

**The Discourse of Stepmothering:
Between the “Wicked Stepmother” and the “Good Mother”**

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Abstract

This study explores the formation of the stepmother as subject and in particular the role of stepmothers' own stories in that formation. Many feminist authors have written about the discursive construction of women as subjects and some authors have considered the experience of stepmothering. However, apparently no research has focused on the discourse of stepmothering brought forward by stepmothers themselves. The research methodology integrates aspects of poststructuralist and feminist inquiry. The method involved assembling a group of five stepmothers to share their own stories of stepmothering. These women employed a collective process of reading, writing, and analysis to explore the constitutive force of the discursive practices through which stepmothering relations operate. This research revealed patterns in the discourse of stepmothering which are culturally and historically specific. These are:

- a) the subjectivity of stepmothers as a site of conflict;
- b) the hegemony of the discourse of the traditional nuclear family and how this constructs stepmothers' subjectivity. Stepmothers often feel like an "extra" within this discourse which can render them powerless and invisible in their family and their social context;
- c) the binary categories of "good mother" and "wicked stepmother" and how this categorization acts to sabotage stepmothers' attempts to (re)write the story of family to better serve their interests;
- d) the discourse of the wicked first wife/biological mother and the harmful effects this discourse has on the relationship between stepmothers and biological mothers;
- e) discourses of resistance in which stepmothers (re)write the story of family, opening up the possibility of alternative stepmothering practices.

In addressing the implications for practice, poststructuralist tools appropriate for working with stepmothers' stories were described.

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To Mom and 'Da' who never stop caring, wherever they are.

Dedicated

to the memory of my mother Leslie

and to my father Sheldon

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Rosy were a little maid as had a stepmother and her were so
wicked and good-for-nothing as twopennorth of Gold-help-us
stuck on a stick.

Rosy handn' no love for she.

(An English folksong cited in Hughes, 1991, p. 50)

A Personal Starting Point

I became interested in stepmothering as I began to engage in the lives of my partner and my partner's child. This brought with it a range and intensity of emotion that I found to be overwhelming. There were few reference points with which I could situate my experience, and this made the circumstances even more challenging.

One way that I coped with the negative feelings of anger, resentment, and confusion was to gather information. I began to read clinical and 'self-help' literature on stepparenting and stepmothering. This material contained helpful advice, potential solutions to various problems, and some theories about remarried families. However, some important issues were not addressed. How did new stepmothers experience themselves as they engaged in the life of their stepchild(ren) and their mate? Women marry into stepfamilies, but how do they 'become' stepmothers; how do they constitute themselves within existing family and societal structures?

To pursue this question I turned to alternative sources. I happened upon a collection of stepmothers' stories as told by the women themselves. In addition, I was fortunate to share stories with a close female friend who was also a new stepparent. This research was both

exciting and different. These stories began to reveal some of the thoughts and emotions of stepmothers, their sense of themselves and their way of understanding their relationship to the world.

This information provided me with a liberating vision and grounds for hope. It became possible to imagine different ways of being a stepmother that resisted the dominant stories about ‘the way things were supposed to be.’ I wanted to hear more narratives, deconstructing the dominant stories about stepmothers and stepfamilies to bear witness to our complex family arrangements, and to help find ways to “seek new communities of intimacy” (Stimpson, 1989).

The Purpose of This Research

The purpose of this research is to describe and explore the narratives that stepmothers, as speaking subjects, use to constitute themselves. The focus will be on the discourse¹ of stepmothering, through which women make themselves and are made subject. Discourse refers here to the particular ways used to organize and regulate meaning. The possibilities of speaking into existence other ways of being will be considered. By inverting, inventing, and breaking old structures alternative narratives can be created that disrupt the dominant myths of the ‘evil stepmother’ and the ‘perfect (biological) mother’ (Maglin & Schniedewind, 1989).

It is envisioned that in becoming aware of the discourses of stepmothering, women will gain access to alternative narratives that can be liberating. Women can further explore the possibility, not of learning their culture as passive receptacles, but of producing culture, as readers, writers, and listeners. This will give them the potential to see the intersection between their own narratives and the narratives of their societal context” which are constantly being (re)spoken, (re)written and (re)lived” (Davies, 1993).

Knowledge of the discourses of stepmothering can sensitize counsellors to the possibilities and assumptions inherent within the stepmother role. With this greater awareness, they will be better able to provide counselling and support to women and their families as they engage in stepmothering relationships.

The Research Questions

The primary question guiding this research is as follows:

1. What are the discursive practices through which stepmothering is constituted? The term “discursive practices” refers here to ways of organizing and regulating meaning around stepmothering.

Several questions that follow from the primary question are:

2. How do women ‘become’ stepmothers? That is, how do they speak and write themselves into existence?
3. How are the categories of the ‘good (biological) mother’ and the ‘wicked stepmother’ constituted and held in place as opposites?
4. Is it possible to deconstruct the binary categories of the ‘evil stepmother’ and the ‘good (biological) mother’ and choose alternative narratives?

The Significance of the Study

This study will investigate the discursive practices of women who are stepmothers. Many feminist poststructuralists have discussed the discursive construction of women as subjects (Weedon, 1987; Gunew, 1990; Haug, 1983; Lather, 1991). Some writers have discussed the stepmothering experience (Burns, 1985; Brown, 1987; Marshall, 1993).

However, to my knowledge, there is no research which focuses on the discourses of stepmothering as spoken by the women themselves.

In counselling practice, clients often describe their life situation in narrative form; they tell the story of their lives. There is often a “co-authoring” by the client and the counsellor of the “messages of possibility” embedded within the storyline (Peavy, 1993). If the counsellor and client can gain awareness of the discursive practices of stepmothering, these possibilities might be expanded. There would be less tendency to hear these stories as “objective” fact. Consequently there would be increased opportunities to act for change; to deconstruct, to twist and shape new possibilities, and to find the ‘spaces in between’ wherein it may be possible to construct alternative and perhaps more satisfying narratives and societal structures.

The Limitations of the Study

This study will not generate findings to be generalized to the experiences of all stepmothers. Since all stepmothers experience the world in different manners, there are multiple possible tellings of the discourses of stepmotherhood. Yet, having access to the discourses presented here may prove insightful to some. The focus of the research will be on the social constructions through which stepmothers are made subject, not on the definition of a set of answers made to fit all individual circumstances.

Historical Context

Before the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, family life was assumed to have one perspective: that of the male, the so-called “head of the household.” Now we have come to realize that there are many possible perspectives available in one family. Stepmothers’

perspectives have been added to the more recently rediscovered voices in the “nuclear” family (Maglin & Schniedewind, 1989).

What sort of voices have we expected to hear? Stepmothers have been haunted simultaneously by the images of the wicked stepmother and the perfect (biological) mother (Maglin & Schniedewind, 1989). Of all the adjectives we might choose to describe stepmothers, “wicked” is one that has most often been associated with the role. Stepmothering has evoked negative stereotypes for centuries--in society in general, and in children’s literature in particular (Marshall, 1993; Watson, 1995). Notable examples from children’s literature in western culture include the stories of Cinderella and Hansel and Gretel, whose stepmothers were mean and cold, requiring supernatural intervention to save the children and to bring about suitable sorts of punishment for the women in question. In addition, several clinical studies have supported the conclusion that people perceive stepmothers more negatively than biological mothers (Coleman & Ganong, 1987; Fine, 1986; Fine & Schwebel, 1992).

It is interesting to note that ‘wicked’ has been the adjective reserved for women who mother without the supposed biological inheritance of selflessness passed on to them in the act of giving birth. This inheritance is assumed to ‘naturally’ predispose the biological mother to enact, and even enjoy selfless parenting agendas. Perhaps the women who have been judged to be “wicked” are those whose self-interests have been too evident for our cultural tastes; in the context of our rather thin ‘mothering soup,’ there are few options and several constrictions.

It is under these kinds of cultural conditions that stepmothers become subjects. This has not stopped some individual women from naming oppressive conditions, and where possible they have risked living in more self-defined ways. The point being made here is that

this is a continuing struggle, limited by the discourses made easily accessible in an historically patriarchal structuring of society.

Endnotes

1. Discourse refers to particular ways of organizing and regulating meaning. The term is used here as described by Lather (1991). A discourse, as a particular area of language use, may be identified by the institutions to which it relates and by the position from which it comes and which it marks out for the speaker. This language practice forms “a conceptual grid with its own exclusions and erasures, its own rules and decisions, limits, inner logic, parameters, and blind alleys. A discourse is that which is beneath the writer’s awareness in terms of rules governing the formations and transformation of ideas into a dispersal of the historical agent, the knowing subject” (Lather, 1991, p. 166). “Discourses represent political interests and in consequence are constantly vying for status and power” (Weedon, 1987, p. 41).

CHAPTER 2

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Relevant theory and concepts have been selected from wider contexts of the literature in which this particular study is based. These contexts include feminism, feminist poststructuralism, and the stepparenting and stepmothering literature. A brief summary of these selected theories and concepts follows below to provide information on the theoretical underpinnings of the inquiry. This review should serve to sensitize the reader to the kind of material that I am interested in exploring.

One goal of this inquiry is to hold on to feminism as a politics which produces tangible results and to take hold of useful theoretical tools in order to work towards change on behalf of feminist interests. Feminist poststructuralism is the theory which, at this moment, appears to offer the most useful theoretical tools for explaining, examining, and changing the patriarchal structures of the family and the position of stepmothers within them. It is on this basis that the fundamental feminist poststructuralist theories will be set out as the conceptual tools in this inquiry. Following this discussion, the implications of these theoretical concepts and the possibilities they present for changing present social arrangements will be reviewed.

Feminist Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism does not have one fixed meaning; however, it generally applies to the range of theoretical positions developed in and from the work of Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, Althusser, and Foucault (Weedon, 1987). While these works share some fundamental assumptions about language, meaning, and subjectivity, they vary widely in both their political implications and their practice. Since the work which these theories informs varies

considerably, taking note of the differences between various forms of poststructuralist theory is important. “Not all forms are necessarily productive for feminism” (Weedon, 1987).

An attempt is made here to focus on some of the particular poststructuralist theories which appear to be most useful in addressing the question of how social power is exercised and how family relations might be transformed. In doing this, I am making reference to a specific version of poststructuralism that has been elucidated by Weedon (1987), and Lather (1991), referred to as “feminist poststructuralism.” The fundamental concepts of feminist poststructuralism, including theories of subjectivity, agency, narrative, deconstruction, discourse, and language, will be set out below.

Poststructuralist Theory and the Concepts of Subjectivity and ‘The Self’

The concept of subjectivity is central to poststructural theory. It marks a crucial break with concepts of identity and the ‘self’ as put forward in liberal humanist thought. In this context, subjectivity “is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding the world” (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). Subjectivity is assumed to be precarious and contradictory; it is always in process, constantly being (re)created in discourse each time we think or speak. In poststructuralist thinking, identity is no longer fixed or unified, but is being continuously figured and refigured within the context of a bombardment of conflicting messages, its boundaries repeatedly remapped and renegotiated (Lather, 1991). This is a shift away from the prevalent humanist conceptions of a unified rational self with a fixed, or at least partially fixed, ‘essence,’ the nature of which varies depending on the particular discourse (Weedon, 1987).

Our subjectivity is shaped by the society, the politics, and the cultural medium in which we live. Certain forms of subjectivity are produced historically, and change when the range of discourses in which they are constituted shift. Feminist poststructuralists further insist that the individual is always a site of conflict between competing ways of thinking, that is, between certain discourses (Weedon, 1987). The individual is the site of competing and conflicting forms of subjectivity. As people learn to express thoughts and feelings in language, they learn to give voice, to make meaning of their experiences. These experiences are understood as particular ways of thinking, or particular discourses, which predate any particular person's entry into the language (Weedon, 1987). These ways of making meaning constitute our consciousness and the positions with which we identify or structure our selves: our subjectivity.

In this theory of subjectivity, 'self' does not flow unproblematically from experience, since experience has no essential meaning. Any experience can be given meaning through a range of discursive systems which are often contradictory, representing differing versions of social and political realities which in turn serve conflicting interests (Davies, 1993). Personal experiences are thus seen in the context of social and political circumstances. Personal failings or difficulties are constructed as socially produced conflicts and contradictions moving beyond the level of an individual's private inadequacies. This kind of thinking provides a relational and non-reductionist method of making sense of our life stories. It allows us to "think constantly against ourselves" (Jardine, 1985, p. 21, cited in Lather, 1991), rewriting personal experiences in terms which provide social, and potentially changeable, causes.

The inadequacies felt by the new stepmother may be understood as socially and culturally produced. A woman inserted into the discourse of stepmotherhood, where she is

exposed to childcare demands structured by the social relations of the patriarchal nuclear family¹ feel 'wicked' or unnatural. As a stepmother, she is supposed to take over where the biological parents left off: loving and caring for stepchildren and feeling fulfilled through meeting their needs. She may come to recognize that her feelings of failure and inadequacy are shared by many women in similar situations, that the current organization of childcare is not 'natural' but rather the result of social and historical developments in the organizations of work and reproduction, and that contemporary definitions of women who 'mother' conflict with many other subject positions which they are encouraged to occupy. This knowledge can offer the frustrated stepmother a new subject position from which to make meaning of her situation, a position which makes her the subject rather than the origin of the conflicts in which she is living. She may be subject rather than object of scorn.

The Question of Agency

When a stepmother gains awareness of her subject position, as one who experiences an assignment to the category of 'stepmother,' new choices for thinking and acting may become available. She may become aware of the process of taking up as her own the discourses through which she is constituted as a member of this category. With this new awareness, she may begin to refuse some of this positioning, and the particular discourses in which those positionings are embedded. She is a subject with different modes of action available to her; she is a subject with agency.

All feminist poststructuralists (Weedon, 1987; Lather, 1991; Davies, 1992) leave open the possibility of a subject with agency. People with agency have the ability to act within their social context. They are not completely determined by the discourses, rules, and structures of

the social world. Instead, they are seen as beings with some autonomy who can take some responsibility for their actions and the outcome of these actions. However, it is made clear that in a struggle for their subjectivity, individuals are “active, but not sovereign” (Weedon, 1987, p. 21). The self is both the site and the subject in a struggle where different discourses compete, creating “disarray and conflict central to the process of political change and to preserving the status quo” (Weedon, 1987, p. 21). The subject gains agency through the very act of making clear the discursive threads from which her life story is woven. In discovering the possibility of resisting and disrupting old discourses, a stepmother may open up to speaking and writing new modes of existence which may not involve the binary opposition of the evil stepmother and the perfect (biological) mother.

Life Narrative, Discourse, and the Self

It cannot be denied that we are all involved in “discursive self-production” when we attempt to produce a coherent life narrative along with our other meaning-making endeavours (Lather, 1991). A sense of identity is built upon the interpretations one can make of one’s own life story (Laird, 1991). Life necessarily involves creating narrative (Peavy, 1993). Stepmothers, like others, are engaged in projects of discursive self-production. Their discourses take a narrative form as they describe parts of their life experience.

Narrative is the “prototypical discourse unit, used across cultures, by all social classes, in the widest possible range of contexts” (Linde, cited in Laird, 1991). “To understand or interpret a narrative, one must understand the *event* structure, the *evaluative* structure, and the *explanatory* structure, that is, the facts of the narrative, what meaning the speaker makes of these facts, and the speaker’s world view or belief system, his or her personal paradigm for

making sense of the world” (Linde, cited in Laird, 1991). Thus, in listening to and deconstructing life narratives, the discursive fields in which they are created may become visible.

Poststructuralism and the ‘Natural’

The images of the wicked stepmother and the good (biological) mother form part of the discourses constituting the subjectivity of stepmothers. These opposing images are not always seen as problematic in the mainstream discourse around mothering activities. They are often assumed to be based on ‘natural’ ways of thinking and feeling about women who mother (Maglin & Schniedewind, 1989; Hughes, 1991). Simone de Beauvoir (1972, p. 206) comments on the opposing motherhood images of good and evil: “...the saintly mother has for correlative the cruel stepmother.”

Poststructuralist theory enables us to see that what has been defined as ‘natural’ is a whole set of constructed meanings. Poststructuralists observe that what we have defined as depending on ‘nature’ is as much ‘metaphysical’ as natural. Derrida (cited in Davies, 1993, p. 7), labels as ‘metaphysical’ any thought-system which depends on an unassailable foundation, on something taken for granted. In examining such ‘taken-for-granted’ principles, it is possible to make visible their constructions. First principles of this kind are commonly defined by what they exclude, by binary opposition. For example, the division of people into males and females is a fundamental metaphysical construction. “It is an unquestionable first principle on which so much rests.” (Davies, 1993, p. 7)

Deconstruction

Deconstruction is the critical practice by which binary oppositions, such as maleness and femaleness, or the images of good and evil influencing societal views of stepmothering, can be formally undermined. It is a way of thinking that allows “multiple meanings to arise and interpret one another” (Parker, 1994, p. 388). Unrestrained by the need to deduce the ‘real meaning’ embedded in a text, readers are invited to relate directly with the possibilities of change, difference, plurality, and particularity. “Numerous interpretations are authorized (actually, de-authorized) and must confront one another.” (Parker, 1994, p. 388)

Deconstructive readings reveal schemes used to ‘sort out’ and stabilize the ‘real’ world. Using this method of reading (or writing) may be challenging and uncomfortable, but it can lead to new patterns of thinking that are more fluid and multi-faceted, explore possibilities, and even bring new insight. Deconstruction, or putting a concept under erasure, may constitute a political act. It can reveal the generally invisible but repressive politics of any particular form of representation (Weedon, 1987).

Language and Subjectivity

Language, its use, meaning and relevance, is reconsidered in postmodern theory. Saussure’s theory of language (Weedon, 1987, p. 22) is fundamental to a postmodern understanding of language. He argues that language is an abstract system of signs. Each sign includes a signifier (word) and a signified (meaning). None of the signs has any meaning whatsoever except in relation to the others. Furthermore, as language always exists in historically specific discourses, the relationship between signifier and signified is never absolute.

Meaning is never fixed and so is therefore constantly 'deferred,' always open to challenge and redefinition with shifts in its discursive context (Weedon, 1987).

Language, which had been seen to reflect pre-existing meaning in a 'transparent' way, now is seen as a site of conflict where meaning and social reality are constructed for us. As children, we become speaking subjects 'inserted' into language, which as a system of possible meanings, predates our entry into it. Language is socially produced, constructing our subjectivity in socially and historically specific ways. In this fluid system of making meaning we are constructed as fluid subjects, always in process each time we think or speak. Formally structured as competing discourses, language continues to construct us as speaking subjects throughout our lifespan, giving meaning to our social context, and enabling us to act to transform it.

Language as Discourse

The context and processes of society are organized and disseminated through institutions and practices such as the family, the church, the political system, and the legal system. Each of these institutions is situated in and constructed by a specific 'discursive field.' Michael Foucault proposed this concept (cited in Weedon, 1987, p. 35) as a tool used to understand the link between language, social institutions, subjectivity, and power. Discursive fields consist of competing ways of making meaning in the world, and of organizing our social context and practices. The differences between competing views of the world are articulated in language. They offer to the individual a 'meaning menu' where meaning making choices are offered; that is, a range of options from which subjectivity is constructed. However, not all the meaning-

making choices or discursive fields are equally likely to be taken up by the subject. In a given societal context there is both a distribution and a hierarchy of discourses (Macdonell, 1986).

In the discursive field of the family, for example, not all discourses are accorded equal weight or power. Some will be heavily weighted, especially those that are set out to maintain the status quo of power relations in which men usually have more power than women, and women more power than children. In the conservative discourse, this set of power relationships is seen as part of a natural order. However, other discourses, such as radical and socialist feminist discourses, challenge the present way society envisions the power relations of family life. Socialist or radical feminists theorize the family as the ultimate instrument in the oppression of women, acting through male control of female sexuality, procreative powers, and their control of economic power (Weedon, 1987). The family is seen as a major social instrument that ties women to heterosexual monogamy. It shapes their sexuality in masochistic ways for the satisfaction of male desire. These more challenging discourses are likely to be marginal to the dominant discourses of family life, and so dismissed as irrelevant or bad in mainstream culture (Weedon, 1987).

Poststructuralist Theory and the Possibility of Change

Poststructuralism provides us with a conceptual tool for changing the politics and practices in family life. When persons are understood as being constituted through both social structures and language, individuals become speaking subjects who may continue to speak and/or write into existence those same structures through those same discourses. "But, as a speaking subject, they can also invent, invert and break old structure and patterns and discourses and then speak/write into existence other ways of being." (Davies, 1993, p. xviii)

The Stepfamily Literature

There is extensive material available in the academic and lay literature about stepfamilies. Typically, stepfamilies have been studied from an apolitical, deficit-comparison model, with the implicit or explicit assumption that families which do not fit the mold of the traditional patriarchal family forms are less adequate and thus 'a problem.' The academic literature is full of facts and figures on topics such as potential sources of stress in stepfamilies, parental role strain, role ambiguity, and the spousal relationship in remarriage (Fine & Schwebel, 1991; Whitsett & Land, 1992; Pasley, Dollahite, & Ihinger-Tallman, 1993). The available lay literature is problem-oriented as well, offering solutions to the difficulties of living in a 'blended' family. For example, only four of the more than 50 self-help books reviewed by Coleman and Ganong (1989) mention any of the potential strengths or satisfactions in stepfamilies. These problem-oriented texts not only fail to raise the question of the discursive field in which the stepfamily finds itself, but also serve instead to merely reinforce the discourse which supports the societal views in which stepfamilies are seen as deficient.

The Stepmothering Literature

An extensive review of the academic literature yielded little research focusing on stepmothers. When stepmothers were mentioned it was observed that they have more 'adjustment difficulties' than stepfathers (Clingempeel, Brand & Ievoli, 1984; Santrock, Sitterle, & Warshak, 1988; Visher & Visher, 1988). When compared with stepfathers, they show higher levels of stress, are less likely to be satisfied in their relationships with their stepchildren, and display more 'negative behaviours' towards their stepchildren (Fine & Schwebel, 1992).

The lay literature had more to offer, but it also adheres to the same apolitical problem-oriented approach described above (Brown, 1987). What has been written, with the exception of some autobiographical pieces and some fiction, does not place the women at the centre of inquiry. There is a dearth of material focusing on the varied experiences of women as told by the women themselves (Maglin & Schniedewind, 1989). Although there are many feminist analyses of women and the family (Braverman, 1991; Levine, 1982; McGoldrick, 1991), it is significant to note that the voice of the 'other mother' has for the most part not been heard. This is particularly significant given that the traditional family (biological mother, biological father, and children) now has mythical status (Grant, 1989).

The voice of the stepmother is the focus of Maglin and Schniedewind's work, "Women and Stepfamilies: Voices of Anger and Love" (1989). This edited anthology was the first feminist work to focus on the unique and varied experiences and perspectives of women in stepfamilies as told by the women themselves. The work contains letters, journals, poems, personal narratives, and analytic essays. All pieces contributed deal with the central issues of love, power, and identity. In a bold move, the women put themselves in the centre of their stories, often reflecting on them from different feminist perspectives. Themes that emerge from the work include struggles for survival, the problems associated with fitting into the traditional family form, and structural barriers that stand in the way of women's thriving in stepfamilies. The structural barriers identified include male power and dominance in families, patriarchal family forms, racism, and boundaries of culture and class. Some women go beyond pointing out the constraints of their situation, speaking to the potential for broadened definitions of family, transforming both women's role as (step)mother and the family itself.

