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Article Title:**Hapless, helpless, hopeless: An analysis of stepmothers' talk about their (male) partners****Authors Names:**

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Abstract

The identity of stepmother is, in many ways, a troubled one – constructed as ‘other’ and often associated with notions of ‘wickedness’ in literature and everyday talk. This paper reports findings from a study on the difficulties faced by stepmothers and how they use talk about their (male) partners, often constructing men as hapless, helpless or hopeless, to repair their ‘troubled’ identities. The data were collected from a web forum for stepmothers based in the UK and thirteen semi-structured face-to-face interviews with stepmothers. The analysis took a synthetic narrative-discursive methodological approach, underpinned by feminist theory with particular attention to the discourses that were drawn on by participants and the constraints that these imposed. This paper presents these findings in relation to three constructions of their partners through which repair work was attempted: *men as in need of rescue*; *men as flawed fathers*; and *men as damaged*. The paper concludes with some

suggestions for supporting stepmothers by challenging dominant narratives around families in talk, in the media and in government and institutional policies.

Keywords:

stepmothers, stepfamilies, marriage, parenting, web forums, narrative-discursive analysis

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Hapless, helpless, hopeless: An analysis of stepmothers' talk about their (male) partners

In twenty-first century Britain stepfamilies are numerically common but difficult to define since they may cross household boundaries. This has meant that stepmother families, which are often non-residential, are rarely included in research in the area with very limited literature considering the perspectives of stepmothers themselves. At the same time, there have been consistent research findings, across decades, suggesting greater stress for stepmothers than stepfathers (e.g. Bernstein, 1989; Feijten, Boyle, Graham & Gayle, 2011; Fine, 1995; Nielsen, 1999; Smith, 1990). In the current neoliberal climate demands on parents, including fathers who do not live with the biological mother of their children, may contribute to particular stresses for stepmother families. Drawing on a larger research project into the experience of stepmothering (Roper, 2017), this paper considers the particular troubles with which stepmothers must contend in order to construct viable identities that do not position them within the more traditional notions of 'wicked stepmother' or 'gold digger'. To this end, we analyse the discourses that were drawn on by participants and the constraints that these imposed. Specifically, the empirical focus is on how stepmothers' talk about their (male) partners often constructed these men as hapless, helpless or hopeless.

Although common, stepfamilies trouble the traditional notion of family because they are often multiply located with children travelling between different homes, they involve more than two adults in an apparently parental role and they are not reliant on biology. They just don't look like a 'normal' family. Definitions of stepfamilies are consequently complex, making it difficult, if not impossible, to produce an accurate picture of their prevalence. This likely reflects the fact that most children whose parents do not cohabit, live primarily with their biological mother (Kalmijn, 2015) so stepfamilies formed with the father, who re-partners more quickly and more often (McCarthy, 2007), can remain unidentified as such.

Moreover, some individuals may self-define as members of a stepfamily when others might not define them in this way while some might not define themselves as stepfamily members despite meeting definitional criteria set by others. This is particularly pertinent for the study of stepmothers as, for instance, based on their own definition, a study by Hadfield and Nixon (2013) found that around ten percent of 'stepfamilies' did not identify themselves as such and these non-self-identifying families were more likely to be stepmother families.

Stepfamilies, particularly in the early stages of their formation, are part of a family network where much needs to be done by both biological and stepparents to establish new ways of enacting family and parenting across households. As Philip (2014) found, this could offer opportunities to rethink existing gendered patterns of care. These gendered patterns dominate current conceptualisations of parenting and are as relevant to stepfamilies as they are to other familial forms. Broadly speaking, ideas of parenting are highly gendered; by parent we often mean mother, mothers are held particularly responsible for the way their children turn out, maternal love is seen as natural, and mothering is seen as the route to emotional fulfilment for women (Athán & Reel, 2015; Burman, 2016; Marshall, 1991). The late twentieth century saw the further development of the modern ideal of a constantly attentive mother (Hays, 1996). 'Intensive parenting', originally coined by Hays (1996) as 'intensive mothering', describes a child-centred approach that requires not only considerable time and energy but also the acquisition of expert knowledge (Shirani, Henwood & Coltart, 2012). These, historic and more recent, gendered patterns are instrumental in how motherhood is seen, understood and judged (Burman, 2016; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). As Hays (1996, p.156) argues, the assumption of women's 'natural' caring abilities does not take account of the 'circumstances, power relations and interests that have made women primarily responsible for mothering'. These issues of gender and parenting provide the current context for stepfamily life.

