to the weeks that we don't have the boys so it's just us four, probably because that's what I pictured my family to be. But then I feel guilty [becomes emotional], because the real picture isn't bad, it's just not the picture.

In addition to a general reluctance to speak out, women who did seek support described a lack of resources available for stepmothers, particularly resources that offered helpful and constructive advice. Julie experienced particularly challenging circumstances that involved a contentious custody battle between her husband and his ex-wife: “I was looking online for how stepmoms deal. What do you do, how do you cope? How do you get out of bed in the morning and face all this?” Other stepmoms reflected on their experience with online outlets, noting that blogs of women ranting and venting were neither comforting nor constructive in their efforts to find supportive resources. Stepmothers who sought advice from self-help books expressed the need for stepparent-specific self-help books. Lisa explained:

I wish there were more good books about stepparenting. There are a lot of books about parenting, and sometimes it feels a little frustrating that parenting books, at
least the ones I’ve come across, seem to be really assuming that this is only for birth parents. For instance, there’s an assumption in a lot of books that you’ll be with the kid every day, which is not true for many stepparents. I just feel like there’s a lack of good models.

A lack of good models with constructive advice combined with a reluctance to speak openly about their experiences resulted in a feeling of isolation, even while knowing that stepfamilies are not uncommon. Towards the end of her interview, I asked Meredith how she felt when she saw the announcement for our study. She replied:

It was nice to see that, I mean, I know there’s other people in my situation, but it was kind of nice to see that it was enough to prompt this study. I was excited, it felt good cause it made me feel a little important, you know, that there was someone who actually wanted to talk to me about this.

Similarly, Kim said, “I felt like it was a good opportunity to finally voice all the things that I think about all the time, because nobody really understands at all…it was just kind of nice seeing that somebody’s interested.”

Celebrations Amongst Challenge

To be sure, stepmothers experienced challenges in reconstructing family images, adjusting to stepmotherhood, and navigating boundaries imposed on them by the motherhood hierarchy. Nonetheless, the positive experiences that stepmothers described were crucial to understanding their stories. When asked how not having biological children before becoming a stepmother influenced their experience, women admitted that not having experience with childrearing was a challenge. Yet, despite this obstacle, all stepmothers acknowledged that by not bringing biological children into the marriage,
they were able to devote their attention towards building relationships with their stepchildren. As a result, they believed that they had stronger bonds with stepchildren than they would have if the circumstances were different. Angela reflected:

I am probably much closer to them than I would otherwise be. I think I just have a lot more space and attention for them, and not having my own kids, it allows me to notice them a lot more and play a more active role in their lives.

Similarly, Renee said, “It really helped, me not having a biological child at the beginning. I think there wasn’t that competition. It could be just him and I, no favoritism in the beginning. We could really just build on solid ground.” Two more stepmothers recounted comparable experiences:

I wouldn’t have had that connection I have with Luke now. Now I feel comfortable bringing other children [into the family], that I won’t lose that connection with him…I guess I prefer being a stepmom first and having that strong relationship before having my own children. –Lauren

If I had my own kid before I met Jackson [stepson], I don’t think that we would be quite as close as we are. We spend a lot of time together. Tyler’s a mechanic so whenever he comes home, he’s usually working on something at home, and Jackson and I just play and make dinner, and I don’t know what that would be like if I had already had a kid. I mean, of course I would be including him as well, but it wouldn’t be like me and him just sitting there talking about our days as much either. –Maryann

Stepmothers’ appreciation of their one-on-one time with stepchildren—those seemingly sacred moments that allowed for the development of a special, individual
bond—was evident from their stories. Kathleen intentionally waited to have shared biological children with her husband because of her unwillingness to give up the moments that her stepsons were “star of the show.” She recalls:

I would have to believe that it [not having biological children] made it easier [to build a relationship with my stepchildren], because once I had kids, you become so immersed in your own kids that I would not have had the time or the attention to spend with them [stepsons]. As it was, when I started dating their dad, every Friday night we were at their sporting events, and our lives kind of revolved around theirs, which would not have been the case if I had had my own kids, especially if they were little. I remember when my stepson graduated from high school, I was pregnant with our first child together and he had just finished his last high school sporting event or whatever, and we had just bought our first video camera, and he was like, “Well, that’s a dumb time to get a camera. What are you going to film now?” ‘Cause in his mind, we were just all about him, he couldn’t even process that there was going to be someone else that we were going to start filming coming along pretty soon. So I definitely think that not having kids of my own made it much easier to make my stepkids the star of the show when they needed to be.

