MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF STEPMOTHERHOOD:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE SYSTEMIC AND CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES THAT REDUCE THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT

by

Marie Muljiani

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Counselling (MC)
City University of Seattle, Vancouver

November 2019

APPROVED BY

Colin James Sanders, PhD, R.C.C., Advisor, Master of Counselling Department
Christopher Iwestel Kinman, PhD., M.Sc., M.Div., Faculty Reader, Master of Counselling Department

Division of Arts and Sciences
Abstract

The diversity of familial structures within westernized culture has expanded beyond the nuclear family framework reflecting familial roles that exist within an expanded scope of the traditional nuclear family unit. The expansion of the family unit into a bi-nuclear structure has also reflected a limitation for diverse families, in particular stepmothers, to access tailored therapeutic supports, legal recognition and destigmatized cultural integration. As such, the correlation between the stepmother role and the increase of mental health challenges reflecting depression, anxiety and addiction (among others) has become more prevalent. In this thesis, I offer a detailed examination into the lived-experience of the stepmother role, the social-cultural contexts within which the role exists and the therapeutic approaches that practitioners should incorporate into therapeutic practice for this client segment. Focused aspects of socialized contextualization and the reflections of the Feminist perspective will also be included along with reflections of Attachment, Emotionally Focused and Narrative Theories will be discussed within this examination. Moreover, the aim of this thesis is to assist therapeutic practitioners, counsellors, and community workers, to reflect on the isolation and systemic implications of familial cultural norms when engaging with stepmothers as clientele. This will reduce her suffering and generate more support for those functioning within the maternal familial role.

Keywords: nuclear, bi-nuclear, stepparent, stepcouple, stepmother, attachment theory, narrative theory, feminist theory, emotionally-focused theory, social context, systemic framework, isolation, mental health
Acknowledgements

When I was young, the concept of writing a thesis and completing a graduate degree was overwhelming, however not an impossibility. However, with increased age and subsequent responsibilities, the limitations to complete a graduate-level education soon became more challenged. Therefore, the writing of this thesis is of significant personal accomplishment.

My thesis is reflective of my lived-experience and academic commitment. That said, it is also the result of a collection of individual efforts and supports that I wish to acknowledge and appreciate throughout this academic journey. It is with these sentiments that I emphasize the most valuable part of this document, this page- the acknowledgements- without which this thesis may never have come to fruition.

First, I would like to begin by acknowledging my partner, Hanif. Your continuous encouragement, interest and appreciation in my academic experience has been the solace I required throughout this academic journey. Though I am expressing my appreciation on this single page, I wish to note that your relentless and unwavering confidence in my abilities has been a vital support throughout this experience. Your belief in me has been the courageous compass that encouraged my explorations and re-centered my steps when I needed a supportive path home. Thank-you for supporting my goals and cherishing my independent spirit, I can never express my appreciation fully within the words on this page.

I secondly would like to acknowledge Aleem and Alisha. We have moved through this journey together and I am grateful for your love and patience throughout. You both have taught me so much about life and I cherish the family that we have created. I am so proud to be your stepmother; it has been a privileged role to hold.
I would like to acknowledge my parents, Anne-Marie and Patrick, who have provided a constant stream of unconditional love and support throughout my life. You both have instilled a belief in myself and my abilities that has been instrumental throughout this graduate work. I love you both dearly.

I would also like to thank my supportive siblings Clare (and Alex), Owen (and Sarah), who have been a part of this journey and extended encouragement and celebration at each milestone. This process has been made easier with your love and support and I am grateful for it.

I also wish to acknowledge my aunt and uncle, Eleanor and Brian, who have been relentless in their support during this graduate degree. You both have continuously been a part of each life pursuit I tackle, and I am so appreciative of the kindness and unconditional love you both continuously supply.

I would like to thank my wonderful friends. This journey has reduced our time together, however to those of you who have stood on the sidelines cheering me through the challenges and celebrating my achievements I wish to thank-you. *Friends are the family you choose*, and I am grateful for the family we’ve made together.

I would like to acknowledge Sheila Robinson, Wayne Wong, Gabriela Gutierrez, Kathy Merabian, Tamara Bustos and Angie Kleinfeld, for your continuous professional support and academic consultation. Each of you have contributed to this process and I sincerely appreciate your efforts beyond the rigors of APA and academia.

I would like to acknowledge all of the teachers and staff at City University and specifically like to acknowledge Chantelle Lam, Bruce Hardy, Chris Kinman, Sarah Kim and Laleh Skrenes, for their attention, encouragement and compassion.
I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Colin Sanders, who has supported me throughout every page of this thesis process. Your guidance relieved the pressures of time and academic rigidity and replaced these sentiments with an emphasis on expression and the rigors of personal exploration.

I would also like to thank my second reader, Chris Kinman, for your support, time and effort. Your thoughts and reflections were invaluable to this thesis production and graduate experience.

Finally, I would like to thank my Cohort 9, we began this journey as a collection of strangers and finish as a family. Thank-you for your words, support and friendship.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the children in my life, Aleem, Alisha, Luella, Olive, Dylan, Charlotte and Anna. Each of you have reminded me of the privilege it is to be a parent and my hope is that through our family’s love, each of you will be courageous to extend yourselves and explore your dreams, knowing you always have a place to come home to.

Thank-you for your patience, grounding and reminder of with is truly important in life.

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in.

-Leonard Cohen, Anthem (Grande, 2018)
**EXAMINATION OF STEPMOTHERHOOD**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................. 2

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... 3

Dedication ........................................................................................................................................ 6

Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................ 7

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO STEPMOTHERHOOD .............................................................. 10
  
  Expansion of Family ....................................................................................................................... 11

  Situating the Author ....................................................................................................................... 12

  Query and Context ......................................................................................................................... 14

  Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 17

CHAPTER 2: RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN FAMILIAL STRUCTURES ........................................ 19

  Familial Concepts ......................................................................................................................... 20

  Historical Background .................................................................................................................. 21

  Challenges in Diversity ............................................................................................................... 22

  Socio-political Influence .............................................................................................................. 23

  Socio-economic Implications ....................................................................................................... 25

  Diverse Families are Evolved Families ......................................................................................... 27

  Family Bonds ............................................................................................................................... 28

  Attachment Theory ...................................................................................................................... 29

  Reflection ..................................................................................................................................... 30

  Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 32

CHAPTER 3: THE INVISIBLE ROLE: EXAMINATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD .......................... 34

  Discourses and Disadvantages ...................................................................................................... 35
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 70
References .................................................................................................................. 73
Appendix (IRB Approval Notification) ........................................................................ 80
Chapter 1: Introduction to Step Motherhood

When you think of stepmotherhood, it is difficult to ignore the stereotypical concepts associated with the role common to ideas of evil, wickedness, selfishness, and manipulation, that are embedded in the themes of children’s fairy tales, media influences and socio-systemic contexts. Such negative sentiments towards stepmothers have had tremendous impacts on how stepmothers carry-out their roles within their social and familial environments, and have influenced their ability to access the necessary social, medical and legal supports, implicit within traditional parenting roles.

As the structures of modern westernized families shift and expand beyond the scope of traditional family frameworks, so too are the individual roles within them. This thesis aims to explore the contextual transitions of the modern family unit, and examine the impacts of these contexts within the maternal role, specifically the stepmother. Through this exploration, the author aims to identify the mental health challenges that result from the ambiguity of the role and provide relevant direction for psychological practitioners to tailor treatment processes that are unique to stepmothers and therefore require contextual perspective in order to ensure effective support services.

As the role of stepparents and, in the case of this thesis, stepmotherhood becomes more commonplace, it is vital for therapeutic practitioners to hold a foundational perspective within the current westernized landscape of stepmotherhood, in order to help enrich the lives of clientele and reduce their silent suffering. To this end, I, the author, will reflect on the personal isolation and internal judgements that I experienced in my early years as a stepmother. This reflection is valuable as it provides a realistic understanding of, and exposure to, the impacts of maternal and paternal roles being embedded within the traditional understanding of familial
development and therefore argues for the incorporation of contextual reflection in order to support these individuals.

As stepmotherhood is more commonplace, much like families and family dynamics within western culture are expanding, it is crucial for practitioners to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of stepmothers to ensure that they can continue to empathize with their clients’ experiences and challenges, and ultimately uphold their responsibilities as care-providers.

**Expansion of Family**

As mentioned, the concept of a blended family, or stepfamily, has become more prominent within current westernized familial structures: over 64% of families within the United States (Riness & Sailor, 2015) and over 11% of families within Canada are considered blended (Kumar, 2017). Within these statistics, over 25% of these remarried families include children who subsequently become part of the stepfamily structure (Papernow, 2018).

The definition of a blended family reflects the introduction of a new spouse to a single parent through a commitment of cohabitation or marriage that includes children for one or both spouses (Kumar, 2017). This differs from traditional nuclear family structures where a couple, generally heterosexual, creates a familial structure where children are biologically related to both parents. The idea of a binuclear family is therefore introduced as a subsect of familial structure and introduces new parenting roles that expand beyond biological attachment. As Shapiro (2014) indicates, “binuclear family arrangements (i.e., a family comprised of two households formed by a divorced couple, their children, and each partner’s new spouse) indicate that stepparenting (SIC) is an increasingly common parenting role” (p. 97).
The complexity of the stepparent role raises challenges within the parenting structure that are ambiguous in definition. Technically, a stepparent is defined as a parent without biological relation to a child (Riness & Sailor, 2015). Though this definition could relate to many familial structures that are common today, such as adoption or surrogacy, this thesis will focus on the primary concept of the stepparent in relation to the blending of families through a spouse with pre-existing children from a previous relationship. Most often, stepparents have been described by those within the blended family structure as, “back-up supporters of parents and family outsiders” (Coleman, Lawrence, Russell, & Frye-Cox, 2015). These sentiments have translated to further psychological and social challenges for stepparents, especially female stepparents who have adopted a maternal role within the new familial unit.

Miller, Cartwright and Gibson (2017) suggest that, “stepmothers have more difficulty than stepfathers adjusting to the stepfamily life and experience unique tensions and challenges as a result of an ambiguous stepmother role” (p. 1985). These challenges are further aggravated by the stigmatization of stepfamilies being viewed as less healthy than biological parent families and the “stereotype[ing] of wicked or evil stepmother[s]...that has dated back to the Roman times...[still present within] popular fairy tales such as Hansel and Gretel, Snow White and Cinderella” (Miller et al., 2017, p. 1985).

An increase of psychological research and education for blended families, particularly stepmothers, assists in reducing common parenting challenges and the psychological and emotional toll that stepmothers experience. This chapter reflects the role of the stepmother and the impacts of societal expectations. An acknowledgement of the author’s personal investment and relation to the topic will also be addressed.

**Situating the Author**
The role of a stepparent—stepmother in particular—is of great importance and concern as the author of this thesis. In addition to being raised in a blended family, I am now a stepmother myself and have been for over a decade. With my experience being raised within a family where biological and non-biological siblings were part of my development, and now raising non-biological children, this thesis is a reflection of the impacts that traditional socialized frameworks had on my stepmother experience, particularly with respect to the lack of specific and relevant support systems, common for traditional mothers. Due to my personal experiences, it is important that I also acknowledge my potential bias throughout this thesis. Each chapter has been written with the intention of showcasing the unique experiences and challenges that I encountered within my social context, immediate family unit and myself. It is important to acknowledge that this thesis does not acknowledge the diverse experiences of others in non-traditional families.

