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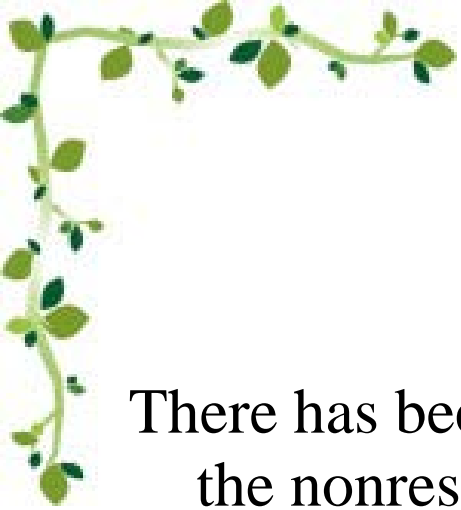
An examination of the nonresidential stepmother role

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Introduction

There has been little research into stepmothers' roles, and even less into the nonresidential stepmothers roles. The previous stepfamily literature has essentially focused on:

- Stepfather roles
- The residential stepmother role
- The stepmother role from the stepchild's perspective.

In addition, previous research focused on the stepmother role has not, for the most part, identified behaviours associated with the role, and the vast majority of studies in this area are from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.



Aims and Research Questions

The aim of the present research was to examine the roles of nonresidential stepmothers living in Perth, Western Australia.

Research Question 1: How do nonresidential stepmothers living in Perth, Western Australia, conceptualise, construct and evaluate their roles within stepfamilies?

Research Question 2: What social, interpersonal, and personal factors influence how nonresidential stepmothers living in Perth, Western Australia construct their roles?



Research Design

Methodology

- A phenomenological methodology was used, as this methodology focuses on the lived experience of individuals, and the present research aimed to explore how participants saw their roles, how they constructed and evaluated them.

Participants

- There were eight participants in this study
- At the time of the interview, all participants were living with, or had been living with (within last six months) a man who had minor children from a previous relationship.
- The participant's stepchildren lived with themselves and their partners for fifty percent (seven nights per fortnight) or less of the time.



Research Design

Procedure

- Participants were recruited through relevant websites and online parenting forums. Letters were sent to relevant service delivery agencies, health centres, community newspapers, child health nurses, and through personal contacts and snowballing techniques. Prior to each interview, participants were given an information letter and an informed consent document.
- Participants engaged in 1 face-to-face, in-depth interview with a duration of up to one hour, which were audio recorded with the participant's consent. All interviews were conducted according to the interview schedule in Appendix A, with additional probes used for further elaboration and clarification. Some participants were re-contacted during data analysis to clarify and verify the researcher's understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions.



Findings

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Transcripts were coded according to role

- Conceptualisation,
- Construction, and
- Evaluation.

A fourth theme of Ideal roles also emerged.



Role Conceptualisation

Many participants saw themselves in a parent-like capacity for their stepchildren, and reported engaging in behaviours such as discipline and emotional support for their stepchildren. However, participants were also very clear that they did not see themselves as another mother for their stepchildren:

In our family, I would...I wouldn't say that I'm the mothering figure, because she's got such a close relationship with her mum, I never wanted to try and replace her mum...



Role Construction

Participants constructed their roles mainly through interpersonal factors such as communication with their partners, but also through personal and social factors such as their own life experiences and the influence of their stepchildren's biological mother.

For example:

...and then we talk about it and he would get it, you know? Um, so it is really important, otherwise I would just be shitty all the time [laughter] for no apparent reason.



Role Evaluation

Participants evaluated their roles according to feedback from their partners and stepchildren, and also through the behaviour of their stepchildren, or how their stepchildren presented themselves:

When for no good reason, they come up and give me a cuddle, or our son turns around and says, "I love you [Participant's name]." And, um, or even if you have told them off, they still come up afterwards and give you a cuddle. Yeah, um, or they ask you to do something with them, or...yeah. So, it...and they're happy, that's the biggest thing. Even if they know they're in the bad books, they're still happy, and they're playing and it doesn't really matter [laughter].



Ideal Roles

Participants also discussed what they would ideally do as part of their role as a stepmother, or what they hoped they were doing:

I do feel uncomfortable asking her sometimes, because I think almost that I shouldn't have to, that [my partner]'s her father and he should be doing it, and that waiting for me to ask her to put dirty dishes away...it annoys me, because I shouldn't have to do it. He should be doing it, you know what I mean?



Conclusions

The results indicate that there are many ways of stepmothering, and many factors which lead to how a woman in this position performs the behaviours that she does as part of her role. One key finding of this research is that there is no one 'right' way to be a stepmother – every participant had different circumstances and different life experiences which led them to adopting the role that they did.

As many of the participants did not have support networks of other stepmothers and stepparents, it would be beneficial for have networking opportunities for these women, so that they can feel supported in their role.



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