The scarcity of feminist analysis of the stepmothering role is problematic. Women suffer as they struggle privately with the myths of the family, and thus they feel any problems that arise are of their own making. In investigating the discourse of stepmothering, repressive political structures that are present can be revealed. It is by addressing the political, that is, the collective issues which have to do with men's power over women and their work, that we can begin to reshape the systems and structures that exert decisive influence over individual women's lives (Levine, 1982).

Endnotes

- ¹ Within the patriarchal structures of marriage and motherhood women have been encouraged to define themselves in terms of their ability to meet the needs of men and/or children. For women, the meaning of life and love in the nuclear family often translates into a pattern of nurturing others which robs us of the self, the centre of our own adult lives (Levine, 1982).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Context

The research method was based on the theoretical assumption that writing stories from live(d) experience is an acceptable methodological approach (Haug, 1983; Brookes, 1992). These personal writings served to contain the narratives which stepmothers use to construct their way into being. The focus was on the ‘discourse’ of stepmothering through which women are made subject. In addition, this included an examination of new ways of writing and speaking that deconstruct the dominant myths of the ‘evil stepmother’ and the ‘perfect (biological) mother.’

The research methodology used conceptual tools provided by both feminist and poststructuralist theory. Feminist and poststructuralist theories have released methodology from prescribed rules and boundaries. The result is a “constructive turmoil” that allows for different ways of making sense of human experience, honouring the complexity and indeterminacy of women’s lives. Such turmoil, while providing limitless possibilities, leaves the researcher in the position of deciding how research should best proceed. Though daunting, this task is too important to abandon. One has to take a risk in this creative act; the risk of making mistakes. It is perhaps comforting for the researcher that in a postpositivistic framework there is never ‘one truth,’ and never just one way to seek for what would count as ‘truth,’ which is now configured as partial, at best, less false.

The absence of prescription does not mean that one is free to do as one pleases. Thus, it is important to be clear on how the theoretical concepts guide the method. A brief overview

of relevant theoretical concepts and guidelines and their relationship to methodology will follow below.

The contributions of feminist methodology

Feminist research places the social and political constructions of gender at the centre of inquiry. Gender is seen as a fundamental organizing principle which profoundly shapes the ways in which we construct our life narratives. Feminism offers “a form of attention, a lens that brings into focus particular questions” (Fox-Keller, 1985, p. 6). The overt ideological goal of feminist research is to change the distortion and invisibility of women’s experience in ways that would serve to end their oppression under the patriarchal structuring of society (Lather, 1991). The personal is made political through the sharing of narratives in which the relations of our everyday world are embedded. The fact that the challenging task of breaking-down the “self-constructed prisons of everyday life” can be successfully accomplished has been emphatically demonstrated by the feminist movement (Haug, 1983, p. 41).

Feminist research informs this inquiry by focusing on women’s experiences in stepfamilies as distinct from men’s experiences. When women tell the story about life in their unique circumstances, they often challenge the old discourses and the silences. Hearing women’s unique perspectives makes it possible to consider the family as a site of oppression and political struggle, a site where people work as individuals to advance their own interests. It is only through the recognition of such struggles that one can come to understand the family in its social context and make plans to change it.

The contributions of poststructuralist theory

By describing and exploring the discourse of stepmothering found in written and spoken narratives, I sought to recognize the means by which these stepmothers have been subjected, the extent to which they have been deprived of agency, and made object, and so inscribed with patterns of desire that hold oppressive patriarchal structures intact. This does not mean that all stepmothers can be seen as occupying a pre-defined category, all experiencing their world in the same manner. In fact, women's lives are viewed as a site of contradiction in a continuing battle for their subjectivity (Weedon, 1987). Instead, the aim is to target the social constructions through which to they are made subject. For these stepmother participants, this meant demanding the right to use their experience as a basis of knowledge. Using their own past experience, they claim the position of speaking subject--a subject who recognizes, speaks, and writes of her (collective) subjected condition.

The methodological focus of this research was on the discourse of stepmothering, where individuals were understood to be constituted through social structures and through written and spoken language. This highlighted the process of subjectification in which women actively take up a discourse as if it were their own. Feminist poststructuralist theory may be used to reveal and to dislocate discourses commonly made available in supporting the status quo (Davies, 1993). Feminist poststructuralism provides agency to the speaking subject, allowing her to break down old patterns and old discourses, and "thus speak and write into existence other ways of being" (Davies, 1993).

The role of the researcher

Poststructuralist theory makes problematic the notion of objective authority in authorship, and aims to break down the barrier between subject and object in research. Social relationships mediate the construction of knowledge so that the question of who speaks for whom becomes central to the inquiry (Lather, 1991). The researcher can not be positioned as “the all knowing one” in an inquiry which aims to interrupt oppressive social relations. As researcher, I positioned myself as both subject and object. My own story of stepmothering was included in the text and contributed to the collective work of the participants. In weaving together the voices of all participants, there was a clear demonstration of how I was inevitably inscribed in the discourses created by the other stepmothers. Such a strategy asserts the “communicational bond between the teller and the told within a context that is historical, social and political, as well as intertextual” (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 51).

However flexible and open minded, the researcher cannot avoid being part of the world that goes on outside her own head, as well as inside it; a world which thus becomes the object of her inquiry. Therefore, I did not attempt the task of removing myself or my biases from the transcripts or the process of analysis. However, I did try to find a suitable place for them among the other participants’ stories. Staying focused on my purpose of creating a product that included many voices, with just one belonging to me, helped to keep the focus away my own biases. In addition, some well-developed counselling skills that include the ability to attend to the process in social interactions were utilized. These skills helped me to see how and to what extent my ideas and values were entering into and influencing interactions and my analysis of them in the transcripts. Also, it was crucial to draw on self-awareness in the analysis. This self-

awareness was developed, in part, through the knowledge gained in writing and reflecting on my own stories as a stepmother: “her head and her inquiry are as much part of it as the object of her investigation” (Smith, 1987, p. 117). Until one understands oneself as a producer of knowledge, one can not consciously or politically analyze, from a position of power, the patriarchal construction of society (Brookes, 1992).

Why work as a collective?

There were several reasons which suggested that pursuing the research questions as a collective, rather than exploring the stories of individual stepmothers, would be a more fruitful method. Individuals are not as well placed to work through all the theories, opinions, and value judgements that are comprised in their experience of stepmothering. In a collective exploration of stories, individuals complement each other by identifying common experiences, pointing out contradictions, and comparing their ‘readings’ of the discourses of stepmothering. Collective work prevents the paralysis of isolation where different models of experience remain fragmented and divided from each other, making it possible for society to infinitely (re)produce itself in its present form (Haug, 1983).

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to the group sessions. Participants were informed as to the nature and intent of the research. A consent form (Appendix A) was signed by each participant. In addition, participants were made aware of the arrangements to protect their privacy. These are outlined below. The names of participants were changed in the transcribed texts and in the thesis itself. Once audiotapes were analyzed documenting the work of the collective, they were destroyed. Respondents were assured that

only the participants, two committee members, and a transcription assistant would gain access to the transcribed tapes. The research plan was approved in a process of ethical review by the 'Human Subjects Committee' at the University of Victoria.

There were no foreseeable imprudent risks for participants involved in working as a collective. However, it was acknowledged that this type work may be destabilizing, producing subjective experiences that are positive and life-enhancing and/or negative and troubling. After each session, participants were invited to comment on their experience of the process of working together. In addition, they were invited to share any part of their personal experience that was brought forward in the work. This assisted participants in integrating either unpleasant or positive feelings that emerged. If this had been insufficient to provide a context for resolving personal issues, the participant(s) would have been referred to additional resources if they so desired.

Method

The method involved assembling a collective of four women to share their own narratives, which was then used as a basis to explore the constitutive force of the discursive practices through which stepmothering relations operate. This collective process drew on the autobiographical methods employed by Haug et al., who worked as a group to examine the way women construct themselves into the world (1987). The group members employed a collective process of writing and discussion, adopting the standpoint of others as "historical contemporaries engaged in reconstructing the mosaic of experiences by which they were trained to enter society" (Haug, 1983, p. 58).

Inspired by the research methods carried out by Haug and her colleagues, this research collective aimed to examine: (1) the ways in which stepmothers have constructed themselves into existing social relations, and are thereby themselves formed; (2) the methods through which they have succeeded in reconstructing social relations; (3) the points at which transformation is possible; (4) the points where our chains weigh upon us most heavily, and the points where accommodations and compromises have been made. The collective explored whether some of the old structures of family relations can be ruptured and inverted; whether new ways of doing stepmother relations can be written and spoken into existence.

Finding participants to form the collective

Four participants were invited to join the researcher to form the collective. These individuals were recruited through methods of volunteer sampling. I began by informing some personal and professional contacts about this research. They in turn informed anyone whom they thought would be interested in participating in the collective. In addition, I posted notices in various locations that I believed to be frequented by women. These notices briefly outlined the kinds of activities and questions to be pursued by the collective (see Appendix B). A contact number was provided for individuals interested in hearing more about the project, or wishing to express their desire to participate.

Personal friends were excluded from the selection process. Close friendships between group members would make it more difficult to cultivate the high degree of skepticism required in challenging the taken-for-granted aspects of participant's circumstances.

Selecting participants

Potential participants were screened in a telephone conversation to assess their suitability for the study. Requirements for participation included:

1. Participants were stepmothers who had stepchild(ren) under the age of 16. This is a period where there is likely to be more intensive involvement in parenting tasks.
2. Participants showed an ability to reflect and articulate their experience as stepmothers. This ability was necessary in a study requiring participants to make their personal experiences relevant in a larger societal context. During the telephone conversation this ability was assessed by asking the question: “What comes to mind when you think about your sense of self during the time when you have been a stepmother?”
3. There was a commitment to participate in group activities, including reading and writing, over the appropriate time frame. Participants were requested to share personal experiences as well as thoughts and emotions relevant to the task at hand.

In addition to the above criteria, an attempt was made to include the experiences of women in different kinds of stepfamilies, with different class backgrounds. The selection of a diverse group of women broadens the base from which the narratives of stepmothering are told.

The research sessions and the process of analysis

Session 1.

The introductory session had several goals. The first and foremost goal was to give participants the opportunity to meet and begin establishing a level of comfort in the group setting. Information was provided on the goals of the research, the protection of confidentiality

and privacy, and procedures such as note taking and tape recording. In addition, participants discussed the rationale for a group research method.

My dual role as researcher and participant was made clear, including my desire to not occupy an authority role, but instead to engage in a mutual exploration of the constitutive power of text and talk in stepmothers lives. I emphasized my willingness to discuss the process involved in negotiating these two roles as events unfolded.

Together the group established a loose structure for the meetings that were to follow. Seven meetings were scheduled over a three month period. Each meeting would focus on a story told by one participant, followed by a group analysis of the discourse embedded in that story, and conclude with a discussion of group process. Participants were requested to select a story that described an experience or a circumstance that was important in influencing their sense of themselves as stepmothers.

After the information as described above was discussed, the rest of the session was available for conversation about stepmothering. This conversation revealed what kind of talk went on at the beginning of the research in a session without the structure of storytelling. Within the context of this conversation, the basic concepts of poststructuralist theory were introduced to the group in an informal manner by using them in the discussion. This included concepts of power and powerlessness, as well as discourse; for example, using phrases like 'the discourse of the wicked stepmother,' and the discourse of the 'good mother,' and 'discourses of resistance.'

The method described above introduces concepts and facilitates learning through the application of the concepts in discussion. It was chosen instead of a didactic teaching method.

This is consistent with my intention to avoid positioning myself in the group as an ‘expert who knows about theory.’

This first session was lively, with people eagerly participating, offering their ideas and examples from their experiences. The meeting concluded with a brief evaluation of process and the establishment of a timeline for the project. Participants initiated a schedule for the next six meetings and planned for a celebration to mark the conclusion of their work. One participant volunteered to bring the first story to work with at the next meeting. In guiding the participants in their writing, it was emphasized that their stories would provide the richest material if they wrote personally and descriptively, with no hesitation in painting “word pictures” that were the most meaningful to their stepmothering experience.

Analysis of session 1.

The research participants’ conversation was transcribed from an audiotape. As noted previously, this conversation allowed the researcher access to the kind of talk that emerged in the beginning of the research in a relatively unstructured context. The aim of transcript analysis was to identify the discourse embedded in the conversation. In addition, this was used as an opportunity to create and describe a method of analysis.

Multiple readings of the transcript, as well as the process of transcription itself, provided familiarity with the content of the session, the flow, and the emotional tone of the conversation. Following several readings of the text as a whole, the transcript was reread page by page. In each page of the transcript the elements of discourse, the particular ways of organizing and regulating meaning embedded in the conversation were identified. These one page units of text contained a workable amount of material to analyze; there was enough

information to provide a context, yet not so much that important elements of the conversation would be overlooked.

The elements of discourse were discovered by using a deconstructive reading strategy that allowed multiple meanings to arise and interpret one another (Parker, 1994). The basic notion of this reading strategy is that meanings have no anchor except one another. This requires questioning what speakers or writers understand as obvious and not in need of mention. The reader needs to catch themselves in the act of 'sense making,' of bringing their own knowledge to the text in order to analyze the complex relationship between it and their own lived experience (Davies, 1993). In addition, the reader needs to hear the speaker (or writer) as a person with intentions and ways of understanding that are expressed through shared cultural symbols, connections, assumptions, image, and storylines. While authors cannot guarantee meanings because of the active ways in which their story is taken up and interpreted by others, their intentions may be perceived and called into question. "The authority of the speaker needs to be disrupted, the author being reconstituted as one like any other who draws on what is known to create something that is both able to be imagined and yet new." (Davies, 1993, p. 158)

To organize the material, each element of the various discourses was assigned a number (or a number and a letter), as well as identifying the page from which it had been extracted. This labelling was done so that specific elements of discourse could be referenced in the final process of analysis.

The process of reading page by page and extracting the elements of discourse was completed three times to assure that this step of the analysis had been thorough. The second

and third readings provided confirmation of the insights previously extracted, but also allowed for new ways of seeing and interpreting the conversation to emerge. This deconstructive method of reading and analyzing is consistent with the theoretical foundation of the research: discourses through which we are constituted are often in tension with one another and have multiple layers of contradictory meaning. These multiple layers of meaning may only be discovered through multiple and careful examinations of a text from different perspectives, accessed by reading and rereading on several different occasions.

In the final process of analysis, the discourses embedded in the conversations were identified and clarified, focusing on the dominant stories of the culture that stepmothers use to speak themselves into existence. This provided insight into the discursive mechanisms which hold the existing structures of the stepfamily in place. Positions of power and powerlessness were examined in the context of the stepfamily. In addition, some of the conflicting subject positions open to stepmothers were introduced. The tensions and contradictions between the discourses were explored and some of the implications for women in stepfamilies were examined.

Sessions 2 - 6.

These sessions all followed a similar format. To begin, participants were invited to bring forward any issues arising from the last meeting. Next, one participant would read out loud the story which she had written. Following the story reading, the first step in analysis would involve the discussion of all members' impressions, thoughts, emotional or physical responses, opinions, and judgements that they might bring to the story. In this way we hoped to discover some of the ways that the discursive field was already colonized.

The next stage in the meeting focused on a group analysis of the text using the deconstructive reading strategy described earlier. Each member of the group was provided with their own copy of the story to facilitate their work. In addition, each was provided with an information sheet that outlined a deconstructive reading strategy as well as some suggestions on how to proceed in its use. This information sheet was especially useful in the early phase of the group meetings as the analytic process evolved in the course of working with the stories. The information sheet is provided below:

Looking at the Stories

Since there is no one 'true method' that is singularly appropriate in this kind of work, it is likely that the analytic process to be used by the group will evolve in the course of working with the stories. However, it would be useful to have some techniques available to guide the work, especially in the beginning stages.

Deconstructive reading is a type of reading strategy. Like previewing, summarizing, or other strategies, it is a way of thinking that produces specific results. The basic notion is this: The world we are born into is a world "not because it has itself any meaning (it doesn't), but because it is a whole of interlocking meanings which establish and interpret on another" (Oakeshott cited in Parker, 1994, p. 386.) "Meanings have no anchor save one another. They are contingent, moving and unstable" (Parker, 1994, p. 386). The aim therefore, is to look at the text itself to see how character, emotion and desire are created in a story. This unmasks the schemes concocted to stabilize or "make sense" of the world. Some suggestions on how to begin:

- 1) Look for "what we take for granted" within a cultural context. How do we understand the events that take place? How do we evaluate these events?
- 2) Look at the story critically, and not just at the surface level. What is the speaker's belief system/personal paradigm for making sense of the world?
- 3) Look at things implied, not explicit, or assumed. How do we explain the "facts" of the story to ourselves?
- 4) Identify unspoken expectations of what "should" be happening (vs what is happening) within the personal or cultural context.
- 5) What are we caught in, in this story? What beliefs and values lure us in to be caught?
- 6) Try to make the familiar strange. Be a foreigner in you own context.
- 7) What do we need to know or assume in order for this story to make sense?

After the second reading of the story each participant worked on their own analysis. Each participant had the opportunity to share her analysis with the other participants. During this group process, meanings were debated, and multiple interpretations of the story arose in naming and clarifying them. In the later sessions, particular attention was accorded to the concept of positioning. This involved examining how the readers entered the text and aligned themselves with particular characters. Participants read the text from different character positions within the storyline to bring to light new aspects of the discourse of stepmothering.

Sessions 2 - 6: Continuing the task of analysis.

Following the first stage of analysis, the audiotapes of the sessions were transcribed. Again multiple readings of the transcripts provided familiarity with the content of the sessions, as well as their flow and emotional tone. The first portion of the transcript, consisting of the group's initial reactions to the story, was analyzed using the method elucidated earlier for the first session. Again I used one page units of text from which I identified the elements of discourse embedded in the conversation.

The second portion of the transcripts contained the discourse identified by participants in the process of group analysis. These elements of discourse were noted and added to the elements of discourse I had identified from the first portion of the session. This extraction of discursive elements was initially completed for Sessions 2 and 3.

Following a review of this material as a whole (Sessions 1-3), it became clear that the dominant discursive structures which stepmothers used to speak themselves into existence had emerged from the material. Although multiple and contradictory, patterns were beginning to be discerned, and the dominant discursive elements had begun to take shape. This being the case,

I decided to use these dominant elements as a base from which to structure a mapping procedure. This mapping procedure simply provided a visual representation of the material to aid in the task of further analysis. Examples of dominant discursive elements used in the mapping process included the discourse of the traditional family, the discourse of the good mother, and the discursive practices governing interaction between stepmothers and ex-wives.

Analysis of Sessions 4, 5, and 6 then proceeded in the following manner. First, the discursive elements embedded in the text were identified using the same method as for Sessions 1-3 (described) above. This material was then organized using the mapping process. In this mapping procedure, the specific details of the discourses which constituted stepmothers were laid out according to different sites (or subject areas). This process made it possible to manage the large volume of material by providing a loose organizational structure which left room for new elements of discourse to emerge, as well as sites and practices in discourses previously identified to become further defined.

The final session.

Following from these previous discussions, in which the discourse of stepmothering was brought forward, the collective undertook a task of group story writing that resisted the dominant discourse. This activity held the key to disrupting and decentering the old discourses and narratives of stepmothering--“to unstitching and fraying the patterns of desire that are held within them” (Davies, 1992, p. 69). Each group member created a list of elements that she wanted included in the final story. These lists were compiled and discussed in the group setting. Due to time restrictions, the group never got to the final stage of putting together their ideas to create a story. Since the researcher had the greatest investment in completing the task, it was

proposed that she write the story including all elements that had been suggested. The story was shared with group members at the celebration gathering that marked the end of the group's meetings. It has been included along with the other stories in the presentation of the work.

Presenting the Work

To present the analysis I decided to use the participants' stories as an anchor for the discussion. One particular aspect of the discourse of stepmothering was highlighted in each story. Portions of the transcripts, which included the conversation of the group at work in the analysis of the story, were selected to gain access to the continuities and discontinuities in the subjectivity of the stepmothers, particularly as they are manifested in our analysis of the story. My task in commenting on these conversations was to enable the reader to see the possible worlds that the story and the conversations offer to stepmothers. I captured them in the act of sense making, recognizing their constitution of self in the familiar and the more marginal storylines of our sociocultural context.

Locating each participant's personal point of entry into the topic

Although discourse and material practices create forms of social relations that transcend the personal and particular, they are constituted, created, and practiced by actual subjects (Smith, 1987). As one method of preserving the presence of the women in this inquiry, participants were invited to submit a piece of writing, describing themselves, which was to be included in the final product. Thus, participants placed themselves in the frame of the picture that they were painting, as women with concrete specific desires and interests. This writing helped to locate each woman's particular point of entry into her work as part of the collective, defining some aspects of her world as it presented itself to her.

A cautionary note

The reader will note that they do not always agree with the deconstruction of the text presented in this work. They do not make the same interpretations. This is as it should be. Numerous interpretations are always possible in a process of deconstruction which is never complete, where meanings arise and confront one another. However, the reader is encouraged to proceed in the task where we have left off. We encourage you to pursue your own multiple interpretations, naming, and clarifying them for yourself. In this way the work will continue, bringing new horizons and fresh vantage points.

The issue of validity

What does empirical rigour mean for the postpositivistic researchers? The best tactic is to construct research designs that include self-reflexivity (Lather, 1991). Lather offers four specific suggestions conceptualizing the issue of validity for poststructuralist research that is “openly committed to a more just social order” (1991, p. 66).

First, triangulation is critical in ensuring the trustworthiness of the data. This means including multiple data sources, different methods and theoretical schemes. This effort to broaden the base of the research material must seek to utilize designs that bring forward counter patterns as well as convergence. This suggestion has been followed in this research design by including data from different sources, including personal stories, and the planned work as a collective, which provided input from several perspectives.

Second, construct validity demands that research is conducted in a conscious context of theory-building. This means that clarity must be ensured on the project at hand and its role with respect to theory construction. This research project seeks to extend and revise the

discourse of stepmothering. Self-reflexivity, also necessary in establishing construct validity, has been included as part of the research design, so that it was possible to observe as *a priori* theory brought forward in the first meeting of the collective evolves through the logic of the narratives as the sessions continued.

Third, face validity should be considered. Face validity is a concept which refers to the degree to which research appears to address what it purports to address (Borg & Gall, 1989). Face validity is critical and inextricably linked to construct validity. Research with face validity provides 'a click of recognition.' This was addressed by writing and rewriting the analysis of the narratives, and by getting feedback from committee members on this emerging analysis as the work progressed. It should be noted, however, that the possibility of encountering 'false consciousness' can create a limit on the usefulness of getting feedback from others in the manner described above.

Fourth, in research that is openly committed to changing the social order, catalytic validity needs to be considered. The research process should be evaluated for its impact with respect to participants gaining understanding of the framework of their lives, as well as a grasp of the institutions and the structures that shape and direct them. Good praxis-oriented research is geared to releasing, not suppressing, the energies of those involved, so that participants will be more able to change their lives, both individually and collectively. It should be noted that on several occasions the participants commented on positive changes that they had experienced, as well as the insights gained as a result of their participation in the research.

