

The Very Perplexed Stepmother: Step Motherhood and Developing a Healthy Self-Identity

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This autoethnographic study unpacks Sonia's experiences as a stepmother. Historically stepmothers are the evil, unkind villains in fairy tales. Most research about stepfamilies has deemed stepmotherhood to be ambiguous and stress-laden. This research explores how becoming a stepmother has impacted her evolving sense of self-identity. To do this we undertook an autoethnographic study of Sonia's experiences. The use of autoethnographic method supports and challenges personal narrative. We reflected upon the specific situations that caused her to question, alter and sustain a healthy sense of self, so in turn she may create a safe and secure environment that supports healthy and ongoing connections within her stepfamily. We found that the growing pains of adjusting to a new role can lead stepmothers into positive self-discovery. Through this process it is vital that one remains true to one's core self while provoking the development of self-identity within a newly constructed family form. This autoethnography offers insight to both stepfamilies and those researching and working with them to build a deeper understanding of the unique issues and experiences stepfamilies have which may be unexpected, complex, and diverse. Keywords: Stepmother, Stepfamily, Auto-Ethnography, Self-Identity

Stepfamilies are symbolic of the changing face of families in western culture where family forms have many different designs. Some of these include the nuclear family, single parent families, adoptive and foster families, same sex families and stepfamilies. Each one shares its own specific dynamics, experiences, and family culture (Malcuit, 2013). Yet social policy development, and professional services in Australia do not meet the needs of all family types as the prototype remains the nuclear family design and the societal stereotypes can view other types of families as second rate or unnatural compared to the nuclear family (Kumar, 2017) Stepfamilies are generally not defined as a separate family form, as they are seen as an extension and result of a breakdown of the nuclear family (Martin, 1998). Statistics concerning the number of stepfamilies are understated due to the way the Australian Bureau of statistics (ABS) collects family data. When collecting statistics on family living arrangements the ABS does not count the nonresidential parent or children, so they are not formally classified as a part of the household. The "stepfamily" is becoming a more commonly seen family structure as divorce and remarriage continue to be on the rise (Statistics Canada 2016; Zeleznikow & Zeleznikow, 2015). These family designs require different support to that of a nuclear family, due to the unique issues that stepfamilies face.

Stepfamily forms have existed for a very long time, and fairytales, movies, other media forms, social and professional understandings throughout history have placed a negative light on stepparents. There are some social scientists that have painted quite a bleak picture of stepparents (Ganong & Coleman 2016b). In particular, stepmothers who have been unfavorably stereotyped throughout history internalize pervasive negative characteristics which can lead to negative self-stereotyping. This can impact their own understanding of themselves as women, mothers, and stepmothers which in turn effects their relationships within their stepfamily (Latrofa, Vaes, Pastore, & Candinu, 2009). Stepmothers may judge themselves according to

their perceived understandings of their gender and the expectations of motherhood. Stepmothers frame their sense of self understanding with preconceived ideas of how and who they are as a stepmother by their stepchildren, stepchildren's mothers, extended family, gender, class, age, and race.

Social and professional institutions add to the framing of self-identity by stepmothers (Miller, Cartwright, & Gibson, 2017). A stepmother's personal well-being may be influenced by their desperate desiring to have a healthy close relationship with their stepchild and at the same time dealing with the unspoken struggle they feel in knowing that their personal dreams and ideals of creating a family where they hold the honored position of mother and matriarch of their own family will not come to fruition (Doodson & Davies, 2014; Perez, & Torrens, 2009). Despite this, many women believe the sacrifice is worth it as they celebrate healthy relationships with their stepchildren (Sanner & Coleman 2017).

The first author, Sonia found the continual understanding and practicing of her role as a stepmother is both a challenging and rewarding experience. It has been a time where she has had many questions which have gone unsatisfactorily answered. The opportunity of a Doctorate has led her down the path of researching stepfamilies through exploring hers and others own experience of stepfamily life. This has had a profound impact on Sonia's personal understanding of family and stepfamily life. The first author's family upbringing was not traditional in comparison to the nuclear family definition. Sonia grew up in a community context, where her family home was situated on the same property with others living in a community environment. The community was born out of a vision to offer support and services to people with varying issues in a short/medium term residential environment. Sonia's parents were the co-founders of this initiative. Julia, Sonia's mother has had a persuasive influence on her own definition of motherhood and family that has held her in good stead as a prelude to becoming a stepmother. Sonia has never known family life to only involve biological members.

Sonia's mother has welcomed many people into the family home, not just as guests, but as participants within the family. The door would knock any time during the day or evening, and even over meal times. Julia would say "come in, come in, have you eaten yet, would you like a cuppa?" She had a big smile on her face, as if she was always expecting them. All the adults within the community were trusted and became like aunts, uncles, and grandparents to Sonia and her three siblings. Mum took the saying "it takes a village to raise a child" very literally and embraced it in a practical way. Sonia didn't get away with much; she recalls when breaking the rules whilst jumping on the trampoline with her friends at the same time there was always an adult that would appear to scold her, saying; "Get off now, you should know better, if I see you do it again I will ban you for the rest of the day." Sonia obeyed immediately in hope they would not tell mum and dad. She loved most of the adults that became a part of her family throughout her youth.