Despite the challenges that the transition and adjustment to stepmotherhood may have posed, women’s positive sentiment as they reflected on their family was clear, and they were cognizant of not representing their stories in a one-dimensional disparaging image. As Renee said, “It’s intimidating to express what we’ve gone through and trying to articulate our situation. Trying not to show it in a negative light is probably my biggest
thing.” Similarly, at the conclusion of her interview, Rebecca said, “I was hopeful that I could portray a positive experience of stepfamilies. By and large, we’ve been pretty functional, and I think that voice probably doesn’t get heard enough.” It was important to them that the positive was not lost in the negative—that the celebrations were not lost in the challenges. When describing a recent family milestone, Lynn reflected on one such celebration, calling it her “stepmother success”:

My stepson, at his wedding, gave a toast to his dad and I because he said we gave him an example of a happy marriage. That made me feel like I’d won, you know? (participant becomes emotional). We were like “Yay, he liked it. We made it.”

Of all participants, Marci arguably struggled the most in her journey of adjusting her family images. But as she concluded her interview, she reflected on her journey with appreciation and gratitude:

It's been a good life, it's wonderful, I have two beautiful daughters because of it and two great stepsons and a wonderful husband, and this extra, what I consider an extra family with Karen [stepchildren’s mother] and her husband and daughter and family. I mean, it’s not what was in the picture, but it’s been a good life. A real good life.
CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

Our findings shed light on an unexplored phenomenon in women’s adjustment to stepmotherhood: the process by which they (re)construct family images, and the implications of the motherhood hierarchy in doing so. West and Zimmerman’s (1987) classic concept of *doing gender* provides a useful interpretive lens. They argued that gender is performed and continually reinforced through interactions, and deviations from appropriate gendered performance have implications for one’s self-evaluation. A substantial component of the appropriate performance of being a woman involves motherhood. Ashurst and Hall (1989), in their attempt to understand the distress of women who sought psychotherapy, concluded that “A woman’s capacity to create, bear, and nurture a child is the very essence of her womanhood, her unique and special capacity” (p. 97). This extreme emphasis on motherhood to the centrality of a woman’s life produces ironic consequences for stepmothers. For one whose personal aspirations involve motherhood, assuming the “secondary” roles of stepmother prior to achieving the higher status of motherhood is challenging. A woman in this position is unable to perform gender in the most appropriate context (i.e., biological maternity) and assumes a position on a lower rung of the motherhood hierarchy instead.

Previous research has documented the trials that stepmothers face in navigating their ambiguous roles (Doodson, 2014; Perez & Torrens, 2009; Weaver & Coleman, 2005; Whiting et al., 2007). However, our findings provide evidence that the consequences of the motherhood hierarchy manifest even *before* stepmothers have assumed their role as a stepparent. Women who dream of becoming mothers, but acquire stepchildren before having experienced the normative transition to motherhood, are faced
with the task of reconstructing their personal images of what they imaged family life would look like. Stepmothers agree that the benefits outweigh the costs, and forfeiting original family images is a sacrifice they are willing to make. Nonetheless, they appear to experience a mild grieving process that resembles disenfranchised grief, as feelings of guilt prevent them from acknowledging their affliction over losing personal images of normative family life.

In her time of editorship, innovative scholar Alexis Walker called for a special edition of *Journal of Marriage and Family* addressing the notion of *ambivalence* in family ties (2002, Vol. 64, No. 3). It was a welcomed exchange in family science, shedding light on the complexity of family dynamics to move scholarship beyond the binary view of families as either harmonious or conflicted (Connidis, 2015). Connidis defines *psychological ambivalence* as “the contradiction of simultaneously holding positive and negative sentiments or emotions about family relationships” (p. 78). Certain family structures are more vulnerable to experiencing ambivalence than others; in kinship networks with less established ways of doing family (Connidis), family members are particularly susceptible to feeling contradictory emotions towards their familial relationships and roles.

Ambivalence provides an effective conceptual lens for understanding stepmothers’ personal narratives at nearly every level of the adjustment process. In adjusting family images, stepmothers feel love for their new family while also feeling loss for an imagined one. In adjusting to their new role, women recognize the challenges of not having biological children before stepchildren (e.g., lack of experience childrearing) while also appreciating its rewards (e.g., opportunity to devote more
attention towards relationships with stepchildren). Ambivalence is evident not only in the
content of stepmothers’ stories, but also in their communication of those stories.
Repeatedly, participants exemplified cautious navigation in appropriately articulating a
balanced picture of both the positive and the negative. Often times, women were visibly
distraught in their vigilance of suitably representing their experience. On one hand, they
seemed to be excited and relieved to share their stories. On the other, they were reluctant
to cross a boundary in their candor.