However, despite my experience having moments that are unique to my family unit, there are numerous stepmothers within our social context and it is my hope that readers, especially practitioners, will take the opportunity to reflect upon my perspective and contemplate the relevance and benefits, that may be applied within session-work. In addition to recognizing the subjectivity of my personal experiences, I aim to draw upon these sentiments in an effort to reduce systemic ignorance, the impacts of stepmother ambiguity and isolation, in order to explore additional supports and potential areas of improvement for therapeutic practitioners. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis, is to explore the lived experience of a stepmother and gain greater insight into how the role is challenging and supported within familial units, social interactions and therapeutic practices.
It is also important to acknowledge that the perspective from which this thesis is written stems primarily from a feminist approach. Central to such an approach is the role of gender, which Shapiro (2014) states “is considered by feminist scholars to be the ‘linchpin’ of family functioning, such that it shapes all other family processes and roles” (p. 98).

The feminist perspective has contributed to my motivations for producing this thesis and acknowledges the central role that females offer within familial structures. It is commonly accepted that societal expectations of families demand “more of mothers than does of fathers…[this social pressure] leaves a stepmother to feel ‘isolated, unsupported, and ill prepared’” (Kumar, 2017, p. 114). Though I participate within the stepmother role and recognize that my experience does not reflect that of all stepmothers, my lived experience provides a unique perspective and greater insight into this exploration.

Finally, I wish to make explicit that this thesis relates exclusively to heterosexual relationships and does not include the LGBTQ2S+ communities within the scope of blended families. Papernow (2018) suggests that for “LGBTQ (SIC) parents, becoming a stepfamily involves an extra load of change as they adjust to [potentially] coming out, as well as to a new stepfamily” (p. 33). Though there is a strong argument for the LGBTQ2S+ communities having relatable experiences within the blended family and stepparent roles, this thesis is limited to the exploration of my cisgendered, heteronormative stepmother identity and includes a subjectivity that is important to be acknowledged.

**Query and Context**

As previously discussed, this thesis is focused on the primary exploration of stepmothers and the impacts of societal expectations within their roles. This role is of paramount concern, as Shapiro (2014) explains in the following statement:
stepparents...have to negotiate their position within the family unit without the help of well-established cultural scripts. Second[ly] stepparenting lacks the default legitimacy that is conveyed through biological relationships, perhaps making supportive relationships outside of marital dyad[s] more difficult to establish.” (p. 98)

Since stepparent challenges are exacerbated by gender roles, the focus on exploring the stepmother position will also addressed.

Step-motherhood, specifically, incorporates related contextual questions that reflect the familial unit as well as the social expectations of a non-biological mother. Firstly, the presence of an ex-spouse can undermine the stepparent creating tension between the current/shared partner and the stepparent (Kumar, 2017). This influence can lead to a rivalry between the preexisting spouse and the establishment of the new spouse or stepparent. Secondly, issues of blurred or ambiguous boundaries are commonplace for stepmothers and their respective familial units. These unclear boundaries reflect the lack of well-established cultural norms of familial structures and displace traditional expectations of a maternal role onto the stepmother to fulfil despite the limited authority and power that they hold. Though the blurred boundaries for blended families are consistent, there is research that suggests boundaries become more defined the longer the relationship lasts, and the family unit begins to bond and trust one another over time (Stewart, 2005).

Challenges within the spousal relationship are also common contextual issues that are associated with blended families. The resulting poor relationship quality is commonly reported among blended family spouses and is often deprioritized (Kumar, 2017) in comparison to previous or initial relational families. The issue of non-biological child bonding becomes problematic for the couple relationship and can present uncommon strains in comparison to
EXAMINATION OF STEPMOTHERHOOD

traditional first-time relationships (Kumar, 2017). These bonds can be challenging for the stepparent, especially the stepmother, who is often expected to be emotionally connected to the children as it can infer judgements and distancing from the spouse. This distancing creates contextual experiences for stepmothers that are often isolating, which is further re-enforced by explanations of stepmothers who report feeling, “under prioritized, and...ignored even in decision-making that directly...[affects] them, and [results on having] mixed emotions about their partners and stepchildren” (Kumar, 2017, p. 114).

Finally, impacts of a blended family on the stepmother role can have psychological implications that can result in mental health concerns and various forms of trauma. Shapiro (2014) reports that, “stepmothers may be more vulnerable to the stresses associated with stepparenting and may have access to fewer supports and buffers that stepfathers do” (p. 98), outlining the potential causal elements that are incorporated into the role. Each of these related issues are reflective of the exploration of the stepmother role and the impacts of societal expectations on the mother and family unit.

The outlined topic and subsequent research areas identify the importance of exploring the blended family unit, and particularly the stepmother, as a necessary part of individual and familial therapeutic practice in current social frameworks. It is my hope that therapists and blended families will benefit from this research as it will help improve the lives of each individual within the family unit. Jensen, Shafer and Larson (2014) report that, “becoming a stepparent is often associated with decreased psychological well-being and...children in stepfamilies tend to have poorer emotional health than those in single parent households” (p. 214). These findings suggest that the lack of academic analysis for this significant part of the population is necessary to reduce personal and familial suffering, further encouraging healthier
child development and parental mental health. This is an innovative area of exploration as it is significantly underrepresented within psychological research.

In reviewing the current research, most studies reflect the concept of blended families and stepparent roles as being challenging and complex. However, there is a deficit of researchable articles that reflect the stepmother role and particularly the impacts of the role on the stepmother’s mental health. This limitation in research indicates the value of this thesis to pursue a deeper exploration of this maternal role within this common familial unit.

**Conclusion**

The challenging role of a stepmother and the related societal expectations of the role can have detrimental effects on the mother, as well as the familial unit. The complexities of a blended family unit are widespread, and create secondary challenges that are related to the familial structure, the blurring of parental roles and boundaries, as well as individual isolation processes of the stepmother. As Riness and Sailor (2015) articulate, “stepmothers often feel they cannot talk with their [partners about]...these feelings for fear of being disconnected, having their fears or emotions minimized...[and] putting unnecessary stress on the marital relationship” (p. 172). These fearful sentiments indicate a common struggle that stepmothers encounter within their efforts to adapt to the stepmother responsibilities.

As blended families increase within western society, the importance of therapeutic research for this section of the population is important. The reflection within this thesis is limited to the role of stepmothering, though further expansion could include the LGBTQ2S+ communities and specific areas of challenge that pertain within differing relational definitions. The aim is to enhance, support and reduce the stigmatization that has been heavily promoted through the superiority of nuclear family units as well as mythical folklore: “Through research,
exploration and education...myths can be challenged, stereotypes can be altered, and positive shifts in society’s perceptions...will become a very probable outcome” (Riness & Sailor, 2015, p. 155). The value of exploration creates an awareness of the struggles that underlie the stepmother role and enhance therapeutic practices in creating valuable directions for blended families to improve functionality.
Chapter 2: Responsibilities within Familial Structures

Throughout the centuries, the human concept of family has been molded and shaped by the influences of location, population, culture, commerce and class. However, the essence of the familial unit to support and protect each individual member has remained consistent. Familial units have also evolved to transcend the boundaries of location, language, ethnicity. This familial evolution has impacted the roles and responsibilities of the parental and child figures and forced a re-examination of the potentially oppressive social structures within which an evolved familial unit exists. As Anderson (2014) suggests, “the demographics of families are changing, and with that, the philosophical underpinnings of [societal] relationships are also changing” (p. 378).

The social and relational structures that define a familial unit in present day politics lack the expansive perspectives that the current diversification of familial units reflect in our communities. The diversity of families within our current communities therefore experience reduced acceptance and legal empowerment necessary to support the fundamental roles and responsibilities of these parents. These challenged positions of non-traditional parents without social supports and legal authority further challenges the bonding and responsibilities that diverse families (Park, 2013) maintain despite their non-traditional representations. Traditional nuclear families (Park, 2013) freely exist with protective parental rights, justified taxation criteria, and access to medical and mental health supports without being challenged, whereas non-traditional families of varying ethnicities, ages, genders or cohabitation status are not necessarily afforded these rights and supports. It is also important to acknowledge that these rights and supports are reflective of the specific country within which these diverse families reside, Canada specifically has been more expansive and accepting of these shifts in comparison
EXAMINATION OF STEPMOTHERHOOD

20
to other countries. However, for the purpose of this chapter, references within North America will reflect a collective perspective of the United States and Canadian systemic frameworks.

In North America, the concept of family is defined through a socially rooted relational structure that lacks appreciation of broader familial types of attachment (Park, 2013). This chapter will examine the contextual constraints that have influenced the definition of family. Firstly, this chapter will examine the predominant Eurocentric and heteronormative concepts of family embedded in colonial influence. Second, this chapter will relate the methods in which current familial definitions are linked to socio-political and economic policy-making that lack ethno-cultural sensitivity and inclusion. These reflections will include a particular attention to those within stepparent positions. Finally, the psychotherapeutic approaches of attachment and attunement will be addressed in order to expand the definition of familial bonds within current North American socialized frameworks.

Familial Concepts

The definitions of family in North America are interwoven with the socio-political impacts of colonization based on Eurocentric perspectives of the familial standard. The Wonder Bread ideal of an English-speaking, Caucasian nuclear family with a Christian faith is the familial standard within which governing social structures were created. As Hallers-Haalboom (2015) notes, “…traditionally mothers were the primary caregivers of their children and fathers were seen as the breadwinners of the family” (p. 11, Bowlby, 1973). This ideology has permeated governmental policymaking and challenged the diverse familial units existing within these traditional familial frameworks.

The rigidity of the nuclear family unit lacks the inclusion of matriarchal family-centered units, and specific cultural practices of non-Caucasian and non-Christian communities,
positioning these types of families as ethically inferior rather than different and viable. As a result, the parent concept has become what Sandin (2017) describes as, “a historical and cultural archetype” (p. 734), that was built to suit the intercultural expectations of the socio-economic and socio-political criteria of western cultures.

**Historical Background**

The traditional familial structure is deeply rooted in historical roles of culture and gender roles. The importance of historical context will support a more meaningful understanding of how the traditional family was founded and clarifies the differing familial forms that are emerging. The role of father and mother was also interconnected with the ideology of marriage and the roles that were to be related to husband and wife. The 1950s subservient role of the mother limited opportunities for women and continuously empowered men to excel and lead. This patriarchal society structure is reflective of the power that men upheld and this was continuously reinforced with legislation, finance, and research data collection where the census bureau’s upheld a “practice of always identifying the husband as the ‘head’[of the home]” (Glick, 1988, p. 862). In addition, the empowerment of men increased into the late 1950s due to an unbalanced ratio of women to men during the baby boom era. Glick (1988) later termed this gendered ratio the “marriage squeeze…[that] referred to…girls born during the rapid increase in the …[baby boom that created] a shortage of men in the usual age range to marry” (p. 865). Thus, men held a status and a power through their gender that impacted the social interactions of family development and socialization.

Slowly households began to expand in the 1960s and 1970s when feminism, civil rights and more freedoms (Glick, 1988; Anderson, 2014; Sandin, 2017) began to expand and evolve within socialized contexts. However, the structure of family remained cemented through the
political legislation and social perspectives of communities. These perspectives presented
gender-related challenges for mothers and different types of families that began to modify the
gendered-norms and living situations, which were socially unacceptable behaviours of the 1950s
North American lifestyle. The traditional gender-related roles of family structures influenced the
expectation of females to be ideally suited for nurturing roles while men were fostered for more
assertive positions. These stereotypical ideologies then led to, as Endendijk et al. (2017) notes,
“differential treatment of men and women, and boys and girls, which in turn lead to gender
differences in behaviour” (p. 299).