Efforts to produce knowledge that will be useful in working toward more equitable social arrangements need to strive for rigor in addition to relevance. A lack of attention to the

issues of validity within the postpositivistic paradigm will only reduce the legitimacy of the knowledge produced therein. If no criteria are put forward on which to evaluate our attempts at theory-building, we fail “to protect our work from our passions and limitations” (Lather, 1991, p. 69).

Summary remarks

From the perspective of the feminist poststructuralist, there is no longer any “real” lived story. The stories we observe, read, and hear, both lived and imaginary, form a repertoire of imaginary storylines through which our life choices can be made (Davies, 1992). The choices that we see as available in any particular moment depend on the discourses made easily accessible, and the story lines that we take ourselves to be living out. Our historically patriarchal culture has destructive discourses and stories through which our identity and desires as women and as stepmothers are presently organized.

This project draws fragments of stepmothers’ lives together to make new kind of story, one that aims to disrupt and decentre old discourses and narratives. It is hoped that this story will be one stage in a continuing process, so that in turn its shape will be broken and its contents burst open to bring forth new possibilities. This bursting forth will not simply result from a creation of images that others can be expected to take inspiration from and follow. Rather it will be the creation of a collective awareness of the power of speaking and writing, both to constitute ourselves in ways we do not wish, and to create a succession of moments in which we know ourselves as otherwise, as stepmothers who are multiple, fragmented, and whole. The stepmothers in this research encompass in their beings both the light and the dark, the wicked and the perfectly good, thus dismantling the categories themselves.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section the participants introduce themselves. In the second section the six stories are told, each highlighting one particular aspect of the discourse of stepmothering. The stories are presented with an introduction and followed by commentary, the group's analysis, and a discussion/summary.

In the group's analysis, portions of the transcript have been selected to gain access to the continuities and discontinuities in the subjectivity of the stepmothers. The commentary on these conversations captures the stepmothers in the act of sense making; recognizing their construction of self in the families and more marginal storylines of their sociocultural context. A transcript notation is also included to assist in reading the transcript portions of the text.

The Participants

Each woman was invited to submit a piece of writing describing themselves that would be included in the final product. Here are their contributions. Some identifying details have been altered to protect the confidentiality of the women and their extended family networks. The pseudonyms of the women in the research group were chosen by them. The names for other family members were chosen by the author.

Moonshadow

41-years old, self-employed professional, with adolescent son and preadolescent stepdaughter. In relationship with father of stepdaughter for six years. Daughter lived with us for several years, then with her mom for some time and now back to us. Her mom has dumped

her with us with no notice, and has also abandoned her other child on the doorstep of one of her ex's girlfriends.

Have never called myself a kid-person...so find it difficult at times to be the "other mother" of a kid who wants to be with her natural mother. The closest that she and I come to intimacy is when we discuss her mother, as Dad doesn't want to discuss it. The last time she lived with us was even less intimate, as she and her Dad became very intimate, and I felt jealousy, which was very difficult to deal with. None would believe that this cute little "Goldilocks" had ways of driving a wedge between her Dad and I, i.e., Why can't I sleep with my Dad? (unspoken: "instead of you").

Relationship with natural mother is stormy; poor communication, escalating to violence at times. Custody situation is currently shared, though we are going for full custody and mental state of mother is very unstable. Daughter, though, wishes to live with mother, so, situation undesirable. Which is more important?

The child's emotional attachment to the mom? or a stable environment. i.e., no threats of suicide, no restricted video rentals, proper meals, help with school work, extracurricular lessons, promotion of girlfriends instead of hanging out with older half brother, smoking pot in the park.

Parenting is a challenge, and step-parenting twice the challenge. I usually try to think the best of people, but relationships with the natural mother test always, and poisons our family. If she were not in the picture, step-parenting could grow comfortable.

Janus

Janus is a 43-year old health care professional who is employed full time in an administrative capacity. She is enrolled (part-time) as a graduate student. She has been twice divorced and has no biological children.

She has been a stepmother to two boys, ages 16 and 13, for seven years.

The boys have an established pattern [for visitation] which consists of one overnight [visit] and alternating Thursday to Sunday nights with Janus and their father. "Ad hoc" kinds of contact [with the stepchildren] occur easily.

Kindree

I am 41-years old, once divorced, remarried four years ago and have two stepdaughters who are 12 and 10-years old. I am a professional in the human services field.

Skye

I am a 30-year old professional. I have been in a relationship with my husband for four years now. I found that being a stepmother was a role that I was never prepared for. No one ever told me how to do it. In fact, no one ever mentioned it to me as a possibility at all. Strange that I learnt more about calculus, baking bread, and coordinating a wardrobe in preparation for adulthood than I ever did about living life in a so called "blended family." Well, maybe they were thinking about blenders when they coined that term. You know, those appliances that chop things up into little tiny pieces and send them flying in a spiral motion. Ah yes, nothing like it to puree those soups. And I have a food processor, too.

Artimus

We are a family of five now. Camas and I met two and a half years ago, lived common law one year after we met, then married in 1995. Larch, aged five now, I met just before his third birthday, Pine, aged eight, I met when he was five and a half. Camas and I also had a baby together in 1994, Spirea, who is turning one.

The boys live full-time with us this year, with visits every third weekend and on school holidays to their Mum and Stepdad, Honeysuckle, and Clematis. Two school years prior to this the situation was reversed, with the boys living primarily with Honeysuckle and Clematis. Summer holidays [are split] 50/50 between the two homes.

THE STORIES

Transcript Notation

(())	author's comment or observation
xx	unclear talk
[]	best guess for words spoken
S	unidentified speaker
(.....)	material deleted to protect confidentiality
/	interruption
?	interrogative or upward intonation
- or ...	self interruption or break in flow of sentence
DON'T	raised voice
“ “	speaker quotes from a previous conversation

Moonshadow

The Green Day Concert: The Conservative Story of Family

Introduction

Since the conservative discourse is hegemonic in creating the vision of family, stepfamilies and stepmothers often see it as normative. However, the stepmother as an ‘extra’ in the conservative storyline becomes someone who does not belong. The stepmother’s attempts to insert herself into the dominant storyline highlight its structure as well as her subjectivity as a site of conflict. While the conservative discourse is certainly hegemonic in a patriarchal society, it is but one among several competing visions of family, all representing different political interests, which as a consequence vie for status and power. As stepmothers make meaning of their identity within the context of their family relations, we can observe in their struggles in the task of figuring out who to be. This is illustrated in the story and the group analysis which follow below:

Moonshadow’s story

Spruce had gone to the Walbran Valley doing under-waterfall shots... I was home with the kids for the weekend and a major PMS headache. As the kids were playing drums, guitar and electric piano, a telephone call came in... It was Fir, Yarrow’s half-brother. Yarrow is just about 11, Spruce’s daughter, my stepdaughter. Fir is just about 14 and has just been placed in a foster home as Hazel, Yarrow and Fir’s mother, recently abandoned her kids.

Anyway enough history... My 14-year son Hemlock had his friend Currant over and they were bugging Yarrow as she tried to have some privacy for her phone call... Yarrow was yelling back at Hemlock, which just caused him to tease her even more. In steps the stepmother...

Hemlock in his best tattle-tail voice: “Fir’s going to a Green Day concert in Vancouver by himself and Yarrow is going too!”

I tried to shut down the pain in my head and calm the situation presented to me by asking the boys to give Yarrow some space. When the phone call was over, Yarrow came rushing to me and gleefully announced: “My mom’s taking Fir and me to a Green Day concert!” Green Day is her favourite band and the posters plaster her bedroom walls and Mom is her favourite person in the world whom she hasn’t seen for a couple of months.

I immediately start into some reasons why she shouldn’t get her hopes up too high but stopped when I see the tears welling up in her eyes. Did I want to take the joy out of the situation because I knew that her father was in the middle of trying to get a restraining order and full custody and would never allow her to go? Because I knew that her mother would probably not carry through, or carry through and take off with the kids? These thoughts were going through my head.

As the boys were trying to listen in, offering to go to the concert with her, I took Yarrow into her room and sat her down on the bed beside me and proceeded to say all sorts of conflicting things: “I like your mother but she’s done a lot of crazy things lately and a lot of people are upset with her and I’d like you to be able to see your mother, but she has to talk to us directly, not send messages through Fir.” And then continued on telling her things that I shouldn’t share with a 10-year old. The flood gates were opening and damn if I could close them. Ending up with commiserating with her situation and putting Spruce as the stopper.

“Why can’t you decide whether or not I go Moonshadow?” Yarrow asked. And that was the end. Let me explain that I didn’t tell her whether she could go or not, so I said I couldn’t decide.

Commentary

It is easy to read this story conservatively, with the grain of traditional gender and family relations. In such a reading there are many features that conform to familiar cultural patterns:

The stepmother, as the adult female, is left at home to look after the children while the father goes out into the world. Since the 'bad' biological mother has "abandoned her kids," the stepmother takes on the mothering tasks, accepting responsibility for the care of her stepchildren. Playing the role of 'good mother' includes attending to children's emotional and physical needs before her own. However, being uncertain about her rank in the family power hierarchy, she feels unable to make certain parenting decisions in her partner's absence.

As we listen to Moonshadow's story, we see that she is aware that she caught in a site of conflict. She is struggling to figure out what to do and who to be as a stepmother. Should she position herself as one who can make decisions about parenting, yet through an evasion of her responsibility chooses the easy way out, leaving the decision to the biological father; or should she position herself as one who is labelled by cultural norms as being too low on the power hierarchy to make a decision. Is she the wicked stepmother who fails to attend to her stepchild's fondest desires, or the good mother who looks only to her stepdaughter's welfare? There are no easy choices here.

Group analysis

A. Positions of power.

In the conversations which follow, Moonshadow discusses her thoughts and feelings about the story she has told. Moonshadow questions her inability to come to a decision about

whether or not Yarrow could attend the concert. The group's analysis highlights the ways she has positioned herself (and has been positioned) in the context of the family power hierarchy:

- 1 Moonshadow: Feeling mad, but also feeling the extreme opposite of... I don't want to disappoint her either. And then her mother too, I don't want to disappoint her either by saying she can't go.
- 2 Artimus: Yeah, you probably felt like you were really in the middle.
- 3 Kindree: It's being a tug-of-war. Back and forth. Back and forth.
- 4 Moonshadow: Which is one reason I may have gone, well, Spruce can make that decision. I'm only the... ((voice trails off))
- 5 Artimus: Well, it does tend to fall that way. Like the ultimate decision goes to the biological parent and in consultation with you often, but ultimately...
- 6 Moonshadow: Which if it had been an immediate thing happening the next day and he wasn't going to be there, that couldn't happen. Right. But you don't get much practice feeling good about making those decisions because...
- 7 Artimus: It's interesting why can't you decide, I mean, Moonshadow, Yarrow is seeing you as this somehow sensitive to her situation and thinking that if you decide, you would probably let her go. And that's what I'm picking up from that.
- 8 Moonshadow: Yeah. Well I think she knows that her dad won't... because she knows that her dad hates her mom and I've told her that I like her mom and there are things about her mom I like, you know? So now I... But then I'm also feeling...and the big thing about that statement is I'm feeling she looks at

me as if I've got no power. In her eyes I'm only seven. Not an adult parent who can make a decision like that. So that's...

9 Janus: So you're saying the emphasis on that statement might have been, why can't you decide, or why can't you decide.

10 Moonshadow: Oh, I see what you mean. Well, why can't you as opposed to...

11 Janus: It makes it different.

12 Moonshadow: It was a bit of both.

13 Janus: Okay.

This conversation illustrates the influence of the conservative discourse around stepmothering and the family power hierarchy. The stepmother feels she can't make this decision because, after all, she is only the stepmother, who is relatively powerless (4). Artimus quickly identifies the discourse in question, agreeing that this is indeed the way that decisions tend to get made in stepfamilies, with the biological parent ultimately holding the most power (5). However, Artimus seeks to question this discourse and wants to examine how Moonshadow has decided that she has so little decision-making ability (power). Moonshadow calls again on the conservative discourse, observing that her stepdaughter also shares her view of family power relations. Moonshadow sees herself as someone with no power, and her stepdaughter sees the situation in the same way. It is interesting to note that she positions herself as a person even younger, and presumably less powerful than her stepdaughter: in her reading of the power hierarchy, Moonshadow is only seven years old. As a stepmother, inserting (or squeezing) herself into the conservative discourse, Moonshadow has given up her to claim to adult status.

It is clear that in the conservative reading of family power hierarchy, adults are meant to have more power than children, and biological relationship are part of what legitimizes parents' positions of authority over children. The stepmother as an adult lacking biological relationship falls to the lowest power position, or alternatively to some unspecified position, in the power structure. The influence of gender in the power hierarchy remains silent, not discussed. Presumably this is due to the distasteful nature of naming gender as an issue in the family scenario, in a time when the influence of feminist discourse has made this undesirable.

B. The power of love.

The stepmothers discuss yet another aspect of influence in the adult-child relationship, the power accessed through love and attachment. Here again the conservative discourse is hegemonic, touting the biological relationship as always primary, yet this interpretation does not go unchallenged:

- 1 Artimus: Yeah. And another thing that comes up for me here too is that when the phone call was over Yarrow came rushing to me, gratefully enough... I mean rushing to you. I mean you're the first person she wanted to...
- 2 Moonshadow: Only because I was the only adult there and the boys were really bugging her.
- 3 Artimus: Yeah. Do you think it would have been different in a different scenario?
- 4 Moonshadow: If there had been someone else there?
- 5 Artimus: Because what I hear in that, and what I hear you just saying right now, is exactly the same thing I use as a stepparent is, I flatly do not believe that

they really love me and really care for me and are really that connected to me. I can't image that that actually is true.

6 Skye: Yeah.

7 Janus: Many times I've wanted these kids to hurry up and be 35- or 40-years old so that they can say things like that. And then we'll just flip back to where we are right now so they'll know that things are okay and we can carry on. But I...

8 Skye: But even when they do say it, do you think that I can believe that either? They don't really understand what it means to love someone. No of course they don't.

9 Artimus: But I think that's key as a stepparent, you know that, that, I don't know whether it's resistance or the inability to take in their love or to trust that they could actually love us deeply, like you know, even almost as much as their biological parent. I know I have a lot of stuff around not believing that.

10 xx: Well, especially when...

11 Artimus: That shocks me when it happens. It's like oh, well, that's pretty neat/

12 Janus: It can't really be. I must be misinterpreting.

13 Artimus: Well it's just a moment.

14 Janus: Yeah/

15 Moonshadow: Where he ran to you for comfort.

16 Artimus: But I think that's a fairly consistent thing in stepparenting.

Artimus begins the conversation by pointing out that Moonshadow was the first person her stepdaughter wanted to tell about her good news. This statement reflects Artimus' desire to overturn the discourse about the primacy of the biological parent-child relationships, and underline the importance and the possibility of love in the stepmother-child relationship (1). Moonshadow refuses her attempt to overturn the conservative discourse which designates biological relationships as more powerful and important. Artimus is quick to pick up on her refusal and acknowledges that she too is vulnerable to the message of the conservative discourse where the love and relationship (and influence) with stepchildren is unattainable in the absence of biological ties (5). Janus joins her, doubting the possibility of the stepchildren's love, but at the same time desiring it, as confirmation that her family situation is 'okay' (7). In families rated as 'okay' people love each other. Skye reveals her own acceptance of the storyline that makes love between stepchildren and stepparents unattainable. She denies the authenticity of the stepchildren's expression of love by pointing to their developmental stage, which might preclude the ability to understand its meaning (8). The influence of the conservative discourse is acknowledged by Artimus (9). She admits that it is difficult to believe that stepchildren "could love you almost as much as their biological parent." However, she continues to point to an alternative discourse which holds out the possibility of love between stepmother and stepchild. This portion of the conversation ends with various methods used by the women to continue a conservative interpretation of their relationships, marginalizing an alternative storyline which includes the possibility of creating powerful ties and loving relationships with the stepchildren they parent.

C. "In the middle."

In this conversation, it is clear that the stepmothers are quite familiar with the problems that arise in trying to fit into the old storyline of family. The women clarify the expectations that they feel have been placed on them in their role as stepmother. In addition, they continue to analyze the implications of their positioning in the family hierarchy:

- 1 Kindree: I think though that there's things that come in though. What hit home for me was: "I was home with the kids for the weekend." You're responsible for the children. It's your role to be there. No matter what. Major PMS. Super Mom. Doesn't matter how sick you are, what's going on, you're supposed to be there and you're supposed to be doing it.
- 2 Moonshadow: Especially with a PMS headache. And then with the stepmother role: "In steps the stepmother." Stepmothers step in, that's their role. Also: "I tried to shove down the pain in my head and calm the situation." Children come first. "Mom is her favourite person." Mom is everything no matter what she does.
- 3 S: I wrote that too.
- 4 Artimus: The fact that "I like your mother, but she's done a lot of crazy things." And I put down that you know when you're saying these conflicting things, mothers are supposed to have all the answers. Aren't stepmothers too? You know, what's going on here? Why am I feeling this way? And I've got that down that stepmothers are in the middle, no power. So even though you have all this responsibility, you have no power. You're in the middle.

That's what I got from it. Also, what else do I have? Oh with um... "I immediately started in with some reasons why she shouldn't get her hopes up too high but stopped." Don't want to rain on her parade.

5 Moonshadow: The evil stepmother.

6 Artimus: Yeah. The wicked stepmother. Can't do that. And the fact that you know when you're talking about with Spruce being in the middle of a restraining order for full custody and would never allow her to go, also you knew that the mother would probably not carry through. Here again you're in the middle. Continually in the middle. Stepparents are in the middle.

7 Moonshadow: And you go well is it just me? Am I not taking that power and just doing it? Or am I just deferring it because I don't feel that I'm as good as an actual parent? Can I just take that power and use it, or am I just deferring it and not that the situation calls for ... or something.

8 Skye: It's hard to know.

9 Moonshadow: Yeah it is.

10 Skye: It's really hard to know because of the story. It's hard to know whether you're not allowed to have it or whether you just don't take it.

The above conversation highlights several aspects of the conservative discourse on the family relations. Kindree makes a clear statement of expectations for women fulfilling the mothering role, and hence the stepmothering role (1). Women are responsible for, interested in, and available for child care simply on the basis of sex. It is an obligatory role which focuses primarily on looking after other people's needs before your own. Moonshadow further clarifies

the discourse on the role of the stepmother: stepmothers ‘steps into’ the mother position when the ‘real’ mother is gone (2). Even in the absence of the biological mother, the conservative discourse indicates that biological ties are primary in loving relationships: mother love is the strongest (2). Artimus provides more information on stepmothering in the conservative storyline: the stepmother, like the mother, is expected to meet everyone’s needs in the family; she is meant to have all the answers (4). Artimus notes that she has the same responsibility to nurture and provide for others, without having the same power base accessed by women who are ‘real’ mothers. In a traditional nuclear family, the women’s arena of power is in the home. In this storyline, stepmothers are in the arena but without the same power to move within it. They are “ in the middle.”

The stepmother in this story is subject to a range of conflicting discourses. This site of conflict is often referred to in stepmothers’ conversations as ‘being in the middle’ (4,6). The discourse of (step)motherhood clearly indicates that the good mother would protect her (step)daughter by keeping her out of unsafe situations, in this case by forbidding her attendance at the concert. Yet the good mother would also make her child happy by providing her with her fondest desires, in this case by making arrangements for her attend the concert. A good woman in the traditional storyline would also abide by their husbands’ wishes, not even considering the alternatives. Yet, a good woman would also want to be ‘nice’ and please everyone, including the biological mother who wants her daughter to go to the concert. The evil (wicked) stepmother in the conservative storyline is one who would disappoint her stepchildren, denying them of things they want the most (4,5,6). Artimus identifies this as a storyline to be avoided (6), but it is one that remains open as a constant trap, should the stepmother make

decision which fail to put children's desires first. A strong woman, empowered and demanding equity within a feminist storyline, would make her decision independently, confidently relying on her own judgement. How is a stepmother to decide who to be and whom to please? There are no easy answers, no easy way of satisfying all people involved.

Ambivalence is yet another problem for women seeking a traditional vision of family where we should at least pretend to be happy together and work towards a common purpose. Stepmothers interrupt this conservative vision of family which includes a sense of unity in working towards common goals, bringing forward another vision of family life which features individuals in conflict with competing needs.

Given the tension between the conservative discourse of stepmothering and more feminist discourses, which suggest the equal division of power as the main agenda, the subjectivity of the stepmother is up for grabs, and at their expense. Moonshadow reflects this struggle as she asks: "Is it just me?" (7). She is left wondering if she is an unnatural or bad parent; she feels that her personal inadequacies are the source of her failure. However, in the next statement she moves beyond herself and looks at the discursive threads through which she is making meaning of her experience. Is she failing to make decisions because she is caught in a storyline of being without power? Alternatively, could she attend to an alternate storyline and take on the subjectivity of the empowered woman who demands an equal position vis-à-vis her male partner and the biological mother, sharing the power and the decision-making which affect everyone involved? (7). Skye affirms her struggle, pointing out that she too finds it difficult to determine whether she is caught in the traditional "story" or whether she has

decided to give up power as a result of her own failure to take what is offered to her in an alternative, but more marginal, feminist discourse (8,10).

Summary

The story and the stepmothers' analyses confirm that the conservative vision of family is still hegemonic. As stepmothers figure out who to be in the context of family relationships, they are drawn into a storyline in which they have no place. Their very presence represents a deviation from the preferred story of family life. The only positive prescription available to adult females in the conservative discourse on the nuclear family is that of the mother. If she is not the mother, or an ill-intentioned rival to the mother, then who is she to be? Alternative, but more marginal discourses position her in different and conflicting ways and meanings confront one another. Clearly, her subjectivity is a site of conflict.

As stepmothers attempt to position themselves within this vision of the nuclear family, the organizing principles that characterize the power hierarchy as set out in the conservative discourse have been revealed once again: generation, gender, and the primacy of biological ties. In the story that was presented here we find that the stepmother feels powerless in the context of the hierarchy. She is considered adult enough to be left to care for children, yet she positions herself as a small child, at the bottom of the power hierarchy, not adult enough to make parental decisions. In her slide to the lowest power position she has managed to lose her adult status.

How did this happen? In the nuclear family the storyline dictates the primacy of the husband, the most powerful member, who unites forces with his wife to form the family power base. However, in the stepfamily, this power base is uncomfortably shifted. The stepmother

enters the family system having her own needs and desires that do not necessarily contribute to the care of the man's children; she interrupts the myth of the happy family where everyone's interests are being met in working for the common good. If choices must be made, the conservative storyline suggests that the needs and wishes of the children, especially the children of divorce, come before those of a second wife (Burns, 1985). This highlights yet another aspect of the conservative discourse which in many ways privileges the needs and wishes of children. Children's vulnerability leaves them in need of protection and care in order to survive and flourish. Stepmothers' needs and wishes often come last, leaving the stepmother feeling that she has little control in the family context.

The prescriptions in the conservative discourse on proper female behaviour further entrenches the stepmother at the lowest rank in the hierarchy. If they find the structures of family life oppressive, they are generally encouraged to make the best of a difficult situation. If they don't do their job cheerfully, or at the very least suffer in silence, then they risk being labelled as a bad wife or a bad mother.