Julia taught and illustrated through her actions what it meant to love the unlovable, give to others in need and to embrace the complexities of a family that does not fit into the traditional institutionalized definition within our western culture: When a new family moved into the community mum would say, "look after the children at school and be kind to them." Family is not just people but an environment that provides a sense of belonging and value to each of the participating individuals. It is these values the first author has been influenced by that have impacted the development of her fluid self-identity as she has learnt to adapt to different contexts within her ever-changing environment over her lifespan.

Thirty years of experience in social welfare and counselling has enabled Sonia to hear others' experiences in family and stepfamily life and the impact it has on their self-identity both in challenging and positive ways. Both authors hope this doctoral journey will open doors for others to continue the exploration of understanding how stepfamilies fit in society and what

needs to change for these families to feel that they are a valued and are important part of family culture in all countries.

The Research Approach and Methodology

Autoethnography is a qualitative methodology that revolves around self-study that both authors used to describe the first author's lived experiences within the context of stepfamily life. This was done by utilizing Sonia's memories and self-reflecting on her journey within her social context, then by both authors examining her behavior, beliefs and how this creates meaning in Sonia's life within her personal cultural setting (Ellis, 2004). The information that comes from the personal data addresses the research question, when becoming a step mother how is your self-identity impacted? This study can be used to produce further sociological and psychological understanding for researchers, clinicians, and community service workers (Wall, 2008). Stepmothers and stepparents need to hear a relevant and personal experience that is comparable to their own. Sonia's story does this, and her research uses methods to consolidate and affirm its validity. Some autoethnographic researchers believe hard evidence is necessary to legitimize the autoethnography, such as photos, personal documents and journals (Duncan, 2004; Holt, 2003; Muncey, 2005). To justify the use of memory as data in this study, researchers have argued that if these stories were collected via interviewing it would not be questioned as "airy fairy" data (Sparkes, 1996; Wall, 2008). Whether using journals, photos, or any other personal documents from the author it is still based on the memories and interpretation of the experience (Coffey, 1999). If Sonia could turn the clock back, her wish is to have kept a journal of her experiences and learnings of understanding herself in the role of step parenting. In the course of this journey she still struggles to find practical time and emotional energy to capture the stories on paper in the moment.

This method demands from Sonia to be vulnerable and courageous (Custer, 2014). Our hope is to be honest and open about Sonia's life as a stepmother in both the joyous times and the darkest times. We invite readers to explore and reflect on their own journey without shame and fear. An autoethnographic approach in studying families can be a very effective methodology when looking at how people think, act, navigate and coauthor their social worlds within the family context (Adams & Manning, 2015). As researchers using this method, we can ask unique and deeply probing questions that of the first author that we may not feel is appropriate to ask others through interviews. The readers may find the depth of information refreshing, connectable and relatable to their own stories (Ellis, 2009).

As first author and researcher the findings collected have given Sonia at times nagging thoughts and emotions of a mother, stepmother and wife worrying about representing all her family members in an accurate and respectful way. She has been careful not to reveal their most confidential thoughts (Ellis, 2007). Concerns and questions monopolizing Sonia's thoughts are: "Should I have asked their permission before writing my story which inevitably includes them? What will they and other extended family members think if they read it? And will they understand that these are my perceptions within my shared context with them"? Sonia is in hope that due to their understanding of her ongoing personal and professional desire to work with stepfamilies providing support and education, they will see this autoethnography as one of the tools that may benefit other stepfamilies and give a better understanding to the professional sector and family community services (Grenier & Collins, 2016). With much reading on the expectations of a researcher using the autoethnographic method it seems clear even though this is a self-narrative it does involve active participants in her stories which is why she has chosen pseudonym names for all individuals in this study (Chang, 2016). Sonia's husband and children were given the opportunity to read the article. After talking to Sonia's mother and allowing her to read the article she gave us permission to use her real name as we

wish to honor her for all she has taught Sonia and supported her in being the woman, mother and stepmother she is today.

