

(M)other?: Stepmothers' use of a web forum



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What I will discuss today

- ▶ Some background and context
 - ▶ why study stepmothers
 - ▶ Where do these data come from
- ▶ The benefits of a digital space as a source of social support for stepmothers
- ▶ The potential of a digital space to reinforce gender and mothering stereotypes and gendered practices
- ▶ The potential of a digital space to construct some women as 'other'
- ▶ Some concluding discussion – how can 'mother or other' be disrupted?

The background and context

Draws on a wider study of
the stepmothering
experience

Why study stepmothers?

Narrative-discursive
approach

Exploring how stepmothers
negotiate troubled identities



Data sources

- ▶ Semi-structured interviews
- ▶ Web forum for stepmothers – the focus of today's talk
- ▶ Why use the web forum?
 - ▶ Access to a large (and fairly diverse) group of stepmothers
 - ▶ Importance of the internet as a source of information, advice and social support for parents (Madge & O'Connor, 2006) – especially new parents and in the context of intensive parenting
 - ▶ Many parenting websites (some include forums) e.g. Mumsnet, Netmums, Justparents – some include information for stepfamilies

Support for stepmothers

Stepmothering has been found to be stressful (e.g. Doodson, 2014; Doodson & Davies, 2014; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011) and this I suggest that this is related to the 'troubles' that stepmothers face

- ▶ the lack of power and control that stepmothers may feel:
- ▶ the idealisation of motherhood together with and in opposition to) the wicked stepmother myth.
- ▶ the difficulties of being a second wife.
- ▶ the constant reminders of the partner's past in the form of their children and ex-wife or partner.
- ▶ the extent to which they can or should take up mothering or mother like roles.
- ▶ the tension that exists for stepmothers between a romantic narrative and the demands of stepfamily life.
- ▶ the problem, for stepmothers, of justifying their relationship with their partner despite the difficulties they face.

Support for stepmothers

- ▶ Good support from a partner can offer a protective effect against depression (Shapiro & Stewart, 2012)
- ▶ BUT Stepmothers may feel unsupported by their partners and this may contribute to the stresses of the role (e.g. Church, 1999; Orchard & Solberg, 1999)
- ▶ Social support is important in helping stepmothers to cope with the stresses that they often face (e.g. Ceglian & Gardner, 2000).
- ▶ Stepmothers may seek new sources of social support when they feel 'othered' because friends do not understand (Craig, Harvey-Knowles & Johnson, 2012) (and this can happen on some parenting websites)

Support for stepmothers from the web forum

- ▶ Advice and information
- ▶ Venting
- ▶ Empathic responses

Advice and information

- ▶ Legal and financial advice
- ▶ Recipes and activities
- ▶ 'Managing' your partner
- ▶ Dealing with his ex (the biological mother of your stepchildren)
- ▶ Dealing with difficult behaviour of the stepchildren
- ▶ Coping with your own emotions

Examples: Venting

Post by W83

Well SS [stepson] is here!!!!!! He sniffs and wipes his nose on his sleeve, so I tell him to get a tissue...!IGNORES ME. I cook his favourite dinner and eats like a pig, I tell him NOT TO SHOVEL IT ALL IN IN ONE GO..... he storms away from the table, so I tell him to sit down until he's finished his mouth full..... he does eventually! Then we get the thrust out bottom chin all night..... who am I in my own home. I feel I get trodden on by him and his IT of a mother!
Sorry... but **where else can I vent all this without going mad myself?**
Thank you forum....

Post by W57

But **being able to rant and seek support and advice on here has helped me feel sane again**, as I have very few friends that understand my situation, everyone's attitude tends to be "well just end it then, I wouldn't take all that on!" ::).

Examples: Empathic response

Post by W1

I get on fine with his son, but I must admit, I feel the strain sometimes. It has totally turned my life upside down, to the extent where **I sometimes feel like a stranger in my own home**, and I'm struggling to cope at times.

Post by W57

I took my OH [Other Half] in early on in our relationship and he moved into my one bedroom flat whilst still paying full mortgage and bills on the marital home that BM [Biological Mother] and 3 skids [stepkids] still lived in (and they were still married). I sacrificed a lot for my OH [Other Half] and the skids[stepkids], **so I can sympathise, and have often felt like an alien in my own home**

Reinforcing gender and mothering stereotypes and gendered practices

- ▶ Slowness of progress towards equality in household chores and childcare
- ▶ Many household jobs are generated by the children so issues of responsibility for these may be especially pertinent in stepfamilies.
- ▶ Here it might be expected that the biological parent has greater responsibility for any 'work' related to their children.
- ▶ So that gendered norms may be resisted or re-negotiated - or at least not be easily invoked without discussion or consideration
- ▶ These data have demonstrated that such resistance or re-negotiation can be difficult and may rarely, therefore, be achieved
- ▶ Heterosexual stepmothers carry a greater burden of household work than their partners, just as much research has demonstrated to be the case in other families (e.g. Lyonette, 2015)

Reinforcing gender and mothering stereotypes and gendered practices

Post by W4.

One of my pet hates: that fanny I'm married to not rinsing the bubbles out of the bath after his child has been in it. He just leaves them to dry in leaving that vile scum at the bottom of the bath that I then have to scrub (because of course in 5 years of living together that c*nt has never once cleaned a bathroom!). I've said time and time again to rinse the bubbles out as it creates extra work for me if he doesn't. I just went to the loo and guess what, of course f*cking bath full of bubbles. It took me 20 minutes to rinse them out! ARRRGGHHHHH!! RAGE! >:(>:(>:(>:(

Post by W81.

Personally I'd be telling your SD [step-daughter] and/or OH [other half] to tidy it up. Sometimes I tidy up after SS [stepson], sometimes I don't, depends on my mood. He needs to learn to clean up after himself and if you don't tell them they won't learn.