Within this context, there is little research looking specifically at the experiences of stepmothers and research on non-residential stepmothers is particularly sparse. In fact, much of the previous research on remarriage and stepfamilies has focussed on the impact of marital breakdown and remarriage on child development, rather than mothering itself, with more studies of stepfather families than stepmother families. (Coleman, Ganong & Fine 2000; Ganong & Coleman 2018).

In this sense, stepmothers are left to find their own way. Taylor and Littleton (2005) have argued that novices in specific contexts have particular difficulties as they explore and construct a new identity, making their talk a useful site to understand how such identities are taken up. Stepmothers, as novices entering new relationships and taking on new roles, are attempting to construct new viable identities and are unusually positioned in a number of ways. Their families do not fit the biological, nuclear family stereotype and their own biographies do not conform to traditional, socially accepted life narratives for women (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). The children most often pre-date the relationship and stepmothers are not part of the planning or birth of the child, nor are they likely to be involved in early care. Moreover, whilst stepmothers are subject to many of the expectations of mothering identities as discussed above, they must also contend with the fact that their very identity as a mother can be called into question. Additionally, in both literature and everyday talk, they are commonly associated with the notion of the wicked stepmother. These issues constitute a set of troubles with which stepmothers must contend. As such their identities may be what Taylor and Littleton (2006) refer to as ‘troubled’. Taylor (2005) argues that this trouble can take two forms; these identities can be “negatively valued or ‘not creditable’” and be challengeable by others as implausible or inconsistent with other identities that are claimed. These identities are therefore difficult to construct and difficult to reconcile. For stepmothers, identities such as ‘good mother’ and ‘stepmother’, are in tension,

which results in a paucity of discourses that resonate with these women's own lives and, as mentioned, those that are available are often associated with undesirable identities such as that of 'the wicked stepmother'. As Taylor and Littleton (2006) suggest, troubled identities need repairing and this repair often takes the form of discursive work.

This empirical study uses the synthetic narrative-discursive methodological approach developed by Taylor and Littleton (2006), which is underpinned by feminist theory, to explore the identity work undertaken by stepmothers. It is therefore concerned both with developing a greater understanding of diverse stepmothering experiences and with considering the ways in which stepmothers make sense of these.

Method

Data collection

A blended data collection approach was taken to maximise diversity. Two sources were used: postings over a one-month period on an online web forum for stepmothers and strategically sampled face-to-face semi-structured interviews with thirteen stepmothers all of whom had adult stepchildren. Participants reported varied marital status, residence of the children, ages of stepchildren, length of time as a stepmother and complexity of the stepfamily. These are the factors that have been identified by previous research as pertinent to the stepmothering experience (Brown & Manning, 2009; Doodson & Davies, 2014; Fine, 1995; Johnson et al, 2008).

Forum

At the time of data collection, the forum had approximately 1300 members and operated mainly as a support group for stepmothers, particularly those early on in the role. The biographical information provided by forum members suggested considerable diversity in respect of potentially pertinent features as mentioned above. The extent to which online

identities are grounded in offline identities is subject to debate, however, for the purposes of this paper, given its discursive approach, we would contend that, as discourses are used in the performance of those identities, the analysis remains appropriate. Moreover, as the biographical information provided by those on the web forum reflects the identity positions being taken up by participants it is indicative of the diversity of such positions. For the purposes of this research web forum extracts are quoted exactly as written by participants with contextual information provided in square brackets if necessary.

Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured and began by asking the participant to tell her story (as a stepmother) using the following words ‘Can you tell me about your family and how you became a stepmother?’ Participants often responded to this question by describing the progression of their relationship with their partner and his children. Most often there was little further need for questions or prompts and each interview lasted between 45 and 105 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analogously to the forum texts, extracts taken from interviews are lightly punctuated so as to minimise any potential assumptions or distortions in meaning.

Ethical considerations

This research was carried out in compliance with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society and the American Psychological Association and received ethical approval from the researchers’ institution. Although the forum is accessible to the public, we were concerned to be as transparent as possible and to gain consent from participants, as far as possible. We discussed the proposed study with the website owner, who felt that forum members would be supportive of the need for research into stepmothering. With their agreement we therefore posted a message on the site advising users that the research would

be taking place during a specified period of one month. This allowed users to avoid posting, if they chose, during the period of research and thus provided the tacit consent of those who continued to post. Participants were also offered the opportunity to contact the researchers by email for further information. None did so.

As we have already indicated, the interest in this research is in patterns across talk rather than treating individuals as representatives of types. For this reason, this research follows Taylor and Littleton's (2012) convention of identifying participants by number. The reasoning for this is that the use of pseudonyms may imply specific social categories (e.g. gender, class and age) and can suggest that the participant in some way speaks for such a collective identity. For the purposes of this paper, sources are identified using numbers with P indicating an interview participant and W indicating a web forum participant. As this analysis considers patterns that are found across the body of data, extracts are provided as illustrations of those patterns.

Design

The synthetic narrative-discursive approach developed by Taylor and Littleton (2006) itself draws on both the synthetic discursive approach proposed by Wetherell (1998) and on a form of narrative analysis (see Wetherell 1998; Taylor & Littleton, 2006 for a full discussion of these terms). With this approach, the analyst does not look for an extended biographical account as in uninflected narrative analysis. Although attentive to a life narrative, this can be quite minimally constructed in details such as brief references to the past or the future (Taylor, 2005). Once data collection was complete, the web forum and the interview data were combined prior to undertaking the detailed narrative-discursive analysis. This required paying careful attention to the details of the talk with "rigorous reading, re-reading and sorting to ensure that all the transcribed material is considered" (Taylor & Littleton, 2006, p.

29). This comprised of two iterative tasks. One was the search for commonalities within and across sources to identify how those discourses, already dominant in the UK context, were drawn upon. The other, requires the researcher to consider the context within which the discourses are found in the text to make sense of what is being accomplished and what ‘trouble’ is being addressed.

Analysis

During the analysis we noticed at once that much of the talk was specifically about the stepmother’s partner, who was usually male. Content analysis of the data confirmed that talk about family members was dominated by discussion of partners and their shortcomings. Some previous research has identified support from a partner as an issue of some contention for stepmothers (e.g. Orchard & Solberg, 1999). However, the partnership relationship also has the potential to protect against psychological distress (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012) and support better relationships with stepchildren as well as greater ease in the stepmother role (Gosselin & Gosselin, 2016). With this in mind, and given feminist attention to issues of gender, together with suggestions from the literature that gender is pertinent to the difficulties faced by stepmothers (Nielsen, 1999), we chose to focus on participants' talk about their male partners.

Whilst men were positioned in a variety of different ways, this analysis focusses on the discursive construction of men as ‘needy’ as it allowed participants to attempt to repair the troubled stepmother identity by positioning themselves positively in relation to their partners. In this dataset, the discussion of partners was used to construct men as ‘needy’ in three ways; unlucky (hapless), requiring help (helpless), or in some way incapable (hopeless). We explore how these discourses offer ways to enact repair through three key constructions:

- Men as in need of rescue
- Men as flawed fathers
- Men as damaged

In need of rescue

We start with an extract that features rescue from financial difficulties. This seems particularly important as money and legal problems were prominent, especially in the web forum discussions, where relationships were often new and children younger (see also Coleman et al., 2001). Participant P13 began the interview by giving a brief history followed by this first extract:

Extract 1. Interview with Participant P13

P13. So it was a kind of a fairly gradual process building a relationship, um, and it was quite difficult for me to build the relationship with his children to start with I think you know I was quite wary that there would be perhaps an element of resentment

She then went on to the difficulties there had been in building relationships including feeling that her own son was being ignored by her stepchildren. She continued:

Extract 2. Interview with Participant P13

P13. ...[my partner] and I moved in together, fairly quickly actually, he had financial difficulties after his wife died he was trying to run the business um with three children.

