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Title: Stepmothers in narratives : negotiations on relatedness

Year: 2018

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

Murtorinne-Lahtinen, M., & Jokinen, K. (2018). Stepmothers in narratives : negotiations on relatedness. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 7(2), 285-300.
<https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X14676453666553>

Stepmothers in narratives – Negotiations on relatedness

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This research was supported in parts by grants to Minna Murtorinne-Lahtinen from Alli Paasikivi Foundation, Finnish Cultural Foundation, Finnish Konkordia Association, and the University of Jyväskylä, Department of Education. Based on data from a dissertation on stepmothers in stepfamilies by Author 1, 2011.

Stepmothers in narratives – Negotiations on relatedness

Introduction

Family forms have become more heterogeneous and family boundaries more ambiguous in Europe and in North America (Allan, Crow and Hawker, 2011; Jokinen and Kuronen, 2011). Stepfamilies, which represent families formed in unconventional ways, provide an ideal context for examining new forms of parenting. Earlier research has approached stepfamilies more from the perspective of children and stepfathers. Less is known about father-stepmother families, although it is evident that step mothering may be a challenging and stressful undertaking (Coleman, Troilo and Jamison, 2008; Shapiro and Stewart, 2011).

Transitions, such as those caused by divorce and re-marriage may actualize reflexive identity work and people may feel ‘compelled’ to ask themselves questions like “Who am I” and “Where am I going” since identity presumes a narrative for sustaining an integrated sense of self (Giddens, 1991). Family continues to structure the lives of people (Morgan, 1996; Silva and Smart, 1999), but does this in new ways. Our focus is on Finnish stepmothers’ identity construction and how stepmothers are related to their new families. Finland is a highly developed society in Northern Europe combining an advanced welfare state with a modern information society. Around one-tenth of all families with minor-aged children in Finland are stepfamilies (OFS, 2013). Our aim is to contribute to the existing stepmother research by focusing on the interaction aspect of stepmother identity construction (drawing on data from a dissertation on stepmothers in stepfamilies by Author 1, 2011). We ask what different identity types can be distinguished in the stepmothers’ stories? Furthermore, we are interested in the meanings stepmothers attach to biological mothers and fathers in their identity construction.

The literature has clearly established that stepmothers experience considerable role ambiguity (Craig, Harvey-Knowles and Johnson, 2012; Hart, 2009; Shapiro and Stewart, 2011).

This in turn has been associated with high levels of stress and maternal depression (Doodson and Davies, 2014). In addition, in most cases, stepparent relationships are formed without the benefit of legal standing (eg, Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Weaver and Coleman, 2005). High levels of stress negatively affect family interaction and thereby marital satisfaction and children's wellbeing (eg, Shapiro and Stewart, 2011). Supportive step-relationships in turn can play an important role in promoting stepchildren's positive development (Coleman, Ganong, Russel and Frye-Cox, 2015). Consequently, how stepmothers construct their identity has a bearing on the quality and endurance of stepfamily relationships and on the wellbeing of individual stepmothers.

Women experience step mothering in a variety of ways. For example, they attempt to appear to be the stepchildren's "mothers", "additional parents", "friends", "back-up supporters of parents", and family "outsiders" or "detached" (Church, 1999; Orchard and Solberg, 1999; Weaver and Coleman, 2005). These typologies reflect the diverse relationships between stepmothers and stepchildren, ranging from emotionally close to emotionally distant (Coleman et. al., 2015).

Symbolic interaction

In this study, symbolic interaction was applied to explore how stepmothers construct their identities. George Herbert Mead (1934/1983) argued that other people play a significant role in how we see ourselves. He made a useful distinction between "me" (the object) and "I" (the subject) as aspects or phases of the self. The "me" represents the organized set of attitudes, deriving from the expectations, norms and habits of the community. We can be thought to become conscious when we take account of the attitudes of others. Role-taking is the

conventional and habitual phase of the “me” whereas the self-consciousness phase of the “me” enables us to reflect, construct and re-negotiate our identity.