To be sure, scholars have acknowledged the applicability of ambivalence to
stepfamily ties. Schrodt and Braithwaite (2011) argued, “Although some scholars have
framed this ambivalence as problematic and dysfunctional…the ambivalence of
stepfamily relationships can, and often does, serve very functional purposes.” We agree
that embracing ambivalence is a necessary step in forging kinship ties outside the
boundaries imposed by the nuclear family model (Schrodt & Braithwaite). Still,
acknowledging (and even embracing) emotional ambivalence as a feature of familial
relationships “does not explain how they came to be that way” (Connidis, 2015, p. 82).
The present study addresses this gap by illuminating a source of ambivalence that occurs
much earlier in the stepfamily adjustment process. In doing so, it sheds light on a possible
explanation for why the development of positive stepmother-stepchild ties may
sometimes be difficult (Doodson & Davies, 2014; MacDonald & DeMaris, 1996;
Santrock & Sitterle, 1987; Schmeckle, 2007). The relationships that stepmothers
subsequently develop with stepchildren, as well as ensuing levels of personal well-being,
may be influenced by the silent struggle they experience in coping with the loss or
adjustment of personal images and ideals of creating a family.
Practical Implications

One of the most striking aspects of our study was the evident turmoil participants experienced when judging how forthright to be with their thoughts. Admitting that one grieves the loss of idealized family images while acknowledging sincere love and appreciation for a husband and stepchildren is a difficult, uncomfortable process. At the same time, stepmothers were eager to “finally voice all the things that I think about all the time” (Kim), and they were surprised that a researcher was interested in hearing their stories. This juxtaposition yields important implications for helping professionals.

In their 10-step approach to stepfamily therapy, clinicians Scott Browning and Elise Artfelt (2012) propose that Step 1 is to recognize the structure of the stepfamily. They argue:

Stepfamilies, although individually unique, share certain dynamic truisms with other stepfamilies that are structurally alike…Research cannot tell a therapist what areas will be problematic in each stepfamily, but a comprehensive understanding of research findings may assist him or her in addressing potential areas of concern.

Our findings suggest that, for stepfamilies in which the stepmother did not bring biological children into the marriage, therapists should be sensitive to the possibility that stepmothers are adjusting family images. Recognizing this process as one that is unique to stepfamily structures in which the woman experienced the transition to stepmotherhood prior to the normative ideal of biological maternity may be an important step in addressing other areas of concern. In approaching this issue, helping professionals should be extremely mindful of the heightened sensitivity of this topic. A popular
approach of stepfamily therapy is to have the initial sessions take place with both spouses present before introducing (step)children to the mix (Browning & Arftelt, 2012). The purpose of this approach is to encourage the couple to share their true thoughts and feelings without editing their comments as they might if children were present. However, given the extreme sensitivity of stepmothers’ disclosures letting go of idealized family images, it is unlikely that they would voice such concerns with husbands present. They were often reluctant to voice them even in the interviews, and they frequently acknowledged that they had not discussed these thoughts with their spouses. Clinicians should keep this in mind when deciding the appropriate combination of individual, couple, or family therapeutic sessions.

Additionally, the sensitive nature of this topic, combined with stepmothers’ fear of reinforcing negative social stigma, warrants a heightened level of compassion when discussing these issues. In accordance with disenfranchised grief, women in this position do not feel that it is appropriate or acceptable to acknowledge their affliction over losing images of ideal motherhood. This lack of social support is precisely what necessitates the need for stepmothers to have an outlet to be open and honest with their thoughts without fear of being judged. For this to be optimally achieved, helping professionals need to be aware of the cultural values that comprise the motherhood hierarchy and the implications of such ideologies on the experience of women in stepfamilies.

Finally, prominent stepfamily clinicians have emphasized that a fundamental therapeutic need of stepfamilies is validation—confirmation that what they are experiencing is normal (Papernow, 2006; Visher & Visher, 1988). Because women are unlikely to discuss this sensitive topic with friends or family—and because there is a lack
of supportive resources available to stepmothers in general—they are vulnerable to perceiving that their thoughts and feelings are unlike those who are in similar situations. In reality, all women in this position are likely to experience an adjustment process of reconstructing family images, but because it is not a popular topic of conversation, they are likely to cope with it in isolation. Efforts to normalize their feelings and confirm that it is okay to have these ambivalent thoughts will be important for reducing feelings of guilt and affliction for stepmothers in the adjustment process.