It bears repeating that the influence of gender in the power hierarchy was not a topic broached in the group's discussion. This is likely due to the continued moral opposition offered by the competing and more liberal discourses which position men and women as equals, at least in the home situation. These feminist and moral liberal discourses are ones which this group of highly educated women clearly have access to. If they felt dominated by their male partners, this would be a painful insight that might be difficult to share with others.

It is clear that the stepmothers attend to aspects of the conservative discourse suggesting the primacy of biological ties. Stepmothers clearly wish to position themselves in a

story in which they love their stepchildren and are loved by them in return, yet they worry that love without biological ties is perhaps impossible. They have accepted the idea that families are composed of people whose biological relationships assure a common bond of love uniting all. Despite their own varied experiences of family life and the much publicized evidence of break up in families in Canada, these women willingly set out to (re)create conventional family life and the warmth and security suggested in the story where we all live happily ever after.

Janus

Why the Laundry Never Gets Done:

The Good Mother and the Wicked Stepmother

Introduction

The dominant cultural storylines around women who mother include the discourses of the good mother and the wicked stepmother, discourses which have been constituted and held in place as binary opposites. Since few women desire to be inserted into a storyline where they feel wicked, stepmothers attend to, and attempt to, follow the prescriptions set out in the discourse of the good mother. This is a difficult task since “good” mothers have high standards to adhere to in order to maintain their “goodness”--one bad meal, one harsh word, one small resentment and we fall from grace. The good mother who has failed all too easily becomes the wicked one.

The discourses of the good mother and the wicked stepmother are clarified in the text which follows below. Observe as the women struggle in coming to terms with these discourses, as they work out who and how to be in the context of their family relationships.

Janus' story

This incident occurred within the first few months of my moving to Victoria and moving in with the boy's father.

As was required of me, I drove over to the after-school care place where the boys had been going all of their school lives to pick them up and bring them to our suite. It wasn't unusual for me to have feelings of dread and anxiety going to pick them up. There were always kids everywhere yelling and screaming, the TV blaring, and I had to go in and get them. They were never ready and at the door. I had already planned what I would cook for them for dinner because

it was one of her late work days, so she wouldn't pick them up at our place until after 6:30 and they should have dinner before that because they might get hungry.

While I was standing outside the door amongst all the kids and shoes and school bags, waiting for Aspen and Sumac to put on their shoes, Aspen looked up at me and said, "Mom says you have to do our laundry now." We finally had our washer and dryer installed in the suite so I didn't have to go to the laundromat. I raised my eyebrows at Rose, the sitter, and said nothing. Rose had a look on her face that I interpreted to be amazement and finally I said, "I guess we'll have to talk about that." And we left and I fumed for many hours and my heart rate was just going.

This issue finally resolved itself three years later when Aspen and Sumac were older and I could teach them how to operate the machines themselves. Their father was never successful at telling her that I refused to do laundry for them.

Commentary

In this piece of writing the familiar storyline is easily discerned: The stepmother is entrusted with the care of the children in the domestic scene, while their father goes out into the world to work. The stepmother, as an adult female, is thrust into the mothering role simply by virtue of her sex. It is taken for granted that she should be interested and involved in the task of raising her stepchildren. The children's needs come before her wants and needs. This is not her preferred scenario, so she copes by being angry and suffering in silence.

The traditional storyline is disrupted in Janus' silent refusal to meet the expectation of others. The dirty laundry accumulates, as does her anger at being inserted into a storyline which does not serve her needs and interests. In the end, she derives her own solution and teaches the boys to do their own laundry.

Perhaps the price of speaking her anger is too high. If she did speak her mind, declaring her resistance to the discourse of the good mother, would she risk being labelled as the wicked stepmother/bad mother? That is, a woman who is self-centred and uncaring, perhaps even too 'lazy' to meet her stepchildren's most basic needs for food and clean clothing. It is interesting to note that discussion fails to occur either with her spouse or the biological mother to change the situation, nor do the biological father or the children ever offer to do the laundry themselves.

Group analysis

A. The good mother and the wicked stepmother.

This conversation highlights Janus' analysis of her own story. The reader should note that Janus uses the term "assumptions" as a name for the discursive elements embedded in her text.

- 1 Janus: Anyway I thought that "as required of me"... I expected it of me because I think society expects it of me. So the assumption there. I'm assuming that everybody expects that I would do all of this.
- 2 S: Mmhm.
- 3 Janus: The driving, the cooking and all that kind of stuff. "The feelings of Dread," you're supposed to be happy with kids around. You know, when kids are all around it's a lively happy place. I'd already planned, like you said before, everything has to be prepared and ready. And the dinner for them-- you're absolutely right Artimus--it has to be what they like and it has to be good for them ((said in singsong voice)). And if you can't do that, or if you

don't do that, boy are you a failure. A failure, big time, if you can't feed people the things that they like to have, then you're a failure. "They have to have their dinner because they might get hungry." Well the assumption is for me, that all is for the sake of the children.

Everything has to revolve around the children. "Mom says you have to do my laundry." Moms are the ultimate in authority. Moms are the controlling people. The laundry... laundry is in my mind a subservient kind of thing to have to do. The washer and dryer.. to me that's... you're not an adult without the required appliances. That's how I am, I know that. "I guess we'll have to talk about that." You have to respond unemotionally and in control. And then the hours, fuming hours after, you have to suffer or you have to be angry IN SILENCE. Like you must not say anything to upset anybody. "When Aspen and Sumac were older and I could teach them."

Interesting that I had the responsibility. That I felt that I had the responsibility of teaching. The way for the situation to be resolved is that I took control of it, by me doing the teaching. The father business... it's not an assumption it's a fact. I was feeling not supported. And the assumption that that's the spouse and the ex-spouse, so they should be able to resolve things, which is you know, when you think about the history, it's probably not a very realistic expectation ((laughs)). And what was really at the bottom of a lot of this for me was I had been in control of much larger Operations before I came here. ((group laughter)).

- 4 Skye: Well I should hope so. ((laughs))
- 5 Janus: And laundry and... I was a nothing when I came here. THIS was a NOTHING. And this subservient kind of thing was really even MORE nothing. And the women's work, for sure... Women's work, this is all women's work.

It is clear that Janus finds the family arrangements as presented here quite oppressive (1-5). She begins her analysis by (1) clarifying some aspects of the discourse of the good mother. She is expected to provide care for the children, "driving, cooking, all that kind of stuff." As well, Janus is expected to derive happiness from providing this care (3). It is clear that the care provided should meet certain (high) expectations: societal expectations and personal expectations which she has internalized (3).

The consequences of refusing the storyline by not doing the tasks or performing them in a manner that might not meet expectations means failure in the good mother role (3). Even if you perform the prescribed tasks in an exemplary manner, if you don't feel happy when looking after children, then you have still failed. It does not appear that there is very much room in this discourse to figure out who to be, to make self-defined choices; you are either a good (step)mother or you are bad/wicked one. To be a good mother one of the key points to remember is that the needs of the children should come first (3).

The discourse of the family power hierarchy is revisited here; the biological mother is seen to occupy the position of ultimate authority. She is the *mother* (3) leaving the stepmother, the other woman in the domestic scene, in the position of being one down. The stepmother

feels that the tasks that she does are of a second class status, that they are “subservient” activities (3).

Janus identifies two subject positions offered in the good mother script: the happy servant who derives pleasure in caring for children, and the long-suffering one who completes the required tasks and buries her resentments silently. There are strong prescriptions in the good mother role to maintain control of ones feelings, to refrain from expressing negative emotions and to think of other family member’s emotional well-being before your own (3).

Janus has inserted herself into the discourse of the good mother and she is following its prescription of emotional repression (3). She keeps silent, and ‘fumes.’ She hopes that the biological father will communicate her displeasure around the expectations about the laundry, but there is only resounding silence. No one speaks for her. The stepmother is a woman, and woman’s work should be her lot (5).

B. More on the discourse of the good mother.

In this conversation, the group is sharing their initial reactions to the story that Janus has read to them. The conversation focuses on the discourse of the good mother, and some of the expectations to be fulfilled for an adequate performance in the (step)mother role.

- 1 Artimus: The other thing that comes up for me too is that it seemed like you... like this: “We left and I fumed for many hours after.” This burying anger, you know, not feeling that it’s okay to express it or that there is nowhere to express it, that there’s, you know... it’s eating you up. It potentially could make you sick to hold that much anger.

2 Moonshadow: We have that it resolved itself three years later, but it was constantly irritating until that time.

3 Artimus: Another thing that comes up for me is the gender stuff too. It's like...

4 Skye: Yeah.

5 Artimus: It's not like... what's your husband's name again?

6 Janus: Salal.

7 Artimus: Salal. Why it's not :”Mom says you and dad have to do our laundry?” It's like you the woman has to do the woman work which is washing clothes you know. It's a very traditional old fashioned... ((lots of laughter)) There are a lot of dynamics going on here that it just definitely feels like an attack of you as another woman, you know. It doesn't have anything to do like, why isn't it anything to do with Salal? Like why... and there's none of this like, I, you know, “Could you tell Janus and Salal that you know it would be really good if the clothes came back clean because you've got to start school the next day and you know, lah, lah, lah, lah? And I would normally do your clothes on the weekend, but if they're with you for the weekend could you make sure that...” That makes sense to me you know.

8 Janus: Even a phone call.

9 Artimus: Yeah.

10 Janus: To discuss the whole thing.

11 Skye: Yeah. It's not the laundry specifically. It's the issue. It's the...

12 Janus: It's the way it was... the method.

13 Skye: And obviously she's stuck in that whole thing too. That you should do it and that she can't tell you herself.

In this conversation, Artimus begins by identifying one of the prescriptions in the discourse of the good mother: the good mother does not openly express anger (1). It is not acceptable to be angry; you should do your work and keep the peace. Artimus wants to resist this discourse. She believes that holding in so much anger could lead to ill-health (1).

Artimus then raises the issue of women's (stepmothers') work in the context of the discourse of the good mother. She resists the conservative storyline which assumes a sex-based division of labour that requires a stepmother's participation (7). She wonders out loud about how the laundry is assumed to be the stepmother's responsibility as opposed to a responsibility shared with the biological father.

Janus (8-10) states her preference would be for the biological mother to call her and ask if she would share in this task, rather than just assuming that she should wash the children's clothes. Janus takes issue with "the method" (12), referring here to her insertion into the discursive practices around communication (or lack thereof) between stepmothers and ex-wives. Relationships are adversarial, and interactions relegate the stepmother to some kind of second class status where she is expected to follow through on orders given by the mother. These orders are within bounds of a good mother's sphere of influence--the domestic scene--for which women are assumed to be responsible. Skye (13) agrees, observing that it is clear that the biological mother is also trapped or "stuck" in the discursive practices which prescribe both the sex-based division of labour as part of the good mother script and the adversarial

relationships between ex-wives and stepmothers, making it difficult to make a direct request clarifying needs and expectations.

C. Women's work.

This discussion highlights once again the traditional discourse around (step)mothers, the good mother role, and sex-based divisions of labour.

- 1 Artimus: Well I was just going to say, did Salal ever offer to Sedge like, you know, I can do the laundry just as easily as Janus or whatever. Like, what's the problem here with it?
- 2 Janus: It's a woman's work.
- 3 Artimus: Was he fairly traditional in that way too?
- 4 Janus: Yes. And he was the only male in a family of three sisters. It's not intentional particularly. It's just kind of somehow natural.
- 5 Artimus: It's just such a great symbol, dirty laundry.
- 6 Janus: Yeah it is. Hanging it out on the line for everyone to see. Yeah.

Artimus begins the discussion by asking if Salal ever offered to do the laundry (1). In making this query Artimus is resisting insertion into a storyline where stepmothers are assumed to be primarily responsible for meeting children's basic needs simply by virtue of her sex. Janus is quick to recognize the discourse in question (2,4). Janus points out that her husband does not resist this dominant discourse because he finds that the present set of arrangements, with women taking primary responsibility for domestic duties, quite "natural" (4). The laundry is identified as a symbol in the discourse around women's work, as well as a site of conflict in the

subjectivity of these stepmothers (5). Janus agrees, (6) noting that it is a public symbol, one of oppression; a symbol which reflects a storyline in which her interests are not served.

D. If you are not good enough, then you are horrible.....

This discussion begins with a reference to the conservative discourse on family relations where a biological parent's status includes a title and a role that is recognized and respected. The discussion moves on to highlight the consequences of not following the good mother script.

- 1 Artimus: I picked up on those two things. One, "the boy's father" and the other "their father," and again he has a title. He has a title, a role--little boy's father. It does feel like you're not in partnership when I hear that. You know it's kind of like he's their father and here I am trying to, you know, do what I'm supposed to do and that led me to the next point, which was stepmothers are expected to do mom things and know about children whether they want to or not, or have had any experience. You're just sort of expected to know.
- 2 All: Um-hum. Yeah. Yeah.
- 3 Artimus: You have to do things as a stepmom that cause you a lot of stress and distress. And you have to do them.
- 4 Janus: Yeah you don't have a choice. Because what a horrible person you would be if you didn't.
- 5 Skye: Right. Because if you didn't...

- 6 Artimus: Or that it's silly. You know silly. All you're doing is picking them up from the... you know like that's so silly. What is the problem here, you know?

This conversation begins with the conservative discourse on family relations where biological parents have a title and a defined role to play in family life (1). Stepmothers' roles in the conservative discourse on the family are less defined, yet they are expected to take on mothering tasks and be competent in performing them regardless of personal interests and needs (1,2), stress or distress (3). There is no choice except to do what is required if one wishes to avoid the designation of "horrible person" (wicked stepmother). Skye reinforces the idea that there would be a price to pay in resisting the discourse of the good mother, but the consequences as she sees them remain unspecified (6). Artimus suggests that a discourse of resistance against these expectations of (step)motherhood, by refusing or protesting against them, could be marginalized by diminishing the personal costs involved in inserting oneself into the good mother storyline. Protesting against such simple expectations would only be "silly."

E. The discourse of the good mother and the surrender of self.

This conversation further clarifies the requirements of the good mother script and the subjectivity of stepmothers.

- 1 Artimus: There's a certain amount of surrendering that's required in mothering in general. But in stepmothering because you don't have that transition time to sort of evolve into it. The surrendering has to happen on a much more accelerated grade so everything gets condensed. But I think that is what's required. I mean you have to sort of surrender and say I've chosen this man

and I've chosen to parent his children because they're a package deal. And I think our egos can get in there too.

2 Kindree: Oh, definitely.

3 Artimus: I mean that whole thing about your ego is like really having a hard time when you're having to serve and do someone else's bidding. It's like the lower caste system or something... and you have been reincarnated on a lower level.

The good mother role dictates the surrender of self (1). If problems are experienced in this surrender of self, these may be attributed to intrapsychic issues, like ego (1). This discourse identifies the stepmother who experiences problems in the surrender of self as the source of her own difficulties. If surrender is a difficult experience, it is her fault and something that could be overcome if she became a better person, with less ego.

The reference to the lower caste system (3) puts the problem into yet another perspective. Perhaps the difficulties experienced by stepmothers in their family relationships are not of their own making, but in fact attributable to historically specific social arrangements which could be made otherwise. This points to the politics of family in which the stepmother adheres to a good mother script which is maintained by the power imbalances in the family hierarchy. The stepmother by occupying the lowest position, a member of a "lower caste" in the family power hierarchy, experiences her most relevant desire as surrender to the needs of others. Within a feminist discourse, such a state of affairs is viewed as problematic for women in stepfamilies.

Discussion

The discourses of the good mother and the wicked stepmother, as dominant storylines in our culture, need to be reckoned with in the task of figuring out who to be as a stepmother. Since few stepmothers desire to be wicked or evil people, there is little choice available to them within the dominant cultural storylines. So, stepmothers, at least in the beginning, often try to insert themselves into the discourse of the good mother.

As the story goes, the good mother's most relevant desire is to serve others. Serving others involves doing those particular tasks as assigned in the sex-based division of labour, for which women are assumed to be "naturally" suited. Since the stepmother, as a female, is "naturally" suited to the tasks in question, she is expected to perform her duties competently.

The good mother's attitude towards serving the needs of her mate and his offspring should be one of cheerfulness; at the very least, at little quiet suffering is in order if duties become thankless tasks. The repression of negative emotions is clearly desirable so as not to upset other family members. Feelings are to be kept under control, because angry women don't fit into the discourse of the good mother. The instructions are clear: smile hard or hide. When appearances are thus maintained it appears as if all family members are "winning," but the stepmother inserted into this discourse often has a smile that looks more like a grimace.

The discourses of the good mother and the wicked stepmother, held in place as binary opposites fail to serve women's interests in several ways: they create little space for choice, and bring confusion, conflicting with other discourses we have been encouraged to adopt. For instance, how can one be a good mother and at the same time someone in charge of their own life? How can one be a good mother and an angry rebel? Limited cultural storylines sabotage

female self-expression, assertiveness, and defiance. The trouble is not that these stepmothers want to be good mothers to be accepted as “real.” The problem is rather that the terms by which we, as women in the family are taken seriously, or even recognized, are unacceptable. We are taken seriously only when we serve, smile, and act nicely.

It is important to note that the power relations of the traditional family are operative in holding the categories of good mother and wicked stepmother in place. Not surprisingly, the discourse of the good mother prescribes behaviours which fit the lowest position in the power hierarchy. Surely, it is most convenient to label women who fail to serve (or be subservient) as wicked. Limited cultural storylines assure that men and children will continue to be serviced and women will continue to desire to serve, thus achieving themselves as recognizable, competent people within the family system.

The stepmothers in this group assert that both the subject positions of the good mother and the bad (step)mother have failed to serve their interests. So where does this leave them? They are left struggling to create a space between the subject positions offered by these dominant discourses. Sometimes they will construct a discourse of resistance and refuse the positioning made available to them in the discourses of the good mother and the wicked stepmother. They will let the laundry pile up, they will ask difficult questions and derive their own creative solutions. Understanding the collective and discursive nature of such refusals, they begin to generate new ways to be stepmothers. At other times, they make decisions to act within the terms of one discourse or another, depending on its relevance and the values of its products. They will figure out for themselves who to be.

Kindree

Why Are You So Crazy When I Get More Perfect Every Day?

Introduction

The relationship between the first wife/mother and the stepmother was often a central topic of discussion in the research group. Stepmothers and first wives/mothers, united and at the same time divided by the same set of relationships, struggled to make meaning of their situation. Their circumstances impose an inherently different perspective on the same people, events, and the circumstances themselves. The stepmothers' stories were often filled with resentment and indignation. The first wives in these stories sound angry, too. How can stepmothers explain to themselves and sometimes to each other what is going on?

The dominant discourse which positions the stepmother and the biological mother as adversaries is explored below. This discourse is maintained and supported under the relations of the patriarchal nuclear family, in which women learn to compete to catch their man, and to mistrust each other. These women compete for power on the domestic front, and the stepmothers feel they have lost even before the competition begins. Thus, the stepmothers, by positioning themselves as the underdogs, give the old story about the wicked woman an interesting twist. The tables are turned and the first wife becomes the receptacle of wickedness while the stepmother applies for sainthood status, and so the old dualities are maintained. This discourse is clearly hegemonic in spite its harmful effects on the relationship between mothers and stepmothers. However, the keen observer will note the influence of an alternative yet more marginal discourse in which the stepmother and the first wife aim to work together across their differences, where neither is saint or shrew.

Kindree's story

Birch, Arbutus, and Willow walked through the door and there was a hum of activity. They both had new shoes to model for us and many stories to share about their week. I was finishing the preparation of supper while Arbutus set the table. Arbutus exclaimed, "My mom said that I can have a friend stay here on Saturday night." "I said blankly, "Oh!" Willow interjected, "My mom told you on the phone that Arbutus could have a friend over." Arbutus piped up, "It's going to be so much fun." I said calmly to Willow, "Your mom did not mention anything about a sleepover." Opting for more time I asked Arbutus to discuss it with her dad. I quickly went into our bedroom. "Birch, did you know anything about Cedar saying to Arbutus that she could have a friend over on Saturday night?" Neither Birch nor I were appraised of the situation. I fumed. Where does she get off telling Arbutus she could have someone over when it's OUR home, OUR time with Arbutus and Willow. How would she like it if we did that to her? Doesn't she have any respect? I hate being put in this position. I just don't believe that she could say something like that without discussing it with us. Birch listened perturbed, nodding his head back and forth saying she just doesn't GET IT. I asked Birch, "Well what do you think about Arbutus having a friend over?" He explained that he did not think it was a good idea: "Gee, you know, we only get to see Arbutus and Willow every two weeks as it is and it's important to me to share time with them." And he asked me how I felt and I agreed with him. Birch called Arbutus and explained his reasoning for her not having a friend over for a sleepover and Arbutus was very understanding and accepting of his explanation. I was so thankful that Arbutus was not angry and disappointed by the news. I wish Cedar could see the big picture before she makes decisions that do not affect her.

Commentary

At first this story appears to the reader as somewhat of a puzzle; a short interruption in a scene of domestic routine where supper is being prepared and stories of the week shared. The stepmother in the story is certainly not wicked, but instead righteous. The emotional focus of this story is on the adversarial relationship between the mother and stepmother. Told from the stepmother's perspective, the mother is described as a person who is clearly not meeting expectations. She is contravening a basic social rule by inviting an overnight guest over to someone else's house without their permission. The reader might guess that this is not the first time that she has failed to meet the stepmother's and her ex-husband's expectations. The couple expects that she should be able to adjust to the changes that have occurred in her family relationships, but in their eyes she is failing miserably. She is positioned as someone who is a little crazy/bad, someone who "just doesn't get it" and who "fails to see the big picture." The stepmother, on the other hand, is positioned as the good mother, one who knows the rules, follows them, and expects the same of others. So in this story the old dualities are maintained, and the character of the wicked first mother/wife has been created. These old dualities are further explicated below in this conversation about the story:

A. Can you believe it?

- 1 Kindree: And going to Birch helps me because that's when I really fume... What the... Who does she think she is?
- 2 Moonshadow: And he defuses her? Basically he is in agreement...
- 3 Kindree: With me?
- 4 Moonshadow: Yeah.

- 5 Kindree: We tend to be very supportive of each other. We think along the same lines so that helps. Because if we didn't, then it could be a real problem.
- 6 Moonshadow: Sometimes it is a unifying situation.
- 7 Artimus: Well if it isn't you're sunk. I mean it's a survival thing too. You know. If you're not together, yeah it's game over. Because the kids pick up on that in two seconds flat and use that as their major leverage. Or levering device or whatever.
- 8 Kindree: Yeah, but I just couldn't believe that you know. And like this happened before where she phoned up, Arbutus had got into a bit of trouble where she was lying and she was doing some stealing. This happened last year, or the beginning of this year. And she phoned up--it was our weekend--and Cedar said "And I want you to know, Arbutus isn't going out, she's not doing this..." and she's going on and on and saying all these things that she wasn't doing. And she says, "and you can TELL Birch THAT." And she's just WOAHH ((gesture with hands to show explosive emotion)). And I said, "um, well Cedar, I said I'll be happy to discuss it with Birch and let him know what you've said to me." And ah...and she said, "yes, well... ((group laughter)) if you could talk to him." And I said, "Oh I will." And then Birch came home and I said, "oh Cedar phoned and it was really a delightful conversation" ((sarcastic tone)).