This self-study began by thinking about the questions Sonia would ask another stepmother, these were written up then Jane interviewed Sonia. She took away the taped interview and added to that by self-interviewing, self-interrogation and reflection on her experiences, challenging her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors within her social context to understand herself and others better (de Bruin, 2016; Karpiak, 2010). As the goal of this study is to reflect and analyze Sonia's experience as a stepmother the data is dependent on what she can recall (Fung, 2014). The recollections come from her own memories as well as the children and other family members provoking memories through informal discussion. We then, as accurately as possible, wrote the stories of Sonia's experience and the meaning they gave to her life using the stereotypical and persuasive fairy tales many of us grew up with. In analyzing the findings, we used a qualitative approach more so than narrative as we combine previous qualitative research to challenge or support the findings that have come from Sonia's experiences. Sonia transcribed the interview and amended the text as she saw fit. Both authors independently read and re-read the transcript and we both noted keywords and phrases in the margins. We then met on several occasions to compare, discuss, argue, and refine our initial codings (Mawson, Berry, Murray & Hayward, 2011). From these codings, we identified emergent themes which helped us decide which particular narratives to include. We set aside the remainder of the narratives for future use. We then crafted the narratives and placed them in a series, using fairy tale representations of stepmothers and stepfamilies to assist readers engage with our text. Throughout the stories the first author, Sonia will be referring to her experiences and thoughts in the first person. The rest of the article will reflect that this research has been designed and written by two people.

Stories

Topsy Turvy Cinderella Story

After dating some "frogs," I found a wonderful man with three children whom I married. Our family dynamics were far from the traditional Cinderella story with the Evil Stepmother, extreme, sibling rivalry and an absent father. My husband did not leave me to attend to stepfamily life on my own, and I felt quietly confident about being a good stepmother with the desire to love both my two biological and three stepchildren equally. How hard could it be? I have had many years' experience in social welfare working with parents, children, and teenagers with many complications, so being a stepmum to just three extra children didn't seem too complicated. It would have stayed that way if my inner fairytale world were the only influences on how stepmotherhood would unfold for me.

The reality is I stepped into this role with very little understanding of my children, step children, and husband's (John) needs, and their expectation for me to fulfil them as a part of my job description. I had no understanding of co-parenting with my new husband let alone a former wife who had her own ideas of my role in her children's lives. My children from my previous marriage were somehow going to fit in with my new family role but exactly how I had not figured out yet. I think I just ignorantly thought they would go with the flow and adjust peacefully and without issue. I found myself confused and overwhelmed adjusting into the stepfamily life in which my preconceived ideas had not come to fruition.

Role confusion: My work with families both step and nuclear dealt with problematic issues impacting the whole family and gave me skills and knowledge to handle difficult situations with educated wisdom and practical skills that I believed would produce positive results within my stepfamily. One day, John was having another fight over the children with

his former wife, due to his distress I suggested I have a chat with her using my much-cultivated communication skills. The conversation did not last long and most of what she had to say to me is unrepeatable, but what I can share, is in so many expletives she told me not to use my counselling skills on her and hung up. That was one of my first wake up calls that my professional background was not going to be as beneficial as first expected. The phone call upset me way more than when I was dealing with an abusive client in the work place.

I found that when the situation is personal it impacts me in a very different way. The problem this realization presented is that professionally I had a clear understanding of who I was and could stand my ground well in most situations. As a new wife and stepmother and plain old Sonia I was not as confident in my sense of identity and handling day to day behaviors that challenged my beliefs, values, and understanding of who I wanted to be and how I wanted to react to constantly changing variables that were all new to me.

When my husband and I would have disagreements mainly over our five children, he would get angry with me and ask me not to be patronizing and use my work tone. On the flip side of the coin he saw my professional background as a strength to handle situations he was uncomfortable with. For example, discipline, boundary setting, conflict resolution, monitoring and addressing the clear behavioral expectations of children in and out of the family home. At times I found it confusing that how I responded to these various issues would either be embraced or rejected depending on John's perceptions of the situation and his willingness to tackle it. There have been times he has felt I have been too harsh on them (Wicked Stepmother) and other times relieved that I have intervened (Fairy Godmother).

Examples of what I perceived as my professional strengths being used are, organizing meetings with teachers and welfare supports in and outside of the school to address concerns we had for the children, giving advice to John on services and resources professionally and within our local community to discuss the best way forward for the wellbeing of the children and organizing mediation for John and his former wife to write up a parenting plan. The reason I see this as coming from my professional experience is because that is the context in which I became aware of the supports available.

I was confident when able to use my welfare skills to benefit our family situation. I was not in my usual work environment where I received emotional, practical support and feedback on my performance. So as a stepmother I did not receive these supports and at times felt underappreciated and undervalued. Somehow, I had to find a balance between the confidence I had using already established professional skills, and how that worked within my role as a stepmother. I needed to allow myself to be vulnerable in learning and establishing the role of being a stepmother and allowing myself to feel okay about making mistakes on the way. I had very high expectations in this role that needed lowering and definite re adjustment for my and my family's wellbeing. Ultimately, this story is about the importance of defining roles and the resources Sonia had within her and externally to support and challenge her as she confronted the complexity of making personal changes to embrace her new role as a stepmother.