This behavioural conditioning is the foundation of Social Role Theory, which has been
perpetuated for generations through repetitive gendered conditioning of the hierarchical roles
within families, marriages and communities (Endendijk et. al, 2017). The gendered ideology of
the North American family therefore became an intergenerational foundation for families to
develop from. Though mothers did begin to enter the workforce, generally the role of mother and
father remained fairly consistent with the traditional positioning of husband and wife. As
Hallers-Haalboom (2015), notes, “mothers spend two to three times as much time on childcare
activities than fathers, even when they work full-time” (p. 14). Though fathers have increased
their parental duties in recent times, they lack the consistent reliance that mothers tend to uphold,

**Challenges in Diversity**

The westernized ideology of the traditional family “exert[s] a strong influence on the
ways in which family members perceive themselves and expect to be regarded by others, which
in turn may affect family conduct and functioning” (Malia, 2005, p. 298). The behavioural
impact of familial gender roles becomes systemic and is interwoven into the legislative
agreements of our government to support families and challenge those without the traditional familial or gender-role structures. As Malia (2005) states, “family law inadequately accommodates diverse family arrangements and relationships and often reflects negative cultural expectations of stepfamilies” (p. 298), gay and lesbian families, single-parents, adoptive families and other diverse forms of familial units. Legal rights are further compounded and potentially oppressed by the influences of religious entities, which stress a specific method of child-rearing that is deemed acceptable. Moreover, those families that lie outside of these religious boundaries and do not uphold the traditional familial standards are considered to be doing a disservice to a child.

Furthermore, the Lutheran church viewed the efforts to improve child-rearing for impoverished families with a critical eye and deemed much of these parents’ attempts to be inadequate, which resulted in the development of orphanages, social welfare institutions and schools to counteract the parental deficiencies in the homes (Sandin, 2017). The interaction of governmental and religious influence is reminiscent of the colonial domination that historically occurred in North America. While these types of authoritative influences present support for the traditional family unit, the expansion of these social criterion is necessary for current diverse families to be as fully functional as the typical nuclear family.

**Socio-political Influence**

The concept of family is historically embedded in ideological, socio-cultural, definitions of biological relationships between children and parents, while upholding a patriarchal familial ideology of functionality. These ideals are deeply embedded in the political perspectives and legislative structures that further re-enforce the family concept of nuclear ideals. Malia (2005) indicates that, “rights and obligations vary greatly [for diverse families], and policymakers
generally remain biased toward nuclear family ideology...despite input from social scientists and clinicians” (p. 299). Diverse or evolved families that extend beyond the nuclear family concept, which Glick (1988) calls “binuclear” families (p. 871), are still challenged with being valued from the perspective of the state.

The socio-political sentiment of many policymakers persists that the offspring of these diverse family units remain disadvantaged in upbringing and therefore the state-run criteria are necessary to fulfill the missing elements of stability, considered constant in nuclear family units. According to Sandin (20170, this “support is...an expression of the direct relationship between the children and the state” (p. 739), that distances the parental roles and can undermine the parent within immediate families as well as in more community-based interactions. The state’s influence on child-upbringing is especially problematic in familial structures that challenge patriarchal gender-roles and are consistent with homosexual couples, blended families and single-father households, where the parents’ own ethics are the basis of child development rather than the socio-political culture (Endendijk et. al, 2017).

Political interactions with familial definitions promote a potential oppression within the categories of parental rights, guardianships and child-protections that relate to children’s access to medical care, educational institutional applications and cultural acceptability. As Malia (2005) indicates, these oppressions are especially problematic for stepparents;

…the law declares that a child cannot have more than two parents, each with full parental rights and duties that are shared with no one else...[therefore] establishing each new spousal or parental family unit entails legally nullifying a preexisting family...prohibit[ing] the recognition of multiple parental figures within stepfamilies and other family norms. (p. 300)
The legal implications of this criterion filters into family functions that can become challenged in areas of maternity/paternity leave benefits, child tax benefits and access to emergency care with the unofficial parent. This can lead to interactional confusion or ambiguity within the immediate family unit. As developed by Boss (1987), family boundary ambiguity “is a state when family members are uncertain in their perception of who is in or out of the family or who is performing what roles and tasks within the family system” (p. 709). When the state presents limitations for different parenting roles to be legally valid, the unconventional parental roles (e.g. stepparent etc.) are devalued and the children develop an ambiguous understanding of their individual worth that can relate to dysfunctional family interactions and possible individual and family breakdowns (Stewart, 2005).

Within the scope of blended or binuclear families, statistical data has been shown to relate problematic children as being the result of developing within nontraditional home environments (Malia, 2005). This has influenced an illegitimacy within federal and provincial laws that has further impacted and challenged these diverse families in having access to necessary support and parental rights that would assist the children in a less challenged development. Family laws “consist of considerable authority to direct the care, control, and upbringing of a child” (Malia, 2005, p. 299), diverse families are not given the same legal supports to raise children with equal opportunities as traditional nuclear units. This continues despite the statistical findings that blended families reflect a larger number of North American households than nuclear families (Glick, 1988). This is further complicated by mixed ethnicities within binuclear marriages or cohabitation scenarios that lack a Eurocentric viewpoint of class and ethnic superiority within the legislative lens.

**Socio-economic Implications**
In the early 1950s the divorce rates in North America were associated with minority groups of lower education and socio-economic status (Glick, 1988). Thus, the increase of single-parents and matriarchically-lead households existed among low incomes that were not supported properly nor reported in statistical data through governmental channels (Glick, 1988; Anderson, 2014). As a result, a negative stigma associated with divorced households and single-parent families developed and solidified over time, and continues to remain as an undertone within society’s current diverse family units. These stigmas have lasting impacts on the individuals within a diverse family structure; children in single-parent households have been reported to be compromised “in all areas of life, including family relationships, education, emotional well-being and future earning power” (Anderson, 2014, p. 380).

Anderson (2014) further highlights that single parents, specifically mothers, “are more likely to remain in poverty compared with married individuals and unmarried men” (p. 381). While there is a wealth of statistical data that identifies the damaging correlation of marriage status and gender with socio-economic opportunities, political legislation lacks necessary amendments to support families outside of these groups (Malia, 2005). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to address what legislation changes need to be made, it is important to be aware of the discrepancies and biases that continue to exist despite the evolution of familial units within current social contexts. Furthermore, should a single-parent household transition into a blended family unit, the legal impasse for stepparents to gain legal authority and benefit from familial tax exemptions and benefits is challenging to nonexistent. This perpetuates the problematic challenges that diverse family units within North America face and supports an oppressive mentality of superiority by governing bodies along with increasing social stigmatization.
Diverse Families are Evolved Families

The evolution of families is related to gender roles and the subsequent opportunities for women and those of marginalized social status. These population segments transition into garnering larger wages and a deeper independence is wholly related to appropriate access to education and professional opportunities.

The current reduction in gendered oppression began in the 1960s with the feminist movement and the beginning of cohabitating lifestyles that did not include marriage contracts (Glick, 1988). As gender-roles became more liberated, women were statistically shown to have “fewer children and [in] doing so later in life, single mothers giving birth to many of our children, more parents cohabitating, and fewer children living with their married biological parents” (Anderson, 2014, p. 378).

However, the cultural belief of the family unit remains somewhat consistent in traditional nuclear structures, which has damaging effects on family members that are within these non-traditional households and subjects them to potential internal dysfunction and social discrimination (Malia, 2005). As such, families may perceive their differences as dysfunction and seek external supports, further encouraging the stigmatized beliefs of one’s self and identifying a desire to ‘remedy’ their family’s deficiencies. It has been commonly projected by political supports that in the cases of nontraditional families, “educated personnel could…mitigate the negative consequences of parenting [within these bi-nuclear family units]” (Sandin, 2017, p. 73). Despite the subtle discriminatory practices of the government and supporting community sentiments, blended and non-traditional families have become more common than the historically common married, biological units.
With the advancement of fertility science, surrogacy is a prominent method for family creation, as is adoption and guardianship of non-biological children. These means of child creation are combined with the single-parent, cohabitation or shared co-parent households that complicate traditional family laws and require a deeper examination of the legislation to begin to holistically incorporate new familial formations. This examination would assist parent’s access to appropriate and necessary supports required by the legal and political forums to raise new generations of healthy, happy and productive adults. Despite the importance of the diverse families being holistically supported, “it is particularly significant that stepparents’ interests have been virtually ignored in family law despite the[ir] prevalence” (Malia, 2005, p. 308).

**Family Bonds**

Regardless of the lack of legal and social support of diverse family units, stepparents or non-traditional parents of non-biological or non-traditional gender have defied typical psychological understandings of child development. Many of these families have proven that the basis of infant growth is as significantly related to nurturing as it is to nature. Though many binuclear families include challenges of co-parenting or possible visitation procedures with biological parents (e.g. adoption, surrogacy), the integration of different parental nurturing and developmental support is essential (Hallers-Haalboom, 2015). Through these non-traditional nurturing interactions children continue to have the ability to “learn to identify and communicate their internal states [and] tend to have more satisfying interactions with family and friends…[resulting in] more popularity, social acceptance and positive social interactions” (Beaudoin, Moersch & Evare, 2016, p. 44). Unfortunately, most non-traditional families do not receive the same respect as traditional families due to oppressive social constructs, which results in additional barriers to the upbringing of well-balanced children.
Attachment Theory

Psychological research has further compounded the stigmatization of non-traditional binuclear parenting through the widely accepted Attachment Theory of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Bowlby, 1973, Weiten, McCann & Halpern, 2013,) within western cultures. Attachment theory is founded on “the close, emotional bonds of affection that develop between infants and their caregivers...usually their mother” (Weiten, McCann & Halpern, 2013, p. 500). The premise of attachment theory is that the primary caregiver and the child develop a bond to ensure survival of the genes of the parent (nature) and the child gains the necessary support to emotionally develop into a well-functioning adolescent (nurture) (Bowlby, 1973, Weiten, McCann & Halpern, 2013. As the child grows into adulthood their attachment style will emerge within their own relational interactions, presenting continued security or distress that is symptomatic of the early attachments formed with the primary caregiver.

The interplays between the primary caregiver and the child are related to the fundamental interactive elements of Attunement, Balancing and Coherence (Siegal & Hartzell, 2014) that produce one of four attachment styles, which are believed to have lasting effects on the child’s life. Firstly, secure attachment is related to children that have had, “consistent, emotionally attuned, contingent communication with their parents...offering repeated experiences of feeling connected, understood and protected” (Siegal & Hartzell, 2014, P. 108). According to Siegel and Hartzell (2014) these individuals tend to have more regulated emotions and resilience in their adult relationships.

The remaining three attachment styles reflect insecure attachments result from the primary caregiver lacking attunement or a coherent processing of supporting the child in their primary years. These insecure attachment styles include anxious-ambivalent, avoidant or
Anxious-ambivalent children tend to behave anxiously when the primary-caregiver is near, however protest when she or he is gone and are ambivalent in self-soothing when the caregiver returns (Weiten, McCann, & Halpern, 2013). The anxious-ambivalent child develops by means of parental behaviors that are “inconsistent or at times intrusive” (Siegal, Hartzell, 2014, p. 110) resulting in relational challenges as an adult. Avoidant children tend to have experienced a caregiver that lacks connection to them and thus learn indifference to the presence, or lack thereof, of the caregiver during early stages of development. As Siegal and Hartzell (2014) explain, this results in children developing relationship skills that “avoid closeness and emotional connection...with a barren tone to their communication style” (p. 110) in their adult relationships.

Finally, disorganized attachment results when children experience their interactions with their primary caregiver as threatening or traumatizing. This presents a challenge for children as the source of their fear while simultaneously also representing their source of attachment and comfort. According to Siegal and Hartzell (2014), this contributes to adults who are “challenged in social communication...[and have] a tendency towards interpersonal violence and a predisposition to dissociation” (p. 111).

Each of these attachment styles relate to the viability of the family functionality and its influence has been echoed in the socio-political definitions of family within North American cultural standards.