The final part of Extract 2 draws on hegemonic gender constructions. The partner had financial difficulties because his wife had died, and he was trying to run the business and take care of the children. Implicit here is the understanding that taking care of the children had been the wife's job and his breadwinner role is compromised by having to take this on. However, this understanding of why the financial difficulties arose became more complex as the interview continued. The participant went on to describe her partner as 'very trusting, quite naïve at times' and this was then reinforced by the more emphatic phrase 'very naïve, very trusting of people'. She suggested that this had led to him being 'taken advantage of' and again this phrase is emphasised by repetition and led to the awful consequence that he 'practically had a nervous breakdown'. So, both financial and emotional difficulties are shown to arise not only because the loss of his wife renders him as both breadwinner and carer for his children ('run the business um with three children'), but also because he is weak in being trusting and naïve so that he is 'taken advantage of'. This is a construction that shows him as neither enacting a hegemonic version of masculinity as financial provider for his children, nor as the 'new father' (Marzano, Capdevila, Ciclitira & Lazard, 2009) offering both financial and emotional support to his children.

A further extract from the same interview demonstrates how the stepmother comes to the rescue when her partner can't provide financially for his family...

Extract 3. Interview with Participant P13.

P13. Because it was very difficult um, so we moved in together, we had to get find somewhere with at least four bedrooms which was quite a struggle, so I took on a big loan.

Taking the biographical narrative across these extracts we would note the tension between the description of a gradual process of relationship building with the children and the later statement that she and her partner moved in together ‘fairly quickly’, which suggests the purpose for the rescue narrative that follows. It functions as prolepsis; rhetorical work that offers a justification and defence of her actions against an assumed criticism (Billig, 1987; 1991) thus working to repair a potentially ‘troubled’ identity. This is needed because, for a woman in the situation of forming a complex stepfamily (where both partners have children prior to the relationship), the expected narratives of relationship formation and mothering are not echoed in her experience. She could therefore anticipate criticism as a bad mother for failing to adequately mother her own child who she suggested was being ignored by her partner’s children and who she also said was ‘only a little boy really’ (Arendell, 2000; Christopher, 2012). She could also anticipate criticism because, by moving in together ‘too quickly’, she has failed to put the children’s needs first, as the idealised selfless mother would do (Forna, 1999; Hays, 1996; Miller, 2007) and so risks being identified as a ‘wicked stepmother’.

Rescue from both financial and emotional difficulties also feature in the next extract posted by Participant W1. After a brief introduction the stepmother explains how she met her partner, who was separated but still living in the same house as his ex:

Extract 4. Post by W1

Over this time period, she has made his life a misery. Whilst they were leading separate lives in the same house, she wanted to maintain control over every aspect of his life. I watched his emotional health deteriorate more and more rapidly, as he was unable to cope with the situation, but unable to move out due to the financial constraints

I felt that the only escape for him was to offer and discuss the possibility of him moving in with me. I have a small 2 bed house not far away. Their plan all along was to go their separate ways and have total joint (50/50) custody of their son. I therefore knew that this offer would involve me clearing out my small study and turning it into a bedroom for his son to stay every other week.

He was totally grateful for my offer, and still tells me so.

The idea of financial rescue in these extracts inverts the normative gender binary. It offers a very strong and powerful position for the stepmother in contrast to the presumed weakness of her partner. Access to power is important because throughout this data, and in other work, stepmothers often express feelings of powerlessness (Roper & Capdevila, 2010) since they live with children who they did not choose and are not theirs. Moreover, they likely have little control over decisions about financial support for stepchildren and ex-wives, when children visit or how they behave (e.g. Jones, 2004; Henry & McCue, 2009).