Identity is a broader concept than role because of the subjective element, “I”, which replies to the organized attitude in a personal way (Mead, 1934/1983). The “I” contains the subconscious and represents freedom, creativity and spontaneity. The dual nature of the self provides an understanding of how social changes and creative solutions take place. Hans Joas (1996) elaborated Mead’s idea of the dual nature of the self by showing how the conscious phase of the “me” becomes active when a habitual action confronts an obstacle. In a crisis, the creative and individual aspect of the “I” is needed as well in order to solve the problem and open the way for new ideas.

It has been suggested that stepmothers try to create a role that is consistent with societal expectations, and that traditional gender roles, for example the man as a breadwinner and the woman as a caretaker, continue to persist when it comes to the expectations centred on stepmothers (Ganong, Coleman and Jamison, 2011; Gosselin and Rousseau, 2012). On the other hand, according to the clinicians stepfamilies function better if the adults do not adhere to gendered stereotypes (Ganong and Coleman, 2004).

The new sociology of family life conceptualizes identity as relational (see Mason and Tipper, 2008; Smart, 2007), thus providing empirical support for the interactionist perspective. The concept relational is well justified in the light of previous stepfamily studies, which suggest that some of the difficulty stepmothers face can be attributed to their dependency on others (eg, stepchildren, partner, biological mother). In our relational approach we elaborate the meanings that stepmothers attach to the role the father in their identity construction. Also, contextual factors, such as the age and place of residence of the stepchildren are critical to the stepmother’s

success in negotiating their identities within the family (Coleman et al, 2008; King, 2007).

Residential stepmothers of young children find it easier to assume a parent-like role with higher degree of stepchild care (eg, Allan et al, 2011).

In the symbolic interactionist frame of reference, interaction is seen as social action that is realized in family practices, such as family meals, bedtime routines, and watching the television. Thus the term 'family practices' developed by David Morgan (1996; 1999) captures a dynamic view of the family created through a process of 'doing' the family in habitual and routinized everyday activities which need relatively little reflection. Gender is also understood as a practice, or a property of interaction. Accordingly, identity construction is approached as a trinity composed of habitual action (realized in family practices), creative and conscious action (reflection and negotiation of family practices), and socio-cultural meanings (eg, metanarratives). Most of the repetition in family life consists of habitual action, which is seen as the basis of identity construction, whereas negotiation and reflection are considered as more conscious ways of constructing identity

Metanarrative of intensive mothering and shared parenting

Stepfamily research has identified two myths, the stepmother myth and the motherhood myth, which influence stepmothers' role performance (eg, Coleman and Ganong, 1997). The motherhood myth can be seen as a *metanarrative of intensive or exclusive mothering* (Hart, 2009; Perälä-Littunen, 2007). The dominance of this myth can also be explained by the ideology of the nuclear family, in which mothers and fathers were assigned divergent roles: the primary calling of women became motherhood whereas men were primarily responsible for providing for the family (Parsons, 1956; Smith, 1993). The essential role of the mother was also emphasized in

accordance with psychoanalytic theory, which accorded the mother a pivotal role in child rearing (Bowlby, 1953; Winnicott, 1957/1971).

The cultural norms inherent in the motherhood myth are, however, contradictory. According to one norm, all women, including stepmothers, should maintain a high level of involvement in their families (Shapiro and Stewart, 2011). Another norm asserts that only one woman, the biological mother, should enact the mother role (eg, Nielsen, 1999; Weaver and Coleman, 2005). Thus it assigns little value to shared mothering (Shapiro and Stewart, 2011). Furthermore, in contradiction to the feminine role, the stepparent role comes with the expectation of a more distant role (Levin, 1997). As it is not possible to meet all these contradictory role expectations simultaneously, role conflicts are likely to ensue.

The situation becomes even more complex when the ancient myth of the wicked stepmother is brought into the picture. The reputation of stepmothers demonstrates a bias against them which arose from stereotypical and misogynistic perceptions of the female character. Watson (1995) explains the persistence of the myth as arising from the tensions inherent in the stepfamily situation as well as from the psychological needs of children to deal safely with their negative thoughts and fears by projecting them onto a universally hated figure.