Reflection

Attachment theory reflects the behaviours of Western, Eurocentric populations with elevated socioeconomic classes and positions these families as superior in contrast to more diverse familial units (Keller, 2017). This superiority permeates the social interactions within
communities and presents consequences in political decision-making. Moreover, as diverse family perspectives are not valued with the same academic rigor as traditional families, they are subsequently made less socially acceptable. Keller (2017) elaborates on this in the following statement:

…parenting practices other than Western middle class and in accordance with attachments theory’s philosophy are often misconceived as intrusive and unresponsive (not following the infant’s lead), harsh (motor and rhythmic handling), emotionally distant (not expressing emotions openly), neglectful (not interacting primarily verbal), and unable to mentalize (not talking about the infants states)....thus [Attachment Theory] is not just a description of parenting but is a moral judgement about its quality. (p. 11417)

Attachment Theory’s analysis of families intervenes with cultural behaviours and presents unnecessary challenges within therapeutic work with families, judicial assessments and educational biases by practitioners. Thus, limiting the understanding of diversity and upholding a rigidity that is damaging to North American familial diversity.

With diverse family configurations becoming increasingly represented within Canadian culture, the devaluing views of non-biological parents that are incorporated within Attachment Theory’s concept have widespread impacts for non-traditional families. In traditional families, the primary caregiver’s behaviour often the biological mother is generally referenced as the leading predictor of the child’s attachment style. In cases of stepparents or non-biological parents (surrogacy, adoption etc.), there is a lack of acknowledgement of the importance that these roles can have on a child that extend beyond the two biological caregivers. Teachers, counsellors and the like can also have dramatic impacts on a child’s development, which can contribute to the attachment style that a child develops during their early years.
Fundamentally, the ideals of attunement and proximity are the most viable elements in the bonding process with a child and have the largest impacts on their development (Keller, 2017; Siegal & Hartzell, 2014). With the ever-changing populations in North America, it is crucial for the fundamental belief in attachment theory to be adjusted to include all care providers who provide children with nurturing and support.

**Conclusion**

The ideology of family units is a socially constructed concept that reflects the prominent ethnocultural group within a society. In North American populations the dominant Eurocentric, patriarchal ideologies are the driving sources of influence for socio-political decision-making that impact the economic, educational and overall welfare of the entire population, despite differences in culture, language and education. These governing entities have created a systemic process by which funding and legislation have been directed to support the nuclear familial ideal and the subsequent government programs and academic research within which all families must abide by. Moreover, the psychological understandings of family and child development that are associated with attachment theory lack the necessary evolution to incorporate the diversity of culture and familial structures. As Malia (2005) suggests, “a more inclusive definition of family could potentially permit stepfamilies to more easily honour psychological attachments that may exist between stepparents and stepchildren, honour biological parents’ relationships with legal rights to their children and prevent unnecessary loss for their children” (p. 310). Amendments to the current definitions of family within our political arenas would promote a top-down shift towards communities, holistically supporting families with their children’s development and providing fair opportunities for all parents.
Unconventional, nonconforming, and diverse families are definitions that relate to a gold-standard of nuclear family understanding. It is important for families, of all compositions, to be given the same rights and privileges as nuclear families, in order for them to raise children in a healthy and responsible manner, ultimately benefiting the larger community. Children require security within their homes and parents and care providers within all configurations and arrangements require validity within their communities. At a time when families are diversifying at an increasing rate, it is paramount that the socio-political and socio-economic influences are examined by judicial and political leaders to ensure that parents are being empowered to take responsibility for their children and support their families. This will benefit individuals and family units, leading to increased flexibility for generations.
Chapter 3: The Invisible Role: Examinations of Motherhood

The role of a mother has various contextual intersections that relate to culture and periods in history. Traditionally, mothers are the foundation of generational growth and the founding aspect of familial units. Cultural contexts and social discourses continue to support the vital aspect of motherhood in North America, ensuring the continuous population growth of humankind. As Burman and Stacey (2010) suggest, “women continue to be constructed as the bearers of cultural continuity by virtue of their positions in biological reproduction” (p. 229). Women are biologically constructed to create children; however, motherhood has the additional expectation of child-rearing pressure that is associated with standards of cultural discourse within modern North American society.

This cultural discourse of child-rearing pressure has been reflective of child development that is of “middle-class [upbringing and]...that is also culturally masculine” (Burman & Stacey, 2010, p. 230). Although these cultural discourses of patriarchal and racially charged sentiments are being challenged in current social contexts their influence have impacted the nature of mother’s decision-making, external resourcing and how those mothers of alternate origin are validated or undermined. Miller (2007) confirms that, “contemporary constructions of the ‘good mother’ continue to be shaped by universalistic and essentialist assumptions found in the popular discourses that shape women’s lives” (p. 340). Such constructs permeate the decisions mothers make regarding their children’s upbringing despite possible biological limitations that may devalue their efforts as ‘true’ mothers in the existing social frameworks.

The universal social context of mothering standards within which many women aim to adhere to often conflicts with their personal, financial, racial, biological and cultural challenges, creating a struggle and consistently position women into insecure socialized stereotypes. In a
EXAMINATION OF STEPMOTHERHOOD

recent study by Valiquette-Tessier, Gosselin, Young and Thomassin (2019), the cultural stereotypes of motherhood were analyzed, and a consistent belief found among participants was that “motherhood [deems]...being there for their children as a primary resource and expressing love, affection, and playfulness. The participants also...agreed that being a good caregiver involved balancing several roles, including being nurturing and a disciplinarian” (p. 314). This study further noted that the role of maternal affection was more instrumental to a child and had higher value than love for a partner, friend or other relative (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019) This premise further suggests that the role of a mother is highly pressured and entails an unrealistic standard of care to be performed by the mother. This only becomes more complex and difficult for mothers that have the added challenge of surrogacy, step parenting and adoption to navigate.

The cultural standards that North American motherhood reflects are embedded in the socialized discourses that intersect with the historical positioning of women and continue to exist within modern society. This chapter will examine the contextual constraints that have influenced the definition of motherhood. Firstly, an examination of the contextual discourses that motherhood has undergone, which have been central and reflective of patriarchal, medical and generational expectations for mothers and their child-rearing practices will be reviewed. Secondly, this chapter will examine the impacts that these historical discourses have had on the current generation of North American mothers and motherhood. Next, this chapter will examine the additional impacts these contextual mothering discourses have had on stepmothers. Finally, this chapter will examine the new opportunities that current North American mothers have fostered in relation to psychological and cultural expectations for the future of mothering practices.

Discourses and Disadvantages
The contextual discourses within which motherhood relates to North American standards reflect the universal, and somewhat archaic, concept of family. As noted in the previous chapter, this archaic definition of familial standard is a nuclear family defined by middle-class status that is the first marriage of both heterosexual parents and where children are the direct biological offspring of this relationship (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). Within this familial scope the concept of motherhood reflects an inflexible position for mothers to achieve maternal perfection due to innate instinct, that medically projects a justification and expectation for mothers to perform their task perfectly due to their biological anatomy (Frizelle & Hayes, 1999; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). As Frizelle and Hayes (1999) note:

motherhood is more than often, not viewed as a natural condition, that is, motherhood is considered to be part of a woman’s human \{nature\}, the skills of motherhood are not acquired but rather an innate quality, a natural gift of biology that ensures that a mother will know just what to do with their child. (p. 30)

When social discourses support this biological rationale, mothers of differing child acquisition such as surrogacy, adoption and the blending of families, are immediately inadequate to their role through their lack of biological connection to a child. Simultaneously, this scientific rationale stigmatizes biological mothers facing child bonding challenges or other negative postpartum experiences. Such challenges require support that often results in an additional experience of shame and guilt due to social stigmatization of their ‘inadequacy’ as a mother. Furthermore, respected authorities, especially within the medical field, impact motherhood with empirically researched data and scientific exploration that re-enforces the right and wrong of motherhood and child-rearing, creating a complexity to the role that can invalidate and undermine a mother’s experience though socialized pressure and authoritative justifications.
EXAMINATION OF STEPMOTHERHOOD

(Frizelle & Hayes, 1999). Moreover, the idea of mothers to “always be there for their children- to be selfless, devoted, and loving” (Miller, Cartwright and Gibson, 2018, p. 1987), is so culturally embedded that the possible contemplation of a mother’s self-care and courage to request support is fundamentally inaccessible rather than systemically built-in, fostering unrealistic expectations by mothers overall.

Within the cultural and social expectations of motherhood stems the medical and psychological authorities that heavily influence and promote expectations and undermine the actual accounts of those mothers that do not fit the stereotypical maternal mold. As many women approaching motherhood regularly consult medical practitioners for guidance and support, the expectations of socialized maternal discourses are reinforced through the scientific authority. Mothers are hard-pressed to challenge these discourses in light of the medical field’s biological rationale of innate maternal instinct through the female anatomy (Miller, 2007; Burman, 1994).

The relentless and unforgiving expectations of motherhood within current social discourses have influenced the psychological field and permeated many therapeutic approaches, such as Bowlby’s Attachment Theory, Freud’s Psychoanalytic approach, among others. These approaches emphasize the importance of maternal bonding and the irreparable damage that mothers, above all other parental influencers, have upon early childhood development and evolution (Mothers, n.d.).

While the influence of medical and psychological practitioners has recently become more flexible with the expansion of the nuclear familial ideal and the commonality of more diverse familial units, there remains a lingering impact of unrealistic expectations for mothers. These discourses are dynamic and can be challenged and reframed, Miller (2007) notes that, “there remains a tendency for these social ideals ‘to be perceived as true’...and notions of ‘nature,’
‘instinct’ and experts’ knowing best” (p. 339), to remain an undercurrent within the social and cultural discourses that influence familial units despite the incongruency of modern familial structures.

A secondary element of the medical and scientific community’s influence on social expectations of motherhood is a saturation of these scientifically validated ideals into the channels of media, spirituality, and government that further shape and impact mothers that are not of the traditional and stereotypical maternal role (Miller, 2007; Burman & Stacey, 2010). The extension of social and cultural discourses regarding mothers can also limit or even damage the ability of a ‘modern’ mother that lacks the traditional familial unit. This damage to modern mothers removes the personal and individualized agency that all mothers require and renders them somewhat powerless in their role. Through this removal of power, a further validation of a mother’s incompetence is rendered and a validation of the very discourses that have caused her to fail as a non-traditional mother is recognized. Though there are many families that remain within the boundaries of the stereotypical and traditional family unit, many mothers now have begun to expand the concept of family. The impact of this diversification of maternal role challenges the discourses that we have socially come to perceive as vital to the healthy upbringing of a child.

**Diversification of Maternal Roles**

The expansion of the maternal role from the nuclear family structure to the modern diverse family definition begins to uproot historical patriarchy and deconstructs the cultural and socialized discourses that have outlined motherhood, expectations throughout history. This deconstruction of the socialized discourse of motherhood reflects the influence of the feminist perspective as it is directly linked to the systemic imbalances within gender roles that have long
been adopted with socialized contexts (Burman, 1994). This expansion has, as Burman and Stacey (2010) state, challenged the role of women as “the moral as well as physical guardians of the next generation, [who have been]... mobilized within nationalist discourse to render women targets of social policy” (p. 229). The expansion of the motherhood ideal has been fostered through the initial reflections of feminist theory and the deeper examination of socialized and cultural constructs that limit diverse familial units from functionality that is necessary for more positive outcomes to develop for the next generation.

The encouragement of the female voice to become more prominent in daily socialist discourses and challenge the male perspective further supports the diversification of mothers throughout North America. This feminist approach has promoted, as Frizelle and Hayes (1999) suggest, an “attempt to critically question naturalistic assumptions that exist around motherhood, arguing that motherhood is a social, historical and cultural construct rather than a natural consequence of maternal instinct” (p. 18). When the rigidity of these socialized discourses can be relaxed, the expansion of motherhood as a concept is more easily applied and non-traditional mothers can begin to enter the role with individualized agency and confidence in their unique approaches.