Kindree starts off the discussion commenting that the thing that helps most in dealing with her anger about the first wife's bad behaviour is to talk about it to her husband (1) who

joins with her in sharing her indignation (2,3,4). This discourse of the bad biological mother/first wife and its potential for creating a sense of unity for the couple is quickly recognized by Moonshadow 6) and Artimus (7). Kindree continues with more examples, of the mother's poor behaviour and demonstrating her own expert management (calm and rational) of a women who is so clearly out of line (8).

B. The first wife becomes the crazy/bad woman.

The discussion which follows below further clarifies the discourse of the bad mother, her portrayal as someone who at best suffers from bad judgement and at who worst could be seen as a crazy. This is a storyline in which the stepmothers, who often find themselves inserted into a discourse in which they are less important than the "real" mothers, derive considerable enjoyment in participating and recognizing. It is enjoyable to join together as stepmothers to display an understanding of the way the social world works, and our competence in its terms. However, the stepmothers, in discussing the discourse of the bad mother, can recognize it as a storyline in which both they and the first wives can get trapped. This knowledge holds the potential to interrupt the old storyline and find alternative discourses. These alternatives might included the discourse of the 'okay' first wife/mother who is caught in difficult circumstances, showing her strong feelings and acting in ways that express her anger. This allows the first wife's 'bad' behaviour to become attributable not just to her individual failures, but to social arrangements and attitudes which are culturally and historically specific.

- 1 Artimus: Does anybody have thoughts and can you move into emotions, bodily responses from that story. I mean, I know I laughed aloud quite a few times with the familiarity of it.

- 2 Skye: Yeah, that's the overwhelming thing.
- 3 Janus: Well I can picture this -quickly went to our bedroom- excuse me, this is down the hall as far as I'm concerned, VOOM! ((gestures to show the quick trip down the hall)) and the door is closed. And the conversation is rather hushed but...tight jawed. I could be angry with her, quite easily.
- 4 Moonshadow: I felt relieved in that Yarrow's mother is not around to have this back and forth situation. I don't have to deal with arrangements... Interesting.
- 5 Artimus: I felt a lot of humour in this thing. It's sort of a rye humour. But it's... I mean it's funny. In itself, notice that whole situation that is just so familiar right down to Camas saying exactly the same words that Birch does. She just doesn't GET IT! ((group laughter)). I've said that so many times.
- 6 Kindree: And you know what, this weekend, with all the different things that happened, that I'm a lot better with them now than I was before. Like I dealt with it pretty good throughout, but the difference is the sense of humour comes to it now. Yeah. Like I look at it and see the humour in it. This is just bizarre. God, the woman has lost it. Like, and then I can laugh. And it has to do with this group.
- 7 Artimus: Well that's neat.
- 8 Kindree: Like... it's just a lot lighter than it was before. It's not as BIG a deal. Like it's still... it still bugs the shit right out of me ((group laughter)), you know and it probably always will. But the difference is that I know that

everybody else is going through it too, and so it's not as hard and I can laugh at it and go... ((gestures with hands to signalling acceptance)).

9 Artimus: Oh that's neat. That's really neat.

10 Kindree: That's really made a difference for me. Like before the whole weekend, because of all these things, I'd be just fuming for hours. And now it's like I fume and then it's over. And so that's really helpful. Like it's... I just think ah, you know, she just doesn't have a clue.

11 Artimus: Yeah. And you know well Camas was always saying to me, well whose problem is it? You know, and it's true. Put the problem back where it belongs. Like she's got a problem with communicating. What came up for me too in this was what comes up for me around Honeysuckle which has gotten a lot better. But um...was that I thought there is nobody else that she would talk to like that or make that kind of arrangement with. Like you know, I mean you take the people and you change the names and you change the relationship, and you take person A here whose child is going for a weekend with this family over here. Doesn't make arrangements for their kid to have a friend sleepover? You know.

12 Skye: You would NEVER do that.

13 Artimus: I would never do it. Right. You'd never. It's just not done. And yet in these situations stuff gets done that is just totally off the wall in terms of social etiquette, general sensitivity to other people's space. Like just really basic kinds of ways of being in the world and it's just bizarre. And yet, you

know, I think Honeysuckle is a social worker and all these people are professionals in there... and they're together people out there in the world and yet they do these things that are completely bizarre when it comes to their step situation.

14 Skye: Yeah. And there's no damage control of the situations. If it were the parents arranging this thing, one would talk to the other and they'd call up and say "I don't really get what's going on." or "I missed something." or... But it reminds you of one of those games where you tell a story and then someone else tells the story and then someone else interprets the story ((laughter)). And by the end, like who knows what the person said originally. But you know in the game, like the circle goes like this, but here it just... ((gestures to indicate a spiral)).

15 Artimus: Well that was another thing that came up for me in this. Why is it that you and me and everybody don't just say, you know, Cedar I just need you to know that it doesn't work for us, for you to make an arrangement around Arbutus or Willow when they're coming to our house for the weekend. You could call and let us know Arbutus would really like to have a friend sleepover on Saturday night, I just thought I'd let you know that in case you want to make those arrangements with her, or something like that kind of conversation. Why is it that that conversation doesn't happen?

The conversation opens with a request by Artimus for any emotional or bodily responses to the Kindree's story. Artimus remarks on the familiarity of the bad first

wife/mother discourse which (1,5) is also easily recognized by both Skye (2) and Janus.

Janus (3) is able to describe a scene defined by this storyline in which husband and wife meet in the bedroom, away from the children, to discuss the misdemeanours of the first wife/mother. It is clear that in the discourse of the bad first wife/mother, blame lies with biological mother who is failing to meet expectations, a woman who has “lost it” and “doesn’t have a clue” (6,10).

The enjoyment derived from placing the blame on the biological mother is clearly a shared pleasure among members of the group. This shared interpretation brings a sense of relief, an understanding of difficult family situation (6-11).

The conversation begins to take a different direction when Artimus observes that Honeysuckle, the biological mother, behaves badly only within her stepfamily situation (13), and in other situations is a completely “together person.” This observation opens up the possibility that it could be something other than the character flaws of the biological mother that create tension and conflict in the stepfamily. Honeysuckle could be a “together” person most of the time, except when she is inserted into the very difficult storyline of her step situation; she is an ex-wife who might be positioned as either saint or shrew. Skye observes that this storyline is a difficult one indeed. If stepmothers and ex-wives never talk, then everything and everybody starts to look and act crazy (14).

Artimus challenges the withdrawal that is part of the bad first wife/mother discourse by asking why are we reluctant to confront each other with our feelings. She asks, “Why is it that that conversation doesn’t happen?” (15). Her question gets put off in an exploration of the particulars of the scenario being discussed. Then, it is taken up again and the stepmothers reveal a desire to avoid the first wife’s anger.

In the conversation which concludes this portion of the discussion, the angry silence between the stepmother and the first wife is further explored. For purposes of clarity and brevity, relevant excerpts of the conversation will be summarised or included in further analysis which follows below.

The stepmothers judge the level of anger that they encounter in interacting with first wives to be unreasonable; first wives all have “major anger issues.” Stepmothers would rather avoid speaking to someone whose behaviour is evaluated to be so angry and extreme. Anger then becomes a moral issue: showing too much anger is wrong or crazy. Explanations are sought: is this the way all women comport themselves following the dissolution of the nuclear family, or could it be that they always were “like that,” that is angry/ bad/crazy? In the end, favour lies with the explanation that the first wives might all be “mentally unstable.”

If the first wife/mother is so bad/crazy, then the sanity of the second wife (and/or her goodness) becomes suspect. How could a man marry two women who are so different? “Do men with women like that go to another kind of woman that is more reasonable?” It is decided that men who have experienced some personal growth following divorce might choose a woman who is more evolved as a second marriage partner. The old dualities are once again maintained. The first wife is “scary” and “out of control,” the second wife by comparison is the kind of person who is judged to be more “reasonable.” However, the possibility is raised by Moonshadow that even ‘normal’ people sometimes behave in extreme ways. This possibility is again discounted. These biological mothers, when positioned in the discourse of the crazy/bad ex-wife, are truly deviants, even “mentally unstable.”

C. A story without a wicked woman.

In this discussion the dominant discourse of the crazy first wife is again put forward, but not without some resistance, opening up the possibility of alternative interpretations:

- 1 Skye: But your question Moonshadow is with me all the time, like, why are these women all so crazy.
- 2 Moonshadow: Yeah. I don't know.
- 3 Skye: Is it the situation and how things are set up that makes them crazy, or are they all just crazy?
- 4 Artimus: Well just to blow the theory, someone was telling me the other day about a stepfamily that they were reading about in the States who, they actually bought a duplex, they're both remarried. They live one on either side and the kids free flow between them and the families really like it and they've done...they parted happily though. I mean there's the other extreme of resolution of conflict and you know a real sharing and flow between the families. Apparently one of the...the mother works out of town quite a bit with her job and so when she's in town she has the kids lots of the time and then vice versa when she has to be away...
- 5 Moonshadow: Maybe you need to go down there and do some research.
- 6 Skye: Yeah.
- 7 Artimus: I think the point is, the big factor is that the relationship parted amicably, you know. So there's a lot of, you know, unresolved anger and hurt and distrust and pain and stuff left over, then that's going to effect every single

communication they have, for ever and ever. And whatever stuff wasn't finished from the relationship, like if one partner wanted this and this and this from that other person and they weren't willing to give it, or vice versa, that person is still going to be trying to get that from the partner even though they've separated and divorced and everything else. Whether it's emotional neediness or wanting to have more of something or less of something else. They're still going to be working that out. And to have to deal with that dynamic all the time. And especially if the woman hasn't let go of her former husband completely. Whether they acknowledge it or not. Then they definitely don't want to deal with you. They want to pretend that you don't exist, I think. You know. They just as soon you weren't there. And the other way around too, like for the stepmother, doesn't really want to have to deal with this other woman. You just as soon pretend they weren't there ((laughs)). You know.

- 8 Janus: And coping with that for me, is not speaking to her."Oh it's xx her."
Unless there's this voice on the phone and I... I was going to say trapped.
And that's how I feel. Like if I am trapped there is no one else there to take the call, then I have to talk with her. But I really avoid her. But I wonder how many of the five of us there really were mental health problems before.
I know there was in our situation.
- 9 Skye: Ours too.
- 10 Janus: Interesting.

- 11 Skye: Like...
- 12 Janus: So is there mental health problems as a result of...
- 13 Artimus: ... definitely leads to instability...
- 14 Janus: As a result of this separation or... the cause of the separation and then that carries on or... You wonder what's... if there is that commonality in the five of us. Where does it fit?
- 15 Kindree: Well I know that my best friend was down in Mexico and they just happened to be with um, at dinner and the person that was with them was her husband's first cousin. And she said to her, is Cedar the same way she was before? And Trillium said, I don't know. Because I've known her in the past six years. And he said, she said, well does she still fly off the handle and she's really crazy and she was going on. And so it sounds like she's been like that for many years. It's not something new. But I don't know. That would be a really good research project, you know, to delve into that a lot deeper.
- 16 Skye: And is that just the way the women end up behaving that are placed in this kind of structure?
- 17 Kindree: Well then we would be behaving that way too.
- 18 Skye: Yeah. Like. Or maybe just... maybe they think the... maybe that's how they see us? Maybe if they were sitting around the table they would say that we were unbalanced.
- 19 Artimus
& Kindree: No ((in unison)).

20 Artimus: No, we've done mediation and Camas and Honeysuckle have talked and Honeysuckle shared with Camas you know her thoughts about me and how she sees me. And that's not how she sees me. In fact it's more of, "you know, I wish, you know I feel envious. I feel really jealous of Artimus because I wish... You know I see her as all the kinds of things in a mother and a woman blah, blah, that I'm not. And that I wish I was." So it's...

21 Moonshadow: So it's right over the edge.

This conversation opens with Skye resisting the discourse of the bad first wife/mother: "Why are these women are all so crazy?" (1) She is suggesting that they have been inserted into a discourse which sets them up to be crazy (3). Artimus observes that not all biological mothers act crazy (4). She follows with a story she has heard about a stepfamily that has rejected the traditional storyline, breaking some of the bonds of the nuclear family and living together as an extended family unit(s). It is a story without wicked or bad women. It is suggested that there may be something to be learned from this particular family arrangement (5,6,7).

Artimus (7) provides her interpretation of what stands in the way of creating family stories without wicked women. Instead of dismissing women with angry feelings as crazy, Artimus points out that unresolved emotional issues in the first marriage, "especially if the woman hasn't let go of her husband" (and you have him), will preclude happy endings. In this alternative discourse women may act badly, but with good reason given the family situation that they find themselves in. The issue believed to be separating the two women would be

rivalry around possession of the husband. However, this still leaves the two women in an awkward position, with each hoping or acting as if the other did not exist (8).

The conversation again returns to the old discourse of the bad/crazy first wife/mother (8-15), but again Skye resists it (16). Skye suggests that perhaps the first wives/biological mothers think that the stepmothers are crazy (unbalanced), too. This suggestion is met with little support and the other stepmothers are quick to assure that their own goodness (sanity) is beyond dispute (19-21).

D. Stepmothers as invisible people.

This discussion arises after the Kindree's story has been analysed and the group has moved on to conversation about their week. Moonshadow has had a particularly difficult week and the women are discussing her experiences with her. This piece has been included here because links can be made between the discourse of the bad first wife/ mother and the stepmother's resentment about being inserted into a discourse in which they feel that their stepmother 'selves' remain unseen and unheard, their contributions unacknowledged. If stepmothers are not to remain invisible most of the time, even to themselves, it becomes important for them to create a discourse of resistance to validate their own sense of self-worth.

- 1 Artimus: When I listen to that story I just, you know, it comes through for me more than anything else is the really significant work that you just did and it's really... you know for all of us we do these really amazingly important work in these children's lives, you know, our children's lives. They really are our children too. And you know, somehow it doesn't sort of... it gets

sort of diminished some how, or not acknowledged, or not seen a lot of the time. Even to ourselves.

2 Moonshadow: xx put the children. It's like other friends have come by and said, oh we heard what's happening. Yeah it's just crazy, your karma, or whatever. Isn't it crazy that she's in your life.

Yeah, they talk about what it does to you but nobody really is seeing the parenting that goes on with it all. The step parenting thing that goes on with it all.

3 Janus: There was this thing that I was reading from that course--feminist writer Helene Ciscoux. There was a little line in this quote that said, "invisible as..." and it was talking about women. And I thought this applies to stepmothers: "Invisible as persons, perceived as tools."

4 Moonshadow: Those tools are very useful.

5 Artimus: We need them there all the time but...

6 Janus: But they are invisible as xx.

Artimus opened the conversation with a discourse of resistance, putting forward the importance of stepmothers in children's lives (1). Moonshadow agrees that her friends can easily see that the events in her life as a stepmother are 'crazy,' but they fail to acknowledge the effort that Moonshadow is putting forward in parenting her stepdaughter. Janus also recognizes the discourse in question and observes that stepmothers as people in the family remain invisible and are perceived as tools (3). Tools and stepmothers are useful, and always necessary, but they remain unseen (4,5,6).

E. When you are so bad/crazy, I look more perfect all the time.

One option for maintaining and supporting the discourse of the bad first wife/mother is to become a ‘very good’ stepmother, to do a great performance in the good mother script. This can take the form of maintaining calm and emotional control in the face of the first wife’s angry (unreasonable) feelings.

- 1 Kindree: Well I see it’s better to talk about your anger than to act on it. I don’t like... I like responding to people. I don’t like reacting to people. And so that’s what I aim for. It doesn’t always happen, but that’s what I aim for. And it probably pisses her off too.
- 2 Skye: Yeah. People are infuriating when you’re that pissed with such a calm... “Oh yes... well... “((duplicates Kindree’s calm light voice she uses to address the first wife)).
- 3 Kindree: “I hear what you’re saying. Yes and I’ll talk to Birch about that...” It just must burn her.
- 4 Janus: And I’m sure it burns a lot of other people.

Kindree focuses this conversation on her interactions with the first wife. She acknowledges that she does aim for to present a responsive instead of reactive interactions with Cedar, even if it does serve to make her angry (1). Skye (2) points out that this approach would certainly work to make the first wife angry and Janus agrees (3). The calmer the stepmother becomes the more crazy the first wife will look by comparison.

Discussion

It is clear to see that stepmothers are not easily swayed from the dominant discourse of the bad first wife/mother. However, there are openings where other possibilities are explored, stories in which we understand that the first wife, like us, is caught in a storyline in which it is impossible not to feel and act angry. We know too that it doesn't have to be this way. Other stories then become possible, stories without wicked women, stories in which women meet beyond these dualities of being good or bad, to see what might be worked out. Yet, there are many reasons that stories about wicked women retain so much power in the domestic scene. They are supported and maintained by the relations of the patriarchal family which are embedded in our psyche, leaving little room in which to move between the old dualities of the good and the bad mother.

With the ideological and normative emphasis on the isolated nuclear family few feel authorized to participate in the task of raising children. In white middle class culture, we are short on stories in which several people share the burdens and rewards involved in caring and nurturing others, let alone in a cooperative fashion. The name and slot of mother is to belong to one person only, so that one is either the mother or not the mother. This works to separate woman from woman by relegating the "other" woman to second-class status.

Since a woman's traditional arena of power is in the home, women, who often do not feel equal in a sexist society, may feel little inclination towards sharing the power that they do have invested on the domestic front. Stepmothers, who are often positioned as less than the "real" mother, are not likely to be in a power sharing frame of mind themselves.

In addition, the patriarchy proposes that every woman needs a man. This is not likely to engender friendly relations between women in stepfamilies, one of which has the marriage and the man, while the other does not.

Feminist discourses, which these women have access to, lead them towards a much sought after goal of being self-determined women. Interference from a mother or a stepmother is unlikely to be welcomed if it is seen to work against what we see as our right to choose a certain way of life, the discourse of individual freedom. This is especially true on the home front, which in our culture is supposed to be a retreat from the world, where people do have control over some of the decisions which affect their lives.

In terms of forming productive relationships between mothers and stepmothers, it appears that the patriarchal system is stacked against us. However, it is possible to imagine making choices that reflect feminist values, moving in the spaces between the discourse supporting the old dualities. The first step might be recognizing the discursive threads through which our feelings and ideas about each other are shaped. Only then will we be able to deconstruct the old storyline, opening it up towards the possibility of multiplicity, more paths from which to choose. Such openings must occur in the stories we tell each other, in individual psyches and in the material and symbolic structures in which we find ourselves.

Skye

The Wicked Stepmother and the Wicked Ex-Wife:

Dancing in the Battlefield

Introduction

Many different aspects of the pivotal relationship between the stepmother and the first wife were revealed as the group continued to explore this topic. The stepmothers and the first wives did not see each other as allies; in the stories that were told the old dualities were maintained and the first wives were judged to be at worst bad, maybe even wicked, and at best inadequate. This chapter focuses on the dominant discursive practices of conducting a relationship between the stepmother and the first wife/biological mother who are positioned as adversaries. Certainly this raises questions about what is normative and why. Is there any way such relationship can be worked out beyond being caught in a story of problems and conflict?

Skye's story

I fumble through the papers on the desk. There are more of them--again. Do papers have sex and multiply when you turn your back? I feel buried in them, but today I will dig myself out from underneath and begin this school work that so badly needs doing. There is a whole day ahead of me. Anything is possible when you have a whole day to yourself. Yes, the house is a bit lonely with my partner far away, but so quiet. The wrinkles are lifting from my soul. It dances cautiously with the invitation of time and space.

The phone rings--it is Currant. I should have known better than to pick it up. Anxiety rises and melts over the edges of my falsely warm and cheerful 'kidspeak' voice. If anyone talked to me like that I'm sure I would feel ill. "My Mom wants to know what time Aidan's party is. She lost the invitation they sent us." I groan internally, knowing that when I get the information I'll have to

phone and risk the possibility of talking to Maple. Even the thought of a phone conversation scares me. I call my friend to ask about the time and place for the birthday party. I complain about having to call HER. My friend, sympathetic to my fears, offers to make the call herself. Tempted, I refuse her offer. The only thing worse than being intimidated by her, is to let her know how I feel. I will try not to act like a weeny, even if I am one.

I take a breath and dial the number. SHE answers. I feel caught, frozen for a moment, like a deer under the headlights. “Oh Hello! I was just calling to let Currant know about the party.” “It is at three this afternoon.” I notice that her voice also rings of false cheerfulness. “Oh, thanks for calling. You know, I forget about you. If you miss Currant, maybe you would like to take her to the party?” Now I’m really caught. I could be missing her, and so take her to this party. Or, I could decline, and therefore prove that I don’t miss her, that I am an evil stepmother, uninvolved, doesn’t give a damn....” Oh I’d love to take her,” I purr sweetly. I could come and get her at 2:30. “Oh, she doesn’t have a present yet.” “Well, I’ll come at noon.” A quick look at the clock shows that it is 11: 30. I’ll have to leave in 15 minutes. I scan the house collecting what will be required: tape, scissors, wrapping paper, some money, a bag for the present. I’ll need to change my clothes. I’m out the door, more nervous than on a first date. I haven’t seen Currant in two weeks, and with Geranium gone I feel more unprotected, going over THERE. There will be no witnesses from ‘our side.’

I arrive to pick up my ‘date.’ I am entrusted to carry the party dress, waving on its hanger, pressed by her Mom for the occasion. An excited Currant jumps into the car. I am happy to see her, but afraid that we will have nothing to say after so much time apart. SHE is ready to SHOP. I am dreading the prospect of containing her in a mall, since she tends to want everything in sight. She requests a trip to “Toys ‘R Us,” which I have always detested on principle. Now, I’ll have the chance to base my feelings on reality.

It is a bloody warehouse, a COSTCO for kids. I have wisely put a fifteen dollar cap on the present before we got into this place, which makes it easier to veto the more expensive options. Currant wants an oversized bag of candy, too. In a weak moment, not wanting to disappoint, I agree to this purchase. I notice that I am still nervous. I am trying to hustle Currant out of here in time for her to get changed, wrap the gift, and head to the party. We are making poor progress.

We are late for the party at the local community centre. I play with Currant in the pool for what seems like forever. I hate playing games in pools. Currant is a poor sport, and her need to always win really pushes my buttons. Somehow, when she gets so competitive and cheats like this I feel the need to win too. My insides are all twisted. This is even more pathetic when you are 30 and not ten.

Currant asks if I would go and get her play clothes in the car. She does not want to wear the dress since no one else is in fancy party attire and her tights don't fit. The poor fit triggers a temper tantrum with whining and shrieking. I hate drama, but no one ever asked me. Since I have little invested in fancy party appearances, I am happy to fetch the clothes and solve the 'crisis.' I watch anxiously as she packs the fancy dress at the bottom of the knapsack, the wet bathing suit wrapped in the towel goes on top. Now we are late again.

After dinner, the party wraps up and we are on the way home. Once I drop her off, I will be free. I will have escaped from this gnawing anxiety, from her mother. We stand in the darkened doorway, I am feeling guilty and embarrassed about the candy I bought earlier. I explain to Currant that we will need to tell her mother so she can dole it out in appropriate amounts.

Maple is standing in the kitchen as I tell her about the candy. Her body language communicates her displeasure and she replies: "Thanks a lot!" As she moves closer towards us she asks Currant if she wore the dress. No. I can see that this does not improve her mood. Currant anxiously explains that no one else had a dress... Maple snatches the knapsack and pulls the

rumped dress from the bottom of the bag. “Thanks for taking Currant to the party.” Her voice is angry and the tone sarcastic.