Nowadays various forms of the stepmother myth have spread throughout the Western world in folklore and fairy tales, such as those of Cinderella and Snow White, guiding the perceptions of persons in one's social network, including stepchildren (Claxton and Oldfield, 2000). Its dominance potentially renders stepmothers vulnerable to internalizing this portrait as a part of their personal identity, in turn causing them to struggle against its connotations of being evil and selfish (Christian, 2005; Craig and Johnson, 2010).

However, in recent decades, changing patterns of parenthood and the spousal relationship have fundamentally reshaped families. The nature of modern intimacy, based on emotions rather than material benefits or social mores, is marked by radical instability (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992). New representations of parenthood are on the rise alongside more traditional models (eg, Jokinen and Kuronen, 2011).

In Finland, as well as in other Nordic countries, policy support for female employment is at a high level. A creation of a family model based on dual breadwinners began in the 1960s and it became quickly an elementary part of the Finnish family and labour market system. Therefore female labor market participation has for decades been higher than in many other European countries. (Eydal and Kröger 2011; Kuronen, Kröger and Jokinen 2011; OECD 2011.) Also fathering has become more visible during last few decades and in family policy efforts have been made to increase fathers' participation in care work. There have been reforms of paternal and shareable parental leave system, and the proportion of fathers taking parental leave has risen. (Eerola and Huttunen 2011; Westerling 2015; see also Philip 2014.)

Yet, although the paternal involvement in family life has increased, fathers still take much less parental leave compared to mothers. Besides, since 1990s, full time motherhood has grown more popular in Finland. Due to financial support to home care, called the home care allowance, most of the youngest children are today cared for at home by their mothers, although every child has a place in day-care centre, whether the parents are working or not. (Lammi-Taskula and Salmi, 2014.) The normative strength of traditional gender roles has not declined rapidly either, and a family model based on dual breadwinners has not lead to entire gender equality. The division of domestic work has remained gendered and the gender gap has only slightly narrowed. (Eydal and Kröger, 2011; Kuronen, Kröger and Jokinen, 2011; OECD 2011.)

Method

Participants and data collection

The empirical data consisted of 58 stories written by Finnish stepmothers. The inclusion criteria were that the women identified themselves as stepmothers and were living with a man who had children from a previous marriage. A narrative-eliciting invitation to write a personal story was published on the websites of the Finnish Stepfamily Association and in a newspaper, a magazine 'Yhteishyvä', a wide circulation publication potentially reaching stepmothers with diverse backgrounds across the country. "We are conducting research on stepmothers. If you have experiences of step mothering, please write to us. Tell us about things that are important to you in this role." Personal stories of all respondents were included in the data.

In addition we asked the stepmothers to describe "the joys, sorrows, difficult situations and moments of happiness as well as the obligations and rights of life as a stepmother." The aim of this line of questioning was to explore how stepmothers made sense of their lives while assuming that by writing a personal story they would simultaneously construct their identity. Even if the accounts were rather short (mean length two pages), most were written in the form of a story with a recognizable beginning, middle and end.

The stepmothers, ranging in age between 23 and 73 years ($M=41$ years), lived in both rural and urban areas. They had lived in their stepfamilies for 1 to 38 years. The ages of the stepchildren ranged from 1 to 43 years. Of the stepmothers, 45 per cent also had biological children and 40 per cent had children from the current relationship. 34 per cent of the stepmothers were residential, 28 per cent non-residential and 38 per cent had stepchildren whose parents had equal residential custody or whose residential status changed over time from non-residential to residential or vice versa (Author 1, 2011). 85 per cent of the respondents worked

full time while the rest of them were stayed at home. The majority of the participants did not see the need to include information of their educational or occupational background in their personal story. All the names of participants or their family members used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Jyväskylä Ethical Committee was informed of the study on stepmothers. They stated, however, that the nature of this research project was such, that a statement on this study was not needed. We paid, however, special attention to ethical issues and discussed them with the respondents via airmail, since the topic of this research is sensitive, and hence the stepmothers involved in this study may be vulnerable. The participants were, for example, informed of the possibility to withdraw their personal story at any stage of the research and of the option to deny the usage of straight quotations of their narratives.