The Ugly Duckling Syndrome

The well-known tale of the ugly duckling tells the story of a little duckling that was told time and time again by the animal community his family that he was not wanted and would not be accepted. As he began to go through physiological changes those around him saw a beauty they wanted to cultivate within him. Eventually his own kind found him for who he was a beautiful swan. Many times throughout my lifespan I felt like the ugly duckling, socially awkward, not feeling accepted for who I am and not knowing where I fit. I grew up in a community where I felt valued, embraced, and loved for who I was and my contribution to the community. At the same time in my years at school I felt alienated, rejected, and ridiculed as I

did not know how to fit into this environment as it seemed so incongruent in values, beliefs, and behaviors that I was used to. In my professional life I found a sense of belonging, importance and an acceptance from others and myself of my role. I was able to connect being a single mother to my self-identity without complication as I had two biological children who relied on me for their survival. We belonged together through blood and family connection.

Transitioning

Throughout my life I swung from ugly duckling to beautiful swan by allowing outsiders too much influence on my definition of self. I wanted to be embraced completely by my stepchildren and hoped to be a second mother to them. I explained to John the importance of my first few years transitioning into the family I needed to step back from the disciplining and authoritarian role and establish a positive relational connection with them where they knew they could trust and depend on me being there for them. My sometimes-insecure thoughts defined that message as “do whatever I can to get them to like me” (ugly duckling syndrome).

Transitioning into the role of a stepmother I had to face and manage multiple challenges at the same time. I found myself falling into the trap of attempting to alleviate stresses for my husband, stepchildren, and children when issues arose. My sense of self-identity became more complex and confusing as I was transitioning into stepmothering and new wife, and maintaining what was a clearly defined role as a biological mother.

As stepparents, John and I planned not to have a primary disciplinary role with the stepchildren, but this did not always go smoothly. John expressed verbally that he wanted me to be involved directly with the stepchildren in monitoring, supervising, and correcting the behaviors. I could also see that he did not cope well with uncomfortable communication and conflict with them. We also discussed that the behaviors I believed went unattended due to John’s avoidance, and because both of us have different values and beliefs on particular issues regarding family. This caused me great frustration as I could see that the expectations I had of my biological children were unequal to the expectations of my stepchildren. These issues influenced my confusion of identity and my integrity as a mother. I also found the professional support and guidance did not resolve the challenges my husband and I were dealing with and we did not take the suggested advice. Our specific concerns were; different children’s bedtimes, age appropriate television, computer, and play station games, children doing chores, and other general behavioral expectations.

I took on a democratic parenting role which means that the focus is on treating the children with respect and dignity, teaching them to be responsible and accountable for their behavior. Logical and natural consequences are used in this parenting style. It is easier said than done, I still struggle with it at times, and though it is a little easier now our children are older. When Rose came for the weekends she would ask to use my hair straightener, “yes, no worries put it back in my bathroom when you’re done.” This may seem a trivial example, but it became an ongoing source of tension. The next time I went to use my hair straightener it was still in her bathroom. This happened excessively, and I was full of empty logical consequences such as, “the next time you don’t return my hair straightener you won’t be able to use it.” I never followed through. Recently she borrowed the straightener and as I was away it was not upon request. Rose took it to a friend’s house where it stayed for quite a few weeks. That was it for me, I was not happy so calmly I told her if she did not get it back to me within a week she will not have access to it again and will have to bring her one from mums. She never got it back to me that week so to my amazement I followed through, she now has her own hair straightener she keeps here and has not requested to borrow mine again.

John’s authoritarian parenting style is underpinned by consistent love for his children. This method is also having control over the children’s behavior and using instant punishment

to remind the children of the error they have made, which in John's eyes is disrespecting him and the expectations he has set for them. John's response to Rose not returning the straightener was to scold her each time I reminded him she hadn't returned it. It was the last straw for John after weeks of Rose not responding to his demands. He sent a text message to her saying, "that if it does not show up tomorrow, you have to replace it with a new one, which is a three-hundred-dollar hair straightener." Rose magically returned it the next day. At times such as the hair straightener experience our different styles complemented each other and at other times it also created its own challenges for us as a couple.

I discovered the need to become more confident in whom I was as a person, how my values and beliefs impacted these multiple new roles I was undertaking. To do this the need to be liked by my stepchildren had to take second place to the children's need be loved and supported, and that is my role. Secondly, I needed to make sure I was being innovative in building healthy positive relationships with my stepchildren in a consistent and productive way. I did this by interacting and engaging in a relatable language for them. I made it a goal that I was not always successful in, to not react and define how they perceive me by their behaviors towards me. From the very beginning I tried staying consistent in my behavior towards them no matter how they maneuvered with their behavior and emotions towards me. The ugly duckling syndrome meant each challenge that Sonia needed to rectify came out of the need to be positively embraced by the stepchildren. Taking that out of the scenario and replacing it with a clearer understanding of the values and beliefs that underpin the stepmother's role puts the focus back on the needs of her stepchildren. This ironically ended up resulting in healthy relationships between Sonia and her stepchildren.