In 1988, Visher and Visher commented on stepfamily research that had informed their therapeutic strategies and concluded, “The implication for therapy appears to us to be that stepparents, particularly stepmothers, may need considerable support from the therapist as new stepfamily relationships are forming” (p. 21). Nearly three decades later, our study provides evidence that their conclusion may still be true. Stepmothers’ unique position at the intersection of cultural expectations—that women in families should be highly involved, and that stepfamily members should be less involved—warrants the need for special attention to their experiences.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite its contributions, there are important limitations to consider in our study. First, our sample greatly lacks racial and ethnic diversity; all but one of our participants were White. In a recent exploration of African American mothers, Dow (2016) found evidence of cultural expectations that challenged dominant hegemonic ideologies of motherhood. In other words, *doing gender*, particularly in regards to motherhood, looks different across cultures. Because mothering ideologies are constructed and enacted within the cultured context (Hays, 1998), stepmothers from various racial, ethnic, and
cultural backgrounds are likely to experience the adjustment process differently. Future research should investigate these differences through a cultured lens.

In addition, the retrospective nature of our data introduces concerns. Of the stepmothers who were married, the duration of those marriages ranged from two weeks to 26 years. Some stepmothers were still in the process of adjusting family images, whereas others were reporting on a process that they experienced many years earlier. Although we did not identify differences within our sample based on elapsed time, it is possible that the more time has passed since their transition to stepmotherhood, the greater chance of inaccuracy in stepmothers’ reported memories. Future research should consider using a more restricted window of elapsed time when asking stepparents to reflect on their adjustment to stepparenthood.

Our study provides evidence that stepmothers are indeed faced with the task of reconstructing family images in their adjustment to stepmotherhood, and they are vulnerable to experiencing feelings of guilt or isolation in the process. On this note, we encourage researchers to execute quantitative investigations assessing outcomes of the adjustment process. In assessing these outcomes, we emphasize the necessity for measures of ambivalence. Focusing on the negative outcomes at the expense of the positive ones further perpetuates the deficit-perspective that is all too often used in stepfamily research. Rather, we advocate for the use of the normative-adaptive perspective in studying stepmothers’ experiences (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). While this perspective does not deny the possibility of problems in stepfamilies or attempt to mask stepfamily challenges, it does seek to avoid focusing solely on the negative dimensions of stepfamily life by shedding light on both the positive and negative experiences in
remarried families. Stepmothers share an important commonality in that they do not want their positive experiences to be lost in the negative. It is important to take their concern to heart; their mixed bag of emotions needs to be recognized as normative and acceptable.

In her decade in review, Connidis (2015) concluded, “I believe that the use of ambivalence in our theorizing and research is a metaphorical tap on the shoulder, encouraging us to bring together some of the best ideas from social science and the humanities and to relate them to family life” (p. 91). We believe that attending to the complexity of stepmothers’ experiences, and incorporating ambivalence in the process, is a crucial step moving forward.

**Concluding Remarks**

Strong cultural ideologies of women in families perpetuate the exalted state of motherhood, and in doing so, hold important implications for the experience of stepmothers. Our study suggests that while the transition to motherhood is celebrated, the transition to stepmotherhood involves a process of letting go of long-held personal images and ideals of creating a family for women who acquire stepchildren before having experienced biological maternity. Such emotional processes have important implications for subsequent stepfamily adjustment; if and how stepmothers attempt to build relationships with stepchildren may very well be influenced by whether or not they may also be grieving the loss of such images. Helping professionals and researchers alike should pay special attention to the implications of gendered ideologies for the adjustment processes of women in stepfamilies.
References


Table

Table 1. Sample Description

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<th># of Stepchildren (Sex)</th>
<th>Custody Arrangement</th>
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<td>32</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1 (F)</td>
<td>50/50</td>
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<td>Sharon</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 (M)</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eileen</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4 (M,M,M,F)</td>
<td>Every other weekend</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 (M)</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>13 (cohabiting)</td>
<td>1 (M)</td>
<td>Full custody</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marci</td>
<td>41</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>2 (M,M)</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>Yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4 (cohabiting)</td>
<td>1 (M)</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3 (M,F,M)</td>
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<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1 (M)</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>Yes (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meredith</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1 (F)</td>
<td>50/50</td>
<td>Yes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3 (F,M,M)</td>
<td>Every other weekend</td>
<td>Yes (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix

Appendix A. Participant Recruitment Ad

Are you a Stepmother?