Narrative approach and data analysis

The theoretical framework outlined earlier was complemented by a narrative approach, which is well suited to studies of identity. First, narrativity is seen as a central means by which meanings that are constructed in interaction are attributed to life events and people's actions (Hänninen, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988). Writing a story allowed the informants to explain in their own words what they felt, thought or believed about their family relationships. Second, the role of culture in shaping these meanings provided a possibility for the researcher to analyse the ways stepmothers applied metanarratives in structuring their stories (eg, Abbott, 2002). Third, the focus on human agency steered attention to the ways stepmothers depicted their agency and power relations (Polkinghore, 1988; Riessman, 1993). Fourth, narrative analysis enabled identity construction to be explored from a procedural point of view (Somers, 1994).

We assumed that the stepmothers' identity would be constructed at the level of action, interaction, and symbolization. The narrative analysis was based on holistic-content and holistic-

form analyses, which examine the whole story of the individual and the overall sequence of events or structure of the personal story. As Smith and Sparkes (2005) state, life stories need to be subjected to multiple forms of analysis, if lives, stories and identities are multidimensional and subject to change in time and context.

We approached the analysis in phases. We began by carefully reading the stories to extract the essential content of each story and to comprehend the stepmothers' perceptions of family relations and interactions. In the second phase, we analysed one-third of the narratives systematically, using set questions, such as: "What actions and routines do the stepmothers describe?" "What is the stepmother's role in these actions (e.g., initiator/subject)?" We then tabulated simplified chronological summaries, with key points at the beginning, middle and end of each story. We paid attention to the narrative structure of the stories, to the thematic connections between them and to the congruencies and incongruities between narratives. Comparison of the stories showed that while the complicating actions were similar, the resolutions varied. In the final, deductive phase, the findings were compared to previous findings, and all the stories were classified into one of three identity types.

Results

Three identity types

The dominant feature of the stories was that the stepmothers perceived themselves primarily in relation to their children's biological mothers. However, the stories had various outcomes depending on the family context and the meanings attached to the actions of the stepmothers and their family members. Based on these observations, three identity types were found: (a) identity restricted by the biological mother (N=24), (b) stepmother-centred identity (N= 17), and (c) team parenthood identity (N=17), but a story may have exhibited features of

more than one identity type. Identity construction was characterized as a longitudinal process, and a particular stepmother may have shifted from one identity type to another.

Identity restricted by the biological mother. The stepmothers comprising this type explained their marginal position in their family by the primacy of the biological mother and lack of spousal support. The biological mother appeared to be strongly present either in concrete or in psychological ways in the stepfamily, and the stepchildren had no need of a replacement for their biological mother. The rejecting behaviour of the stepchild was attributed to the behaviour of the biological mother. This identity type typically occurred in families with teenagers or older children.

In the quotations below these stepmothers depict the biological mother as influential in defining the stepmother's position. The biological mothers constrained the stepmother's identity as a social parent by, for example, reminding their children that the stepmother was not their mother and not allowed to raise her children. Parenting practices were not negotiated with the stepmother. Furthermore, the stepmothers reported having very little control over children's visitation routines or financial matters. Several stepmothers argued that the biological mothers undermined and bad-mouthed them, which the stepmothers saw as negatively affecting their interaction with the stepchild.

'The biological mother made it clear that I had no right to get involved in her children's upbringing.' (Susan)

‘The biggest problem was my partner’s ex. She started calling me a “housekeeper”.

Through her children she did her best to mess with our family life. I would have liked to discuss matters concerning the children with her, but it was impossible.’ (Mary)

In this type, the stepmothers were either left *without a clear role* in the family or their role was limited to *taking care of* but not raising the children. Those left without a clear role reported limited opportunities to perform child-care related tasks, such as reading a bedtime story or preparing meals, which caused them feelings of frustration, irritation and uselessness as they were unable to occupy an identity of their own choosing. The caregivers appeared to have responsibilities similar to those of the biological mother, but without the right to parent their partners’ children.