This fairytale creates an understanding of the internal struggle stepparents may have when determining who and how they will present themselves as a stepparent. This story also draws out the healthy and unhealthy influences that impacted Sonia's journey in discovering the development of her role as a stepmother.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall Who is the Most Conflictual of them All?

The first year of our marriage my 14-year-old stepson, Tim was playing MA+ play station games, and to my biological children's disgust they were banned from any MA+ material as it was not age appropriate. The games were confiscated, and Tim was told that he needed to be the right age to play them. Till this day he says, "that was the most annoying thing about me living with them." This created cross relational conflict between John and me, Tim and John, and Tim and me. John backed me up but felt uncomfortable and pressured to do so as a new husband supporting my new role as a stepmother.

Conflict

A few years into our marriage I wanted to introduce chores into our household. John did not want to do this as he knew his children will kick up a huge fuss and conflict would follow between us all. I asked him to leave it to me and wouldn't raise it again with him. With some fear and trepidation, he agreed to this. I wrote on a piece of paper the children names that were living with us full time who were Tim and Lyn, two of my stepchildren. I then wrote the chores that needed doing after dinner every evening. I approached them after I had cooked them a lovely dinner and in front of them cleaned the mess. I could see they were in a pleasant state of mind, so I took advantage and requested to have a talk with them. I kept it short and sweet, by showing them the timetable I wrote up with no names on it and explained that I would like them to do these chores daily, and it is up to them how they would like to fill out the timetable for the week. They said, "no worries," and no further discussion was entered into.

Within a week they were in a routine, and within three weeks our three other children that came on the weekends also contributed to the after dinner clean up. Neither John or I had to remind them to do the chores, it just became routine. I praised both step and biological children regularly for the great job they did. Some changes were remarkably smooth and uncontested. How I wished I had a magic mirror that would clarify the correct answers needed in the process of forming our stepfamily. The roles for all of us became transient in nature and confusing with both parents' roles lacking consistency at times due to our own lack of understanding of the function of a stepparent's responsibilities.

This story draws out how conflict is an important part of the process of change in a stepfamily. This story reflects on how healthy conflict and challenges can bring about positive change that enhances flourishing step families. Conflict is also a form of communication used by all members of the family whether it be an unhealthy or healthy form to relate children's and parents' concerns, thoughts and stresses that need addressing. Conflict is not to be avoided and will bring about a more honest communication within your stepfamilies, though it does come with some discomfort. Suppression of conflict only creates greater problems in the long term.

The Old Lady Who Lived in a Shoe

American literature tells the story that came from the original Mother Goose nursery rhyme that tells of a mother who had many children. Her husband and home were taken from her by a giant leaving the woman without a partner and needing to find a new large place for all her children to live. As the story goes she finds the giant's shoe which she decorates and moves her children into, making it a home for all (Baum, 2017). When John and I were married and combined our five children, the size of the home was not the only challenge we had to face. As a newcomer into the family home that once housed John and two of his stepchildren, I found taking a parental role awkward at times because the home did not feel shared. I was in their space and making attempts to initiate changes that I believed would help all of the family members with the transition into a healthy stepfamily household. When we did move to a new home within six months I felt I had much more confidence to maneuver into more of a parenting role and felt the children's cooperation and compliance had improved, the playing field seemed more even between us all. We had found our shoe.

In the story the old lady needed to find a home that met the needs of a large family. In a stepfamily it is not just the building that is of great importance but the psychological and mental impact it has on all members within the stepfamily. John and Sonia believed in finding a design of home that allowed the children to have their own space. The home has three small living areas and each child had their own room no matter if they lived with us full time or not. This gave the children a sense of ownership towards the home. The new home was not referred to as John's or Sonia's as the other homes were previously titled. It was made clear by John and Sonia through changing our language that this is our family home.

“To Be or Not To Be” Connected

A fear that would come and go for me when I had to stand my ground with my stepchildren was hearing the words, “You are not my mum!” With a sigh of relief to this day I have never heard those words. So why is this? When I reflect back on my relationship with all my stepchildren in the earlier years I can recall special moments and consistent behaviors with each that impacted the growth of a positive and respectful relationship with each other. With Tim our first interaction was playing hacky sack together, after that our positive interactions were based around talking about his interests and creating our own relational rituals that

established a special connection between us. For example, he introduced a kiss goodnight before he went to bed, which continued till he left home even when our relationship was tense at times. Developing a positive connection with my other two stepchildren was different again. The youngest (Rose) was six years old when her father and I began dating. She loved driving in my car when I had my biological sons with me, as we sang songs and played travelling games which she loved to be a part of. With Lyn who was ten years old, our connectedness developed over a longer period of time and changed depending on her circumstances. When she became a teenager, I played more of a support role for her when she needed it or requested it.