It is also apparent that rescue is not easy; it involves sacrifice for the stepmother. In Extract 3 the use of the expression 'a big loan' emphasises the exceptional nature of what she is doing. Similarly, in Extract 4, it is clear that the stepmother is giving something up (her study) in order to rescue her partner. That this is recognised by him as a sacrifice is evidenced by his being 'totally grateful'. This rescue narrative then offers a powerful position for the stepmother as she takes financial control. However, she also invokes the idea of sacrifice (potentially powerful in itself) which serves to mitigate the idea of the controlling wicked stepmother and is more in line with gendered notions of caring and, particularly, of the selfless mother. So, although in some ways this rescue narrative inverts the normative gender binary it does not necessarily challenge it. This is further demonstrated later in the interview with Participant P13 when, having told the interviewer that for many years her stepchildren

were unaware that she owned the house and paid all the bills, she explains why she hadn't told them.

Extract 5. Interview with Participant P13

P13. I understood and I wouldn't have said anything to them because I think that was you know [my husband] was still trying to be the provider you know that was his...

I. Difficult isn't it?

P13. Yeah.

I. to do it without undermining the position for him, yeah.

In this extract the participant and the interviewer co-construct the breadwinner model as normative and acknowledge that it is important for the partner's identity that the stepmother's sacrifice is hidden. This understanding is supported by research that points to the continuing salience of the economic provider/breadwinner identity for men (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006; Shirani, Henwood & Coltart, 2012).

As well as offering a more powerful position for a stepmother, the idea of financial rescue functions in another way to repair the identity of stepmother. As second wives or partners, stepmothers are often significantly younger than their partners (Crohn, 2006) and can therefore be seen as 'gold diggers' marrying (an older man) for money. Indeed, this was referenced by a number of participants drawing on their personal experience as stepdaughters. This sometimes involved the use of disparaging nicknames and phrases such as 'these women', which served to differentiate the speakers from such (gold-digging) stepmothers allowing them to claim a more admirable identity. In this research, by offering a reparative narrative of financial rescue, a stepmother pre-empts an implied or anticipated

criticism on these grounds and emphasise her own identity as a financial asset rather than a 'gold digger'.

Flawed fathers

The neoliberal philosophy which has taken hold over the past twenty years in the UK and elsewhere emphasises individual responsibility, self-management and management of risk (Phoenix, 2004) and has produced a corollary change in the demands placed on parents (Featherstone, 2010). This has included the development of 'intensive parenting' (Hoffman, 2010) and the increasing use of the word parent as a verb. Parenting has thus moved from being relational to being re-framed as a job requiring particular skills and expertise (Gillies, 2006). This requirement places considerable pressure on parents making the role a source of risk and anxiety (Phoenix, 2004). This may be a particular pressure for some types of parent with its tendency to marginalise any family that is 'other' than the normative heterosexual, white, middle class, able-bodied, nuclear and two-parent (Gillies, 2006).

Additionally, as previously noted, changing understandings of contemporary masculinity and fatherhood require men to become involved and caring fathers in addition to providing for their children economically (e.g. Dermott, 2008; Marzano et al., 2009; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Although, as Dermott (2008) argues, there is still a gap between the discourse of new fatherhood and men's actual participation in child care. Such requirements may be particularly onerous for fathers who do not live with their children full-time. These fathers may also be stigmatised by political discourse that shames fathers who do not live full-time with their children (Toynbee, 2011) and positions stepfamilies as 'other', thereby creating a difficult environment that is unlikely to be helpful for relations between parents who are separated. Indeed, as Segal (1990) suggested, whilst it is important to involve men in childcare as part of a struggle for equality in the home, there is a risk that if the importance of

fatherhood is emphasised this also emphasises the importance of the heterosexual nuclear family, again constructing the stepfamily (and alternative family forms) as 'other'.

With this context in mind we turn to consider an extract where talk of parenting is sometimes framed as 'advising' a partner how to parent his children. In this interview, the discussion was about suggestions the stepmother had made as to how he should parent his daughter.