‘Ann’s mother had emphatically told her daughter that I was not Ann’s mother and John (my son) will never be her brother. So Ann started pointing out that I was not her mother. She did this whenever she had a chance. -- She didn’t like the food I prepared and she did not allow me to be involved in the day-to-day routines. She often asked about the food I was preparing and when I told her that I was preparing minced meat sauce, she smacked. At the table she, however, said that the food is not tasty and found multiple reason not to eat. My husband got tired of her being so picky but did not suggest any procedure.’ (Rita)

As Morgan (1996) points out women largely assume responsibility for the preparation of food. This family practice, however, proved problematic owing to the reaction from the child. By rejecting her stepmother’s ‘mothering’ action, the stepchild’s feeling of loyalty to her mother

may have stayed unharmed. Even though Rita's habitual action encountered obstacles, she did not know how to relate to her stepchild and renegotiate her identity. This could be due to having very few 'surfaces' for reflection and negotiation, such as support from her husband in interaction with the child. Public narratives (e.g. books or films) with alternative models for stepmothering were not mentioned either.

The relationships of some of the non-residential stepmothers with their stepchildren were problematic owing to disputes between the biological parents. Biological mothers were frequently said to prevent appointments between fathers and their children or they "dictated when the father should meet his children" (Miriam). Disputes about child custody, visitation rights and child maintenance often led to lengthy court cases. The conflict-torn atmosphere appeared to complicate the building of a positive stepmother-stepchild relationship. According to Lena, the practices of the social welfare department, the extra-familial party of interaction, did not enhance equal post-divorce parenthood by mothers and fathers:

'During this process I have realized how sacred the motherhood myth is and how biased social welfare office practices are. The biological mother is always considered a saint and good no matter how stupidly she behaves as a mother.'

One reason for stepmothers' poor position in the family was that their partners were said to be passive and permissive with their children. This was seen as a source of stress and aroused feelings of 'being wicked' (Hannah). One stepson called her stepmother "a hooker" and "what hurt most" was that her partner "did not intervene" (Pat). During the absences of some career-engaged fathers, the stepmother pursued to take the responsibility for child-care related practices

but her efforts to establish a distinct family order was resisted by the children. One of them, Kathy, emphasized the significance of father's active role in the everyday life of the family: "In this kind of union both parents would be needed to share responsibility." One reason for the role of the father within this identity type may be based on family practices prior to divorce. According to Smart and Neale (1999) the fact that mothers tend to see themselves as both responsible for and more experienced in childcare than their husbands makes the transition to post-divorce parenthood hard.

Many stepmothers in this group seemed to feel marginal in the triangular relationships identified by Church (2004), such as the stepmother-father-child, stepmother-mother-child, and stepmother-partner-ex-wife relationship. It is not surprising that they wrote about rivalry between the parental and spousal subsystems. Some stepmothers were dissatisfied with the quality of the spousal relationship and complained about lack of partnership time, open communication and support. Four stepmothers withdrew from family relationships. Even if withdrawal is a poor problem-solving strategy, because it means avoiding interaction, these stepmothers felt they had no other choice since their partners took no initiative in tackling problems.

For some, their new home presented a threat to the self. They experienced "homelessness", a concept that has been previously conceptualized as a space of marginalization, as they did not feel related to the children when they came for a visit. "I am like astronaut on a strange planet." (Miriam) Some stepmothers disclosed that the children did not greet them or addressed them indirectly. "Will there be somebody at home when we get back from school?" Susan was asked by her stepchildren. Moreover stepmothers were outsiders in the family history. As new arrivals they did not feel included in the "we-ness" of the family core. The post-cards were, for example,

addressed to the family of origin. For Emma, the feeling of being on the margin was manifested by depression: “I sometimes even thought it would be best to withdraw from life altogether”.

Stepmother-centred identity type. Stepmothers in the second type were portrayed as mother figures or “executive managers” with organizational responsibility for the family. By negotiating a more involved role in family practices in interaction with their stepchildren, the stepmothers constructed their own routines and achieved a more or less central role in their family. Thus, it is not surprising that their narratives focused on the stepmother-stepchild relationship while the husband remained more invisible in their narratives compared to the third identity type. In these stepmothers’ families, more young residential children were present than in the other stepmothers’ families. Furthermore, the biological mother was not said to be as actively involved in her children’s lives as in the first identity type.