Physical contact was a natural thing between my children Logan, Brendan, and myself, so to discover that this was not the case in my husband's family was alien to me. I believe my first lunge for a hug at each of my stepchildren was a shock for them, but over time they began to initiate both physical contact and verbal terms of affection such as "I love you." This took much time and understanding and respect of where each child was at, and learning not to push any unwanted physical contact on them. My children had an influence I believe on my stepchildren becoming more affectionate both in words and actions as, my they saw how we expressed our love to one another. They in time joined in and followed how my boys treated me. What I found most difficult and most rewarding simultaneously was staying consistent with my stepchildren even at times when the stepchildren were showing changes in their relationship with me, such as verbal or emotional withdrawal. Another example of this is when Lyn, Rose and I were out I would ask how they would like me to introduce them to others. They would say "just say mum." I could have burst with pride when they said that and felt it was a reward for my efforts in developing the relationship we had.

This question was never asked of me; I was always Stepmum. I had times when I wanted to be seen as mum particularly at times when they were in conflict with their biological mum. I knew I can never take the title of the biological mother, but often felt like that was the job I was doing. The title "Stepmum" as mentioned in the Cinderella story reminded me at times that I would never be a complete member of the biological family I married into. My stepchildren have never said such a thing and yet it was a thought that would come and go occasionally. I was never the Wicked Stepmother, but I was not always the Fairy Godmother.

At times I would notice changes in their behavior towards me that put distance between us. I began to learn over time that they were trying to understand how I fit into their lives and how that worked with them already having a mother, amongst other issues they were coming to terms with due to being a stepfamily and the usual issues that come with growing through teenage life and finding their own sense of identity. In respecting that, I was able to work on not taking on the changes of relationship as rejection from them. I must state this was and is not easy. It still to this day takes much self-talk and logical reminding that this stepfamily story is not just all about me.

Connectedness can come through the means of interactive relationships and the act of patience and understanding that all members of a stepfamily have their own unique personalities that impact how they individually connect with their stepparent. There are other external and internal experiences children have that alter the connection they have with their stepparent, such as the biological parent's attitude to the stepparent, the relationship between the two biological parents and the relationship between the children and their biological parents. All of these factors influence how connected the children and stepparent will become. Most importantly the stepparent needs to stay consistent emotionally and practically available to embrace an opportunity to grow in connectedness with their stepchildren.

Discussion and Conclusion

When Sonia chose to marry John, her reasons were very focused around love, companionship, and happiness for both of them. These thought processes led John and Sonia into discussions mainly focused around their needs, fears, and desires as they move into their second marriage (Ganong & Coleman, 2016a). John and Sonia both felt they had a good relationship with each of their stepchildren. Sonia gives a few examples from her stepchildren illustrating this. Rose, who drew a picture when she was six with all of us including my dog as one big happy family and hung it on the wall in my home. Lyn, when we were by ourselves and I was brushing her hair, asked me to come and live with them permanently. When any of my stepchildren implied they wanted me to be permanent in their lives it made me feel wanted and valued to them.

Sonia chose to keep those comments at the forefront of her thoughts and not ask the hard questions about the reality of combining the two families and how this will really impact both lots of stepchildren (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013). John and Sonia had very little discussion on parenting styles, family traditions, family values, and other issues directly connected to the wellbeing of their children. This is not a question of a lack of commitment and love for them, more so it was ignorance about the need for these discussions to arm them with the relevant information that would be of benefit and result in wiser step-parenting, and give them the tools to encourage the children to be honest and open about how they are coping with the reality of transitioning into a stepfamily (Weaver, & Coleman 2005).

The other reasons these discussions should have occurred was to give John and Sonia an understanding of what were the expectations of one another as stepparents and biological parents, and what values and beliefs were important for them to promote in their new stepfamily (Ganong, & Coleman 2016b). If Sonia had not focused so strongly on her fairytale preconceived ideas of what her stepfamily would look like she believes she could have prevented much conflict between John and herself (DeGreeff & Platt, 2016), and created a smoother transition for all the children. Sonia believes before marrying she needed to be more aware of all the family members understanding of how they are coping with their experiences of the past relating to the family processes post-divorce and how that will impact them accepting a new stepfamily environment with many changes to come to terms with (Jensen, Lippold, Mills-Koonce, & Fosco, 2017). The varied struggles each child had dealing with the changes of becoming a stepfamily came out at times in unexpected, unhealthy, and unhelpful ways for all members of the family (Jones, 2004; Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

As we talked about this research, Sonia reflected on her experiences and together they could see the part of Sonia that strongly identifies with her profession, social welfare. She ridiculed herself for not recognizing what she needed when becoming a stepfamily, that she may have recognized when in professional discussions with other soon-to-be stepparents. Sonia's professional identity and her role as a student have its place as she and Jane analyze the data from her experiences. Being a student and a welfare worker also allows her to further her knowledge beyond her personal inexperienced understandings of families and stepfamilies. Sonia needs to state that she believes that her professional skills gave her a false sense of confidence in her role as a stepmother. She hid behind the "I know best due to what I do for a living" instead of facing her own fears of not knowing how to cope with all the challenges that arose in their stepfamily.