“No problem,” I say, beating a hasty retreat. I am furious. I have been manipulated. It is no one’s fault but my own. It is everyone’s fault but my own. I have failed again somehow. I am a bad stepmother.

Commentary

In this story the biological mother and the stepmother are positioned as enemies. The relationship described is warlike. There are “sides” to be taken and positions to be defended. The old dualities are maintained; from the stepmother’s perspective there is a good woman (herself) and an evil woman (the biological mother). Positioned as adversaries, these women are certainly fulfilling expectations. Their relationship leaves no room for intimacy and the interactions are filled with false “warmth” and “cheerfulness.” As in a war, there are manoeuvres and defenses used to keep ourselves hidden from each other.

The “good mother” discourse reappears in this story. This discourse has the potential to induce guilt--by admitting that you have failed to fulfill the role of the good (step)mother as defined by the script, then you are bad (step)mother. If you do not feel loving towards your (step)child as the culture expects or if you fail to want to give them your all, you are a bad (step)mother. If you don’t want to see your (step)child, preferring instead to stay home and do something for yourself, something must be wrong with you. This script is so powerful and idealized that guilt is inescapable, and this stepmother is no exception. So the story in the end tells the tale of two bad women, one full of evil, and the other a failure for not meeting her own expectations for good motherhood.

However, there are some aspects of the story that make a different reading possible, a reading that goes against the grain of the discourse that constitutes women in the stepfamily outside of the good/evil dualism. The reader may fail to be certain about who is good and who is evil. In the end, of the author shows us her own ambivalence: “It is no one’s fault but my own. It is everyone’s fault but my own.” Both of these women are caught, in the dominant discourse of conducting a relationship between stepmother and first wife. They never reveal their intentions towards each other or the pain they experience in the relationship Who’s fault is this? Perhaps this is an unproductive, yet habitual question.

Group Analysis

A. It is all HER fault.

The focus of this conversation is on the discursive practices of conducting a relationship between a first wife/biological mother and a stepmother. The dominant practice is to blame the “other” woman to take away the sting of the feelings of anger, rejection and powerlessness.

- 1 Skye: And she actually did say that. You know, “I forget about you”. I think she... those were her exact words.
- 2 Kindree: That’s very strange.
- 3 Artimus: I think that’s hateful.
- 4 Skye: It is.
- 5 Kindree: That’s purposely hurtful.
- 6 Moonshadow: That’s not the truth. She remembered.
- 7 Skye: Oh I know.

- 8 Moonshadow: She knew who could take to the party.
- 9 Skye: I forget about you...
- 10 A.J: It is a planned attack.
- 11 Skye: And that's why it's so scary when you call her. On the surface there's nothing specific that you have to complain about. Like there's nothing overt said, so it's really hard to say: "Now you did this, and that was really a wrong thing to do".
- 12 Artimus: I think you should just be a super bitch right back.
- 13 Skye: Yeah.
- 14 Kindree: I really do. Like why be nice to this person?
- 15 Skye: I've changed. Sort of now I just...most of it I can just by through avoidance, but sometimes I'm working up to the bitch, but I mean I really don't have a lot of that to pull on.

The discussion begins with Skye expressing her anger and indignation about being forgotten by the biological mother (1). It is assumed that the first wife aims this remark to cause hurt and bad feelings (2-5,10) as well as tell a lie (6-9). The dominant storyline prescribes hostility, a counter attack, (12-14) or avoidance (15) as a reasonable set of choices to respond to the ex-wife. Hostility and counter attack are seen by the stepmother as less viable choices because she perceives that she is lacking in the personal qualities required to be sufficiently disagreeable towards the nasty biological mother. This is yet another expression of the old duality, the good one and the bad one, so that from the stepmother's perspective blame for bad feelings is easily directed towards the first wife.

B. She sure is rotten, and maybe even crazy too.

The conversation which follows once again illustrates the discursive practices of stepmother and first wife relationships. It shows the stepmothers at work in shifting the blame to the ex-wife in this problematic interaction.

- 1 Kindree: Yeah. And I think that her goal is to make you feel like you're a bad stepmother.
- 2 S: She needs you to be a...
- 3 Kindree: That's not reality.
- 4 Artimus: She needs you to feel that way, so she feels good.
- 5 Kindree: Yeah.
- 6 Moonshadow: Imagine what it must... and that's kind of going on to the next step...
Imagine what it must feel like for her to say all these rotten things. To say all these nasty, vindictive, evil things.
- 7 Skye: She's even said to me, you must think I'm really crazy. And that's before I really knew her ((loud laughter)). Because now if she gave me that opportunity, I would wholeheartedly agree.
- 8 Janus: "I know, you are."
- 9 Skye: Like before I used to sort of think well, you know, I don't know the whole side of the story. But now I just think, "You are nuts".
- 10 Artimus: Yeah.
- 11 Skye: "You are crazy. You're right."
- 12 Kindree: But then this... Where do you go from here?

13 Skye: All the way down hill. Presumably.

The dynamics of the relationship between the stepmother and the first wife are interpreted to include a surprising lack of insight and ill will on the part of the first wife (1-5). In the stepmother's interpretation, the biological mother has wrongly positioned the stepmother as failing to meet expectations, when in fact it is really she, the first wife, who does the "nasty, vindictive, evil things" (6). Not only is the first wife evil, closely aligned to her evil aspect is her craziness (7). Given the first wife's lack of goodwill/sanity, there is little room for the relationship to ever improve (12,13); thus in the dominant storyline this relationship is either stuck or in continual decline (13).

C. The stepmother takes second class status in the relationship.

This section of the transcript includes Artimus's analysis of the discourse embedded in the storyline. The discursive practices of stepmother-first wife relations are highlighted in her analysis:

Artimus: So that you don't have to talk to them. You don't have to deal with them. You don't have to be in relationship with them because you're in conflict. Rather than facing the person and dealing with the conflict. Anyway, third party communication is going on here due to unsolved conflicts that have nothing to do with Skye per se, but end up affecting you. But you have a sense of responsibility. You still feel like you have to call. You as a stepmom pretend: "I will try not to act like a weenie, even if I am one." You pretend. You don't want to be seen as vulnerable because it's unsafe. And it's the stepmother that comes up all the way through here. It's not

safe for you to be vulnerable or to be yourself, to speak the truth, etc. etc.

So there's an erosion of your sense of self all the way through there which happens a lot I think for stepmothers. The dynamics that this...

Stepmothers are useful if mom wants something. Stepmoms are disposable, forgettable, manipulatable. "If you miss Currant"--manipulative emotionally, it's a set up. And then you go through like if I do this it's this, or if I do that. Stepmoms feel guilty if they don't do something with the child and resentful if they do. Given the situation, if not every single time, but... You put all your plans on hold for yourself. Takes responsibility for things the mom could have done. Like all of that comes... like stepmoms because you get so little time with Currant there's all this duty and obligation stuff that goes on. Duty and obligation should. "With Geranium gone I feel more unprotected going over there," like partners serve as buffers and support. There will be no witnesses from our side. It's like war. Warlike. Our side and their side. "I arrive to pick up my date," that's like a stranger which to me speaks that there's not much time spent, so there's little relationship to build on. So every time you get together it's like being with a stranger. And yet I'm happy to see her despite all that the child is cared about and for. There's mixed feelings that you'll never just be happy, you're also afraid or anxious. You can never just be relaxed and happy.

The child's behaviour is not great. Stepmoms have little control due to lack of authority, experience, ground rules and relationship. You do things like

find out through doing things what one hates because one should, because the child wants to and you hardly ever do things together. The child is controlling the adult, is allowed to behave like this at home. Again the stepmom is in a no win situation because you don't have enough time with the child to really elicit any changes in behaviour. In the last conversation you have I just tried to finish up, all the niceties. There's no authentic communication that occurs. You can't say the truth because it may do more damage. Really hurtful body language and language from the mom. Stepmom becomes like a criticized child. There's only room for one mom, one person to be in power here. And so what I see is like you as a stepmom are accepting that you have to be like the um...you know how the dog that lies on its back and rolls over and exposes its belly. It's like okay, you've won. And you have to be in that sort of role of the lesser person all the time.

Artimus sees the stepmother-first wife relationship involving conflict which precludes intimacy, relying on tactics such as avoidance and communication through third parties. Pretending is required, since revealing yourself is too risky. In this relationship it is the stepmother who clearly holds a position of less power and so becomes vulnerable to being used by the first wife, who is manipulative. The relationship is warlike. Since the traditional vision of family only provides for one mother, she who wields power over children and household affairs, the stepmother is placed in the lesser role, feeling like a criticized child. The first wife, like a dog's master, is always the one in control.

D. Those stepmothers are useful in a pinch.

In this section on the transcript, Moonshadow provides her analysis of the discursive practices governing stepmother relationships. Moonshadow positions herself as the first wife, taking on the voice of the first wife as she provides her analysis:

Moonshadow: Yeah. It's about the same as yours. This is the first "Yoh-ho, thanks for calling, you know I forget about you." It's like ah... the cheerfulness. Okay. I mustn't put her off. She could be useful ((laughter)). Laying a guilt trip. You haven't seen her for two weeks, so I can try this one. Put her in her place and try and forget about you. Make her feel guilty about not seeing her more. Get her to do what I don't wish to do. Create a bit of manipulation. It's much too delicate a situation to come out and speak truthfully between mother and stepmother. It's just too intricate. "I'd love to take her," you say. She could be thinking, well, she does love my darling daughter. Or she could be just going, oh, a small victory, now I'll go out for more. Get her to buy the present. Because I'm sure I don't like to shop with my daughter either because I know what a hassle that is. So the assumption sort of... they do have their use, stepmothers, in a pinch. "Candy!" --this woman knows nothing about raising kids. The last thing she needs is a big bag of candy. Stepmoms just don't know how to do it. "Thanks for taking her," sarcastically. And the dress, it's like I went to all this trouble and pressed the dress. Nice dress and she trashes it. Currant is a

direct reflection of me. I'm her mom and she's my reflection. I want her to look nice. Obviously stepmothers don't care about their stepchildren.

Here again the stepmother-first wife relationship is described in adversarial terms, where intimacy would be too "dangerous" in such a "delicate" situation. Beyond assuming general ill will between the two women, the first wife is manipulative and controlling, seeking to "put the stepmother in her place." The stepmother for her part is viewed as inconsequential, but perhaps useful, like a tool, in certain situations. The stepmother is judged incompetent to carry out the good mother script. She is described as incompetent and uncaring in her parenting.

E. Well now, maybe we got it wrong.

In this section a different discourse is revealed. The stepmother-first wife relationship appears in a new light, and this time the first wife is seen from the stepmother's perspective as something other than evil motivated by a sense of vindictiveness.

- 1 Moonshadow: Because part of me wants to give this mother's side of it... I'm beginning to think, which is really scary, but there, maybe the mother's side of it isn't as vindictive as I've thought all along.
- 2 Skye: It may not be. I think some of those things we talk about she could be thinking, but I don't know how many exactly she has access to. Like right on the surface, when she does them. Like they may be under here and...
- 3 Kindree: Oh yeah, subconscious...
- 4 Janus: But they come out.

- 5 Skye: Yeah they come out and it looks really calculating when it comes out. But she may not be. It doesn't require me to think of it, that she's constantly, absolutely, planning it down to the letter.
- 6 Artimus: That sort of occurred to me that she could be genuinely worried that you are not a competent person to look after her daughter.
- 7 Skye: Oh yeah, I'm sure she does. Like to her/
- 8 Moonshadow: Deep down... whether her husband is in the picture or ex-husband is in the picture, she wants to/
- 9 Janus: Is it different when Geranium is around? Does this kind of thing happen when he is around?
- 10 Skye: Well you see it is kind of like the people you send down to Guatemala so that you can't kill somebody because there's a witness. It's like that. So basically if there's two of you she'll always act better, I think. Well that seems to be my observation, when there's two of us, because somebody can see what she's doing.

Moonshadow, who has positioned herself as the mother for purposes of analysis, raises the possibility that the biological mother may not be always motivated by vindictiveness in her relationship with the stepmother (1). It is interesting to note that the notion of the sub-conscious is brought forward here (2,3). Using the concept of the sub-conscious, the biological mother's actions could be understood as undesirable, but she can not be blamed for her poor intentions because she may not have access to them (4,5). Artimus points out that maybe the biological mother acts in an unfriendly way because she is worried for her daughter's

welfare (6), and Skye acknowledges that this may be so (7). By the end of the conversation, however, the view of the evil of the biological mother has returned yet again, to seeing her as evil. She is compared to a would be murderer who is thwarted due to the presence of those who would serve as witnesses to her crime.

Discussion

The discursive practices of conducting a relationship with an ex-wife outline a story two women caught in conflict. The relationship is understood in terms of a “war,” with positions to be defended and manoeuvres used to avoid intimacy or personal vulnerability. The “enemies” create distance in their relationship through avoidance or communication through third parties. The stepmother, from her perspective, places the blame for this difficult relationship on the first wife. It is the first wife who is evil/crazy/vindictive, and the stepmother who is an innocent victim with second-class status. The stepmother feels angry and powerless. Seeking revenge and holding grudges towards the first wife is seen to be an entirely reasonable response to the situation.

The discursive practices which define the relationship between the stepmother and the first wife are certainly limiting possibilities in terms of cooperation and mutual respect between the women involved. However, the women caught in this storyline are not alien and strange, or even foolish. It is the patriarchal culture, separating woman from woman, that offers this destructive narrative through which our identity and desire as stepmothers is organized. Stepmothers are simply working within the constraints of the discursive practices that present themselves as readily available and comprehensible.

Feminists see the values embedded in the dominant storyline as problematic in many ways. Women trapped in this storyline fail to meet each other as individuals, worthy of respect. Separated from each other, they cannot share the gift or the burden that motherhood represents with anyone else. They cannot honour each other or make any connections across their differences.

In poststructuralist terms what is needed in order to escape this narrative of evil women engaged in conflict is to understand the story itself and how stepmothers and ex-wives are drawn in and positioned within its terms. What are the “hooks,” images and metaphors of the old storylines which draw us into this conflictual relationship against our better judgement? Again we return to the dominant images of women and the family in which women are deprived of agency, except in the domestic scene. In this domestic scene, our claim to power as women is closely aligned being “good women.” We are good women when we fulfill our prescribed functions as defined in relation to men and children: good wives, good mothers. In the story of the good mother it is clear that there is to be only one mother, such an idealized position is not to be shared with any other women. The singularity of motherhood as a social construct leaves both mother and stepmother fighting for the power to be gained in fulfilling the prescriptions of the domestic scene. Basic inequalities of power create the battle lines that are drawn.

What other hooks draw the stepmothers into the storyline of conflict? Marriage in a patriarchal culture is seen as an important and revered social institution. A divorce, breaking the bonds of marriage, is seen as a failure, a tragedy on a personal scale. Given the alliance between the stepmother and her husband, the blame for this “failure” is most easily placed on

the on the ex-wife. Old and unresolved marital wounds become evidence of her defects of character. Her various misdemeanours, which are remembered and avenged for by the stepmother, who cites her love of her husband as a natural explanation for her feelings and behaviour towards this “other” woman.

Poststructuralist feminists seek to imagine new storylines in which the positions available to us are not as destructive. In letting go of some of the social and political power assigned to motherhood, we can relate more fully as women, helping to create diverse forms of family in which parenting is shared. This could mean working towards stepmother--first wife relationships based on equalities of power, balancing our rights and responsibilities. Alternative storylines could include sharing the joys and burdens of parenting not just with stepmothers, but also with others members of the family and the community, who at the present time receive few invitations to participate in the life of children . By replacing the “good mother” and her evil counterparts the” wicked stepmother” and the wicked “first wife” with adult women who have both strengths and weakness, we can create the opportunity for women to be both autonomous and connected in loving relationships with others. By reconsidering the meaning of marriage, marital failure, and the family itself, we can see more connections to each other, instead of seeing only our different perspectives on the same events, people, and situations. In the sharing our stories, we can see how the idea of what it means to be women in this relationship is collectively and discursively constituted.

Artimus

Stepfamilies: Discourses of Resistance

Introduction

It is possible to use the discourse of the traditional family to make sense of one's life as a stepmother. However, it is a story that has severe limitations and in which the good/wicked dualism is made fundamental to its existence. It is a storyline to be recognized as prescribed by the patriarchy and replaced with others. Yet, the task of creating new storylines that with the power to disrupt and displace the old ones is extraordinarily complex.

The story which follows below illustrates a movement away from the traditional story line. But, new story lines are always at risk of being interpreted in terms of the old; this story is no exception. The story shows that even as we move away from old ways of being our patterns of desire are not easily altered, especially when they are defined as signifying some aspects of the 'essential' self, such as femaleness and (step)motherhood. Old discourses coexist with new, resulting in a contradiction in our positions, and thus our subjectivities as stepmothers.

The alternate storyline that emerges here is influenced by feminist discourse. It is a version which seeks relationships based on equalities of power. Father, mother, stepmother, and stepfather position themselves as co-parents, each one equally responsible for the care of children. Divorce is seen not so much as a severing of connection, but as a situation which requires reconnecting on different terms. This means that instead of a purely adversarial stance, between mother and stepmother there is some commitment to construct relationship and work across differences.

Artimus' Story

So this happened last summer in the middle of July. And just on the background Pine and Larch, and their mom and step-dad and Camas and I had agreed that we would, in the summer it would be two weeks, two weeks, two weeks, two weeks of shared time and then the boy's living with us full-time this fall, totally. I'd been looking forward to going to the Folk Music Festival for months. It was to be our big splurge for the summer. Just Camas, Spirea and myself. Pine and Larch were booked to spend two weeks with their mom and Clematis. Then everything changed. Honeysuckle called (anxiety filled my body). She and Clematis are going through a break-up. She'll take them for the weekend but can we have them for the rest of the two weeks? Oh, and by the way, she's decided she deserves some fun so she's taking them to the Folk Festival. Oh great! I feel so angry, I can hardly contain myself. Of course we'll take them because their other home is filled with angry fighting and tension. Why the Folk Festival of all the millions of things you can do?

I decided to tell Honeysuckle how important this weekend is. How much I'd been looking forward to it. How I need her to be sensitive to the fact that this is our weekend without the boys. This is now magnified since we now have them almost the whole summer.

The event arrives. It's the Friday night concert. Thousands of people have relaxed. We're having a really good time. Then. Guess who puts her blanket 30 feet from ours? Of course, Pine and Larch are over at our blanket in no time. I'm filled with rage. So much so I leave our blanket and sit with friends. I don't even want to see Pine or Larch. But of course, Pine doesn't understand and comes to give me a hug. I force myself to do it mechanically. I'm torn. I'm rejecting them. I'm angry at Camas for not being clearer, letting them sit on a blanket. The evening goes on and on. Eight o'clock. Past Larch's bedtime, past Pine's. Nine o'clock. Ten o'clock. What the hell is Honeysuckle doing? They're exhausted. Take them home for God's sake and put them to bed

where they belong. Who's needs are being served here? Honeysuckle's need to have a good time, blah, blah, blah. The weekend continued like this.

This is where I ran out of time to write, but the next day we didn't see them very much. Um, when I did run into them, I felt like running the other way. I didn't even want to see them. I tried to pretend I didn't see them. I thought, oh God, get a grip on yourself. And then I was over getting coffee at a coffee stand. Spirea was sleeping and Camas was at the main stage with her, and over the loud speaker came the announcement that a little boy with red hair named Larch wearing stripped shirt and blue shorts, who is four and three quarters-years old, is lost. And immediately my heart filled with love and tenderness. I couldn't wait to get back to Camas so that he could run over to where the little lost children were and... So I did that as fast as I could. He couldn't leave because he had Spirea sleeping. And he whipped off. And then they came back and Larch was in between Honeysuckle and Camas like a little family, walking along. And that was really hard for me to see that and yet at the same time I was really glad that he was safe. And then as soon as he got back to me he just tore himself away from both Camas and Honeysuckle and jumped into my arms. And his little body was so scared, and I had this really big hug. And I felt like I was xx and told him he was safe and he was with his family. And I was amazed at how I could flip from being so angry to feeling so much tenderness when there was a real need.

And just to add on to this, Pine asked me tonight what I'd written about. And I said I wrote about the Folk Festival and I didn't want to tell him all about the details because he doesn't need to take that on at eight years old. And he said, "Did you write about being sad?" I said, "No I wasn't feeling sad." And he said, "I was feeling sad at the Folk Festival." And I said, "What about?" He said, "...when Larch got lost, my mommy told me it was my fault." And right away I got angry again. And I said, "Well it couldn't possibly be your fault because you're not responsible

for Larch, Honeysuckle is.” And he said, “I know. She told me she was so angry she just needed someone to blame.” I got angry again. Oh! So that’s where I’m going to stop.

Commentary

This piece offers the reader the possibility of a conservative reading in which the story is understood as confirming the status quo. Interpreted in these terms, it is the story of two wicked women, the stepmother and the first wife, positioned as adversaries:

- First wives are wicked; they fail to appreciate both children’s and stepmothers’ legitimate needs.
- Stepmothers are bad mothers, wicked enough to reject their stepchildren.
- Stepmothers’ needs get met last. They are positioned at the bottom of the family hierarchy.
- A “real” family includes a biological mother and father and a child.

There are some features of this story that allow a different reading of the discourse of stepmothering to be possible, a reading that runs against the grain of the good/wicked dualism. The alternative reading provides a critique of the discourse of the traditional family and gives the reader an alternative story line.

Artimus relates to Honeysuckle as an individual, she calls her to discuss her needs and request consideration of her feelings. Even though Honeysuckle decides not to heed the stepmother’s request for time without the children, this communication negates the storyline in which the stepmothers and ex-wives simply act as enemies. In the traditional storyline, no emotional honesty is allowed, women never feel safe enough to discuss their needs and feelings with each other; they have a relationship with a (wicked) figure in a storyline, rather than an individual.

The children's love for their stepmother is shown to be strong. The stepmother is an important part of the family scenario. Pine leaves his mother's side and comes to give his stepmother a hug. Larch, the lost child, tears himself away from his "real" parents and jumps into his stepmother's arms for love and affection.

Although Artimus loves the children, she does not want to be with them all the time. She does not want to sacrifice her self for them . She knows that she has a right to get her own needs met for time alone with her partner. She is angry when her needs are not respected. This can be read as a rejection of the discourse of the good mother. Artimus is a competent and strong parental figure, feeling real tenderness towards her stepchildren, as well as respect for her self. She exists not as "stepmother" but as a multiple being who incorporates and reconstitutes what was previously understood as essential to goodness or wickedness.

Group analysis

A. Stepfamilies can work out.

In this discussion an alternative storyline is further clarified. Interpersonal relationships are constantly improving in this stepfamily,

- 1 Artimus: Well I do keep focusing on the fact that it's gotten better and it's getting better and better and better and better. It's definitely on this improvement continuum.
- 2 Skye: So why do you think?
- 3 Artimus: Um. Well I think there's a lot of things um... We've done a lot of mediation. We actually did mediation with Honeysuckle, Clematis, Camas

and I together. And then we've since then yeah, that was huge. Two sessions of that, that summer because it was really crisis level.