As it has been noted, “sensory perception in early life [is]...tuned to recognize caregivers above other individuals,” (Mothers, n.d., p. 2) therefore the importance of family units with differing cultural and racial backgrounds, gender diversifications and methods of acquiring children, all begin to have a place within the motherhood concept. The importance of validating these different types of maternal acquisition is invaluable in fostering strong children for the future, as it removes the underlying stigmatization that is common within the traditional familial expectations (Miller, 2007). This validation of diverse maternal roles also impacts the socialized
supports within community and legislative structures that trickle into school yard politics and parent interactions, which may otherwise reduce a non-traditional mother from feeling included and valued within their parental cohort. Through the promotion of diverse maternal roles, we are also promoting diversification of a new generation while maintaining the necessary protective human rights and social supports that each child should have access to.

**Deconstructing Discourses for Stepmothers**

Though there are many different types of maternal roles that have developed within the more recent diversification of the modern family construct, the following section focuses primarily on the impact of social and cultural discourses of motherhood have on the stepmother.

The increase of divorce in North America has resulted in the common familial structure of the binuclear family (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). As discussed in the previous chapter, the binuclear family is defined as a familial arrangement in which the biological parents live in separate households, perhaps with separate partners, and the children of these parents will live within both households through a schedule of mutually agreed upon habitation (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011).

These binuclear families can also be termed blended families and reflect a new partner within the household who also add their biological children to the family unit. These families are more commonplace in North America and challenge the traditional socialized familial discourses of nuclear structure. Moreover, these families conflict with the traditional family discourse, which reduces available social supports to the family, the agency of the non-biological parent – in this case the stepmother – and create insecurity within a stepmother’s innate ability to nurture a child due to their lack of biological/natural child-bonding.
As a result of the conflict of step mothering in comparison to traditional mothering, the extensive discriminatory narratives surrounding the role have become prominent challenges for the stepmother. It is commonplace for “stepmothers ...to balance norms and expectations about motherhood alongside possible assumptions that they are selfish, financially motivated, unnatural, and even mean, all while their stepchildren, other family members, and society as a whole evaluate their adequacy as mothers” (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011, p. 535). Navigating the challenges of these stereotypical ideals while remaining neutral towards stepchildren, an ex-spouse and a current partner can create a deeply insecure internal dialogue that is relentless in all aspects of a stepmother’s existence. This internal dialogue is further fueled by the socialized and cultural discourses of traditional child-rearing that renders a stepmother incompetent, simply through the acquisition of her role, despite her greatest efforts to supersede all expectations. The illegitimacy of the role is so deeply embedded in historic nuclear familial structures that stepmothers often experience unique insecurities. These insecurities, as unique as they may be, can become isolating and foster a social invisibility that negates acceptance or supports that other mothers have access to. Moreover, it is common for stepmothers to reduce their contributions within socialized parenting discussions, physical interactions and/or family support systems due to the social illegitimacy of the role (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008; Miller et al., 2018).

The concept of a step-mother has also been firmly demoralized through the promotion of the ‘wicked or evil stepmother’ stereotype that was initiated within the fairy tales of Hansel and Gretel, Snow White and Cinderella, among others (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; Claxton-Oldfield, 2008; Miller et al., 2018). The stepmother role within these fables is commonly positioned as an antagonist alongside other “representations of evil...[including] bears, wolves, giants, ogres, [and] witches” (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008, p. 52) remaining an established stereotype of
stepmothers despite the inaccuracy of the representation. In fact, the stepmother role within these narratives is traditionally “the villain of the story- a figure that can be hated by everyone- [further supporting]...the pure image of motherhood” (Claxton-Oldfield, 2017, p. 53). This characterization has transferred into the social and cultural discourses of our society and influenced and validated the traditional beliefs regarding motherhood with an irrational explanation of the stepmother stereotype.

Lending a new perspective to the stepmother role requires active and curious lenses to openly acknowledge the problematic challenges that the current social discourses have placed on this important and common role in current society. These include the realities that stepmothers are instantly placed in a disadvantaged position through a lack of preparation in the immediacy of gaining a child, the inability to have complete authority or to navigate the ambiguous boundaries of stepchildren, facing a lack of ‘new-mother’ communities and the possible inclusion of an ex-spouse within their immediate familial dynamic (Miller, 2007; Miller et al., 2018). Such disadvantages result in tremendous outputs by stepmothers to overcompensate for their status and overcome the stigmatization that is commonly realised in fictional narratives and social discourses (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011).

A stepmother’s overcompensation within her maternal role has also resulted in an examination of the negative and increased psychological impacts that she may experience in relation to her well-being and overall functioning (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). As Miller et al. (2018) state, “stepmothers report higher levels of stress and depression compared with [biological] mothers...and stepfathers” (p. 1985). Furthermore, stepmothers have been commonly and increasingly diagnosed with “a range of mental health outcomes...particularly...depressive symptom expression[s]” (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011, p. 538).
diagnoses often require stepmothers to receive some form of treatment, however appropriate
treatment is somewhat inaccessible for stepmothers due to a lack of practitioners’ specific
contextual therapeutic knowledge regarding the rooted social and cultural discourses that have
contributed to these depressive symptoms in the first place.

**It Takes a Village**

The historic impact of systemic discourses on the stepmother role requires an analysis of
the marginalized and disadvantaged position that stepmothers face. The stepmother role
transcends characterizations of race, class, and ethnicity, and is complex in its positioning in
modern society as it is a role that is groundless in historical validity. Through the initiation of the
very medical and psychological fields within which maternal roles have been scientifically
defined and authenticated, the stepmother role could also begin to emerge as a valid and
important familial role. This would require tailored support to be offered to stepmothers, similar
to the support that is offered to those women within the pregnancy and postpartum periods of
their motherhood experience.

The importance of the medical and psychological fields acknowledgement of the
stepmother position ensures legitimacy to the position, promotes exceptions within society and
influences the first-hand interactions that stepmothers experience daily. As Claxton-Oldfield
(2008) notes, “the time has come for society to redefine step parenting in a more realistic (and
more positive) light” (p. 56). Such acknowledgement and increased understanding of the
challenges unique to stepmothers would promote more tailored support systems for this modern
role.

The encouragement of deeper feminist analyses on the social and cultural discourses that
impact the stepmother role, among other diverse forms of familial roles, also inspires relevancy
for authoritative governing and socialist structures to re-examine the current boundaries of family and expand these rigid definitions into more diverse and inclusive concepts of child-rearing (Burman & Stacey, 2010). Frizelle and Hayes (1999) notes that, “motherhood is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which needs to be recognized by those disciplines that theorize it…[moreover] motherhood needs to be acknowledged, recognized and validated rather than problematized or pathologized” (pp. 33-34). The acknowledgement of the role will reduce stigma and make it easier for stepmothers to access necessary resources that will support their well-being and enhance the upbringing of their children. It can be argued that this support will then help to produce a new generation of well-loved and nurtured adults who will recognize the damage that the stigmatization of stepmothers and other types of diverse parents’ experience. With this recognition, families and individuals will be better equipped to navigate and challenge the systematic marginalization, while opening social constructs to more empowered attitudes of diversity.

**Conclusion**

The contextual structures that relate to social and cultural assumptions of right and wrong, good and bad, have been intertwined with historical, fictional and authoritative influences that have shaped the discourse of current modern society. While these discourses have played vital roles in the concept of ‘progress,’ the impacts of these practices have shaped legislation, social supports and definitions of acceptance have challenged many modern families in North America. Through the feminist perspective of empowerment, familial roles have shifted, and the historical concept of a nuclear family has evolved into diverse forms of intimacy, nurturing and child-rearing. Motherhood has been significantly impacted within the evolution of
family and the new generations of diverse mothers require social and cultural discourses to address archaic assumptions and reduce stigmatization.

As Frizelle and Hayes (1999) notes, “by giving mothers the opportunity to give an insider’s perspective on the experience of motherhood it becomes possible to identify a combination of 1) ideology, 2) ignorance. And 3) competence that exists around the experience of a mother” (p. 24). Providing this opportunity also enhances the ability for current social and cultural discourses to adjust and evolve in channels that engage support and access for different types of families. This begins with the governing bodies and authoritative aspects of our social structures, such as medicine, to reduce the suffering and isolation that many of these women experience due to stereotypical attitudes and beliefs. Furthermore, detailed and specific research within the scope of mental health and social limitations is required in order to validate the legitimacy of this sector of society and engagement of tailored support is necessary in order to reduce harm and increase support for generations to come that will likely continue to expand the concept of family and the frameworks.

Though families are considered to be independent entities within the dominant discourse of North American standard, the integration of social and cultural acceptance is necessary to reduce isolation and encourage community within each family’s experience. Afterall, it is the village that holds individuals together.
Chapter 4: A Stepmother Reflection

As mammals, the evolution of humankind has been dependent on procreation to ensure the survival of the species. The evolutionary process requires a biological component of male and female chromosomes to successfully produce new generational offspring. This genetic requirement has contributed to the notions of familial structure, translating into modern concepts of nuclear, and more recently, bi-nuclear family structures. While the expansion of these familial ideologies is becoming more normalized, the maternal role has not mirrored the pace of modernity that accepts binuclear family structures in western society. Perhaps due to the biological nature of a mother, the expansion and acceptance of the diverse maternal role has also not received necessary attention, neither academically nor socially.

In my previous chapters, the examination of family structures, parenting frameworks and notions of motherhood have been analyzed based on my perspective and researched academia. These chapters provide a foundation for the socialized frameworks of motherhood and a greater understanding of the rationales that further perpetuate the negative story-book themes and cultural judgements that are often associated with step-motherhood.

This chapter will expand these more structured notions of step-mothering through my intimate and lived-experience. The aim of this chapter is to provide connections between the impacts of these socialized constructs within my own experience, and expose the silent challenges that western culture has fostered within these systemic misrepresentations of stepmothers. Firstly, I will expose my contextual background, the childless perspective that was impactful in my early 20s and introduce my current blended family structure. Secondly, I will examine the personal realities of my blended family interaction, more specifically the silent struggles I experienced as a stepmother that relate to the ambiguous definition of the role within
society and the relational resentment that arose as a result of power imbalances between my partner (a biological father) and my stepparent role. Next, this chapter will expose the isolated theme that permeated much of my early stepmother position, which translated into silent suffering and contributed to moments of depression, insecurity and frustration. Finally, I will reflect on the experience of stepmothering and affirm the need for specialized therapeutic supports that would engage therapeutic practitioners to be specific in the stepmother role, thereby reducing the negative systemic impacts that are fundamentally embedded in North American maternal ideology.

Situating the Author

The role of a stepmother is of great importance and concern to my familial role and identity. In addition to being raised within a blended family, I have been a stepmother for over a decade. In being raised with biological and nonbiological siblings and now collaborating in raising non-biological children, this chapter is of great relevance as it explores the lived experience of my existence, providing greater insight into how my stepmother role was challenged and supported within the culture at large, social interactions and therapeutic practices.

Secondly, it should be noted that my perspective stems from a feminist approach that influences the reflective nature of this chapter. According to Shapiro (2014), “feminist thought on the role of gender in individual and family functioning is beyond the scope of this discussion, gender is considered by feminist scholars to be the ‘linchpin’ of family functioning, such that it shapes all other family processes and roles” (p. 98). Furthermore, feminist perspective is a critical approach within which I am situated, as it initiated much of the “broader access to reproductive choice and women’s wider participation in the paid workforce” (Gillespie, 2003, p. 123). This perspective is also the foundational catalyst in validating my existence within my
binuclear family. Furthermore, the Feminist perspective supports my ability to examine the role within this academic forum, and normalize the position within archaic aspects of current systemic socialized ideologies.