The values that stepmothers attached to parenting seemed to reflect the prevailing cultural expectations typical of the nuclear family ideology and the metanarrative of intensive mothering. The identities of men and women were narrated as asymmetric and gendered. Active support from one’s partner was not self-evident. Several fathers worked long hours, leaving responsibility for the family with the stepmother. A point of interest with respect to the metanarrative of intensive mothering was that these stepmothers characterized themselves as responsible and proper parents whose parenting style was more demanding than more permissive and lax style of the father.

The quality of the child’s relationship to her biological mother had an impact on the stepmother-stepchild relationship. If the birthmother’s presence in the lives of her children was limited, eg, owing to alcoholism, or she was deceased, the stepmother saw herself as her replacement. The stepmothers construct their ‘moral tales’ about their mothering (Allan et al,

2011). In presenting their accounts the way they do they are evidencing their own moral worth and higher standards of childcare compared to biological mothers and fathers:

‘I was really surprised because his mother didn’t say anything. Instead, I told him off and said that under this roof you don’t speak to your mother like that. But Joshua didn’t stop arguing. He thought he could say whatever he wants. I told him that when I’m around, you behave properly towards your mother, and I expect you to behave properly elsewhere too.’
(Lisa)

‘No way would I want the children to move to their mother’s place, because I don’t think it would be good for them. For the children’s sake I’m concerned about giving them a stable environment and I believe, a bit selfishly of course, that things are better for them here. I have less of a sense of humour and I am stricter as a parent than the children were used to before, but at the same time I take comprehensive responsibility.’ (Ann)

Becoming a parental figure appeared to be a transformative process for stepmothers. Some of them reported feeling marginal in their stepfamily at the beginning of their story. Yet, over time some mother figures described how they shaped and fostered a reciprocal and affectionate relationship with the stepchildren. By spending time with their stepchildren, taking care of their everyday needs and establishing rules and routines, these mother figures gained their stepchildren’s confidence.

The majority of the stepmothers in this group appeared to utilize an authoritative parenting style (loving, demanding and understanding), which Perälä-Littunen (2004) identified as the

child-rearing style of a “good mother”. Lisa, for example, was willing to reason with her 5-year-old stepchild, who did not want to drink liquids with his meal, at the same time giving him clear guidelines. She allowed the child some to say by letting him choose between half a glass and a full glass of milk, thus teaching the child to take responsibility for his behaviour. Initially, she was met with resistance, but gradually the child socialized into the norms of his new family.

Home was occupied as a key element in the construction of self by some stepmothers. Construction of the sense of personal identity was also presented in terms of decor (see Morgan, 1996):

‘My own pictures on the walls, and I am a bit more the lady of the house. – I don’t try to live at home on my partners’ and stepchildren’s terms anymore. – When I sweep the yard, I’m on good terms with it. This year the yard and I are one more than before. Now, when the children’s mother drops by, I feel this is my yard and my home.’ (Kate)

Only two non-residential stepmothers were found in this type. One of them, Jennifer, felt rejected by her 11-year-old stepdaughter. The biological mother was intensively involved in her daughter’s life and was especially fussy about clothes. The stepchild, Nina, followed her lead and gave her stepmother instructions on how to wash clothes, which Jennifer felt threatened her self-determination. Consequently, Jennifer redefined her identity as a friend in her interaction with Nina. She also talked to Nina about her feelings and need for self-determination at home. Reading a stepmother guide supported her identity construction. She did not accept the wicked stepmother image, but instead developed a new kind of self-image by means of her own creative interpretation (“I”) and distancing herself (“me”) from the stigmatized identity. Viewing herself

in the mirror, she invented new adjectives about herself by asking: “Who is most patient, horrible, imaginative, loveliest, fattest, etc. in the land?” What she found was a more permissive, realistic and heterogeneous self-image.