Extract 6. Interview with Participant P1

I. But would he usually agree with you?

P1. I think so yes, yeah. I mean what I've said about the way he was with her, I suppose some of that was to do with, and I'm sure this is very common to people in his position, not wanting to discipline her about not discipline but just setting boundaries really or making such a big fuss about anything so that everything was perfect for [his daughter] 'cos I think he was just scared she wouldn't want to come again...

In research with mothers looking at constructions of fathers' roles in childcare, Petrassi (2012) identified a construction of fathers as 'shirking' (in contrast with the selfless mother). However, in Extract 6, although the stepmother here does construct the father as failing in his parenting responsibilities, this is not seen as shirking but rather as understandable. The participant explains that it is not just her husband, this failure to provide discipline and set boundaries is common to people in his position as a part-time parent, and he does it for the understandable reason that he is scared of losing his daughter. In this way she is positioned as advisor while her husband, as the biological father, maintains agency.

Sometimes stepmothers take a more direct role than simply advising their partner. The following extracts are from responses to a thread started by a stepmother whose stepchildren were living with her full-time and who was looking for advice.

Extract 8. Post by W57

It is hard, you shouldn't have to have any responsibility - but ultimately you are in the 'mum' role whether you like it or not... OH [Other Half] is a bloke and they just tend to end up causing more problems if you leave it all up to them, they need our support!

Extract 9. Post by W77

... you have to forget the 'his kid his problem' approach for your own sanity. From a personal perspective no man (certainly not my OH [Other Half] anyway) notices or even feels as frustrated by certain actions/behaviours as I do. As difficult as it is sometimes it is easier and more beneficial to take control of certain situations

Extract 10. Post by W67

You will be required to make a lot of sacrifices because you married this man who has a child. He won't get how hard it is for you, but *we* do.

In these extracts men are constructed as hopeless and in need of support in relation to caring for their children; 'blokes tend to end up causing more problems if you leave it all up to them'. However, there is no challenge to the status quo, as we see in Extract 8 'you're in the mum role whether you like it or not'. Similarly, this will require selflessness as participant W67 says in Extract 10 'you will be required to make a lot of sacrifices'. This draws on the discourse of an idealized unselfish mother and suggests a gendered expectation,

within the forum discussion, that childcare is a woman's responsibility and that 'the mum role' will be taken up by the stepmother. There is a tension then between not taking up a mothering identity ('you shouldn't have to have any responsibility') and a normative gendered discourse ('the mum role'). This tension creates 'trouble' for the stepmother that is addressed by constructing a partner as flawed thus justifying the stepmother's positioning in the role of 'mother'.

Gendered expectations of the stepmother taking up a mothering role can also come directly from the children as is evident in the following extract from the interview with participant P4. Here she is telling a story about her stepsons prior to her marriage.

Extract 11. Interview with Participant P4

P4. And one of the things they said was 'when you get ..., when we're with [P4] will we have meat, will we have biscuits?'

I. [Laughs] So they were looking forward to an improvement in the cuisine?

Here, as the interviewer notes, participant P4 indicates that her stepsons expected an improvement in the catering when she married their father. This constructs the father as less competent than the stepmother in feeding his children and positions her in a mothering role with both the competence and responsibility for ensuring that the children are properly fed.

These constructions of men as 'understandably hopeless' in their role as fathers is reminiscent of Sunderland's (2000) finding that, in parenting texts, men were positioned as 'mother's bumbling assistant'. And of course, this leaves mothers (and stepmothers) positioned as the main parent, 'the selfless mother', reinscribing the gender binary. Whilst this identity is problematic in many ways, it is arguably a more superficially positive and less troubled identity than that of stepmother.

Damaged

In this section we turn to consider some extracts that construct men as damaged. This is a particular type of helplessness or hopelessness for which, while the man is shown to have some responsibility, someone else – usually a woman – is also held accountable. The first extract is from the web forum and is entitled ‘We're separating’.

Extract 13. Post by W76.

Last night I made a decision that DH [Darling Husband] & I will need to separate, at a minimum we need to live in separate home as I can't continue with the situation. It feels as if I had a moment of clarity – DH [Darling Husband] is not 'fit for purpose' he has too many issues to deal with and those issues (BM [Biological Mother] & SD [Stepdaughter]) are draining my energy.