- 4 Skye: That's pretty amazing that she would take part. Like there's something there you know...
- 5 Artimus: Well when she calms down she's quite...she can be quite reasonable.
- 6 Skye: There's raw material there to work with.
- 7 Artimus: Yeah, she's a counsellor, social worker.

In this alternative storyline improvement is possible (1,2). The parents and the stepparents work together in a meditation process (3). In order to engage in this process, it would be necessary to believe that it is worthwhile, that there are possibilities for a relationship which go beyond blaming, withdrawing, and defending oneself. It requires a discourse of resistance in which the stepmother and ex-wife can relate to each other as individuals, where they exist for each other beyond the category of wickedness (bad/crazy/pathetic) (4-7).

B. A flattened power hierarchy.

Artimus discusses her story and the family power hierarchy as seen from her stepchildren's perspective. The arrangement she describes represents an overturning and an incorporation of some aspects of the traditional family hierarchy.

- 1 Artimus: It revealed to me a real equality in adults in this world. I mean if Clematis was there, I don't know, because he wasn't there, so I can't presuppose what would happen, but we told him that he... that there are pretty equalized relationships.
- 2 Janus: Oh, okay, you just switched?

- 3 Artimus: Well, you know, you might think well he would just want his mom, you know. But he didn't.
- 4 Skye: Yeah, he was pretty fluid between people.
- 5 Artimus: And I was feeling a bit unsure because it's like well what's my role here? You know, because Honeysuckle is here, right. And usually Honeysuckle is not there when they're with me and it's much clearer. Well I'm the mother, and Camas is the father, and we can do the thing, you know. But here, there's the mother and the father and there's me, you know. Hello? And so I waited for his cues. His cues were he let go of them and let... then leaned his arms towards me and then that was okay.

Artimus reflects on the equality of parenting relationship that exist in the family. Father, mother, stepmother, and stepfather are co-parents, though in this particular situation the stepfather was absent, so his role can not be illustrated (1). The stepmother is positioned as a important and competent parent in the family. The children expect and receive their stepmother's care. This more flattened family power hierarchy goes against the dominant discourse in which the "real" parents are the ones to whom the children are attached, with a special value place on nurturing obtained from the biological mother (3). This alternative, but more marginal discourse, which allows for equally involved and responsible parents creates uncertainty, the necessity of learning how to conduct oneself within a new frame of reference (5).

C. Another discourse of resistance: I won't be the martyr.

Here, Artimus describes how the discourse of the good mother is so powerful that it “hooks” her into a denial of her anger. In addition, she describes her refusal to be positioned within the dictates of this discourse.

- 1 Artimus: I mean there's something I didn't talk about here in the story and that was that when I went to sit with friends, I found I needed to talk because I confided in a couple of different friends and said what was going on for me and why it was going on and how I felt. What was going on underneath, or on top of it, or mixed with it or whatever was... I shouldn't be so negative. I shouldn't be feeling this way. I shouldn't be so... I felt like this poisonous stuff was coming out of my mouth or something you know.
- 2 Janus: What judgement is being made of what I'm doing?
- 3 Artimus: Yeah.
- 4 Skye: So if I pushed you a little further what would you say you shouldn't be doing...
- 5 Artimus: I should want to be spending time with Larch and Pine no matter what. I shouldn't not want to be with them like that, to such an extreme. You know. And that equates with I don't love them.
- 6 S: Mhm.
- 7 Artimus: Yeah... and ah...
- 8 Janus: And I'm expected to love them.

- 9 Artimus: Um-hum. It was like oh what does love look like? Does love mean I can never get angry? We never have a fight or whatever?
- 10 Janus: Does love mean all the time, everything that you do?
- 11 Artimus: Yeah. And then I'm supposed to be a martyr. Like I'm not into it, the martyr thing. And maybe that's part of the reason, I'm supposed to martyr myself to the cause of step-parenting or something.
- 12 Janus: Um-hum. Absolutely. And the martyring, I can identify with the martyring a lot because it has lots to do with the women's stuff.
- 13 Artimus: Yeah.
- 14 Janus: All the time. I am the only female in the house. Therefore my job is all those things ((group laughter)). And so the martyr happens all the time. So yeah. There is that assumption too.

Artimus articulates some of the now familiar elements of the discourse of the good mother (1). If she loves her stepchildren she “shouldn't not want to be with them” (5). In outlining this discourse, Artimus is at the same time questioning and refusing it (9,10). Janus' and Artimus' questions bring forward an alternative discourse for stepmothers in which love can tolerate both anger and imperfection: having a fight, not feeling loving at all times (9,10). Artimus refuses to be positioned as a martyr, one who makes great sacrifice for a cause (the patriarchal family) (11).

In speaking the requirements of the discourse of the good mother, the stepmothers come to understand the collective and discursive nature of their refusal to adopt this traditional

view. They seek to laugh this discourse out of existence (14). From this position, they may begin to generate alternative practices.

D. Who are we now anyway: the mother who is not the mother but is.

In this conversation, Artimus refuses the positioning of stepmother available to her in the traditional discourse of the family, and discusses some alternate positioning within the ever shifting discourse.

- 1 Janus: So what's the role of stepmothers?
- 2 Artimus: It's like constantly changing. That's what I realized you know writing this story. It's like you know, I have Spirea and Spirea is mine, Camas's partner and mate. You know and Larch's maybe... significant woman person you know.
- 3 S: Yeah.
- 4 Moonshadow: And as they spend more time with you, you get along more. And you feel more [like you are their mother].
- 5 Artimus: I don't feel like I'm their mother. It's I'm... I mean I'm definitely in a mother role and doing everything that a mother does and they see me as their mother, second mother, their second mother.

At the beginning of this conversation, Artimus notices that her positioning shifts with each moment of being within this or that discourse; she can be a mother, a partner or a "significant woman person" (2). Moonshadow suggests that if she spends enough time in pleasant interaction with her stepchildren she may find herself positioned within the discourse of motherhood (4). Artimus does not feel like their mother at this moment, but she struggles to

find a place to position herself outside of the discourse of the traditional family. If she is not the mother, then she must position herself within an alternative discourse; as co-parent, as their “second mother.”

Concluding remarks

It is easy to see that the stepmothers, speaking and writing their way into existence, can become multiple beings. They find ways to incorporate more than one storyline into their construction of self, combining the old with the new. The alternative storyline described here is but one within a range of possibilities that incorporate rather than negate each other. As stepmothers’ stories continue to be told and deconstructed, the search for what’s what, who’s who, and how it all got to be that way in the stepfamily will continue to evolve.

The Collective

Parenting Reconsidered: Creating a New Story

Introduction

The group's final task was to create a story which would resist the dominant discourse. Each group member created a list of elements that she wanted included in the final story. These lists were compiled and discussed in the group setting. It is interesting to note that these lists were wish lists of a sort, putting forward visions of the way these stepmothers wished things could be if they could go beyond the limitations they felt in their present situation. Here is a small sample of some of the items included in the lists:

- all members of the extended family can be in the same room and feel safe and have a good time
- kids live in one place, with parents coming and going
- kids call the shots with trained, neutral, state-funded advocates to assist kids to decide on their family of choice (this would be legal and binding for kids and adults)
- kids could choose to spend time one on one with their adults or in whatever combination so as to receive individual attention, change birth order roles (i.e., not be the youngest)
- families do good things for each other
- adults stand beside each other (not in front/behind)
- biological parents are licensed/educated/prepared and have lived together for two years [to be allowed] to mate
- all parents are people first, they are not defined by "mother" and "father" roles
- respect and dignity

- honesty, openness, and integrity
- no “games” or hidden agendas
- men and women are not trapped in roles, no gender specific task assignment
- family conferences for healthy conflict management
- children participate in family work, they are not over indulged

Given time restrictions, the group never got to the final stage of putting all of their ideas together to create the story. Since I had the most invested interest in completing the task I proposed to write a story that would include all the elements that had been suggested. I promised to share the fruits of my labour at the final meeting of the group.

I include this story as one possible answer out of the multiple answers that are needed to the questions raised in our work. The analysis which follows provides another example of a nonconservative reading, or a reading against the grain, that we need to learn to do with the stepmother stories which are going on around us.

Parenting reconsidered

Once upon a time, stepmothers got fed up. They all got together in a group and talked. They were tired of feeling tired. They were tired of the nuclear family which left them feeling like unnatural or bad parents. Recognizing that their feelings of inadequacy or failure were common among women in similar positions, they looked instead to the current organization of child care and the family. In a flash of insight, they understood that the nuclear family was not simply a result of nature, but of social and historical developments in the organization of work and procreation. Nature might not be so flexible, at least in the short term, but social arrangements could be changed. How would these stepmothers change things? Listen closely, and you will hear one story of the way things might be different. I will give you a guided tour....

First, let's look at the places where people live. Take my hand and we will walk together through this big house, divided into several separate living areas. Notice that there are people moving between the different living spaces. Kids live in a central part of the house, and adults flow back and forth between this central area and their separate living spaces. Also, there is a common area.

Enough about the architecture, let's move on to the most interesting part: the people. We'll go downtown and see what we can find. Our first stop is the mating bureau. It is here that some people will apply for a license to procreate. It is okay to have sex and live together without a license, but the privilege of bringing forth new life and taking on parenting duties is taken very seriously. At the mating bureau, we see a young couple waiting nervously in the front office to see a counsellor. They have been living together for two years, so now they can start the counselling and education program. This program will prepare them for the responsibilities of parenting and ensure that they have some of the skills necessary to parent effectively and live cooperatively. Looking down the course list we see 'communication skills,' 'conflict resolution,' and 'anger management,' as well as others. If they do well, this couple will leave the program with a license to procreate.

Let's follow this couple with their new baby. They are moving out of their tiny apartment and into one of the big houses we walked through earlier in this story. We see that all the people in this house share in the task of raising the new baby. In fact, it looks like everyone here is taking some responsibility for caring for those around them. A small boy and girl are reading a story to a elderly man sitting over in the corner. The new baby is riding in a sling on the back of one of the men as he goes about preparing dinner for the 13 people who live here. The woman who just had the new baby is resting and chatting with a teenage girl. Her partner is getting lunches ready for the people who work or go to school tomorrow. People look happy together. After dinner is over,

the adults on the nighttime 'parenting shift' will begin the bedtime routine for the younger children. The other adults will be free to stay to visit and help with the kids or move on to their own section of the house.

One of the women explains to us how things work in this household. She tells us that at all children at the age of six can choose two (or more) parents. This decision-making process is made with the help of specially trained neutral advocates for the children. This advocate program is a free service offered by the province and administered through the school system. This decision, made in consultation with all involved, is legally binding for children and parents. Parent-child units live in cooperative households with one or more family groupings. Often children live in the company of their biological parents, even though they may not have been designated as 'most responsible parents' in the children's legal agreement. There is no great prestige attached to being a biological parent and no stigma attached to being a non-biological parent since relationship and attachment are valued more than genetic similarity.

Sometimes children may go and visit other households, to spend time with another adult with whom they have developed a close relationship. Other times, adult friends visit them and so join the child's household for some time. Those who have designated parenting responsibilities for a particular child share these responsibilities equally with the other parents over the lifetime of the child. Sharing in this manner, adults can take time out to have a life on their own, sometimes completely free of the responsibility of parenting. Parenting is considered to be sacred and valuable work, but not an identity unto itself.

This is a fluid system, based pragmatically on finding the best compromise over the long-term for everyone involved. Children's needs are considered equally along with adults' needs in determining lifestyle choices and family unit groupings. The careful observer will note that families

with similar lifestyles, parenting styles, and levels of income often share households since finances are pooled within the household to support the children.

As you can imagine, lots of talking needs to get done so that all this works. Household conferences are held regularly. We are lucky enough to get invited to observe. On occasion, we hear that state-funded mediators are requested to come to assist with resolution of a dispute about parenting or household decisions.

At the meetings, children and adults speak about their successes as well as their wants and needs. They follow through with decisions and plans for the running of the household. It is surprising to notice how freely people communicate during the conferences. All those involved practice good communication skills and they are committed to using them. Interactions demonstrate a strong respect for others. Conflicts are handled in a healthy way and there are no hidden agendas. Even small children effectively express their dissent. Women and men, freed from the old social meanings attributed to biological sex differences, define and negotiate their contribution to parenting tasks within the household according to their talents and interests.

And finally we wonder--What do the children think of all this ? While children enjoy many advantages, they also have lots of responsibility. In sharing the care for those around them, they feel that their unique contributions to the household are needed and valued. They enjoy lots of adult attention, but they could not be said to be over-indulged. The children say this is good. In fact, they can't imagine living any other way. But then again who can? Can you?

And so they lived happier ever after, but this is no nirvana, because sometimes life is difficult and sad. And no one will ever change that.

An analysis

This story pulls us in the directions of both present and the past; towards what is and what was. Certain elements in the story signal the ultimate return to family values. The

extended family is the basic unit of socialization and procreation, with the heterosexual couple as its point of origin. Children are valued members of the family who are cared for by adult members, as under the present rules set out for family life. The author tempts us with a rosy vision of family life almost worthy of Norman Rockwell. Yet again, we are lured towards the home hearth where the family is a warm and friendly place in which it is possible to attain happiness. Such a story skips lightly over such possibilities as hatred, family violence, sexual abuse, or drug and alcohol addictions which can make living in any kind of family a special sort of hell, not matter what attempts are made to legislate compromise and reason. We still want to believe that families, in some form, work towards making people happier.

However, in some ways this family vision constitutes a radical attack on the status quo. It leaves the reader shaking their head, thinking of the absurdity of what is being proposed. The traditional family hierarchy based on gender, generation and the primacy of biological ties has been dissolved, and so we feel uneasy, unwilling to suspend judgement, to move away from familiar territory.

Yet, this is a feminist story in which women have refused to bear primary responsibility for parenting. Men and women take on an equal share of the work. Also, the responsibilities of parenthood now extend beyond the nuclear family; members of the extended family who love and care for a child are also responsible for raising the child. In this society, the power of motherhood has been relinquished so that motherhood (and fatherhood) has ceased to be an identity in itself. This is possible because the entire family, and the community as a whole, participates in the raising of children.

The hierarchy of generation has also fallen by the wayside. Children share the power to determine family form and norms. Children choose their parents and occupy positions of power equal to that of adults when it comes to making decisions about family life. Challenging the myth of biological parenthood makes way for new family form.

The problems inherent to those who are classified as stepmothers have been eliminated by erasing the category itself; there are no stepmothers. Biological ties fail to represent certain access to power or love in this new family scenario.

By replacing the “good mother” and the “evil/bad” (step)mother, space is created for women to be both autonomous and connected in loving relationships with others. There are no women ‘set up’ to resent each other, no women acting out the pain of marital breakdown, no women competing for the privilege of being named “the best mother,” and no women competing for the attention of men. What is proposed in this collective of individuals is a democracy in which power, responsibility, and love are shared.

A most poignant aspect of the story is the legislation of respect for others. If we as stepmothers cannot command respect under the present system, in the world of our dreams we will make rules to command the respect we seek. While the old storyline offers us fertile ground for conflict and relationships based on power imbalances, we can only dream of a life in which compassion and order rule. Even parenthood, now an almost sacred ground for individual choice, becomes legislated so that the institution of family may become a fairer and kinder proposition. It is clear that we are prepared to sacrifice a great deal of our individual freedom in order to make the family a more equitable and less painful arrangement.

The story concludes by challenging us to examine our own responses to it; to examine our refusal to believe that any family could or should be like this. Our refusal to believe that family life could be anything other than it is: “In fact, they can’t imagine living any other way. But then again who can? Can you?” This is clearly a challenge to look at the family’s sacred and not so sacred cows and those who suffer when the dirt flies in the barnyard of domesticity.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND REVIEW: LOOKING BEHIND, LOOKING AHEAD

I do not really wish to conclude and sum up, rounding off the argument so as to dump it in a nutshell on the reader. A lot more could be said about any of the topics I have touched upon. . . I have meant to ask the question, to break out of the frame. . . . The point is not a set of answers, but making possible a different practice. . . . (Kappeler, 1986, p. 212).

Introduction

In this chapter, some elements of the discourse that the stepmothers used to speak themselves into existence will be reviewed and presented in the context of some of the previous writing about stepmothers. This discussion will be limited to writings which raise questions about the discursive field in which the stepmothers find themselves. The reader should remember that the material presented in this section represents only one swing through the never ending cycle in the discursive construction of stepmothers. There is always the uneasy awareness of the myriad of contradictions that a project like ‘summarizing’ the material will hold. There are no immutable truths to be found here, but instead messages of possibility, an array of interlocking meanings, perhaps a path toward different practices, doing stepmothering differently.

The stepmother’s subjectivity as a site of conflict

The stepmothers in the stories presented here are embedded in a range of discourses that confront and disrupt one another. There is confusion for them all as they work out who and how to be. The press of the conservative discourse of women in the family calls for the perfect wife and “the good mother,” ever-loving and nurturing. The discourse of North American adulthood stresses individual rights and freedoms, that we must “be our own

person.” There are feminist discourses which call for marital equality, equal opportunity in the workplace, and successful careers. The discourse of the wicked stepmother, the evil one, rises easily in the face of female assertiveness, anger, and other forms of self-expression... And so, the ever changing list continues... In the midst of this conflict stepmothers frequently blame themselves. They often flounder, feeling angry, and confused, like an unnatural or bad stepmother. Sometimes they will choose between one discourse or another, depending on the value of its products. At other times, they will seek a path in between the social and cultural prescriptions and bring forward discourses of resistance. Clearly, the stepmother’s subjectivity is a site of conflict.

The stepmother’s subjectivity as a site of conflict has not gone unnoticed in the literature on stepmothering: “Perhaps more than other nontraditional relationships, the stepfamily creates serious confusion: there are people who theoretically could fill the roles of mom and dad, and kids, but who either cannot or do not want to” (Grant, 1989, p. 219); and “Current society doesn’t even seem to have a standard for the role” (Burns, 1985). Stepmothering carries with it “built in structural ambiguities, loyalty conflicts, guilt and membership problems” (McGoldrick, 1991).

Elizabeth Minnich (1989, p. 192) in her article “Choosing Consciousness” describes some of the emotional cost of being subjected to the conflicting discourses of stepmothering:

Cliche'd though it is, getting through a week as a stepmother is like skating on ice that threatens, but in shifting places, to be too thin. When things are fine with the children, trouble arises because of the ex; when things have settled down with the ex, trouble arises with the school; when there seems to be no trouble, anxiety bubbles up from the psyche: Who am I? Why am I here? Can I do this? And through it all, there is the high tension, the joy, and the fear, of love.

In the collective discussion of these conflicts, the stepmothers in the research group realized that difficulties previously attributed to personal weaknesses and failures could be reconsidered from a new perspective. They came to recognize that these feelings were shared by women in similar family positions. Personal difficulties then became attributable to discourses and social arrangements that were historically and culturally specific and hence open to the processes of change. Several other feminist poststructuralist authors have commented on the emancipatory effect derived in realizing that conflicts and contradictions in women's lives are discursively constructed and socially produced (Lather, 1991; Weedon, 1987; Davies, 1992).

The traditional discourse on women and the family

Over the course of the conversations with stepmothers it became clear that our subjectivity was shaped by the dominant discourse of the traditional nuclear family. "We retain very limited models--stereotypes, in fact--of domestic life. These are patriarchal blinders that prevent us from seeing the mechanisms of the traditional family structure let alone imagining new ones. With these in place, any domestic structure that deviates from the "norm" can, nonetheless, still be contained" (Callaghan, 1989, p. 246). Three patterns in the discourse of the traditional family which are of special interest to stepmothers will be outlined below:

A. The stepmother as an interruption in the 'happy family' story.

The stepmother who interrupts the dominant storyline of a family happy and united in a life of common purpose was a frequent pattern that emerged in the discourse presented here. Minnich (1989) has also commented on the stepmother as an interruption, an anomaly, in the discourse of the traditional family (p. 200):

I am coming to realize that to be a stepmother is to experience what it means to be a woman in the dominant culture in a particularly intense way. To live as a woman is to live as an anomaly in a male-defined system. It is to live simultaneously as an insider and an outsider, as victim and as victimizer, as a category to ourselves and participants in other categories. In a sense, all women are step-humans, living daily subject to all that is prescribed for humans yet denied the status of the “real” humans: the privileged, heterosexual, able-bodied Euro-American men.

Callaghan (1989) also comments on the stepmother and her role in bringing forward issues of power and gender “in vivid technicolor” that remain invisible in the “natural” intimacies of the traditional family (p. 251). The presence of the stepmother, someone who does not belong in the traditional story of family reveals the “often suffocating ‘happy’ foursome from which we may have come” (p. 251).

B. The stepmother and her position in the family hierarchy.

The stepmother’s subordinate position within the traditional family structure was often discussed in the group. The traditional story of family biological relationship accords access to a “legitimate role with regards to the children” (Hughes, 1991, p. 149). “To the stepmother, the world says, as she and the children struggle to believe in each other’s care and trustworthiness, ‘Oh? They’re not your *real* children?’” (Minnich, 1989, p. 196). Schniedewind (1989, p. 324) puts it this way:

We bore important responsibilities for raising children and yet weren’t taken seriously as a real mother. We were granted small decisions, but the biological parents had the final say about big decisions. We had responsibility with little power, a situation leading to low self-esteem and stress in any institution, family, or workplace. To give, then, didn’t pay off. In response we distanced ourselves from our stepfamilies, to protect ourselves from worthlessness.

The traditional story of family also denies the stepmother access to the other forms of power: power accorded by virtue of gender and power usually located in the generational

hierarchy. The stepmother as a woman is surely excluded from the claim to power accorded only to the male head of the household (Goldner, 1991). In addition, she also experiences difficulty accessing the power inherent in the caretaking role. She is expected to act as an adult in charge of children, taking her position within the generational hierarchy, but without the authority or the parental closeness to succeed (Kelley, 1996). “If anything, public perception puts the needs and wishes of children, especially children of divorce, above a second wife’s” (Burns, 1985, p. 6).

C. The good mother and the evil stepmother.

The categories of the ‘good mother’ and the ‘wicked stepmother’ are held in place as opposites within the context of the traditional story of family. In this story of Dad, Mom, and the kids, the adult female is appointed ‘angel in the house’--the ‘good mother’ (Hughes, 1991, p. 149). However, women who deviate or who do not fit into the discourse of the ‘good mother,’ are positioned as evil or wicked women. The implications for stepmothers trying to fit into the traditional story of family are particularly overwhelming (Burns, 1985). Several authors have commented on the binary opposition of the ‘good mother’ and her evil counterpart the ‘wicked stepmother’ as central aspects shaping the dominant family narrative:

Stepmothers accept a definition of their personae within the stepfamily which includes attributions of wickedness. Clearly this notion of wickedness does not fit with other ideals which they also hold of good mothering. Neither does it accord with the stereotype of normal family life. The stepmother is therefore presented with opposing images of good and bad, evil and virtuous, abnormal and normal (Hughes, 1991, p. 59).

Schniedewind, who participated in a support group for stepmothers, (1989) describes the conflicting cultural prescriptions set out for them. Stepmothers in her group often described internalized expectations of the 'good mother' who is nurturing and always ready with unconditional love to give to the children. As a counter point, the other theme emerged was that of the wicked stepmother. "We slowly learned that deep down, we were afraid we were evil." (p. 323)

Maglin, in her work "Reading Stepfamily Fiction," also writes about the opposing dualities of the good mother and the wicked stepmother as written in fairytales which serve to underline the cultural prescriptions for (step)motherhood:

The fairytale splits the mother in two: the good mother, who is the protector, often taking the form of the good fairy, old woman, or biological mother; and the bad mother, the evil fairy or the stepmother, who invariably appears odious."