To find solutions to various issues Sonia was dealing with she needed to allow herself to experience and understand her fears, vulnerabilities, and accept that often she lacked resolution (Weaver & Coleman 2005). This was and still is not always what she would call her comfortable safe place. She had to learn to relinquish some control, by not playing the role of the therapist and biological mother to the stepchildren in the family and tackle the challenges

as the new significant adult, participant within the stepfamily. At times she did it well and at other times she lost the plot and behaved in ways that she is not proud of as a parent such as yelling, threatening to leave, and threatening the stepchildren with imminent removal and so on. Stepmothers are a stereotyped group that can have many negative connotations attached to them. Stepmothers' response to this may include moving into compensatory behaviors to prove they are not the stereotypically evil or a second-rate parent (Jones, 2004; Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985). Stepparents such as Sonia desire to be looked at through a positive lens by her stepfamily, biological family, and the surrounding community. She wants to be recognized as passionate and committed to the role of a loving caring stepmother (Gallardo, & Mellon-Gallardo 2007). To do this Sonia learnt the importance of not allowing all these influences to interpret who she will be and how she will behave as a stepmother. Sonia learnt to recognize and identify her own wrongs and reach out to heal the relationships she believed may cause damage. She did this through apologizing without blaming, not hiding her remorse, and going back to the issue when everyone has calmed down to discuss it in a caring and open-minded way (Jensen, & Howard, 2015). When the time rose for her to challenge all the children at different times on their inappropriate behavior and the expectations she had of them, Sonia was not asking of them anything they have not seen her practice in the household before.

The influences that shape who we are over our lifespan can be from multiple sources. For example, roles others have played in our lives, the roles ourselves have played, a variety of influential relationships, life experiences and commitments (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2016). All these experiences influenced the future role of the stepparent that Sonia wanted to be. Over time and with much reflection Sonia realized she only felt confident in who she was when those within her social context affirmed her definition of self (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell & Schreindorfer, 2013). Her family life, community living, and professional life most of the time affirmed she was on the right track of how she perceived herself. School and negative experiences such as sexual, emotional, verbal abuse (Aneschensel & Bierman, 2013), and divorce were external experiences that had a powerful impact leaving Sonia with a low self-esteem and self-doubt that carried into most of her adult roles including step parenting. Because of this she recognized that she took on a role as a people pleaser, self-absorbed in needing to be liked and validated on doing a good job (Latrofa, Vaes, Pastore, & Candinu 2009). Any constructive criticism was taken as putdowns and rejection of self. This was destructive to her personally and impacted her role in being a healthy parent and stepparent. Through self-reflection and seeking guidance from counselling her internal perception of self, became much healthier, and she was able to recognize external influences that needed to be rejected when they did not align with who she chose to be and the values she cherished (Miller, Cartwright, & Gibson 2017). Understanding the stepparent role to be a protector, care-giver, carer, guide and nurturer was like giving her a job description that need not be affected by the times her stepchildren showed negative behaviors towards her. This is because their behaviors do not alter her goals and values as a stepmother.

In the first year of stepparenting, Sonia found the professional advice given such as, the biological parent needs to be the main disciplinarian (Ganong & Coleman, 2016b) and the stepparent working on a more relational connection was much more complicated than expected (Claxtonoldfield, Garber, & Gillcrist, 2006; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). John wanted Sonia to participate as a co-parent which involved discipline and enforcing the boundaries and expectations in the home. She appreciated that John also made it his role to let the children know that they are to respect her and do as required because this was his expectation. When the children challenged Sonia by not following through with requests, he would back her up by informing them this behavior is being disrespectful to both parents. As John wanted her role to be very similar to that of a biological parent, it was paramount that Sonia understood who she wanted to be in a parenting role with her stepchildren (Riness &

Sailor, 2015). This was difficult as she felt she could not parent the stepchildren the same way as she did her biological children as they have all been raised differently. The rules and expectations in John's home previous to remarrying were very different to those in Sonia's home. The challenge for Sonia was how does she stay true to herself? How does she support both biological and stepchildren whilst adjusting to her new role? How does she maintain fair and reasonable expectations without the children resenting their new family situation? As a couple how do Sonia and John do this together?