I kept a diary of all the days I've felt sad, stressed and emotional and the impact on my life is too high. We made poor choices all driven by BM [Biological Mother] & SD [Stepdaughter] and DH's [Darling Husband's] ability to put his head in the sand.

In this extract the stepmother describes her husband as so damaged that he is not ‘fit for purpose’, a term that is perhaps more usually applied to inanimate objects and works to dehumanise him thus supporting her proposition that they separate. The mention of a diary as a record of ‘all the days I’ve felt sad, stressed and emotional’ adds evidence and thus weight to the veracity of the claim that she is suffering in the situation. This supports her decision to end the relationship, or at least to live separately. Additionally, although the stepmother takes some responsibility for the situation when she says, ‘We made poor choices’, she also attributes blame to her husband for his hopelessness in ‘putting his head in the sand’ and to

his ex-wife and the stepdaughter. By discursively attributing blame to the ex-wife she is constructed as damaging to him. This attribution of blame to the ex-wife for damage to a man is frequently invoked. This can be important for the 'troubled' identity of stepmother, who is by definition never 'the first' yet faces a culture in which there are normative narratives of love as 'one and only', a meeting of soulmates (Leslie & Morgan, 2011) and of marriage and children as the culmination of a romantic story (Shumway, 2003; Sternberg, 1988). With the attribution of blame on the ex-wife these narratives are both resisted and subverted. The ex-wife is constructed as a 'false love' and this opens up a position for the stepmother to offer care to repair the 'trouble' and to demonstrate her rightful place as 'number one'.

Yet it is not always ex-wives or partners who are blamed for the damage sustained by men as mentioned above. The partner's mother may also be held responsible. The following two extracts are responding to a post by another stepmother complaining about her partner's failure to provide for them financially.

Extract 14. Post by W22

He seems to have came [sic] from very spoilt stock and this is such a shame I think in some mothers.

My OH [Other Half] was spoilt in the fact that his mother did hardly anything with him and his two younger brothers then when she remarried and along came the baby.

Extract 15. Post by W31

He sounds like a child in a man's body. His willy works ok - so he's got 4 kids - but he doesn't have the emotional intelligence to see that he has responsibility that goes with this.

Mummy is bailing him out. He's immature, he can't stand on his own two feet...he

can't be arsed to get out there and earn some money and help support you and his kids.

Such mother blaming (Caplan, 2010) draws on psychological discourses that emphasise the centrality of the mother-child relationship (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). These offer highly gendered ideas of parenting and hold mothers responsible for the way their children turn out (Athán & Reel, 2015; Burman, 2016; Marshall 1991); mothers are thus accountable for these damaged men. Here we also see reference to men as lacking in 'emotional intelligence' as alluded to earlier and in this last extract this is linked to lack of maturity. Damage here has been caused by his mother 'bailing him out' so that he fails to mature and therefore remains 'a child in a man's body'. This construction of 'a child in a man's body' is emphasised by the focus on the part of his body that has unquestionably reached maturity since it has allowed him to father children.

Constructing men as lacking maturity and not fully responsible adults, positions them as incapable. This construction leaves stepmothers positioned as needing to enact care and to repair the damage. Perhaps it also allows them to be positioned as the mature and responsible partner in the relationship. This is the case even, as in Extract 13, where it acts as a justification for ending the relationship.

The invocation of men as damaged also reflects the way that families are seen as damaged by divorce, for example Visher and Visher (1979) describe stepfamilies as 'born of loss' and, of course, much research focusses on damage to the children of divorced parents. Even when it is not the result of divorce, a stepfamily troubles the romantic narrative of boy meets girl and lives happily ever after and it troubles the ideal of the biological nuclear family.