At the beginning of their stepfamily life, some stepmothers attached their identity to traditional gendered practices. As a result, they became exhausted due to their assuming all-encompassing responsibility for domestic chores. They resolved the crisis by re-negotiating their identity, combining their need for individual time with their need for relatedness. They strove to take care both of their family members’ needs and of their own well-being. In order to do this, they made efforts to share the parenting of the children with their partner and the biological mother. Thus in some cases the stepmothers’ identity could be argued to shift from the stepmother-centred to the team parenthood identity type.

Team parenthood identity type. Team parents saw parenting as a shared responsibility and emphasized the importance of an emotionally strong couple bond as the foundation stone of the family. In a few cases, the team included other adults considered to be in a position of responsibility for the children, such as the biological mother or aunts and uncles. The ideal of teamwork was identified as “working together towards a common goal”, as one stepmother, Nancy, phrased it. Although the stepparents often referred to themselves in a gender neutral way as simply parents or adults, the rearing styles of women and men and the distribution of household work seemed, however, somewhat traditional. The children with stepmothers of this type were more often elementary school-aged than those in the families with the other stepmother types.

An emotionally strong couple bond and shared parenthood were closely intertwined in the narratives. Stepmothers emphasized the importance of both unity in the spousal relationship and

the parental authority of the stepparent. Annabelle characterized the nature of a supportive spousal relationship as follows: “We’re on the same side, and we respect and support one another, for example, when the children get cranky.” As illustrated in the quotations from the narratives of Martha and Caroline below, the stepmothers underlined the importance of their partner’s support:

‘We have a set of family rules that we have systematically followed right from the beginning. According to these, both parents have full rights at home and responsibility for all children in the family. The children are treated equally irrespective of who is biologically whose. – If I disagree with my partner on something, we don’t do it in front of the kids. We discuss it between the two of us.’ (Martha)

‘The children have always behaved well towards me. I attribute this partly to the attitude of my partner. I have been given full authority as a parent right from the beginning.’
(Caroline)

An emotionally strong couple bond was said to compensate for the possible negative experiences of interaction between the stepmother and teenage stepchildren and their biological mother. Thus, as Ganong and Coleman (2004) suggest, a solid couple bond may serve as a buffer when other family relationships are stressful. However, the stepmothers argued that spousal collaboration required negotiation between the partners when the children were not around. Open communication was seen as a way of resolving mutual conflicts and creating shared meanings and establishing rules.

The team-type stepmothers felt that their stepchildren enriched their lives: “There is plenty of room in my lap; I think that new kids add something to my life.” (Olivia) These stepmothers posed their spousal relationship as a foundation of ‘doing’ family (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, and Gillies, 2003) by emphasizing shared activities in which both parents were involved with all children. These activities consisted, for example, of playing games and music, reading books and making handicrafts together. The stories conveyed the impression that their family practices involved love, intimacy and trust. “I love you is a phrase that we use every day.” (Sophie)

By means of conscious identity work and personal interpretations, along with humour, Cecilia distanced herself from the wicked stepmother image of the fairy tales. She strove to avoid being labelled as wicked by refusing to be called a stepmother, which may indicate that the stigma related to stepmothers is still alive in present-day Finland.

‘I don’t like the word stepmother and we never use the word when we talk to my partner’s daughter. Stepmothers only exist in fairy tales.’

Cecilia went so far as to say that her partner’s ex-wife is a perpetual headache and, therefore, instead of wicked stepmothers one should talk about evil mothers. She put forward a new binary opposition – that of the biological mother as evil and the stepmother as good (see also Christian, 2005).

In the stepmothers’ narratives, being together, engaging in activities, maintaining some of the pre-stepfamily rituals and creating new family traditions were means of constructing a sense of “we-ness”. Rituals played an important role in displaying the family as a coherent unit: “What really unifies us is that we create our own, new traditions.” (Amelia)

By highlighting the importance of relationship maintenance tactics, such as open communication, joint problem solving, and the establishment of rituals for creating feelings of connectedness, the stepmothers re-produced an image of “strong stepfamilies”, as described by Golish (2003).