Maglin asserts that storylines such as these construct the stepmother in discursively opposing categories, "sabotaging female assertiveness, power, defiance and self-expression" (1989, p. 255).

Hughes (1991) also highlights the direct links that have been established between the ideological requirements of motherhood and those of stepmotherhood. "Such ideology speaks of caring, giving, and devoting oneself to a child. But not to the exclusion of caring, giving, and devoting oneself to a husband" (p. 13). Moreover, she points out how the ideological requirements of motherhood and wifehood cannot be separated from that of housewife. So, the (step)mother is expected to look for perfection in all three categories.

Certainly the tenets of good motherhood have been set out often enough. Hughes describes selfless care and the nurturing of children as essential aspects (1991). Callaghan tells

of the perfect mothers “who feed their children with their own flesh, mothers who never yell” (1989, p. 250). They sacrifice their own lives for others and bear the moral burden of creating and maintaining the moral fabric of society (Callaghan, 1989, p. 250).

The image of the wicked stepmother also has a long and venerable history. Patricia Watson demonstrates that even ancient Greek and Roman cultures perceived stepmothers in an “entirely negative light” (1995, p. 18). The stereotypic presentation of the stepmother in both Greek and Roman texts tells of a woman who is clearly wicked. Such villainous stepmothers have stepchildren who become persecuted innocents (Watson, 1995, p. 18). Watson asserts that the image of the stepmother featured in the ancient texts is an encapsulation of “the negative traits assigned to females in general by a misogynistic tradition which flourished in Greece and Rome and is by no means extinct” (1991, p. 20).

Implications of the binary opposition of good and evil for stepmothers

“I always identified with Snow White or Cinderella instead of their stepmothers. I wasn’t prepared for this role; I didn’t choose it.” (Thayer, 1981, p. 9)

The categories of the good mother/wicked stepmother, held apart as opposites, have negative consequences for stepmothers. Several authors have outlined some of the difficulties:

Burns remarks “most stepmother will verge on the masochistic in order to assure themselves and anyone who’s watching that they are not wicked” (1985). Maglin (1989, p. 258) writes: “One of the problems in the process of stepping is silence; no one ever speaks her anger, fears, and needs”. Schniedewind (1989, p. 323) discusses the guilt and blame stepmothers incurred in failing to attain the standards set out in the discourse of the good mother:

When we didn't meet these expectations we blamed ourselves, felt guilty and disliked ourselves. Our 'wickedness' also played itself out in the dailiness of household living. Our need for a semblance of control became dramatized in what other family members saw as petty matters--keeping the house neat, eating healthy food, limiting phone use and so forth. We confirmed our self-perceptions of being bitchy and nasty. We were resorting again, unconsciously to these old notions. These limiting expectations of women's sphere of influence again trapped us in our evilness.

The singularity of motherhood

The dominant discourse of the family is clear on the fact that mothering is done by one person only. The singularity of motherhood excludes or pathologizes the participation of others, including stepmothers. Minnich, (1989, p. 291) frames the issue in these terms: "If I am not the mother (without prefix), then who can I possibly be and what right do I have to be concerned for children?" Maglin (1989, p. 269) confirms that the ideological and normative emphasis is on the nuclear family, especially in the white middle class where "one is either mother, or not mother." In the traditional story of family, the singularity of motherhood emerges as a strong social construct.

The relationship between the stepmother and the ex-wife

The adversarial relationship between the stepmother and the ex-wife explored in the stories of the women who participated in the group form part of a familiar narrative. Wolfstein (1989) observes in her research with stepfamilies that innumerable stepmothers "see in the biological mother an archenemy" (p. 123). Burns (1985) devotes an entire chapter in her book about stepmothering entitled "The Evil Ex-Wife." Hughes (1991) also describes the adversarial position between the first and second wife.

The five stories presented in the stepmothers' group also work with binary opposites (good/evil) in the construction of the relationship between the stepmother and the first wife.

Yet, the tables have been turned: Now the biological mother is constructed as evil and/or crazy, at the very least, pathetic. Biological mothers fail to meet expectations, and their anger, which is judged unreasonable, is to be avoided. Stepmothers, on the other hand, are portrayed as “good”: they know the rules, play by them and expect others, namely the biological mother, to do the same. Nan Bauer Maglin in her study of contemporary literature about stepfamilies has also noted the discourse of the evil biological mother: “She is a bad mother; she is a cruel and wicked mother; she is a crazy mother”(1989, p. 269).

Several authors have commented on the discourse of the patriarchal, heterosexual nuclear family and its role in maintaining the adversarial relationship between the first and second wives. These authors see the problems encountered in the relationship as structural; the traditional story of family is embedded in the social fabric, in our hearts and minds, and in the organization of society. In this traditional family discourse, political and social power is accorded to the mother on the domestic front, and denied to women in the other areas of their lives (Maglin & Schniedewind, 1989). This works to separate women from women; one gets to be the ‘real’ mother, and the other, the stepmother, is relegated to “second-class status” (Maglin & Schniedewind, 1989, p. 13). Minnich (1989, p. 199) also comments on the power accorded to the biological mother which serves to divide first and second wife: “In a world where you are so powerless, it is hard to walk away from power handed to you, however double-edged. And of course, the power of the Mother is double-edged as well as severely circumscribed.”

In the discourse of the traditional story of family the woman derives much of her sense of identity from her role as wife. Hughes (1991, p. 130) comments on the impact of this

discourse on the relationship between stepmother and ex-wife: “Women’s investment in marriage as a primary form of identity means that by virtue of their role of wife and ex-wife there can be no question of friendly feelings or emergent sisterhood.” Women learn to compete for men and to mistrust each other.

Drawing the battle lines, dancing in the battlefield

The discursive practices of conducting a relationship between a stepmother and a first wife were frequently discussed in the stepmother’s group, but they have received little attention in the literature. The stepmothers in the research group derived these practices from the starting point of positioning the ex-wife as the bad one, the evil mother. The patterns that emerged here included interactions that were described in war-like terms, involving the use of “defenses” and “manoeuvres” used to remain hidden from each other. The stepmother felt that in spite of mutual animosity, it is the first wife who retained the upper hand. She was still the one in charge, the one with the socially sanctioned position. She was the *mother*, and the stepmother was often described as her victim.

Burns writes the dominant discourse of this relationship: (1985, p. 41): “A husband’s ex-wife is the woman most stepmothers love to hate.” “To hear stepmothers tell it, ‘She’s (neurotic, batty, wacko, a real psychotic, absolutely nuts)’” (Burns, 1985, p. 41). Wolfstein, who shares insights both from her research on stepfamilies and her personal experiences, comments on patterns of interaction she has observed between herself and her husband’s ex-wife: “I was mirroring the same emotions of righteousness, resentment, and blame that I could not abide in her. When the ashes settled there was no mistaking the stark truth: I had followed the script and I was not above the fray” (1989, p. 124).

The new discourses on the family

Stories that deconstruct the dominant discourse continue to be told. The stepmothers in the research group rewrote the family, envisioning new family forms. The utopian fiction that they created opened up relationships, outside of ties dictated by biology or economics. Some elements of these discourses of resistance are reviewed below. The careful reader will note that these discourses are located within feminist discourses on women and the family; that is, they are closely related to “feminist demands for gender rearrangement and equality in the family and the workplace” (Zipes, 1986, p. 32). These new discourses seek equalities of power among those parenting in the stepfamily, with both men and women taking responsibility in caring for children. There is a degendering of motherhood and of “maternal thinking,” habits of mind and actions that respect the balance between self and others, between self-assertion and altruism (Stimpson, 1989, p. 336). It is possible for stepmothers and ex-wives to relate to each other as individuals, entering into relationships which go beyond the categories assigned to those who mother, beyond goodness or evil. Thus, the dominant power structures of the family are overturned and the hierarchy of power is flattened. In this discourse, motherhood has ceased to be an identity unto itself, because both men and women have power in other areas of their lives which extend beyond domestic concerns.

However, this is not the first time women have sought to rewrite the family. Many other feminist writers, while skeptical of the family that others fancy, have turned to the task of imagining new systems of kinship “so that the divisions between women (the mother and the daughter, the stepmother and the mother) designed by men, are healed” (Maglin, 1989, p. 270).

Maglin comments further (1989, p. 270):

Feminist science fiction often rewrites the family, often completely without men. But whether with or without men, the nuclear family is never the basic reproductive and socializing unit of society. The utopian fictions of Joanna Russ and Marge Piercy, for example, open up the relationships between mothers and daughters; there are many mothers, and mothers and daughters are tied by neither biology nor economics.

Nancy Schniedewind and the stepmothers who are part of her support group also put forward their own discourse of resistance, while retaining the structure of the nuclear family. Schniedewind writes about what would be required to be released from conventional family expectations. "Release would mean acknowledging several truths: the mother could be other than saint or shrew; 'real' families have conflicts and not everyone loves each other equally; it is not necessarily healthy for the mother to be the emotional linchpin of the family; and finally of power and love which can be shared in different ways in different families." (1989, p. 325)

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this research was to describe and explore the narratives that stepmothers as speaking subjects use to constitute themselves. The participants in the study put forward a discourse of stepmothering through which they made themselves and were made subject. The research and the insights that arose from it were enhanced by the use of other writings from feminist authors to broaden the base from which the stories were told. The insights described here are congruent with and extend feminist writings on women and the family.

In hearing, reading, and rereading stepmothers stories it becomes clear that the task of rewriting the family is a difficult one. However, we are certainly not alone in our desire for change. That being said, it is easy to become discouraged. Alternate stories of family are easily

contained by our own desires to achieve ourselves as 'good women,' as competent and loving members in a happy family. "It is very hard to envision one's place in the world as a woman who does not want to be someone's mommy" (Callaghan, 1989, p. 250). The hooks that reach out to pull us into the patriarchal story are especially seductive, and we have been discursively constructed as women and as stepmothers to attend to its appeal. It is difficult for us to refuse promises of warmth, happiness and material security offer to us with such assurance. It is difficult to refuse the positioning of wife and mother since they offer their own forms of power and reward, though limited and circumscribed by male control.

This being the case, we need to go beyond the task of speaking and writing new family stories. Political action aimed at changing the social and economic structures of society will also be required in opening up new possibilities in our kinship systems. This is not a job that can or should be left for women as yet another task to accomplish, it is a job for everyone. Though progress is slow and the task is large we can take comfort by the fact that some of us are working on it.

CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS

This final chapter will include a discussion of the study's implications for counsellors and other helping professionals, implications for stepmothers, and implications for further research. In addition, the limitations of the study will be described. Finally, the personal changes encountered in writing this research will be addressed.

Implications for Helping Professionals

In the context of this research feminist poststructuralist theory has provided a meticulous critique of the received view about women in stepfamilies. The work presented here reflects a way of thinking and proceeding that can help make people better counsellors. It is yet another tool to employ in the task of helping others making meaning of their lives.

For the helping professional the most fundamental implication is to understand and acknowledge the way in which they have taken up as their own the dominant cultural stories about women, and more specifically, the dominant cultural stories of women who are mothers and stepmothers. It is imperative for helping professionals to acknowledge their favourite interpretations secure the meanings that they attribute to women, men and relationships in families. With these insights helping professionals might allow stepmothers and their families a different relationship to family structure, a recognition of the structure as less than absolute, leaving an opening for both groups of people and individual clients to act upon it and work for change.

The use of poststructuralist concepts in helping relationships

Helping relationships can be described as an exploration of the clients' life stories, an exploration that helps them choose between multiple possible interpretations, to rewrite stories and to compose new ones which can be models for future action. The tools of poststructuralist discourse can be made central to the therapeutic task. These tools, previously described by Davies (1993), can be introduced by making the basic concepts operative in therapeutic conversation with stepmothers and their families:

- a) Clients may be introduced to the concepts of discourse, thus gaining awareness of the inescapably political contexts in which we speak and live.
- b) Clients may learn to catch discourse in the act of shaping their desires, actions, social and cultural constructs. In this way clients may come to see the intersection between themselves as fictions (albeit intensely experienced fictions) and the fictions of our culture which are constantly in evolution.
- c) Changes can occur when clients act and see themselves as producers of culture, speakers or writers who makes themselves and are made within the discourses available to them. Then, clients may consciously choose to act in terms of one discourse or another, depending of the value of its products. Most importantly, clients can learn to "break the rules" about living in families in creative and fruitful ways. They can move beyond the tedious and oppressive repetitions of culture, to the cutting edge where old stereotypes are disrupted, where we can sometimes escape the alienation and coercion of present day family life by reaching beyond it.

The therapeutic relationship

Working with individuals and families in the way described above signals a shift from authority relations between counsellor and client towards mutual exploration. Together counsellor and client explore the constitutive power of stories and conversation in their lives. Together they can reveal the discursive threads out of which we become the (stepmother) beings that we are. Counsellor and client need to work cooperatively to gain insight into the discursive mechanisms which hold existing structures in place. They will unmask the schemes that they (and others) draw on to stabilize the world, and judge for themselves which interpretations they favor at a particular point in time.

Contributions from feminist discourse

Counselling from the feminist perspective as suggested here demands that we 'look differently' and share that different looking with our clients. It demands that we confront the dilemmas of gender in the family context with sharp clear anger. The feminist poststructuralist counsellor can see that these dilemmas take on different meanings depending on the subject position that they are viewed from, depending on the patterns of power and powerlessness, and the analytic tools at one's disposal. Feminist counsellors can join in a collective effort to disrupt old patterns and create new ones by seeing the dilemma of gender not as a cultural recipe/requirement, but as shifting cultural patterns that can be, that are being and that will be changed.

Poststructuralist work in groups

As illustrated in this research, working with people in a group setting can be of critical importance in realizing the collective nature of the stories we live in. Group work provides a

rich environment in which to rethink what it means to be a specific person at the same time as that specificity becomes visibly woven out of the material available in the contexts in which we find ourselves. It is not women alone who can (or should) bear the responsibility for changing societal arrangements. Women, men and children need to work together to find and perhaps unpick and restitch the invisible cultural/discursive threads that bring stepfamilies into being.

Implications for Stepmothers

This study focused on the narratives that five stepmothers used to speak themselves into existence, as opposed to discovering knowledge that may be generalized to all stepmothers' experience. If other stepmothers had interpreted the stories presented here they would deconstruct them differently. This is as it should be. Our cultural and societal narratives are in constant evolution. However, the findings can serve as useful considerations for women in stepfamilies, and offer them a perspective from which to consider their own family situations and their favourite interpretations of them.

If stepmothers have awareness of some of the dominant discourses through which they are constituted they can choose to either write new stories or at least know when they are participating in the old ones. They can catch discourse/structure/ practice in the act of shaping desire, perception or knowledge (Davies, p. 199). Difficulties experienced in stepfamily life can then be understood as originating from social and cultural arrangements which could be made otherwise, as opposed to individual or family deficiencies. This shift in perspective can be liberating in and of itself.

Implications for Further Research

This research represents the beginning of an exploration of the narratives that stepmothers, as speaking subjects, use to constitute themselves. Further research should work to broaden the base from which these stories are told. There is an obvious need to move beyond the cultural stories of white middle class women, and to hear the multitude of voices in the stepfamily not represented here. This would mean choosing people from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds. It would also seem imperative to include other family members in the study. In addition, further storytelling might generate a movement away from the ‘problem-saturated’ storylines that have been presented here. The recognition of multiplicity in stepmothers’ stories is in itself useful in dislocating the storylines use to stabilize meaning in the stepfamily.

Limitations

There are multiple possible tellings of the discourse of stepmotherhood. This work only begins to point toward what must be a much more extensive exploration of stories based on race, ethnicity, sexual preference, marital status, and class. Having access to the insights presented here may prove useful to some, but indeed it would be wrong to think that these findings reflect the experience of all women who are stepmothers. In the context of poststructuralist research where meanings arise and confront one another, insights gained through the exploration of stories are never applicable to all circumstances. The insights instead point to the multiplicity and the richness of the stories which will continue to evolve in each moment, each conversation and in each family. We need to listen to what other people say

about their experiences in stepfamilies, so that we may continue to open the possibilities through which family life may be told.

Concluding Remarks

Feminist stories about the family describe what might be possible. These stories can only be concocted in terms of what is happening now, the familiar storylines. So, people need to have the opportunity to tell both the stories that are well known to them and the stories of their imaginings. The stories of our imaginings could work in ways that we cannot even anticipate, transcending our present limitations.

Afterword

In this section I will address the changes that I experienced as a result of writing and living in/with this research. I thought at first that I would be able to write about the emancipatory effects derived for all group members, to speak for all of us. However, in beginning to write about the changes that I had experienced it quickly became clear that I could speak only for myself. It is wrong to speak for others in so personal a way, especially from the position of writer and researcher. I came to realize that even though I had been a member of the group, in many ways “just like the others,” I occupied a different position vis-à-vis the project as a whole and its relationship to my personal life and processes of change.

I was the only one in the group with the opportunity to see all the work as a whole, or to guide the research process as it began to take shape. In addition, I was in the unique position of being able to reflect on the theoretical underpinnings of the work and to experience the intersection between the theoretical narrative and the narrative of my own life. In other words, I had a view from the top of the hill as well as a view afforded from living in a specific house on the hillside.

In sharing the stepmothers’ stories with the other women in the group, I came to realize that the difficulties I encountered were not mine alone. In gaining awareness of the discourse of stepmothering through which my life was shaped, I could interpret the challenges encountered from a new perspective. Many of these challenges arose in the conflict between different discourses that I was encouraged to adopt as a woman and as a stepmother. I came to realize that many of the problems that I had confronted were due to social arrangements and social structures that were culturally and historically specific and hence open to change.

In coming to the awareness that I took part in defining a 'reality' that was discursively produced I realized that I had new options. I could choose to act or speak within the terms of one discourse or another depending on the value of its products. Alternatively, I could choose to write or act out my own or shared discourses of resistance brought forward by other members in the stepmother group.

To have new awareness brings both pleasure and pain. The pleasure comes from the heightened sense of clarity through which to understand and act within my own life. The pain comes from realizing the dominance of the traditional discourse on the family in shaping the subjectivity of (step)mothers, as well as the pressure it exerts on my personal choices. The patriarchal nuclear family still has a firm hold on our psyches, on our social structures, and on our hearts, my own included. Love tainted with oppression tastes bitter no matter what form it is presented. This makes me wary of my own desires, which is I suppose is as it should be. To what extent is it possible to trust my own desires even when it comes down to 'personal' choices like whether or not to become a mother? How much 'choice' can there be if I am sure that the 'choice' represents a certain working out of a storyline which preexists me? Do all these questions really matter if the present state of affairs is just that? In posing these questions, I take heart from Martin Luther King's caution regarding the paralysis of analysis. In an era of rampant reflexivity, "just getting on with it may be the most radical action one can make" (Lather, 1991, p. 20).

When it comes to the creation of new kinship systems change does not come easily. It is not easy to imagine new ways to live or to imagine new relationships that have yet to be even named. Like many of us, I am engaged in a never ending and grand experiment--trying to

rewrite the story of family. I hope to write new stories about love and about freedom for myself and for others.

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Appendix A

LETTER OF CONSENT

I hereby give consent for my participation in the study entitled: “The discourse of Stepmothering.”

I understand that the persons responsible for this study are Dr. Vance Peavy and Ms. Kim Daly, Counselling Program, Psychological Foundations, University of Victoria.

I understand that this research project is studying stepmothers’ stories. I understand that I will work as part of a group of five women, including Ms. Daly, discussing and writing about individual and collective experiences as stepmothers. The purpose of the research is to describe and explore the stories that stepmothers use to define themselves within societal structures. I understand the probable time commitment of 14 hours as a participant in this study.

I understand that the group meetings will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. A research assistant may be employed to do the work of transcription. After the analysis of these transcripts, the tapes will be erased.

I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation. I may also refuse to respond to any questions during the group sessions or request that the tape recorder be turned off.

I understand that Ms. Daly will make arrangements to protect my confidentiality; transcripts from group sessions will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Kim will code the written transcript with numerical identifiers to identify results obtained from individual participants. Only Kim and two members of her thesis committee will read written transcripts of the audiotaped sessions. The purpose of the committee members’ examination of the transcripts will be to clarify research findings. In published results, my anonymity will be further protected by using a code name to identify spoken or written text. However, I understand that participation in group sessions will mean that my name and the statements I will make will be known to others members of the group, and in this sense my anonymity will be lost to the other members of the group.

If I have questions regarding this study I may contact Kim Daly at 595-3686 or Dr. Peavy at 384-0612.

YOUR SIGNATURE ON THE NEXT PAGE INDICATES THAT YOU ARE
WILLING TO PARTICIPATE HAVING READ THE ABOVE.

-2-

(Participant's Signature)

(Date)

(Researcher's Signature)

Appendix B

NOTICE TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

I am working on my Master's Degree in Counselling at the University of Victoria. I am doing a study on stepmothers and how they experience themselves as they take part in the life of their stepchild(ren) and their partner. The purpose of the research is to describe and explore the personal stories that stepmothers use to define themselves within society.

I am looking for stepmothers who are married, and have stepchild(ren) under the age of 16 years. Prospective participants will be willing to join a group that will meet weekly over a seven week period. These participants will be invited to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and personal stories about their stepmothering experience. A short piece of writing about an important experience as a stepmother will be requested from each participant.

A total time commitment of 14 hours is requested for the seven group meetings. The group meetings will be audiotaped and transcribed. Participants will have the opportunity if they wish to review and clarify their personal accounts. Arrangements will be made to protect confidentiality. Audiotapes will be destroyed following transcription. Pseudonyms will be used in any written material that results from this study.

Meeting and talking with other stepmothers will certainly be a therapeutic activity for some women; however, research will be the main focus of these meetings.

I would really appreciate your involvement and will be happy to answer any questions you might have. Please contact me at 595-3686. Thank you for your attention to my request.
Sincerely,

Kim Daly

ATTENTION STEPMOTHERS!

Living between the 'wicked stepmother' and the 'perfect' mother:

A Research Study

Research has shown that it is often a challenge to be a stepmother. I am wanting to explore the personal stories that women use to define their sense of self as they are actively engaged in stepmothering. Would YOU be willing to share your experience with me and three other stepmothers? If so, I would be very interested in talking to you. My name is Kim Daly and you may reach me by calling 595-3686. Please leave a message so that I may return your call. All information shared will be confidential. Scheduling of meeting times is flexible, requiring seven sessions of approximately 2 hours duration. You may withdraw from the study at any time. I look forward to hearing from you.

VITA

Surname: Daly Given Names: Leslie Kim
Place of Birth: Montreal, Quebec Date of Birth: September 18, 1963

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS ATTENDED:

Queen's University	1981-1986
McMaster University	1986-1990
University of Victoria	1993-1997

DEGREES AWARDED:

B.Sc.	Queen's University	1986
B.Sc.N.	McMaster University	1990

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Title of Thesis:

THE DISCOURSE OF STEPMOTHERING: BETWEEN THE “WICKED STEPMOTHER”
AND THE “GOOD MOTHER”

Author



Leslje Kim Daly
April 2, 1997