Discussion

Stepfamilies do not fit with stereotypical notions of family as biological and nuclear and stepmothers' experiences do not, in a number of ways, parallel the 'traditional' narratives of women's life stories. For these reasons such families have to work to establish new ways of enacting family and parenting, often across households. This can offer opportunities to rethink gendered patterns of care and, discursively, to either challenge or reify gendered constructions of parenting. Stepmothers may also have to work at establishing identities that are troubled and difficult to construct since they can be in conflict with culturally available discourses and therefore in need of repair. In this paper, we have suggested constructing men as in some way 'needy' opens up particular positions for the speakers which offers ways to enact such repair to the troubled stepmother identity.

We have identified three specific ways in which men may be constructed by stepmothers as hapless, helpless or hopeless. However, these are complex families in varied and often complex situations that are not easily reducible to such simple divisions. We would not wish to suggest that these constructions are the only ones that have (or indeed could have) been drawn from these data, or that they are entirely discrete. Indeed, we see the three as overlapping and interwoven. In the rescue narrative male partners are constructed as helpless in failing to live up to a hegemonic masculine role as breadwinner and therefore to be in need of financial rescue. This overlaps with constructs of men as damaged since such damage reflects a failure to function fully as a father and partner. Additionally, discourses of men as hopeless at managing relationships are closely linked to constructions of men as inadequate or flawed as fathers.

Across these constructions we have proposed that the presentation of men as hapless, helpless or hopeless can offer a more nuanced position of power and control for the stepmother and that this can be an important repair in a situation where a woman feels that

she has little control over key aspects of her life, including the existence of her stepchildren. We have also discussed the ways that talk demonstrating a stepmother's financial contribution and sacrifice acts to counter an anticipated accusation of being a 'gold-digger' or a 'wicked stepmother'. By framing men as in need of rescue, flawed as fathers or damaged, stepmothers can offer justifications for actions for which they fear criticism, particularly for not putting the children first, for example, by moving the couple relationship forward too quickly or even for ending the relationship. A further trouble for the stepmothering identity is that it does not fit with normative romantic scripts. Stepmothers are never the first and face a constant reminder of their partner's past; his previous relationship(s), in the form of his children. With this in mind, it is apparent that constructions of ex-wives and partners as responsible for causing damage to a man, or for leaving him in need of rescue, counter an idea of the ex-wife or partner as a true love and thus open this position for the stepmother to demonstrate the sacrifices she has made to justify such a claim.

In this paper we have shown that women often find themselves positioned in a way that makes it difficult to resist taking up gendered roles such as managing emotional work or taking on mothering tasks and responsibilities and that, whilst men are often framed as inadequate in these areas, this can be constructed, not as criticism but, as understandable in the circumstances. So, although, at times, there may be some inversion of 'traditional' gender roles, this is very limited and constructions of men as hapless, helpless and hopeless offer few opportunities for men or women to challenge the heterosexual gender binary. This frequently leaves stepmothers with difficult roles and yet they continue to make sacrifices in their attempts to care for partners, children and stepchildren, often with limited recognition of, or support for, their own needs. Indeed, although previous research has highlighted the importance, for stepmothers, of support from partners (e.g. Gosselin & Gosselin, 2016) it is clear that the discourses discussed here are not helpful in achieving this. It is evident from the

data, as has been claimed in previous research (e.g. Bernstein, 1989; Nielsen, 1999; Johnson et al., 2008), that lack of support can result in considerable distress for women.

By highlighting the complex ways in which stepmothers work at repairing this troubled identity we hope that this research will be useful for stepmothers and their partners and for those supporting stepfamilies. This research thus contributes to the stepmothering literature by focusing on the ways in which the role is embedded in societal discourses, rather than relying on individualistic explanations that look only to specific attributes of the stepmother herself. This contextual analysis of stepmothering draws attention, for instance, to issues of finances and other resources that could serve to inform policy and official support for non-normative families. What this current research also indicates is that one way in which we could support these women and those they live with is through a rejection of those ‘traditional’ narratives around gender and families that demand so much of women whilst making it impossible to fully manage the troubled identity of stepmother. Most importantly, it is crucial that these narratives around stepmothering, currently embedded in everyday discourse, be challenged when encountered – be it in talk, in the media or in government and institutional policies.

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