As Kumar, (2017) outlines, many of the oppressive social structures that remain current require more of a demand “of mothers than it does of fathers…[this social norm] leaves a stepmother to feel ‘isolated, unsupported, and ill prepared’” (p. 114). Though I participate in a form of stepmothering it is also important to recognize that my experience does not reflect the intricate diversity of many other stepmothers. Moreover, this chapter reflects my experience as a cisgendered, heterosexual individual, and lacks the perspectives other diverse binuclear mothers especially within the LGBTQ2S+ community. Papernow (2018) suggests that for “LGBTQ (SIC) parents, becoming a stepfamily involves an extra load of change as they adjust to [potentially] coming out, as well as to a new stepfamily” (p. 33). Though there is a strong representation of the LGBTQ2S+ community to have relatable experiences within the binuclear family frameworks, I acknowledge that this chapter will only reflect the experience of my heteronormative stepmother role.

Childless vs. Childfree

The culturally predominant discourse and ideology of motherhood as the defining trait of being female, and the expectation that all women desire to be mothers, despite their positioning within varied cultures and social statuses, remains a common present-day perception that permeates most women’s thought processes (Gillespie, 2003). Furthermore, motherhood has been termed the “ultimate fulfillment” (Frizelle & Hayes, 1999, p. 18) that supersedes any other role that a woman may choose or be passionate about due to the biological connection with her physicality. This expectation of motherhood above all other adult roles is an expectation that I
had projected to include in my 30s after completing my education, establishing a career and formulating some independent financial well-being. However, this projection was revoked after receiving an unexpected medical diagnosis of severe infertility in my early 20s. The imposing involuntary infertility (Gillespie, 2003) within my life challenged the projected timelines of my future existence and my value as a female within current society.

A long process of reflection, grief and loss, ultimately resulted in an acceptance of this diagnosis, an acceptance that uniquely challenged the ideals of being childless. Eventually I was able to integrate the diagnosis as a part of my internal self-compassion and validity noting I was uniquely positioned with a broader perspective of what I was to become in relation to the incongruency of my social expectations.

As Gillespie (2003) notes, “the term childfree has been reclaimed by those who emphasize that childlessness can be...active and fulfilling” (p. 123). This perspective increased my self-worth by dismissing the stigmatization that was associated with the common childless positioning. My ability to embrace my infertility opened space for alternative perspectives and allowed me to choose other options for my life rather than be dictated by a socially constructed framework. Furthermore, the concept of family and the acquisition of children into a family unit was expanded beyond the scope of heterosexual procreation and relaxed my pace, persistence and ego, which were all originally attached to the validity of motherhood.

**Bending and Blending**

My open perspective and dismissal of conventional motherhood stigmas exposed me to relational interactions that expanded my ideological and conceptual frameworks regarding possible family configurations.
In time, a chance meeting introduced me to a life partner who is diverse in age, culture, spirituality and familial position (a divorced father). The transition from single to married was rapid for me; bringing forth a transparency regarding their unconventional positions and viewpoints in relation to expected social contexts. Our unguarded approach towards each other fostered an immediate authenticity within our relationship and provided a grounded foundation that may have conventionally been more time-consuming and difficult to establish.

The addition of a stepchild within our union added a complexity to the interactions of their father and my new stepmother role, however it also provided a sense of anticipation in fulfilling a void that had been involuntarily revoked many years prior. In reflection, my stepmother role began early in the partnership prior to marriage when definitive expectations were not yet cemented however the impacts of social frameworks and my suppressed desire for a child regained prominence and were placated by the romantic fulfillment and joy that was associated with a prospective binuclear family.

**Realities: Bonds**

In the early blissful wedded months of my marriage, a transition into a silent struggle arose, primarily centered on the symbol of my stepson and all that he lacked genetically from me became difficult to reconcile. During the year leading to my marriage, the hope and unconfirmed bonding with my stepson was unconsciously pursued in the hopes of regaining some of the missed moments that were buried within my infertility diagnosis. Furthermore, my stepson also included the genetic structure of my partner and this was a benefit that would not be realised in the option of adopting a child in the same relational context. Fundamentally my stepson represented a trigger of emotions that were unconsciously lingering from my infertility diagnosis and motivated a pursuit to fulfill the need to be a mother satisfying my personal needs while
muting society’s maternal expectations of women. This pursuit may have encouraged an oversight of a more detailed analysis regarding the prominent challenges that were associated with my binuclear familial structure and the conflicts typically associated within these dynamics. My desire to seek deeper understanding remained unsatisfied as therapeutic resources and academic references did not address the role of a childless stepmother due to the position being unrealized and under researched in comparison to mainstream familial norms (Craig & Johnson, 2010).

Cementing a deep maternal bond with my stepson was impacted by several challenges that I had not identified until each issue became a prominent issue that was lacking in my relationship prior to our marriage commitment. Firstly, my integration into a preexisting family unit illustrated my limited history with them and lacked the emotional bonding that is typical of young children and primary caregivers in the early stages of life. As Craig and Johnson (2010) cite, stepmothers “experience the myth of instant love. [However] If stepmothers do not feel close to their stepchildren when the expectation is that they will then great stress can occur...These [types of] inconsistencies are particularly evident for childless stepmothers” (p. 870). This aim for my stepson and I to theoretically fall in love with each other, much like a biological mother and child do in infant years, was complicated by his older age and a lack of historic unconditional love that is more commonly established in biological parenting relationships.

In addition, the inconsistent bi-weekly cohabitation with my stepson diluted the bonding process and increased conflict between myself and my stepson, subsequently placing pressure on my marriage. As Kumar (2017) notes, “stepparents are not always readily accepted as parental figures by stepchildren” (p. 113). Kumar’s (2017) statement mirrored my challenged sentiment
towards my stepson and the limited bonding opportunities that related to our limited time together, both presently and historically, and a possible conflicted loyalty that he felt between his biological mother and I.

The complexity of a binuclear family that includes a biological parent and a stepparent can be further challenged by the presence of the second biological parent that may not be as accepting or receptive of their ex-partner and consequently rejects the stepparent. This sentiment is commonplace in many binuclear families and often devalues the stepparent, creating additional frustration and negativity that impacts the stepparent as well as their marriage and relationship with the shared children. In my case, the presence of an ex-partner presented challenges that resulted in my needing to ‘prove’ my value to my stepson rather than being unconditionally accepted. I reflected sentiments of anger and frustration in our different parenting styles and a lack of communication that was child-centered with my partner’s ex. This type of negative sentiment is typical for stepparents to project on the ex-biological parent and can bring an element of jealousy and envy for the ex-partner’s unquestioned role in the child’s life, thus reducing the parenting efforts of the stepparent (Kumar, 2017).

Realities: Overcompensating Selflessness

Motherhood requires a considerable amount of selflessness to ensure that the attachment of the child and their development are securely fostered. My lack of early attachment towards my stepson reduced my bond towards him and instantly encouraged a sentiment of ‘catch-up’ that increased my anxieties, fostered guilty beliefs that I was a mediocre parent, and reduced awareness regarding my selfcare. As Frizelle and Hayes (1999) note, the expectation for mothers is that “anything short of perfection begins to feel like a failure and they become caught up in a spiral of trying even harder to achieve the unachievable, and become increasingly guilty with
what they see as the worst failure of their lives” (p. 27). My added childlessness further questioned my innate ability to parent and fostered an unrealistic drive to perform at perfected levels for the children I was hoping to be accepted with. As such, the stereotypical stepmother, being all things to all people in her family, was my lived experience and deepened my sentiments that by making “more personal sacrifices…I could prove …[I am] not a ‘bad person’ [or an incapable parent]” (Jones, 2004, p. 130).

I began a journey of self-critical perfection that resulted in constant anxiety and isolated stress that could not be eased by my partner. He was unaware of my suffering as a result of his bias as a biological parent in the relationship, his perception and expectation of me as an adult, and therefore incapable of self-regulating my frustrations in a healthy method. These personal challenges were further influenced by the socialized familial frameworks that perpetuate a mother to be selfless regardless of biological or stepparent status (Gillespie, 2003).

**Realities: Ambiguity**

As discussed in the previous chapters the impact of ambiguity for stepparents, particularly stepmothers establishing their role within a family, reduces their ability to parent, and provide valid influence and leadership within the family. The impact of the ambiguous position within which stepmothers engage with family members reduces their ability to create immediate meaningful relationships and dilutes their power with the children despite the expectations for their presence to uphold parental responsibilities due to their adult status.

In particular, as Craig and Johnson (2010) reflect, “negotiating new roles becomes complex when family members are faced with disciplining stepchildren and navigating complex legal relationships. The ambiguity of step-parent roles may affect the health and successful functioning of the [entire] stepfamily unit” (p. 869). Further compounding this ambiguous
stepparent position is the addition of the second biological parent is the presence that generally portrays an authority for a child as a result of their biological and early bonding with the child. This elevated biological status is further enforced by the empirically structured legal system. The role of the stepparent is devalued as they generally lack in both of these defining and prominent structures that validate the definition of a parent.

In my experience, the role’s ambiguity resulted in a sentiment of powerlessness that was exacerbated by an expectation to perform as a mother. This expectation further fostered an isolated despair that I often referred to as drowning by my own decision. Navigating the ambiguous boundaries within a binuclear family is a constant trajectory of differing roles which DeGreef and Platt (2016) note is a, “relationship between husband, wife, and ex-spouse; among husband and wife, and stepchild; among the child, nonresidential parent, and stepparent; and among the residential parent, biological child, and stepchild” (p. 113). Each of these inter-relational identities have a consistent and valid roles within the binuclear family that are nonexistent within the single-unit nuclear familial structures.

**Realities: Resentment**

The reality of living in a family unit with intersectional relational roles is a challenging experience for all individuals involved. I recall moments of frustration while constantly navigating the challenges of the stepmother role, which fostered an insecurity in my personal beliefs that was expressed as resentment towards my partner. In moments of experienced exclusion, I recall an anger towards my spouse that was left unsaid due to the residual impacts and influence of the systemic expectations of motherhood that had been ingrained in my psyche throughout my life. As I navigated this internal dichotomy, deeper insecurities about my
relationship were fostered and challenged the endurance of our prospective future as a marital unit.

As Kumar, (2017) clarifies, “the couple relationship in a first-time family allows for [a] time before children are introduced to into the [familial] system...In a blended family nurturing the couple relationship can be difficult thanks to a lack of privacy or time...this situation can strain a couple relationship” (p. 119). I recall the moments when my resentment, perpetuated by isolation and insecurity, propelled thoughts of dissolution and revoking my marital vows in exchange for an existence that reduced the consistent invalidation that I felt between my roles with my stepchild and partner.

Statistically, the dissolution sentiments that I felt as a result of my resentment, are commonly experienced by stepmothers resulting in divorce and separation for binuclear families, especially during the initial years (Jones, 2004). Though I shouldered the challenges of these negative experiences during the early bonding of my marriage and subsequent binuclear family establishment, the residual reflection of the experience added a guarded layer to my internal psyche that developed as an adaptation to reduce feelings of depression and grief for my situational experience and remains a permanent behavioural trait that I rely on for protection during moments of insecurity or invalidation.