The department of Human Development and Family Studies is interested in the experiences of women who became stepmothers before having biological children of their own. We will interview women who had dreams of starting a family of their own but married into a stepfamily first. Participants must be 18 or older to participate in the research study. Interviews will be scheduled for a mutually convenient time and location. If you are interested in participating or have questions, please contact Caroline Sanner at cms4qc@mail.missouri.edu or Professor Marilyn Coleman.
Appendix B. Codebook with Example Quotations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Theme</th>
<th>Verbatim Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructing Family Images</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Family Image</td>
<td>“I figured I would have four kids.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I wanted two children, a girl and a boy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family of Origin</td>
<td>“Cause my mom had a girl and a boy (laughing), so I wanted the same thing.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I just always imagined meeting somebody similar to me, and doing what my parents did.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal Expectations</td>
<td>“[It’s] what I thought you were supposed to do…as far as like, you know, the ideals that society places on us.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It just seemed like that is what you’re supposed to do, you know, that is what women do.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Origin of Image</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to Adjust</td>
<td>“They [husband and stepson] stole my heart. I fell in love with Daniel [husband], and he came as a package deal.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Whatever I was losing was pale in comparison to what I was gaining.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adjusting Family Images</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalizing</td>
<td>“So I thought, ‘Yeah, you’re right, you know, there are,’ like this isn’t really an uncommon situation.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It started to seem like more and more of a, you know, quote/unquote normal family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadening</td>
<td>“Even though I’d already have a girl [stepdaughter], I still wanted a girl that was mine, that I birthed myself. So I was like ‘Okay, well, instead of two I’ll just have three.’”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I held onto that, you know, that one day I will have my own kid, and then this will be worth it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replacing</td>
<td>“I realize that I sort of missed out on having babies, but I have this new family that is wonderful and fills that need.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Being with Jack [husband] has made me feel less and less like I need to have my own kids…having Cameron and Liam [stepchildren] in my life, that’s enough of...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting to Stepmotherhood</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Experience</td>
<td>“I had no clue what I was doing. I went into this relationship with a 3-year old and I had never had children, I hadn’t really been around kids.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Power</td>
<td>“I didn’t know how to discipline a kid, let alone my kid… I didn’t know what to do, and there’s nobody to tell you what to do or give you a right or wrong answer.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling like the Family Outsider</td>
<td>“I put in all this effort and care about him [stepson] so much, and I still have really no say in anything.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Motherhood Hierarchy</td>
<td>“You’re second fiddle when you’re the stepmother… As a mother, you are the central person… but as a stepmother, you’re just a little off to the side.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Maternity as Superior</td>
<td>“You always kind of feel like the outsider, because you will never be part of that original nuclear family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Reinforcing Stigma</td>
<td>“I don’t think society views [being a] stepmom as actually being a mom. You didn’t go through the whole process of motherhood; you just came into being a mom.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Support</td>
<td>“I think there’s a perception that if the child didn’t come from your own loins, you know (laughs), then you don’t have this some kind of full experience.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Maternity as Superior</td>
<td>“I just feel like, you know, the whole pregnancy and motherhood and stuff is glorified while stepmoms are kind of put in the dark and not really thought about.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of Guilt</td>
<td>“Being a stepmom, you’re kind of scared to let people know of the negative things because of, you know, the media and what kids see growing up, people hear the word stepmom they usually cringe. It’s just not really something I talk about.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Support</td>
<td>“I feel guilty sometimes, because I look forward to the weeks that we don’t have the boys so it’s just us four, probably because that’s what I pictured my family to being a mother for me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Maternity as Superior</td>
<td>“I just feel like, you know, the whole pregnancy and motherhood and stuff is glorified while stepmoms are kind of put in the dark and not really thought about.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrations</td>
<td>Benefits of Experiencing Stepmotherhood Before Motherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I wish that there were more good books out there about stepparenting. I feel there are a lot of books about parenting, [but] a lot of books seem to assume that you’ll be with the kid every day, which is not true for many stepparents. I just feel like there’s a lack of good models.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

be. But then I feel guilty about that [becomes emotional], because the real picture isn't bad, it's just not the picture.”