Post by W34.

I agree with [W81]. It depends what mood I'm in, **but mostly I will clean up because I know full well that OH [other half] won't!** But sometimes I ask SS [stepson] to as well. I kind of see it as a given that things will get messy when there's a kid around, that's just what happens, so I've never really cared that much. However if SS [stepson] goes out of his way to make a mess deliberately, then there's no way I'm going to clear it up!

Reinforcing gender and mothering stereotypes and gendered practices

Post by W57

Despite only being a week and a half into being a fulltimer, I can obviously sympathise. 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**, not [sic] matter how much you try to stop it!! 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!

Post by W77

I suppose there is one thing I would say, sometimes I think as a F/T [Full-time] stepfamily 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

Post by W67

It's like having a job where even when you leave the office, you're still on call. You can't just totally relax and forget about it. That responsibility is always there hanging over your head. It's a huge life changing event and it takes an adjustment period to learn how to cope with it. 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. Keep posting, honey. We're here for you.

Constructing some women as 'other'

- ▶ In this study, constructions of biological mothers were rarely positive and this was most evident and most strongly expressed on the web forum
- ▶ They were often described using pejorative adjectives such as 'nutter', 'loony', 'nightmare', 'lazy', 'vile', 'evil', 'irresponsible' and 'manipulative'.
- ▶ There were many suggestions that biological mothers can be harmful to their children
- ▶ In summary they were constructed as 'Mad, Bad and Dangerous'

Constructing some women as 'other' Mad

Post by W86

I have always said that I didn't want any children and so knowing that being a step mother would be hard I thought long and hard before committing to a relationship with OH [Other Half] (even though I was **crazy** about him from the moment I saw him :-)

After talking a little about what the two stepchildren are like she goes on to say:

BM [Biological Mother] very much likes to get her own way and thinks nothing of canceling our weekends at the last minute but goes **crazy** if we try moving it with plenty of notice.

Constructing some women as 'other' Mad

Post by: W76

Thanks again - This is such a sensible forum, why is it that SM [**Stepmothers**] are **so much more balanced**. I imagine if I posted on other sites with MUM in the name..DH [Darling Husband] would be labelled controlling!! Seems to be a response to everything, oh and that **Mums are divine creatures who don't make mistakes**.

Constructing some women as 'other' Bad

Post by W76

When I started the journey of stepmum, many years ago, I was so positive (*I wasn't even the cause of the breakup - she had affairs!*) My thinking was - "Yes the BM [Biological Mother] is bitter & angry, often after a breakup it takes years to move on. Time was on our side, she wouldn't/couldn't stay angry for ever" Boy was I wrong despite years of placating her she is still a *nasty vindictive woman*.

We have spent so much time, money and energy trying to make things work and I'm just worn out by it - I want it to stop.

Post by: W51

BM [Biological Mother] *left OH [Other Half] for another man so*, no, I don't feel any sense of victory over her as a woman because I didn't know either of them when they were together. I tend to think the worst of any suggestion she makes because so far (three years) *she has lied consistently and intricately*, refused to tell her kids the real reason why the marriage ended whilst encouraging them to hold OH [Other Half] and I responsible for the divorce. Despite that it was five years in between.

Constructing some women as 'other' Dangerous

Post by: W82

Long story short BM [Biological Mother] isn't exactly, um, stable? And the court ruled she was **guilty of emotionally abusing SS** [Stepson] plus a heavy duty case of PAS [Parental Alienation Syndrome]. So DH [Darling Husband] was awarded custody on the grounds of a more healthy home environment and that we would support BM [Biological Mother] still having a relationship with her son whereas she would have prevented DH [Darling Husband] ever seeing him again if she'd retained custody.

Constructing some women as 'other'

Post by W92

- ▶ It seems that there are no end of BM's who either want to get back with the father of their child(ren), or if not that, don't want the father to move on at all and have a new GF/wife. From my own experience and the, admittedly little, I've read here, this is quite a usual attitude for the BM to have along with a vast array of other negative traits.

Now, if the BM harbours those feelings and acts on them in any way, I can imagine it will impact on the skids to quite a large and negative degree. This strikes me as particularly counteractive to benefiting the BM in any way whatsoever, she only ends up with stressy children whose issues make *her* life a misery, never mind their father's and his new wife's and she'll also show herself up to her exH. But more importantly, surely she should love her children enough to not allow her feelings to impact on their well-being?

So how much of this negative attitude are we imagining? Although I'm sure that some BM do have these traits and I don't doubt the stories about them here, I do wonder if we may at times imagine or exaggerate their actions and feelings to fulfil something within us? Is it because of the good feeling that we have 'won' a man from another woman, that because of that we are a better person than her, another woman?

I think women tend to be quite competitive amongst themselves as far as men go and I, for one, find it very hard work knowing one's H's ex will always be on the scene because they have children together, so I wonder if the thought that she isn't acting in her children's best interests is a way of assuming a position of superiority, which may not be completely accurate.

Now, I am VERY reluctant to think anything positive about my H's ex wife, my skids BM. I feel I have evidence enough through her children's behaviour towards me and their attitude towards their father, to know she has always acted selfishly and had a hugely negative effect on her children. But I'm also honest enough to know that I'll look for anything to see her in a bad light.

Bit of a ramble and I'm navel gazing, but I'm very interested to read your thoughts.

Some concluding thoughts

Mother or other?

- ▶ Some background and context
- ▶ The benefits of a digital space as a source of social support for stepmothers

BUT

- ▶ The potential of a digital space to reinforce gender and mothering stereotypes and gendered practices
- ▶ The potential of a digital space to construct some women as 'other'

Thank you for listening

Questions?

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