In facing these questions, it put their role as stepparents into perspective, recognizing the importance of being prepared to make the necessary changes to what John and Sonia always saw as their role as parents. Sonia was able to identify what they did well in supporting the children through the transition of becoming a stepfamily. First, they moved into a home that had no personal or historical family history for anyone of them, this gave all of them a new context to grow together in, secondly, they both found their own ways to connect with the children in a relational way. Lyn and Rose dubbed Sonia the tea lady as most nights she would offer a cup of tea. In time both girls began to offer her a "cuppa" and Lyn would jokingly say "I am the tea lady in training." "Stepmum making cuppas" for the children and John became a tradition within the family. Sonia recognized it also as a one of her languages of love. Other ways both John and Sonia built healthy relationships with the children was through mundane everyday conversation (Schrodt, 2017). For example, what did you today? How are your friends going? Tell me about your week? They also did things together as a family, such as go out for lunch on Sundays, go to church, have family dinners, always celebrate birthdays and other special events as a family. This all helped to build mutual respect between them all which positively impacted how the children responded to the new parental expectations (Brown & Robinson, 2012; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001).

Sonia reflects on what she would have done differently in establishing the stepfamily with hindsight and documented research which has given her insight. The changes would be, include more open communication as a family allowing the children to input into the family rules, boundaries and expectations, Sonia believes they did not do enough engaging in family problem solving, and allowing the children to give them some feedback on how they are all doing adjusting to the new family situation and ways they can all participate to improve the environment and situations. (Schrodt, 2017). In reflection Sonia states, "I believe if I understood how important these reflections were at the time I may still not of done it in the early days of stepfamily life due to perceiving the children's feedback as an attack on my person." These days Sonia is more open to hearing the children's concerns or issues that involve frustration towards to her. She says, "that doesn't mean I won't feel disappointment or frustration towards the comments, but it does mean I understand that my role and purpose as their stepmother is to let the children know they are not observers in this family but active participants that can contribute to the health and wellbeing of all of us."

Some research discusses a concern, which is the difficulty to embrace stepmotherhood as a part of your self-identity as it can be taken away from you as quickly as you have received it. The law in the United States does not recognize stepparents or former stepparents' rights and responsibilities to their stepchildren (Hans, 2002). Stepparents who lost their partner through death gradually decreased their contact with former stepchildren. Stepmothers who divorced had more of an abrupt decrease in contact with their stepchildren (Noël-Miller, 2013). As a biological parent that is divorced Sonia will always be a mother to her biological children. If her stepchildren's father and Sonia are not together due to death or separation her stepmother participation will change if not cease if that is the children's and existing biological parents' wishes. Sonia will always embrace the title as a part of her identity, just as she would if her children died and yet she would still describe herself self as a mother. Recent research is showing the more the stepparents who connect well relationally with the stepchild the more

likely they will be seen as kin even after a separation (Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2015). Sonia believes, for “myself to see the title and role of a stepparent as a part of my self-definition, I need to embrace it as a value, belief, and an internal commitment that is not easily altered by external influences, even if the role may look different, it will be a part of who I am forever.”

Sonia finishes this paper with a wash of emotions from reflecting on ten years of discovering more about whom she is and continues to aspire to be as a person including her role as a stepmother. Sonia states,

I open my mind and heart to the ongoing education I gain from other researchers, clinicians, my husband John, my mother Julia in which I honor for my strength to share openly and honestly, the positives and struggles that have defined the person I am today, a mother, stepmother, student, welfare worker, and wife.

There are strengths and weaknesses to using an autoethnographic approach to study families (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). For example, insider accounts of families; understanding the everyday, unexpected experiences of families, particularly when discussing unique or difficult situations like stepfamilies; and allowing the research to be more accessible to nonacademic audiences (Adams & Manning, 2015). We acknowledge that this article is about the experiences of one person and her family. This is not generalizable to other populations, but a nuanced exploration of the individual can illuminate the general. Stories can offer readers the opportunity to listen and attend, resonate with the subjects, foster reflection, and possibly begin a deepening and transformative experience (van Manen, 2016). I believe this autoethnography can offer insight for counsellors, teachers, and other practitioners working with families, as the writing gives them a personal account with a reflection that looks at the development and growth of a stepfamily alongside research that both supports and challenges this personal narrative. The other important implication to professionals this study has is to encourage the importance of listening uninterrupted to people’s stories.

As a one of the author’s writing this article I (Sonia) am declaring exactly where I sit personally in this study and further ongoing research I do on stepfamilies. I have not hidden my biases or opinions as they are laid here clearly. It also gives insights to the readers on how understanding, feeling confident and secure in one’s self-identity impacts the way the stepmother manages the challenges and changes that come with becoming a healthy stepfamily. This study has explored a small part of my journey as a stepparent adjusting to a new role that has become a part of my self-identity. I have explored the areas in my life I have had to adjust personally in a practical, emotional, and relational way to establish and develop the role of a stepmother that is working towards a healthy impact on all members of the family. I desire to continue to improve my understanding and knowledge of stepfamily life both professionally and personally. As I move forward in my doctoral studies I am not only able to reflect on my own personal experiences as an exploration tool but am able to learn from others’ experiences of living life in a stepfamily within their context and community life.

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