Discussion and conclusions

This study examined how, in their written narratives, stepmothers constructed their identities. Identity construction was approached as a trinity composed of habitual action, creative and conscious action, and socio-cultural meanings. Three identity types were found: (a) identity restricted by the biological mother, (b) stepmother-centred identity, and (c) team parenthood identity. While the first two mentioned types resemble those identified in earlier research, the third one which challenged the motherhood myth, is more unique, maybe due to the Finnish context emphasizing equality between sexes.

Yet post-divorce practices and parenting were gendered in many ways, especially in the first two types which were rather tightly attached to motherhood ideology (see also Ribbens et al, 2003). Remarriage involves changes in parenting roles and building of new, altered family relationships. On the other hand, from the point of view of identity maintenance practical repetition, such as gendered habitual action familiar to stepmothers e.g. from their home of origin, can serve as a means of securing temporal continuity. If the habitual action, however, encounters obstacles and stepmothers feel that they cannot meet the expectations and norms of the community, ‘habit discontinuity’ (Southerton, 2012: 340) may shake their ontological security (Giddens, 1991) which in turn can have a damaging effect on their sense of self.

As we have noticed stepmother identity construction is in many respects problematic owing to the contradictions presented by the dominant metanarrative of intensive mothering, the

nuclear family ideology and the negative stepmother stereotype. Identity construction in this situation thus calls for reflection and negotiation. Coleman et al (2008) argue that active negotiation on identity may increase stepmothers' power and agency. This view was realized in this study among the stepmothers who were more skilled in negotiating their family practices or they had more reflective 'surfaces' to support their identity work, such as mediated interaction with public narratives with alternative models for 'mothering' or interaction with support groups or professionals with expertise. All in all, the complexity and diversity of 'doing' the family and intimacy were evident in this study.

However, reflection and negotiation does not resolve the issues discussed above. This is because stepmother identity is relational. Stepmothers have to build relationships with people whom they have not personally chosen, in particular with stepchildren and biological mothers, which is challenging. Children in these stories had agency. Still, the crucial relationships were those between the stepmothers, their partners and the biological mothers.

In Finland simultaneous, yet contradictory trends – the move towards a growing variety of family trajectories and gender equality on the one hand and the rise of neo-familialism, nuclear family ideology, and more traditional ideas of motherhood on the other – have made the position of women more challenging (Kuronen, Kröger and Jokinen, 2011). These trends are visible in the identities of stepmothers identified in this study.

Team parenthood identity type, which was narrated as an ideal, reflects the emergence of involved fatherhood in present day Finland. Accordingly in this type the fathers' active role in childcare and the spousal relationship as a foundation of 'doing' the family were emphasized. The adults in the stepfamily appeared to be stronger when they were able to manage the stressors of stepfamily life together. In addition, it is arguable that by participating in the everyday care

and upbringing of his children, the biological father allowed the stepmother to transcend the traditional models of gendered parenting, thereby eliminating a major root cause of tension between the biological mother and stepmother regarding the role of a mother.

On the other hand conservative views of gender relations are on the rise as we outlined previously. Although cultural shift toward involved fathering is noticeable, it is non-linear. Changes in gender relations and attitudes seem slow. Gendered images of moral responsibility in (step) parenting were apparent in this study (Ribbens et al, 2003) and in stepfamilies there is still much to do in terms of navigating co-parental and spousal relationships. Thus, fathers may be in a unique role in the father, mother and stepmother triangle.

The focus of this study was on the meanings that stepmothers attributed to their lives. Further research is needed to capture the perspective of the fathers, children and biological mothers in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of social relationships in stepfamilies. A potential limitation of the present study is that the stepmothers who chose to write their stories may have experienced more negative feelings about step motherhood than stepmothers in general. Although the data included many tragic stories, several examples of positive experiences and new perspectives on step motherhood were also present. Despite its limitations, the present study contributes to our understanding of stepmothers' identity construction by focusing on the relational aspects of step mothering. Furthermore, the study contributes to the field of stepfamily research by providing new insights on shared parenting in stepfamilies as experienced by stepmothers.

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