**Mental Health Expenses**

The instability of familial position and the unclear identity of my initial stepmothering experience resulted in an isolated suffering that permeated my emotional and cognitive capacity while I continue to maintain an exterior presentation of poised and maternal selflessness. My private struggle and lack of external social supports among my peers and family, as well as a lack of specific therapeutic supports, left me without the necessary resources that should have
existed to ease my state of unwavering internal conflict (Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). As Jones (2004) reflects, “the personal costs for stepmothers lacking a network of peers with whom they can confide and compare experiences can be high...suggest[ing] that stepmothers experience more anxiety and depression” (p. 130). Furthermore, I reflect a sentiment of grief and bereavement for my childless state due to an infertility diagnosis that has been challenged by the immediate presence of my stepchildren. This secondary option of stepmotherhood conveyed a verbal indication of my inability to biologically produce a child through every reference of ‘step’ before the word ‘mother’. This ‘step-status’ was further compounded within each introduction and explanation in social settings, instilling a consistent reminder of how my stepmother role lacked the fulfillment of a biological connection that would have embodied the value and acceptance in the nuclear family experience (Jones, 2004).

Over time, this unresolved grief and isolation transitioned into a depressive state with symptoms of oversleeping, weight-loss, misuse of substances and time spent in isolation from my family unit. Shapiro and Stewart (2011) note that coping methods with “higher levels of depressive symptoms are a particularly worrisome outcome, not only because of their debilitating effects on the individuals, but also because of the well-documented link between maternal depression and child psychological and behavioural outcomes” (p. 525). My undiagnosed depressive symptomology and grief-related experiences were left untreated and ignored due to the lack of validity of the ‘step’ role within the systemic socialized structures of support. These support options are primarily centered around the care for nuclear families and the associated research that has been provided that directs resources in this manner.

**Conclusion**
As reflected in several chapters, the systemic socialized implications of nuclear family structure’s universal acceptance in western culture has challenged binuclear families. This systemic influence has impacted the roles of parents and their ability to engage in society from a community and legal perspective, as well as providing some validity to the differing roles that are present within their immediate family interactions. The importance of acknowledging the binuclear family will lend more specific and directive support towards funding academic research and exploring this common familial unit within modern social contexts. Such research and exploration will translate into legal, therapeutic and educational resources for binuclear families, lending more accessible support options and acceptance among their peers.

This macro perspective towards building an acceptance for diverse family structures will promote stepparents, particularly stepmothers, to resource support among immediate communities without the fear of judgment and dismissal for their suffering. Craig and Johnson (2010) note that, “supportive communication focuses on verbal and non-verbal…exchanges that, ‘reduce uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one’s life experience’” (p. 871). By gaining control, there is a space of awareness that can be exchanged in exchange of the stepparents’ unrelenting defensive adaptation for their devalued existence. Acceptance of the role from a social framework would therefore enable stepparents, especially stepmothers, to reduce their anxieties in ensuring validity within their family units. Processing of the role could be supported therapeutically and externally of expressions of irrational resentment and frustration that are more common in current stepparenting positions.

In my experience, the ability to reflect relationally with stepchildren has provided the ‘opening and holding’ of space that creates room for appreciation and pride in recognizing the
resiliency that has been fostered within the family unit despite these layered challenges.

Stepmotherhood is not for the faint of heart, but the eternal bonds that can be fostered as a result of the dedication and perseverance in the role can outweigh the struggles. With increased social supports and social acceptance these struggles are reduced, and stepparents can thrive benefiting future generations.
Chapter 5: Relief and Clinical Recommendations: Stepmother Therapeutics

The expansion of the familial structure from a traditional nuclear family unit to one that includes diversity in culture, faith, gender and bi-nuclear formula, has impacted the traditional forms of theorized therapeutic practice for modern clinicians. As reflected in previous chapters, stepmotherhood is the primary focus of this thesis, and this chapter specifically relates to therapeutic practice and the necessary contextual adjustments required by clinicians in working with this segment of the population.

Stepmotherhood is a role that hosts numerous impacts and mental health challenges faced by those within the experience. With this knowledge, it is important that therapeutic practitioners reflect a sensitivity and understanding for these individuals in supporting and providing clarity in their thought-processes, in order to transcend the unconscious and systemic influences that are integrated in much of the traditional therapeutic approaches.

This critical analysis raises awareness for the ever-growing stepmother facet within our population and highlights an area where psychological research, awareness and understanding has been overlooked within traditional approaches and therapeutic offerings (Papernow, 2018). Through contextual understanding, the systemic stigmatization of the stepmother role can be reduced externally and within the therapeutic field (Papernow, 2018). As Jones (2004) notes, “biological motherhood represents such a sacred and privileged status that the role of stepmother, which typically carries with it all of the normal duties and responsibilities of parenthood, is viewed as a second-tier form of motherhood” (p. 137). Jones’ (2004), sentiment is commonly exercised within the structures of a stepmother’s social, cultural and religious contexts and unintentionally impacts her interactions and personal value within these systemic structures.
It is of vital importance for therapeutic practitioners to gain perspective and clarity regarding the social and cultural expectations of motherhood in order to name and deconstruct with the stepmother in concrete ways. This concreteness provided by a practitioner of contextual understanding can filter the systemic stigmatization and interpersonal expectations commonly experienced by a stepmother and provide specific and acute support that is relevant to validate her specific lived experience. Practitioners have an ethical and professional responsibility to continually examine the systemic conventions that impact clientele, and the increase in blended families and stepcouples requires a vigilant examination by modern therapists to reflect on how non-traditional families navigate and are impacted by systemic structures. This reflection and practitioner awareness facilitates increased specificity of therapeutic support and tailored spaces of solace for many of these individuals that have not found support within traditional therapeutics.

Within this chapter the analysis and recommendations of clinical practice will be discussed. Specifically, for therapists working with stepcouple clientele, primarily focusing on the stepmother experience, lending perspective towards the areas of theoretical practice that require adjustment and integration within contextual frameworks, providing tailored support to this ever-expanding client-type, and adding valuable and important perspective to their lived-experiences.

First, this chapter will reflect the importance and benefits integrating several therapeutic approaches within session-work while also defining the role of the practitioner for this client segment. Next, the exploration of several theoretical approaches will be analyzed, aiming to highlight the value these conventions have within the discourse of step-couples and stepmother therapeutics. Specifically, the examination of Attachment Theory and the underlying influences
that family-of-origin attachment may play within the stepfamily unit will be discussed. Then, Emotionally Focused Therapy will be reviewed with the inclusion of an integrated Feminist perspective providing a tailored context for step-couple clinical work. The discussion of a Narrative approach will also be discussed within the context of support group work for stepmother demographics, lending accessibility for this clientele to begin to create awareness of their contextual experiences and to expand their definitions of parenting and partnering within a like-minded community. Finally, the author will reflect on the necessary expansion of current systemic implications that require modernization in order to highlight this ever-expanding familial-structure and provide support and empowerment to stepmothers within all sectors of socialized contextual experiences.

**Role of the Practitioner and Beneficial Integrated Therapies**

Providing therapeutic support for stepcouples, specifically stepmothers, is a relentless challenge for practitioners due to this demographic’s inclusion of systemic influence, impacting the interactive and individualized roles that each play within the couple framework. As Papernow (2018) suggests, “stepcouples often arrive in our offices feeling alone, ashamed, and deeply disappointed” (p. 30), showcasing the isolating effects of socio-cultural impacts that reflect a non-conformity within the traditional familial structure and historical therapeutic processes. It is therefore ethically important for practitioners to promote integrative therapeutic approaches within session-work. Therapists that equip themselves with a broad scope of understanding regarding internalized and repressed behaviours that are often represented within stepcouple's relational challenges and individual sufferings, they are better situated to address such challenges within the couple unit and provide awareness and a promotion of compassion between the partners.
In addition, a specifically focused feminist lens is invaluable in working with the systemic impacts that have influenced this client-type by providing contextualized normalcy and validity to their struggle. Vatcher and Bogo (2001) emphasize the importance of this in the following argument:

…the trend toward integrative approaches in couple and family therapy has virtually taken over the field. A flexible approach that integrates a feminist understanding of gender, a systemic understanding of couple interaction, and attention to the emotions of each partner is timely... specifically, a well-developed, empirically tested model for couple therapy that integrates systems, experiential and attachment theories [is of immense value for this demographic]. (p. 69)

I cite the importance of theoretical foundations within Attachment and Emotionally Focused theories as necessary methodologies to support a stepcouple and stepmother role, which will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

**Psychoeducation**

Within the scope of therapeutic support for stepcouples, the foundational establishment of clear communication is paramount in navigating the additional therapeutic processes that will be explored in future session-work. Statistically, the improvement of couple growth stems from necessary psychoeducation regarding the importance of communication skill-building, resulting in listening and verbal skill enhancement (Halford, Nicolson, & Sanders, 2007). While this type of skill-building is a necessary form of therapeutic processing, in the case of stepcouples, the inability to communicate their individualized challenges within the relationship may also be a systemic result of the lack of acceptance contextually, thereby limiting the terminology and confidence to express these challenges freely, ultimately causing discomfort and fear to be the
prominent sentiments within the session interactions (Halford et al, 2007). Again, the role of the practitioner within the scope of the communication skill-building for this client-type requires a contextualized awareness of the potential challenges that may be experienced by the clients throughout therapy.

Practitioners must be consistent in assuring that their client’s suffering is valid despite their non-traditional familial structure. More specifically, the impact of systemic judgement may reduce a step couple’s ability to express themselves and “avoid the discussion of sensitive topics more than first marriage couples” (Halford et al., 2007, p. 473). This avoidance must be addressed directly, and requires a psychoeducational component to ensure these couples are aware and supported to release their emotional expressions with less hesitancy.

The importance of adult attachment can also be impacted by this released emotional expression and can develop a deeper sense of security and acceptance between both the biological and non-biological parent. As Cassidy, Jude, Shaver and Phillip (2008) note, “feelings of security, and threats to the availability of an [adult] attachment figure can produce fear, anger and sadness. [A]...focus on communication holds considerable promise for extending attachment research and clinical practice [towards stepcouples and stepfamilies]” (p. 24). The author notes that through an establishment of foundational communication skills, the opportunity to provide further psychoeducation regarding attachment theories and additional therapeutic processes is more easily navigated and openly accepted.

Papernow (2018) notes that “attention to process is critical in effective work with stepfamilies…[while] focusing on identifying patterns and cycles of interactions” (p. 28). Within the author’s lived experience, the importance of understanding the value for mutual support by each member of the step couple unit is founded in Attachment Theory, and behaviorally
expanded upon in the framework of Emotionally Focused Therapy. Both of these approaches provide necessary therapeutic value within a stepcouple’s therapeutic growth, however the couples’ ability to communicate effectively is foundational, as is the therapist’s responsibility to incorporate a feminist context within their approach to ensure that the systemic impacts of gendered expectations are highlighted and addressed throughout the work.

**Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory was originally developed by John Bowlby in the aftermath of WWII. Bowlby developed, “his ideas in the context of scientific and political settings that [traditionally] gave little recognition to the importance of a child’s ties to parents” (Kobak & Madsen, 2014, p. 24). Bowlby began to examine the possible impacts of attachment with children and their primary caregivers that he distinguished as four resulting attachment styles—namely, *secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant* and *fearful avoidant*—based on a child’s experiences of separation and physical acknowledgement during development (Kobak & Madsen, 2014). Attachment theory promotes that these behavioural styles result in patterned behaviour that defines much of an individual's relational interactions in later life due to the developmental foundation of their primary caregiver’s imprint of security or insecurity (Kobak & Madsen, 2014).

Attachment theory is a foundational support within the context of stepcouple work, as it lends perspective for clients to understand possible rationales behind their individual and relational belief systems and supports the therapist in connecting couples’ resentment and replacing it with compassion. Further and deeper understanding of Attachment Theory is necessary for stepmother and stepcouple work and this chapter aims to acknowledge its value,
EXAMINATION OF STEPMOTHERHOOD

however, is limited in reflecting the full scope of research required by practitioners to be fully prepared within the treatment setting of stepcouple therapy.

