(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