The importance of Attachment theory within the scope of therapeutic stepcouple work reflects the relationship of a partner as a representative of the primary care-giver imprinting. Though Attachment theory initially results from infant and care-giver behaviors, much of the attachment bonding styles are continued within adult relational interactions and stepcouples present a unique challenge in attachment bonding as the security of their relational bond can be impacted by the interaction of the pre-existing children, often creating similar injury to the couple’s secure attachment bond (Kobak & Madsen, 2014). As Kobak and Madsen (2014) note, “a persistent disruption of an attachment bond will result in a feeling of sadness and despair…[that reduces] an individual’s sense of safety and security [that] is derived from maintaining a bond with an accessible and responsive [partner]” (p. 24). These sentiments of sadness and despair are generally repressed within a stepmother’s emotional expression and isolate her from necessary access to support and empathy from her partner and additional professional options.

A stepmother’s emotional suppression also lends to the common reduction and avoidance of sensitive and more emotionally charged topics related to the stepfamily unit, creating withdrawal behaviours common within adult avoidant attachment styles (Halford et al., 2007). In addition, biological parents who are the divorced partner within the step couple unit can also experience attachment injury as a result of their divorce, separation, experience as single-parent and combined bonds with their biological children conflicting with their new partner (Feeney & Monin, 2014).
Navigating the challenges of therapeutically supporting stepcouples therefore requires diligent reflection and awareness by clinicians. Psychoeducation and communication become primary tools throughout the exploration of the stepcouple’s individual family-of-origin experience and lend reference to the couple in rationalizing their ‘why’ in behavioral beliefs and behavioral patterns (Halford et al., 2007). While Attachment theory “emphasizes the propensity for human beings to make and maintain powerful affectional bonds with significant others” (Makin & Johnson, 2006, p. 1055), and is a valuable reference within the scope of interaction with this client demographic, the author also acknowledges that its research and development was based on the sanitized and specific examination of Caucasian, cis-gendered males within an unnatural hospitalized setting. This research setting lacked the normalized interactions of upbringing and developmental analysis within a traditional family home, possibly exaggerating some of the attachment styles due to the unconventional and controlled framework within which the research sample existed (Feeney & Monin, 2014).

**Emotionally Focused Therapy**

The incorporation of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) within the therapeutic practice of stepcouple work provides a necessary framework for Bowlby’s Attachment theory to be applied within a processing framework for stepcouples to gain perspective and understanding regarding the ways in which their relational interactions have impacted their overall happiness and where their individual behaviors may be rooted. Emotionally Focused Therapy was originally developed by Sue Johnson and Les Greenberg and expanded on Bowlby’s Attachment theory within the scope of adult relationships and therapeutic couple-work (EFT, n.d.)

The author cites EFT as an invaluable approach for stepcouple clinical work, due to and as Greenman and Johnson (2013) note, “the major goal in EFT is to help couples replace
criticism and defensiveness with open, heartfelt discussions of underlying feelings that are, from and EFT perspective, born out of a primordial need to feel safe, close, and connected to significant others” (p. 49). This foundational goal is primary to supporting stepcouples within their relational challenges, however the importance of integrating a feminist approach is necessary for EFT to be most effective for stepcouple and stepmother therapeutic growth.

Integration of Feminist Perspective in EFT

Much like the modern and common diversity in familial structures, EFT’s framework is enhanced with the contextualization of stepcouple struggles due to the influences of systemic, and socio-cultural expectations that impact this demographic in combination with their family-of-origin attachment styles. As Vatcher and Bogo, 2001, outline,

EFT calls for an expanded repertoire of experiences and behaviours for both men and women, the model has the ability to challenge and expand traditional, restricted, and polarized gendered behaviours and heal some of the damage inherent in traditional gender socialization…[and] avoids pathologizing women’s ways of being in a relationship. (p. 70)

Moreover, through the incorporation of a feminist perspective, the validity of women’s assertiveness and independence creates a counter-reaction of supporting men’s vulnerability and dependence that is counter-intuitive to the socialized contextual expectations of gender roles and the subsequent overflow of these sentiments within relationships and stepcouple disconnections (Vatcher & Bogo, 2001).

Emotionally Focused Therapy’s empirical evidence and flexibility within a therapists integrative approach designates the framework as an effective and important tool for practitioners to support ‘step’ demographics with relevant and attuned processes that are
applicable and uniquely connected to the lived experience of a clients seeking this tailored support (Greenman & Johnson, 2013; Johnson & Talitman, 1997).

Emotionally Focused Therapy processing is outlined through a three-stage approach that includes processing steps to support couples in creating awareness and positive change within their interactions and overall satisfaction (Greenman & Johnson, 2013). According to Greenman and Johnson (2013), the stages are noted as, “[stage one] cycle de-escalation…[stage two] withdrawer reengagement and blamer softening…[and stage three] integration of therapeutic gains” (pp. 47-48). Within each stage, the EFT model outlines the necessary steps that therapists can utilize in combination with a feminist perspective, lending contextual filters that modernize the theory and create relevance within the stepcouple’s experience, traditionally lacking in other theoretical frameworks.

Moreover, the “EFT model provides a comprehensive, flexible framework that takes into account individual emotional experience[s], the relationship system and sociocultural gender learning…[that] utilizes the interconnectedness of these multiple levels in therapy with couples” (p. 69). Through this understanding, the stepcouple can begin to understand the challenges that each individual has experienced independently. This understanding provides perspective and security to expose repressed emotional challenges, especially by the stepmother, and validates and privileges the role of the stepmother with respect and empathy (Vatcher & Bogo, 2001).

The therapist's role in contextualizing the stepcouple’s experience provides a lens that empowers and educates each partner about their unique and non-traditional roles within their bi-nuclear family unit. This perspective initiates important opportunities that release resentment, fear and insecurity that may be felt by both partners for differing contextual reasons. Also, the integration of the therapist’s consistent feminist perspective maintains a consistency, ensuring
that the practitioner is present within the stepcouple’s unique contextual challenges and reduces the possibility of the therapist to overlook these unique experiences within traditional EFT work (Vatcher & Bogo, 2001).

**Support Groups and Stepmother Clientele**

Due to the systemic isolation that exists for stepmothers within socio-cultural expectations, a secondary opportunity for tailored support lies within the support group concept. Support group opportunities have the ability to create awareness in supportive environments that reflect more detailed examinations of individual experiences as well as contextual influences that are otherwise overlooked within more public forums of discussion. Jones (2004), notes that groups encourage “others [to] listen, bear witness, and find hope and courage” (p. 133), within a community of like-minded and similar contextual experienced individuals that is vital in empowering, supporting and visualizing those that exist outside of cultural norms:

...support groups offer a visible way of providing ongoing services to those who have exhausted their benefits. Support groups also meet the needs of those who live with stressful situations …. [and offer] a supportive community in which to share their stories… [and] a therapeutic context in which to change them. (p. 137)

Through this concept, stepmothers can gain access to a community that is lacking in their day-to-day school mother groups, parenting classes and family gatherings, that tend to ignore and invalidate their role as a responsible parent and participant within a valid family unit.

**Narrative Therapy within Support Groups**

Narrative Therapy was developed by Michael White and David Epston and is founded on the premise that, “a client’s negative thinking is identified and replaced with more positive thinking” (Jory-Hile, 2014, p. 34). The process of transitioning a client’s thinking from negative
to positive is achieved through three main processes that are defined as, “[1] identifying and externalizing the problem…[2] promoting equality…[and 3] identifying a solution to the story” (Jory-Hile, 2014, p. 35). Through these steps, clients have an opportunity to reflect on their negative circumstances with a different perspective and individualize themselves from their contextually related problems resulting in negative experiences (Jones, 2004).

Narrative therapy supports a form of individualized detachment from the client's existence that enables their circumstances to be expanded, thereby engaging other opportunities for problems to achieve solutions and more positive outlooks to be considered. In the cases of stepmother therapeutics, Jory-Hile (2014) notes that Narrative therapy can “aid stepmothers in identifying the social construction of stepmotherhood and then reconstructing positive model of stepmotherhood. Having a positive model both empowers stepmothers and enables them to create a positive identity, and with that, a healthier stepfamily” (p. 37). In addition, Narrative therapy supports stepmothers in navigating the negative stereotypes and stigmatizations related to ‘wicked, evil, gold-digger or trophy-wife’ sentiments that have historically permeated fairytales and cultural ideologies (Jory-Hile, 2014).

Through the interactions of support group members, stepmothers can begin to validate their roles externally and with a community that re-enforces these new understandings of their role and the associated negative structures within which their isolation and repressed emotions are conceived. This awareness is a vital aspect of a stepmother's empowerment and transition from isolation and shame, into conscious awareness and validity for her familial role and existence.

Conclusion
The importance of specific and tailored therapeutic approaches for stepcouple and stepmother support is essential in creating therapeutic growth for this client demographic. This chapter noted the importance of clinicians’ contextual integration within the scope of this therapeutic work as traditional theoretical understandings lack, and can actually compound, the negative contextual disconnection that many stepcouples feel within socio-cultural interactions, and validate an illegitimacy towards their roles as parents and partners. Through larger perspective and awareness that clinicians promote within therapeutic practice, further psychological studies and research areas will be developed (Halford et al., 2007). Expanding the current psychological resources for practitioners will also validate and legitimize the diversity of modern family units and reduce the stigmatization and fundamental isolation that many stepparents, especially the marginalized female stepmothers, experience.

Furthermore, the impact of research and expanded academic studies will influence the legal aspects that impact stepfamilies and promote more equality within the role and the family-definition. In areas such as the United Kingdom, stepparents are beginning to experience inclusion that supports their role as a legitimate caregiver and parent. This perspective provides a dilution of current binuclear family and stepparent stigmas therefore reducing the isolated suffering that the members of these families experience (Papernow, 2018).

Overall, promoting inclusion and increasing awareness of the possible harm and impact that therapist’s contextualization’s and traditional theoretical approaches, mannerisms and interactions can have on stepcouples and stepmothers is a step towards overall systemic equality. As clinical counsellors, reducing suffering and highlighting injustices are paramount in assisting clients to move forward with validity, empowerment and confidence. The role of a therapist is a privilege, not due to the position of power within the therapeutic space but metaphorically. The
as the opportunity to *bear witness* to a client’s vulnerability is sacred, and with that opportunity must come reverence and respect for the continued ethical responsibility that the position holds. It is a role that has the ability to make change, and in each client, the ability to move mountains.

Entire of itself.

Each is a piece of the continent,

A part of the main.

-John Donne, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Donne, J. 1839, p. 574)
References


Craig, E. A., & Johnson, A. J. (2011). Role strain and online social support for childless

https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510393055


https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12015

Gillespie, R. (2003). Childfree And Feminine: Understanding the Gender Identity of Voluntarily


Malia, S. E. C. (2005). Balancing Family Members’ Interests Regarding Stepparent Rights and

https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243207300561

https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X17739049


https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12321


Appendix

Institutional Review Board

Certificate of Approval
IRB ID# Muljiani_Sanders020519

Principal Investigator (if faculty research):
Student Researcher: Marie Muljiani
Faculty Advisor: Colin Sanders
Department: DASC M couns.

Title: An examination of step-motherhood.
Approved on: , 2019
Renewal Date: , 2020

☐ Full Board Review
☐ Expedited Review (US)
☒ Delegated Review (Can)
☐ Exempt (US)

CERTIFICATION

City University of Seattle has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The Faculty Advisor Colin Sanders and the student researcher Marie Muljiani have the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original Ethical Review Protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol, consent process, or documents. Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the IRB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion.

Brian Guthrie Ph D, RSW, RCSW
Chair, IRB City University of Seattle
IORG-IRB REGISTRATION: IORG 0009788/IRB registration number: IRB000627 CITY UNIVERSITY of SEATTLE IRB #1